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Mascarades ~ The Historical Understanding of Dance in the European Court

Kelly Topita, Nu Delta Alpha honors student
Washington College
Advisor: Karen Lynn Smith

Kelly Topita is an English major at Washington College (WC) in Chestertown, MD. She is a member of the WC Chapter of Nu Delta Alpha and has been its historian for three years. She has participated in the Dance Program, primarily concentrating on ballet, and has performed with the Washington College Dance Company in concerts, Drama Department productions, and in 16th century court dances for the annual Renaissance Christmas dinner in collaboration with the WC Music Department. She also has taught dance to children at Community Dance Days hosted by Nu Delta Alpha. Prior to college she studied ballet, tap, and jazz at Dancer's Dreams Studio in Pasadena, Maryland.

Dance, in its many forms, provides a unique venue for social interaction. This was true for European courts of the medieval period through the eighteenth century. Scholarship indicates that the social dances, *masquerades*, and court ballets were not static, but evolved within and reflected upon the changing perspectives of the culture.

The European aristocracy developed forms of dance that mirrored these aspects of world hierarchies. This analysis focuses on dance as an indicator of its social, political, and symbolic significance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

La Volta. Image courtesy of author

Basse dance

The Dictionary of the Middle Ages indicates important transformations in the dances of the upper classes in the fifteenth century (Strayer, 1984, p.88). Some of the earliest recorded medieval dances from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were performed to songs such as *rondeaus* and *carols*, which were suited to circle dances with steps

performed in unison by dancers holding hands (Strayer, p.86). The roundness of these early dances suggests a rustic and communal understanding of its social significance at this time. With all dancers performing together, this conception of dancing seems devoid of the hierarchy that was to be so significant to European aristocrats.

A new form of dance that developed in the fifteenth century, the *basse danse*, was characterized by "stately" steps performed close to the floor (Strayer, pp. 88-89). Foremost, the dances of nobility became more dignified and regimented. The *basse danse* was created in Lombardy and Burgundy and spread throughout Europe, whereby it maintained the same set of steps but was arranged in different patterns (Strayer, pp. 88-89). Thus, the dances of European courts became more formalized, with specific steps popularized throughout Italy and France (Strayer, p. 89). By the late Renaissance, the *basse danse* was replaced by new dance forms such as the *volta* and *courante* (Strayer, p.89). Dance was then to adapt to suit the changing culture.

Though this transition from communal circles to processions indicates its importance in societal interactions, dance also faced criticism. The treatise *A dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lasciuious dauncing,* written by Christopher Fetherston in 1582, voices many of the moral concerns about dance. Fetherston's dialogue stressed the deterioration of dance from its idealized biblical form. Though the dances of holy men, such as King David, were "sage" and "sober," Fetherston's dialogue maintained that contemporary dances were "light" and "lasci[v]ious" (Fetherston, 1582, p.36). Given Fetherston's objections, European court dances were neither mild nor moderate, but exciting and often provocative (Fetherston, p.36).

In 1578, a few years before Fetherston's *Dialogue* was printed in London, "nine or ten" quarrels over the order of dances broke out in the court of Henry III of England (McGowan, 2008, p.130). Though such incidents indicate the political and emotional significance of dance, an important aspect of court dancing was the spectacle and pageantry that accompanied performances. The display of grandeur was integral in the clothes and jewels worn for dancing (Nevile, 2008, p. 83). This exhibition of wealth, according to modern scholarship, emphasizes Fetherston's complaint that dancing is "vanitie [that] doth dishallowe the Sabboath day" (Fetherston, p. 20). Notably, Fetherston does not object to dance itself, but to the manner in which it had changed from its moderate biblical representation.

Extremes

Perhaps Fetherston's most prominent objection was the proximity of men and women as lasciviousness. "Your dances must have women, or else the market is marred" (Fetherston, p.37). Indeed, choreographies represented "the relationships of small groups" and provided for the interactions and flirtation of men and women in cultures that otherwise segregated men and women (Nevile, pp. 88-89). Fetherston's argument that dancers "do frisk and fling like wild coltes" was not unfounded (Fetherston, p.37). His criticism corresponded to the decline of morality and the hierarchy of dance performance that illustrated the significance of social stratification in European courts.

In *Dance and the Renaissance,* Margaret McGowan discussed the *volta*, which captivated France in the mid-sixteenth century, and required extreme proximity between male and female partners (McGowan, p. 98). Though McGowan placed less emphasis on its moral implications, the scandalous nature of the dance was nevertheless emphasized.

In her discussion of a *volta* performed in 1579, McGowan noted that "the point of all these gyrations is worldly vanity" (McGowan, p. 99). Therefore, though Fetherston's *Dialogue* was not explicitly discussed in the secondary material, the criticism of dance as vanity was understood. The dance was deemed indecent because, in order to achieve exquisite turns and leaps, the man had to grip the woman by the waist and lift her with his thigh; the woman used one hand to "protect her modesty," to keep from exposing her undergarments or bare leg as her dress flew around her (McGowan, p. 99). This execution of such dancing provides important social insight to Fetherston's sentiment that "[w]hereas is wanton dancing, there the Devil daunceth also" (Fetherston, p. 34). Because of such criticisms, the Italian dance masters of the fifteenth century consciously set themselves apart from the seemingly lewd dances of the lower classes (Nevile, p. 85).

The most noted way in which the aristocracy separated themselves from the criticism of dance was the control of the body. Scholars place a great deal of emphasis on the regimented pageantry of developing dances and the manner in which its hierarchy was understood to correspond to societal stratification (Nevile, p. 83). The greatest dancers were lauded for the control of their bodies and emotions, because the movement of the body was understood as a physical representation of the state of a person's soul (Nevile, pp. 83, 87).

Historians have found that this aspect of the societal understanding of dance largely contributed to the increased importance of dance in the education of the aristocracy (Nevile, p. 85). In "Dance and Dance Music of the 16th Century," Anthony Rooley discussed the syllogism that existed between dance and other cultural notions in the sixteenth century. Dance was viewed as "ordered movement," just as music was "ordered sounds;" and all of the cosmos was understood to be comprised of the orderly and hierarchical movement of heavenly bodies (Rooley, 1974, p. 79). In this manner, dance provided a reflection of the cosmic order.

Power and Social Order

An important change in dance was the move towards hierarchical processions of the king and lesser nobles. Historians have found that dance in European courts represent power and social order (Nevile, p.81).

The court of King Louis XIV of France illustrates the pageantry and hierarchy that characterize the changes to the dances of the aristocrats. The symbolic theatrics of balls and dance performances provide special insight for scholars (Garlick, 1997, p.14). Louis XIV (1638 –1715) was considered a "superlative" dancer, with his natural ability to infuse his actions with "majesty" (Garlick, pp. 10-11). He seems to epitomize the notion of kingly virtue under the belief that dance provides an outward representation of the

inward state. At seven years old, he was so accomplished that he danced in the opening *branle* at the marriage of the king and queen of Poland (Garlick, p.12). The idea of being first was continually emphasized by the kingly roles that Louis XIV played in court ballets. In the French court throughout the 1650s he was the principle dancer, often featured as "royal or godlike" (Garlick, p.27). These grandiose displays were a prominent aspect of the politically charged nature of dance in European courts.

Although dance faced criticism, it remained an integral part of European court life. In retrospect, dance continues to provide a microcosm of societal understandings of culture and politics, as both an outward sign of inner emotions and as a representation of the cosmos. For this reason, dance is intrinsically linked with societal perceptions of morality and aesthetics. Most significantly, scholars depict the changes in dance over time, which ultimately reflect a cultural understanding of the world.

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