

Introduction

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Dancing-masters are also as numerous in every street as posts in Cheapside, there is no walking but we stumble upon them; they are held here but in very slight esteem, for the gentry call them leg-livers, and the mob, from their mighty number and their nimbleness, call them the devil's grasshoppers.

(Tom Brown, 1690s)¹

Whether as 'hop merchants', 'devil's grasshoppers', or 'leg-livers', the instructors in the art of dance were not always held in the highest esteem by the social groups within which they plied their trade. We can with certainty trace such derogatory terms back to the 17th century, though the sentiment is likely to have existed from much earlier times. This is no doubt a consequence of the ambiguous role they played – at once an instructor in the niceties of social behaviour, but denied full access to the same society.² It is perhaps for this reason that Castiglione warns the courtiers of 15th century Italy not to go overboard in imitating the excesses of the professional dancing master, nor to appear too competent in this art – it was vital to remain an amateur. As we read in the keynote article by Françoise Carter, such sentiments were voiced from the time of Plato to the turn of the 19th century (and later).

This ambiguity is one of the threads running through this conference as it traces the role of the dancing master through the ages, from classical antiquity to the early 20th century. The view was not always negative, however. The term 'dancing master' initially indicated a high level of skill in the art of dance; such a person may have been a well-paid member of a royal court's retinue, perhaps performing and teaching, or a member of a reputable theatre company. Gradually it acquired the meaning of 'teacher of dance'; many of these may not have been 'masters' of their trade.

Several interesting questions were hinted at but not explored in any detail. One is the question of what social factors lead to the proliferation of dancing masters at certain periods. Another is to understand what fosters the adoption of the arts and social behaviour of foreign countries. Times of social consolidation after prolonged periods of social stress appear to be conducive to waves of new dances, with their associated dancing masters. The Restoration of the Monarchy in the 1660s brought French-influenced dance teachers to instruct the populace in the new ways of social etiquette and dance style. Following the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, there was enormous enthusiasm for French quadrilles. In the twentieth century, there was the age of the charleston after the first world war, and American jive after the second.

In the distant past, dance often had a ritual and religious function; states of religious ecstasy were induced by communal dancing; the role of the 'dancing master' was often attributed to the devil or the 'witch doctor'. This may still be observed today in tribal cultures such as that of the Australian Aborigines. Such dancing would have been seen as a threat to established religion. By the 13th century it had been largely outlawed from the churches, only to re-emerge in ritual carnival festivities in the streets (usually on holy days), although there too it met with censure.³ The opposition of the church to this communal dancing (and by extension to dance in general) can be interpreted as a natural reaction to a perceived threat to their monopoly over religious ritual.

Such opposition to dance in general is amply documented in the first paper by Françoise Carter. Her paper documents the extraordinary swings between approval and

radical disapproval of dance (and by implication dancing masters) from classical antiquity to 1800, concluding with a timely reminder that opposition (even to the seemingly innocuous pleasures of line dancing) has far from disappeared: “No Christian who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit should engage in it”, according to the Free Presbyterian Church in Ulster in an official pronouncement as recently as 2008. While I can understand that objections to line dancing may be made on aesthetic grounds, moral objections of its abetting “fleshly lusts” spring less readily to mind; it is a useful warning that intolerance is ever-present.

One important area not represented in these papers is that of the 15th and 16th century Italian dancing masters, Domenico, Guglielmo, Caroso, Negri and others. In fact, this is an area that has been very well covered in recent years by many dance historians such as Jennifer Nevile and Barbara Sparti so its absence from these pages is made up for elsewhere. Less well studied is the dance practice of the Burgundian Courts of this same period, a subject close to the heart of the previous editor of these proceedings, David Wilson, whose loss we greatly miss. In Chapter 2, Bill Tuck outlines some provocative ideas about the Burgundian *basse danse*, placing it firmly in the domain of a late flowering cult of ‘courtly love’ in which learning to choreograph your own *basse danse* is a prerequisite for a young knight’s education, obviating the need for any professional dancing master.

With the democratization of dance instruction in the 16th century through the publications of Arena, Elyot and Arbeau, we see a growth of dance throughout ‘polite’ society based on models derived from the aristocratic courts. Yet always eager to be one step ahead (or perhaps obliged to be in the lead) the courts themselves invested heavily in dance instruction. Anne Daye’s paper on dance at the Jacobean Court of the early 17th century clearly shows the importance of this art within court culture and the very significant part that the dancing masters played in its promotion.

The art of war and the art of dance have always been viewed as distant and antagonistic relatives. Yet strong connections lie just below the surface, as attested by the well-known references to sword dancing in Arbeau’s *Orchesography*. Through the discipline of fencing, Sydney Anglo shows the commonality between the two areas as represented by the problem of notating movement. The ample illustrations show a degree of similarity between dance instruction and the teaching of swordsmanship that is relatively unknown to dance historians, except for those also well-versed in the art of fencing, such as the late Patri Pugliese.

With the 18th century, the demand for dance instruction becomes even more widespread, leading to the familiar question of how to ensure a degree of quality control over the practitioners of this emerging business. This is the topic addressed by Madeleine Inglehearn in her paper on the emergence of a properly recognised and well-paid ‘profession’ of dancing master. Formal seven-year apprenticeships, on a par with those for surgeons, apothecaries or lawyers, were instigated in an effort to advance the social standing of this new profession. In addition to providing instruction in dance, they were also experts in ‘sitting, standing, and walking well’, and they played an important role in the job of teaching gentlemen how to do these things.

Much evidence on the lives of specific dancing masters (and their apprentices) during the 18th century is beginning to emerge from the archives, and both Jennifer Thorp and Moira Goff have been mining these rich deposits for some time. Further fruits of their researches are presented in these pages. It does seem true, as Jennifer Thorp says, that only with the detailed study of the lives and working conditions of individual dancers can a more accurate picture of how the dance world worked be achieved. In this respect, her analysis of the master and apprentice/scholar relationship is very enlightening. In a similar way, the investigation of the life of a specific

dancer gives a valuable insight into the workings of the 18th century world. Moira Goff presents a study of the dancer Francis Nivelon, detailing his career from French fairground to London stage, then, as author of *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*, to a role as instructor in dance and deportment to the offspring of upper-class families; this marks a well-documented path that is likely to reflect the aspirations of many others of this profession. Whether many were as successful as he in following this course remains to be seen.

While London may have been the centre for dance in the 18th century it was not alone in the cultivation of this art. The paper by Gráinne Mc Ardle details the remarkable extent of dance teaching in Dublin, for example, during the early part of the 18th century. Although Dublin at that time was rather more than just another provincial capital (it ranked, after all, among the ten top European cities) the dancing and social life described is probably similar to that of many other perhaps smaller cities. In addition to teaching, the dancing master opened or even organised balls, and composed dances for special occasions. As an arbiter of taste he probably played an even more important role in society than his counterpart in London, for example, for his authority over the local aristocracy (as with Beau Brummell in Bath) was less likely to be questioned.

‘Reception history’ has long been a domain explored by musicologists and literary theorists. In Jeremy Barlow’s account, we get a fascinating view of how that great mainstay of the dance-historical world – Arbeau’s *Orchesography* – has fared at the hands of dance historians since the rather dismissive comments of John Weaver in the early 18th century. From the standpoint of a novice dance historian seeking instant enlightenment on renaissance dance from perusing general histories of dance, it seems to have fared too well, since up until relatively recently it appears that nothing else got much of a look in! As Jeremy notes, the dance history

manuals of even the quite recent past have perhaps given undue weight to Arbeau’s worthy treatise. Yet the weakness inherent in our dependence on this one source of information is clear – how can we begin to understand the full range of dance during the Renaissance if we rely to such an extent on this book alone? Of course, now things have changed considerably (a Google search on ‘renaissance dance’ immediately brings up Domenico, Caroso, Negri, et al - along with Arbeau - among its first few hits). Furthermore, the great value of conferences such as that which the present publication represents, is that they broaden out and make public a much greater range of material to help us understand this world – early dance is much more than ‘Arbeau’!

Notes

1 Tom Brown’s “Letters from the Dead to the Living”. This quotation comes from a letter imagined to have been written by Henry Purcell (who died in 1695) to his former master Dr John Blow (still alive at the time of Brown’s writing). Purcell (surprisingly?) is writing from Hell. See *Amusements Serious and Comical and other Works By Tom Brown*, edited by A.L.Hayward, London:Routledge & Sons, 1927, pp.432-433.

2 The ambiguity goes even deeper than this. It was the role of the dancing master to help the nobility to reveal an elegance of deportment that was deemed to be ‘innate’ to their class, an elegance not supposed to be possessed by (or even to be attainable by) the class from which most dancing masters themselves emerged. This may account for the many caricatures of dancing masters in both print and pictures (see picture on page 4).

3 See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.



A plate from Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* (1735);
the central figure shows a typical caricature of the dancing master.