

‘J’ai deffault de la dance’ The place of Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* in histories of dance

Jeremy Barlow

(Unless otherwise stated, London is the place of publication for works with English titles, and Paris for works with French titles)

This paper arises from the question: why has Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* of 1588¹ been such a dominant source of information on European social dance of the Renaissance? It is of course the earliest dance treatise to marry dance steps precisely to the music, and it also acts to a certain extent as a retrospective on much of the 16th century, because of the author’s advanced age when he wrote it. But, as we shall see, even when dance historians became aware of, for example, Caroso and Negri, such treatises were often passed over in favour of Arbeau. In this selective historiographic survey quotes from works in French have been translated by me, though for *Orchésographie* itself I have also referred to the two published English translations (see below).

Orchésographie itself provides some dance history; in a section near the beginning Arbeau and his pupil Capriol discuss dancing in biblical and classical antiquity.² Many historical surveys of western dance since *Orchésographie* have started in antiquity, but then, through lack of information, have had difficulty linking that period to Europe of the Renaissance and more recent times. John Weaver, in *An Essay Towards an History of Dancing* (1712),³ moved straight from classical antiquity to modern theatrical dancing (in chapters 6 and 7 respectively). However, he referred fleetingly to Arbeau at the very conclusion, when discussing dance notation: ‘The Supposition of Monsieur Feuillet, that the Invention of this Art receiv’d

its first Rise from a *Treatise* of one Thoinot Arbeau, is certainly erroneous; since I find upon Perusal of that *Book*, (which *Feuillet* by his own Confession could never procure a Sight of,) that it is an imperfect rough Draught, treating ridiculously upon *Dancing*, *beating the Drum*, *playing on the Fife*, and the like.’⁴

Jacques Bonnet’s *Histoire Generale de la Danse, Sacrée et Prophane; Ses progress & ses révolutions, depuis son origine jusqu’à présent* (1724)⁵ suggests from its title that the author aimed to present a continuous historical survey. The book does indeed contain more history between the ancient and the modern, including descriptions of Renaissance dances that have not been lifted from Arbeau. Bonnet only mentioned Arbeau in passing when lamenting the amount of information on dance history that has been lost; he quoted the entry in Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* of 1690 that describes ‘a curious treatise made by Thoinot Arbeau, printed in Langres in 1588, entitled *Orchesographie* [sic]: this is the first or perhaps the only which has noted and figured dance steps according to their characteristics, in the same way that a musician writes down songs and tunes; the book is not to be found any more, or at least it has become extremely rare.’⁶ A little later Bonnet wrote ‘It is good to know that Thoinot Arbeau was Canon at Langres, as M. de la Monnoye of the Academy, which had this book in its library for quite a while, has told me; he thinks that it has passed into the King’s Library.’⁷

Louis de Cahusac, in *La danse ancienne et moderne, ou Traité historique de la danse*

(1754)⁸ mentioned Arbeau in a lengthy Preface, and like Weaver and Bonnet, was concerned only with the choreological significance of *Orchésographie*: ‘The choreographies of Thoinot Arbeau, Feuillet, and that of which Beauchamps declared himself author by an arrêt of Parliament, are only the rudiments of dance’.⁹

Moving forward 70 years, we come to a work much raided by later writers: Élise Voïart’s *Essai sur la danse, antique et moderne* (1823)¹⁰; indeed this book, with its generalised assertions and unsourced descriptions, sets the tone for many of the dance histories that appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Voïart did not mention *Orchésographie* by name, though she described some of Arbeau’s branles, and her description of noble grandeur in dancing the pavane bears a little resemblance to the Arbeau passage on how gentlemen may dance it with cape and sword, etc. Her tone is a little disparaging however, particularly when describing noblewomen in the pavane: ‘they, very stiff and formal, wear dresses so long, so full, and are so laden with gold, pearls and jewels, that decked out in such finery, it was impossible for them to dance with liveliness, without risk of constantly falling over.’¹¹

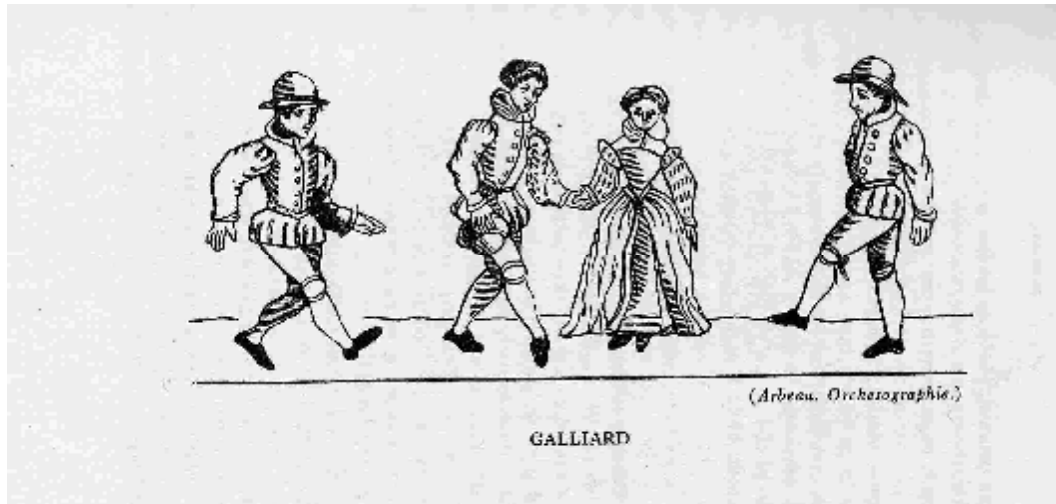
An important historical survey from the mid-19th century is *The Art of Dancing, Historically Illustrated* by American dancing teacher Edward Ferrero (New York, 1859).¹² This too seems to have been used by later writers such as Lilly Grove and Edward Scott. Ferrero knew *Orchésographie*. Writing of the Morris, he stated that etymologists linked the word Morris to the Spanish Morisco and then wrote that ‘Thoinot Arbeau describes the Morris Dance as practised in France in the early part of the sixteenth century.’¹³ He paraphrased Arbeau’s description of the pavane being danced by gentlemen dressed in cape and sword, adding that the motion of the ladies in their gowns resembled that of a peacock’s tale. He believed, like many since, that the derivation of ‘pavane’ is from pavo, a peacock.¹⁴

So far, none of these histories has paid huge attention to *Orchésographie*. Two factors in its subsequent prominence were the German translation by Albert Czerwinski (Danzig, 1878),¹⁵ and the first modern edition in the original French, edited by the French ballerina Laure Fonta (1888).¹⁶ The scholarly introductions to both editions entailed original research into primary sources. Czerwinski included the earliest references in any dance history I have seen to Caroso and Negri,¹⁷ and Fonta to Ebreo and Ambrosio, in addition to Caroso.¹⁸

From the 1890s onwards, up to the publication of Curt Sach’s *World History of the Dance* in the 1930s, a great number of books on early dance appeared, including historical surveys and various works that purport to teach the dances. The quality is uneven. One of the first attempts at a comprehensive survey from this period is *Dancing* by Lilly Grove, 1895.¹⁹ The section on Renaissance Italy does not mention any of the Italian treatises, though Chapter 8, ‘The Dance in France’ does refer to the basses danses in Arena, and continues: ‘The most interesting book on these old French dances, indeed the most interesting book on dancing, was written in 1588 by Jehan Tabourot, under a pseudonym, for he was a monk of Langres, and had to hide his identity. Nearly all later books borrow or quote from him. When Tabourot published his ‘Orchésographie’ there were still very few men who could write at all. Hence we have few details about the dances of this period, which we know must have been a very important one for choreographic [sic] art.’²⁰ Grove’s description of the pavane is familiar in the picture it paints, though not quite as we know it from Arbeau: ‘It was mainly a Court dance, and was also called “le grand bal,” because it was used on State occasions, when ladies in their brocaded gowns dragged their heavy trains over the polished floors, when courtiers with their capes and swords solemnly and with knightly chivalry took off their plumed hats to do homage to their fair partners.’²¹ Here we have Arbeau, re-written via Voïart’s description, embellished with brocade,

plumed hats and polished floors. For her illustration of a galliard Grove provided a bogus conflation from *Orchésographie*. This appeared in several later histories and books of early dance instruction; the reproduction

below comes from Louis Horst's *Pre-Classical Dance Forms* (New York, 1937).



Conflation of illustrations from *Orchésographie* for the 'greve' or 'pied en l'air' step and the 'reverence'. The couple demonstrating the reverence and the figure on the left have been reversed. The figures have been re-drawn from the original woodcuts.

Shortly after Lilly Grove came Gaston Vuillier's hefty tome *A History of Dancing from the Earliest Ages to our own Times*, published in French and English versions in 1898, with many illustrations. Arbeau is much quoted in relation to the basse danse, tordion and Gaillarde;²² Laure Fonta is quoted on the pavane.

Both Grove and Vuillier started their histories in antiquity, and also included sections on dances of other cultures; in Grove, the chapter headed 'The Dances of Antiquity', is followed by 'The Dances of the Savages'. Edward Scott, in *Dancing in All Ages* (1899) rejected such a comprehensive overview; he wrote in his Preface: 'To the dances of barbarous countries and primitive tribes my attention has not here been given.' In Chapter 6, 'Remarkable Dances of Later Times', Scott wrote: 'Perhaps the oldest dances of which any actual descriptions have descended to us were those known as the "basses danses," which, according to Arbeau, had been discontinued since about 1538'.²³ Scott found Arbeau unnecessarily wordy in his description of the basic simple and double steps, and

wrote 'There was very little of what may be termed genuine dancing in the original pavane'.²⁴ He did not refer to any other Renaissance treatise.

Plenty more books on dance with historical content were published in the first two decades of the twentieth century,²⁵ but I shall move on now to a work that tried to break fresh ground in its use of textual and iconographic sources, and that is the collaborative venture between Cecil Sharp and art historian A. P. Oppé, *The Dance: An Historical Survey of Dancing in Europe* (London and New York, 1924). It includes 75 plates and was published shortly after Sharp's death. After an Introduction subtitled 'The Folk Dance' come the two main parts of the book, on social dance and spectacular dance respectively. In 'Social Dance', the section on the 16th century follows on from the usual discussion of dancing in ancient civilisations and a quick passing over of the middle ages: 'Very little is known about European dancing during the dark centuries that followed the fall of the Roman Empire'.²⁶ Sharp placed Arbeau in the company of Ebreo, Coplande and

Caroso. Yet he wrote that ‘though Caroso’s account is extremely interesting and in some respects more detailed, he did not possess the gift of exposition to the same degree as Arbeau, whose account must accordingly be followed as the clearest.’²⁷ Sharp then went on to base his descriptions of Renaissance dances entirely on Arbeau. As a folklorist, Sharp was keen to make connections with traditional dances that he knew, or knew of: ‘Those who are acquainted with the Helston Furry and the Tideswell dances of England or the Polonaise of Poland will not hesitate to relate both Basse dance and Pavane to the May dance in its processional form, though in the passage from country-side to Court they shed many of their most characteristic qualities.’²⁸

After Sharp we arrive at that monument of dance history overviews, Curt Sachs’s *World History of the Dance* (New York, 1937)²⁹ (translated by Bessie Schönberg from *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes* (Berlin, 1933)). To examine Sachs on Renaissance dance in detail would take an entire paper, but I can recommend an exposé of his book as a whole by Suzanne Youngerman, ‘Curt Sachs and His Heritage’.³⁰ To give Sachs his due, he cited many more treatises of the Renaissance than hitherto, among them Domenico, Ebreo, Ambrosio (considered then a separate person from Ebreo), Cornazano and Coplande. Arbeau no longer holds quite such pride of place in the company of these authorities. But in relation to Arbeau, I just want to demonstrate the kind of trouble that Sachs got himself into through his attempts to tease out connections through time and space in the material he accumulated. In discussing the Morris dance, Sachs posed and answered the question of its relationship to the Morisca or Moresque: ‘All doubt of their relationship is silenced when we hear that the same melody which Arbeau gives for the genuine *moresque* in France was printed as a *Morris Dance* in England in 1550 and is still played by English fiddlers today’.³¹ For a start, the Moresque tune was not printed in England in 1550; perhaps Sachs was referring to its inclusion in Susato’s *Danserye*, published in Antwerp in

1551. And Sachs did not know that the Moresque tune from Arbeau had been introduced into English Morris by the determined folk revivalist D’Arcy Ferris, less than half a century before Sachs wrote his book.³² Cecil Sharp initially drew the same mistaken conclusion about this tune. Both he and Curt Sachs may be seen as the last of those 19th century antiquaries and folklorists who believed they demonstrated scholarly prowess by unearthing supposed links across great distances of time and space.

The size, scope and authoritative tone of Sach’s *World History* seems to have deterred further attempts at comprehensive historical surveys for many years; what we do have though is a number of works by writers on dance history such as Louis Horst,³³ Melusine Wood³⁴ and Mabel Dolmetsch,³⁵ who focused on describing and reconstructing dances of the Renaissance and baroque. I should also at this stage mention the two English translations of *Orchésographie* that appeared in the 20th century, and helped to perpetuate the book’s influence among English speakers: by Cyril Beaumont (1925),³⁶ and by Mary Stewart Evans (1948), the latter available still as a Dover reprint (1967).³⁷

The next substantial historical overview of European social dance as far as I can discover is A. H. Franks’s *Social Dance: A Short History* (1963). His chapter, ‘The Sixteenth century’ is subtitled ‘The Teaching of Arbeau and Others’. The ‘others’ include Negri, Caroso, Coplande, Sir John Davies and Arena. A good portion of the chapter is devoted to the *Balet Comique de la Royne*; towards the end Arena is mentioned, followed by Caroso, as a man ‘responsible for a work entitled *El Ballerino* [sic]. This work too is not very rewarding, for it contains vague descriptions only of mimetic dances which were not the most popular of their time’.³⁸ Franks agreed with Curt Sachs that Negri suffered from ‘self complacency’.³⁹ He concluded: ‘It is Arbeau, in fact, who must have the last word in this century, at any rate as far as style and technique are concerned. He very clearly defines various positions of

the feet and how best to achieve these positions – positions necessary in all dances. In making these definitions he proves to us today that here were the turned out positions which were eventually to form the basis of the classical ballet.⁴⁰

Franks cited Belinda Quirey twice in *Social Dance*, and acknowledged her help in providing him with material; the copy of *Social Dance* in the ISTD Library belonged to Quirey. Her book *May I Have the Pleasure? The Story of Popular Dancing* was published in 1976⁴¹ and linked to a BBC television series. In describing the dances of the early Renaissance, Quirey made use of Domenico, but, like Franks, wrote disparagingly of Caroso and Negri in the section on the High Renaissance: ‘the beauty and simplicity of Italian Quattrocento dancing had disappeared on its home ground. It was hidden under a mass of fussy footwork and rather trumpery music, at least as far as the books of dance instruction go. The old flowing spaciousness seemed to be out of favour with the late-16th century dancing masters, of whom two, called Caroso and Negri, have left us substantial volumes of their compositions.’⁴² There is little direct reference to Arbeau in her descriptions and instructions for the pavane, galliard, branles and so on, but Quirey cited him in her Introduction, when discussing the problems of using textual, musical and iconographic evidence to reconstruct dances of former ages. Whereas Franks based his assertions on turnout mainly from the illustrations in *Orchésographie*, Quirey wrote: ‘Good examples of illustrations that can mislead us badly are the drawings in Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchesography* (1588). ... Capriol is represented as a quaint little woodcut figure, endearing and unpretentious, and very badly drawn; in some of the figures it is hard to tell which leg is which. The impression we get is homely, folksy and disarming. But the dances which Arbeau is describing are the great dances of the High Renaissance: Pavane, Galliard, Almain, and Coranto. We shall never understand what Pavane should be like if we associate it with this little creature. We have to imagine in his

place the figures of Leicester, Sidney, Raleigh and Essex in all their splendour and magnificence’.⁴³ But Arbeau was actually teaching the pavane to the endearing and unpretentious Capriol; he wrote ‘A gentleman may dance it with cape and sword – and *you others* [my italics] in your long gowns’.⁴⁴ Presumably then it was danced at Capriol’s level, as well as by the English and French nobility. It seems to me that Quirey followed the brocade and polished floor tradition of Lilly Grove in her courtly picture of Renaissance dance. Indeed, her focus, until she reached the advent of rock ‘n’ roll, was almost exclusively on genteel dance.

This narrow focus does enable Quirey’s chronological narrative to flow smoothly on the whole. Authors of broader historical overviews struggle to create a coherent narrative because they have to incorporate synchronic material on region, culture, class and genre within a diachronic or chronological framework. I shall conclude with a book that circumvents such organizational dilemmas; it’s the American author Gerald Jonas’s *Dancing: The Power of Dance Around the World* (New York and London, 1992). Like Belinda Quirey’s *May I Have the Pleasure?*, this was produced in association with a television series.⁴⁵ Instead of proceeding chronologically, each of Jonas’s chapters draws together dances of widely different age and region that nevertheless have a societal or cultural function in common. The format also enabled Jonas to avoid the ethnocentric perspective of so many comprehensive dance histories, as exemplified above in quotes from Lilly Grove and Edward Scott. In the chapter ‘Social Dance’, Arbeau’s Renaissance couple dances are juxtaposed with the social dances of the Cook Islanders that so shocked 19th century missionaries, even though men and women never touch each other, and with gender-separate social dances found in Islamic Morocco.⁴⁶ As a result, the book demonstrates that what we consider ‘normal’ social practice – a man and woman dancing together – is unthinkable in some other parts of the world. The extracts from Arbeau⁴⁷ include the well-

known bits on etiquette - ‘Spit and blow your nose sparingly’⁴⁸ and so on - and are used to show how dancing masters, as authorities on etiquette, were needed by those who wished to climb the social ladder in European society.

Yet even in this well thought out book, information from our Canon of Langres is, by inference, applied to European Renaissance society as a whole. There are no references in Jonas’s index to any other Renaissance

treatises, though Cornazano and de Lauze are listed in the bibliography. ‘J’ai deffault de la dance’ - roughly ‘I can’t dance’ – says Capriol near the start of *Orchésographie*.⁴⁹ I can’t dance either, but how can I begin to learn about the many variations in dances and etiquette that must have occurred during the Renaissance period between classes, regions and several generations of dancers, if I rely so heavily on this one source?

Notes

¹ The author’s name Thoinot Arbeau is a pseudonym and anagram for Jehan Tabourot (b. 1519 or 1520, d. 1595); the book takes the form of a Socratic dialogue between Arbeau as a dancing teacher and Capriol as his pupil. Three editions of *Orchésographie* were produced by the original publisher in Langres, Jehan de Preyz: an edition undated on the title page, but with an ‘Extraict du Privilege’ (extract from the letters of copyright) at the end of the book, dated 22 November 1588; an edition dated 1589 on the title page, and an edition dated 1596. The text used for this paper is that of the 1596 edition, as reproduced in facsimile by Minkoff Reprint, Geneva, 1972.

² f.2v-f.4v.

³ Facsimile in Richard Ralph’s *The Life and Works of John Weaver* (London, 1985).

⁴ p. 171 in Weaver; p. 670 in Ralph (see preceding note).

⁵ Facsimile edition by Forni Editore, Bologna, n.d.

⁶ ‘un Traité curieux fait par Thoinot Arbeau, imprimé à Langres en 1588, intitulé *Orchesographie*: c’est le premier ou peut-être le seul qui a noté & figuré les pas de la Danse de son tems par des caracteres, de la même maniere qu’un Musicien note le chant & les airs; on ne le trouve plus, ou du moins il est devenu fort rare’ (p. 20).

⁷ ‘Il est bon de sçavoir que Thoinot Arbeau étoit Chanoine à Langres, à ce qui m’a dit M. de la Monnoye, de l’Académie, qui a eu ce Livre en sa Bibliothèque assez long-tems; il croit qu’ila passé dans la Bibliothèque du Roi.’ (p. 20 – p. 21)

⁸ Digital facsimile available on the Library of Congress (USA) website *An American Ballroom Companion*, compiled by Elizabeth Aldridge (www.memory.loc.gov).

⁹ ‘Les Corégraphies de Thoinot Arbeau, de Feuillet, & celle dont Beauchamps se fit déclarer auteur par un Arrêt de Parlement, ne sont que des Rudimens de Danse.’ (p. xxi).

¹⁰ Digital facsimile available on the Library of Congress (USA) website *An American Ballroom Companion*, compiled by Elizabeth Aldridge (www.memory.loc.gov).

¹¹ ‘celles-ci, bien raides et bien compassé, portent des robes si longues, si amples, si chargées d’or, de perles et de pierreries, qu’affablées de tels habits, il leur était impossible de danser avec vivacité, sans risquer des chutes continuelles.’ (p. 110 – p. 111).

¹² Digital facsimile available on the Library of Congress (USA) website *An American Ballroom Companion*, compiled by Elizabeth Aldridge (www.memory.loc.gov).

¹³ p. 54.

¹⁴ p. 54.

¹⁵ *Die Tänze des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts und die alte französische Tanzschule vor Einführung der menuett. Nach Jean Tabourot's Orchésographie herausgegeben von Albert Czerwinski.*

¹⁶ *ORCHESOGRAPHIE PAR THOINOT ARBEAU Réimpression précédée d'une Notice sur les Danses du XVIe siecle par Laure Fonta.*

¹⁷ p. 9.

¹⁸ p. XVII – p. XVIII.

¹⁹ Digital facsimile of 1907 edition available on the Library of Congress (USA) website *An American Ballroom Companion*, compiled by Elizabeth Aldridge (www.memory.loc.gov).

²⁰ p. 245.

²¹ p. 253 – p. 254.

²² p. 92 onwards.

²³ p. 125.

²⁴ p. 132.

²⁵ These include, among others:

Reginald St.-Johnston *A History of Dancing* (London, 1906)

Arden Holt *How to dance the revived ancient dances* (London, 1907)

'An Antiquary' *The Dance: Historic Illustrations of Dancing from 3300 B.C. to 1911 A.D.* (London, 1911)

Alfred Moffat and Frank Kidson *Dances of the olden time* (London, 1912)

Troy and Margaret West Kinney ("The Kinneys") *The Dance: its place in art and life* (first published 1914; revised edition New York, 1936)

Chas. D'Albert *The Encyclopædia of Dancing* (revised edition, London, n.d., c.1920)

Edward Scott *Dancing for Strength and Beauty* (London, 1921)

Ethel L. Urlin *Dancing Ancient and Modern* (London, n.d)

Isabel Chisman, Hester E. Raven-Hart *Manners and movements in costume plays* (London and Boston USA, n.d.)

²⁶ p. 12.

²⁷ p. 13.

²⁸ p. 14.

²⁹ Reissued in paperback 1963. The German edition has fuller references.

³⁰ Full title: 'Curt Sachs and His Heritage: A Critical review of *World History of the Dance*, with a Survey of Recent Studies That Perpetuate His Ideas', in *CORD* (Council on Research in Dance) *News* (July 1974, Vol. 6, No. 2).

³¹ p. 336.

³² See Roy Judge, 'D'Arcy Ferris and the Bidford Morris', in *Folk Music Journal* (1984, Vol. 4 No. 5), p. 443 – p. 480.

³³ *Pre-Classic Dance Forms* (New York, 1937; reprinted by Dance Horizons, New York, 1972 and 1979).

³⁴ *Some Historical Dances (Twelfth to nineteenth century)* (first published London, 1952, republished as *Historical Dances*, London, 1982).

³⁵ *Dances of Spain and Italy, from 1400 to 1600* (London, 1954).

³⁶ *Orchesography*, published by Cyril Beaumont, with a Preface by Peter Warlock; reprinted by Dance Horizons (New York, n.d.).

³⁷ *Orchesography*. The 1948 edition was published by Kamin Dance Publications (location not given); the 1967 reprint (New York, Toronto and London) has a new introduction and notes by Julia Sutton, and a new Labanotation section by Mireille Backer and Julia Sutton.

³⁸ p. 71.

³⁹ p. 71.

⁴⁰ p. 72.

⁴¹ First published by BBC; reprinted 1987 by Dance Books.

⁴² p. 33.

⁴³ p. 5 – p. 6.

⁴⁴ ‘Le Gentil-homme la peult dancier ayant la cappe & lespee: Et vous aultres vestuz de voz longues robes, marchant honnestement avec une gravité posee.’

⁴⁵ First transmitted on BBC in 1993; production by Thirteen/WNET in association with RM Arts and BBC-TV.

⁴⁶ Chapter 4, ‘Social Dance’, p. 128 – p. 127.

⁴⁷ p. 122.

⁴⁸ f. 63r.

⁴⁹ f. 2v.