

# Scotch Jig or Rope Dance? Choreographic Dramaturgy and *Much Ado About Nothing*

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## Abstract

This essay considers the role of dance in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play that pairs two large company dances with a sustained verbal discourse *about* dance. This pairing creates a rich, embodied metaphor that bridges the gap between text and performance and extends to the larger themes of masquerade and mistaken identity that permeate the play. After this brief textual analysis, this essay then looks particularly at the role of dance in Joss Whedon's 2012 film adaptation to argue that Whedon's production makes a curious connection to popular early modern rope dances and acrobatic performances. This production offers a renewed context for the diversity of early modern dance.

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When it comes to early modern choreography, stage directions do not give theater historians much to work with. From the vague "they dance a strain" in *Blurt, Master Constable* (1602), the equally imprecise "Here they dance" in *The Faire Maide of Bristow* (1605), and the especially maddening "Musique, dance, &" in George Chapman's *The Tragedie of Charles Duke of Byron* (1608), these stage directions leave plenty to the imagination. Deceptively simple, the word "dance" appears in stage directions nearly 350 times in plays written between 1580 and 1642 (Lin 2012, 107). It follows, then, that dance constitutes some of the more memorable scenes in the canon, from Romeo's first encounter with Juliet to Prospero's supernatural wedding masque. But when it comes to Shakespeare, no play engages the metaphor of dance quite like *Much Ado About Nothing*, which pairs two company dances, one in act 2 and the other in act 5, with a sustained verbal discourse *about* dance. This pairing creates a rich, embodied metaphor that bridges the gap between text and performance and extends to the larger themes of masquerade and mistaken identity that permeate the play. This two-part essay explores the way in which the discursive metaphor of dance operates in the text and then considers the dramaturgical mark that embodied choreographic choices have left on productions of the play over the past decade, especially in the case of Joss Whedon's recent 2012 film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

### Dance in the Playtext

Not only does *Much Ado About Nothing* feature multiple embodied dances, but the characters in the play overtly discuss these dances, demonstrating a deep awareness of the way dance could be used to signify social relationships. Notably, characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* use dance as a litmus test for their suitors. For instance, Margaret wishes to be matched with a good dancer but hopes to escape after the dance is finished (2.1.89-92). Similarly, Beatrice prizes dancing ability, saying that "a good leg and a good foot" could win her over, though she doubts anyone will have the skill to match her (2.1.13). In their desire for accomplished dancers, Margaret and Beatrice speak to the influence of Castiglione on early modern English culture. Hoby's English translation of Castiglione prizes a balance between dancing, wit, and fashion (Scodel 2002, 53), a trifecta that Benedick criticizes when he notes the change in Claudio's taste in musical preferences, fashion sense, and conversational style:

I have known where there was no music with him but the drum and the fife, and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier, and now is he turned orthography. (2.3.12-18)

As behavior manuals like Castiglione's helped to change the definition of model masculinity, many men, like Benedick, struggled to adapt. Benedick, a soldier recently returned from war, begins the play enshrined in the older model. He eventually tries to adapt in order to win Beatrice, but is surprisingly bad at writing poetry, complaining that "I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried . . . I was not born under a rhyming planet" (5.2.35-40) and is likewise "an awkward dancer and ineffectual masker" (Collington 2006, 302). With dance situated as an essential social skill, it represents Benedick's struggle to master the rules of courtship.

Extending the logic that men who are bad dancers will also be bad lovers, Beatrice uses three different popular dances to unfavorably describe the stages of courtship:

For, hear me, Hero, wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace. The first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig — and full as fantastical; the wedding mannerly modest, as a measure, full of state and ancientry. And then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster till he sink into his grave. (2.1.60-66)

Critics such as Harry Berger (1982) and Skiles Howard (1998) have read this metaphor as evidence of Beatrice's conflicted attitudes towards marriage: it is at once too tedious and too frenetic. In this way, Beatrice's critique reveals her impossible expectations, setting her up for a change of heart in act 5. On the surface, Beatrice's aim is to disparage marriage by comparing it to a series of over-the-top dances. However, her metaphor also makes these dances appear ridiculous. After hearing her speech, it would be impossible not to view the dancing that begins just four lines later without a sense of irony. If the dancers begin a Scotch jig, we have been conditioned to see it as over-the-top and ridiculous; a measure "full of state and ancientry," stuffy and pretentious; a cinquepace, braggadocious and unsustainable. Thus, we are asked to view the dance through Beatrice's eyes.

While there are a number of dramaturgical possibilities for the masked dance, Alan Brissenden suggests that the rhythm of the scene, with its four-unit patterns of equally-paced dialogue, suggests a pavan, a traditional dance that allows couples to dance side-by-side. Brissenden elaborates: "the steps involve turns back and forth, retreats and advances, so that it is ideal for highlighting dramatic conversation" (Brissenden 1981, 49). A black alman, like the one described by the Rawlinson Poet and transcribed by James Cunningham in his book *Dancing in the Inns of Court* (1965), could also match this dialogic rhythm with some added tension of near partner changes and pinwheel movements. Brissenden suggests that the masque might conclude with a cinquepace, "the quick, showy and energetic dance in triple time whose figures are based on five steps" (Brissenden 1981, 50), sending the partners off stage in a rush of excitement. If this was the case, the connection with Beatrice's earlier metaphor would have been even more pronounced.

But regardless of which dance pattern was originally used, Beatrice's participation in the masque poses a particularly sticky problem. Beatrice has disparaged three dancing styles and then, just a few lines later, says she must "follow the leaders" (2.1.130). Though she participates, she dances ironically, hoping to abscond as soon as possible: "if they lead to any ill I will leave them at the next turning" (2.1.132-33). The rhythm of her insults further disrupts the rhythm of the dance. Instead of adhering to short stichomythic lines, Beatrice responds with two longer rants, beginning "Why, he is the prince's jester" and "Do, do" (2.1.117, 125). Beatrice views dance as she views marriage — as structured, confining, and best avoided. However, early modern dance scholars have shown that the constraints of dance could actually provide dancers with opportunities to challenge social rigidity. For instance, Desai argues that the symmetry of early modern partner choreography undercuts its own appearance of conservative formality: "Dance was the only form of body language that allowed a woman to express herself as an equal of, and in perfect symmetry with, a man" (Desai 1993, 291). Thus, it is from within the structure of the dance that, perhaps paradoxically, women could be most liberated. Masked dances were especially associated with

these kinds of "liberating inversions" (Castle 1986, 18). Castiglione says that being in a mask meant that one could behave with greater abandon: "Because to be in a maske bringeth with it a certaine libertie and lycense" (Castiglione 1561, sig. M3r). This license permitted men to show off more challenging dance steps and women to hold eye contact with their dance partner, both of which were otherwise uncouth (Winerock 2011, 460). Thus, Benedick attempts to use the anonymity of the masked dance to insult Beatrice, but Beatrice is able to seize on "certaine libertie and lycense" to criticize him in kind, calling him dull and rude (2.1.118-23). In this way, dance allows both characters the liberty to speak freely with one another, though this freedom only deepens their mutual ruse.

It is not until act 5 — once everyone is "unmasked and happy" (Brissenden 1981, 51) — that Beatrice and Benedick come together by way of a concluding dance:

BENEDICK: Come, come, we are friends, let's have a dance ere we are married, that we may lighten our own hearts and our wives' heels.

LEONATO: We'll have dancing afterward.

BENEDICK: First, of my word; therefore play, music. (5.4.112-16)

Flouting social convention, Benedick suggests dancing before the wedding, not after. In this way, he seeks to avoid a repetition of Hero's crisis at the altar. Though inverting the order of events may make Benedick a social rebel, his self-appointed role as leader of the dance ultimately confirms his transformation into a gentleman, as he "assumes the mantle of the courtier-ideal" (Collington 2006, 307). The stage directions imply that Benedick, not Leonato, gets his way. Cleverly, Benedick's use of dance also ameliorates Beatrice's earlier concerns about "hot and hasty" (1.2.61-62) engagements. Through the delay of dance, Benedick is able to curb Beatrice's prejudices and give dance a new context for consensual rather than obligatory partnership.

In his reading of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Harry Berger references Beatrice's dance metaphor from 2.1 to argue that a Scotch jig was originally used to close the play: "everyone in the last scene does a Scotch jig to avoid the imminent dispersal through marriage" (Berger 1982, 312). However, we cannot know for sure how this final dance was originally performed. Certainly there was a concluding jig, as all plays of the period featured them (West 2009, 203). Jigs were so commonplace that in Ben Jonson's play *Every Man Out of His Humor*, printed the same year as *Much Ado About Nothing*, he refers to a custom as "a thing studied, and rehearst as ordinarily as his coming from hawking or hunting, as a jigge after a play" (Jonson 1600, sig. F3v). However, the particular style of the concluding dance is open to interpretation; as William West admits, "the jig is whatever happened at the end of the play" (West 2009, 205). Though original dances — pavan,

Scotch jig, or otherwise — cannot be entirely recovered, we can explore the range of interpretative possibilities by examining recent performance choices.

### Dance in Recent Productions

The dances in *Much Ado About Nothing* have taken many different forms in the past decade, from a Cuban salsa conga line at a professional Florida production (Stodard 2006, 83) to a 1940s jitterbug at the Old Vic (Collins 2014, 289). At the Wyndham Theatre in London, director Josie Rourke even added lap dances to her production, as Claudio and Hero enjoyed simultaneous bachelor/bachelorette parties onstage (Collins 2011, 653-54). In performance, dance — like music, costuming, set construction, and other design elements — can pull subtle meanings from the text while offering interpretative shape to a production. Thus, a conga line evinces a festive celebration of community rather than a celebration of coupling, while a "formal and ordered" dance, like the one that concluded the San Diego Old Globe Theater's production of *Much Ado* (Croteau 2012, 165), suggests the traditional ascendancy of marriage, and perhaps even the cultural capital of "Shakespeare." Thus, the Globe Theatre in London uses "curtain call" dances to harness what they believe to be an authentically early modern experience, even though these dances are not necessarily choreographed from early modern dance manuals, reflecting more of a contemporary nostalgia for an idea of an "original Shakespeare" than anything else.

Often, the precise forms of dance matter less than who dances and who does not. This dramaturgical choice can offer insight into the social position of various characters. For instance, when we first meet Don John, we are told he is "out of measure sad" (1.3.1); this sense of being excluded from a dance casts him as "out of step" (Brissenden 51) with his fellow characters. Moreover, Don Pedro traditionally does not join the final dance in *Much Ado*, as he is excluded from the happy ending and has no partner to dance with (Collins 2011, 653-4; Klett 2007, 58). However, Joss Whedon's 2012 film adaptation opts to excuse Beatrice and Benedick from dancing throughout the entire production. Though a masquerade goes on around them in 2.1, Beatrice and Benedick are seated for their repartee and do not dance together during the scene. Beatrice excuses herself to join a conga line, but this operates primarily as her polite exit from the conversation.

But why excuse Beatrice and Benedick from the dance? Whedon's approach is risky, considering the fact that the witty "dance" between Beatrice and Benedick is what drives the play; as A. P. Rossiter argued over half a century ago, "Messinans have dancing minds, and make words dance or caper" (Rossiter 1961, 68). Removing this crucial metaphor from the two leads would seem impolitic. And yet, Whedon uses cross-cutting, a technique exclusive to film, to temper this choice and provide an even more effective dance metaphor for his production. During the masked

dance scene (2.1), Whedon cross-cuts to repetitive shots of two acrobats performing on an elevated trapeze (figure 1). The dancers are dressed as twins, and their movements echo one another as if in a mirror. As they move through their balletic routine, they hold one another up with their bodies, suspended in midair and poised above the raucous crowd below. They pay no attention to the partygoers, but focus intensely on each other with sustained eye contact that intensifies as their routine continues. Whedon cross-cuts to the acrobatic dance throughout Beatrice and Benedick's argument, a dramaturgical choice that creates the effect of an intellectual montage, connecting the dancers to the couple. Like the acrobats, Beatrice and Benedick are shown to be twinned equals. Though they remain unaware of this until the final act, the audience is led to this dramatic irony through choreography. Film reviewer Ted Scheinman praises the choreography, arguing that the dancers evoke a sense of doubleness that permeates the play: "The masque [sic] scene features a pair of acrobats who mimic each other's bodies in gravity-defying poses that create a mirror effect, as though the uppermost tumbler is posed over her own reflection. It's a rich, lovely moment that evokes the play's undercurrent of deceit, even among the good-hearted matchmakers" (Scheinman 2013). Rather than an undercurrent of deceit, though, I argue that these acrobats provide the film with a sense of embodied trust: Beatrice and Benedick must learn to forget social pressures and hold one another up.

This is precisely what Beatrice and Benedick embody by the end of Whedon's film: in the final scene, other couples pair off to drunkenly dance, while Beatrice and Benedick stand apart, pressed against the wall away from the dancing, enjoying each other. As the shot focuses on Beatrice and Benedick, the music transitions to an extradiegetic crescendo, as if they cannot perceive their surroundings. In removing Beatrice and Benedick from both dance scenes and introducing cross-cutting in its place, Whedon offers a moving foreshadow of their developing relationship.

Not only does this choreographic choice offer a striking visual metaphor, but it also colors the way in which viewers perceive the play. For instance, in his review of Whedon's film, A. A. Dowd makes no mention of the acrobats but says that the film is full of "acrobatic wordplay" (Dowd 2013). Similarly, Melissa Croteau's review of a stage production of *Much Ado*, published the same year as the film's release, argues that "directors must walk a tightrope between these extremes both to capture the complexity of Shakespeare's mature comedy and to please an audience" (Croteau 2012, 160). Dowd's use of the term "acrobatic" and Croteau's use of "tightrope" are evidence that choreography can shape the way we perceive a text, a perception that can even bleed into subsequent viewings of different productions of that text. Therefore, if we see acrobats, we think the language is acrobatic, a cognitive interpolation that speaks to the power of choreographic dramaturgy.

## The Early Modern Rope Dance

Whedon's directorial choices do more than offer a contemporary context for *Much Ado About Nothing*, as the jitterbug or Cuban conga do. I'd like to suggest that Whedon's use of acrobats actually brings a peculiar early modern sensibility to his production. Whether or not this choice was conscious, it is especially effective. This is because acrobats were a popular form of entertainment in the early modern period, performing some of the "feats of activity" that entertained English people on a regular basis (figure 2). Many of these "feats of activity" involved performing while suspended in air (figure 3). One specific form of entertainment was tightrope walking, better known as rope dancing (figure 4). In her survey of the history of the high wire, Catherine Yass (2008) shows how English rope dancing was popularized by medieval festivals and continued to be popular through the Restoration. Rope dancers are discussed in Holinshed's *Chronicles*; in 1554, an acrobat "came downe upon a rope tied to the battlements with his head before, neither staieng himselfe with hand or foot: which shortlie after cost him his life" (Holinshed 1587, 1121). The coronation of Edward VI in 1547 was likewise celebrated with a rope dancer who "went upwards upon the rope till he came over the midst of the churchyard; where he, having a rope about him, played certain mysteries on the rope, as tumbling, and casting one leg from another. Then took he the rope, and tied it to the cable, and tied himself by the right leg a little space beneath the wrist of the foot, and hung by one leg a certain space" (Strut 1801, 180). Even companies better known for their theatrical performances took part in these entertainments. For instance, the Lord Admiral's Men were paid £20 in 1588 for "showinge other feates of activitie and tumblinge" to Elizabeth I (Butterworth 2005, 33). Such popular entertainments relied on shock and skill to thrill spectators (Lin 2012, 107-108). With the visceral excitement of the early modern rope dancer, Whedon's acrobats infuse his adaptation with a taste of the range of early modern performances — beyond traditional drama — that were available to early modern spectators.

In early modern England, rope dancing was part spectacle and part metaphor. For example, it was used as a political metaphor in a song by playwright Alexander Brome — "Those that on the high rope dance, / Will do the same trick too" (Brome 1664, 92) — and was used to critique Oliver Cromwell's tenuous control over London (figure 5). By bringing this spectacle of metaphor to the dance in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Whedon's production offers an intriguing interpretation of the play. When the final dance begins in act 5, the acrobats are gone. However, Whedon's Benedick literally sweeps Beatrice off her feet into his arms to "lighten her heels." As she is suspended in mid-air, we are visually reminded of the acrobats' dance. Seeing Beatrice and Benedick as early modern rope dancers emphasizes the precarious position of love extolled by the play: first they must

fall — "she shall fall in love with Benedick" and "he shall fall in love with Beatrice" (2.1.331-34)  
— so that they might catch one another.

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Figure 2. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Figure 3. By permission of the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.

Figure 4. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 5. By permission of the British Museum.



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