

Staging Dance in English Renaissance Drama

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Abstract

*Although dance in the English court masque has recently received some much deserved attention, dance references in plays of the same period have remained relatively unexplored. This paper addresses this silence by examining dance staging in dramatic works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, demonstrating how playwrights used dancing to convey a range of character traits and to further plot developments, as well as to denote love, lust, and celebration. The paper concludes with observations on staging movement in modern-day productions of early plays, drawing on the author's experience as dance consultant for the Toronto-based Shakespeare and the Queen's Men project.**

My first experience with dance dramaturgy occurred while I was an undergraduate student at Princeton University. I was taking an English seminar on *The Winter's Tale* (first performed c.1611, published 1623). The semester-long course examined the Shakespeare play in great detail, paying equal attention to text and performance. The final project was to stage our own version of the play, complete with music, costumes, and lighting. As the seminar only had nine students—eight women and one man—we all played many roles, both within the play and as the production crew. I ended up as costumer and choreographer, in addition to playing Florizel, the dashing young prince, and numerous bit parts. As costumer, I bought some fabric, cut it up, and draped or tied pieces on my fellow actors to represent sashes, capes, and skirts. My responsibilities as choreographer, however, were not so easily fulfilled.

The stage directions for *The Winter's Tale* call for two dances. However, Shakespeare does not describe them. The stage directions simply specify a dance of shepherds and shepherdesses and a dance of twelve satyrs (coincidentally the subject of Anne Daye's early dance panel presentation and workshop yesterday). What was I supposed to do? What had Shakespeare had in mind? What had other choreographers done? A research trip to the library turned up a single book, Alan Brissenden's *Shakespeare and the Dance* (1981). While Brissenden's exposition of the significance of dancing to plot and characterisation in Shakespeare plays was interesting, it was not much use choreographically. Brissenden mentions in passing that the shepherds and shepherdesses may have danced an "orderly brawl" and that the satyrs' dance was "grotesque, with wild leaps and outlandish gestures."¹ However, he offers no explanations as to how to do an "orderly brawl" or what exactly might be meant by "outlandish gestures." There was also the problem of numbers. The dance of satyrs calls for twelve men

* I do not directly address my work as a dance consultant for the Shakespeare and the Queen's Men project in this paper, but that experience informs my readings of Marston and his contemporaries' stage directions.

to enter into a scene in which over half a dozen characters are already on stage. As our cast only had nine people, this was simply not possible. In the end, I decided to cut the dance entirely.

The dance of shepherds and shepherdesses fared only somewhat better. As I was quite at a loss as to how to choreograph a “brawl,” I had to make something up. My creation was a variant on the only social dance I knew—swing dancing—slowed down a lot and dressed up with some “historical” touches inspired by Franco Zeffirelli’s film of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), which I had seen in junior high school. This solution was successful in the sense that it allowed Perdita, the shepherdess princess, to move in such a way that the onstage spectator’s comment, “she dances feately,” did not seem wholly inappropriate. However, as an historically informed, archaeological, or unconstrained performance (to borrow Ken Pierce’s categories from yesterday) it was a dismal failure. This dance did *not* approximate the dance that would have been done in the original 1611 performances. It did *not* feature the dances of real shepherds and shepherdesses. It did not even offer a modern re-envisioning designed to convey some sort of essential message to a modern-day audience. It was simply a dance I made up; a placeholder so that there would be a dance in the performance for the place in the script that said “*Dance of Shepherds and Shepherdesses*.”

I must admit that there were moments when I blamed Shakespeare for my lacklustre results. If it mattered what dance the shepherds and shepherdesses did, shouldn’t he have given some sort of choreographic description, or the name of the dance, or at least the dance type? And since Shakespeare’s plays have been performed almost continuously for over 400 years, shouldn’t there be written records of what other people had done for those dances? Eventually my curiosity won out, leading to further research, discovering the world of early dance reconstruction, learning what the mysterious “brawl” was, and eventually writing undergraduate, M.A., and Ph.D. theses on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dance. Along the way, I also discovered a handful of English playwrights that do tell us what dances they had in mind.

There are no known English dancing manuals from this time period, but there are choreographic notes on the old measures (a series of English processional dances) and two dancing manuals written by French dancing masters in the employ of George Villiers, the Marquess and future Duke of Buckingham. Unfortunately, these sources lack clear explanations of steps, floor patterns, and music, which can make reconstructions difficult. Therefore, it is helpful to use as supplementary sources some of the more fully developed French and Italian dancing manuals—most notably Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* (1589), Cesare Negri’s *Le Gratie d’Amore* (1602), and Fabritio Caroso’s *Il Ballarino* (1581) and *La Nobiltà di Dame* (1600). These manuals give instructions on etiquette, explain each of the dance steps, and provide a variety of choreographies with accompanying music. Many of the dances named in English Renaissance plays are described in these dancing manuals, so when used cautiously, these manuals enable reasonable hypotheses about, and reconstructions of, dancing for English Renaissance plays.

Dancing in English Renaissance plays is usually indicated by infamously brief and cryptic phrases such as, “*A Daunce*” or “*They Daunce*,” but there are a few plays by contemporaries of Shakespeare that provide more detailed stage directions or give

choreographic descriptions in the surrounding text. Among these, plays by John Marston are notably overrepresented. Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson's *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (1999) collates stage directions from all known extant plays of the period. The dance entries indicate that John Marston was more likely than any other playwright to name the dances that were to be performed, rather than merely indicating that there should be a dance. Scores of playwrights called for "a dance" or "dancing," but Marston contributed twenty-five percent of the stage directions calling for a coranto, fifty percent for a galliard, thirty-three percent for a volta, thirty percent for the measures, and twenty-nine percent of the stage directions specifying a morris dance.² As there are only ten surviving Marston plays (eleven including *Eastward Ho!*), this is quite an impressive showing.

Marston's stage directions primarily refer to court dances like the galliard, the volta (or lavolta), and the coranto. The galliard, an athletic and physically demanding dance in triple time, was also known as the cinquepace or sinkapace because it consisted of five steps --- four kicks and a closing jump, preferably embellished with a capriole or caper. The caper was a high jump in which the dancer quickly moved his legs forward and back while in the air, similar to the beats in ballet jumps.³ One man or one couple generally danced the galliard, and for the latter, the typical galliard figure featured "the alternation of the gentleman and the lady, each doing a variation to show off before the other."⁴ The galliard was one of the most popular dances in the late Renaissance, and innovation and improvisation were expected. In fact Cesare Negri's *Le Gratie d'Amore* has more than seventy pages on the galliard while Livio Lupi provides two hundred galliard step variations in *Libro di Gagliarda* (1607).⁵

John Marston mentions the galliard and the caper frequently, and gives stage directions for at least two galliards. In *Jack Drum's Entertainment* (1601), Sir Edward calls for dancing on the green to celebrate thwarting Pasquill's suicide and Planet's murder:

... Come, sound Musicke there,
 What Gallants have you ne're a Page can entertaine
 This pleasing time with some French brawle or Song?
 What shall we have a Galliard?⁶

The subsequent stage direction simply states, "A Galliard," but we can glean a bit more from the text. Sir Edward initially inquires if there is a page who could entertain them, and after the dance he says, "Good Boy Ifaith, I would thou hadst more roome" (Act V, p. 61). Clearly, one person, a boy or young man, danced this galliard, rather than a couple.

Marston's play *The Insatiate Countess* (1613, also attributed to Lewis Machin and William Barkstead) likewise contains a man's solo galliard. The dance is part of a masque performed within the play. After the masquers have danced with the ladies in Act II, the host, Roberto, invites them to sit and rest: "Sit, ladies, sit, you have had standing long."⁷ Guido, one of the masquers, in the meantime, entertains them with a dance. The stage direction says, "Guido dances a Lavolta, or a Galliard, and / in the midst of it falleth into the bride's lap, / but straight leaps up, and danceth it out" (II.i.154.1-3). In other words, Guido starts dancing, falls onto a spectator, gets back up, and finishes the dance.

This is a curious instruction. It narrates several actions, and is particularly long and detailed for a description of dancing. Perhaps this is because of its importance; Marston uses the fall to further the plot. Guido falls into the lap of Isabella, who promptly falls in love with him. As Isabella is the bride being honoured by the masque, and the groom is someone else entirely, the dancing leads to a key plot twist. Moreover, that Guido picks himself up again and continues dancing also reveals a great deal about his personality; he remains focused in spite of mishaps and recovers gracefully from a fall. Finally, the scenario gives clues about blocking and choreography. Isabella must be sitting close enough to the dance floor that Guido is able to fall into her lap, while the actor playing Guido must be especially aware of his movements in space so as to fall in the right place at the right time.

What is confounding to the dance historian, however, is the first phrase: “*Guido dances a Lavolta, or a Galliard.*” The volta was the most scandalous and risqué dance in the Renaissance canon. Some dancing masters like Thoinot Arbeau questioned whether it ought to be danced at all: “I leave it to you to judge whether it is a becoming thing for a young girl to take long strides and separations of the legs, and whether in this lavolta both honour and health are not involved and at stake.”⁸ The volta’s association with licentiousness would explain why Marston suggests it as the dance that feeds Isabella’s illicit love for Guido, except for one problem. The volta, according to all known sources, was a couple dance: “the couple travels about the room then revolves on the spot, with the gentleman lifting his lady into the air and helping her up with his thigh.”⁹ It would be quite difficult for a gentleman to dance a volta by himself. It makes much more sense that Guido would have danced a galliard. Why Marston, who seems quite familiar with a variety of dances, would even suggest the volta as an option for a man’s solo remains a mystery.¹⁰

Another galliard, or rather some galliard steps, occurs in *The Malcontent* (1604). The character Guerrino describes a supposedly simple dance, “Biancha’s Brawl,” to his fellow courtiers:

Why, 'tis but singles on the left, two on the right,
three doubles forward, a traverse of six round; do this
twice, three singles side, galliard trick-of-twenty, coranto-
pace; a figure of eight, three singles broken down, come
up, meet, two doubles, fall back, and then honor.¹¹

Some of these steps such as singles and doubles are common to most dances of the period, and figures of eight, meeting, and falling back are typical movement patterns. Similarly, most courtly dances end with an honour, or bow. However, very few of these steps are associated with the branle. Rather they represent a smorgasbord of steps from different courtly and country dances.¹²

The stage directions suggest that the other courtiers dance the steps as Guarino describes. Having attempted to reconstruct this dance, I can confirm the impossibility of dancing the named steps in the time allotted. However, the spastic and abbreviated results if one tries are hilarious for the audience. Embracing the scene’s comic potential gives a very different reading from Philip Finkelpearl’s interpretation of the same passage: “Life in the palace is imaged by a symbolic dance ... a “brawle”—the pun alludes to a complex French

dance—resembling in its meaningless intricacy and confusion a “maze” where “honor” is lost.”¹³ Aside from the problem of defining the branle as a complex French dance when it was known for its simplicity and rusticity, Finkelppearl’s view is theoretically defensible. However, dramatically, it does not work. Stressing “meaningless intricacy and confusion” undermines the scene’s humorousness, and implies that Finkelppearl does not realize that (a) the scene is supposed to be funny, and (b) “Biancha’s Branle” is not a real branle but a fantastical collage of different dances designed to literally and figuratively trip up the courtiers who are trying to follow Guerrino’s explanation. Finkelppearl’s reading exemplifies the misinterpretations that can occur when scholars are ignorant of the nuances of Renaissance dance steps.

John Marston might be the playwright who most frequently specifies dances, but he was by no means the only playwright to do so. In John Day’s *Law-Trickes* (1608), the playwright describes devils dancing, a not uncommon phenomenon in early modern plays, but he adds to the usual description the detail of what dance his devils perform.¹⁴ In Act IV, the courtier Julse tells Duke Ferneze about the strange doings of his son, Polymetes, who has devils as regular visitors:

I tell you my Lord, comming a bruptly as your honor or any else may do to the Princes chamber, about some ordinarie service, a found him in his study, and a company of botlnos'd Devils dauncing the Irish hay about him, which on the sudden so startled the poore boy, as a cleane lost his wittes, and ever since talkes thus idle, as your Excelence hath heard him.¹⁵

In this passage, the playwright through the character of Julse specifies that the devils dance an Irish hay. The hay was a dance figure in which dancers wove in and out of each other in the manner of modern-day maypole dancers; the hay could be danced in a circle or in a line with as few as three dancers.¹⁶ There is no known choreography for a specifically Irish hay, but it was apparently a lively and active dance with devilish connotations. In Thomas Dekker’s *A Strange Horse-Race* (1613), damned souls in Hell dance “an infernall Irish-hay, full of mad and wilde changes.”¹⁷ The choreography involved “skipping to and fro,” and the dancing souls “did bobbe up and downe.”¹⁸ This boisterous movement style would surely have suited the bottlenosed devils whose dancing so startles the Duke’s son in *Law-Trickes*.¹⁹

Thanks to the survival of dancing manuals from the period, when an English playwright mentions a specific dance such as a galliard or hay in one of his plays, we have a good, general idea of what those dances looked like. At the same time, we do not know specifically how they were staged. Uncertainties include the floor pattern, whether the dance was improvised or choreographed, or sometimes even the number of dancers. We do not know the exact musical piece that accompanied the original dance although if we know the dance type, we can select music that matches it. It is also unclear whether a galliard danced on stage differed in significant ways from a galliard danced at court. Finally, as seen in the example of the volta from *The Insatiate Countess*, specifics can create confusion as well as dispel it.

Nevertheless, John Marston’s plays and a handful of others offer some much appreciated details. All of Marston’s plays include staged dances as well as textual

references to dance. These dances vary widely; some are group dances in masques; others are solo performances by a page or courtier. Most are courtly dances, but there are also morris dances and round dances. Both men and women dance solos, and group dances can feature several couples or a mixed circle of dancers. There is even a dance in Act II of *Antonio and Mellida* (1602) where each lady dances with two gentlemen at the same time.²⁰ The dancers sometimes sing their own accompaniment, but ordinarily they are accompanied by waits, the musicians who played in the music gallery, or by another character onstage. There are certain aspects of Marston's staging of dance that are distinctive, for example, his tendency to kill off characters during masque dances. However, for the most part, Marston employs dance in the same ways and for the same purposes as Shakespeare and many of their contemporaries. Dance is used to introduce or forward a plot point, to illuminate character or personality, and to provide entertainment to on- and off-stage audiences. Therefore, paying attention to the specific dances Marston calls for in his stage directions can help us make better, more historically informed choices about what dances to do when playwrights like Shakespeare simply write as the stage direction: "*Music. They daunce.*"

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Notes

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- ¹ Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 124.
 - ² Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 64-5, 56, 99, 129, 142, 144.
 - ³ Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance*, p. 113.
 - ⁴ Fabritio Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance: A New Translation and Edition of the Nobiltà di Dame (1600)*, ed. and trans. Julia Sutton (New York: Dover Publications, 1986, 1995), p. 40.
 - ⁵ Caroso, *Courtly Dance*, p. 41.
 - ⁶ John Marston, *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, ed. John Farmer (1601; The Tudor Facsimile Texts, 1912), p. 60 (Act V). Hereafter cited by Act and page number in the text.
 - ⁷ John Marston with William Barksted and Lewis Machin, *The Insatiate Countess*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (1613; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 90 (II.i.154). Hereafter cited by line numbers in the text.
 - ⁸ Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography*, ed. Julia Sutton, trans. Mary S. Evans (*Orchésographie* 1589; New York: Dover, 1967), p. 121.
 - ⁹ Anne Daye, comp., *A Lively Shape of Dauncing: Dances of Shakespeare's Time* (Salisbury, Wiltshire: Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society, 1994), p. 50.

- ¹⁰ It is possible that the stage direction refers to the music rather than the dance steps, as galliards and voltas were both in triple time. But the stage direction says, “*Guido dances a Lavolta, or a Galliard,*” which would more likely indicate the type of dance than the dance music. Another possibility is that a less knowledgeable author or editor added the stage direction. However, Act II, scene 1 is one of the few scenes in *The Insatiate Countess* that is almost universally attributed to Marston, and the courtiers discuss Guido’s fall later in the scene. Yet, while Marston refers to the volta in dialogue in *Antonio’s Revenge* and *The Fawn*, this is the only time the volta occurs in a stage direction. Elsewhere when Marston specifies a staged dance it is usually a galliard or a coranto.
- ¹¹ John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. Martin L. Wine (1604; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 77-8 (IV.ii.6-10). Hereafter cited by line numbers in the text.
- ¹² Arbeau, *Orchesography*, p. 128.
- ¹³ Philip Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 180.
- ¹⁴ George Wilkins may also be an author of the play, but see M. E. Borish, “John Day’s *Law Tricks* and George Wilkins” *Modern Philology*, 34, no. 3 (1937), pp. 249-266.
- ¹⁵ John Day, *Law-trickes or, Who would have thought it* (London: Printed by E. Allde for Richard More, 1608), Act IV.
- ¹⁶ See “The Hay Branle” in Arbeau, *Orchesography*, pp. 169-171, and “The Alman Hay” in Ian Payne, *The Almain in Britain, c.1549-c.1675: A Dance Manual from Manuscript Sources*, (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), pp. 50-51.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Dekker, *A strange horse-race at the end of which, comes in the catch-poles masque. And after that the bankrouts banquet: vvhich done, the Divell, falling sicke, makes his last will and testament, this present yeare.* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes for Joseph Hunt, 1613), “The Divels last Will and TESTAMENT.”
- ¹⁸ Dekker, *A strange horse-race*, “The Divels last Will and TESTAMENT.”
- ¹⁹ Unfortunately, these references do not offer enough detail to determine how or if the Irish hay was distinct from the choreography for the hay branle given in Arbeau’s *Orchesography*, pp. 169-171, or the Irish trot in John Playford’s *The English Dancing Master* (1651), as discussed in “Further Light on Playford” in Payne, *The Almain in Britain*, p. 36.
- ²⁰ John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, ed. W. Reavley Gair (1602; Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), Act II.643-650.

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