

"We'll measure them a measure, and  
be gone": Renaissance Dance Practices  
and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract

Dance is an oft-overlooked, yet frequent feature in Shakespeare's plays. The playwright utilizes dance scenes, not only to convey general festivity and celebration, but also to advance plots, to display character traits such as grace and nobility (or their absence), and to highlight the development of romantic relationships. While there are no surviving records detailing the original staging of these dance scenes, there are extant dancing manuals from the period that explain how to do many of the dances that Shakespeare mentions. Moreover, references in a plethora of early modern literary, pictorial, and archival sources offer evidence of how these dances were understood and interpreted by dancers and spectators. Using *Romeo and Juliet* as a case study, this paper demonstrates how one can bring together these diverse sources, supplemented by the insights gained from the "experiential learning" of staging these dances for live audiences, in order to choreograph historically-informed dances, regardless of whether the production is set in the Elizabethan period or the present day. Finally, the paper argues that a better understanding of Shakespeare's dance scenes enables us to gain a better understanding of his plays' central concerns and questions overall.

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The precise footwork and exact dance figures performed in the original sixteenth-century performances of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* may never be recovered. Yet, surviving dance instruction manuals and choreographic notes from the period, spectators' descriptions of dance practices in England, France, and Italy, comparisons with similar dance scenes in contemporary plays, and references to dance elsewhere in the text of *Romeo and Juliet* itself enable some reasonable hypotheses regarding what dances might have been done in the original productions and how those dances were "read" or understood by audience members. Attending to dancing also illuminates how Shakespeare used audio-visual forms such as dance to complement or complicate spoken dialogue. Early modern scholars of many disciplines can therefore benefit from giving more

consideration and attention to how, historically, dances were staged and interpreted in productions of Shakespeare's own time.

In 1999, for my undergraduate thesis at Princeton University, I scripted, choreographed, and directed a performance of dance scenes from William Shakespeare's plays, entitled *The Bard's Galliard, or How to Party Like an Elizabethan* (Winerock 1999). The performance featured period costumes, live music, and my attempts at historical reconstructions of Renaissance dances adapted to work in scenes from *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Henry VIII*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, among others. Having subsequently continued to do research in early dance, theater, and history, I have had many opportunities to look back on my first experiments in dance reconstruction, prompting reflections that elicit equal parts pride and embarrassment.

*The Bard's Galliard* included two scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*: act 1, scene 5, the party scene during which Romeo sees Juliet dance and falls in love with her; and act 1, scene 4, a short scene in which Mercutio and Romeo discuss Romeo's emotional state and his reluctance to participate fully in the evening's festivities, namely in the anticipated dancing. In this essay, I will use my initial embodied exploration of dance in *Romeo and Juliet* as a jumping off point for examining the function of dance in the play more generally and reflecting on how, today, I might stage act 1, scene 5 a bit differently.

### *Romeo and Juliet*: Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, scene 4 of *Romeo and Juliet* opens with Romeo and his friends on the way to a party. The party is at the home of Lord Capulet, and so the young men, as members of the rival Montague faction in Verona, have not been invited. This fact, however, presents only a small obstacle to the intrepid young revellers; they have donned masks and will attend the party in disguise. Romeo, in the throes of melancholy due to a bad dream and his unrequited love for the fair Rosaline, accompanies the others reluctantly. Mercutio, Benvolio, and the other masquers are excited to dance with the girls at the party, to "measure them a measure," but Romeo complains, "You have dancing shoes / With nimble soles. I have a soul of lead / So stakes me to the ground I cannot move" (1.4.10, 14-16). Romeo offers, instead, to carry one of the torches: "I am not for this ambling. / Being but heavy I will bear the light" (1.4.11-12).

Despite Mercutio's attempts to persuade him otherwise, Romeo remains determined not to dance: "A torch for me. Let wantons light of heart / Tickle the senseless rushes with their heels / . . . / I'll be a candle holder and look on" (1.4.35-36, 37). Mercutio and Romeo continue to banter back and forth for a while, and Mercutio waxes eloquently about Queen Mab, the fairy trickster and haunter of dreams, until Benvolio reminds them that "[s]upper is done" and they shall come too

late to the party if they dally further (1.4.112). Benvolio then calls out "Strike, drum," (1.4.121), and the youths "march about the stage" before withdrawing, ending the scene and creating the impression that they are now marching through the streets of Verona on the way to the Capulets' house (Winerock 1999, scene 4).

In analyzing the function and significance of dance in *Romeo and Juliet* and in the plays and time period of Shakespeare more generally, this scene, which describes dancing rather than displaying it, provides a helpful complement and counterpart to the later dance scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, which only specifies that "*Music plays, and they dance.*" In this earlier scene, Shakespeare reveals various assumptions about and associations with dance of the period, even if he does so primarily to pun and play on them.

### Sixteenth-Century Festive Dance Traditions

Romeo contends in act 1, scene 4 that he should not dance because he is heavy- rather than light-hearted and thus suggests that dancing is only appropriate for those wanting to express joyful, light-hearted emotions. This insinuation is certainly supported by the evidence of dancing practices that can be gleaned from archival and literary sources. In the sixteenth century, dancing was *strongly* associated with joy and celebration. In England, we regularly find dancing at life-cycle celebrations such as weddings and at communal festivities for both religious and secular holidays, including Whitsuntide, Christmas, May Day, and Midsummer (Hutton 1994, Winerock 2012). Dancing on Sundays after church services was another popular, if problematic, customary dance practice, especially in the countryside, as was inviting dancers to perform at church fundraisers to draw larger audiences (Parker 1988, Forrest 1999).

These events all featured dancing that expressed joy and delight and that was thought to elicit the same positive feelings in viewers. Delight in dancing might be tainted by lust or lasciviousness, thus making its delights sinful, dangerous, and worthy of condemnation, but there is little evidence of people dancing to express or expunge sorrow or grief. Rather, when someone dances or mentions dancing during a sad or mournful moment, it is an aberration that highlights the discrepancy between actual and expected feelings or behaviors. While there are a handful of moments in plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries in which dancing serves as a metaphor for agitated motion that is not necessarily celebratory, such as the jerking of a dying body at a hanging, all of the staged dances and all of the in-text references to actual dancing in these plays assume that dancing customarily expresses happiness.

Similarly, at court, dancing at revels and entertainments expressed the positive and the joyful. When Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet* in the 1590s, the anti-masque —

the comic, theatrical opening pieces of the English court masque — had not yet been invented (Welsford 1962, Daye 2008). The early masque popular during the Tudor period was a much simpler and more informal affair. Masquers — masked or disguised noblemen — crashed parties at the houses of other nobles, sometimes performing a choreographed piece for the hosts, sometimes simply engaging in social dancing with those present. Although the antic gestures of the later court masques might sometimes convey distress or anger, the dancing in these early masques was always light-hearted. Thus, Romeo's excuse that his sorrow and heavy heart make him unfit for dancing since it is best suited for "wantons light of heart," is a straightforward statement with which his audience would have been familiar and likely agreed. It also sets up the expectation that the dancing at the party will be similarly joyful and light-hearted.

### *Romeo and Juliet: Act 1, Scene 5*

There is a short comic exchange at the very beginning of act 1, scene 5, in which servingmen jest with each other while they clear away the remnants of a feast. Then Lord Capulet and his family, including his daughter Juliet, enter, as do the other official guests, and Lord Capulet greets the masquers who have just arrived, welcoming them and inviting them to dance with the gentlewomen present, or "walk about" with them (1.5.19). He teases the women, saying that only those who have corns on their toes can resist dancing: "Will now deny to dance? She that makes dainty, / She, I'll swear, hath corns" (1.5.22-23). He then acknowledges that the newly arrived guests are mysterious, disguised masquers, although he is not bothered by this. Rather, seeing the young men in their masks reminds him of his own youthful masked adventures and love conquests:

. . . I have seen the day  
That I have worn a visor and could tell  
A whispering tale in a fair lady's ear,  
Such as would please: 'tis gone, 'tis gone, 'tis gone. (1.5.25-28)

And he and his cousin have an amusing exchange about whether it has been twenty-five or thirty years since they were last in a mask.

Lord Capulet's welcome to the masquers is immediately followed by several instructions: he asks the musicians to start playing music, he orders the servants to light more lights but "quench the fire" since the room has "grown too hot," and he orders them to make more room in the hall by turning up or stacking the tables. He also tells the young women to start dancing, presumably with the newly arrived masquers, "foot it, girls" (1.5.29-33).

This flurry of activity indicates not just that the masquers' arrival was unexpected, which we already knew, but also that the dancing that is about to occur is happening *because* of their arrival. There were musicians on hand, but the dancing that we see in this scene is unscheduled, improvised, and a direct response to the sudden arrival of mysterious young men in masks. The servants have to move the furniture in order to make sufficient room for dancing, and they must adjust the amount of light and warmth to accommodate the needs of dancers. These details are revealing: first, they confirm that this "masque" is the impromptu, informal type rather than a staging of a carefully choreographed, elaborately costumed, and well-rehearsed court masque.

They also suggest that dancing was not a requisite activity at a private party but could be easily added. There is no indication in the text that this sudden decision to have dancing was particularly unusual. So we may assume that Shakespeare's audience expected that both the masquers and the invited guests would be able to dance together without advance notice, already knowing the steps and figures for several dances, and that the musicians present would know the appropriate dance tunes to accompany them.

### *Romeo and Juliet* versus *Henry VIII*

These assumptions hold true for the similar scene in Shakespeare's later play *Henry VIII*. In act 1, scene 4, masked young men arrive unexpectedly at a private party and dance with the women present, and the dancing leads to one of the men (Henry) problematically falling in love with one of the women (Anne Boleyn). The main difference between the scenes is that Henry VIII falls in love with Anne as he dances with her, whereas Romeo falls in love with Juliet while watching her dance with someone else. Nevertheless, in both scenes the unexpected arrival of masquers does not cause consternation. Masquers, invited guests, and musicians already have a shared repertoire of dances upon which they can draw for impromptu dancing.

This is an important detail to take into consideration when choreographing this scene for a modern production and also for hypothesizing what sort of dancing might have been staged in the original production. The dance should be interesting enough to please the audience, but it does not have to be choreographed especially for the production. Indeed, one can make a strong argument for staging a well-known dance such as one of the processional pavaues, almains, or English measures (Payne 2003, Ward 1993). The dance only needs to afford Juliet the opportunity to display her notable beauty and grace.

In other words, the choreographic needs of the dance scene in *Romeo and Juliet* are much more modest compared to those in *Henry VIII*, where the dancing must make visible Henry's sudden enchantment and Anne's cautiously positive reaction. In staging this scene for *The Bard's Galliard*,

to show Henry's sudden interest in Anne, I had him cut in on one of the other men who was about to ask her to dance (Winerock 1999, Scene 10, 4:43-5:06). To convey Henry's illicit sexual interest and foreshadow Anne's eventual acceptance, I chose the volta, the most scandalous and lascivious dance in the courtly dance canon (Arbeau 1967, 119-23). It was not a forbidden dance, but it was definitely at the far end of acceptable, and women who were particularly jealous of their reputations did not dance it. In addition, to show how Henry's passion for Anne has already begun to distract him and cause him to disregard propriety, I had them dance an extra set of volta turns after the other dancers had finished (Winerock 1999, Scene 10, 6:07-6:30). This extension made their dancing together seem more symbolic, as well as focused the audience's attention on them.<sup>1</sup> (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

### Choreographic Problems and Solutions

In *Romeo and Juliet*, such elaborate machinations were not necessary. However, there were still difficulties in terms of timing and focus. The actual stage direction, "*Music plays and they dance*," occurs in the script partway through Lord Capulet's welcome speech to the masquers, in between "Come, musicians, play" and "A hall, a hall, give room" (1.5.30). It does not make sense that he would call for more room after the dancing had ended, so either the stage direction is in the wrong place, or, more likely, this is where the music begins, but the actual dancing begins somewhat later. One option is to have the masquers seek out their partners, bowing to them, and inviting them out into the center of the stage, while the musicians play a long introduction, the servants move the furniture to make more space, and Lord Capulet bustles about giving instructions and reminiscing about his own dancing past. This, then, allows the dancers to come together and begin dancing in time for Romeo to notice Juliet and her graceful beauty, inquiring of a servingman, "What lady's that which doth enrich the hand / Of yonder knight?" (1.5.48-49). He then continues to praise her beauty while she continues dancing. We know that she is still dancing because he tells us he will wait until the measure is done to approach her. The scene then shifts to Lord Capulet and Tybalt's substantial exchange, after which Romeo approaches Juliet. At this point, she has clearly stopped dancing, but it is unclear when exactly the dance should end. In other words, we know that there is definitely dancing happening during moments of dialogue, but how much overlap is not clear. In a film, where one can shift the focus between dancers and speakers, this works well, but on stage this leads to a divided focus. Does one watch the dancers or the speakers? Moreover, it can be difficult to hear spoken dialogue when music is playing.

In *The Bard's Galliard*, I attempted to solve the first problem by having two dances. Shortly after Romeo and his friends arrive, I had Juliet and one of the gentlemen perform an elegant

Italian courtly dance, "Alta Mendozza" (Wortelboer 1996, 8-10). The young woman playing Juliet was a ballet dancer, and her partner a ballroom dancer, and their performance was quite charming and lovely (Winerock 1999, Scene 5, 0:45-2:43). (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Romeo's sudden interest in Juliet did not feel surprising, since she was being featured, and historically, having the daughter of the house dance a duet towards the beginning of a dance event would be entirely appropriate. The first dance was followed by a short processional pavane with all of the masquers, except Romeo, dancing with the women at the party. As they watched the dancers, Lord Capulet reminisced with his cousin about their own dancing days, and we added a comic "bit" where Romeo followed the procession, trying to catch a better glimpse of Juliet (Winerock 1999, Scene 5, 2:52-3:45). (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

While the procession was visually pleasant and clearly involved dancing, it was not particularly choreographically interesting. Thus, the audience did not feel too torn between watching the dancing and listening to the gentlemen, although perhaps Romeo's antics were a bit distracting. Still, the main problem in performance was that it was difficult to hear the dialogue over the music. In retrospect, I should have had the musicians play more quietly or had the actors further forward on the stage with the procession behind them. Nevertheless, the two dances worked as a staging solution. The initial duet danced by Juliet enabled the audience, along with Romeo, to notice her easily and naturally and to see how she "o'er her fellows shows" (1.5.56); the subsequent processional dance fulfilled the requirement of the text that the masquers, except for Romeo, dance with the girls at the party. However, this solution required adding a dance that was simply not called for in the script — a substantial intervention. It worked in performance and was historically plausible, but I am no longer comfortable adding in extra dances. Indeed, Linda McJannet and I recently published an essay about how significant adding dances can be (McJannet and Winerock 2016).

### Torch Bearing versus Torch Dancing

That being said, one of the only serious choreographic suggestions that has been published, Alan Brissenden's recommendation in *Shakespeare and the Dance* of a torch dance, also has problems (Brissenden 1981, 65). Thoinot Arbeau's dancing manual *Orchesography* provides a choreography for a candlestick or torch dance (Arbeau 1967, 161-63), and Anne Daye has written about torchbearers in the English masque (Daye 1998). She discusses, of course, the torchbearers who clearly dance in the masque processional dance in Henry Unton's memorial portrait (c. 1596; see figure 1).

Yet, it is hard to reconcile Romeo's insistence that he will bear the torch instead of dancing with there then being a dance with torchbearers in it. In such a case, would not Romeo be required to dance with his torch? Moreover, while Unton's portrait features dancing torchbearers, other pictorial evidence shows that torchbearers for dancers did not necessarily join in the dance. In an early seventeenth-century print by Crispin de Pas designed by Martin de Vos known as *Couple Dancing*, two young men hold up torches in the background next to the musicians while a man and woman dance a galliard in the foreground (Barlow 2012, 67). Plate 6 of *The Masquerades*, after Jacques de Gheyn II, has two masked dancers in the foreground, and a partially obscured torchbearer behind them. The torchbearer is in mid-step, but he faces a different direction than the dancers, indicating that he is not "in step" with them (see figure 2).

### Conclusion

In *Romeo and Juliet*, dance, character, and plot are enmeshed. A dance mediates the first encounter of the star-crossed lovers. But it is not through dancing together that the lovers come together. Juliet's dancing sparks Romeo's love, but though his heart is lightened, his heels remain heavy. As the play unfolds, his love pulls Juliet away from her family and the light-hearted dancing of their first encounter; he is not drawn into her dance.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare uses dance to skillfully manipulate the audience's emotions and expectations. The dances in the beginning of act 1, scene 5 fit the sixteenth-century assumption that dancing was appropriate for and indicative of joyful, communal expressions of celebration. Thus, Juliet's dancing is not simply aesthetically pleasing; it also demonstrates that she is a valued member of a warm, inclusive community. Then the playwright unsettles these expectations by having Romeo draw Juliet away from the dancing instead of joining her, mirroring the way he will draw her away from her family instead of joining it.

There are countless possibilities when staging the dancing in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as many challenges, especially if one wants to stage historically plausible dances. However, understanding dance's sixteenth-century connotations, and how Shakespeare mines and undermines them, can help modern-day choreographers and directors make decisions that support and clarify the play's nuances rather than inadvertently obfuscating them.

### Notes

1. For ease of access, some video clips are embedded in the body of this essay; additional footage is available at <https://shakespeareanddance.com/video-gallery/shakespeare-miscellanies/the-bards-galliard> [accessed 30 April 2017].



### Permissions

Figure 1. Excerpt from the memorial portrait of Sir Henry Unton, unknown artist, c.1596. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 2. Plate 6, *The Masquerades*, after Jacques de Gheyn II , c1595. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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