Movement 2

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Research Paper

Shakespeare/Elizabethan Era Dance

Elizabethan Dance as a Metaphor for Shakespearean Harmony

American dance pioneer Martha Graham once said, "Dance is the hidden language of the soul" ("Dance Quotes"). While the element of dance may not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of the works of William Shakespeare, with a deeper look, one can see how Shakespeare clearly understood and utilized the power of dance and its effects on the human spirit for multiple purposes in his timeless plays. Heavily influenced by the Elizabethan court and society, William Shakespeare implemented the element of dance into his comedies, tragedies and histories to metaphorically represent harmony (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 109).

Shakespeare wrote in a time that seemed to have conflicting views on dance in general, because it was a highly-valued part of most of society despite some religious backlash. The very religious in this time were against any dancing that didn't explicitly glorify God, because it was viewed as far too sexual. However, the argument against dancing on the grounds of religion did not hold much weight, because the "majority of Biblical references" to dance are positive and refer to "occasions of exultation" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 5). As for the rest of England, dancing had a "firm and vital place" in everyday life, especially in the countryside where they would host annual dance festivals (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 2). Contrary to modern views of dance (like those shown in the Broadway musical and film *Footloose*) where dance is used to

break free from society's constraints, the English were actually drawn to dance because "numbers and patterns are essential" to dance, and thus dance could be seen as "order…out of primal chaos" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 3). Not only was it completely normal, if not expected, for both the nobility and middle classes to take dance lessons as part of their overall Renaissance education (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 10-11), but dance also went all the way up to the royal class, where Queen Elizabeth herself "encouraged music and dance" amongst her subjects ("Elizabethan Dance") and was an avid partaker in dance as a part of her daily exercise. The Galliard was a popular dance that involved "leaping and bringing…your calves together in the air" (*The Dances of Shakespeare*, 42), and Queen Elizabeth would perform six or seven of these every morning (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 5). Shakespeare used dance in all of his plays to mirror the views of society and, most importantly, the views of the queen.

Shakespeare used dance specifically in his comedies to help move along the dialogue and influence the plot towards a harmonious ending (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 110). Just as an actor can use physical tactics to influence how they get what they want from their scene partners, Shakespeare used the "movements of a particular dance form" to influence his "dramatic structure" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 50). In Act II Scene I of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the scene is "structured so that the dialogue" between Balthasar and Margaret, Ursula and Antonio, and Beatrice and Benedick fits the movements of a dance, such as a Pavan. The Pavan would help create "dramatic conversation", because it involved "hands linked at arm's length", as well as "retreats and advances" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 49). Also, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, dancing signifies the "restoration of harmony" because, when Helena enters

after curing the King of France, Lafeu says, "Why, he's able to lead her a coranto", meaning the King is healthy again and order is restored (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 52).

While Shakespeare used dance in comedies to move the plot towards harmony and order, he used it in tragedies as an ironic juxtaposition against the tragic disorder to come, which explains why dance usually occurs in the earlier stages of the play before the theme of "disorder has gained momentum" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 110). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet leaves the dance (which represents order and harmony) to meet and kiss Romeo. This not only provides "ironic contrast" to the tragic ending, but also, because the start of their romance takes place outside of the dance, it is a metaphor for the chaos that will ensue and how they are going against order by breaking their parents' rules (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 64). In *Timon of Athens*, the Amazons could perform a Masque, which is a dance that is a "presentation of illusion", creating a bitterly ironic symbol for the wealth that Timon "imagines he still possesses" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 74-75). Similar to modern horror movie trailers that begin by making the audience feel safe only to suddenly add a scary element, Shakespeare makes the characters, and perhaps the audience, feel safe in the early parts of his tragedies only to make their unfortunate endings have that much more impact.

As an actor must find what makes their characters emotionally "balanced", Shakespeare used dance in his histories to convey the harmony and order that his characters were trying to obtain throughout the course of the plays. He uses dance in his histories to provide "imagery, not action" (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 18). While *Richard II* has more references to dance than any of his histories written earlier, Shakespeare purposely makes all the allusions to and images of dance have negative rather than positive connotations (*Shakespeare and the Dance*,

25-26). This negativity gives "expression to the theme of disorder", which is essential to the play's central through-line (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 27-28).   Mowbray is about to fight Bolingbroke when he says that his "dancing soul doth celebrate/This feast of battle with mine adversary", meaning he is balanced and ready for this battle because he knows the truth is on his side, thus using dance to represent his internal peace/balance. Even though dance still represents harmony here, it is within the context of a battle (albeit, one that doesn't end up occurring), so it is still considered to have a negative quality (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 26).

Only William Shakespeare himself knows exactly what inspired the creation of his plays, but one can determine that he was catering greatly to Queen Elizabeth and Elizabethan society as a whole when he used dance to symbolize harmony (or lack thereof) in his comedies, tragedies and histories. Even though Shakespeare never actually stated what specific dances he wanted in his stage directions (*Shakespeare and the Dance*, 1), he used dance incredibly meticulously to create beautiful stage pictures while simultaneously driving plot forward. Anyone working on a Shakespearean production should understand the theme of harmony in the play, and one will better understand how the characters reach (or fail to reach) that harmony if one understands Shakespeare's strategic use of dance.

Word Count=1024

1. HOSKINS, JIM. DANCES OF SHAKESPEARE. ROUTLEDGE, 2017. Discusses the different Elizabethan dance styles used in Shakespeare's works. Includes step by step illustrations for choreography, along with examples of dances that are outside of the Elizabethan period that would work if the play was presented in a different time period.

2. Brissenden, Alan. SHAKESPEARE AND THE DANCE. Humanities Press Inc., 1981. Discusses and analyzes the ways Shakespeare utilizes dance in his Comedies, Tragedies, and Histories. Includes how dance affected Elizabethan culture and vice versa.

3. "Dance Quotes." Notable Quotes, www.notable-quotes.com/d/dance_quotes.html. Website with quotes on many life subjects, including dance, from many different sources such as playwrights, pioneers, and novelists, just to name a few.

4. "Elizabethan Dance." Elizabethan Dance, m.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-dance.htm. Website that includes short, succinct facts about aspects of dance in Elizabethan culture, such as dances of the different classes, dance festivals, and the influence of Queen Elizabeth on dance in society during Shakespeare's time.