

PART I

From the Renaissance to the baroque: royal power and worldly display

1 The early dance manuals and the structure of ballet: a basis for Italian, French and English ballet

JENNIFER NEVILE

In the dance treatises of the fifteenth century choreographies were first recorded in Western Europe: dance became literary and philosophical as well as a physical skill and oral tradition. These treatises laid the foundation for the future structure of European dance. The main dance genres recorded in the treatises, *ballo*, *bassadanza*, and *basse danse* in the fifteenth century, *pavane*, *galliard*, *branle*, *almain*, *balletto*, *bassa*, *brando* and *cascarda* in the sixteenth century, were the dances of the upper levels of society: the courtiers and nobility, those who wielded power, as well as the wealthy merchants and trading families. Important state occasions, marriage celebrations, official visits by neighbouring rulers or ambassadors, annual religious festivities and theatrical events were all marked by formal balls or dancing at which members of the elite performed. Often these dance events took place in public spaces, on a stage erected in the main piazza in front of thousands of spectators. At other times the space in which the dancing was conducted was more private, being the main hall of a palace. But even on these occasions the dances performed were part of the official ceremonies and rituals, contributing to the presentation of the image of a ruler as a powerful and magnificent prince, whose authority could not be challenged. When a ruler and the leading members of his court danced in public before his subjects he was displaying his magnificence, and in doing so he was displaying his power. The Italians in particular were obsessed with protocol and ceremony, and one of the chief means of indicating rank was by spatial relationships among people. Thus dance, an art form with spatial relationships as its basis, was a significant tool in this presentation of power and rank through rituals and ceremonies.

The dances recorded in the treatises are overwhelmingly for both male and female performers (see Fig. 1). Many of the dances are for one or two couples, or for three performers, two men and one woman or vice versa. Some dance genres were processional in nature, for example the *basse danse*, *pavane* and *almain*, during which a line of couples paraded around the hall, exhibiting not only their skill at dancing, but also their sumptuous clothes, hairstyles and jewellery. Other genres chronicled the social

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Figure 1 Maestro dei Tornei di Santa Croce, cassone panel, *La magnanimità di Scipione*, 1460. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Inventory No: 5804.1859.

interactions between the men and women. The choreographic sequences and floor patterns of the Italian *balli*, for example, emphasised typical interactions that occurred on a daily basis at court. Some of the *balli* enact themes of fidelity, fickleness or jealousy. *Sobria* is a *ballo* for one woman and five men where the sole woman remains faithful to her partner despite the advances and pleading of the other four unattached men. *Merçantia*, for one woman and three men, presents the opposite scenario, as the woman is all too ready to abandon her partner and flirt with the other two men. *Gelosia* (jealousy), a *ballo* for three couples, is a dance in which the men constantly change partners, thereby providing many opportunities for the display of this emotion. In the sixteenth century the confrontation between the sexes became more explicit with dances entitled *Barriera*, *La Battaglia* and *Torneo Amoro*. Often these dances started with two lines of men and women who advanced and retreated before clashing (often striking hands that echoed swords hitting shields) and the final reconciliation. Other dance genres such as the *galliard* were explicitly choreographed for a display of virtuosity and athleticism, especially on the part of the man, who was expected to perform sequences of complicated variations that could involve kicks, leaps and turns in the air. Hundreds of these variations were recorded in the dance treatises, and competent dancers were expected to memorise many of them, to be used at will during a performance. By the sixteenth century the necessity for a courtier to be skilled in the art of dance was without question. The ability to perform gracefully, seemingly without any effort, was one of the

distinguishing marks of a courtier and the absence of this ability exposed a gentleman or lady to ridicule and derision from colleagues.

The dance treatises from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (often dedicated to members of the leading families) contain hundreds of choreographies – a substantial body of material. Perhaps the most obvious contribution of these treatises to European dance practice is the idea of a choreography as a unique arrangement of steps, floor patterns and music. Dances such as the *pavane*, in which a simple sequence of steps was repeated until the end of the music, continued throughout this period, but the vast majority of dances recorded in the treatises were individual choreographies. A dance was therefore a specific creation: it needed a creator – usually a dance master – who also often wrote or arranged the music to fit the step sequences of each dance. The fifteenth-century Italian dance master Guglielmo Ebreo recognised dancing as an innate, natural human activity.

[I]f eight or ten people are dancing without music, [but] with steps that are harmonised and measured together, then it is a natural thing. And when a musician plays and those dancing harmonise and measure their steps to the music, then it is an acquired skill.¹

But when music was played and the dancers adjusted their steps to fit the music, then dance became an art, a product of human ingenuity and skill. In this latter scenario the “natural” product of dance was ordered and perfected by the addition of human application and skill, and training and education in the dance.

Each new dance was a unique combination of steps drawn from the existing step vocabulary. The number of different steps available to the choreographer increased dramatically in the sixteenth century. The step vocabulary of the fifteenth-century Italian *ballo* and *bassadanza* were nine “natural” steps and three “accidental” steps, with variety obtained from performing the steps of one *misura* (a specific combination of metre and speed) to the music of a second *misura*, and from adding the quick “accidental” steps to the “natural” steps.² By contrast, the late sixteenth-century Italian dance treatises of Fabritio Caroso contain descriptions of fifty-eight different steps (*Il Ballarino*, 1581) and seventy-four (*Nobiltà di dame*, 1600) respectively. Cesare Negri in *Le gratie d’amore* (1602) describes fifty-one widely used steps, as well as forty-two variants on the galliard *cinque passi* and thirty-four different galliard *mutanze*, twenty-seven *salti* (jumps), thirty *capriole*, and ten *zurli* (spinning turns).³ With this many steps the possibilities for new combinations of step sequences were vast, even without the addition of improvised passages and added ornamental steps.⁴

The structure of these individually choreographed dances enhanced the importance of memory in European ballet, and led to the requirement for

sustained rehearsal. A good memory was crucial for anyone who wished to perform in public, as one had to commit to memory each different choreography. Dances were subject to fashionable trends, and those in the elite level of society had no wish to be seen performing last year's dances, let alone those of five or ten years ago, which had now filtered down to a lower level of society. Therefore, new dances had to be continually learnt and mastered. For example, in 1469 the dance master Filippus Bussus wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici offering to come to Florence in order to teach Lorenzo and his siblings "some elegant, beautiful and dignified *balli* and *bassadanze*". According to Bussus, the performance of such new and elegant dances would bring "honour and fame" to Lorenzo and his family.⁵ The letter from Bussus highlights the need for rehearsal before these dances were performed in public. Thus dance education began at an early age for the children of the nobility. Ippolita Sforza was only ten when she danced at Tristano Sforza's wedding celebrations in Milan in 1455, while Isabella d'Este started her public performances from the age of six.

A high level of skill was needed in order to perform gracefully in public, without error. A dancer had to be able to learn the correct carriage of the body, to master the steps and their variants and to memorise the choreographies. Furthermore, he or she had to possess a thorough understanding of the interaction between the dance and the music, the ability to adapt the patterns of each dance to the available space, the wit and invention to subtly vary each step so that it was not performed the same way several times in a row, a knowledge of the gestures and movements of the body which accompanied the steps, an awareness of the phrasing of each step as well as the agility to cope with the speed changes in the choreographies. An example of the difficulty of mastering the mechanics of the dance practice as an adult, let alone its subtleties, is illustrated by a letter from the German painter Albrecht Dürer. Dürer, while on a visit to Venice in 1506, wished to improve his social standing. Apart from buying new and luxurious clothes, Dürer also enrolled in a dancing class. He found this part of the process of social ascension much more difficult than just purchasing expensive clothes, as the somewhat complaining tone of his letter reveals. "I set to work to learn dancing and twice went to the school. There I had to pay the master a ducat. Nobody would make me go there again. I would have to pay out all that I earned, and at the end I still wouldn't know how to dance!"⁶

Dürer's letter vividly illustrates that dancing was a social marker, a means of distinguishing those who belonged to an elite group from those who did not. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries dance had always been regarded as a normal aristocratic pastime. But from the fifteenth century onwards the art of dance as described in the dance treatises became a sign of membership in the upper levels of society. The rules and postural codes

as taught by the dance masters were part of the mechanism by which the court made itself appear superior and inaccessible to the rest of society. The courtiers believed that their superiority should be demonstrated to the rest of society by the different way in which they moved, walked, danced and even stood in repose. Their carriage and demeanour when on the dance floor did not change once they finished dancing: it remained with them as it became their normal posture. Thus the instruction the young children received from the dance masters was extremely important socially and ethically, as it not only allowed them to obtain approbation when they exhibited their skills in the dance, but it also trained them in the patterns of behaviour and deportment essential for membership in the social elite. If you moved ungracefully you immediately demonstrated to others that you did not belong to the right class of society, as you could not perform the movement patterns appropriate to that class. Dancing taught the chosen members of society control over their body and over all their actions, both when dancing and in day-to-day interactions with their colleagues and superiors. It was visible evidence that a person was capable of appearing in public without making an exhibition of herself or himself. If a person could control his or her outward bodily movements, then they were capable of controlling their inner emotions as well. Dancing, therefore, functioned as a social marker, as one of the ways a certain group in society defined itself and excluded others. A stark example of how dance was used to define the elite in society comes from Nuremberg in 1521. In this year those who held political power wished to limit further the numbers of citizens entitled to vote. Therefore they designated the voting elite as “those families who used to dance in the *Rathaus* in the olden days, and who still dance there”.⁷ In Nuremberg it was the ability to dance that was used as a tool to exclude people from the group who exercised political power.

Dance as an elite activity was strengthened in the Renaissance because it became a form of consumption: a consumption of both time and money. The dance practice recorded in the treatises needed many hours of teaching and practice from a young age, and only those who were wealthy enough to have the leisure time to devote to this activity were able to participate.

The fifteenth-century Italian dance treatises were more than just a compilation of choreographies.⁸ These manuscripts also contained a theoretical section in which the steps were briefly described, rules for the mastery of the dance were given, as well as the essential principles of the art and its philosophical basis. In their treatises the dance masters argued for dance to be included among the liberal arts. The authors of the treatises, Domenico da Piacenza, Antonio Cornazano and Guglielmo Ebreo, were fully aware that for dance to be included in the liberal arts through its association with music, it had to be understood both on a physical and intellectual level. If dance was

a liberal art it could then lay claim to be a demonstration of eternal truths, and a path to understanding the nature of God and the universe. The dance masters, especially Domenico, devoted a great deal of attention to setting out the philosophical basis of the art of dance that had the same numerical basis as the other mathematical arts of the quadrivium. These numerical proportions that were believed to order the cosmos found expression in the ratios of the relative speeds of the four *misura – bassadanza, quaternaria, saltarello* and *piva misura* – out of which the *balli* were constructed.⁹

Dance masters were also concerned with eloquent movement. Ever since the late fourteenth century, Italian humanists had been passionately concerned with eloquence in spoken and written text. The humanists' professional activity was the use of words, and so the production of elegant prose or poetry was one of the chief aims. The professional *métier* of the dance masters was movement of the human body, and this was where they strove to inculcate eloquence. For Domenico and his colleagues a person's gestures, deportment, facial expressions and manner of walking were a silent language that carried a rich treasury of meaning.

Given the concern of the dance masters with the performance of elegant patterns of movement, it is not surprising that a large part of the specialised technical vocabulary developed in their treatises dealt with nuances of these eloquent movements. *Maniera, aiere, gratia* (grace), *ondeggiare, campeggiare*¹⁰ and *fantasmata*¹¹ were all terms developed by the dance masters in their attempts to describe elegant movements, all of which involved a fluidity and flexibility in the dancer's body. For movements to be eloquent they also had to be in harmony with the gestures and steps performed (a constant refrain in Guglielmo's treatise), as well as with the clothes worn by the dancer. Movements that would look dignified and seemly when dancing in a long garment would appear slightly ridiculous when dancing in a short tunic. Similarly, the jumps, turns and flourishes that appear elegant when wearing a short garment would have the opposite effect if observed on a dancer in a long tunic. Elegant movements, therefore, were not always slow or stately. They could be vigorous and lively when appropriate.

The engagement of the dance masters with contemporary intellectual concerns continued in the sixteenth century. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards the intellectual climate in both continental Europe and England fostered an interest in symbols. Indeed, the "manipulation and interpretation of symbols became a popular intellectual sport in the sixteenth century".¹² Symbols were seen as a great force both to draw heavenly power down to earth, and to help raise human understanding closer to a knowledge of the divine. Marsilio Ficino, in his treatise *De vita* (1489) is explicit on the power of "figures" (*figurae*) to influence human activity. And these "figures", or magical symbols that contained a hidden power, included music, people's

gestures, facial expressions, movements and dance.¹³ Ficino's writings were very popular in France in the sixteenth century, not only *De vita*, but also his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, which influenced many poets including Ronsard and Baif, both of whom were involved in the danced spectacles at the French court. In Ronsard's own writings he says that dance is divine and has the power to bring those divine effects down to the earthly sphere to transform those who perform and watch it.¹⁴

The evening that Love enticed you down into the ballroom to dance with skill, the wonderful dance of Love . . . The dance was divine . . . now it was circular, now long and then narrow, now pointed, as a triangle . . . I mistake myself; you did not dance, but rather your foot touched the summits of the earth; and your body was transformed, for that night, into a divine nature.¹⁵

The aim of the dance master when choreographing a dance for a masque or fête was to present to their educated audience of the court a series of symbols and images that communicated messages to the viewers just as did the spoken or sung portions of the spectacle. To them dance was a language analogous to writing, a form of "moving script" and the geometric figures created by the physical bodies of the dancers were the equivalent of the words and sentences of a spoken or written text. Thus choreographers built the dance around a series of discrete geometric figures or patterns that continually changed over the course of the dance. Each different rearrangement of the geometric shapes of a circle, square, triangle, or symbol such as a cross, produced a new dance figure with a different meaning. Dance masters saw themselves as architects responsible for the design of a dance, in geometric and proportional terms, and for these choreographers the true beauty of their dances resided in the geometric figures. Geometrically patterned choreographies were one way in which cosmic influences could be magically (that is, in a hidden or occult manner) transported to earth and, once there, could induce the same cosmic harmony to operate on earth.¹⁶ Dance was seen as a form of alchemy: an alchemy that acted upon performers and viewers, refining and transforming them into a purer state, closer to that of the divine nature. Therefore the notebook of a French dancing master who worked in Brussels c.1614–19 does not contain written descriptions of steps as do the treatises of Caroso, Negri and Arbeau, but rather over 450 drawings of figures for five to sixteen dancers.¹⁷ Many of the figures are simple geometric shapes – squares, circles, triangles, pyramids and lozenges – as well as composite figures in which discrete geometric figures are combined to form larger figures. Other named shapes are alchemical images: the salamander, serpent, tortoise, dart, sun, moon and star.¹⁸

Thus the interest in images and symbols that prevailed in society in general affected the choreographic structure of the theatrical dances in the late

1500s in France and England. By this time alchemical images and emblem books circulated widely, and by the beginning of the seventeenth century the language, images and metaphors of alchemy “were available to anyone who cared to read or listen”.¹⁹ It is inarguable that the texts of the masques and the French fêtes were written by the leading poets of the time, all of whom would certainly have been well aware of alchemical ideas and images, but the choreographers would also have had access to this imagery through the large number of printed books available on the subject, as alchemical books were part of the staple literature of the reading public.²⁰ By the end of the sixteenth century the corporeal rhetoric and eloquent movement of the previous century had given way to a language of symbols – alchemical and mystical – that spoke directly to those watching who had the intelligence to comprehend and interpret what they saw.

A further contribution of the early dance manuals to European ballet was the ideal of dance as morally virtuous behaviour. In *quattrocento* Italy it was a commonly held belief that movements of the body were an outward manifestation of the movements of a person’s soul.²¹ This belief was part of the reason for the dance masters’ cultivation of, and insistence on, elegant movements, and the distancing of their choreographies from the dances of the peasants. Thus those who moved in an ungraceful and inelegant manner in public exposed their inner nature for all to see. There was more at stake than momentary ridicule for one’s clumsiness. Vulgar movements that were not eloquent would be a clear sign that a person’s soul was not virtuous. Dancers could move those who saw their performance to sorrow, anger, happiness or laughter, as the emotions of the dancers were made visible through the movements of their body. This gave them both a tremendous power and responsibility: a power to affect the emotions of those who watched, and the responsibility to represent only morally edifying emotions.

Thus dance had the ability to teach ethical behaviour. A virtuous person when dancing would be imitating in his or her movements various positive ethical states, these would then be recognised by the spectators, who could themselves learn to imitate these virtues in their own lives. Naturally, the reverse position was also true; that is, a dancer’s movements could represent negative emotional states. Guglielmo did not seek to deny that the art of dance could be abused and used for immoral or improper purposes. But he also argued that when used by virtuous, noble and moral men, it could have a positive ethical effect on its practitioners and on those who observed it. Even though Guglielmo devoted an entire chapter on the behaviour and demeanour expected of young women of gentle birth, which he said had to be more moderate and virtuous than that expected of young men, he was not excusing a low level of behaviour from the latter. They still were

expected to exhibit courteous and virtuous behaviour. Therefore, the dance masters had an interest in promoting the moral virtues of the art of dance, and in emphasising its benefits for society as a whole, as is illustrated by the following passage from Guglielmo's treatise:

But when it is practised by noble, virtuous and honest men, I say that this science and art is good, virtuous and worthy of commendation and praise. And moreover not only does it turn virtuous and upright men into noble and refined persons, but it also makes those men who are ill-mannered and boorish and born into a low station into a sufficiently noble person. The character of everyone is made known by the dance.²²

In the sixteenth century the ability of dance to teach moral truths was carried further by northern European writers. The status of dance as a medium of moral instruction was elevated by the publication of such works as Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (London, 1531). Elyot's book was an educational treatise for young boys who were destined for careers in the country's administration. According to Elyot, dance was a noble and virtuous pastime, as it provided both recreation and a means to learn and comprehend the virtues necessary for adult life. Through the study and practice of the *basse danse* children could learn the important moral truths, as each step of the *basse danse* signified a different aspect of prudence.²³ For example, the reverence that begins every *basse danse* signified the honour due to God that is the basis of prudence, and which should be the starting point for all of mankind's actions.²⁴

The *written* history of Western European ballet begins in the fifteenth century with the production of the dance treatises. These manuscripts document a dance practice many of whose characteristics continued in the ballet of later centuries. Each dance was individually choreographed: a unique arrangement of steps, floor patterns and music. The treatises record hundreds of individual dances, as well as describing a large and sophisticated step vocabulary. These dances required a creator, or choreographer, and their complexity demanded that dancers learn, memorise and rehearse them before performing in public.

The choreographies were performed by members of the aristocracy, those who participated in the government and wielded power. These performances were often part of official state ceremonies and festivities, as well as for private entertainment. Dance was part of the display of wealth and power of the elite, as its practice involved the consumption of leisure time and money. The dance practice as described in the treatises, with its specific movement patterns, gestures and carriage of the body, acted as a social marker, identifying those who belonged to the elite level of society.

The dances that are recorded in the treatises are overwhelmingly choreographed for both men and women, rather than for one sex only. Thus the dances served as a means of expressing common social interactions and relationships between men and women. The dances also embodied societal norms, such as the need to control the movements of one's physical body and inner emotions. The dances performed by the elite in society were also seen as teaching ethical behaviour to those who watched through the external representation of moral virtues.

Most importantly, the dance practice as described in the treatises was part of the contemporary intellectual culture. The choreographers, either through the corporeal eloquence of the dancers' movements, or through the figures and symbols formed by groups of dancers, communicated important truths to the viewers who had the knowledge to comprehend what they were seeing. Dance was a liberal art, and as such was one path towards understanding the nature of God.