Chapter 4

Dance at Court: The Late 16th and 17th Centuries

# Overview

Dance at court focuses primarily on the span of time from Queen Catherine de’ Medici’s *Le Ballet-Comique de la Reine* through the 17th century and most of the reign of Louis XIV. During this period, France rose to political power and became the artistic center of Europe. Louis XIV, dancer, producer of many and varied entertainments and patron of the arts, used ballet and other arts in his court to politically manipulate his courtiers to achieve his political ambitions. He was instrumental in moving dance from a court amusement with his inception of the Académie Royale de la Danse (Royal Academy of Dance) as an entity in which to train professional dancers. Dance at court is a fascinating period in which dance is a major theme intertwined with the court and its political and social intrigue.

# Activities and Assignments

## Activity 1. Capturing the Past

Using some of the Web Links later in this chapter, research the French court. Then develop a summary of the French court under Catherine de’ Medici, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV. Your instructor might ask you to develop a similar summary for the English court during that same time, then compare and contrast the two summaries.

## Activity 2. Performing Court Dances

Your instructor will divide you into groups. Using some of the Web Links in this chapter, learn one or two of the dances that are part of the four-part suite (allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue).

Each group will

* reconstruct the dance,
* select music for the dance,
* practice putting the movement to music, and
* rehearse the dance until they know it.

After each group has learned their dance, they will analyze the dance and how it related to other arts of the period, the court, and the society by which and in which it was performed.

Follow the four steps listed previously: Re-create the dance, select the music, practice the dance, and rehearse the dance until you perform. As a group, analyze the dance you selected using the dance design elements (see Writing About the Dances). Your instructor may have one person in the group summarize his or her findings about the dance and share them with the rest of the class.

### Writing About the Dances

As a starting place, use the dance classifications first discussed in chapter 3 to compare and contrast the two dances in the sequence you have selected.

* Time signature of the dance
* Quality of the dance
* High (haute)
* Low (basse)
* Choral
* Couple

Continue the comparison to include specifics to describe dance.

* Types of movements or steps (in more detail than described in previous list)
* Relationships and formations (in more detail than described in previous list)
* Dance structure (e.g., AB, ABA, and so on)
* Dance type (in more detail than described in previous list)
* Dance accompaniment: self-accompaniment and musical accompaniment
* Costuming and other accoutrements
* Performing space, time of day, and occasion

### Writing About the Dancers

Who performed the dance?

Where did they perform the dance?

Why did they perform the dance?

### Extensions

Select one or more activities from this list:

* Teach the dance your group has reconstructed to another group.
* Write out the dance that was performed with musical counts and steps.
* Illustrate the dance with figures (the floor pattern for the dance). You might even devise a new method to notate your dance.
* Read Arbeau’s book *Orchésographie,* and write out a dance with counts and movements. Give the dance to another classmate for him or her to read and perform. (His book was written as a series of letters from a teacher to his student. He tells the student the steps he or she should learn to dance and how to dance it. He also provides information about how to conduct oneself at court.)

## Activity 3. Read French? Read Movement?

**Do you read French?** Find an early version of *Orchésographie,* and select and read a passage in French. Can you translate it into English? A copy of Arbeau’s *Orchésographie*—in French—is located at the Library of Congress and is available here online: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/?q=orchesographie&fi=title>.

**Do you read movement?** Later editions of *Orchésographie* have some of the steps in Labanotation at the back of the book. Can you translate the historical notation into movement? Can you translate the Labanotation into movement?

## Activity 4. Dance Roles and Costumes

From either print or Internet sources, find three pictures each of a male and a female dancer from the 17th-century court, a male professional dancer (costumed in a male role or a female role), and a female professional dancer.

Print or draw and identify costume items such as corsets, sleeves, tonnets (male skirts), and high-heeled shoes for men and women.

Can you ascertain who designed the costumes?

For what ballet were the costumes designed? What were the date and location of the performance? Can you describe the ballet for which the costumes were designed?

Classic sources for costumes and costume designs:

* Kirstein, *Movement and Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet.* New York: Praeger Publishing, 1970.
* Clarke and Crisp, *Ballet: An Illustrated History.* New York: Universe Books, 1973.

Review websites listed in the Costume document in Capturing Dance from the Past. Or, do a web search using key words such as “17th-century female dress” to link you to a number of sources. For example, searching for “dressing to impress in the 17th century” links you to this site: [www.historyextra.com/article/social-history/dressing-impress-17th-century](http://www.historyextra.com/article/social-history/dressing-impress-17th-century).

## Activity 5. Significant Works From 17th-Century France

Ballets produced in the 17th-century French court numbered well over 1,000. Find two or three examples of each of the ballet forms (ballet-mascarade, ballet pastoral, ballet mélodramatique, ballet-comique, ballet de cour). Write a paragraph about the ballet example and include the following items:

* Dance supervisor or the person who arranged the ballet
* Composer of the music
* Story line and date
* Performance space

# Web Links

Life in Elizabethan England  
[www.elizabethan.org/compendium/index.html](http://www.elizabethan.org/compendium/index.html)  
Go to “Contents.” Check out “The City of London” and other links.

Virtual tour of Versailles  
[www.stockholm360.net/list.php?id=versailles](http://www.stockholm360.net/list.php?id=versailles)

All about Louis XIV  
[www.louis-xiv.de](http://www.louis-xiv.de)

A day in the life of Louis XIV  
<http://en.chateauversailles.fr/history/versailles-during-the-centuries/living-at-the-court/a-day-in-the-life-of-louis-xiv>

Transition from Renaissance to Baroque  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/about-this-collection/related-resources/#tran>

How to read a dance manual and links to dance manuals  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/articles-and-essays/how-to-read-a-dance-manual/>

Dance manuals  
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dihome.html>

Kingdom of Atlantia: dance instructions  
<http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/index.php?action=displaycat&catid=295>

Music and musical instruments of the 17th century  
[www.historiccoventry.co.uk/1605/main/content.php?pg=music](http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/1605/main/content.php?pg=music)

Ben Jonson: *Masques*<http://hollowaypages.com/Jonson.htm>

Masque costume examples  
[www.elizabethancostume.net/masque/index.html](http://www.elizabethancostume.net/masque/index.html)

*The English Dancing Master,* 1651–1728  
[www.izaak.unh.edu/nhltmd/indexes/dancingmaster](http://www.izaak.unh.edu/nhltmd/indexes/dancingmaster)

# Review Questions

1. What was society like during the late 16th and 17th centuries?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dance works and literature of the period?

# Vocabulary

Académie Royale de Danse

allemande

anti-masque

Arbeau, Thoinot

*ballare*

ballet

ballet-comique

*Ballet-Comique de la Reine, Le*

ballet d’école

ballet de cour

ballet-mascarade

ballet mélodramatique

ballet pastoral

*ballo*

Balon, Claude (“Jean”)

baroque period

Beauchamps, Pierre

courante

de Beaujoyeulx, Balthasar

de Lafontaine, Mademoiselle

de’ Medici, Catherine

*English Dancing Master, The*

entry, main, and going-out dances

equestrian ballet

four-part suite

gigue

grand ballet

Jones, Inigo

Louis XIII of France

Louis XIV of France

Lully, Jean-Baptiste

masque

opera

*Orchésographie*

Playford, John

Restoration period

Roi Soleil

sarabande

turnout