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RELATIONS BETWEEN FRENCH PLAYS AND BALLETS

As many of the leading playwrights of the early seventeenth century wrote verses for ballets given at the courts of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, it is only natural that plays and ballets of this time had much in common. Both genres included spoken verses, solo songs, serenades, and occasionally sung choruses. Like comedies and farces, ballets often depicted characters drawn from ordinary life (soldiers, peasants, milkmaids, tailors, gardeners, bakers, chimney-sweeps); and, like comedies and tragicomedies, ballets also included exotic figures (Turks, Moors, pirates, gypsies). Shepherds and shepherdesses, gods and mythical woodland beings, magicians and monsters are common to both pastorales and ballets. The stage machinery, elaborate sets, and pyrotechnic displays came to the early mythological machine plays from the ballet dramatique, where special effects often accompanied divine epiphany, Ovidian transformations, and acts of magic. Plays and ballets often drew upon the same sources: for instance, during 1658–72 the fable of Ariadne and Bacchus became the subject of an opera, a masque, and a musical machine play. Of the Italian epic romances, Ariosto's Orlando furioso was especially popular in France due to its French heroes, Gallic settings, and fantastical events. In addition to inspiring a number of plays...

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1 Some of these dramatists who served as ballet poets during the early 17th century include Théophile de Viau (Ballet des fargones dans l'antichambre de la Reine-mère, 1617); Ballet du roy, fait dans la salle du petit Bourbon le 14 février, 1621; Ballet du roy, représentant les Bacchantes dans le Louvre, 1623; Benoîte de la Brousse (Masque du ballet, c.1618), Charles de l'Empire (Ballet des Mores, c.1633; Ballet des Monceveix, c.1623; Ballet des Faux, c.1625); Charles Scour (Ballet du roy, représentant les Bacchantes dans le Louvre, 1623); Barbaïbert (Ballet du roy, représentant les Bacchantes danse au Louvre, 1623); Ballet des Nymphes borgnées de la forest sotère, 1627); Tristan l'Élévan (Ballet de Morlon, des bandits, 1626); Ballet du naufrage héroïque, 1626; ballet des Quatre-vingts danse au Louvre, 1627); Pierre Cornelle (Masque de l'enfant gâté, c.1630; Ballet des châteaux de Brevère, 1632); Jean Rotrou (Ballet de la Vallée de Misère, 1633); Georges de Scudéry (Ballet du banquet de la Vraie et de l'Étête, c.1637); Desmarets (Ballet de la Pêcheur, 1639); Masque des Graces et des Amours, c.1641); Charles de Beys (Ballet donné devant Mgr le Cardinal de Richelieu, c.1642); and Poger de la Scerve (Ballet donné en l'honneur du roy sur le sujet de ses triomphes, 1643). See M. McGowan, L'Art du ballet de cour en France 1581–1643 (Paris, 1963), 231–309, esp. (Sources des ballets de 1581 à 1643).


3 e.g. the imaginative settings, masques, musical interludes, and scenic splendour of Montbéliard's L'Amphitryon (1630) probably derive from the startling acrobatic effects found in contemporary ballet.

4 Perissin's opera Ariane, ou le Mariage de Bacchus (1639), the court masque Le Triomphe de Bacchus dans les Indes (1666), and de Vaul's comédie-ballet Le Mariage de Bacchus et d'Ariane (1672).

5 Early French dramatizations of episodes from Orlando furioso include Charles Baumer's Raimondore and La Mort de Roger (1605), the anonymous Les Amours d'Angélique et de Mélusine (1614), the anonymous Tragi-comédie des amours de Zélin et d'Isabelle (1612), Du Rocher's Incomparable amour (1613), La Calpernic's Raimondore (1617), Jean de Mazer's Roland furieux (1637), Pierre Du Ryer's Alcione (1637), and Guillaume Le Riche, Sœur des Rocher's Les Amours d'Angélique et de
episodes from Ariosto's epic also provided the subject for two early ballets dramatiques: the Ballet d'Alcine, ou de Monstre de Vendôme (1610) and the Ballet de la Fâtrie de Roland (1618).6

The world of the theatre was the subject of several ballets à entrées. The Ballet du Roy représentant les comédiens italiens depicted some of Louis XIII's favourite commedia dell'arte comedians: Colo, Pantalon, Stephanel, Lélio, Florinde, Harlequin, Léandre, Maistre Philippe, Le Doctor, Lycida, Fiquet, and Le Capitan.7 The Bouffon de la comédie italienne included various theatre staff—a doorkeeper, a candle-snuffer, and a seller of lemons—along with stock characters: Le Capitan, Briguelle and Marinette, Flamindo, Trivelin, Ottavio and Aurelia, Le Docteur, Pantalon, Polchinelle, and Scaramouche.8 A 1642 masquerade depicted a poster of playbills, 'a Captain and a Spaniard who sing a serenade', and 'Gautier dressed as a lover'.9

As the theatre and dramatic literature became fashionable, contemporary ballet reflected their impact on French culture. The Ballet de la Bouffon des comédiens (c.1664) portrayed fictional characters taken from the most popular plays of the 1630s and 1640s.10 Theatre-going was one of several pleasures that comprised the subject of the Ballet des plaisirs (1655), the first part of which depicted the delights of the countryside, the second the entertainments of the city. In the second entrée of part 2, four French actors announce and perform a short comic play—most likely Boisrobert's 1655 farce L'Amant ridicule, which featured only three actors.

Menestrier points out that the episodic form of Orléans forains in French and Italian plays, intermedii, tournaments, and ballets are traced in I. Manzaccara, 'Quelques aspects d’interaction dans les théâtres italien, français et polonais des xvi è et xvim siècles: Didascalie humaine, comédie dell’arte, théâtre musical', in Le théâtre italien et l’Europe xvi–xviii siècles (Paris, 1983), 183–204.

Médir (1638). The theatrical treatments of Orléans forains in French and Italian plays, intermedii, tournaments, and ballets are traced in I. Manzaccara, 'Quelques aspects d’interaction dans les théâtres italien, français et polonais des xvi è et xvim siècles: Didascalie humaine, comédie dell’arte, théâtre musical', in Le théâtre italien et l’Europe xvi–xviii siècles (Paris, 1983), 183–204.11

The following entrée brought on three Italian clowns (Trivelin, Scaramouche, and Pantalon) who improvise commedia dell’arte.12 Professional acting companies added ballets to their plays, particularly when they were called upon to perform en visite. For example, the Marais company gave a command performance at the Arsenal on 28 November 1634, in honour of the wedding of three dashing young courtiers to cousins of Cardinal Richelieu. The company performed two comedies, a farce, and a burlesque ballet, while an ensemble of sixteen lutes performed a miraculously echo concert as an intermède. A special issue of Renaudot's Gazette provided further details of this noble entertainment.13

The first entrée was danced by four well-dressed servants, who sweep the hall to prepare it for the first play, which was in prose.

The second entrée, given between the first and the second act of this play, was of six comical characters: two of them represented the master of the house and his pregnant wife—nevertheless, her extended stomach did not prevent her from dancing to perfection, even though she was so advanced in her pregnancy that she gave birth behind the stage.

The third entrée, given between the end of the prose play and the beginning of the other in verse, was for ten characters. Among them a dancing wetnurse, who carried this newborn child, rocked it, and gave it pate; then suddenly the infant cast off the swaddling clothes, appearing completely naked in the flesh-coloured tights that he wore, and performed all sorts of marvellous dances to the amazement of everyone.

The subject of this prose play was the play itself—for which the argument and the prologue agreed that a subject was no longer required, except in bad plays—and the social conditions of the good actors were portrayed there.

The unnamed play in prose was probably the first two acts of Georges Scudéry's La Comédie des comédiens, which depicted the Marais actors as characters in the play. No doubt Corneille's Mélite, ou les fausses lettres was the prose verse given with framing ballet entrées. Evidently the subject of the dances was chosen to

11 The frères Perreau were the first to connect Boisrobert's L'Amant ridicule with the Ballet des plaisirs; see Histoire de l'âge Français, viii. 115. Lancaster points out that the privilege to publish the play was granted on 16 Feb. 1655, a week after the ballet had been given; see Lancaster, History of French Dramatic Literature, i. 127.


13 Gazette extraordinaire, 130 (30 Nov. 1634). 327.
embarrass the newly weds, for there seems to have been little attempt made to relate these ribald entrées to either comedy.

Surely the most ambitious and complex alliance of drama, literature, and ballet was the Ballet des Muses (1666–7). Its second entrée dedicated to the tragic muse (Melpomene) depicted the main characters from Théophile de Viau’s Pyrame et Thisbé (1619), a tragedy that was a favourite among amateur thespians. For the third entrée dedicated to the comic muse (Thalia), the troupe du Roy performed Moléire’s Mélisande, which was later replaced by La Pastorale comique. Dedicated to the muse of history (Clio), the fifth entrée depicted the historic battle between Alexander and Porus as told in Racine’s Alexandre (1665). The sixth entrée honoured the muse of poetry (Calliope); it originated as a dance of five poets, and later evolved into Quinault’s comedy Les Poètes. The eighth entrée, dedicated to the muse of lyric and amorous verse (Erato), offered three pairs of lovers from famous novels: Théagène and Chariclée (from Amyot’s translation of L’Histoire éthique de Heliodorus, contenant dix livres traitant des loyales et pudiques amours de Théagène et de Chariclée), Mandane and Cyrus (from Milé de Scudéry’s Artamène, ou le grand Cyrus), and Polexandre and Alcidiane (from Gomberville’s Polexandre and its sequel, La Jeune Alcidiane). The ninth entrée honoured Polyhymnia, ‘who rules over eloquence and dialectics’: three Roman orators—played by the Italian comedians Arlecchino (Domenico Biancolelli), Scaramuccia (Tiberio Fiorilli), and Valerio (Giacinto Bendinelli)—improvised a philosophical debate with three Greek philosophers, played by the playwrights Zacharie Jacob (dit Montfleury), Raymond Poisson, and Guillaume Marcouereau, Sieur de Brécourt.

Several plays of the 1630s adopt a basic organizational procedure of the ballet à entrées, that of systematic exploration of different aspects of a chosen subject. Les Bocages (1632) by Pierre Cotignon, Sieur de La Charnaye, presents a succession of different types of lovers in a manner akin to the process of working out a ballet, whereby the subject subdivides from genus to species. Meliarque, a lover who is ‘subject to extravagant acts’ and goes mad; a shepherd and shepherdess who shun love, but wish to engage in ‘discours amoureux’; the aged lover Tholitis, who uses magic in an attempt to win Filenie’s love; the jealous lover Eliandre, who finds in his indolence his sweetheart to kiss another girl; and the duplicitous Amire and the frigid Nerislet, who ‘love no one and do not wish to be loved’. As if to confirm its affinity to ballet, Les Bocages ends with a ‘Ballet des Metamorphoses’—a mimetic reflection of this world of change and transformation, of striking contrasts and shifting moral values.

Following much the same procedure, Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin explores the subject of human eccentricity in Les Visionnaires (1637). Here, the author eschews plot and intrigue in favour of presenting a succession of eccentric characters—each representing a different species of human folly and each believing himself to be the opposite. As the author explains in his preface: ‘In this comedy are represented several types of chimerical or visionary individuals, each of whom is afflicted with some particular folly; but it is solely with these follies, for which no one would be committed, and we see among us every day similar individuals who think at least as great extravagances, even if they do not speak them.’ This comédie episodique most completely mirrors the interplay of contrasts basic to the aesthetic of ballet de cour. Aldor has three daughters who are courted by four suitors. Of the latter, Captain Artabaze believes himself to be very brave, but is in fact ‘so craven that he is reduced to fearing the ravings of a poet, and so ignorant that he mistakes all his poetical expressions for the names of demons and magic words’. Amidor, a disciple of Ronsard, believes that he has attained perfection by writing verse full of exaggerated and obscene terms. Filidan prides himself on being a connoisseur of poetry (but in fact does not understand it), and he loves an ideal woman who never assumes human form. Phalante, who is poor, imagines himself to be rich, and speaks earnestly about his imaginary riches. Of the three daughters, Mélièsse (having read histories and romances) is in love with Alexander the Great, and scorns all living lovers; Hespérie fancies that all men are in love with her, and cannot marry one without offending the others; Sestiane, mad about the theatre, thinks only of writing plays and will not sacrifice her chosen career to matrimony. Their father Alcidon is so easily influenced that he readily promises his three daughters to four men (one per act), without taking stock of the number of daughters at his disposal; in the final act, everyone agrees that each visionary should cherish his illusion and give up all thoughts of marriage. The suitability of these eccentric characters to balletic representation is confirmed by the ‘Ballet de la Boutade des comédiens’, where the cowardly Captain Artabaze and the inept poet Amidor appear in the twelfth entrée. 14

16 Moléire’s first comédie-ballet, Les Récits (1661), would follow much the same procedure in exploring a succession of characters with amusing obsessions; see Ch. 8, pp. 152–9.
17 See Lacrosse, Ballets et mascarades de cour, vi. 172–3.