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Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008. xix + 330 pp. Figures, color plates, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-11557-4.

Review by Nadine D. Pederson, Central Washington University.

François de Belleforest (1530-83) and his contemporaries claimed that French court festivals surpassed those of other European countries. Margaret McGowan (who surely needs no introduction to anyone familiar with the French Renaissance) examines, in meticulous detail, the aspect of dance in these festivals, as well as France's role in the larger context of European dance, and in turn, dance's "extraordinary grip...on the minds and behavior of men and women" in the Renaissance (p. xv). The author aims "to recreate a vision of Renaissance dancing within the cultural, political and aesthetic frames that gave it meaning" (p. xviii). Her argument for a French-focused book on Renaissance dance is grounded in the opinions of non-French sources as well: "by the end of the sixteenth century, the French court had become a kind of crucible, the source of inspiration for dance forms and choreographic spectacles in other European countries and the touchstone by which would-be rivals were judged" (p. xv).

A book about early dance presents specific historiographical challenges: how does a scholar write about sources created long before technology provided the means to record the history of bodies in motion? The answer is in McGowan's range of evidence: "The picture I shall paint is a complex collage, made up of bits and pieces drawn together into an imperfect yet striking whole" (p. xvi). She discusses the challenges involved with relying on production records that discuss "preparation, not performance" and eyewitness testimonies from the audience's perspective that "assume a prior knowledge of this art on the part of their readers" (p. xvi). If much dance scholarship focuses on reconstructing the choreography, that is, in a way, anachronistic for sixteenth-century dance, when dance had more important socio-political function than an artistic one—"to display the person" (p. xvii).

Chapter one, "The Status of the Dance," establishes dance's popularity at court. This popularity was spearheaded by people like Marguerite de Valois, who helped solidify the obsession for ballets and *mascarades* at court as an organizer. Her reputation for favoring the art form spread throughout Europe, so much so that during her travels (for example to Flanders in 1577), her hosts ensured that dance was a part of the entertainments in her honor. The high level of performance meant extensive training; teachers at court are a topic of current research as rare sources come to light and are edited by scholars. The experience of dancers is harder to trace: "but what evidence of personal experience of dancing can be found in the writings of French performers themselves?" (p. 13) Diaries record little, but occasionally we have comments on the challenge that dance presented to the dancer. One French source is Philibert de Viennes' 1547 satire, which makes reference to the impossibility of complicated training as a background to the ease with which courtiers were supposed to display skill and range of dancing. This example of evidence from literature is supplemented with a dose of reality from an English work of 1581 by Barnaby Rich. McGowan points out that Rich expressed his difficulty dancing and his "underlying fear that—with such incompetence—what began in sport was likely to end in shame" (p. 14).

This key chapter also discusses the role of dance in Renaissance self-fashioning. Castiglione and his ilk, as well as diaries and histories, underlined the core usefulness of dance training for a career at court. Dance appears to have been a completely practical skill. As McGowan notes, there is little evidence for any kind of “pleasure it gives the performer; instead it was proclaimed as an instrument of management in the first instance, and as a step towards power in the second” (p. 18). The importance of dance is difficult to document this consistently at the French court in the sixteenth century due to incomplete household accounts. This is unlike early seventeenth-century English records, which preserve samples of the high salaries dancing masters (often French) earned. One example offered is a Ben Jonson/Inigo Jones collaboration, *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly* (1611), for which the person who taught the dances (Mr. Confesse) was paid more than the poet and the scenic designer. Not everyone was equally thrilled with the importance of dance: “A measure of the status of the dance and of the significance attached to it by the French court may, paradoxically, be gained from the hostile remarks of satirists, diplomats and men of affairs,” who considered dance a distraction from the kind of political and economic business that they believed should be central to the court’s activities (p. 30). Complaints of diplomatic receptions (and even wars) delayed for the cause of dance and other entertainments abound.

Chapter two, “Discourses on Dancing,” tackles texts created by dance masters—mainly French and Italian, with some from the Netherlands and some published in England. There seems to be a relative abundance of these works, but there are significant issues with scholars’ “ability to analyze the dances of the past . . . [being] hampered by the imprecision of many descriptions of dance forms . . . We are also hindered by inadequacies of technical language in sixteenth-century discourses, and the musical accompaniment is directly related to the surviving choreography all too rarely” (p. 32). The dance masters themselves had difficulty rendering a body’s movement through space in book form; Italian treatises handled the problem differently than in France and England, where “choreographies were given by means of signs and alphabetical shorthand” (p. 37). Choreographers were expected to have the kind of interdisciplinary knowledge usually associated with the humanist tradition, and discussions in dance treatises often made reference to texts by Cicero, Plato, Aristotle, and the like in order to strengthen the positive image of dance (and their own status as dancing masters). McGowan acknowledges the variety of treatises—some written for patrons, some for fellow professionals—and the “contradictions and omissions” they present for dance historians to untangle and fill (p. 59). One of the major challenges is their relationship to dance in performance: the theory of a certain technique described on the page may not translate well into actual practice.

This idea is carried into the next chapter, “Making a Ballet,” where McGowan considers the evidence of production plans at court: “we shall never know how far a performance matched the intentions of the team who invented the spectacle” (p. 61). Using contracts, household accounts, and illustrations, she considers the scale of performance and discusses the specifics of several spaces known to be used for dance productions. Financial records also turn out to be useful for information about musicians who played music for these productions. This music was subject to adaptation as it passed from one musician to the next and was rarely recorded in print—the *Balet comique* of sixteenth-century France is a rare example. Choreography for performance was also rarely written down, leaving the bulk of the evidence for dances in the realm of plans and payments for costumes, props, sets, and temporary spaces (or decoration of existing ones), all of which McGowan discusses with the aid of illustrations.

“Forms of Dancing,” chapter four, provides an explanation of the different types of Renaissance dances, describing the conditions under which each would have been performed. This chapter gives the reader a sense of the ubiquity of dance during this time, covering everything from social dancing to horse ballets to the Pyrrhic—a form that crossed into the martial arts. McGowan also delves into three case studies of dance forms in performance: Brach’s *Mascarade de Diane*, the 1573 *Ballet des Polonais*, and the famous 1581 *Balet comique de la reyne* of Beaujoyeulx. (A minor note: the position of this chapter mid-book rather than at the beginning might be frustrating for some readers unfamiliar with dance history, since the terms defined in it have been used in previous chapters.)

Chapters five and six, “Dance Conquers the Court I: François Ier and Henri II” and “Dance Conquers the Court II: Catherine de Médicis and her Sons,” trace the rise of dance at court over the course of the sixteenth century. These chapters often (but necessarily) reference material covered earlier in the book, but they allow McGowan to scrutinize the monarchy’s use of and participation in dance much more fully, and so allow for a clearer picture of the centrality of the art form at the seat of power. Reaching beyond that seat, chapter seven, “Dancing in the Country” discusses—among other things—the influence of court dancing on dance in the countryside, as well as the influence of the pastoral genre on dance.

In chapter eight, “Dance as Transformation,” McGowan enters the realm of the philosophy of dance; the chapter’s “arguments rest largely upon the written evidence of poets” (p. 209). Having constructed a solid case for dance as obsession and fashion by citing plentiful evidence of performance from the archives, she turns to writers such as Jean Dorat and Pierre Ronsard to understand the more spiritual power of dance in the Renaissance. Less accomplished scholars might have been tempted to use this chapter to trot out general theories of ritual as they apply to performance; McGowan stays grounded in the words of Renaissance writers (and the classical authors who influenced them—not a supposition—dates of the availability of printed texts abound). She explores dance as a kind of magical power, as well as its power to inspire poetry and to seduce. One particular text, Ronsard’s *La Charite*, “sums up the power that sixteenth-century minds thought should be attributed to the dance, and—in many ways—provided the ultimate expression of those beliefs” (p. 228). A final chapter, “The Rise of the Professional,” looks at evidence not only of dancers and dance masters, but also other kinds of professionals who plied their trade in the realm of movement, such as acrobats and *commedia dell’arte* actors.

McGowan ends her book with an anecdote about Henri III nearly dancing himself to death; his doctors attributed his severe ear infection in September 1579 to “excessive dancing.” If this were not a clear enough illustration of “how enthusiasm had become an obsession” (p. 248), readers may cast their eyes on the appendix that follows. McGowan keys her impressive list, “Records of the Dance in the French Renaissance: Dances, Mascarades and Ballets, 1500-1600,” to references in the bibliography. Such useful tools, along with the author’s masterful handling of difficult, fragmented evidence, guarantee that *Dance in the Renaissance* will serve as both a reference text and a model for further studies in French Renaissance performance.

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