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The Eloquent Body: Dance and Humanist Culture in
Fifteenth-Century Italy (review)

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Book Review

Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body. Dance and Humanist Culture in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. i–x, 1–247. ISBN 0-253-34453-0.

This book makes a notable contribution to the history of dance. It brings the art of dance into the scholarly fold, arguing persuasively that humanism influenced dance treatises as much as it affected poetry, music and philosophy, and demonstrates that skill in dancing in the Early Renaissance was a grace that every courtier had to master in order to distinguish himself as a true gentleman and to do well at court. The intellectual and philosophical framework generated by the humanist movement was used by dancing masters to claim high status for their art. For them dance was a part of a cultivated life – the rules for dancing which stressed correct carriage, manner of moving, grace and decorum were also social skills. Even more importantly, they believed that movements of the body reflected the condition of the soul. These claims for a lofty view of dancing in fifteenth-century Italy are thoroughly grounded in analyses of the written records of dancing masters, both practical and theoretical. The focus is correctly on Italy since our knowledge of Renaissance dance comes from Italian courts and from there, too, throughout Europe, spread an appreciation and knowledge of the choreographic art.

Nevile begins with a discussion of the social context in which the dancing masters – Domenico da Piacenza, Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro and Antonio Cornazano – flourished. She examines their role in court festivities, especially during wedding celebrations or state occasions when Domenico, for instance, taught the principals the steps they would display to visitors. In his choreographies, he frequently named the dances after the nobles for whom they were created – *Belfiore* or *Leoncello* for the d'Este family. From an analysis of the dancing such as that performed at the wedding of Costanzo Sforza and Camilla d'Aragone in Pesaro (1475), a clear picture emerges of the way couples interacted as they traced out geometric patterns with their feet moving linearly up and down the often narrow confines of the rooms. Due stress is given here to the fusion of music and choreography which permitted the manipulation of tensions between movement and stillness so characteristic of these early dances. Thus dancing at this time had a central place in the ritual of official ceremony and of essential court display; but it is also shown to have a more intimate role, providing opportunities for courtship between the dancing couples. And, it was not always noble, but could be varied with more athletic forms such as *Moresca* where young men (usually) performed imitative and sometimes satirical dances.

Having examined the social context of the dance, Nevile then moves to a consideration of intellectual matters and places the written work of Domenico, Guglielmo and Cornazano alongside other expressions of artistic ideals. Dance, it is argued, embodies the harmony of music. Dance – like architecture and painting – is practised by and appeals to an elite who recognise in all these arts the same qualities of order, control and skill.

In the exposition of fifteenth-century Italian dance, Nevile highlights one essential factor which has, all too often, been ignored. She realises the importance for the dancing master of discovering a vocabulary which could describe and direct movement. In their development of a language capable of capturing the qualities of danced figures, choreographers borrowed and adapted terms that had been prized in other art forms such as painting and rhetoric. Thus, *measure*, *manner*, *countenance*, *proportion*, *moderation*, and *variety* of movement became standard terms, and *elegance*, *grace*, and *decorum* were the words which summed up any assessment of good dancing. However, these same words also applied to good behaviour, successful architecture, a pleasing painting, a musical performance or a piece of oratory. All these terms are carefully analysed here with specific references to examples from dance treatises and from humanist sources. These origins are developed further in a chapter that aligns writing down a choreography with Pythagorean and Platonic traditions which helped to set the art of the dance onto the highest plane where, like music, it offered a pathway to understanding divine things.

Jennifer Nevile is right to claim that dance in the fifteenth century has never been considered by scholars as part of the humanist movement. Her book not only sets that record straight, it also paints a vibrant picture of choreography in practice, made all the more real with Giovanni Carsaniga's translation of the contemporary Italian manuscript poem describing a *ballo* in Florence in 1459, and Nevile's own interpretation of a selection of Domenico's choreographies.

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