

Hypothesizing a *Chorea Speculativa* English Renaissance Dance in Theory and Practice

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When scholars mention dancing in works on Renaissance and early modern England, they tend to cite from a limited number of sources, generally Phillip Stubbes' antitheatrical treatise, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) or Sir John Davies's poem *Orchestra Or a Poeme of Dauncing* (1596). In *The Anatomie of Abuses*, Stubbes defines dancing as "...an introduction to whoredom, a preparative to wantonness, a provocative to uncleanness, & an introit to all kind of lewdness..."¹ In notoriously vivid detail, Stubbes rails against activities that accompany dancing:

"For what clipping, what culling, what kissing and bussing, what smooching & slobbering one of another, what filthy groping and unclean handling is not practised every where in these dancings"?"²

In these passages, Stubbes presents dancing as a highly problematic activity that either involves or leads to illicit sexual encounters and general troublemaking.³

The *Orchestra* presents dancing rather differently. Davies describes dancing as the means by which order is imposed on chaos. The lengthy, allegorical poem uses dancing as the symbol of harmony and accord amongst planets, people, or ideas:

Dancing itself both love and harmony,
Where all agree, and all in order move;
Dancing the Art that all Arts doe
approve:
The faire Character of the worlds
consent,
The heavens' true figure, and the earth's
ornament.⁴

According to Davies, the symmetrical choreography of figured dances mirrors and makes manifest the divine order of the cosmos.

Up until recently, these and a few similar passages have provided historians and literary scholars with everything they wanted to say about dancing in the early modern world. When an antidance reference was required, they cited Stubbes; when a pro-dance reference was needed, they cited Davies.

However, the selective and decontextualized quoting of these passages belies the complexity and ambiguity of their authors' views, not to mention those of the early modern society more generally. Stubbes, for example, in the Preface to *The Anatomie* states very clearly:

...concerning dancing, I would not have thee (good Reader) to think that I condemn the exercise itself altogether, for I know the wisest Sages and the Godliest Fathers and Patriarchs that ever lived, have now and then used the same, as David, Solomon, and many others: but my words do touch & concern the Abuses thereof only.⁵

Phillip Stubbes might not have been an active proponent of dancing, but he was not categorically opposed to it either; rather he wanted to highlight and correct what he saw as the decline from the dancing described in the Bible to the dancing practices of his own day.

Similarly, Sir John Davies presents multiple views of dancing in his poem. After listening to a series of glowing tributes to dancing, Penelope, the heroine, reminds the dance enthusiast,

What mean the Mermaids when they
dance and sing
But certain death unto the Mariner?
What tidings doe the dancing Dolphins
bring
But that some dangerous storm
approacheth near?⁶

Davies, through the voice of Penelope, indicates his awareness that dancing can be dangerous, and a harbinger of misfortune. Penelope argues that dancing reveals “vainness, frenzy, and disorder.”⁷ In these verses Davies presents dancing as problematic and disorderly, contradicting his earlier descriptions of dancing as the embodiment of cosmic order and harmony.

Phillip Stubbes and Sir John Davies were contemporaries, both were writing about dancing in late Elizabethan England, and editions of *The Anatomie of Abuses* and *Orchestra* overlapped publication years, even if they appealed to different audiences. How do we reconcile their explanations of dancing’s significance? How do we explain the seemingly contradictory views expressed within a single author’s own works? Writings by Mark Franko and Alessandro Arcangeli, and Skiles Howard’s article, “Rival Discourses of Dancing in Early Modern England,” (published in *Studies in English Literature* in 1996) touch on some of these questions. Skiles Howard, for example, identifies five “discourses” of dancing: the patriarchal, the mercantile, the medical, the moralistic, and the sovereign discourse,⁸ and she cites the standard passages from both Stubbes and Davies – Stubbes under the moralistic discourse, and Davies under the sovereign. Her analysis accounts for one person expressing contradictory views, as an individual can engage in different discourses. However, while Howard’s categories may be helpful for modern scholars, there is little evidence that men and women in the early modern world thought of dancing in terms of mercantile discourses. How might they have understood and selected from the multiple meanings of dance?

It is the intention of this paper (and one of the goals of my dissertation from which it is drawn) to relate the varied and sometimes contradictory interpretations of dancing in Renaissance and early modern England and Europe, incorporating them into a conceptual framework that explains how a single author, such as Sir John Davies, can simultaneously conceive of dancing as a symbolic representation of cosmic order, a visible manifestation of vanity, and a practical skill.⁹ Where I depart from Howard’s method is that I

am interested in classifications of dance that are based on Renaissance, not modern, theories.

In *Music in the English Courtly Masque, 1604-1640*, Peter Walls defines *musica speculativa* as, “theories describing the ultimate position of music in the created universe transmitted from ancient Greek sources to the mainstream of Western European thought by Boethius in the early sixth century.”¹⁰ Humanists revived and expanded on *musica speculativa* in the Renaissance, and brought it into the university curriculum. *Musica speculativa*, the speculative, or theoretical approach to music, was commonly divided into two components – *musica mundana* (macrocosmic harmony of the spheres), and *musica humana* (harmony of the healthy human body and, metaphorically, the state). These were joined by a third category, *musica instrumentalis* (music one hears, playing of instruments), or as at it was sometimes called, *musica practica*. According to Walls, these categories were viewed, “not as separate phenomena, but as different aspects or manifestations of a universal harmony.”¹¹ The tripartite system distinguished between theoretical and practical approaches, but incorporated them into a single, comprehensive system.¹² Considered both a science and an art, *musica speculativa* and *musica practica* acknowledged how music could be simultaneously symbolic and concrete.

Unfortunately for dance historians, Renaissance texts do not offer a parallel classification system for dance types, what one might call a *chorea speculativa*. However, the Boethian music categories provide a useful substitute and can be adapted to create a model for analysing dance. These parallel categories I have named: *chorea mundana* for the divinely choreographed dance of the planets; *chorea humana* for the harmonious functioning of the State (order) and the body (grace), which was sometimes explained as the manifestation of virtue through movement; and *chorea practica* for the practical study and performance of dance steps and choreographies.¹³ (Due to time constraints, this paper can only briefly describe each classification to indicate how records fit the proposed *chorea* categories. However, I would be happy to provide more examples or further details subsequently.)

Chorea Mundana

Sir John Davies' *Orchestra*, mentioned earlier, provides the most elaborate and detailed articulation of the *chorea mundana*, developing dancing as a metaphor for, and manifestation of, the divine order of the cosmos. However, other authors also describe dancing in cosmic terms. In *The Booke Named the Governour* (1531), which contains seven chapters on dancing, Sir Thomas Elyot cites Plato as the precedent for his references to the cosmic dance:

The interpreters of Plato do think that the wonderful and incomprehensible order of the celestial bodies, I mean stars and planets, and their motions harmonical, gave to them... a semblable motion, which they called dancing or saltation....¹⁴

Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) expresses a similar idea, "The Sun and Moon (some say) dance about the earth... they turn round, jump and trace..."¹⁵ As Alan Brissenden writes in *Shakespeare and the Dance*, "Since number and pattern are essential to it, dance was seen as the means by which order came out of primal chaos."¹⁶ Whether in describing the creation of the world, or the subsequent motion of heavenly bodies within it, authors such as Davies, Elyot, and Burton considered dancing an appropriate metaphor to describe the movements of the planets, and to convey a sense of the beauty and wonder of the natural world and its order and hierarchy.

Chorea Humana

Dancing's relevance to wonder, beauty, order, and hierarchy was hardly restricted to planetary motion. The *chorea humana* category describes dancing that revealed the presence (or absence) of harmony in human affairs, which was made manifest by grace in the body and order in institutions.

For Sir Thomas Elyot, the graceful and harmonious movements of the dancer both cultivated and revealed nobility and virtue. Elyot writes:

Now because there is no pastime to be compared to that, wherein may be found both recreation and meditation of virtue, I have among all honest pastimes, wherein is exercise of the body, noted dancing....¹⁷

Elyot asserts that remembering dance steps is good for the memory, and dancing promotes virtues like prudence and reflection. Graceful movement reveals a noble mind, while selecting an appropriate dance and style of performance for a particular occasion reflects good judgement.

Baldesar Castiglione shared Elyot's concern with grace and good judgement on the dance floor. In *Il Cortegiano* (1528), translated into English as *The Book of the Courtier* by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561, Castiglione stipulates that a courtier's dancing should be executed "in such fashion that he shall always appear genial and discreet, and that everything he may do or say shall be stamped with grace."¹⁸ Castiglione emphasizes repeatedly that it is crucial that a courtier demonstrate both nobility and ability on the dance floor:

when dancing in the presence of many and in a place full of people, it seems to me that he should preserve a certain dignity, albeit tempered with a lithe and airy grace of movement...¹⁹

A courtier should be graceful and dignified in his dancing, but he must also know which dances are appropriate for the context.

In public, a courtier was discouraged from attempting more complicated, technically demanding steps. Wearing a mask entitled the wearer to dance with more impunity, even if the spectators would have been able to determine the masquer's identity, but generally dancing with what Castiglione calls "*sprezzatura*" or "nonchalance" was recommended.²⁰ Dancing badly insinuated that you lacked the grace inherent in true nobility, but dancing too well implied you were a working professional from an inferior social class. Castiglione and other courtesy manual writers stressed the need to balance these two extremes to achieve a "nonchalant ease" or grace.²¹

One may have noted that up to this point the *chorea humana* has had very little to say about non-elite dancing, other than to avoid it. However, the communal dancing that marked church ales and fundraisers, rites of passage, and religious festivals can also be considered within the classification of the *chorea humana*. Popular dancing in the early modern period was generally sponsored by the Church or by civic officials, so it often reinforced social hierarchies, while strengthening a sense of community.²² Whether at court or in the churchyard, official sponsorship of dancing made it potentially a tool for social control.²³ The practice of using dance to celebrate life cycle events such as weddings and religious festivals such as Christmas occurred at all levels of society, and dancing offered opportunities for self-display to servants and aristocracy alike. However, the types of dances favoured by different ranks of society varied significantly, as did the amount of training or instruction required for mastery.

Chorea Practica

The third category, *chorea practica*, describes records of Renaissance dance in practice. There were dancing masters in Italy and France who wrote dancing manuals for elite or middling status readers. They gave choreographies for dances such as the galliard, and described how to do individual steps like kicks and turns. English archives also mention musicians who taught dancing, and refer to dancing schools at, or at least in the vicinity of, English universities and the Inns of Court, the English law schools.

From 1606 to 1636, the Oxford City Council granted John Bosseley a lease of a room at the Boccardo, the city jail at the North Gate of Oxford. This upper chamber (which was not in the jail itself, but in the same building) was known as the Dancing School.²⁴ Apparently John Bosseley, described as a city musician, ran a lively operation, for the 1610 City Council Minutes record the following amendment:

a Proviso shall be putt into John Bosseley's Lease...not to dance nor suffer any Dancing after ten of the Clock in the night nor before five of the Clock in the morning.²⁵

That this proviso was added just four months after Bosseley had signed the 1610 lease implies that dancing at the school between 10 P.M. and 5 A.M. was a significant enough problem to warrant an amendment. Similarly, the 1612-1613 *Quarter Sessions Examinations* record evidence of late-night dancing. An apprentice encountered the city musician, Robert Cally, around four in the morning, and “desired him to teach him dance & stayed dancing one hour.”²⁶ Although they may not be representative, these records provide concrete evidence of dancing instruction outside of London and the court.

Case Study: Pagitt's Dance Instructions

Having briefly described the three categories, I will now offer an example as to how the proposed *chorea speculativa* may be used to analyze Renaissance dance records and events, drawing on archival material from my dissertation research.

The journal of Justin Pagitt, a student at the Middle Temple of the Inns of Court, contains the following directions in an entry from 1633:

De arte Saltandi [The Art of Dancing]

1. follow your dancing hard till you have got a habit of dancing neatly
2. Care not to dance loftily, as to carry your body sweetly & smoothly away with a graceful comportment
3. In some places hanging steps are very graceful & will give you much ease & time to breath
4. Write the marks for the steps in every dance under the notes of the tune, as the words are in songs.²⁷

These instructions may be notes that Pagitt wrote down after attending a dancing class, general observations, or the recommendations of a peer on how to improve his dancing. One might assume, initially, that these notes are only concerned with the practicalities of executing dance steps properly. However, when considered in terms of the *chorea speculativa*, it becomes clearer that Pagitt's “Art of Dancing” falls under two of the three categories. While he makes no attempt to relate dancing to cosmic harmony or

the dance of the spheres, Pagitt is not only interested in such practical matters as rehearsing, style, timing, and memory aids, but he also shares the concern with grace and nobility discussed above as a central component of the *chorea humana*.

This combination of categories, of which Pagitt's notes are but one example, draws attention to an often overlooked paradox. As Sir Thomas Elyot stresses in the *The Boke Named the Governour* and Fabritio Caroso writes in *Il Ballarino* (1581), dancing was thought to be best suited to the nobility, and the nobility were supposed to take dancing lessons merely to augment their inherent grace. Yet the law student's notes indicate that he was learning tricks like hanging steps that would make him appear graceful, while his first recommendation, "follow yr dancing hard till you have got a habit of dancing neatly," indicates that sufficient effort would produce "effortless" dancing.²⁸ Indeed Caroso makes the bold claim that "through devotion of spirit" to one's dancing, a lower status individual could "become the equal of those created by birth."²⁹ That all and sundry could take lessons to learn how to dance like a nobleman or noblewoman contradicted the tenet of *chorea humana* that asserted that grace was the natural and exclusive province of the nobility. From the perspective of *chorea practica*, however, dancing masters purported that with dedication, time, and energy, anyone could learn to dance well. The *chorea speculativa*, therefore highlights the contradictory views held about dancing lessons, a Renaissance version of the still current debate of nature versus nurture.

Conclusion

Considering these and other printed and archival dance sources in terms of the proposed *chorea speculativa* leads to several observations. Firstly, the views of so-called defenders and critics of dancing were quite similar. Most agreed that dancing could be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the context. Where they disagreed was in defining specific contexts as one or the other; when did an impressive sequence of galliard jumps signify graceful nobility, when did it show inappropriate bravado? Secondly, the most often cited

interpretation of dance in the Renaissance, dance as the embodiment of celestial motion, has been overemphasized. While it was certainly a known and accepted view, of early modern writers on dancing, only Sir John Davies favours it above the other categories. Thirdly, scholars have rightly noted the association of graceful dancing with virtue and self-control, but (apart from the court masque) they have missed the similar associations of orderly dancing with institutional virtue and social control. Finally, the inherent contradiction between *chorea humana* and *chorea practica* has been overlooked. Dancing masters like Fabritio Caroso asserted that the requisite grace of courtly dance was innate and could not be learned at the same time as they attempted to teach it by publishing etiquette tips and step instructions.

That the Renaissance saw a conduct manual explosion suggests pervasive anxiety and confusion about what proper behaviour entailed. Not only dancers and spectators, but also civic, ecclesiastic, and university officials struggled to determine when dancing conveyed order and virtue, and when it undermined these principles. Philip Stubbes might laud the harmonious dancing of the Israelites and denounce the licentious dances of the alehouse in the same treatise, because he could appreciate the symbolism of dance as divine harmony, while simultaneously abhorring the flirtation and physical contact present in the actual execution of dances of his own day. Consequently, I propose the *chorea speculativa* as an imperfect, but useful, framework to highlight the multiple layers of meaning available to Renaissance dancers and audiences, and to help modern-day scholars comprehend the sometimes curious, sometimes contradictory, dance references that caper through the records of the early modern world.

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Endnotes

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- 1 Phillip Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses: containing, a discouerie, or briefe summarie of such notable vices and imperfections, as now raigne in many countreyes of the world: but (especiallye) in a famous ilande called Ailgna* (London: John Kingston for Richard

- Jones, 1583), p. 98. Facsimile available from Early English Books Online (EEBO), <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>.
- 2 Stubbes, *Anatomie*, p. 99.
 - 3 Early English spellings have been silently modernized and apostrophes have been added for possessives in the quotations.
 - 4 Sir John Davies, *Orchestra Or a Poeme of Dauncing* (1596), in *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger and Ruby Nemser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 115, stanza 96.
 - 5 Stubbes, *Anatomie*, introduction (unpaginated).
 - 6 Davies, *Orchestra*, stanza 101.
 - 7 Davies, *Orchestra*, stanza 100.
 - 8 Skiles Howard, "Rival Discourses of Dancing in Early Modern England," *Studies in English Literature* 36.1 (Winter, 1996), p. 32.
 - 9 For the purposes of this paper I am using the terms "early modern," "Renaissance," and "Renaissance dance" loosely so as to encompass records from 1300-1650.
 - 10 Peter Walls, *Music in the English Courtly Masque 1604-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 8.
 - 11 Walls, *Music*, p. 9.
 - 12 Claude Palisca, "Theory, theorists: 14th century," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 30 July 2007), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
 - 13 To mirror *musica humana* exactly, *chorea humana* would be the idea of the state as a living body that functions harmoniously like the limbs of a graceful dancer. This view of dancing is held by Sir Thomas Elyot in *The Boke Named the Governour*, among others. However, as most conduct and dancing manuals discuss dancing as revealing the inner virtues of the dancer, I have expanded the *chorea humana* definition to apply to both individuals and institutions.
 - 14 Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Governour*, ed. H. H. S. Croft, vol. 1 (1531; New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), p. 218. However, as John Major points out in "The Moralization of the Dance in Elyot's Governour," (*Studies in the Renaissance* 5, 1958) this is the only instance where "Elyot shows an awareness of the deeper, metaphysical meaning of the dance" (p. 33). The rest of the work is more concerned with dance as "an exercise in virtue" (p. 33).
 - 15 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (1621; New York: Tudor, 1938), p. 710.
 - 16 Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 3.
 - 17 Elyot, *Boke*, p. 239.
 - 18 Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. and trans. Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (*Il Cortegiano* 1528; Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000), p. 32.
 - 19 Castiglione, *Courtier*, p. 82.
 - 20 Castiglione, *Courtier*, p. 35, p. 324, note 53.
 - 21 Castiglione, *Courtier*, p. 36.
 - 22 See John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1999).
 - 23 See Margo Todd, "Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community: The Persistence of Popular Festivities in Early Modern Scotland," *The Journal of British Studies* 39.2 (April 2000), pp. 123-156.
 - 24 *REED Oxford*, pp. 397-398.
 - 25 *REED Oxford*, p. 389.
 - 26 *REED Cheshire*, p. 391.
 - 27 Walls, *Music*, p. 114.
 - 28 Walls, *Music*, p. 114.
 - 29 Translation quoted from Judy Smith, "The Art of Good Dancing - Noble Birth and Skilled Nonchalance. England 1580-1630," *Historical Dance* 2.5 (1986-1987), p. 30.

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Note: In the original publication, the majority of the conclusion was accidentally omitted. Here it is included, but the pagination is thus off by one page.