

‘We’ll Have a Crash Here in the Yard’

English Country Dance in early modern stage plays: an introduction¹

Jennifer Kiek

Iris: You Nimphs called Nayades of ye windring brooks,
With your sedg’d crownes, and ever-harmless lookes,
Leave your crisp channels, and on this greene-Land
Answer your summons. Juno does command.
Come temperate Nimphes, and helpe to celebrate
A Contract of true Love: be not too late.

Enter Certaine Nimphes.

You Sun-burn’d Sicklemen of August weary,
Come hether from the furrow, and be merry,
Make holly day: your Rye-straw hats put on
And these fresh Nimphes encounter every one
In Country footing.

*Enter certaine Reapers (properly
habited:) they joyne with the
Nimphes in a graceful dance...*

(The Tempest IV i)

Might this graceful dance of country footing have been an English Country Dance?

¹ Paper presented at The Fifth DHDS Conference *On Common Ground 5: Dance in Drama, Drama in Dance*, Cecil Sharp House, London, 12 March 2005. The proceedings are available from DHDS, see www.dhds.org.uk.

Those plays which are commonly attended and set forth with lascivious, mixt, effeminate, amorous dancing; either of men with women, or youths in women's apparel, are undoubtedly sinful, yea utterly unlawful unto Christians.

But all our popular stage plays are commonly thus attended and set forth.

It is this prolific and dance-rich period of theatre history which happens to coincide with the appearance and apparent establishment of the country dance. A few of the play references are well-known and regularly cited, if only in passing. Further digging may, or may not, reveal a little more to add to the still surprisingly elusive early history of this enduringly popular English dance and, possibly, its relationship to Playford's first collection.

One of the earliest references which is often cited is from a play called *Misogonus*, a comedy possibly associated with Trinity College, Cambridge, and written by 1577. A conversation between several of the characters contains the following lines:

- M. Trifle not the tyme then say what shall we have
What countrye dauncis do you here dayly frequent
- C. The vickar of s.fooles I am sure he would crave
to that daunce of all other I see he is bent.
- Sir John. Faythe no I had rather have shakinge oth shetes...
or cachinge of quales or what faire Melissa...
- Melissa ...foole I see by him is geven holy to scorn
- O. Preste kepe your sincopasse and foot it oth the best sorte.

This quotation, albeit early, is actually characteristic of many of the later references. It is helpfully even clearer than some in the explicit association between country dance – ‘what countrye dauncis do you here dayly frequent’ – and the titles mentioned – ‘shakinge oth shetes’ and ‘cachinge of quales’ – but it also serves as a timely warning: when the names of dances are used they must be considered in the light of their function in the speech and the context in which they appear. The dances may be real enough but it is their word-play value and not their dance merit which matters. *Shaking of the Sheets* was an obvious favourite of which two further examples will suffice:

You must not think to dance the shaking of the sheets alone (*The Insatiate Countess*, 1608, - more of her anon.)

and

Thee and I shall dance the shaking of the sheets together (*Match at Midnight*, William Rowley, 1621)

As we shall see later, it has been used with greater subtlety. All we can infer from the *Misogonus* reference is that there was a country dance called *Shaking of the Sheets* in existence by 1577, not that it was necessarily the earliest, the most popular, or anything else.

A dance called *The Night Peece*, which is only later given the alternative title of *Shaking of the Sheets*, occurs in Playford's 1651 edition as a longways for three couples. *Catching of Quales* first turns up in the fourth edition of 1670 as a Round for eight which includes hand-shaking and toe-touching figures:

First man puts his Toe to his woman's Toe 3 times.

which does seem to chime with the sort of thing Sir John had in mind some seventy years before. Both dances have what I call the formulaic sequences – doubles, sides, arms – and *Catching of Quales* also includes set and turn single.

A country dance commonly thought to be one of the earliest if not positively the archetypal circle dance is *Sellenger's Round*, especially as it has the alternative title of *The Beginning of the World*. It certainly features in play references although sometimes only as a tune: *The Lady of Pleasure*, by James Shirley, 1635, opens with a diatribe against country life by Aretina, Sir Thomas Bornwell's wife and newly arrived in town:

.... I would not
Endure again the country conversation
To be the lady of six shires – the men
So near the primitive making they retain
A sense of nothing but the earth, their brains
And barren heads standing as much in want
Of ploughing as their ground; to hear a fellow
Make himself merry, and his horse, with whistling
Sellinger's Round; to observe with what solemnity
They keep their wakes and throw for pewter candlesticks!
How they become the morris, with whose bells
They ring all in to Whitsun ales, and sweat
Through twenty scarfs and napkins till the hobby-horse
Tire, and Maid Marian, dissolv'd to a jelly,
Be kept for spoon meat.

She changes her tune at the end of the play, of course. In *The Court Beggar*, Brome, 1639, a figure 'whistles and Dances Sellenger's round, or the like'. It is Richard Brome, incidentally, whom Keith Whitlock, in his cultural-political study of *The English Dancing Master*, puts forward as the prime candidate for the position of Playford's 'knowing Friend'. It is unfortunate, therefore, that in the words from *The Northern Lass*, 1629, quoted by Whitlock, the references to 'Arm your ladie' and 'Side your ladie' are in reverse of the usual order although, oddly, there is one 1651 dance which also has 'armes' before 'sides' – *Chestnut* (or *Doves figary*). In Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West*, 1630, the court of the kingdom of Fez is treated to two English country dances, *Sillinger's Round* and *Tom Tiler*. And in Brome and Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches*, 1634, it is *Sellenger's Round*, according to the stage directions, which the bewitched fiddlers attempt to play at the country wedding revel. As the dancers begin, the tune unaccountably changes whereupon the fiddlers are ordered to stop and start again with the same tune which is now, in the character's speech, referred to by the alternative title:

You drunken rogues, hold, hold I say, and begin again soberly
'The Beginning of the World'.

The ensuing cacophony is said to sound like:

‘The Running of the Country’ several ways.

The fiddlers end up smashing their instruments and a bagpiper, who happens to be loitering by, is called in to play a hornpipe during which the bride and groom ‘reel’. The play was noted at the time for its ‘diverse songs and dances’. When it first appears in Playford in the third edition 1657/1665, *Sellengers Round*, without alternative title, is depicted as a ‘longways for six’ although the words ‘either Round, or’ appear in front of ‘longways’ as if possibly added as an afterthought. When it appears again in the fourth, 1670, edition together with its alternative title, it is as a Round for as many as will and circle round has been added to the figures. Again, the dance includes the formulaic sequences with set and turn single and, most unusually, it also has the step sequence ‘two singles and a D.back’ which, in my view, does mark it out as an older choreography.

Much time and ink can be expended on debating whether or not dances we know from Playford can be associated with plays of the same title. For example, is *Hyde Parke*, a square dance from the 1651 collection, connected with Shirley’s comedy of 1632? Dancing certainly features in the play, not least when the long-lost husband turns up on his wife’s wedding day when the revels are under way, and later when he challenges his rival to what I can only call duel by galliard:

Bonavent: You do owe me a dance, if you remember
And I will have it now; no dispute.-Draw!

This is the pre-arranged cue for a bagpiper to play a galliard, but the rival draws his sword:

That will not serve your turn; come, shake your heels,
You hear a tune;

There is opportunity within the play for dancing a country dance especially at the wedding party; the choreography of *Hyde Parke* nicely suits the play’s theme of interlinked pairs and, as a square dance, the domestic room setting. The scene includes references to footing ‘chamber jigs’ and even a ‘vagary’ but these are part of the witty, and suggestive, repartee, while the stage directions read simply ‘dancing’ and ‘A Dance’. The possible association between play and dance, however plausible, must tantalisingly remain conjecture.

Another example worth mentioning because it is so particular in both title and form is *The Slip*, the last dance in the first edition. Appropriately enough, it seems to be a formal ‘finishing’ dance without the usual figures in which each couple successively leads down the set from the top with much honouring. Although it is described as a longways for as many as will in which each couple joins on the bottom and works back up the set again, it would be elegantly in keeping to have them ‘exit’. This would also solve the problem of the whole set shuffling up each time through to keep in the space. *A Mad World, My Masters*, 1605, uses the device of a play-within-a-play set up by one Follywit and called *The Slip*. The word ‘slip’ is used regularly throughout the play proper:

- How soon he took occasion to slip into his own flattery...

- ... and yourself slipped into the form of a physician.
- Shall we let slip this mutual hour

and is repeatedly emphasised as the title of the comedy to be presented at the feast put on by the hospitable Sir Bounteous which, following the final twist of events, becomes in effect a wedding feast. Of the playlet itself there exists only the Prologue spoken to cover the exit of the rest of the supposed players who are busy making off with ill-gotten loot to be followed as soon as maybe by their leader Follywit:

The play being call'd The Slip, I vanish too.

This is a remarkable correlation between play and dance but it is worth noting that *A Mad World, My Masters* was later revived and republished in 1640. It should be borne in mind that even when the association of a country dance with a particular play seems beyond reasonable doubt, the dance may derive from a later revival and not necessarily from the play's first staging. This would explain the inclusion of *The Slip* in Playford's first edition from which a number of dances with very early references are omitted only to appear in later collections. This suggests to me that they no longer had any currency at the time of the 1651 collection, being sourced only when it became apparent that there was a market for further editions.

A scene or two depicting a dancing lesson wouldn't come amiss! Cue *The Ball* and Monsieur Le Frisk, dancing master – 'a mere French footman, sir' - complete, of course, with fiddle-kit, who waits upon the ladies and later two of the gentlemen to put them through their paces before the big event. The play by Shirley was licensed and performed in 1632 and printed in 1639. The ball also seems to have been the sign of certain gatherings, to which Shirley refers again in another play, which had acquired some notoriety, and a golden ball descends prior to the entry of Venus at the beginning of the masque which forms part of the final entertainment. At the ladies' session, a coranto is practised then one of them, Lucinda, wants to do a country dance and invites their attendant to make up the numbers:

Lucinda: Nay, a country dance. Scutilla, you are idle,
You know we must be at the ball anon; come.

Le Frisk: Where is the ball this night?

Lucinda: At my Lord Rainbow's.

Le Frisk: Oh, he dance finely, begore – he deserve the Ball of de world; fine, fine, gentleman! your oder men dance lop, lop, with de lame leg as they want crushes, begore, and look for l'argent in the ground, pshaw!

They dance a new country dance.

and, no, the direction doesn't continue with 'called – whatever'. So was 'new' the latest from the ballroom – or previously unknown and devised for this scene? Later, Monsieur Le Frisk attends Lord Rainbow himself when he is obliged to teach another gentleman who is a 'cynic' and not keen on dancing. He wants something energetic so Le Frisk, much against his better judgement – 'I teach you presently dance with all de grace of de body for your good, and my

profit' – tries him with 12345. The cynic takes this too fast, gets told off – 'You be at Dover, and me at Greenwish' - and retorts

I'll kick him to death, and bury him in a bass-viol, Jackalent!

Might the name just possibly have stuck to that new country dance? *Jack-a-Lent* appears in 1651 and is a longways for six couples consisting of figures which each couple does in turn – 'Every Cu. do this change' - interspersed with leading up and back. The evening and the play ends with dancing:

Lord Rainbow: Ladies and gentlemen, now a banquet waits you;
Be pleas'd to accept, 'twill give you breath, & then
Renew our revels, and to the Ball again.

Clearly these revels included country dancing which the participants had been practising earlier and this is the most usual context for country dance references in the plays; the revels occur mostly as part of wedding festivities which are often also associated with a masque. There may be other clues, therefore, in similar scenes which do not necessarily mention country dance specifically. One which I find particularly interesting is in *The Insatiate Countess*, 1607. This is rather an unpleasant piece – she ends up being executed on the grounds of implication in the death of one of her victims:

She died deservedly, and may like fate
Attend all women so insatiate!

At the beginning of the play, the Countess is already a recent widow and it is at the masque held in honour of her new marriage that she lights upon her next victim, the Count Rogero. At first he is unaware of this because he has the misfortune to fall over while dancing a galliard, still masked:

Stage Direction: *The Ladies sit down. Rogero dances a lavolta, or a galliard, and in the midst of it, falleth into the bride's lap, but straight leaps up and danceth it out.*

He is praised for carrying on – 'Bless the man, sprightly and nobly done' – but he is properly mortified and all he wants to do is slink away:

Good gentlemen, if I have any interest in you,
Let me depart unknown; 'tis a disgrace
Of an eternal memory.

This episode comes after a bout of social dancing which is interspersed with dialogue:

Stage Direction: *The masquers take the women and dance the first change*

Mendosa: Fair widow, how like you this change?

Lady Lentulus: I changed too lately to like any.

...

Stage Direction: *Mizaldus holds Abigail by the hand*

Abigail: You grasp my hand too hard, i'faith, fair sir

Mizaldus: Not as you grasp my heart, unwilling wanton

...

Stage Direction: *The second change; Isabella falls in love with Rogero when the changers speak*

Isabella: Change is no robbery; yet in this change
Thou robb'st me of my heart. Sure Cupid's here,
Disguised like a pretty torch-bearer...

...

Rogero: The spheres ne'er danced unto a better tune.
Sound music there!

Isabella: 'Twas music that he spake.

Stage Direction: *They dance the third change, after which the ladies fall off*

The word 'change' is crucial to the play but stage directions only appear in subsequent printed text: in performance, the meaning of the direction must be clearly conveyed by the action, here the actual dancing itself, reinforced by the punning dialogue: 'Fair widow, how like you this change?' It is 'change', of course, which is the crucial word in country dance figures as the dancers change places with each other in a sequence of changes. In a number of dances in the 1651 collection, such a sequence is itself referred to as a 'change'- a 'change' of 'changes' – as in *Jack-a-Lent* for example : 'All doe this change' and 'Every Cu. do this change'. In many others this is simply shortened to 'Doe thus' ie this change, sometimes within the same dance as in *Have at Thy Coat Old Woman*.

In the romantic comedies, the wedding normally comes at the end of the play and the customary concluding dance may be specified in the stage direction:

Lord: Come, madam, I find here's music. Lets lead the brides a dance
to stir their appetites to dinner.

Dance

More often it is only implied in the closing speeches:

Bornwell: Our pleasures cool. Music! And when our ladies
Are tir'd with active motion, to give
Them rest, in some new rapture to advance
Full mirth, our souls shall leap into a dance.

Other Works

Dessen, Alan C. and Thomson, Leslie *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama 1580-1642*, Cambridge University Press, 1999

Gurr, Andrew *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, Cambridge University Press, 1992

Whitlock, Keith *John Playford's The English Dancing Master 1650/51 as Cultural Politics* in *Folk Music Journal*, EFDSS, 1999, Vol. 7 No. 5

various editions of *The English Dancing Master* and *The Dancing Master*, London, John Playford, 1651 and after