

Dancing Masters and the Social Implications of Grace and Ease
Hillary Burlock, PhD candidate in History, Queen Mary University of London

Dancing masters, purveyors of gentility and refinement, grappled with the enigmatic nature of grace, and published numerous treatises articulating the qualities a lady or gentleman required to become a proficient dancer during the long eighteenth century. Indeed, ‘graceful’ was a term applicable to both men and women in the Georgian period, particularly surrounding deportment and dancing. The quality of grace was an element which defined, motivated, and baffled dancers, musicians, artists, and philosophers for centuries. The concept of grace baffled due to tension between whether grace was an innate talent or whether it could be taught, as well as tension surrounding what it looked like and how it could be described. According to Samuel Johnson, grace amalgamated spirituality, morality, aesthetics, attitudes, and behaviour. Grace was multifaceted, including notions of beauty, virtue, and divine influence. However, being graceful had more implications than a person simply having ‘decent or becoming’ behaviour. Otherwise, the majority of society who followed polite codes of behaviour would have been described as graceful, and this was apparently not the case. Johnson’s definition of ‘graceful’ is also challenging, being ‘full of grace and virtue; beautiful with dignity.’ To be graceful is to be full of grace – a rather circular definition, concealing the source of grace’s manifestation. To be graceful suggested the outward application of an acquired skill, whereas to be full of grace suggested an expression of an enigmatic quality. Grace was primarily defined by what it was not, but endeavouring to describe grace’s inherent qualities spurred significant debate in the eighteenth century. The first section of this paper examines how dancing masters discussed the concept of grace in their dance manuals and treatises.

The paper then analyses how dancing masters translated the concept of grace into reality, through education in schools and dance publications across Britain. Dancing masters held paradoxical positions of power in society, as necessary instructors in the production of ladies and gentlemen, involved in supporting the upwardly mobile, and maintaining the position of the social and political elite. It was the dancing master’s responsibility to prepare his pupils to be competent and confident, social actors within the ballroom and beyond. Proper education in polite and genteel walking and deportment in bows and curtseys served well beyond the walls of the assembly rooms. Dance was a social skill that few could do without, at least for members of the nobility and gentry, and the socially aspirant. Dance was an essential skill that facilitated relationships, whether

romantic, marital, financial, business, or political, and it was recognised within society more generally that the relationships forged in the ballroom could prove valuable beyond its walls. Indeed, dancing masters advertised their academies for lessons for ladies and gentlemen who were ‘untaught or incomplete.’ Dancing masters’ advertisements propounded the notion that a person was not whole, not fully polished, unless they knew how to dance. This paper seeks to explore the critical role of the dancing master in eighteenth-century Britain, in the creation of social actors who could navigate the political space of the ballroom with ease.

Dance is an alternate lens of analysis through which Georgian social and political history can be examined. Dance was ubiquitous in Georgian society; all strata danced in some form, helping to build social cohesion. Whether dancing a minuet, cotillion, or country dance, this activity was integral to social life, much more so than today, as rounds of assemblies and balls peppered a community’s social calendar. Indeed, dancing was key to socialisation, contributing to establishing personal identity and reputation. Despite varying levels in dance competency and participation, social dance was a significant medium for negotiating one’s place in society. As such, I view the ballroom and the field of dance as an ‘arena’, in which display and performance operated in tandem with entertainment. Enjoyment could be had within this carefully constructed space. The concept of the ‘arena’ requires that there is an audience, a spectator, watching and assessing the interactions in the ballroom. With anecdotes from James Oakes of Bury St Edmunds describing balls with 400 guests, of which 160 were active dancers, the ballroom can be reframed as a space in which the spectator’s gaze was vital. With the majority of ball attendees watching from the sidelines, the focus shifts to the gaze of the viewer, keenly assessing the dancers for skill, deportment, and their interactions with their fellow dancers. The ballroom was a space to be read, a space for display, socialisation, and networking, with gatekeepers like chaperones and Masters of the Ceremonies regulating the social intercourse.

Approaching dance, social, and political histories from a practical dance background allows for differing analysis of the source material. Having physical dance experience both helps and hinders in dance history writing. On the one hand, a dancer may assume too much basic dance knowledge on the part of the reader. On the other hand, not having dance experience means that the historian may overlook some interpretations that can be gleaned from physically experiencing the footwork, movements, or the relationships forged through dance. My own experience in

Georgian dance enables me to understand how social dance was experienced, and provides a unique lens for the interpretation of dance manuals, letters and memoirs in which dance is commented upon. I researched and practised late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century dance for ten years at Fort York, a heritage site in Toronto, Canada, and have continued to learn from various dance instructors whilst in the UK. Not only have I gained insight into deportment, carriage, and footwork, but I can visualise the balls and dances unfolding as they are described in these primary sources. Dance is mediated through textual and visual representations, but the ability to experience the different movements and forms removes a layer of mediation and allows closer access to the eighteenth-century ballroom.