

The Interplay between Professional and Amateur dancers in Early Modern Festivals.

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I would like to start by asking you to look again at the two images on the flier for this lecture. From them, you will get a glimpse of amateur and professional dancing at the very beginning of the sixteenth century at the Court of Emperor Maximilian I. On the left, you see courtiers finely dressed, the gentlemen wearing masks. They perform a round dance before an aristocratic female audience to the sound of a shawm; a torch bearer is prominent on the right, and a clown - apparently commanding the proceedings - in the background. On the right, you see professional dancers performing acrobatic dances around a central static lady. Again, the torch bearer is well in evidence, two musicians and an audience of ladies who are rather more distanced from the boisterous dancing.

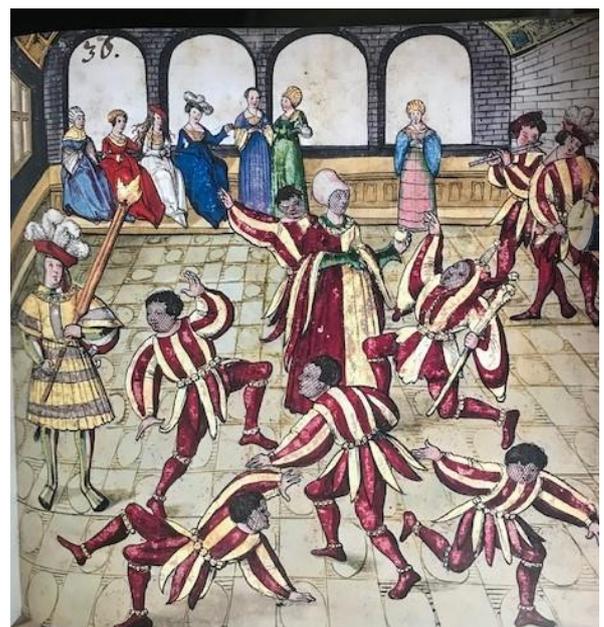


Courtiers dancing (*Freydal*)

Let me now turn to a writer who published his famous book *The Courtier* in the same year that the manuscripts from Maximilian I were created (1516). In this book,

The Courtier, Baldassare Castiglione asserted that knowledge of dancing lasted one's whole life and even when the body no longer permitted an individual to dance, he or she could still appreciate the quality of a dance performance. In Early Modern Europe, knowing how to dance was a necessity for every lady and gentleman at court. However adept a nobleman might be at dancing, and Castiglione made clear that such skill was desirable, he also insisted that extraordinary dancing abilities in a nobleman should never be shown in public - that smacked of the professional, the man in the trade.

The earliest dancing masters, anxious to enhance their status, were very careful in their instructions. There were different rules for male and female dancers, the latter had to perform with discretion and modesty, wrote dancing master Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro in 1463, (for instance flaunting one's leg in public was the trademark of the professional or - in the later seventeenth century of a male dancer). Despite these restrictions on female dancing, this did not mean that the lady did not thoroughly understand all the steps and measures of both dance and music. Grace, balance, lightness of movement, and knowledge of the limitation of the dancing space were the chief criteria.



Acrobatic dancing (*Freydal*)

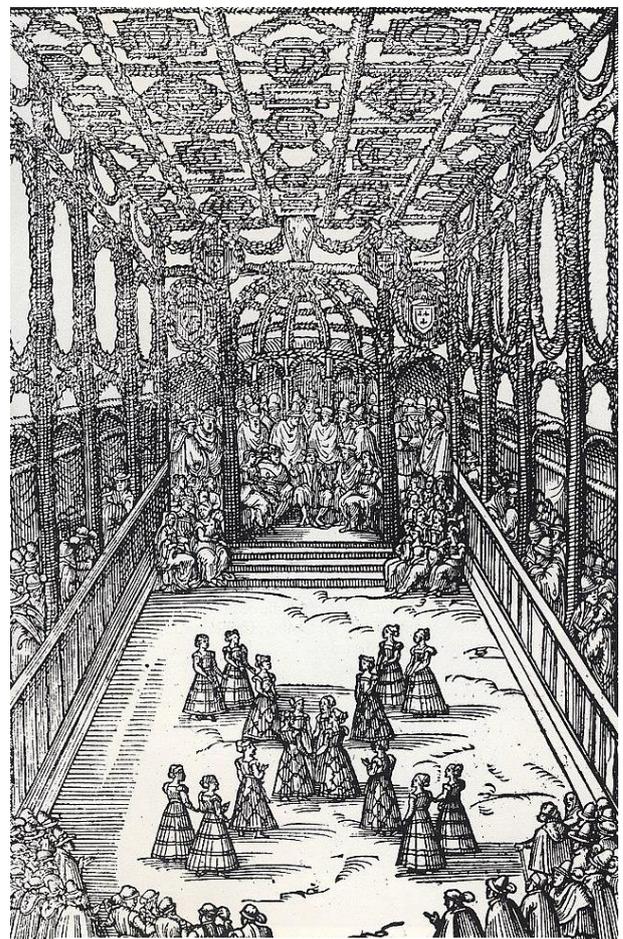
The main concern was that both lady and gentleman were sufficiently knowledgeable about the range of skills available so that they could appreciate fully the quality of the performances they witnessed. Daedalus, in the masque *Pleasure reconciled to Virtue*, performed at the English Court in 1619, gives a good idea of what was expected from spectators. This is Daedalus' song;

*So let your Daunces be entwined
Yet not perplex men, unto gaze,
But measur'd, and so numerous too,
As men may read each act you do
And when they see ye' Graces meet,
admire the wisdom of your feet
For dauncing is an exercise
Not only shows the mover's wit,
But maketh the beholder wise
as he hath powre to rise to it.*

Court audiences at this time wanted more than graceful harmony, and well-tuned performances. They wanted to be thrilled by agility, by extraordinary leaps, caprioles, entrechats in abundance, yet Castiglione had reminded his courtier that this was not in the nobleman province. For these skills, choreographers turned to the professional who, increasingly, not only devised ballets for Italian, French and English courts, but participated fully themselves. The amateur, beautifully and richly costumed, covered in sparkling jewels and often wearing masks, shared the stage with the professional who was often disguised as a magician, a demon, an incarnation of evil, ever ready to disturb any harmony that had been created; or dancing roles that required exceptional agility and poise.

At the end of the sixteenth century, noble dancers tended to perform in large formations, creating geometric patterns on the floor of the stage, which were intended to imitate the harmonious movements of the heavens. Examples of these ambitious formations can be found in the forty geometric figures performed by the twelve ladies who brought the *Balet Comique de La Reyne* to an end in 1581; or in the final ballet of 27 dancers which brought to a close *La Pellegrina* in Florence (1589); or in the torch dances created

by Cesare Negri for the marriage of Isabella of Spain with the archduke Albert - future Governors of the Low Countries. Negri describes his choreography in his book *Nobiltà di dame* (published in 1600, the same year as the performance). Initially, the noble dancers, holding torches, move forwards threading through diverse patterns before returning to their original positions. As the violins changed the rhythm of the music, torches passed from hand to hand as they moved into a new crescent formation which they held while songs congratulating the married couple were performed.

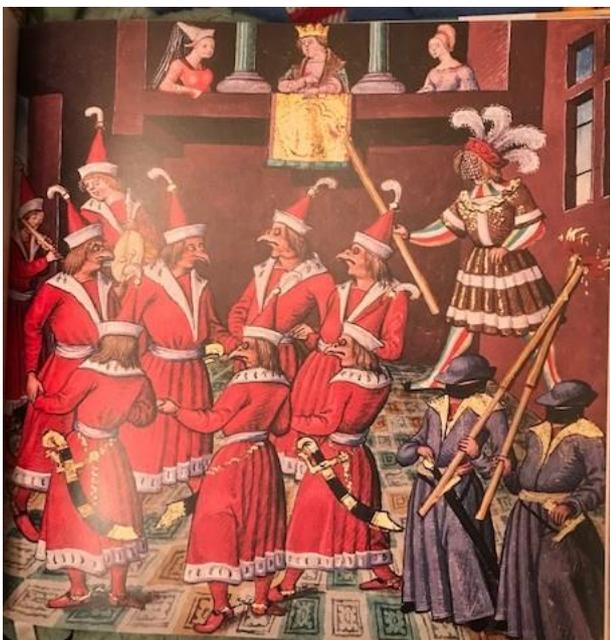


Ballet at the Tuileries for the Polish ambassadors (1573)

These rather grand patterned figures and groupings were not the only dance types which nobles favoured. The reign of François I had seen the development of a dance genre, called masquerades, which had also been popular during the reign of Emperor Maximilian I. These were relatively short works whose invention tended to rest upon on a bizarre idea which usually involved the

maskers wearing extravagantly designed costumes, face coverings and carrying different impedimenta which announced their character. Of shorter duration, these works were often blended in with social dances which would bring together the maskers and all the ladies and gentlemen of the court in a ball, as they were to continue to do at the English court into the seventeenth century. A specific example of such inventions are the masquerades invented to celebrate the wedding of the princess of Navarre to the Duke of Cleves in 1541, danced at the French court in the presence of François Ier. On this occasion, there were nine masquerades. Here is a sample of them:

1. dancers dressed in satin cloth, carrying baskets and a lantern
2. dancers with head dresses designed as hourglasses, topped with plumes
3. dancers imitating Jewish priests
4. dancers with Turkish head dresses
5. dancers resembling ostriches
6. dancers in short tunics, imitating Romans - and so on.



Dancers in bird costumes (*Freydal*)

As you see, the emphasis here is firmly on the ingenuity of the dress, rather than on the nature of the dancing, for dancing was the

way of showing off the subtlety of the clothing. Here, the artist was almost more important than the dancing master, and it was the nobles - ladies and gentlemen - of the court who performed these roles side by side with the professionals. François Ier himself, for instance, danced the role of a bear; or he entered the hall as a tree; or on another occasion, disguised as a Turkish nobleman; his son - the dauphin - came in on a tortoise signifying sloth, or he danced as Hymen with two *papier maché* babies resting on his head. Designs for these remarkable costumes, devised by Primaticcio, still survive in the Tessin Collection of drawings in Stockholm and in the *Cabinet des dessins* of the Louvre. Italian observers of festivals at François Ier's court praised the French nobles for the speed and virtuosity of their dancing. This was an opinion so generally shared that, unfortunately, they failed to identify the specific virtuoso qualities they so admired.

It was not until the 1570s and 1580s that dance performances became more complex as dancing places became larger, and more elaborate, and that architects mastered mechanical contrivances which could fill the stage with moving clouds, with caves and with forests that appeared and then disappeared, with the chambers of hell that could rise out of the ground while devils replaced the angels before the very eyes of the spectators. I'm thinking, for example, of the Uffizi theatre in Florence, constructed by the architect Buontalenti who managed the 92 stage-hands, working in teams of 12, that were needed to effect the miraculous cloud changes in his productions; François Ier instituted the creation of the *Salle de bal* at Fontainebleau, while his successor, Henri II, ensured that extensions and improvements were made to the theatre at Saint Germain en Laye and in the Louvre. With these transformations came the need for professional dancers as the themes of spectacle became more ambitious and complex.

The taste for acrobatic dancing had grown in Italy, where *commedia dell arte* characters performed marvels before the crowds in Venice or at the courts of Mantua and Ferrara with their amazing feats, leaps and pirouettes, and the grotesque movements of

the body which were deliberately managed to astonish those who looked on by the extreme and exaggerated movements of the head, arms and legs. Masks both identified the character but at the same time gave anonymity to the person. Groups of Italian dramatic dancers travelled all over Europe at this time. They were particularly welcomed by the French monarchs, by Charles IX and by Henri III, who had seen them perform in Venice on his way back from Poland to France. Such developments were to have an impact on the invention of larger ballets in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries.



Commedia dell Arte dancers (17thC)

The themes of these more ambitious ballets told a story, often one borrowed from myth or legend and usually relating the need to re-establish harmony and union in the State after the destructive powers of enchantresses like Circe, Armida or Alcina had wrecked havoc in the land, or heroes like Apollo or Hercules had come to install tranquillity in a country devastated by the power of evil. The overall political context of these works was to highlight how divinely-inspired princes would perform the heroic deeds which re-established peace in the land and who would, as a consequence, be considered guarantors for future tranquillity. Such stories, associating evil and goodness, required both the talents of noble dancers and those of the professionals.

If we take as a first example, the ballet performed in Paris in 1619 to celebrate the union of the House of Savoy to that of the kingdom of France - Duke Victor Amedeo to be married to Christine, sister of King Louis XIII. Many weeks in the making, the *Ballet de Tancrede* was put on in the *grande salle* of the Louvre to great acclamation as its scenery was elaborate - forests and cloud machines spilled

across the stage, and the story was one which ensured due respect to King Louis XIII. The idea came from Tasso's epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered* and opens with the appearance of the sorcerer Ismen who, with his magic wand, immobilizes Godefroy de Bouillon's troops in their effort to conquer Jerusalem. Thus rendered helpless, these French soldiers become mere spectators of the fiendish drama that unfolds. Ismen's monsters invade the stage, where they dance with devilish steps, all angles and leaps, wearing extravagant costumes. These are the professionals taught by the dancing master, Jacques de Belleville, to perform acrobatics which both frighten and amaze. The sieur de Belleville was a multi-skilled artist, leader of the King's *violons du cabinet*, he not only choreographed the steps of court ballets, but also composed the string parts of the dance music. The physically testing performance of Ismen's monsters is followed by another strange sight, also engineered by professional dancers. The inhabitants of hell emerge from the depths of the stage. Pluto and Proserpine together with a set of devilish beings. The Master of the Underworld sets alight to the head dresses of his spouse and of his demons, and they then cavort around the stage adding the movement of lights to the complex figures which they perform in order to demonstrate their sinister power. As was customary, there is sudden change of mood and of sound. As the violins change their tune and quirky measures gave way to more solemn sounds. Tancrede (danced by the king's favourite the Duke of Luynes) appears; he soon dominates the evil beings, chasing them back to hell. As they depart, clouds begin to cover the stage, peopled with angels singing approval and joy. Then comes the finale danced by the so-called "amateur" nobles, King Louis XIII with fifteen members of his court. Their harmonious performance with patterns of movement figured on the ground, interlacing one with the other, brings the ballet to an end. The king and his companions have restored peace. It is important to consider the ways in which dance and music were blended together to achieve the changes in choreography and to alert the spectators to those changes.

I have discussed the *Ballet de Tancrede* in this amount of detail for it presents a kind of paradigm for royal ballets in most European courts in the Early Modern period, stretching well into the reign of Louis XIV when he stopped dancing in public around 1670. Each work posits some kind of disaster, the world is turned upside down, and that reversal of the normal is depicted through extravagant and virtuoso dancing performances from professional dancers. Once the world has been set to rights, then noble dancers can take the stage, and through their own choreography, demonstrate physically harmony restored.

It would not, however, be correct to conclude that professional dancers only took on demonic roles. Other types of virtuosity came within their province as they imitated the movements of the elements in ways which were beyond the capacity of even the most proficient noble dancer, although we must not dumb down their own evident skills. If we move for a moment to the Court of Savoy, and consider the Ballet, invented by count Philippe d'Agliè for the last day of Carnival (1626) and for the benefit of Madama Reale, in the final ballet a group of noble performers - for over an hour - danced twelve distinctly different figures, each new movement is signalled by a change of tempo from the violins; the written record of the performance congratulates these dancers, itself drawing attention to the variety and ingenuity of the figures as though this was exceptional. It was at this Court, too, that professional dancers had the opportunity to show off their extraordinary imitative skills. In 1650 and 1651, to celebrate the marriage of the Savoy Princess Adelaide to the Duke of Bavaria, a ballet was performed twice - entitled *L'Education d'Achille*, the Education of Achilles (really, of course, to be understood as that of the Duke of Savoy, Charles-Emanuel II). At one moment, the Elements come in to take up the lessons. The four winds arrive on stage; two by two they simulate the specific characteristics of each wind type. First the speed of air which required a lightness and velocity of movement which was extraordinary; then a completely different disposition was needed to render the movement of torrents of water; then came

two more dancers who rendered visible the fierce blasts that accompany a tempest; and finally, the audience was introduced to the birth of light and the dancers became rays of the sun shooting across the stage with remarkable speed. Representation of such airy and almost evanescent elements was much appreciated and clearly became a regular challenge at this court, for again in 1660, the winds featured prominently in the ballet created to celebrate the union of Margaret of Savoy to the Duke of Parma. This time, all together, the winds rushed out from the rocks which littered the stage. Their performance was prolonged as their steps imitated both the lightness and the vivacity of real winds.

The distinction between amateur and professional dancers is less clear in early modern Spain where, until the very end of the sixteenth century, two types of dances were performed by non-professional dancers. The first were suites of courtly dance forms performed in spectacular costumes and to the music of plucked instruments, such as vihuelas or harps and lutes. The second were popular danced forms performed to the sound of flutes, bagpipes and drums. Both were immensely popular and were - generally - danced outside in the streets, or on platforms specially erected for the occasion - usually, for a princely entry into a major city. There is one interesting example from Spain which shows that by the end of the century professionals were needed to dance many roles in choreographed spectacles; they performed for the dances invented for the 19 choreographies created for King Philip III's new queen Margaret of Austria when she entered Madrid in 1599. It was well known that the king was a lover of the dance and that he was a particularly skilled performer so that it is not surprising that so much attention was given to all nineteen creations. We are fortunate in that the contract for all these dances still survives and describes them all in some detail. They were inspired from dances thought to be created in antiquity, from the celebrations of mountain dwellers, from diverse country dances performed in the different provinces, and from court performances. To give just one example which might, at first, seem

ambiguous: the contract stipulates that for the dance specified as the 'dance of the music', this was to be performed by four pairs of gentlemen and ladies, but then the contract makes this interesting addition: 'all eight of them dancing masters'.

If we turn to the Banqueting House in London for the Entertainment of Count Palatine and his wife, Elizabeth, daughter of King James I, in 1613, Thomas Campion shows that the share of the dancing was divided between amateurs and professionals in a similar pattern as in France. In the masque, the latter - the professionals, are called up by Orpheus, to dance the role of the Franticks. There were 12 dancers in all - 6 men and 6 women. Among them is Poetic Fury, who gives a hint as to the mental derangement suffered by his companions; that madness is represented by their vigorous figures, the choreography specifically designed to imitate their uncontrolled character. After their impressive display, a curtain falls to discover a bank of clouds, within which a choral dance of stars is observed, in 'a strange and delightful manner' matching their figures to the humour of the song. These are not humans really dancing then, but an illusion created through the genius of the architect Inigo Jones who, after demonstrating their delightful measures, contrived to make them vanish amongst the clouds. They are replaced by 8 noble maskers who change the tempo of the work; richly attired, they dance solemnly together. However, that solemnity does not last long, for they are supported by 16 pages called 'sparks' because their clothes are composed of flames, they wear fiery wings, and they bear in each hand a torch. These 'sparks', professional dancers, came out among the knights and interrupt their 'solemn figures with lively measures'. After this interruption, the 'sparks' leave the stage and the maskers remain to perform two more solemn ballets, before the Revels begin.

Royal ballets were not always serious affairs. King Louis XIII who devised ballets himself, for instance the *Ballet de la Merlaison* in 1635, frequently took on the role which one might have supposed professionals would perform, as when he danced two Muslim roles

in *Le Grand bal de la Douairière de Billebahaut* in 1626. Yet this judgement could seem misleading for there were subtle political manoeuvres in these choices at a time when France was in delicate negotiations with countries from the East, and the King wished to give sympathetic signs of friendship through his dancing. It is always instructive to consider the specific political context in which a ballet is performed as, so often (as here) the distribution of roles hides a specific political message. Similarly, when Louis XIII chose a subject for a ballet in 1617, taken again from Tasso, he played both the role of a demon and that of the all-conquering hero, Godefroy de Bouillon, conqueror of Jerusalem. The *Delivrance de Renaud*, as this ballet was called, displayed a series of alternating solemn and burlesque type scenes. The ballet opens with king and his companions disguised as demons, gradually they descend onto the stage and with the king performing as the demon of fire. They dance frenetically as Renaud - under a magical spell - sleeps. A change of scene brings soldiers before the audience, they are steadfastly untouched by the evidence of magic that continues to fill the stage. They remain as spectators gazing at the Monsters, called up by the enchantress Armida, who invade the theatre. These monsters are owls, dogs and monkeys. Imitated by professional dancers, these animals perform grotesque miracles, only to be dismissed when the enchantment ends. Armida, however, is not to be beaten, she will not tolerate such a disappearance of her powers; in her fury, she transforms the animal monsters yet again; this time they are metamorphosed into tortoises, snails and all kinds of creepy crawlies. Professional dancers, led out by the choreographer, the sieur de Belleville, perform their grotesque figures with extravagant gestures. Their incongruous steps and leaps were intended to mirror the fury and the magical powers of Armida. Having impressed the spectators with their undoubted skills, they retire and are replaced by the king surrounded by members of his court. He sits in triumph as the hero Godefroy de Bouillon who has triumphed over Jerusalem and has defeated all the magical enterprises set to trap him. It turns out that his choice to dance the demon of fire

was deliberate. By joining the manifestations of evil, he sought to show that he understood their ways and knew how to triumph over them. It also suggests that grotesque dancing was well within the capacity of noble dancers.

The experience of performing a grotesque role clearly influenced the development of court ballet in France in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Themes from mythology and romance were increasingly replaced by spectacles where satire reigned supreme, where professionals and amateurs joined together in performance. Moreover, ballet was no longer limited to a court audience. At Carnival time, the *bourgeois de Paris* wished to see the ballets put on at the *Hotel de Ville* and elsewhere, or to witness them invented and performed for individual households. Improvisation became a major factor in their production; and for that, was required a profound knowledge of the dance and enhanced skills to show off the kinds of variations of figures needed to impress. Patterned figures on the floor of the stage gave way to improvised and imitative performances. A professional dancer was indispensable if the kinds of leaps and perilous steps that imitation demanded were to be achieved. In fact, according to Michel de Pure writing in 1668 - a contemporary commentator on ballets at court, '*Baladins*', this was the name he gave to professional dancers, were absolutely necessary to fulfil the demands of figure variations which were then required, especially in what are now called *Ballets à entrées*. In this context, the publication of a dancing master's notebook from Brussels (compiled in 1619, and recently published by Jennifer Nevile), is most informative. The manuscript gives details of six *ballets à entrées*, the longest of which was designed for 16 dancers. The entries are short, still structured around geometric patterns, but these are speedily performed. Set sequences change all the time in the 450 figures that are recorded.

Michel de Pure had maintained that noble dancers did not do well in such rapidly changing measures - although such figures had clearly been invented and taught for the international students who came to study in

Brussels. Michel de Pure insisted that noble dancers could no longer cope with constant step changes, aerial acrobatics and type imitation. These skills had already been needed in earlier ballets. For a ballet performed in 1632, for example, the high point was a stage/danced battle between goblins and cripples, which after a long and improbable spectacle of conflict, the cripples won. They had been equipped with sticks, walking frames, dancing often on only one leg, using their crutches to great advantage. In another work, vices and virtues gave battle disguised as furies and monsters and aerial demons. Even noble entertainments were satirized in 1625, for the *Ballet des Fées de la Forest de Saint Germain*. These fairies were fantastic creatures. Their trains held up by owls, cats and frogs. They put on a burlesque *course à la quintaine*, - running at the Quintain, this was an erstwhile noble pastime for which knights mounted on horseback attempted to lift with their lance a ring attached to a lofty pillar. For this ballet, the most outlandish characters had been created: humpbacks, mad people, those with two faces, those who limped and those who were blind. The challenge was, of course, for the dancer to stay within his character, while performing extraordinary choreographic feats.



Costume design for Jacqueline, the knowing one, in the *Ballet des Fées de la Forest de Saint Germain*, 1625 (V&A Collections)

This trend in short *ballets à entrées* and burlesque ballets had two consequences. On the one hand, it favoured the increase in numbers of professional dancers - ultimately leading to the creation of the Académie de Danse in France in 1661; on the other hand, the court ballet which had become a means of propaganda for the monarch retained its significance alongside the development of satirical conceptions. By 1639, the political situation in France had become less dire for King Louis XIII who now had an heir to the throne, and cardinal de Richelieu saw the opportunity and the need to put monarchical power back on the stage, and this was to be done most effectively through dance, in the *Ballet de la Félicité* (1639), or the *Ballet de la Prosperité des armes de France* (1641). In these ballets of evident propaganda, the monarch appears all powerful and later - in 1653 - he was to become an incarnation of the Sun, shining his beneficial light upon his kingdom - an image that was to become so familiar in the person of Louis XIV, and destined to be the device which represented his power and authority.

The same mixture of character-satire-driven works alongside more formal productions which retained the conquering of Thevil themes were repeated across Europe, although in Italy, the opera began to establish itself as the major theatrical genre with ballets confined to interludes between the acts, although these were still impressive choreographic performances. In England, the antimasque served the evil purpose. In the *Masque of Queenes* (1609), for instance, the Witches dance in the anti-masque, with all its back-to-back dancing and the deliberately contrary movements of a witches' Sabbath, had been performed by male performers. There were still opportunities for nobles to continue to participate, although the professional had now acquired his more secure place. In Stuart masques, the mythological creations continued to be important in order to project onto the stage the idea of King Charles I as a monarch in control of his kingdom, however unrealistic this vision was. In France, such serious performances continued while King Louis XIV persisted with his dancing

in public. However, as *ballets à entrées*, that is to say, ballets created as a series of entries without an over-riding theme, became the norm in France in the works created by Isaac de Benserade, and the collective large patterned formations performed by groups of noble dancers became chiefly a spectacle of the past. Individual performance was prized and respected, and that preference brought with it the necessity not only for the dancer to have mastered all available steps and figures but to be able to improvise, to astonish by his/her ability to multiply variations on standard performance. The time of the professional had come.

Margaret McGowan

Talk given to the Early Dance Circle
on 28 May 2021



Note: The text above is the unaltered transcript provided by Professor McGowan. The illustrations have been added by the editor and are linked to direct references in the text. The whole article will be available on the EDC website at some point and many of the issues raised will be discussed further in later issues of the EDC Circular.