

Dancing feet

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I work on the history of masculinity in Britain's long eighteenth century and my current work is on the history of shoes. Footwear provides a unique insight into historic bodies. Shoes support the whole bodily frame and have a direct effect upon posture and movement. Studying shoes as material objects – paying attention to their shape, weight and suppleness – can therefore provide the historian with a sense of how people in the past stood, walked and danced. At the same time, because shoes bear the entire weight of the body, the body impacts upon the shoe, leading to indentations, stretches and stains in the leather. The shoe becomes a lasting record of its owner, allowing us to study historic bodies. Shoe history can therefore move beyond its current preoccupation with changing styles and consumption patterns, to provide a truly embodied study of the past.

Prior to working on shoes, I worked on masculinity in the Georgian military. The eighteenth-century military is notable for its close connections with the civilian sphere, particularly for officers who straddled these two worlds. It struck me that dance played an important role in the eighteenth-century military. Balls were a common feature of social life in the army, reinforcing a culture of refined masculinity and heterosexual gallantry. But the significance of dance went deeper than that. Dance was central to the culture of polite masculinity, which was to a large extent concerned with bodily cultivation and discipline. Army officers were schooled in the 'accomplishments' of a gentleman rather than formal military training, and the drill performed by privates gave them the bodily deportment and suppleness that a wealthier man would learn from a dancing master. Both were codified in manuals: drill books and dance manuals have many important similarities. I explored the close connections between dance and drill in an article in *Cultural and Social History* (8:3, 2011).

For this workshop I wanted to bring these two areas of investigation together. By thinking about the shoes worn by Georgian dancers, we gain a greater understanding of dance as a material and physical practice. Dancing shoes for men were typically lightweight and flexible, being made from supple uppers and thin soles. This made it easier to perform the dances of the eighteenth century, which emphasised the movements of the legs and often required the dancer to bounce on tiptoe. Dancing shoes contrasted with the boots that were favoured by men for outdoor wear (my article in *Social History* 42:4, 2017), at least until the introduction of the supple and thin-soled wellington boot. Whereas men had specific footwear for indoor and outdoor wear at the end of the eighteenth century, women's lightweight shoes only really befitted the domestic sphere. Changes in shoe fashions therefore provide an insight into the divergence of gender roles, from the perspectives of material culture and the body.

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