‘Filthie groping and uncleane handlings’: an examination of touching moments in dance of court and courtship

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Accost, Sir Andrew, accost [...]

front her, board her, woo her, assail her!

(Sir Toby Belch to Sir Andrew Aguecheek, upon meeting Maria;
Twelfth Night, 1.3.46–54)

When a person becomes aware of having physical, bodily contact with an external object, then the sense of touch creates a variety of specific feelings and sensations. When someone is physically linked to another person, a private communication channel can be established based on different ways of touching which are interpreted as different emotional responses. These responses or sensations may be hidden from others not engaged in the act, even if the touching can be clearly seen. However, as Constance Classen points out, such sensual interaction is ‘not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of culture.’¹ Using this definition of touch, this chapter will consider what level of contact occurred during the activity of dancing in social situations in early modern England and will examine how the private sensations produced were then recorded and commented upon in different written, visual and theatrical forms. Sometimes the purpose of such records was for practical instruction, and I will consider the importance given to the tactile in developing a communication skill which had to be mastered by those courtiers wanting to excel in courtly dance. From this practical understanding of the dance technique based on touching between partners, this chapter will consider the representation of such courtly dance in artistic works of different media using examples of paintings, poetry and drama. Courtly dance was also referred to outside of the court environment in which it was performed, and examples from the plays of Shakespeare will demonstrate how physical contact occurring in dance gains dramatic effects in the public playhouse, with the effect depending on the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. In particular this chapter considers how specific images, technical words and

gestural actions can signal particular touch qualities even if the viewer, reader or audience member is not physically involved with the activity themselves. The most extensive written material commenting on the touching of partners in dance is actually by those wishing the activity to be prohibited. It is with these writers that we will begin this investigation, for they describe clear categories of physical touching determined by the types of people involved and the specific places where these touching moments occur.

Unclean handling

In early modern England the social activity of dancing was fiercely criticized because of the opportunity it afforded for partners to come into close proximity with, and physically touch, someone of the opposite sex: 'what clipping, what culling, what kissing and bussing, what smouching & slabbering one of another, what filthie groping and vncleane handling is not practiced euery wher in these dauncings?'² These words, spoken by the puritanical character of Philoponus in *The Anatomy of Abuses*, may indeed be the viewpoint of the puritan writer Philip Stubbes whose published work was a vitriolic attack on the manners, customs, amusements and fashions of the period. One chapter entitled 'The horrible Vice of pestiferous dauncing, used in Ailgna' is the report of a fictional traveller who has witnessed how social dance has become a totally immoral activity. Such 'beastlie slabberings, bussings & smouchings and other filthie gestures & misdemeanors therin accustomed' (N8^v) must, he insists, inevitably lead to promiscuous behaviour between men and women. It would be as impossible to avoid such behaviour as it would be 'for a naked Man to lye in the midst of a hote burning fire, and not to consume' (N8^v). Ailgna is none other than England, and the activities being criticized are current, prolific and morally dangerous. Within this conceit Stubbes has Philoponus use very sensual words to describe the activity of dancing and to warn his fellow 'brother' Spudeus of what would inevitably happen if he danced with a woman.

Other pamphlets at this time warn against the same situation, some even more directly. John Northbrooke produced a treatise in 1579 criticizing dicing, dancing and the performance of plays. It is dancing which he terms the 'vilest vice' because this activity allows physical contact between men and women: 'Maidens and matrones are groped and handled with vnchaste hands, and kissed & dishonestly embraced'.³ Dancing schools are here seen as 'houses of bauldrie' as they teach young women how to hold onto men's arms so that they can 'hop the higher' (fol. 64^v). In 1582, Christopher Fetherston produced *A Dialogue against light, lewd and lascivious dancing* in the hope of preventing those who obtain their 'wicked purposes' and then 'entise others to naughtines'.⁴ The main criticism shared by these moral writers is that the purpose of dancing is sexual and made entirely explicit through the act of touching. Northbrooke

comments that ‘the things, which nature hath hidden, & modestlie couered, are then oftentimes by meanes of lasciuiousnesse made naked’ (fol. 66^v) and Stubbes’s Philoponos confesses he has seen ‘the very deed and action it selfe [...] purtrayed and shewed foorth in their bawdye gestures of one to another’ (M8^v), which will ‘stir vp carnall appetites and fleshlie motions’ (N3^{r-v}). Even if he does not wish to offend ‘chast eares’ (M8^v) by actually naming the sexual act that these gestures simulate and stimulate, the full-bodied language conveys the salaciousness of the physical behaviour.

Likewise, the 1581 *Treatise of Dances* contained in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lambeth Palace Library puts forward the view that dance can only lead to one thing: whoredom.⁵ Dances are ‘nothing els but impudent, shameles, and dissolute gestures, by which the lust of the flesh is awaked, stirred vp, and inflamed, as wel in men as in wome[n]’ (A5^r). This ‘lust of the flesh’ is then put into action when men and women ‘mingle mangle’ (B1^v), a phrase emphasizing the physical connection when ‘the lusty and fyne man should holde a young damosel, or a woman by the hand’ (B7^r). Following this he may ‘remoue himselfe, whirle about, & shake his legges alofte’ (B7^r) while presenting ‘wordes, amorous deuises, or deuises of loue’ which convey ‘wanton communications or speeches or markes onely knowen to the Ladye, or Gentlewoman’ (B7^v). The opportunity to speak privately while dancing is one of the most dangerous aspects, and this is initiated by the intimacy provided by the touching of hands, thus bringing the bodies closer together. These puritanical texts appear to propose a link between the practice of early modern dance and an overt display of sexual desire.

However, such writers do not place all activities named ‘dance’ in this ‘unclean handling’ category. Stubbes’s dialogue between Philoponus and Spudeus is a lengthy discussion, considering many specific occasions when different types of dancing would occur, and even Philoponus does not think that all dancing is an abuse. He remarks that, ‘as concerning dauncing, I wold not haue thee (good Reader) to think that I condemne the exercyse it self altogether’ (¶6^v). He makes it clear that ‘though I conde[m]ne all filthie, luxurious and uncleane dauncing, yet I condemne not al kind of dauncing generally (N8^r). He is able to discern between dances that are morally acceptable and those that are not. The level of touching that occurs in dance could be one of the main distinguishing factors in categorizing different forms of dance in the early modern period, contributing to whether the dance form would be morally acceptable. Poetic and dramatic references to specific dance types may also imply precise physical sensations of different types of dancing. These were real sensations experienced by those dancing. An observer standing outside of the dance may not have felt this sensation, so may only imagine what things might have been occurring during the dance. Without feeling the touch themselves it remains pure conjecture, and the image may have deceived the viewer. Here I would

refer you to the idea of visual deception in courtly behaviour and theatrical performance as discussed in Chapter 2 by Jackie Watson.

Chaste concord

To puritan moralists the image of holding hands in dance may have signified illicit fornication, but there are examples where the same dancing image is used as a symbol of chaste concord. Partners holding hands and touching during dance was a well-established symbol to signify harmony between either groups of people or indeed a man and a woman. The ultimate religious blessing for a couple was the union in marriage where their hands would be joined in a Christian ceremony. Dancing was part of the courtship ritual frequently used by the European royal and ducal courts to establish unions between different dynasties.⁶ Even Stubbes's puritan figure of Philoponus agrees that this type of dance may be considered 'both a recreation for the minde, & also an exercise for the body, very holosome, and not only that, but also, a meane wherby loue is acquired' (M8').

The champion of this form of wholesome dance is Sir Thomas Elyot, who uses this example of a dancing couple in his treatise *The Book of the Governor*, written in 1531 and dedicated to King Henry VIII. An entire chapter is devoted to putting forward arguments to support the inclusion of dance in the humanist education of noble men, from the age of seven until 20. Even though Elyot mentions those who have attacked dancing, such as Saint Augustine who criticized the connection of dance to paganism and saw it as part of the worship of gods such as Venus and Bacchus, he argues that it is the 'interlaced ditties of wanton love or ribaldry' accompanying such dancing which should be avoided, and not the practical activity as such.⁷

Elyot proposes that dancing can be part of moral instruction, teaching a man about the virtue of Prudence, and the associated skill of governing oneself by reason. He entitles Chapter XXII, '*How dancing may be an introduction unto the first moral virtue, called prudence*' (p. 78). Central to this is the perfect symbol of a couple dancing holding hands: 'In every dance, of a most ancient custom, there danceth together a man and a woman, holding each other by the hand or the arm, which betokeneth concord' (p. 77). The balance between a man and a woman would be a combination of the different qualities perceived as masculine and feminine, being stereotypically considered as 'fierce' for the man and 'mild' for the woman: 'Wherefore, when we behold a man and a woman dancing together, let us support there to be a concord of all the said qualities being joined together' (p. 78). The physical action of linking by hands demonstrates how two people are now joined and seen to be operating as one, and for this activity to be honest, virtuous and modest, the dance would begin by making 'a reverent inclination of curtesy' to the female partner, while showing 'due

honour to God, which is the root of Prudence' (p. 79). Only after this moment displaying reverence should the hands of the couple be joined.

Alongside this connection to the Christian God there is also a reference to the neo-Platonic idea of cosmic dance:

The interpreters of Plato do think that the wonderful and incomprehensible order of the celestial bodies, I mean stars and planets, and their motions harmonical, gave to them [...] a form of imitation of a semblable motion, which they called dancing or saltation; wherefore the more near they approached to that temperance and subtle modulation of the said superior bodies, the more perfect and commendable is their dancing. (p. 73)

Although practically the dance would comprise human bodies physically touching by joining their hands, the poetic image avoids being visceral. There is no mention of what happens when hands touch in dance. The union remains spiritual and ethereal in quality.

Elyot is not writing an instruction manual for practical dancing, rather he uses dance to discuss the ideas of leadership and self-control. However, to understand the dance metaphor requires the reader to have detailed knowledge of the terminology for the specific dance form he refers to: the *Basse Dance*.

Basse Dance or base dance: practical techniques

The *Basse Dance* was one of the principal courtly dances in early Tudor England and practical instruction for it has survived in written form. An abridged translation of the standard fifteenth-century French treatise was printed on the final leaf of a volume of papers published by Robert Coplande in 1521, entitled 'The manner of dancing of *basses dances* after the use of France and other places'.⁸ A year previously, the English nobles had danced with the French court at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, where King Henry VIII of England met King François I of France. The chronicler Edward Hall reports how dancing brought the two courts together, and remarks on the behaviour of the French king:

Before he started to dance the French king went from one end of the room to the other, carrying his hat in his hand and kissing all the ladies on both sides – except for four or five that were too old and ugly. He then returned to the queen [Queen Katharine of England] and spoke with her for a while before spending the rest of the day dancing.⁹

Courtiers throughout Europe would need to share knowledge of certain dance forms, to be able to partner people of other nations at formal and social occasions. The French *Basse Dance* repertoire comprised different choreographies, each with variable combinations of basic step units, following specific structural metrical rules which Coplande's commentary explains. It assumes that the reader will know this was a dance for a couple, requiring men and

women to dance side by side, with hands joined. In such a dance it was the male partner's responsibility to lead the lady positioned to his right with his right hand around the room. Through the handhold she would need to receive the information of the pace being taken, and the direction in which to step, in addition to the step-sequence being performed.¹⁰

Coplande's text does not discuss the use of hands, nor the female partner at all. Information needs to be gathered from other sources to begin to understand how partners could communicate during courtly dance, and then to consider how the same dance could have contrasting interpretations: as a virtuous display of 'chaste concord' or as immoral 'filthy gropings'. French dance instruction manuals of the sixteenth century were addressed to the male partner, and offer practical advice on how to implement such a technique through the sense of touch.¹¹

The *Basse Dance* was still considered the most virtuous dance in the late sixteenth century, appearing in *Orchesographie* of 1589 and the republished 1596 version.¹² The title page of this manual states the aim to teach the 'honête' form of dances so that 'all manner of persons may easily acquire and practice the honourable exercise of dancing'.¹³ The dialogue is between a young student of law, named Capriol, who returns to his former teacher, Monsieur Arbeau, to ask advice on how to improve his skill in dancing. He thinks that he needs this skill to be able to impress the young ladies, believing that the whole reputation of an eligible young man depends on it (p. 11). Arbeau had a reputation for being a good dancer in his youth, and willingly agrees to share his knowledge of social dances 'in the hope that such honourable dances are reinstated and replace the lascivious, shameless ones introduced in their stead to the regret of wise lords and ladies and matrons of sound and chaste judgement' (p. 59). The teacher informs his pupil that 'a mistress is won by the good temper and grace' displayed while dancing (p. 12), and instructs him in the first instance on how to show reverence and offer his right hand to the lady. Then, the lady 'being sensible and well brought up' will give her left hand, stand up and join him to dance (p. 52).

Arbeau states that the principal purpose of all dancing is to woo a female partner: 'For dancing is practised to reveal whether lovers are in good health and sound of limb, after which they are permitted to kiss their mistresses in order that they may touch and savour one another' (p. 12). Touching can join with the sense of taste and smell to ascertain if their dancing partners 'are shapely or emit an unpleasant odour as of bad meat' (p. 12). From this activity of kissing and caressing, the aim is to form a respectful social union through marriage, and Arbeau concludes that 'from this standpoint, quite apart from the many other advantages to be derived from dancing, it becomes an essential in a well-ordered society' (p. 12). Although he notes that the *Basse Dance* had been danced 30 or 40 years previously, Arbeau hopes that 'such honourable dances are reinstated' and this dance is the first to be described in detail (pp. 59–76).

Arbeau acknowledges that he had learnt from his teacher, Antonius Arena, who penned a similar dance treatise *Ad Suos Compagnos* in 1528 when the *Basse Dance* was in fashion.¹⁴ Many further editions of this text remained in circulation throughout the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Preceding an extensive list of *Basse Dance* choreographies, written in the same form as the English translation by Coplande, is a poetic elegy advising his student friends on how to use the activity of dance to impress the ladies. Written in macaronic Latin with colloquial student slang, these tongue-in-cheek instructions suggest that even in the sedate *Basse Dance* the touch between the man and the woman can communicate sexual intention. He implies that holding hands is the most important element, for the man must first remove his gloves to allow the caressing of the hand.¹⁶ Issues of leadership are considered, such as the man placing the lady close enough to him so he can set the pace, to be able to prevent her moving ahead too hastily or being left trailing behind. While dancing side by side, the man would communicate his desire through ‘tender messages’ (p. 165). For this reason, being able to see the eyes of his partner during dance was important, so Arena insists that there should be torches when dancing at night (p. 165). Respect for the lady must be made by only using moderate force when leading with the hand, so as not to give her any cause for complaint (p. 157). In practice, this involves subtle changes of muscle tension in the leading hand, to create an unspoken understanding between the dancing partners: different instructions are interpreted from the intensity of the grip, the manipulation of the fingers, the direction given by pressure from the hand, and flow signals to stop and start motion. Similar practical techniques of using the hand to guide the lady are also noted by Arbeau, for example when considering how a couple could turn together to face a different direction in the room, requiring the lady to follow the lead of the man’s hand, which he calls a *conversion*.¹⁷ Throughout both these manuals it is evident that an intimate communication between the man and woman is being encouraged, aided by the close proximity of the moving bodies and the touch of bare hands: an *artis secreta* or secret art that would be hard to perceive from the outside. Maybe it was the secrecy of this communication that fuelled the fears of those believing that immoral practice was being initiated? Maybe the female would have no choice but to follow the male’s lead if she agreed to join the dance? Maybe the male partner could take advantage of this moment of touch?

Following discussion of the *Basse Dance*, both instructors consider other dances that offer even more extreme physical contact. Arena encourages ‘kissing dances’ to make further contact with the ladies, reminding his friends not to eat onions so that their breath remains sweet while giving prolonged kisses during these dances.¹⁸ Arbeau includes instructions for one such kissing dance, the *gavotte branle*, which allows kissing between all partners in the dance. He remarks on the care needed by the man when leading a lady in lively dances

such as the *tordion* so that he does not cause ‘needless discomfort and jolting’ to the lady.¹⁹ This will lead him to mention ‘wanton and wayward dances’ including the most ‘lascivious’ of such dances he will identify as *lavoltas*. Despite this reproachful mention, Arbeau will give full instructions for this specific dance later in the manual, explaining its very particular technique for physically handling the female partner when she is lifted and turned in the air.²⁰

Lascivious *lavoltas*

‘Volta’ means literally ‘to turn’, so to begin with, Arbeau instructs the man how to make his turn, without mentioning where the lady would be placed. This instruction follows on from extremely detailed explanations of various steps for the *tordion* and *galliard*, and this new dance links to the same rhythm and vigour of the intricate jumping and turning steps. The young pupil, Capriol, is quick to question how he could possibly execute such leaps and turns if he held the lady with only the normal handhold: she would be so far away from him. His teacher then explains that having taken her hand during the reverence and led her around the room, he must now bring his partner as close to him as possible, lifting her with one arm ‘grasping and holding her firmly by the waist’ with his hand on her hip (pp. 120–21). The closeness of the bodies in this dance is an image used to imply secret physical intimacy, such as in the Elegy *Callirée* by Amadis Jamyn (1575) where a couple touch ‘flanc contre flanc’ and Venus, while dancing with Mars, exposes her thighs.²¹

While holding the lady around her waist, Arbeau describes the lifting technique needed to combine with his turning-jump: with one leg lifted behind the lady, pushing her forward with his thigh, the opposing hand is placed at the front of her body, lifting her up by pushing towards her. Three points of contact with the lady’s body are needed: an arm around her waist, a knee under her posterior, and one hand pushing against her bodice. It is this third point of contact that appeared to be the most salacious. Arbeau specifically refers to this place as ‘under her busk’.²²

The word busk may refer to the corset worn by the lady, and sometimes specifically the wooden piece running vertically at the front. This was a reinforcement to which the corset was fastened, and consequently acted almost like another spine running down the front of the dress to the triangular point of the bodice, technically called the ‘stomacher’. The man’s hand grabbing in this area may justify why the dance was considered scandalous, being viewed as a simulation of a sexual act.

The busk is mentioned with overt sexual connotations in *A Glass Wherein is the Pride of Vainglorious Women* (1595) during a criticism of foreign additions to female fashion.²³ This ‘bawdy busk’ is something that men must attempt to break through to become intimate with the lady. In his 1591 translation of *Orlando Furioso*, Sir John Harington uses this dance specifically to imagine

Mercury's rape of the nymph Chloris: once caught in his net he teaches her 'to daunce *la volta*'.²⁴ In practice, however, the lady would need to be in complete agreement to allow the turn to occur by freely jumping high herself. From the outside, however, the dance could appear as a display of indiscreet manhandling.

Despite Arbeau's stated intention to eradicate such dances, the technical description given to his pupil is detailed enough for precise practical dance reconstruction in historical costume replication even today.²⁵ Following such precise practical descriptions, the tutor steps away from the moral debate:

le vous laisse a considerer si c'est chose bien seante a une jeune fille de faire grands pas et ouvertures de jambes.

['I leave it to you to judge whether it is a becoming thing for a young girl to take such long strides and separate her legs.'](p. 121)

Whether the dance is enjoyed by the individual will of course depend on the felt sensation.

The dance sensation

Arbeau also captures the feeling of the dance, mentioning the likelihood that the lifting and turning would give a dizzy sensation to the lady in the air as well as to the man making the moves: 'However brave a face she shows, she will feel her brain reeling and her head full of dizzy whirlings; and you yourself will be no better off' (p. 121). When performing such a dance, both partners need to synchronize their rhythm, ensuring that the bending and jumping match the musical structure, and that each turn places the lady three-quarters around the circle, so that after four turning-lifts the couple remain facing the front position ready to recommence a further travelling section. The hold of the lady needs to be secure, and she will need to use one hand to hold down her farthingale skirt, as it is likely to rise as the body is lifted. When the dance is being executed correctly at a lively pace there is little time to sense where the hands are being placed on the body. The touch of the man's hand would hardly penetrate the many layers of corset, bodice and skirts. Even the active leg, thigh and hand of the man helping the lady to be lifted are sensed as a combined assertion, rather than individual elements. Dancers joined together will still be able to see each other's faces and enjoy the shared experience of dancing as one entwined couple.

The visual appearance

An outside observer may notice other elements that the dancing couple would not be so aware of. A couple dancing the *lavolta* takes central position in a painting of a court scene, dated around 1574, that now hangs in Penshurst Place.²⁶ A consort of viols plays music as a lady is lifted mid-air by a jumping

man. Her legs are identified by red stockings, showing her legs apart, with the man's lifted foot visible, indicating that the thigh of his leg is pushing her from behind. The man's right hand is shown pushing into the lady's skirt between her open legs: the artist appears to have interpreted the 'under the busk' location as the lady's genital area.

Striking similarities are found between this painting and another anonymous painting found in France, identified as being at the Court of Henri III in France. Although art historians are reluctant to identify the figures as particular members of the royal household, the dance of *lavolta* is strongly associated with the King's sister, Marguerite de Valois.²⁷ Marguerite's memoirs inform us that she knew of the origins of *volte de Provence* as a dance performed expertly by a group of ladies. She mentions the many balls she attended herself: dancing solo, joining with her brother or coupling with other noble gentlemen, but changing partners frequently. This would be one of the rare dances to allow a female dancer to display some virtuosity in rhythmic capering.²⁸ Dancing *lavoltas* with many different male partners seems to match her reputation for having many lovers, both before and during her marriage.²⁹

DeValois's courtly dancing was apparently worthy of gossip over in England. In 1580, Lady Cobham writes a letter home to report how the French king dances each dance with a different partner, before dancing the *lavoltas* 'very lustily' and another visiting courtier, Richard Cook, confirms this custom. He describes the set order of dances at King Henri III's court including the fifth dance where: 'the violins sound *Lavolta* in the which the King taketh his greatest pleasure, [the King] will always dance the same [*lavoltas*] with the Q[ueen] Mother's maids of honour'.³⁰

Did the dance scene in England resemble that of France, with couples touching in such an openly sexual way, or are the visual depictions being used as warnings against the practice of the dance? It is unlikely that the many-partnered Queen Marguerite dancing *lavoltas* would be a model for the chaste Queen Elizabeth. In fact in one of the English madrigals in *The Triumph of Oriana*, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, shepherds and nymphs are wantonly dancing '*Lavoltos* in a dairry-tapstred valley' until the 'bright majesty' Oriana arrives as 'A crowne grac't Virgin whom all people honor' to immediately stop such dancing.³¹

The two paintings depict not only the dance of *lavoltas* but also visualize physical touching being made by observers of the dance. Around the central dancing couple are other couples also engaged in intimate physical contact. Arms are hidden behind bodies, and hands are secretly joined, hidden from view of the other courtiers. The use of hands in bowing and plucking of the musical instruments is also emphasized. Fingers are fiddling everywhere in this painting. 'Unclean handling' is not only occurring in the dance, but by all those involved at the court seen to be sharing these touching moments.

Early modern poetry and drama suggests that such lascivious touching dances did occur in England, however. In Shakespeare's history of *Henry V* the Duke of Bourbon suggests that English dancing schools could teach the French the '*lavoltas* high' as they flee the battlefield (3.5.33). Although practical dance manuals in English for this period have not been found, the members of the Inns of Court noted dances related to the Revels: occasions when the young men could meet women and woo them for pleasure. By the time John Ramsey is admitted into the Middle Temple on 23 March 1605, the '*French lavolta*' is included.³² His brief description mentions the holding of hands and use of the arms and legs to lift his partner, although the dance needs to be learnt 'by demonstration'. It concludes with the customary 'honor and ende' to restore dignity to the occasion. It was at such an occasion at Inner Temple in 1561 that Queen Elizabeth was said to have first admired the dancing of Christopher Hatton, later knighting him and elevating him to the position of Lord Chancellor. Such young suitors would attempt to woo their Queen, hoping that a touch of the hands during dance may lead to a ceremonial touch of the sword: if they lifted the Queen in the *lavoltas* would they then rise in the court too?³³

Declining to dance

Whether through sedate gliding in the *Basse Dance* or vigorous leaping in the *lavoltas*, many dances could contribute to the wooing of a lady. What the manuals do not comment upon, however, is how to deal with a situation where a lady refuses to take hands and dance. This exact situation is the theme of the poem *Orchestra* written by Sir John Davies when he was a student at the Middle Temple. Although the work is subtitled 'a Poeme of Dauncing', the narrative is concerned with a lady who actually refuses to accept a man's invitation to dance. The lady in question is Queen Penelope, arguably the most chaste queen from classical literature, and the male courtier figure is the most devious of the suitors in Homer's story, named Antinous.³⁴

In the classical tale, Antinous attempts to convince Penelope that she should not wait for Ulysses to return, and asks her to consider taking him as her new husband. The Elizabethan poet imagines a scene where the queen is asked to dance. The Queen is, however, seriously concerned that dance is nothing but a frenzied immoral activity, and Antinous must therefore put forward many arguments to convince her that dancing with him would actually be a decent and honourable activity, leading to love rather than lust.

For the male suitor to achieve his objective he must obtain a real physical commitment from the female partner, so that they can touch and begin dancing together. Contrary to the classical depiction of Antinous, in *Orchestra* this suitor is described as having 'faire maners' (stanza 11), and he first addresses Penelope as a goddess who could move as a celestial being, thus connecting to the idea of

the dancing cosmos. Antinous's request to be her 'mouer' is a request to lead her around as a male partner would lead a female (stanza 13). The queen rejects this idea immediately. If Antinous were following the guidance from the dance manuals and the ideas from the art of courtly love, his words would be accompanied by the reverence with an offer of his hand to begin the dance.³⁵ As this process fails, the suitor can only present his many arguments as a verbal 'moot' speech based on the poetic conceit that Love created many different types of dance forms appropriate for different people and occasions, even considering the whole natural world to be following a dance-like motion. Throughout many variations on the same theme, Penelope steadfastly refuses to become involved with the activity she can only uphold as 'frantick iollitie' (stanza 26). When she does respond in words, she entirely dismisses the idea that Love has anything to do with this situation.

The catalogue of dance forms, used as examples in Antinous's argument to positively support the act of dancing, are actual dances from the Elizabethan court, which the contemporary readership would have entirely understood in physical terms. However, certain elements of these dance forms have been modified in their poetic rendition, so that dance is presented as being part of a courtly love tradition, and any violent 'skippings and leapings' are refined. The idea of kissing in dance is attached to the flowers who touch each other when they move in the wind waving 'their tender bodies here and there' (stanza 55), and the vine around the elm tree is seen to be 'imbrac[ing]' during a dance (stanza 56), while the streams run to the sea as nymphs holding hands in 'rounds' and 'winding heys' (stanzas 63–64). From these poetic visualizations of examples from nature, the suitor moves closer and closer to the civilized world of his present day. The rhythms of dances are categorized, speaking of the meter and musical structures which connect these supposedly ancient dances with popular equivalents that would be easily identified by members of the Elizabethan court: such as the 'fiue paces' of the *cinquepas* (*sink-a-pace*), the 'gallant' and 'liuely' *galliard*, and the 'currant trauses' [i.e. traverses] of the *coranto* (stanzas 67–69). Within this context the poet introduces the dance of *lavoltas* (stanza 70):

Yet is there one, the most delightfull kind
 A lofty iumping, or a leaping round,
 When arme in arme two Dauncers are entwind
 And whirle themselues with strickt embracements bound,
 And still their feet an Anapest do sound:
 An Anapest is all theyr musicks song,
 Whose first two feet are short, & third is long.

Reading this poetic description alongside the dance instructions allows us to imagine how the contemporary reader would have understood the physical actions being referred to, although Antinous disguises this 'most lascivious' dance as 'delightfull'. The rhythm of the feet is emphasized, synchronizing

with harmonious music, while equality between the two people is implied by the couple formation made with arms 'entwind'. In the next stanza the 'wayward dance' is metamorphosed into the twins of Castor and Pollux, mythological figures who are apotheosized into astrological formations:

As the victorious twinns of *Læda* and *Ioue*
 That taught the Spartans dauncing on the sands,
 Of swift *Eurotas*, daunce in Heau'n aboue,
 Knit and vnited with eternall hands;
 Among the starres their double Image stands,
 Where both are carried with an equall pace,
 Together iumping in their turning race.
 (stanza 71)

Here the hands are eternally united in the dance in a celestial formation. His next stanza is more salacious, however, as he refers to the image of Venus and Mars discovered in an 'entangled' position dancing *lavoltas*:

This is the net wherein the Sunn's bright eye
Venus and *Mars* entangled did behold,
 For in thys Daunce, their armes they so imply
 As each doth seeme the other to enfold.
 What if lewd wits another tale haue told,
 Of icialous *Vulcan*, and of yron chaines?
 Yet this true sence that forged lye containes.
 (stanza 72)

In the classical myth, jealous Vulcan discovers that his wife Venus is 'entangled' with Mars and catches them in his net for all to see their adultery. The story of Venus and Mars is a central part in Ovid's erotic text *Ars Amatoria* and the tale of transformation of the twins is a reference to Zeus raping Leda in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Eroticism and sexual relationships are still connected to this dance through such classical allusions. The suitor would love an opportunity to dance *lavoltas* with his lady, but these violent and passionate desires have to be poeticized in an attempt to woo a lady who is resisting any form of physical engagement.

Orchestra demonstrates a real practical understanding of dance and the techniques involved. Information from the poem can develop ideas from the French treatises, including reference to leading by touch where the idea of dance representing concord, in the manner of Elyot, is presented as a constant negotiation happening through the physical activity of touch. Stanza 111 insists that the lady must follow the man's lead:

For whether forth or back, or round he goe
 As the man doth, so must the woman doe[.]

However the stanza following considers ‘enterchange’ of place where the woman will get the ‘vpper hand’ during the dance, before returning to the usual position.

Embrace

Of all the dances catalogued in Antinous’s wooing rhyme, *lavoltas* allow most closeness for the touching couple as they ‘whirle themselves with strickt embracements bound’. The term ‘to embrace’ is used specifically in the commonplace memory cribs of choreographed sequences from the Inns of Court.³⁶ As a dance instruction the idea of embrace may appear morally acceptable, as a symbol of harmony, but it also could be the beginning of something more sexual. One early modern dance in particular uses the action of embrace repeatedly for this reason. It is an *almain* appearing in all the Inns of Court manuscripts dated from 1565 onwards with identical choreography and similarly sounding names: *Cyellya Alemayne*, *sicillia Almaine*, *Madam Sosilia pavin*, *Cecilia 7 Measure Sicilia Almaine*. One can speculate whether the dance was named after a certain lady Cecilia, or as a dance from Sicily, or both or neither, although the connection to Princess Cecilia of Sweden and her visit to the Elizabethan court does seem plausible.³⁷ This royal celebrity arrived in England in 1565 along with rumours that a few years before at her sister’s wedding she had been caught with a man in her bedchamber. Princess Cecilia remained in England for a full year and was in attendance at the court, wooing Queen Elizabeth on the part of her half-brother, King Erik XIV. Such a scandalous story of men climbing into her bedroom window, along with the idea of this being a tale set in Sicily, allows us to make connections to the plot and setting of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. This play includes a theatrical use of touch in dance to discuss the courtly systems of social negotiation.

In *Much Ado*, social dance is used to make potential new marriage matches when Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon arrives at the house of Leonato, the governor of Messina, Sicily. As Leonato’s niece Beatrice tells his daughter Hero, ‘the fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not wooed in good time’ (2.1.62–63). Beatrice then continues by demonstrating a practical understanding of the different categories of dance, listing their appropriate place for performance. A *Scotch jig* is the style of wooing as the man impresses with his solo capering; a *Measure* for the wedding would be similar to a *Basse Dance*, with sedate steps as the couple stand side by side touching hands. In the *cinquepas* the man would move away from the lady to present his *galliard* combinations, with an opportunity to impress not only his lady beside him but also others around, although Beatrice’s image of sinking into a grave refers to the dangers of tripping backwards and collapsing on to the floor by being too ambitious.

For the partnering implied in the text for the actual dance scene (2.1.77–144), an *almain* dance such as *Cecilia* would be suitable for use on stage as couples circle the room, enabling the dialogue of those nearest the front of the stage to speak their lines. This dialogue could either be spoken as the couples begin to join hands ready to dance, leaving the stage space for the audience to imagine the dance, or a dance could have been staged at this part of the play, and the dialogue spoken over the dance proper. The dance scene in the play is complicated further by the men appearing masked. The comedy of the dialogue is based on the fact that the ladies can immediately ‘see through’ the disguises and the physical touch confirms this. The serving maid Ursula knows it is Signor Antonio from his ‘dry hand up and down’ (l. 108). Benedick and Beatrice have in some way been left behind in the actual dancing, as Beatrice ends their sparring with the insistence that they must ‘follow the leaders’ (l. 141) and if they go astray she will leave them ‘at the next turning’ (ll. 143–44) which would match the frequent choreographic device in the *almain* of turning around each other.³⁸ Don Pedro has used the opportunity in couple dancing for private conversation, advising Hero to ‘speak low if you speak love’ (l. 90). The ‘much ado’ that develops is created because what is seen to be physical contact is not as it appears. The prince seems to be wooing for himself, as he is holding the hand of Hero. A man is seen climbing up to what looks to be Hero at her bedchamber, so she must have been soiled by touch. To reveal the truth, a ritual has to be made with the ladies being masked this time, as the disguised Hero is physically joined to Claudio by the giving of hands (5.4.52–60).

Benedick and Beatrice will at first deny their own ‘hands’ when their love letters are discovered until Benedick agrees to marry Beatrice, and calls for a dance ‘ere they are married’ (5.4.117). Leonato wishes to wait until after the wedding for another dance, when couples would have officially been joined, and there would be less risk in changing partners. However, Benedick at this point is determined to ‘lighten our own hearts and our wives’ heels’ (ll. 117–18). Touching his partner in dance can ascertain whether his choice is ‘shapely’.³⁹ Maybe this is the way Benedick can check that ‘all the graces’ can be found in Beatrice as the one woman he will actually wed (2.3.28). Even the capture of Don John cannot stop Benedick’s desire for immediate dancing and he commands, ‘Strike up, pipers’ (5.4.127). A dance to lighten the heels of the ladies would include jumping, lifting and embracing. The ladies had made a sexual reference to these dance types earlier in the play (3.4). ‘Light ’a Love’ is a favourite dance of the serving maid Margaret, to which Beatrice adds further innuendo:

Ye light ’a love with your heels! Then if your husband have stables enough, you’ll
see he shall lack no barns.(3.4.42–44)

In the final scene, dance remains part of the wooing process. The handhold of the partners during the dance would lead to kissing and embracing which

would be seen by all those present, but the dance occasion would still allow private communication to occur between the individuals, before they have to make their public declarations at the wedding ceremony.

Fools in hand

So far, we have assumed that courtiers would know about the value of touching. The dance manuals offered instructions to explain which dances would allow touching and how social negotiation could occur with un-gloved hands, to enable courtly love to be achieved through physical contact with their special lady, or indeed with the ruling monarch. These gestures were, to the eyes of the puritan moralists, immoral moments as glaring as hell and brimstone. It is possible, however, to learn these dances and not realize the value of touch. There is none better than Shakespeare's Sir Andrew Aguecheek to demonstrate this ignorance. Although his legs were supposedly 'formed under the star of a galliard' (1.3.127–28), Sir Andrew represents the courtier who has received the requisite training but lacks the skill or intuition to understand the value of touching in early modern England.

In the first act of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby invites his friend Sir Andrew to 'accost' his niece's chambermaid, Maria. Sir Andrew misunderstands the instruction. Maria displays her wit on wordplay based on the idea of touching:

Sir Andrew: Fair lady, do you think you have fools in hand?

Maria: Sir, I have not you by th' hand.

Sir Andrew: Marry, but you shall have, and here's my hand.
(1.3.61–65).

What follows is a sequence of jests with Maria keeping the upper hand in every way, as Andrew seems oblivious to the sexual innuendo that Maria is making. Even though they are holding hands, this particular male courtier is failing to communicate to his lady with the sense of touch. When she removes her hand and leaves, the dialogue with Sir Toby continues to expose Sir Andrew's lack of understanding of how these physical skills could be of value to a courtier. Sir Andrew may have learnt the 'kickshawses' (l. 111), which he assumes are specific dance steps, yet his scant knowledge of languages means he is unable to make the link with the French phrase 'quelque choses'. Physical skills such as dancing were included in a Renaissance education to demonstrate control of the body: 'Courtly dancing, like civility, instructed the ambitious if unrefined courtier to prepare and present his credentials by means of an "outward bodily propriety"'.⁴⁰ However, such training may not have been fully understood nor achieved in practice by all. Even our poet of the dance, Sir John Davies, is mocked for his own bad dancing skills in practice.⁴¹

Sir Andrew has arrived in Illyria to woo the Lady Olivia. He may have learnt the appropriate courtly dances, but he is not aware about how to use dance in the art of wooing. He thinks he has the technique but he certainly doesn't know how to sense the 'fleshly motion' of the moves, nor understand how touch can communicate his desires. Not every courtier may have had the awareness of what this sense of touch could reveal, not being aware of the potential secret communication that could be made. In such a case this would be an example of 'hands against [their] hearts' (5.4.91–92), as Benedick feigns in *Much Ado* when he tries to deny writing his love letter to Beatrice. 'Hand against [...] hearts' is an ambiguous phrase, however: placing your hand *against* your own heart on your chest would also be the gesture for swearing the truth and expressing emotion. Touching hands can only communicate something with the appropriate physical sensation attached, and the touching moments allowed in social dance would need to be accompanied with shared awareness and mutual agreement if the activity of dancing was to initiate further social interaction between two physically joined human beings. In fact, when dancing courtly dances in practice, an opportunity to touch is such a special moment in the choreography that the parts of the dance where dancers are close but not able to touch can be more powerful, being sexually charged with the anticipation of physical contact when they will eventually 'embrace'. The dance manuals contradict those puritan writers who would have their readers believe that the dancing was saturated with overt sexual touching. Even the most lascivious *lavoltas* only allowed the man to touch the outside of the clothing, with the lady's body protected by layered skirts, corseted bodice and strengthened busk.

Touch was required to make a physical connection between dancing couples. To some, this may have signalled the moral danger of what could potentially follow such dancing activities. However, the dance itself may have frequently deceived the sense of sight of the onlookers. In actuality, the criticism of touching sensations in these 'dirty dances' may literally have been 'much ado about nothing'.

Notes

- 1 Constance Classen (ed.), *The Book of Touch*, Sensory Formations (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 1.
- 2 Philip Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses* (1583), M8r–v. Further references are marked in the text.
- 3 John Northbrooke, *A treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine plaies [...] are reprov'd* (1579), fols. 66v–67r. Further references are marked in the text.
- 4 Christopher Fetherston, *A Dialogue against lewd and lascivious dancing wherein are refuted all those reason which the common people use to bring in defence thereof* (1582), D6r.

- 5 *A Treatise of daunces wherin it is shewed, that they are as it were accessories and depe[n] dants (or things annexed) to whoredome, where also by the way is touched and proued, that playes are ioyned and knit together in a rancke or rowe with them* (1581), A5r.
- 6 For examples of how dance was part of a humanist culture firmly established in the fifteenth century by dynastic marriages, see Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body: Dance and Humanist Culture in Fifteenth-century Italy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 34–49, 52–57.
- 7 Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, ed. by S.E. Lehmberg, Everyman's Library, 227 (London: Dent, 1962), p. 71. Further references are marked in the text.
- 8 D.R. Wilson, *The Basse Dance Handbook* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012), pp. 143–48.
- 9 D.M. Loades (ed.), *Chronicles of the Tudor Kings* (Godalming: Bramley Books, 1996), pp. 145–46.
- 10 Wilson, p. 146.
- 11 Wilson discusses the vital skill needed to lead through the handhold, and even if he concludes that sometimes speech may be necessary, this would surely be a last resort. See *Basse Dance Handbook*, p. 280.
- 12 Thoinot (Jehan Tabourot) Arbeau, *Orchesographie* (Langres, 1589; 2nd edn 1596).
- 13 Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography*, trans. by Mary S. Evans, with introduction and notes by Julia Sutton and Laban notation by M. Becker and J. Sutton (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), p. 9. All further references are marked in the text.
- 14 Arbeau refers to Arena when discussing the reverence at the start of the dance: Arbeau, pp. 54–55.
- 15 There were nine editions of the Arena manual between 1529 and 1546, and a further eight in the 1570s. See Wilson, p. 149; Peggy Dixon, *Dances from the Courts of Europe*, 8 vols (London: Nonsuch, 1986–93), I, III, IV.
- 16 Wilson, p. 155.
- 17 Arbeau, p. 58.
- 18 Antonius Arena, 'Rules of Dancing', trans. by John Guthrie and Marino Zorzi, *Dance Research*, 4.2 (1986), 3–53 (p. 26).
- 19 Arbeau, p. 87.
- 20 Arbeau, pp. 119–21.
- 21 Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 100.
- 22 The exact translation of this technical term is debated: *Busq* translated as 'busk' or sometimes 'bust'.
- 23 Erroneously attributed to Stephen Gosson.
- 24 Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. by John Harington (1591), p. 116 (xv. 43).
- 25 See Nonsuch History and Dance's reconstruction film footage: www.nonsuch-dance.co.uk (accessed 21 August 2013).
- 26 Penshurst Place painting of *lavolta*, reproduced in Nevile Williams, *The Life and Times of Elizabeth I* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), p. 173.
- 27 McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance*, Plate IV. Ball at the court of Henri III showing *la volta*. Anonymous sixteenth-century painting (Musée des Beaux Arts, Rennes).

- 28 McGowan, p. 8 n. 28.
- 29 McGowan, pp. 9, 15.
- 30 McGowan, p. 22 n. 87.
- 31 George Marson, 'The Nymphs and Shepherds Danced', in *The Triumph of Oriana*, compiled by Thomas Morley (1601), B4r-v.
- 32 John Ramsey's manuscript, 'Practise for Dauncinge', transcribed in D.R. Wilson, 'Dancing in the Inns of Court', *Historical Dance*, 2.5 (1986–87), 3–16 (p. 7).
- 33 Marcia Vale, *The Gentleman's Recreations* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977), pp. 88–89.
- 34 John Davies, *Orchestra, or a Poeme of Dauncing Iudicially proouing the true obseruation of time and measure, in the authenticall and laudable vse of dauncing* (1596).
- 35 Arbeau, p. 52.
- 36 Wilson, 'Dancing in the Inns of Court', pp. 3–16.
- 37 John M. Ward, 'Apropos "The Oulde Measures"', *Records of Early English Drama*, 18 (1993), 2–21.
- 38 Dixon, III–IV, 73–75.
- 39 Arbeau, p. 12.
- 40 Howard Skiles, *The Politics of Courtly Dancing in Early Modern England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 31; quoting Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), p. 201.
- 41 Hans S. Pawlisch, *Sir John Davies and the Conquest of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 18.