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SHAKESPEARE AND THE DANCE

Alan Brissenden



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Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Dance and the Elizabethans	1
2 The History Plays and the Imagery of Dance	18
3 The Comedies I	34
4 The Comedies II	49
5 The Tragedies	63
6 The Last Plays I	76
7 The Last Plays II	96
8 Conclusions	109
<i>Glossary of Dance Terms</i>	112
<i>Notes</i>	117
<i>Bibliography</i>	128
<i>Index</i>	137

I Dance and the Elizabethans

Learne then to daunce you that are Princes borne
And lawfull Lords of earthly creatures all;
Imitate them, and thereof take no scorne,
(For thys new Art to them is naturall)
And imitate the starres cæstiallyl.

For when pale Death your vitall twist shall sever,
Your better parts must daunce with them for ever.

Sir John Davies, *Orchestra*

The achievement of order in a fractured world is a major theme in all of Shakespeare's plays. He began writing for the theatre just as the Elizabethan age reached its peak of magnificence, with the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and during his lifetime, as the period of greatness waned, questions of hierarchy in government and society were brought increasingly into open debate. Queen Elizabeth could tell the historian William Lambarde, 'I am Richard II; know ye not that?'¹ in acknowledgement of the insecurity of her throne, even though it was tacitly agreed that she held it by divine right. Her less subtle successor aggressively proclaimed his belief in divine monarchy, in *Basilikon Doron*, the book he wrote for his elder son, Prince Henry, for example, and in such public statements as his speech to Parliament on 21 March 1610:

The state of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods.²

Four years later James's court spawned the scandal of the Overbury murder, as malevolent as anything in Webster or Middleton, an example of corruption in high places which could have served for

the 'cursed example' of Antonio's first speech in *The Duchess of Malfi*:

A prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver-drops in general. But if't chance
Some cursed example poison't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread.
(1. i. 11-15)

Disorder in the state resulting from discord in the affairs of those in authority is the basic action of many of Shakespeare's plays, but even the tragedies, which deal with the extremes of human suffering, present a view of life which is optimistic at the most fundamental level, the view that order is possible, that harmony can be restored. Closely related to this attitude is his use of dance both as part of the visually presented stage picture and as the content of dialogue. In some plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Winter's Tale* among them, dance is essential to the dramatic action; in many, particularly the history plays, it provides material for imagery; *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* are but two in which references to dance illuminate character. An understanding of dance and of particular dances themselves adds much to an appreciation of many of the plays and it is indispensable for the proper comprehension of certain scenes and passages.

An awareness of dance during the period also adds to our understanding of both the Elizabethan theatre and the society of the time; further, it can help our perception of the relationship between the two. Although it had long been under attack by the church, dancing had a firm and vital place in English life, particularly in the country, where the seasonal round of the year was marked by festivals. Many of these had dances characteristic of specific times and places, like the hobby-horse and floral dances of May Day in the West country, the more ubiquitous maypole itself, and the morris dances of Whitsuntide. Alongside these ritual dances, rehearsed and mostly performed by the few, were the popular dances which were part of celebration at any time or place—longways dances, with no top, bottom or leader, for instance, rounds in which the ring of dancers broke and reformed, changed and reassembled, or chain dances, with running steps and simple interlacing figures. During the sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth, dancing became ever more important at the English

court. Country dances were taken up, and formal dancing developed in variety and complexity, reaching its most extravagant presentation in those symbolic theatrical expressions of monarchic power, the Stuart masques.³ In the theatre, dancing from both court and country became part of the living fabric of drama.

From classical times onward the dance had been a symbol of harmony and concord, and in the elaborate entertainments of the Renaissance courts especially this symbolism was supported by spectacle of costume and setting. The cosmic dance, the rhythmic movement of all things in relation to one another, lasted until the eighteenth century beside the great chain of being and music itself as a commonly accepted metaphor of order, a concept closely allied to the Pythagorean belief in the primacy of number, that pervasive philosophy which affected so many corners of Renaissance thought and activity.⁴ Translating a snatch of Boethius, for example, the Elizabethan mathematician John Dee wrote,

All things (which from the very first originall beeing of thinges haue beene framed and made) do appeare to be Formed by the reason of Numbers. For this was the principall example or patterne in the minde of the Creator.⁵

Since number and pattern are essential to it, dance was seen as the means by which order came out of primal chaos. Plato mentions the idea in his *Laws* (653e) and the *Timaeus* (47e), and the satirist Lucian deals with it in detail in his dialogue on dancing. Even though Lucian is being ironic, his use of these ideas indicates their general acceptance when he was writing in the second century. His dialogue provided a major source for theories of the creation of the world by means of the dance of atoms, and the dependence of the universe for its equilibrium on the joyous dance of the heavenly bodies.

In Sir John Davies' nimble expression of these notions in his poem *Orchestra* (1594) Prince Antinous tries to persuade Penelope to dance by saying,

Dauncing (bright Lady) then began to be,
When the first seedes whereof the world did spring,
The Fire, Ayre, Earth and Water did agree,
By Loves perswasion, Natures mighty King,
To leave their first disordred combating;

And in a daunce such measure to observe,
As all the world their motion should preserve.

Twenty-five years later, Robert Burton wrote in his compendious ragbag of Renaissance thought, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

The Sun and Moon (some say) dance about the earth, the three upper Planets about the Sun as their centre, now stationary, now direct, now retrograde, now in apogee then in perigee, now swift, then slow, occidental, oriental, they turn round, jump and trace, Venus and Mercury about the Sun with those thirty-three Maculae or Bourbonian planets, dancers about the harping Sun, saith Fromundus. Four Medicean stars dance about Jupiter, two Austrian about Saturn &c., and all (belike) to the musick of the Spheres.⁶

Another divine, Jehan Tabourot, who cloaked his religious identity under the anagram 'Thoinot Arbeau', ended his dance manual *Orchesography* (1589) by saying to his pupil: 'Practise these dances carefully and you will become a fit companion of the planets, which dance of their own nature . . .'.⁷

Davies' poem draws to a close with a glorious vision of the 'bright moon' surrounded by 'a thousand sparkling stars' which 'moved in such measure/To do their sovereign honour and delight' – a 'divine image [of] our glorious English court'. Queen Elizabeth was frequently presented in literature and art in this central position; King James's wife, tall, plain Anne, arranged to embody the symbol, giving it life in court masques in which she appeared. For Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609), for instance, she became Bel-Anna, Queen of the Ocean. Similarly, Prince Henry appeared as the fairy prince himself in the marvellous *Oberon* (1610) and, much later, Charles I and Henrietta Maria impersonated such emblematic characters as Philogenes, the Lover of his People, and the Chief Heroine, sent down from Heaven by Pallas, in Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia*, the last of these inward-looking celebrations of royal authority. This final spectacle was prepared and presented by the king and queen during the unpropitious days of January 1640.

Although Queen Elizabeth did not appear in masques as the Stuart royal ladies delighted to, she was, like her father, a notable dancer, and in 1589 John Stanhope, gentleman of the Privy Chamber, wrote to Lord Talbot, 'My Lord, the Queen is so well as I

assure you, six or seven galliards in a morning, besides music and singing, is her ordinary exercise'⁸ – a galliard would have been a far more spiritually and aesthetically satisfying form of exercise than many of today's mechanical movements. Nearly ten years later the French Ambassador, André de Maise, remarked that 'without doubt she is a mistress of the art, having learnt in the Italian manner to dance high'.⁹ This may have referred to the volta,¹⁰ a lively dance which was a favourite of the Queen, in which the lady is lifted into the air by her partner, and the steps include high leaps and turns. In her old age the Queen danced less, but enjoyed watching others, rebuking her maids if they did not keep time. On 28 April 1602, in her sixty-eighth year, she opened a ball at Richmond with the Duke of Nevers; if the dance really was a galliard, as has been reported, it is unlikely that the queen, sprightly as she was even then, took the liveliest part.¹¹ It is more probable that she formally began the evening by leading the French Duke in a stately processional pavan, which was usually followed by a galliard. Arbeau gives the following graceful description of such occasions:

On solemn feast days the pavan is employed by kings, princes and great noblemen to display themselves in their fine mantles and ceremonial robes. They are accompanied by queens, princesses and great ladies, the long trains of their dresses loosened and sweeping behind them, sometimes borne by damsels. And it is the said pavans, played by hautboys and sackbuts, that announce the grand ball and are arranged to last until the dancers have circled the hall two or three times, unless they prefer to dance it by advancing and retreating. Pavans are also used in masquerades to herald the entrance of the gods and goddesses in their triumphal chariots or emperors and kings in full majesty.¹²

The galliard gave men particularly the chance to show their grace and agility, with leaps, turns in the air, rapid kicks and intricate footwork.

In a court led by Queen Elizabeth, dancing was an essential accomplishment for both ladies and gentlemen. According to one of his few enemies, Sir Christopher Hatton 'came into court "by the galliard"', for he came thither as a private gentleman of the Inns of Court in a masque; and for his activity and person, which was tall and proportionable, taken into [the Queen's] favour'.¹³ He eventually leaped high enough to become her Lord Chancellor. The

entertainment in which Hatton first caught the Queen's attention was probably the masque given at Whitehall after the performance of *Gorboduc* on 18 January 1562 by the Gentlemen of the Inner Temple, a repeat performance of part of the Christmas festivities of the Inner Temple in 1561 in which Hatton was Master of the Game and Robert Dudley, later to be the Earl of Leicester, was Governor of the festival and the Christmas Prince, Pallaphilos.¹⁴

The Inns of Court were not simply the law schools of the time; they were considered to be a third university and the place to acquire gentlemanly skills. Dancing was a recreation and an exercise to give final polish and as regular ceremonial it formed part of the established corporate life of the Inns from before 1471 until at least 1733.¹⁵ It is a significant coincidence that the most complete dance instructions in English known before the publication of John Playford's *Dancing Master* in 1651 (the preface of which mentions the 'sweet and ayry Activity' of the gentlemen of the Inns of Court) are to be found in six manuscripts, all among the papers of men who had been Inns of Court students. Three are in the Bodleian Library, including the earliest, a commonplace book of about 1570 which has fifteen dances (MS Rawl. Poet. 108, ff. 10–11); instructions for seven and the name of one other were written out by the astrologer and antiquarian Elias Ashmole, probably in the 1630s (MS Rawl. d. 864, fo. 199); and the most interesting, the commonplace book of John Ramsay, has twenty-one (MS Douce 208). The British Library has a manuscript with eight dances (MS Harl. 367, ff. 178–9), the library of the Middle Temple one with ten (Misc. vol. xxvii) and the Royal College of Music another with eight (MS 1119). What is remarkable is that even though at least fifty years, and probably more, lie between the writing of the earliest and the latest of these important sources for dance history, they all have the names of six dances in common, copied down in the same order. Variations in the instructions for the dances indicate that the steps were modified over the years; but even though they were not precisely identical throughout all the time, the manner of their listing shows not only a continuing tradition of dancing at the inns, but, more interestingly, a continuing tradition of the same dances, and of ritualised performance. The six shared by all the manuscripts are the Quadran Pavan, Turkeyloney, the Earl of Essex Measure, Tinternell, the Old Almain and the Queen's Almain. The Black Almain is common to five of the manuscripts, and the Cicillia Almain is found in four. These are all court dances, not the rounds,

hays and hornpipes of the country, but several in these lists must have been known outside the Inns of Court, since the tunes for the Cicillia Pavan, the Nine Muses and the New Almain are suggested as melodies for ballads printed in *A Handefull of pleasant delites*, a small anthology of 1584.

John Ramsay describes his twenty-one dances under the heading 'Practise for Dauncinge'. Conveniently, he also includes in his commonplace book an autobiography which relates that he was born in 1578, was admitted to Peterhouse in Cambridge in 1601, then withdrew from the university and joined the court. He became absolutely weary of that 'tedious life'¹⁶ and, on inheriting wealth at his father's death, entered the Middle Temple on 23 March 1606. He travelled on the Continent and in the Holy Land between 1613 and 1616, settled down to married life in 1620 then went on a voyage to Guiana in 1623, as the last, shakily written, entry tells us. The dances he records can be safely dated between 1606 and 1613.

Bulstrode Whitelocke, who was Master of the Revels at the Middle Temple in 1628, has left a detailed description, written about eight years later, of ceremonial on All Saints Day, and while critical of the way in which the students' dancing has deteriorated to 'bare walking'¹⁷ he says that the leading gentleman is asked by the Judges to sing, and while dancing (or walking!) he begins a psalm which all the gentlemen, presumably following him, then take up. These were 'Solemn Revels', which began with the measures, slow and stately, similar to if not exactly the same as the pavan. Faster dances followed as the Post Revels – galliards, corantos, brawls, almains and country dances. Interestingly, this was exactly the pattern of the final dances of the court masque: when the chief masquers came down from the stage to take out the guests on to the floor of the hall, they first danced the measures and then followed these with the more lively, energetic dances. Whether there is a connection between the structure of the Solemn Revels and Post Revels at the Inns of Court and the final dances of the court masques has yet to be explored. What is certain is that many courtiers were at one time Inns of Court men.

The learning and practice of dancing at the Inns is consistent with the training of a gentleman as laid down by several influential writers including Richard Mulcaster, whose pupils from the Merchant Taylors' school performed masques and interludes before Queen Elizabeth; Roger Ascham, who advises learning to 'daunce cumlie' among his list of 'pastimes that be fitte for Courtlie

Gentlemen'; and the great arbiter of behaviour, Baldassare Castiglione, who, despite his nationality, was much admired by Ascham, a noted Italophile. In his much translated and reprinted *Book of the Courtier*, Castiglione encourages his reader to 'daunce well without ouer nimble footinges or to busie trickes' in public, keeping such ostentatious 'swiftnesse of feete and doubled footinges' to the privacy of his own chamber.¹⁸ Castiglione is among those who advise against dancing too energetically in public because the sweat produced may offend the rest of the company.

The longest discussion of dancing printed during the sixteenth century in England is in *The Book named the Governor* (1531) by Sir Thomas Elyot, who was 'not of that opinion that all dancing generally is repugnant unto virtue' although he realised that dancing 'of the more part of sad [i.e. serious] men is so little esteemed'.¹⁹ After an engaging description of the Platonic idea of the dance of the heavenly bodies, Elyot goes on to moralise the dance, first as symbolising concord between a man and a woman and then as a means of teaching the moral virtue of prudence. He demonstrates this by matching the five figures of the basse dance with different ingredients of prudence. The honour, a bow for the man and a curtsy for the woman, reminds us that 'at the beginning of all our acts, we should do honour to God'. The brawl, or branle, which seems to have been a rocking, stationary step, he sees as signifying 'maturity – a mean between two extremities, wherein nothing lacketh or exceedeth', a nice introduction of Aristotelian thought. The singles, in which one foot glides forward and is then joined by the other, are 'two unities, separate in passing forward; by whom may be signified providence and industry'. The reprise, in which the feet move back, so that the dancer retreats, 'may well be called circumspection' and the doubles, in which one foot moves forward and pauses while the other glides up to it, then pauses while the first moves on, is for Elyot 'compact of the number three, whereby it may be noted these three branches of prudence: election, experience, and modesty. By them the said virtue of prudence is made complete, and is in her perfection.'

Early in his discussion, which is in effect an apology for dancing, Elyot suggests that dance is a good recreation 'to recomfort and quicken the vital spirits' lest they become overtired with mental effort; he ends by saying that it is 'as well a necessary study as a noble and virtuous pastime'. He gives one chapter each to hunting and archery, and to other exercise three chapters, but he devotes seven

to dancing, an indication of his enthusiasm for the art and the need to defend it. The basse dance, which he uses as his exemplar, is hardly the jolliest of measures, though he may have chosen it because it was well-known, even if already going out of fashion in courtly circles. *The Governor* was published just ten years after the first dancing instructions in English were printed; these were *The maner of dauncynge of bace dañces after the vse of Fraunce*, translated by Robert Coplande and appended to a little book on how to write and speak French.²⁰ This had appeared in 1521, and may indicate Coplande's acumen in cashing in on the popularity of things French at Henry VIII's court in the year after the Field of the Cloth of Gold rather than the popularity of the basse dance itself, which does not appear in any of the manuscript sources noted earlier and was certainly out of fashion in France by the time of Arbeau, who says it has been replaced by the pavan. The two dances share similar steps, which result in a gliding, undulating movement, and it would appear that the later dance, the origins of which are obscure, developed from the earlier. As well as being used specifically, 'basse' is a generic term for 'low' dances, in which the feet remain close to the ground, in contrast to 'haut' dances like the volta and the galliard, with their springings, leaps and turns.

The basse dance is not even among those listed humorously by Barnaby Rich in the 'Epistle Dedicatorie' to his *Farewell to Military Profession* (1581):

As firste for Dauncyng, although I like the Measures verie well, yet I could neuer treade them a right, nor to vse measure in any thyng that I went aboute, although I desired to performe all thynges by line and by leauell, what so euer I tooke in hande.

Oure Galliardes are so curious, that thei are not for my daunsyng, for thei are so full of trickes and tournes, that he whiche hath no more but the plaine Sinquepace, is no better accompted of then a verie bongler, and for my part, thei might assone teache me to make a Capricornus, as a Capre in the right kinde that it should bee.

For a Ieigge my heeles are too heaue: And these braules are so busie, that I loue not to beate my braines about them.

A Rounde is too giddie a daunce for my diet, for let the dauncers runne about with as much speede as thei maie: yet are

thei neuer a whit the nier to the ende of their course, vnlesse with often tounring thei hap to catch a fall. And so thei ende the daunce with shame, that was begonne but in sporte.

These Hornepipes I haue hated from my verie youth: and I knowe there are many other that loues them as euill as I.

Thus you maie perceiue that there is no daunce but either I like not of them, or thei like not of me, so that I can daunce neither.²¹

When Rich talks of 'the measures' he is using the word specifically but 'measure' was also a general term for any kind of dancing. At the end of the instructions he has just written down, for instance, Ashmole writes, 'Rowland Osborne taught me to dance these measures', though only one of the eight dances he includes, 'The Earle of Essix measure', has the exact title. Comparison of the manuscript sources strongly suggests that the measures and the pavan were one and the same, though there were clearly several variations; the dances during a masque for instance, were usually, perhaps always, specially choreographed but at the conclusion when the masquers came down into the hall to dance with the audience, they began with 'the measures', which must have been known to those they took out as partners as well as to the performers themselves.

Gentlemen at the Inns of Court, many of whom took part in masques, had classes from individual teachers or attended dancing schools, which seem to have grown more numerous in London during the 1570s. An application for a monopoly on teaching in 1574 is supported by a statement claiming: 'There has late been a great increase in the number of dancing-schools established; these have been conducted by persons unqualified both by their knowledge and their morals, and have been set up in suspect places, to which the most lewd persons resort. The Queen is particularly anxious to suppress those who under the pretence of good exercise entice the young to exercise lewd behaviour.'²² Both the nobility and the middle classes could have lessons in private, and in more senses than one, to judge from the opening speeches of Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613); Maudlin Yellowhammer, the ambitious goldsmith's wife, asks her daughter if she has been with her dancing master lately, then launches into sentimental reminiscence about her own youth:

When I was of your bord, he missed me not a night, I was kept at it; I took delight to learn and he to teach me; pretty brown gentleman, he took pleasure in my company . . .

(1. i. 14-17)

Clearly, Maudlin has close affinities with Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who 'coude of that art the olde daunce'; later in the play she seduces her son's willing tutor by inviting him into her 'husband's chamber'.

According to Leslie Hotson, 'to dance the beginning of the world' was a euphemism for intercourse; if so, it is a singularly beautiful one²³ which recalls not just a line from Antinous's persuasion of Penelope in *Orchestra*, 'Dancing is love's proper exercise', but the whole Pythagorean idea of the creation of life and order in the universe, when 'dancing . . . began to be'.

Such philosophical ideas were of small or no account to those who disapproved of dancing, the 'sad men' so gently alluded to by Elyot. Among these, at least so far as the preparation of a prince for kingship was concerned, were Erasmus and J. L. Vives, the Spanish educationist who spent most of the years from 1523 to 1527 in England. Writing of the occupations of a prince in periods of peace, Erasmus lumps dancing in with other time-wasting activities:

How, then, can you expect that anyone who has spent his first years among flatterers and frothy women, corrupted first by base opinions and then by sensual pleasures, and wasting these years engaged in gambling, dancing, and hunting, could later on be happy in those duties the fulfillment of which requires the most diligent thought?²⁴

Vives wrote similarly in his *Linguae Latinae Exercitatio* (1539), a series of dialogues on the education of a prince, which was immensely popular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; over a hundred editions have been noted. It is dedicated to the boy who became Philip II of Spain, who appears in Dialogue xx as the young heir being given advice by a foolish counsellor, Macrobolus, and a wise one, Sophobolus. Distressed to see Philip 'quite lean' with studying so much, Macrobolus advises him to do

That which other nobles, princes, and rich men do – ride about, chat with the daughters of your august mother, dance, learn the