

Dance References in the Records of Early English Drama

Alternative Sources for Non-Courtly Dancing, 1500-1650

E. F. Winerock

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England has long fascinated both historians and dance historians. The galliard, the pavan, and the coranto were the contemporaries of Puritanism, enclosure, and the English Reformation. Most research on dance in Early Modern England, however, has focused on courtly dance, especially dance in the court masque, and recent work continues to share this focus. The goal of this paper is to broaden this focus by concentrating on dancing beyond the court.

Non-courtly dancing has received less attention, presumably because references are scattered and difficult to find. John Playford's *The English Dancing*, first published in 1651, would seem to be an excellent source, but Playford's "country" dances are highly edited and gentrified, if not newly choreographed, dances targeted at courtly circles. Playford himself stresses dance's elite connections in his introduction, and recommends dancing as "a commendable and rare Quality fit for yong Gentlemen."¹ Similarly, *Kemps nine daies vvonder. Performed in a daunce from London to Norwich*, William Kemp's autobiographical account of his marathon morris dance, is frequently cited as one of the few descriptions of popular Elizabethan dancing. But while the people who joined Kemp in dancing included commoners such as butchers and servant girls, Kemp himself was associated with the court; the *Mayors' Court Books* of Norwich refer to him as "Kempe the Lord Chamberleyne his seruante."²

Yet more resources for English historical dance exist. During the past twenty-five years, Records of Early English Drama (REED) collections have been published for sixteen [seventeen with Oxford out this year] different areas of England. Featuring exhaustive listings of drama-related records for a town or county, they also include a significant number of dance references drawn from ecclesiastical and civic records, account books, and other archival materials rarely available outside of public record offices.

These dance references are almost unexamined. In the *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter*, James Stokes, the editor of the REED *Somerset* collection,

published a short study with Ingrid Brainard in 1992 on "The olde Measures" in the West Country: John Willoughby's manuscript," which was critiqued by John Ward in "The olde Measures," in the same publication the following year. While this use of the REED records clearly has important implications for understanding the dancing in the Inns of Court and by extension courtly dancing in general, it examines only one document from one REED collection. Similarly, Audrey Douglas's article "'Owre Thanssynge Day': Parish Dance and Procession in Salisbury" in *English Parish Drama* quotes several REED volumes, but only features the few records that are directly relevant to its examination of the parish "dancing day" in Salisbury.³

The only broader examination of REED dance references I have found is John Forrest's *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750*. Forrest uses material from REED and his morris dance database, *Annals of Early Morris* (1991), to trace overlapping shifts in morris dance patronage, and discredits the unsubstantiated but pervasive theory that morris dancing was "the degenerate remnant of a long-lost druidic fertility ritual."⁴ However, Forrest's history of morris dancing necessarily focuses on the REED records pertaining to morris dancing. A comprehensive examination of general dance references in the REED collections has not yet been attempted.

For my Masters thesis in Early Modern History at Sussex University, I examined the sixteen extant REED collections' dance references; these ranged from one-line records of payments to morris dancers, to lengthy dance-related court cases and petitions. This paper, however, although based on my thesis research, will focus on dance references of particular interest to dance historians and reconstructors.

REED Dance References

[Image 1: Coverage of REED Collections as of 2003.]⁵

Two types of records make up the vast majority of REED dance references: these are payments to dancers and prosecutions for dancing. Almost every region had a majority of one or the other. [Explanation of Image 1.]⁶

The typical payment for dancing is brief and straightforward such as, “And 20d given to dancers of Dover,” or “ffidlers and dauncers 2 s.”⁷ Variants include the type of dancer such as morris dancer, ropedancer, or dance teacher; the age or sex of the dancer; and the parish or nationality of travelling performers. In Cambridge and in the earliest records payments are written in Latin, but for the most part, they are recorded in English. Dance payment records are found in town treasurer, churchwarden, and household account books.

The typical prosecution in the REED collections is for dancing on Sundays or holy days, generally in the time of divine service. Almost all of these legal dance references are found in bishop or archbishop court books, except when dancing accompanied a civic disturbance or offence. The first person cited is usually the host or owner of the house or alehouse, next are minstrels or fiddlers who provided dance music, and last are any specific persons reported to have been dancing at the event. As dancing in the time of divine service was a religious offence, the punishment was performing penance publicly in church, often while wearing a white sheet. Failure to appear before the court or to perform penance generally resulted in excommunication. Prosecutions for dancing on Sundays are the most common REED dance reference, and comprise over 70% of the approximately 550 references I examined.

Dances Specified by Name

The REED records also mention specific dances (although not nearly as many as one might wish). Morris dance is the most common dance specified, but it is also the one about which we know most, so I will highlight the other dances and types of dances mentioned instead.

The *Journal of Nicholas Assheton of Downham* names several dances that were performed for James I in Lancashire on his return progress from Scotland in 1617; “Then, about ten or eleven o’clock, a maske of noblemen, knights, gentlemen, and courtiers, afore the King, in the middle round, in the garden. Some speeches: of the rest, dancing the Huckler, Tom Bedlo, and the Cowp Justice of Peace.”⁸ In his editorial notes, David George writes that these dances were probably jigs, but as they occurred at the end of a masque, they were just as likely to be country dances.⁹

The long dance is mentioned frequently in the South West counties. In Shafesbury in Dorset, an *Indenture Concerning Enmore Green* notes that as part of Lord’s Day or Holy rood celebrations, the mayor, burgesses and inhabitants do a long dance walking or dancing

hand in hand.¹⁰ This is particularly interesting because although it sounds like an early sixteenth-century community ritual, it is actually the latest dance reference in the REED collections, from 1662. An earlier example comes from Wells in Somerset in 1607-8. Many of the statements in the court case *Hole v. White et al* describe long dances in addition to morris dances winding through the streets; “And did you and your Companye thence Contynewe Dancinge the Longe dance till you did meete the Complainant” one defendant was asked.¹¹ The editorial notes for the *Dorset/Cornwall* collection describe a specific version of the long dance. The furry dance (presumably an old spelling of fury) is “a long line of specially-selected dancers [that] weaves in and out of houses and gardens, symbolically “driving out evil and darkness to let in goodness and light.”¹²

Another popular, if somewhat racier, dance was the cushion dance. [Image 2: The Cushion Dance]¹³ The *Compert Book for Bishop’s Peculiar* for Catcott in Somerset for 1625 registers an accusation against William Trelognie for selling ale and having dancing on Sundays during the summer. He “did a dawnce a daunce called the cushion daunce by meanes wheareof hee gathered mutch companie to his house of younge men, and maydens which daunce they daunced in the Churchyard there vppon the Sabboth daye.”¹⁴ According to the charge, Trelognie used his own dancing of the cushion dance as a way to gather a group of dancers who then danced a variety of dances in the churchyard.

The *Gloucester Diocese Consistory Court Deposition Books* give a slightly more detailed description of the cushion dance. The deponent saw Mr Willmott, Tortworth’s recently suspended parish minister, “amongest diuers others of his parishioners dance and lay a Cushion on the ground and kneele downe vppon 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.”¹⁵ Another witness reported that Mr Willmott ‘ledd the Cushin dawnce with a Cushin on his sholder and kneeled downe as the order of the dawnce is, and kissed one goodwife Hickers.”¹⁶ A hypothetical reconstruction might have a man dancing with a cushion on his shoulder, choosing a lady before whom he lays the cushion, kneeling down on it and kissing the lady (although this seems at bit awkward), and then dancing away. Then each of the other men performing the dance would also kneel and kiss the lady in turn. The entire dance might then repeat with a different dancer choosing a different lady. [Compare this description with Image 2.]¹⁷ That the cushion dance

is mentioned in both Somerset and Gloucestershire suggests widespread popularity.

While the combination of kissing and dancing in the cushion dance was bound to rouse ire amongst religious reformers (especially since the Gloucester incident involved a suspended cleric kissing a married woman in the church house), the fact that the kissing took place publicly within the structured format of a dance regulated and controlled its effects. A decidedly unregulated dance, however, was mentioned in the 1639-40 entry in the *Ex Officio Act Book* for Bridgwater in Somerset. Henry Pillchorne was one of a number of men in Somerset who “daunced with his britches downe about his heeles.”¹⁸ Moreover, in his testimony, Pillchorne named his dance; he “said he did daunce Piddecocke bolt vp right, and readie to fight.”¹⁹ It is possible that Pillchorne was making a pun on “Wooddicock,” one of the dances included in Playford’s 1651 *English Dancing Master*, although the pun would only have been on the name and not the format of the dance, which, at least in Playford’s version, is for three couples.²⁰

While Henry Pillchorne’s “Piddecocke” may allude to a well-known dance, the manner of his performance was hardly typical. One of the benefits of the REED collections is not only do they give a sense of the *ordinary* manner of dancing in England, but they also feature a fair number of references to the *extraordinary*. In my thesis I examined three very different types of unusual dancing that periodically crop up in the REED collections: lewd dancing, cross-dressed dancing, and rope dancing. While the first two categories certainly make entertaining reading, here I will concentrate on the third (and least known category) rope dancing.

Rope Dancing

[Image 3: Barn-stormers in Holland, c. 1635]²¹

Rope dancing is mentioned in a variety of sources across England: in the Midlands, in Newcastle upon Tyne, and in Bristol. Moreover half of Norwich’s ten dance references are to rope dancing.

But to what exactly does rope dancing refer? Nowadays we see tightrope walkers from time to time, men and women in skin-tight garments doing arabesques and handstands on ropes high above our heads at circuses or street fairs. But how similar is this image to the type of activities performed on ropes in Early Modern England?

Happily for dance historians, the eighteenth-century scholar Dr John Taylor’s manuscript collection includes a wonderfully detailed description of rope dancing from

1589-90. In this account, the ropedancer, a Hungarian travelling with the Queen’s Players (who might be none other than the Turk recorded as travelling with the Queen’s Players in several other accounts), performs a series of feats not unfamiliar to the modern circusgoer. In bare feet he traversed a rope tied between poles, “daunsinge and turninge hym sellff” while holding a long pole. Then he put on “two broadeshues of copper” without using his hands, crossed the rope a few more times, and putting the pole aside, “shewyd woonderfull feates and knackes in fallinge his head and handes downewardes and hangid at the roape by his feete and assendid vp agayne and after that hangid by his handes and all his feete & body downewardes and turnid hys body backward & forward betwyxt his handes & the rope as nymbell as yf it had been an eele.”²² While these feats were certainly not for the amateur, [note the full Elizabethan woman’s costume worn by the ropedancer in Image 3,] aside from the copper shoes, they sound quite similar to modern acrobatic rope tricks.

This might have been the first time that Shrewsbury residents had seen rope dancing, “the licke was neuer seene of the inhabitantes there before that tyme,” writes the author, but it was certainly not their last opportunity.²³ The Queen’s Players and their ropedancer returned to Shropshire in the following year. A payment in the 1590-1 *Chamberlain’s Accounts* for Bridgnorth reads, “Item bestowed vpon the Queenes players at the dauncinge on the Rop by debenter x s.”²⁴ Apparently the Queen’s Players toured with a ropedancer who was paid along with them.

In Chester, there is simply a record of ropedancers (as opposed to a payment) in the *Mayors List II* for 1606-7; “A strange man Came to this Cittye and his wife & the[y] did daunce vpon a Rope. Tyed over Crosse the streete: with other pleasante trickes: which was rare to the behoulders.”²⁵ The main points are that both a man and a woman perform, they are strangers to Chester, and that either specific “pleasante trickes” or their performance in general is considered “rare.” There is also the detail that the rope was tied over a street, presumably with a crowd of spectators below.

In Gloucester, *Gifts and rewards* for the 1636-7 *Corporation Chamberlains’ Accounts* records an “Item payd vnto Vincente that Caries Sightes / and shewes with dauncing on the Ropp wch was by / order of the Iustices.”²⁶ As Vincent was paid the extremely large sum of 1 pound, 6 shillings and 8 pence, the “Sightes and shewes” that accompanied the rope dancing must have been quite substantial.

In Coventry, one third of the dance references are to rope dancing. While the first dance reference for Coventry is from 1482, all of the references to rope dancing -- payments listed in the *Chamberlains' and Wardens' Account Books* -- occur between 1609 and 1642. The amount paid to ropedancers varies from 5 shillings to "a man that would have Dawnced vpon the rope" in 1609, to 10 shillings for "William Vincent who had commission for him and his company to daunce vpon the ropes & shew other trickes of legerdemeane" in 1642, but since the exact number of performers is unknown, it is often difficult to determine if there was a standard fee.²⁷ Moreover further inspection reveals that the 1609 entry was actually for *not* dancing, "paid the 23 of Maie to a man that would have Dawnced vpon the rope v s."²⁸ It is unknown whether the man did not dance for practical reasons such as weather or plague, or whether he was paid not to dance to avoid religious controversy from reformers, especially as the day he was going to perform on, 23 May, was in the heart of the spring festival season.

Bristol in the nearby West Country also had a ropedancer come to town. Listed in the 1589-90 *Mayor's Audits* is an appearance of the Queen's Players, "which tumbled before them at the ffree schole where was tumblinge shewen also by a Turcke vpon a Rope. with runninge on the same - xxx s. et for wyne drancke there... ij s."²⁹ While not specifically referring to dancing, the "Turcke vpon a Rope" in Bristol can be safely assumed to be the same performer as the rope dancer with the Queen's Players mentioned earlier.

In Newcastle upon Tyne there is one reference to rope dancing in the *Chamberlains' Account Books* for 1600, "Paide wche was given to a ffrenchman a fune ambule or rope walker playing before mr maior the aldermen with others in the Manners commanded to paie i s."³⁰

In Norwich at least half of the dance-related records refer to rope dancing, ranging in date from 1589-1620. Although there is the typical account of 40 shillings given on "the xxijth of Apriell to the Quenes men when the Turke wente vponn Roppes at newhall" listed in the 1589-90 *Chamberlains' Accounts X*, most of the records regard licenses.³¹

Apparently Norwich in the early 17th century was quite strict about licenses for performing. While "Iaques Babell A ffrenchman did shewe A lycense from Lords of the Counsell to play vponn A Roape and other actyvitie dated in Aprill 1607" and was allowed to perform in 1608-9, not everyone's license was deemed

sufficient.³² *Mayors' Court Books XV* for 1616-17 record:

John De Rue and Ieronimo Galt ffrenchmen brought before mr Maior in the Counsell Chamber A Lycence Dated the 23th of ffebruary in the xiiijth yeare of the Reigne of Quene Elizabeth & in the yeare of our Lord 1616 thereby authorisinge the said Iohn De Rue and Ieronimo Galt ffrenchmen to sett forth & shewe rare feates of Actiuity with Dancinge on the Ropes performed by a woman & also A Baboone that can doe strange feates, And because the lycence semeth not to be sufficient they are forbidden to play.³³

This account does not specify why the license was insufficient, possibly because it was initially granted in the reign of the prior monarch. (Still one cannot help wondering whether the baboon helped or hindered their cause!)

Another license was deemed insufficient in 1620, but this is more surprising given that the performers, William Peadle Sr and Jr and Abraham Peadle, had previously performed in Norwich in 1616 and 1618 "they with the rest of their Company are lycensed to vse dancinge on the Roape and other feates of actiuity."³⁴ Touring ropedancers -- they were in Coventry in 29 November 1621 as noted previously -- it appears from three entries in the *Mayors' Court Books* that the Peadles passed through Norwich in June every other year. In 1620, however, they still had the same license that they'd had in 1616 and 1618, "a warrant vnder his maiesties Signett and signed with his maiesties hand Dated the xiiijth of May in the ffourteenth yere of his Maiesties Reigne."³⁵ They were denied permission to perform -- nominally for the expired license, but the "evill" influence named in the explanation suggests that religious prejudices against dancing were also in effect:

nowe for that the evill accruinge to this Citty by permission of such sportes ys well knowne to this Company aswell by concourse of people as for many other inconveniences Therefore they are absolutely forbidden to play in this Citty.³⁶

Sabbath profanation was not the issue as the Peadles were previously only allowed to perform Wednesday through Saturday in 1616 and on Tuesday and Wednesday in 1618. Therefore, a general antagonism

towards “such sportes” and/or the crowds that gathered to watch them seems the only explanation. This antagonism is confirmed by the other mention of “feates of actiuty” in the *Mayors’ Court Books XV* for 1619-20 where John Dorman was paid 22 shillings to “forbeare his feates of actiuty in this Cytty.”³⁷ Dorman’s license was from the Lord of Suffolk and issued in March of 1618. The license must still have been considered valid, or Dorman presumably would have been turned away sans payment. If religion or crowd control were matters of concern, however, paying a performer not to perform, even a sum as high as 22 shillings, might be the least controversial choice.

Conclusions

New and exciting work on dancing in the court masque has increased interest in courtly dance in recent years, but popular dancing is still sadly neglected. The court masque is a distinctive and fascinating site for dancing, but examining dance references in local archives is important for understanding dancing habits outside of the court. As the majority of the dance references in the Records of Early English Drama collections are to dancing in towns and villages, they provide an excellent alternative, or rather supplement, to masque and courtly dance accounts. Local archives contain a variety of relevant civic and ecclesiastical records as well as journals and correspondence. Sometimes specific dances or dancers are named; at other times dancing is simply one of a list of pastimes or entertainments. Payments to morris dancers and prosecutions for dancing during divine services are common to all regions examined, but the REED collections contain many strange and unique dance records as well. Moreover they reveal that regional differences in politics and religion influenced the perception and practice of dancing.

While I have concentrated on records that hint at choreography and offer reconstructive potential, the REED dance references suggest that dancing played an important role in the Protestant reformation and Puritan debates in England. Whether or not dancing should be allowed on Sundays was a particularly controversial topic under the later Tudors and the Stuarts. The Book of Sports issued by James I in 1618 and reissued under Charles I included dancing and morris dancing in its list of allowable Sunday pastimes; at the same time Puritan reformers became increasingly vehement about the sinfulness of engaging in recreational activities on the Sabbath.³⁸

Whereas the court masque presented dancing as a unifying and harmonious medium embodying the divine order of the cosmos, dancing outside of the court was more open to interpretation. Dancing at church ales and May games could affirm the unity and hierarchy of the community, but it could also deepen the growing gap between traditionalists and reformers. Dancing figured in debates on Sabbath observance and the proper relationship of the church and the community -- on one side dancing served as a symbol of sinful lust and disorder, on the other, of the good ole days of honest recreation and community involvement. Dancing played an important role in weekly and seasonal rituals, and in increasingly heated debates on their observance.³⁹

Subsequent REED publications will further extend the number and type of resources available, but the current collections already point to many areas that warrant closer scrutiny. The gender and age of dancers; prosecution of hosts, widows, and musicians; average payments to dancers and dance teachers; regional variations in visitation articles; in-depth studies of specific incidents; and the routes of travelling dance groups and ropedancers are just some of the topics that beg for investigation.

In the meantime, even an initial survey of the REED collections’ dance references such as that presented here reveals the centrality of dancing in Early Modern England. The abundant documentation of dance prosecutions amassed in the Records of Early English Drama collections demonstrates the persistence and commitment of dancers defending their dancing traditions and of religious reformers bent on abolishing them. Dancing was not an occasional phenomenon in Early Modern England, but an integral, if controversial, part of weekly and seasonal rituals of devotion and celebration.

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Endnotes

¹ John Playford, *The English Dancing Master: or, Plaine and easie Rules for the Dancing of Country Dances, with the Tune to each Dance.*, ed. Hugh Mellor and Leslie Bridgewater (1651; London: Dance Books Ltd., 1933, 1984), p. x.

² David Galloway, ed., *Norwich 1540-1642* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 114-5.

³ Audrey Douglas, "'Owre Thanssynge Day": Parish Dance and Procession in Salisbury,' in *English Parish Drama*, ed. Alexandra Johnston and Wim Hüskén (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 41-56.

⁴ Jeremy H. Kessler, 'Review: The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750,' *American Morris Newsletter* (December 2000), available at http://www.thedonkey.org/Recycling/review_history_morris.html (22 July 2003).

⁵ Image 1. E. F. Winerock, "Unmasquing' the Dance: Alternative Sources and Interpretations of Dancing in Early Modern England" (M.A., University of Sussex, 2003), Appendix 1, Figure 1.

⁶ Image 1 shows that most of the REED collections are for coastal and western counties, that each county has a significant pro or antdance bias, and that pro or antdance counties are clustered together.

⁷ James M. Gibson, ed., *Kent: Diocese of Canterbury*, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 824, 915.

⁸ David George, ed., *Lancashire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 146.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 346-7.

¹⁰ Rosalind Conklin Hays, C. E. McGee, Sally Joyce, and Evelyn Newlyn, eds., *Dorset/Cornwall* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 294.

¹¹ James Stokes, ed., *Somerset, including Bath*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 275-6.

¹² Hays, McGee, Joyce, and Newlyn, eds., *Dorset/Cornwall*, p. 414.

¹³ Image 2. Lilly Grove Frazer, with illustrations by Percy Macquoid, *Dancing* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), p. 158, available at <http://www.vintagedance.info/dance/c2.pl?book=077> (22 July 2003).

¹⁴ Stokes, ed., *Somerset*, p. 72.

¹⁵ Audrey Douglas, ed., *Cumberland/Westmoreland/Gloucestershire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 343.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ The Gloucester deposition describes the man kneeling on the cushion. However, Image 2, which is based on the 1698 Playford description of the cushion dance, depicts the woman kneeling on the cushion.

¹⁸ Stokes, ed., *Somerset*, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Playford, *The English Dancing Master*, p. 15.

²¹ Image 3. Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, 3 vols., vol. II: 1576 to 1660, Part II (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), Plate XXXI.

²² J. Alan B. Somerset, ed., *Shropshire*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 247.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁵ Lawrence Clopper, ed., *Chester* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 218.

²⁶ Douglas, ed., *Cumberland*, p. 326.

²⁷ R. W. Ingram, ed., *Coventry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 376, 411, 439, 447.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

²⁹ Mark Pilkinton, ed., *Bristol* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 135-6.

³⁰ J. J. Anderson, ed., *Newcastle upon Tyne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 136.

³¹ Galloway, ed., *Norwich*, p. 96.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 147, 156.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See Patrick Collinson's *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988).

³⁹ See Ronald Hutton's *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 1996).