

“Every Savage can Dance” or, Dance as a Class Identifier

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“Every savage can dance,” replies Mr. Darcy sardonically in Jane Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice*, mocking Sir William Lucas’s innocent pronouncement that dancing is “one of the first refinements of polished societies.”

And Mr. Darcy has a point! Here we have a picture of what might be considered ‘savages’ dancing:



Picture 1 Engraving of John White’s *A Festive Dance* by Theodore de Bry c.1590. (de Bry’s engravings of White’s images later accompanied an illustrated publication of Thomas Harriot’s *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*)

But of course Sir William is not referring to just ‘any old dancing;’ he is referring to the kind of dance that is current in his particular set in society; and above all, to the ‘refined’ style of performing these dances, a style that confers admission into ‘polite society’, a style that has become a ‘cultural’ identifier, and more particularly in this case, a ‘class’ identifier,’ for the *beau monde* of the period. Dance as a class identifier is not a new idea, and is certainly implied in Sir William Lucas’s comment. But I’d like to explore the

ways in which this has influenced dance styles through the centuries.

The title of this conference is *Ballroom, Stage and Village Green: Contexts for Early Dance*. Let us look at some pictures of people dancing - firstly on what might be thought of as ‘the village green’:



Picture 2 Dancing on the village green

Let us contrast this picture with those from what we might call ‘the ballroom.’



Picture 3 A 16th century ballroom



Picture 4 An 18th century ballroom

The chief difference between these two sets of pictures is not really the fact that the former are depicted dancing ‘on the village green’, and the latter in the ballroom, or between dancing out of doors versus indoors. It is that ‘the Village Greeners’ represent the lower classes, while the ballroom crowd represent the upper classes.



Picture 5 Dancing in a garden, early 15th C

Of course, the upper classes will show their particular style of dance, not only in the ballroom, but even when dancing on the village green – albeit a private one – and an idealised one at that!



Picture 6 Dancing in a garden, late 15th C

As will the lower classes, even when dancing indoors:



Picture 7 Interior of a tavern, c. 1700

A picture by de Bry from the 16th century shows very clearly the juxtaposition of what we might call the Ballroom dancers and the Village Greeners, or the upper versus the lower classes:

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Picture 8 Théodore de Bry (c.1550)

The most notable difference between the two styles of dance is the lack of deportment in the lower classes, the lack of bodily control.

The 15th C

The first descriptions of dance that we have are from the 15th century, so let us start our explorations here. Clearly dance was used as a class identifier at this time. The famous dancing master Guglielmo Ebreo remarked in his dance treatise of 1463 that the art of dancing “most favours and befits those whose hearts are loving and generous and those whose spirits are en-nobled by a heavenly bent rather than by a fortuitous inclination. But it is completely alien to, and the mortal enemy of, vile and rude mechanicals, who often, with corrupt souls and treacherous minds, turn it from a liberal art and virtuous science into something adulterous and ignoble.”¹ It is hard to imagine a stronger statement confirming the role of dance as a class identifier. The steps of the 15th century *basse dance* and *balli* were very simple, very easy to execute at some level, yet the thought of the village folks being able to perform these dances was both laughable and threatening to the upper classes. How could this be?

In the 15th century, it was believed that everyone had an allotted place in society, a status allocated to them at birth. Basically, the

upper classes were virtuous, the working folks corrupt and licentious.

Dance was used to render this difference visible. Guglielmo Ebreo, echoing earlier classical writers, declared that “the virtue of the dance is none other than an external action reflecting interior movements of the soul,”² in other words, if you are a virtuous person, then all your body movements will be graceful and harmonious (and of course it helps if you have enough money to pay a dancing master to show you how to make your inner virtue more visible!)



Picture 9 Young nobles with a dancing master

If, however, you belong to the working classes, Castiglione assures us, *even if* you had time and money to learn to dance, you would never have enough grace to dance well. When I give my dance classes, I can always tell at a glance who is of noble birth, and who is not!

Grace and harmony required enormous control over your body. You must be moderate in your movements, neither too fast nor too slow, you must not make exaggerated poses with your body, but being too rigid is equally abhorrent. Your movements must be fluid - you had to undulate like a gondola on the waves. You must express lightness in your movements – only peasants are heavy. To perform a double step with grace, you must rise slowly, and fall more quickly at the end; when you get to the highest point, just before falling, Domenico tells us to freeze a moment, as if you've seen the Medusa's head, then you soar like a falcon (this is *umbra fantasmatica*). What chance did the poor working folks have of mastering this style, dancing maybe just a few days a year, at carnival time or at a wedding, letting off steam?

And the final *coup de grâce*, the final clincher in making these seemingly simple dance steps quite unattainable by anyone who did not belong to the upper classes, was the *un-natural* body shading of their dance movements. When you walk naturally, the arm that swings forward is the opposite one to the foot that is coming forward. But dancing in such a natural style would be too easy for interlopers to imitate. I believe, however, following the style of movement first proposed in this country by both Jim Cartmell and Diana Cruickshank, that a unilateral style was used in 15th century noble dancing, where the whole of one side of the body comes forward at the same time, a style totally different from the 'opposition' used by most dancers today. Many people find this style un-natural and difficult to make look graceful – perhaps understandably, because that was the name of the game – to make it hard for outsiders to imitate. This style can easily look like the proverbial bear dance; only if you are

endowed with virtue by the heavens above can you turn what might feel like an un-natural movement into what looks like effortless 'naturalness'!

16th Century

If we turn now to the 16th century, we find the same claims made, that the nobles will reveal their inner virtue through their graceful body movements when they are dancing. Thomas Elyot (1531) even associated particular steps of the *basse dance* with specific virtues³. Descriptions of body movement indicate even more clearly than do those from the 15th century that a unilateral style of movement is required. You must *pavoneggiare*, sway like a peacock, preen yourself. But you must always be careful never to appear affected – only to exude *grace*.

A problem arises in the 16th century. All over Europe, including England, the galliard became the most popular dance in the ballroom, especially with the gentlemen. Books were written detailing hundreds of galliard variations, many requiring virtuoso footwork and great agility – great leaps and bounds are *de rigueur*. Some variations, suggesting 3 turns in one galliard variation, are difficult today even for a trained dancer. But such virtuoso dancing was the province of the lower class professional, with whom the courtiers would definitely not want to be identified.



Picture 10 Morisco dancers, 15th C

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Here we see some professional dancers from the 15th century, highly paid *morisco* dancers, who travelled from one court to another. Their dances were athletic and virtuosic; they would have been thought entertaining, but essentially circus entertainers, not purveyors of the noble art of dance.

The popular *La Volta* was another 16th century dance that might seem more fitting to the ignoble and licentious excesses of the lower classes than to the noble ballroom. In the *Volta*, the man throws the lady up in the air, booting her around by putting his knee under her bottom; one of the man’s hands is under her busk, round about her crotch area; the lady is thrown into the air, modestly trying to hold down her petticoats with her free hand. Not surprisingly, it was considered rather scandalous at the time, with its encouragement of “uncleanly gropings.” “The *volta*... besides [its] rude and bold movements, [has] the misfortune of causing an infinite number of murders and miscarriages, killing and destroying all who are yet unborn.”⁴ But Queen Elizabeth loved dancing *La Volta*, and she also liked to watch her courtiers display a fine leg in their galliard variations. What was to be done then to distinguish these displays from the antics of the common people, so that dance could still be used as a class identifier?

Castiglione, in his *The Book of the Courtier* 1528, points to a solution when describing another sport.

“Not even though (the courtier’s) performance is outstanding should he let it be thought that he has spent on it much time or trouble...”⁵

So long as the virtuosity of your dance steps appears to emanate naturally from within you, with no evidence of sweat or toil (which would be the mark of a lower class professional dancer), so long as all is nonchalance and decorum, cultivated ease, then it can be accepted as *noble* dance. Indeed, if we look at the picture below showing a couple doing *La Volta*, nonchalance and decorum do seem to prevail.

Only in private, at masquerade balls or in masked theatrical spectacles could courtiers

indulge in dance steps and style unsuited to their station.



Picture 11 *La Volta* danced at the Valois Court

The 17th century

The 17th century ushered in fresh problems for the upper classes. James I of England wanted to use the masque to show off the glory of his court, and the benevolence of his rule.⁶ For this purpose he required dance to play a bigger role in these masques, and he needed the dances to be expressive and dramatic. However he met with great hostility from his courtiers – emotion and passion were not part of the noble style of dance that was a component of their core identity. And they certainly would not tolerate common professionals debasing their noble dancing with posturing and dramatics. Eventually James managed to come to a compromise – professionals would be brought in to do expressive dance and mime, but only in comic or grotesque roles, in what became known as the *antimasque*, thereby allowing graceful noble dance to remain as a class identifier for the courtiers.

The civil war in England put a stop to the development of most theatrical dance, but in France, matters gathered apace. Louis 14th, saddened by how few nobles could dance well, established the Royal Academy of Dance in Paris, mostly to train nobles to dance more competently. But he also let in

some professional dancers. By training lower class professionals in the noble style, he immediately took from the nobles their ability to use dance as a class identifier. And of course the professionals did it better than most nobles, so the nobles soon withdrew from the fray.

18th C - ballroom

By the beginning of the 18th century, this training of professionals in the noble style led to a complete split between ballroom and stage dancing. Let us first see whether the upper classes could continue using dance as a class identifier in the ballroom, and then we shall move on to the stage.

The idea that deportment and dance betray a person's status is still alive and well in the 18th century. The famous dancing master John Weaver claimed that "from the Regular or Irregular Position, and Motion of the body, we distinguish the handsome Presence, and Deportment of the fine gentleman, from the awkward Behaviour of the unpolish'd Peasant; we discover the graceful Mien of a young Lady, from the ungainly Carriage of her Maid..."⁷ Another dancing master, John Essex, asserted that "a light Carriage and Deportment, are certain Indications of a loose and roving mind."⁸

Country dances were extremely popular in the ballroom throughout the 18th century, all over Europe. But before one could indulge in the pleasure of these dances, one had to run the gauntlet of **THE MINUET**. In high society ballrooms, minuets were still danced, one couple at a time, under intense scrutiny by the whole court – no pressure here!

(see pictures 12 & 13)

The minuet was the only one of the French-style *danse à deux* to be danced in most ballrooms in the 18th century; greatly changed from its original lively nature in the 17th century, it had become a slow ceremonial dance, performed solely to indicate one's credentials as part of high society.



Picture 12 Jean le Pautre *La Salle du Bal donné dans le petit Parc de Versailles (1668)*, engraving 1679



Picture 13 – a minuet at the English court

To dance the minuet well, you needed a dancing master. It took at least 6 months to learn the figure of the minuet, and another 6 months' practice to perform it with mediocrity, claimed Magri, a Neapolitan dance master in 1779.⁹ "The *Minuet* needs hidden control which corresponds to the gracefulness which is sought in it in order to make a good presentation. It needs a languid eye, a smiling mouth, splendid body, unaffected hands, ambitious feet" (Magri).¹⁰ You had not only to move with lightness and grace, thereby revealing your inner virtue, you also had to know the rules of decorum: how to enter the dance space and do the initial reverences with poise, the gentleman must know how to manage his hat, donning and doffing it continuously throughout the dance,

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you must know how to traverse the beautiful serpentine lines, glancing at your partner at precise moments, and with just the correct degree of inclination of the head, you must be able to improvise some steps, and know how to take the hands of your partner, such that the two arms make a perfect serpentine line between them. Yet again, the lower orders stood no chance of easily understanding such arcane practices; so for the whole of the 18th century, the upper classes could use the performance of the minuet as a class identifier in the ballroom.

A masquerade ball was the only exception - if say you were to observe a masquerader “pranc[ing] a minuet on his hobby-horse, with a dancing bear for his partner.”¹¹ At the very popular masquerade balls, you were obliged to behave and to dance in accordance with the cut of your clothes. The ever popular Harlequin costume obliged the wearer to dance in a comic style, the many cross-dressers had to dance in the style of the opposite sex, and both men and women, if suitably clad, could do the virtuoso dance steps, or even the grotesque ones, that they had seen performed by professional dancers on stage, thereby subverting the class connotations of dance.

18th C - stage

Let us turn finally to the 18th century stage, in contrast to the ballroom and the village green.

In the 17th century, dance was beginning to emerge onto the public stage, outside the restricted confines of the court. From this time on, attempts were made to use dance alone to tell a story, without the help of words or song, to create what later became known as *ballet d’action* - narrative ballet - which became what we now call *classical ballet*. I’d like to suggest that even this endeavour in the theatre was influenced by the class connotations of dance.

As we heard earlier, because the English courtiers in the early 17th century used dance as a class identifier, they did not want to put

passion and drama into their dancing. Professionals were permitted to be dramatic, but they could only represent the dance of the lower orders, and their dancing was usually comic. This established an association of expressive and comic dance with low class. This connection was greatly strengthened by the advent of the extremely popular English Pantomime in the 18th century. In these productions were to be found virtuoso dancers who expressed narrative stories solely through the use of dance and mime, but almost always associated with comedy and virtuosity, as in the antimasque of a century earlier. Pantomimes were considered ‘low art’.



Picture 14 *Commedia players* Copy of an engraving by Callot, late 17th C

We see a striking resemblance between the dance of the commedia players and that of our original ‘savages’:



But the choreographers attempting to create narrative ballet, such as Weaver and Noverre, wanted their nascent art form to be recognised as ‘high art’. They wanted to disconnect dramatic dance from its association with low class – to incorporate expression and mime into ‘noble’ dancing, dance that revealed grace and decorum, the style formerly associated with the upper classes, albeit with updated dance steps.¹² For these early choreographers of *ballet d’action*, affording mere entertainment was not enough, their creations had to be edifying, uplifting, creating harmony in the breasts of the beholders.

There has always been a tension in every field between the serious and the comic – can a serious intellectual art form accommodate the comic within it? In the field of dance, this tension is reinforced by the centuries’ old association of comic and acrobatic dance with lower class professionals. Weaver, echoing the humanist ideals of the 15th century dance masters, wanted to exclude from the true art of dance all movement that did not express “the Beauty of Imitation, and the Harmony of Composition and Motion.”¹³ He did not want dance that was “so intermixt with *Trick*, and *Tumbling*, that the Design is quite lost in ridiculous *Grimace*,”¹⁴ a dance style perhaps too reminiscent of our original ‘savages’.

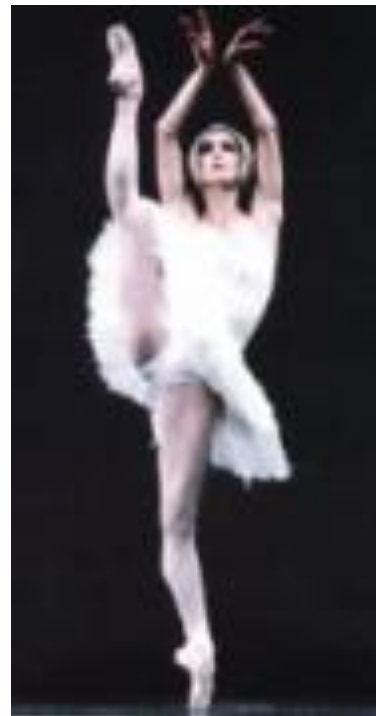
Unfortunately for Weaver, 18th century audiences seem to have really enjoyed watching comic and virtuoso dance. He admitted, to his sadness, that the English are extremely fond of “ridiculous senseless Motions, insignificant Cap’ring, and worthless Agility.”¹⁵ But for a self-financing theatre, getting bums on seats was essential for survival. Had Weaver been willing to integrate virtuosity and comedy into his productions of serious danced drama, truly melding ‘high’ and ‘low’ class art, then the emerging art form of *ballet d’action* might have gained earlier acceptance in the theatres.

Maybe it is only in the Modern Age, with its acceptance of the Enlightenment belief that all men were created equal, that comic and virtuoso dancing could be truly integrated with the noble style that the upper classes had

always used as a class identifier – as exemplified by these striking images.



Picture 15 An 18th C fairground dancer - resolutely ‘low’art



Picture 16 Sylvie Guillem, purveyor of ‘high’ art at the Opera

Notes

- 1 Ebreo, Guglielmo. *De pratica seu arte tripudii*, 1463. Trans. Barbara Sparti, On the Practice or Art of Dancing, OUP, 1993, p. 91.
- 2 Ebreo, Guglielmo. Trans. Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body*, Indiana UP, 2004, p. 91.
- 3 Elyot, Thomas. The Book Named the Governor, 1531. See Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body*, Indiana University Press, p. 97.
- 4 Bouchet, Guillaume. *Les Serées* 1597. Quoted by Julia Sutton in International Encyclopedia of Dance, vol. 6, p. 350. OUP, 1998.
- 5 Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier* 1528, p. 118. Trans. George Bull, 1976
- 6 See Anne Daye, *The Jacobean antimasque within the masque context: a dance perspective*. Unpub. PhD thesis, University of Surrey, 2008
- 7 Weaver, John. *Anatomical and Mechanical Lectures Upon Dancing*. London 1721, p. viii-ix
- 8 Essex, John. *The Young Ladies Conduct: or, Rules for Education, Under several Heads; with Instructions upon Dress, both before and after Marriage, and Advice to Young Wives*. London, 1722, p 46-47. Quoted in Françoise Carter, Attitudes towards Dance through the Ages: an Overview. In *Dance and Heritage: Creation, Recreation and Recreation*. Proceedings EDC Conference, ed. Barbara Segal & Bill Tuck, 2010
- 9 Magri, Gennaro. *Theoretical and Practical Treatise on Dancing*. 1779. Trans. Mary Skeaping, Dance Books, London 1988, p. 87.
- 10 Magri, Gennaro. *Theoretical and Practical Treatise on Dancing*. 1779. Trans. Mary Skeaping, Dance Books, London 1988, p. 187.
- 11 Castle, Terry. *Masquerade and Civilization*. Stanford University Press. p. 23.
- 12 “Dancing is an elegant, and regular Movement, harmonically composed of beautiful attitudes and contrasted graceful Postures of the Body, and Parts thereof.” John Weaver, *Lectures upon Dancing*, p. 137
- 13 Weaver, John. *The History of the Mimes and Pantomimes*, London, 1728. p.2
- 14 Weaver, John. *An Essay towards an History of Dancing*. London, 1712. p. 168
- 15 Weaver, John. *An Essay Towards an History of Dancing*. London, 1712, p. 139.