Playthings in Early Modernity

Party Games, Word Games, Mind Games

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"Mixt" and Matched: Dance Games in Late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Europe

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DANCING WAS A FREQUENT OCCURRENCE at private gatherings, religious festivals, and civic celebrations in the early modern period. While some of these occasions were solemn affairs that called for only the most sober and stately measures, most dances featured at least an element of play. In fact, there were a substantial number of dances specifically devised as dance games; thus, attending to dancing can help us understand early modern playfulness—and its boundaries.

This essay examines three types of dance games—courtship games, pantomime dances, and "social mixer" dances. It argues that these dances were not simply enjoyable recreations, but also helped communities manage potentially disruptive behavior. At the same time, this function of dancing was not uncontroversial: some critics argued that rather than containing or diverting lustful tendencies, dance games encouraged them. However, since dancing was generally considered among the *adiaphora*, or things indifferent, it was the contextual details of a dance—who danced it, in what style, and under what circumstances—rather than a dance's steps that decided its acceptability and appropriateness.[1] It is therefore important to attend to contextual details to understand how early modern dancers and spectators interpreted a dance's significance and playfulness.

In the early modern period, the term *dance* described a wide variety of movements, including several activities that modern-day observers might not define as dance. These include rope dancing, which was almost identical to modern-day tightrope walking, and processional dancing, which we might describe today as marching, parading, or simply walking to music. The dancing found in dance games, however, would have been easily recognized as such by the modern observer. Dance games involved either choreographed or improvised steps and figures performed to musical accompaniment. Choreographed dances had predetermined arrangements of steps and dancers performed those steps in the same way each time the dance was presented. Improvised dances involved creating a new series of movements each time the dance was performed, dancing "after sundrie fashions."[2]

Improvisations were not completely random movements, however. They drew from a known body of dance steps and had to take into account the rhythms and structure of the music.[3] There were also hybrid forms. Dances like the galliard and the canary

incorporated improvised solos into a larger choreographed duet structure. A male–female couple performed the opening, closing, and "chorus" figures together, but in between, the man and woman took turns improvising four to sixteen musical bars' worth of kicks and jumps (for the galliard) or stamps and toe taps (for the canary).[4] Dancing masters also encouraged experienced dancers to use embellishments or "accidental" steps to add variety to the regular or "natural" steps specified in choreographed dances.[5] While certain choreographed dances were devised as dance games or had strong playful elements, improvisation brought an element of play into other dances as well and was a key to success in dance competitions.

Most of what we know about the steps and structure of dancing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries comes from a dozen or so dancing instruction manuals written by dance instructors and aficionados. Formats vary, but all the extant dancing manuals include one or more of the following: step descriptions, set choreographies for different dance types, accompanying music, accompanying illustrations, recommendations for performance, rules of ballroom etiquette, and defenses or rationales for dancing based on Greco-Roman writings, biblical passages, and historical precedents.[6] All the manuals are aimed at elite audiences and describe court dances, with the exception of Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* (1589), which is addressed to a middling-status audience and contains a mix of courtly and rustic dances.

A handful of the manuals are comprehensive enough to enable full-fledged reconstructions of choreographies—most notably the manuals of Fabritio Caroso, Cesare Negri, and Thoinot Arbeau—but some of the less step-focused manuals, such as Juan de Esquivel Navarro's *Discursos sobre el arte del danzado* (1642), nevertheless provide welcome details about dance instruction, styling, and dance competitions. While one must be cautious in assuming that the dances in a French manual would be known to Italian dancers and vice versa, the higher the status of the dancers, the more likely this would be the case. Barbara Ravelhofer, among others, has argued convincingly for a pan-European courtly dance culture created and supported by the frequent movement of dance instructors among European courts, whether as an invited guest, independent entrepreneur, member of a foreign visitor's entourage, or a royal bride's household accompanying her to her new home.[7]

Several of the surviving dance instruction manuals include choreographies for dance games, providing concrete descriptions of steps and floor patterns. However, dance manuals only give the steps the dancers were supposed to do, not necessarily the ones they actually did. In addition, they do not usually offer details about the contexts in which dance games occurred, how they were perceived by spectators and participants, and what factors influenced their reception. For these aspects, other sources must be consulted. Happily, archival records can sometimes provide these missing details.

An examination of dancing practices in urban and rural England from approximately 1560 to 1650 indicates some interesting aspects of dancing in context that may

have also held true in other European countries.[8] Religious moralists such as Philip Stubbes and Christopher Fetherston argued that youths and maidens were naturally drawn to dancing, but archival records support only part of this contention.[9] Young people are mentioned in dance-related archival records more than either children or older adults, but men actually appear more often than women.[10] This may be due to the fact that many of the records are court prosecutions, and men seem to be more likely to end up dancing in a problematic manner than women. Nevertheless, these records clearly show that men were dancing regularly. Moreover, they also demonstrate that men danced in single-sex groups (as did women), despite the claim by critics that their contemporaries were only interested in "mixt" dancing of men and women together.[11] Another nuance is that whereas young people were more likely to do most of the actual dancing, older members of the community were frequently the hosts or sponsors of dance events. They also defended dancing in court cases by testifying to the antiquity and long-established acceptability of their parish's dancing traditions.[12]

Other details that emerge from these records include typical times and places for dancing. Dancing on Sundays was common but problematic, especially in Protestant areas with more Puritan or Calvinist leanings.[13] In other areas, however, dancing on Sundays or holidays was only a problem if the dancers also skipped church services.[14] The time of day in which dancing occurred is occasionally mentioned, especially when it was unusual or problematic. From these records, we learn that people danced at all times of day and night, but that morning dancing was almost never controversial, and afternoon dancing was only a problem on Sundays or when the dancers were supposed to be engaged in other activities. Dancing in the evenings, however, was not only more frequently accompanied by problematic behaviors such as drinking, dicing, and fighting, but it was also viewed as inherently more morally suspect than dancing during the daytime.[15]

The examined archival records sometimes noted the type of event in which dancing occurred and the venue in which it took place. Among the named event types, informal social events were unquestionably the most common. The next most common events were ales (both those sponsored by the parish and by private individuals or groups), followed by holy days and seasonal celebrations. Dancing was also mentioned in a handful of accounts of life-cycle celebrations like weddings and baptisms, civic entertainments, the performances of traveling players, and private dance lessons.[16] The most common venues for dance events were private homes and estates and church and chapel areas, especially the local parish church's churchyard. Also popular were alehouses, inns, and public spaces such as the village green.[17] One complication was that some of the homes in which dancing occurred were unlicensed, *de facto* alehouses, often run by widows or others fallen on hard times. "Tippling," or drinking, might be listed in addition to dancing as an offense in such cases.[18]

Most dance games were not inherently controversial, but the context in which they occurred could make them disreputable by association. For example, depictions of the

Dutch egg dance generally place it near an alehouse with many of the onlookers indulging in drinking, dallying, and other disorderly behavior. In Pieter Aertsen's painting *The Egg Dance* of 1552, the dance occurs in a scene of drunken disorder and wantonness (Figure 2.1). In the foreground, an inebriated young man seemingly in mid speech or song holds a pitcher in the air, his left arm draped over a young woman's shoulder and his hand resting on her breast. The floor of the alehouse is littered with so much debris that, at first glance, one does not even notice the egg and bowl that indicate that the young man with his right foot in the air is dancing the egg dance. A seated young man and an old woman who also holds a pitcher watch the dancer intently, and there is a musician who provides accompaniment with a bagpipe. Adding a touch of innocence are the little boy and his mother framed in the doorway in the upper right hand corner. The boy watches the dancer, while his mother leans over him protectively.

The message the painting conveys about dancing is complex. On the one hand, it presents the egg dance as the sort of activity that takes place in disorderly dens of iniquity. On the other hand, by having the little boy and the man and woman sitting by the hearth watching so appreciatively, Aertsen acknowledges that the egg dance was a genuinely challenging physical feat that required substantial skill and a great deal of practice to master. At the same time, while presumably this image was not supposed to laud or encourage drunkenness, it would have reminded those familiar with the egg dance that dancing it while inebriated would have been much more difficult, and thus more impressive, than dancing it sober.

A late sixteenth-century engraving after Maerten de Vos published by Johannes Baptista Vrints, and also known as *The Egg Dance*, conveys similarly mixed messages (Figure 2.2). In this picture, a crowd gathers outside an alehouse or inn to watch a man dance the egg dance.[19] Some of the spectators are seated, as is the musician who accompanies him on the bagpipes. At least one of the women watching the dance is drinking, but it is wantonness rather than drunkenness that is the dominant sin in this scene.

The engraving depicts two amorous couples. One couple sits together in the left foreground, their arms around each other and their eyes locked. Just to the right of the man dancing the egg dance is another couple. Unlike the others in the picture, they wear notably elegant courtly attire. The man embraces the woman closely, his right arm on her chest and his eyes on her alone, but the woman watches the egg dancer. Moreover, while most of the other spectators are focused on the dancer's feet, the precise object of this woman's gaze is less clear. Is the artist insinuating that viewing dancing makes spectators like this gentlewoman more receptive to amorous advances, such as those of her companion? Has the skill of the dancer made him an inappropriate object of desire? Either way, the two embracing couples situate the egg dance within a context of license and lasciviousness.

At the same time, just as in the Aertsen painting, the engraving calls attention to the technical difficulty and impressiveness of the egg dance itself. By having so many of the spectators within the picture watching the dancer's feet, the artist encourages the

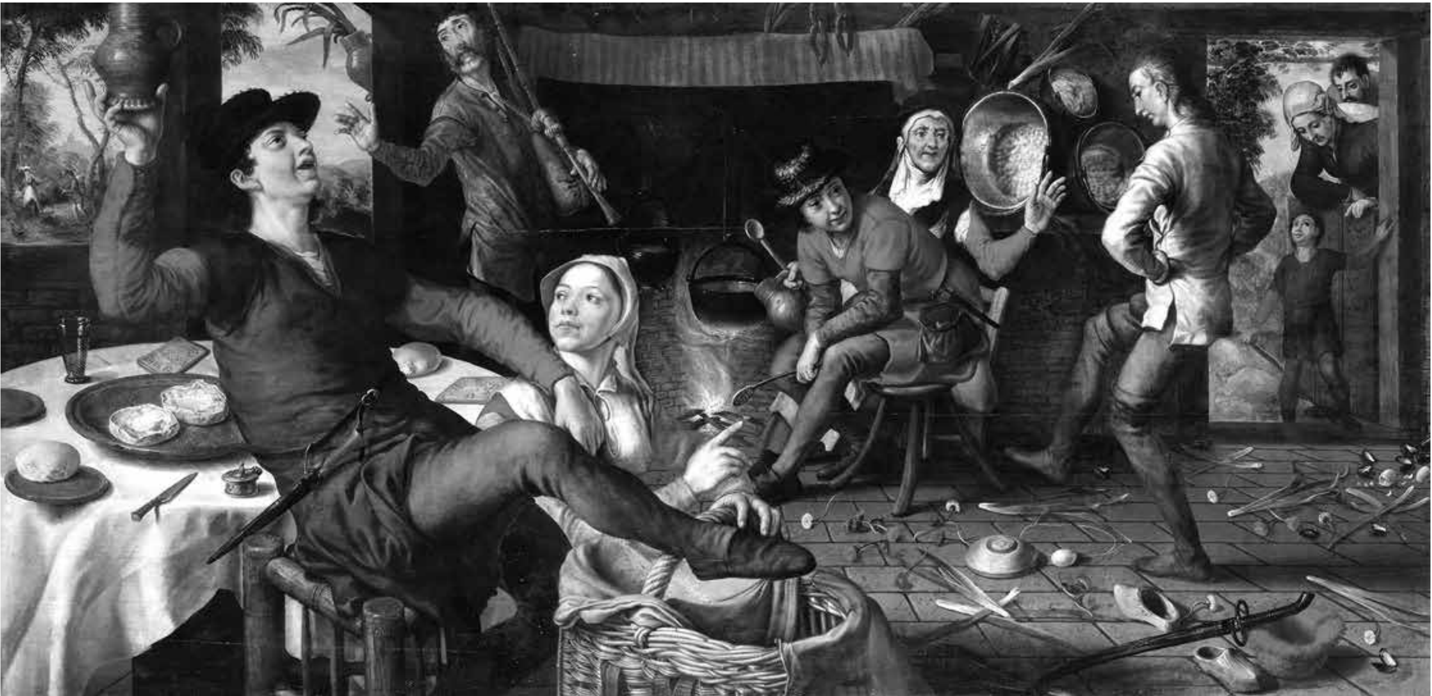

Figure 2.1. Pieter Aertsen, *The Egg Dance*, 84 × 172 cm, oil on panel, 1552, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

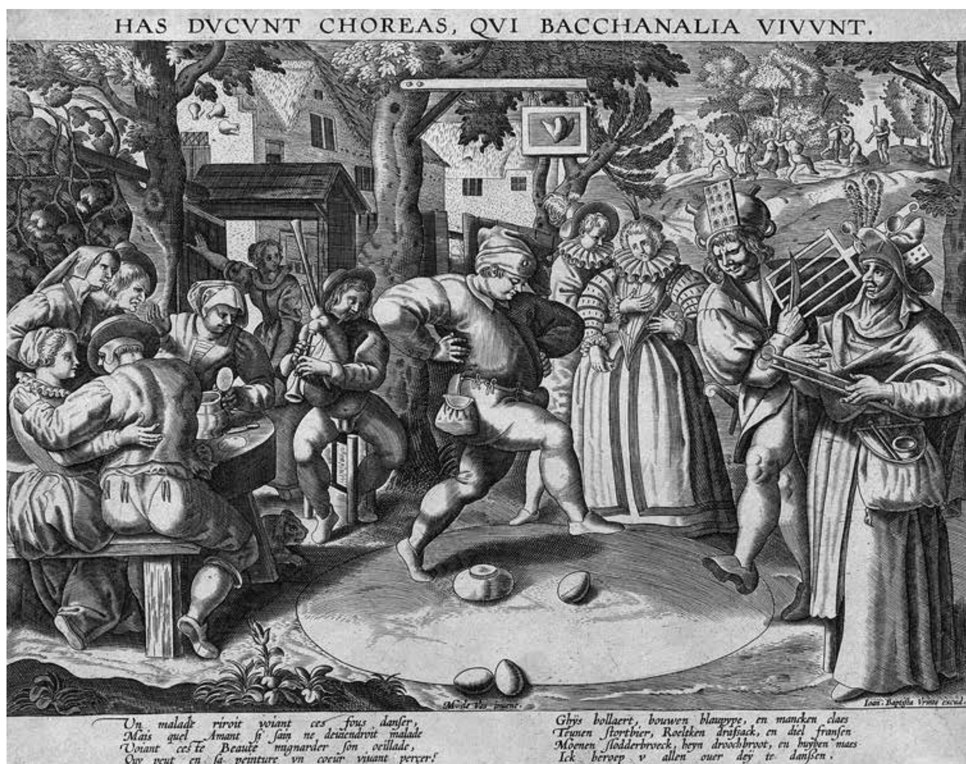

Figure 2.2. After Maerten de Vos, published by Johannes Baptista Vrints,
The Egg Dance, 23.2 × 29.7 cm, engraving, late sixteenth century,
Elisha Whittelsey Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

viewer's eyes to do so as well. The positioning of the dancer—his right leg impossibly poised in the air above a large egg, defying gravity—similarly stresses his skillfulness.

While no surviving dancing manuals give a choreography for the egg dance, descriptions of its overall characteristics in other sources are consistent. To dance the egg dance, the dancer—using only the feet—carefully removed an egg from a bowl, danced around and over it, and returned it to the bowl, all without breaking the egg or allowing it to roll away. While most of the pictorial and anecdotal evidence depicts it as a man's dance, it is a woman who toes the egg in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's *The Egg Dance*, suggesting that the egg dance, like the galliard, was available to female dancers wanting to show off their athletic skills, whether sober or otherwise.[20]

Excess drinking may also have contributed to several of the fights among morris dancers or between them and audience members that are described in English court records.[21] Morris dancers, usually four or six men, wore bells at the ankle and knee that

jangled merrily as they performed athletic kicks and jumps in intricate patterns. To accentuate their arm movements, they wore coats with long dagged sleeves, tied ribbons around their arms, or carried handkerchiefs. They also used props like sticks or swords for mock battle choreographies. Morris dancers belonged to recognizable groups or teams who rehearsed together, performed together, traveled regionally, and competed against other teams at fairs and festivals. Costumed characters from the Robin Hood tale often accompanied the dancers, especially Friar Tuck and a cross-dressed Maid Marion. Other common accompanying characters included the fool, the foreman, and the hobbyhorse. Dancers traveled with their own accompanist who played pipe and tabor.[22]

Many of these aspects are visible in the depiction of morris dancers in *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace*, an early seventeenth-century painting in the Flemish style in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge sometimes attributed to Daniel Vinckenboom (Figure 2.3).[23] The troupe comprises six performers and a musician playing pipe and tabor. Three of the performers wear white shirts with ribbons tied to their sleeves as well as morris bells on their legs. Two typical costumed characters dance along with them: a Maid Marion and a hobbyhorse. These dancers would likely also be wearing morris bells, but their costumes obscure their legs from view in the painting. The sixth performer, the fool (distinguished by his particolored coat), offers his ladle

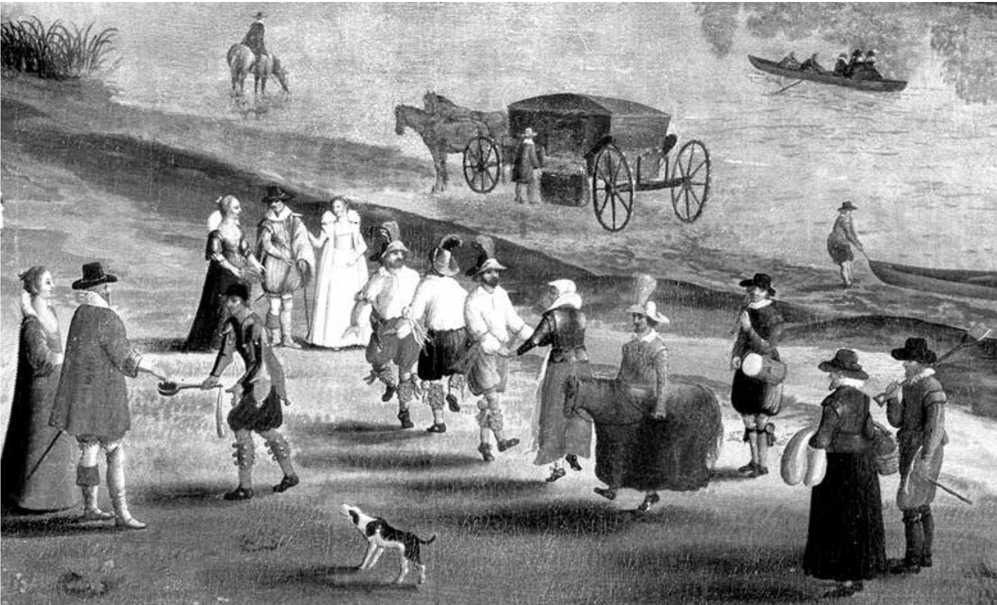

Figure 2.3. Attributed to Daniel Vinckenboom, detail from *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace*, 152.1 × 304.2 cm, oil on canvas, ca. 1620. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

to some well-heeled spectators whom he has persuaded to make a donation. Part of the "game" of a morris performance was the playful harassment of spectators by the costumed characters who threatened and cajoled in order to extract donations. While occasionally these exchanges could escalate into actual harassment or violence, generally the ribbing was tolerated or even enjoyed, as appears to be the case in the scene depicted.

Morris dancers were semi-professional, receiving compensation for their dancing through contractual agreements as well as from tips and donations. The account books of churchwardens, town treasurers, and local elites contain numerous entries for payments to morris dancers hired as an added attraction for May games, Whitsuntide festivities, church ales, town watches, fairs, guild processions, and other festive occasions. That dancers were sometimes paid in ale and carried sticks or swords as props likely increased their tendency to get into fights, but an overly keen competitive instinct might also have been a factor, especially when the morris dancers were "on tour" in neighboring villages.[24]

In addition to their association with drunken disorder, dance games could also cause controversy because of their potential to arouse illicit sexual interest. Religious and moral critics decried dancing that was lascivious in its movements, but they also cautioned that dancers had little control over the reception of their performance.[25] Even the most chaste dancing was capable of inspiring lust in the eyes of a viewer inclined to wantonness, and occasions of dancing, in which the sexes mingled more than usual, provided ample opportunities for such wanton-minded persons to corrupt the naïve and innocent. Kissing dances, including the cushion dance, are mentioned in a number of sources, but they represent only a small portion of the surviving choreographies from the period and were probably not danced nearly as often as anti-dance writers like Philip Stubbes seemed to believe.[26] Moreover, while kissing dances and other "social mixer" dances like "The Candlestick Branle" facilitated interactions between men and women, they were just as likely to lead to legitimate marriages as to illicit liaisons.

Social mixer dance games, so called because they involved more "mixing" or intermingling of the dancers than was otherwise customary and possessed game-like characteristics such as choice and uncertainty, provided a structured form for flirtation, usually in a safe and supervised context. This may have been helpful to further the legitimate courting of young men and women whose spheres did not often otherwise overlap. As Thoinot Arbeau observes in his dancing manual *Orchesography*, "If you desire to marry you must realize that a mistress is won by the good temper and grace displayed while dancing," and that "without a knowledge of dancing, I could not please the damsels, upon whom, it seems to me, the entire reputation of an eligible young man depends."[27]

Arguably, all couple dances can be considered playful or flirtatious to some extent, but the choreographic structure of many Renaissance courtly couple dances heightened this potential.[28] These dances featured a "chorus" danced by the man and woman together,

and "verses" in which the man and woman alternated dancing solo. Fabritio Caroso, whose dancing manuals contained a number of choreographies following this pattern, referred to these back-and-forth alternating solos as a "pedalogue," or conversation of the feet: "Just as we say that when two people converse they are engaging in a dialogue, so here, when the gentleman danced one group of steps (or one variation) with his feet, and the lady answers the same way, this foot conversation leads me to term it 'pedalogue.'"[29] Some of Caroso's pedalogues involve fairly long sequences for each dancer that seem more like alternating monologues or speeches than conversations. However, a few dances utilize quicker alternations.

In the galliard section of the balletto "Forza d'Amore" (The Power of Love), Caroso describes a sequence in which the dancers do four *destice*, or "dexterous steps," as a pedalogue, "that is, the gentleman does one with his left hip in; the lady does another; the gentleman repeats this to the other side, with his right hip in; the lady does the same."[30] The speedof the alternations gives this "conversation" the feel of playful banter between close friends or lovers.

A few dances of this type emphasized the playful, flirtatious aspect of the pedalogue even further. In the *canario*, or canary, a dance with supposedly Spanish origins and percussive footwork, the solos for the man and woman follow a floor pattern of approach and retreat.[31] At the end of the opening figure, the dancers separate. Then during the man's solo, he first approaches the woman doing a series of stamps and kicks before retreating in a zigzag pattern back to where he started. After doing the chorus figure together, the woman performs the same solo, dancing across the room towards her partner and then zigzagging backwards. Another chorus follows, as does another set of solos (with a similar floor pattern but with different steps), and the two dancers "continue to sally and retreat as many times as the variety of passages permits."[32]

While for each pair of solos the man dances first, the dance is otherwise quite egalitarian. The woman dances the same steps as the man and advances across the floor towards her partner with aggressive stamps and kicks in her solos just as he does. Perhaps this gender equality is made more acceptable because of the canary's playful, theatrical spirit. Arbeau describes the dance as "gay but nevertheless strange and fantastic with a strong barbaric flavour."[33] Regardless, the alternating advancing and retreating solos of the man and woman with their loud, percussive footwork suggest an intense, tumultuous courtship or relationship.

A more lighthearted but no less flirtatious choreography is found in the version of the coranto, or running dance, that Thoinot Arbeau outlines in *Orchesography*. After detailing the distinctive coranto single and double steps, which "must be executed with a spring which is not the case in the pavan or the basse dance," Arbeau goes on to describe "a kind of game or mime" that uses the steps and music of the coranto, quoted here in full from Mary Stewart Evans's translation:[34]

> In my youth there was a kind of game or mime arranged to the coranto. Three young men would choose three young girls, and, having ranged themselves in a row, the first dancer would lead his damsel to the other end of the room and then return alone to his companions. The second dancer would do the same, then the third, so that the three girls were left segregated at one end of the room, and the three young men at the other. And when the third dancer had returned, the first one, playing the fool and making amorous grimaces and gestures while pulling up his hose and adjusting his shirt, went off to claim his damsel who refused his suit and turned her back upon him, until, seeing the young man was returning to his place, she feigned despair. The other two did the same. Finally [the young men] all three advanced together, each to claim his own damsel and to implore her favour upon bended knee with clasped hands. Whereupon the damsels fell into their arms and they all danced the coranto helter-skelter.[35]

Arbeau calls this dance a game, and its playfulness derives from having young people on the dance floor both imitate and mock the rituals and dynamics of courtship off the dance floor.

The coranto pantomime conveys a complex picture of gender relations and agency. Although the choreography is for six dancers, the courtship rituals enacted are monogamous: the three couples are maintained throughout the dance, and the language emphasizes these pairings, with the female partner "belonging" to the male partner. After separating to the sides of the room, each young man seeks to "claim" his partner, who is referred to as "his damsel" or "his own damsel." The men are also more physically active than the women, crossing the room several times while the women remain in the same place waiting. However, the women and men play equal parts in the pantomime, and the women's responses to the men's suits are an essential component of the game. That the women initially spurn the men's advances reminds the modern commentator and would have reminded the early modern observer that women were entitled to accept or reject their suitors, even if they were expected to wait for the men to make the first move. That the men have to beg for the women's favor on bended knee further emphasizes women's power in the game of courtship. Likewise, in the "helter-skelter" dancing of the coranto that follows the pantomime section, the women would be just as active and engaged in the dance as the men, perhaps suggesting that in the actual marriages that follow courtship both partners must be active participants. Finally, there is a layering of fiction and fact in this dance. Arbeau specifies that it is young people who play this dance game. Yet, participants who are "playing at" courtship may also be courting, or at least flirting with, potential spouses.

As previously stated, Arbeau's coranto dance game describes couples who dance with each other for the duration of the dance, which was typical for group dances featuring several couples. However, in a comment that follows his description of the coranto pantomime, Arbeau notes that sometimes, "When a dancer's companions perceive that

he is weary they go and steal his damsel and dance with her themselves. Or else they provide him with a fresh partner if they see the first one is fatigued."[36] Phrases like "steal his damsel" continue to emphasize that the female dancer belongs to her initial male partner. Yet, one might still end up dancing with a different partner at the end of the dance. The uncertainty of one's final partner adds to the playfulness of the dance and makes it much more like social mixer group dances. On the other hand, unlike most other dance games, including the social mixers, there are clear "losers" as well as "winners" in this version of the coranto.

The coranto was not the only pantomime dance game popular in early modern Europe. In *Orchesography*, Arbeau offers instructions for a number of different dances that he categorizes as mimed branles. He distinguishes these from the other branles such as double branles and mixed branles, because in mimed branles the dancers imitate animals, foreigners, clergy, and other groups with distinctive gestures. Arbeau does not directly call these dances games as he does for the coranto pantomime. Nevertheless, their playful character is apparent from his descriptions and the choreographies themselves.

Branles were usually circle dances, although a few such as "Branle de la Montarde" were line dances. Branles could be danced by any number of people of any gender, but typically they were structured as a circle of couples, with men and women alternating around the circle. They were simpler and more rustic in style than galliards and corantos, and Arbeau mentions them being danced by "lackeys and serving wenches."[37] Nevertheless, he considers even the more energetic branles to be suitable for young gentlemen and gentlewomen to dance in the ballroom, either in a masquerade "disguised as peasants and shepherds" or "for a lark" in a private gathering.[38]

One such branle that might be fine for a private party but inappropriate for a more public event is "The Horses Branle." The choreography calls for the dancers to tap one foot on the ground twice in a row in between the more typical branle steps and turns. Arbeau comments, "These tappings remind me of horses when they want water or of palfreys when they are kept waiting for their peck of oats."[39] Other branles imitate the dances and gestures of foreigners. "The Scottish Branle" ends with a big jump and a caper in the air, while in "The Branle of Poitou" the women "stamp their feet in the second and third bars of triple time" to approximate the "agreeable noise" that women from Poitou make in their wooden shoes.[40] "The Maltese Branle" was originally danced in a court masque in Turkish costume and features dramatic facial expressions, "twisting movements of the body," and "touching the hands, or … raising them in mock praise with the head thrown back and eyes lifted heavenwards."[41] It is not clear from Arbeau's descriptions how accurate these foreign-inspired dances were nor whether contemporaries from Scotland, Poitou, or Malta would have found them complimentary or insulting.

What *is* clear is that Arbeau believes these dances are amusing, enjoyable, and done "all in good fun." When Arbeau is concerned that a dance might not be in good taste,

he says so, although he still provides instructions for the dance.[42] In his introduction to "The Hermits' Branle," he cautions against dressing up like hermits as the young men did who first performed the dance in a masquerade. He even questions whether doing the dance at all is appropriate: "I do not advise you to wear such habits for fancy dress, nor to mimic the behaviour of a Religious Order, because one should respect both their cloth and their persons."[43] The pantomime gestures are not inherently irreverent; the dancers simply "cross their arms and bow their heads as young novices do." But, as Arbeau notes, imitating clerics' gestures may be more playful but is not particularly respectful.[44]

While there would be an element of play involved whenever higher-status men and women intentionally danced in the style of their social inferiors (and vice versa), mimed branles like "The Washerwomen's Branle" exaggerated this aspect. In this branle, the dancers clap their hands vigorously at several points in the dance in order to "make a noise like the women beating the washing on the banks of the Seine."[45] The dancers also "place their hands upon their hips" and "shake their fingers" at their partners elsewhere in the dance.[46] Arbeau does not explain these gestures, but they likely allude to the stereotype of lower-status working women being shrewish and quarrelsome.

In his section on branles, Arbeau also gives a choreography for "The Candlestick Branle," or "Torch Branle." This dance is not a mimed branle, but it is a dance game—what I call a social mixer dance. In this type of dance game, participants dance with more than one partner of the opposite sex during the dance, and one or more partners are selected by the dancer during the dance. This is quite unlike group dances like the coranto pantomime where one dances with the same partner for the whole dance.

In "The Candlestick Branle," one or more men "take a candlestick with a lighted candle, or a torch or link, and make one or two turns around the room walking or dancing forwards and looking to right and to left the while for the partner of their choice."[47] Once a man finds "the damsel he fancies," they dance together "for a little while," and then bowing, he hands her the light and exits the dance floor.[48] The woman "then repeats what she has seen the young man do and dances off to choose another partner."[49] Arbeau concludes with the explanation that "in this manner all are invited in turn to join in the dance."[50] This description emphasizes the flirtatious aspect of the dance, since one selects a partner whom one "fancies." It also includes communal participation, since "all are invited," and female agency, since the women get to choose their next partner just as the men do. That one can be chosen suddenly to enter the dance from the sidelines and then decide spontaneously with whom one will dance next are part of what makes a social mixer dance game-like.

Fabritio Caroso describes a somewhat similar dance to "The Candlestick Branle" in *Nobiltà di Dame*. In "Ballo del Fiore," a man starts with a flower and invites three women to dance, one by one. He then invites another man to join them, and the men and women form two lines opposite each other. The men "pass between" the women "who are at either end," and then the woman in the middle passes between the men, the "gentlemen gently

doffing their bonnets (or hats)" as she does so.[51] All the dancers then turn and change places. Caroso observes, "Formerly, it was customary to do only one passage, but it is much better to do two, for in this way the gentleman who leads this dance will end up with his own lady," and the other dancers will also be "back in place."[52] The dancers do another figure in which each man dances with each of the women in turn. Finally, the man leading the dance gives the flower "to the lady of his choice," although Caroso adds that "in my opinion he should properly give it to the first lady he invited, for she should take precedence."[53] The woman who receives the flower is the new leader, and she remains on the dance floor, while the two men accompany the two remaining women back to their seats.

The new leader "follows the same procedure" as the first leader, except that she invites three men to dance and one additional woman.[54] They dance the same passages described, but with the gender roles reversed. "At the end she gives the flower to the gentleman of her choice," and she and the remaining dancers exit the floor, while the new leader picks new dancers to join him, and so on. "Ballo del Fiore" is a more elaborate choreography than "The Candlestick Branle," with more dancers involved in each repetition of the dance as well as more complex figures and steps. Nevertheless, the overall structure of the two dances is similar. Men and women alternate leading the dance and picking their partners, thus enjoying equal agency, and there is uncertainty at the beginning of each iteration of both dances as to who will be picked. In addition, although Caroso frowns upon it, there is another layer of uncertainty throughout the duration of each repetition of "Ballo del Fiore." The leader can give the flower to any one of the three opposite gender dancers, even if it is customary to give the flower to the first partner selected.

Social mixer dances differ from group dances such as the country dances in John Playford's manual, *The English Dancing Master* (1651), in which two or three couples form a "set," or small group, and dance with each other's partners at different points in the dance. The main distinction is that in such dances, no matter how many different partners one dances with during a particular figure, usually by the end of the figure, and most definitely by the end of the dance, one has returned to one's original partner. Indeed, in *The English Dancing Master*, the dancers are referred to as "first man," "first woman," "second man," "second woman," and so on throughout the dance, even when they dance with others. For example, in the dance "Petticoat Wag," the second figure specifies that "First man crosse and goe behind the 2. Wo. the first Wo. going behind the second man," while the fourth figure begins with the "first Cu." crossing behind the second couple.[55]

Since these dances are completely choreographed, at least as far as partners are concerned, once partners have been chosen for the dance and the set of couples assembled, there is absolute certainty about with whom one will dance during the piece and with whom one will exit the dance floor. This is quite the opposite of social mixer dances, in which the choosing of the next partner is a central aspect of the dance. To reiterate, uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of these dance games and part of what makes them playful.

A related consequence of the uncertainty and mutability of partnering in social mixer dances is that all of the participants spend part of the dance as free agents. While they enter the dance by being chosen by another dancer, they then get to choose their next partner. This is quite different from nearly all other couple and group dances for which choreographies survive. The phrasing of *The English Dancing Master* articulates what the manuals of Arbeau, Caroso, and Negri insinuate: partners "belong" to each other for the duration of the dance. For example, the country dance, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morn," includes the instruction, "Meet againe, take *your owne* We." while the final figure of "Jenny Pluck Pears" has "First man take out *his* Wo."[56] Of course, as one sees from these examples and previously in the coranto pantomime, although the insinuation is that both partners belong to each other, when this possession is overtly stated, it is nearly always in terms of the female dancer belonging to her male partner.

Interestingly, however, the usual early modern gender biases and inequalities are largely absent in social mixer dances. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of these dance games is the substantial amount of agency given to female participants. Although all social mixer choreographies describe a man beginning the dance, they then specify that the woman with whom he chooses to dance becomes the next leader. As leader she does all of the same steps and gets to make all of the same choices as did the man, including choosing her next partner from among the other men present. The man she chooses then becomes the next leader, and the dance continues on in this fashion, alternating male and female leaders, until the dance ends. This is the structure for more decorous social mixers such as "The Candlestick Branle" and "Ballo del Fiore" as well as for kissing versions such as the cushion dance discussed below.

The alternation of men and women leading part of the dance provides evidence that, in practice, it was considered acceptable for women to dance and interact with men in ways that, in theory, should have compromised their modesty.[57] In order to ask a man to dance, a woman had to approach him and indicate her desire to dance with him. According to conduct and advice manuals, modesty prevented women from making eye contact with men outside of their close acquaintance. However, Fabritio Caroso explains with a hint of exasperation in *Nobiltà di Dame* that women who out of excessive modesty do not make eye contact when asking men to dance are actually guilty of much worse violations of etiquette than women who are more forward. This is because overly modest women "cast their eyes so low that the gentlemen cannot tell which one of them has been invited," and the wrong gentleman may respond, or worse, several gentlemen may rise to their feet and "give her their hands, with the result that she does not know which one to take."[58] This passage clearly shows that even upholders of dance-floor decorum like Caroso assumed that there would be occasions in which women would be asking men to dance and that emphasizing one's feminine modesty was less important than avoiding confusion and offense.

Kissing dances also downplayed feminine modesty, although they lacked the persuasive rationalizations that Caroso provides. Thoinot Arbeau provides one of the only known choreographies for a kissing dance: the gavotte. The gavotte was a collection or suite of branles "selected by musicians and arranged in a sequence" and danced energetically by several couples at a time "with little springs."[59] The simple sideways steps of the generic branle were embellished by "passages borrowed at will from the galliard," which would have included kicks and jumps.[60] The opening figure of the gavotte is danced in a circle or line holding hands, but after "those taking part have danced a little while, one couple detaches itself from the rest and executes a few passages in the centre of the room within view of all the others."[61] The couple then separates, and the man "proceeds to kiss all the damsels in the room" while his partner "kisses all the young men," after which "they return to their rightful places" in the group.[62] The dance continues with the second couple dancing in the center of the room, kissing the others, and so on, until all the dancing couples have had their turn. As with the previously described social mixer dances, men and women dance the same steps and figures and have equal choice in deciding whom to kiss.[63]

Arbeau notes a variation in which "this prerogative of kissing" belongs only to the male and female hosts of the event. At the end of the gavotte, the hostess presents a garland or bouquet to one of the dancers, and this dancer becomes the host of the next gathering, which includes the responsibility of paying the musicians who play for the dancing.[64] At that next gathering, that host "will then avail himself of the same prerogative and thus it is taken in turn."[65] While this alternative gavotte does not necessitate kissing all and sundry, there is nothing in Arbeau's description to suggest that the motivation for this variation is modesty or propriety. Rather, it repurposes the playful aspects of the kissing gavotte to help decide who should be the host (and who should foot the bill) of the next dance party.

Archival sources describing the cushion dance, another kissing dance and social mixer, can help illuminate some of the fine lines between appropriate and inappropriate dances.[66] A deposition in a 1602 church court case against John Wilmot, the parish rector of Tortworth, Gloucestershire, provides an unusually detailed account of this dance:

> uppon the sunday before St. Thomas day last past at a wedding and in the Church howse of Tortworth after Candellighting this deponent did see mr wylmot articulate amongest divers others of his parishioners dance and lay a Cushion on the ground and kneele downe uppon it and kysse a woman that then daunced with him, as all the rest that then daunced with him (being v. or vj. or more) also did, and ymedyatly after, this deponent did heare the said mr wylmott say thus in effecte viz. Bycause my Lord Byshopp of Gloucester will not geve me leave to preach, I will studdy noe more on my booke and nowe I will studdy knavery.[67]

The deponent, William Lawrence, who was one of Wilmot's parishioners, describes a dance with some now familiar components. The leader, in this case Wilmot, dances around the room and lays a cushion down in front of a member of the opposite sex so that they can "kneele downe uppon it and kysse." They then dance together, and the five or six other men do the same. It is not clear whether the other men also kissed the woman Wilmot chose or whether the explanation that "all the rest" who danced with Wilmot "also did" what he did refers to their each leading the dance and each choosing a woman to kiss. Regardless, once Wilmot had led the dance through its first iteration, he would have passed the cushion to another dancer, although again it is not stated in the deposition whether that would be to the woman, "one goodwife Hickes," whom he had kissed or to the next man in the line "that then daunced with him."[68] As the earlier discussion of social mixer dance games shows, there is precedent for the latter, but the former is more likely. Pictorial evidence can help fill in gaps left by the lack of published choreographies of the cushion dance before the late seventeenth century.[69]

A Dutch emblem book by Johannis de Brunes first published in 1624 likely depicts a cushion dance (Figure 2.4). In the image, a gentleman, holding a cushion on his back or shoulder, bows in front of a seated lady, holding his hat with his other hand, as was customary.[70] The woman returns his gaze, while the other men and women in the room, also seated, either watch this encounter or converse. The gentleman bowing appears to be the only one dancing, so this may indicate that, at least in this version of the dance,

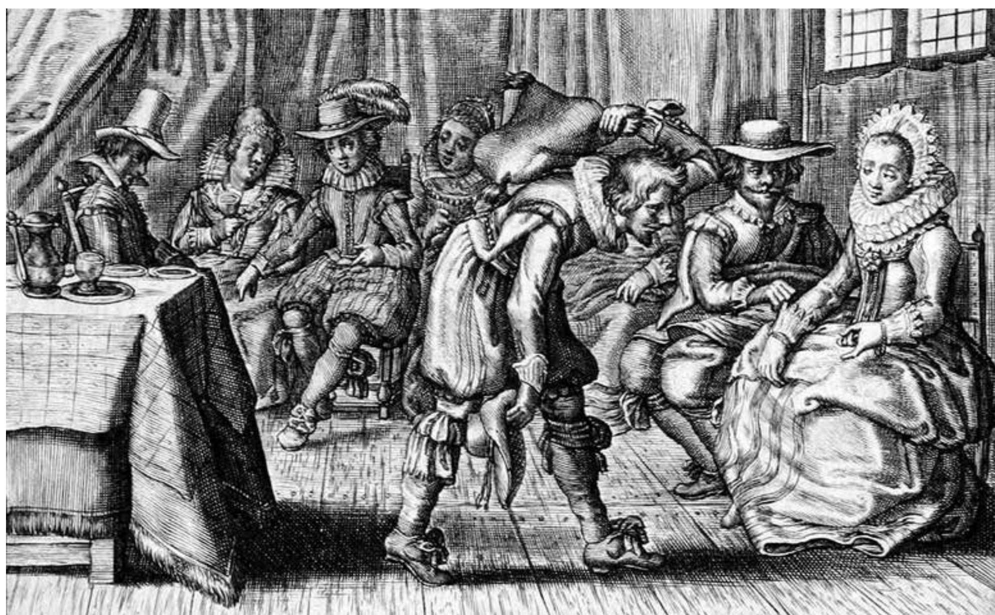

Figure 2.4. Emblem IV, Johannis de Brunes, *Emblemata of Zinne-werck* (Amsterdam, 1624), p. 23.

he will give the cushion to the woman after they dance together, and she will lead the next iteration. The woman's coy, slightly challenging expression and her suggestively downward-pointing finger also hint at future amorous possibilities should the gentleman's dancing please. The accompanying text gives a short history of kissing and compares good and depraved types, arguing that one can "savor this temporary life" without necessarily losing oneself to "sinful wickedness."[71] The theme of the emblem's text adds further support for the belief that the image is indeed of the cushion dance, a kissing dance.

The company in the emblem appears to be of a higher status than the villagers who dance the cushion dance in Tortworth, but the way in which the man approaches the seated woman, holding the cushion in one hand and doffing his hat with the other while he bows, is likely similar to the village version. However, many questions remain, including what were the steps and footwork of the dance, how many times was the dance repeated with different leaders, how long did it take, how much improvisation was expected, and what was the musical accompaniment? Later sources can provide some answers, including musical scores, but not without raising new questions.[72]

What is clear is that the cushion dance was not a forbidden dance. None of the other dancers was prosecuted for participating. In fact, it must have been an established piece of the local dance repertoire, or John Wilmot would not have been able to call for a cushion dance and have five or six other men spontaneously join in. Kissing dances might have been mildly titillating, but the amount of sexual contact was minimal, regulated by the watchful, multi-generational audience and the structure of the dance itself. The problem was that Wilmot was the parish rector, and clergymen were held to stricter behavioral standards than lay people. Moreover, Wilmot led the cushion dance "before all the people," and in so doing opened himself up to "publique dirision," according to his supervising bishop.[73] Wilmot's own assertion that it was "knavery" for him to lead the cushion dance acknowledges that he knew he was dancing inappropriately.

This exploration of dance games in early modern Europe suggests two conclusions. First, dance games, especially social mixers in which men and women alternated leading the dance, offered women substantial agency. Not only did they perform the same steps as men, but they also got to choose their partners. Moreover, women were expected to ask men to dance, which required approaching men directly and maintaining eye contact, actions that might otherwise have been considered immodest. Dance games can therefore help paint a more accurate and nuanced picture of early modern gender relations and expectations.

Second, the steps and figures of dance games, even ones with kissing, were considered morally neutral; it was the details of the context in which the dance was performed that decided whether it was appropriate or not and shaped its meaning to dancers and spectators alike. This mutability of meaning is particularly important when discussing

courtship games like the coranto and social mixers like "Ballo del Fiore," because of the ease with which the boundary between innocent flirtation and lascivious wantonness could be crossed. However, it also applies to other playful dances like mimed branles since contextual details influenced whether imitated gestures were perceived as irreverent or offensive or "all in good fun." Finally, the case of John Wilmot and the cushion dance demonstrates how a dance deemed acceptable for some to perform in a particular context could be considered inappropriate for others.

Many, if not most, of the dances of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries have an element of play. However, it is in intentionally choreographed dance games that one sees early modern society at its most egalitarian, allowing women significant agency and near equality with men while still policing the boundaries of modesty and propriety.

NOTES

[1] Lowin, *Conclusions vpon dances*, sig. B1v.

[2] Kendall, "Ornamentation and Improvisation," 174.

[3] Sparti, "Improvisation and Embellishment," 122, 118.

[4] Kendall, "Ornamentation and Improvisation," 183; Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 164. English quotations are from this translation.

[5] Nevile, "Disorder in Order," 147.

[6] "List of Dance Treatises and Manuscripts, Modern Editions, and Translations," in Nevile, *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick*, 313–29.

[7] Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque*, 16–20.

[8] The study examined 325 references to dancing found in the archives of Lancashire, Cheshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Somerset, most of which have been published in the Records of Early English Drama collections for those counties. Most of the references to dance occur in church court presentments, but there are also a smaller number in secular court prosecutions as well as in household and churchwardens' accounts, personal writings, and so on. See "Early Modern Dance Fundamentals" in Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 42–118.

[9] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 87–88.

[10] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 91.

[11] Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses*, book I, sig. N2r; Fetherston, *A dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lascivious dauncing*, sigs. D4v, D6r.

[12] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 88–89.

[13] For Scotland, see Todd, "Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community." For England, see Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*; and Parker, *The English Sabbath*.

[14] For England, see Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth*; Racaut, "The 'Book of Sports' and Sabbatarian Legislation in Lancashire;" and "Performative Interpretations" in Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 85–114.

[15] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 96–100.

[16] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 101–7.

[17] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 108–11.

[18] Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 108.

[19] The sign hanging from the tree clarifies that the group is outside of an inn or alehouse. According to Stephanie Porras, the sign depicts a codpiece. Porras, "Copies, Cannibals and Conquerors," 252.

[20] Newall, "The Egg Dance."

[21] See, for example, the "Examination of Ralph Whoode and Others" in the Borough Court Books, which mentions a fight between several morris dancers and bystanders in Shrewsbury in 1619. Shropshire Record Office: 3365/1198/1 pp. 1.15–1.17 (June) and 3365/2637; quoted in Somerset, ed., *Records of Early English Drama*, vol. 1, 309–12.

[22] See Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing*. The Betley Hall stained glass window now in the Victoria & Albert Museum features morris dancers wearing bells and coats, a pipe tabor player, a hobbyhorse, Maid Marion, and Friar Tuck, as well as a maypole. Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 72.

[23] Williams, *Domestic Memoirs*, vol. 3, 21–22; Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing*, 72; and Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance*, 172.

[24] Forrest, "Morris Dance."

[25] A substantial number of studies have examined this subject. See, for example, Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*; Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial;" Goring, *Godly Exercises or the Devil's Dance?*; and Pennino-Baskerville, "Terpsichore Reviled."

[26] Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses*, book I, sigs. M8–M8v.

[27] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 11–12. English quotations are from this translation.

[28] There has been little work on dance and flirtation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, or even on dance and courtship more generally, but a number of studies touch on dancing, flirtation, courtship, and playfulness for later periods. See Kaminsky, "Gender and Sexuality in the Polska." Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control," describes the flirtatious, sexually playful aspects of courtship (415) and mentions several courting couples who attended dances together (410, 411, 414), but she does not discuss any instances of flirtation while dancing.

[29] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 164.

[30] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 93, 230.

[31] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 179–80.

[32] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 180.

[33] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 180.

[34] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 123.

[35] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 123–24.

[36] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 124.

[37] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 136.

[38] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 136.

[39] Arbeau, *Orchesography,* 165.

[40] Arbeau, *Orchesography,* 151, 147.

[41] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 153–55.

[42] See, for example, his caveats, as well as his instructions, for the volta. Arbeau, *Orchesography,* 119–23.

[43] Arbeau, *Orchesography,* 159.

[44] Arbeau, *Orchesography,* 159.

[45] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 155.

[46] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 156.
[47] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 161.
[48] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 161.
[49] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 161.
[50] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 161.
[51] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 281.
[52] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 282.
[53] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 282.
[54] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 282.
[55] Playford, *The English Dancing Master*, 68, uses the following abbreviations: "Wo." for "woman;" "We." for "women;" "Cu." for "couple;" "2." for "second;" and "3." for "third."
[56] Playford, *The English Dancing Master*, 80, 95. Italics are mine.
[57] For a fuller discussion, see Winerock, "'Performing' Gender and Status on the Dance Floor."
[58] Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 146.
[59] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[60] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[61] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[62] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[63] Arbeau writes that the dancers kiss all the members of the opposite sex in the room, but, in practice, the leading couple likely only kissed some of the spectators though they may have kissed all of the other dancers. Regardless, the male and female dancers had the same degree of choice, whether that was a lot or a little.
[64] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[65] Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
[66] For a more detailed discussion of John Wilmot and the cushion dance, see Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 307–21.
[67] Gloucester Diocese Consistory Court Deposition Books, Gloucestershire Record Office: GDR 89, fol. [106r] (October 13), quoted in Douglas and Greenfield, eds., *Records of Early English Drama*, 343.
[68] GRO: GDR 89, fol. [106r–106v] (October 13), quoted in Douglas and Greenfield, *Records of Early English Drama*, 343.
[69] The first full choreographic description does not appear until the seventh edition of Playford's *The Dancing-Master*, 208, where it is entitled "Joan Sanderson, or The Cushion-Dance, a Round Dance." Christopher Marsh sees a "striking resemblance" between the cushion dance by John Wilmot in 1602 and Playford's version. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 385.
[70] Caroso's instructions for how to ask a woman to dance begin with a detailed discussion about how to "doff," or remove, one's hat. Moreover, all the other men in the emblem picture are wearing their hats. Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 96.
[71] I am indebted to Bert Roest for translating the emblem text. The translation is in the Appendix of Winerock, "Reformation and Revelry," 366.
[72] Music for the cushion dance includes "Gaillarde Anglaise" in *Tablature de Luth* (Amsterdam, 1615), "Gallarde Suit Margriet" in *Nederlandtsche Gedenck-Clunck* (Haerlem, 1626), and "Joan Sanderson, or The Cushion Dance" in Playford, *The Dancing-Master*. Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, vol. 1, 155–56.
[73] Articles Objected, GRO: B4/1/2642, fol. [1r].