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Cavalieri’s Theatrical Ballo and the Social Dances of Caroso and Negri

Jennifer Nevile

What are the connections between the final ballo of a visually stupendous series of intermedi and the late sixteenth-century Italian social dances as exemplified by the treatises of Caroso and Negri? Opinions among scholars have been divided on this issue, but I suggest that the gulf is not so wide as some assume, and that the two genres are remarkably similar when one considers the use of choreographic and floor patterns, the number of performers used, the step vocabulary, the terminology used to describe the choreographic patterns, and the length of the dance.

Method of Describing the Choreography

In sixteenth-century Italy there was only one way thus far discovered in which dances were notated: lengthy written descriptions. If one compares the description of Cavalieri’s ballo, as printed in Cristofano Malvezzi’s description of the event, with the dances printed in the treatises of Caroso and Negri, one finds that the same terminology is used
in both choreographic descriptions. For example, when describing the dancers taking hand(s) the verb piglandosi is used; when a hay is required the term una treccia or una intrecciata is used. The method of describing the path in which the steps are performed is the same, for example, the use of the phrases in volta or voltandosi à sinistra and in ruota. Cavalieri describes many step-sequences performed by the three main men as una mutanza (in this case, a sequence of variations in one particular meter and tempo) di gagliarda, a standard term found throughout the entire range of dances from Caroso’s and Negri’s treatises. Furthermore, when describing the men’s mutanze, Cavalieri used the term tempi, another standard term straight from the dance manuals, which referred to the number of breves in each mutanza.

It has been assumed that because the choreographic description of Cavalieri’s ballo, as published by Malvezzi, is ambiguous and full of errors, that it and the accompanying diagrams could not have served any functional purpose, but when one examines the description closely, one finds that the conclusion drawn from this assumption of ambiguity does not hold true. Some parts of the choreographic description are ambiguous, but so is every single dance notated in the form of a written description. It is almost impossible to describe a sequence of movements and floor patterns solely in words without some ambiguity or error entering into the description (or without the description becoming exceedingly lengthy), especially when viewed from four hundred years after the event. The level of ambiguity present in the text also increases with the number of performers required for the dance. This is because as the number of performers rises, the complexity and number of permutations of the interactions among the performers also increases. Once a choreography has been notated in a written description, it is also difficult to check for any inadvertent errors; one has to be very familiar with the dance being described to translate the sentences into a series of movement patterns.

The presence of some level of ambiguity and the occasional error in the text does not, however, imply that a particular choreographic record was nonfunctional at the time it was written and served only a symbolic or commemorative purpose. In spite of these problems of interpretation it is still possible to reconstruct choreographies notated in a written description with a high level of certainty as to the result, as often choices made from early ambiguous passages will be
resolved by a later section of the text. In this respect Cavalieri’s ballo of 1589 is no different from the dances found in the treatises of Caroso and Negri. There are several occasions when one wonders if an error has occurred in the text, and some sections of the text where one is not one hundred percent certain of exactly what floor track is being described, but this does not invalidate a reconstruction of the whole dance.

The accompanying diagrams for Cavalieri’s ballo are certainly functional (Figure 1). The first diagram shows the starting positions of the twenty-seven dancers and the position to which the seven principal dancers return at the end of each parte, which is the arc in front of the other twenty dancers. The second diagram shows the final position of the twenty-seven dancers, the result of the only time the twenty dancers actually move from their positions around the larger arc.* The text in Malvezzi’s publication is as functional a record of the choreography as is the text of dances in the printed dance treatises.

Another similarity in the method of description between Cavalieri’s theatrical ballo and the court social dances is that in both cases the sequence of steps is divided into sections called tempi or parti. The social balletti and cascarde are divided into sections contained in paragraphs, which almost invariably correspond to either a complete rendition of the music or one or more repeats of one or more section(s) of the music. Just over half of the social dances have four or five parti (or tempi), while about forty percent have six to ten parti. Often a parte contains one mutanza for either the man or woman and the next parte is a repeat with a change in the gender of the performer(s). Also, sections of the dance that are in a different meter and tempo, such as gagliarda, sciolta, or canario, are often contained in separate parti.

The six parti of Cavalieri’s ballo do differ slightly from this norm: the second, third, and fourth contain several (rather than one) mutanze for both the women only and the men only. Also, the formula of the ladies repeating the mutanza that the men have just performed is followed only briefly in the first parte. “O che nuovo miracolo” is

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*To show all the intermediate positions would require numerous diagrams, which can be found in my article “Cavalieri’s Theatrical Ballo: A Reconstruction,” Dance Chronicle, Vol. 21, No. 3. These give a floor plan of my reconstruction of the ballo.
BALLO
DELL'ULTIMO INTERMEDIO.

Q Vefto disegno ci ha da rappresentare il Palco: & i numeri rappresentano le persone, il qual fegno, à freggio, come si chiami, che è dietro a' numeri hanno volte le spalle; cosi seguirà flando in Scena, et in ciafcuna attione, che nel presente Ballo s'intercuenga.

Diagram 1. Opening position of the twenty-seven dancers.

Diagram 2. Final position of the twenty-seven dancers.

Figure 1. From Cristofano Malvezzi, Intermedii et concerti (Venice: G. Vincenti, 1591), ninth partbook, pp. 21, 23.
through-composed: each *parte* is a unique sequence of steps and floor patterns.

**The Step Vocabulary**

Another important common characteristic of this theatrical *ballo* and the courtly social dances is that they share the same step vocabulary. The steps named in the 1589 *ballo* are:

- riverenza incrocciata
- continenze salto tondo
- cango capriola tagliata a diretto
- seguito mezze capriole
- seguito scorso capriole
- seguito trangato riprese
- spezzato fioretto
- trabuchetto passi

These same steps are used and described by both Caroso and Negri. Throughout the *ballo* Cavalieri uses sixteen steps, the majority of which are those common steps found in every *balletto, cascarda*, and other types of social dances. By comparison, in *Il Ballarino* Caroso describes fifty-eight different steps and in *Nobilità* seventy-four. Negri in his *Gratie d'Amore* describes fifty-one widely used steps as well as forty-two different ways of doing the *cinque passi*, twenty-seven types of jumps (*salti*), thirty different types of *capriole*, ten types of *zurlo*, and thirty-four different *mutanze* of *gagliarda*.

Cavalieri is fairly conservative in his choreography, as he does not fill the dance with the more unusual and/or difficult steps described by Caroso and Negri, such as *fioretto con capriola spezzata*, or one of the thirteen types of *salto del fiocco*. However, having said this one must add a note of caution. Cavalieri does not elucidate the steps he required for the men's *mutanze* of *gagliarda* and *canario*. Therefore, it is possible that the more virtuosic steps were performed by the men during these parts of the dance. In not prescribing the steps for the men’s *gagliarda mutanze* Cavalieri was also following the practice of Caroso’s and Negri’s social dances. For example, in “Cortesia” Caroso first asks the man to do a *mutanza* of four *tempi* of *gagliarda*, performing whatever pleases
him: "Il Cavaliere solo farà la prima Mutanza di quattro tempi di Gagliarda, una di quelle che meglio gli parerà." If the gentleman does not know what steps to do, Caroso then suggests a very simple mutanza of two seguiti, two trabuchetti, and one seguito finto. The same instructions apply to the lady’s mutanza of tordiglione. These same seguiti, trabuchetti, and seguito finto appear again in "Selva Amorosa," as the suggested simple alternative for the lady’s gagliarda mutanza if she cannot perform the given one, which includes a groppo, fioretti, sottopiede, and a cadenza.

Negri, in his four “theatrical” choreographies, is similarly conservative in his choice of steps. For example, the majority of the steps in the first three parti of “Alta Regina” are seguiti and spezzati, while the remainder of the dance calls for only riverenza, continenze, represe, trabuchetti, cinque passi, saltini, and passi. The step vocabulary of the two torch dances is enlarged by the addition of only passi puntati, and in “Il Pastor Leggiadro” by capriole, sottopiedi, and fioretti spezzati.

**Number of Performers**

Although Cavalieri’s ballo is choreographed for twenty-seven performers, the first four parts of the dance involve only the seven principal dancers, a number much closer to that of performers in the social dances than is twenty-seven. Thus, for most of the dance the remaining twenty performers contribute to the spectacle by forming a living backdrop to the choreographic action, coming to life only in the finale of the dance.*

*Among the probable practical reasons for this decision not to involve all twenty-seven dancers for the whole ballo is space. It would be very difficult to create any interesting patterns for twenty-seven dancers without needing a large amount of space. For example, based on my experience of performing sixteenth-century balletti, I would estimate that the average space needed to perform a dance for six to twelve performers would be twenty-one by fifty feet. The dimensions of the stage in the Medici Theatre where the performance took place was 20.3 meters wide [66.6 feet] and 14.5 meters deep [47.5 feet] (Nino Pirrotta, *Music and the Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, tr. Karen Eales [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], p. 374). The stage would also have to contain the flats for the scene changes, the technician galleries, the hoists for the machines, and space for the musicians and singers (Pirrotta, p. 374). In spite of the fact that the set for the sixth intermedio contained no space-consuming architectural elements like caverns, mountains, gardens, or caves from hell, it is difficult to imagine that sufficient space would have been available for a full choreography with twenty-seven people.
choreographies Negri recorded in his treatise as a record of the dances performed on public occasions were also for a small group of dancers. For example, the *brando* “Alta Regina,” written for the visit of the Queen of Spain, Donna Margarita, to Milan in 1598, is for four couples, while his two theatrical torch dances are choreographed for six men in one dance and for six ladies in the other.

One of the attractions of social dancing is the opportunities it provides for the interaction of men and women. The striking difference between Cavalieri’s *ballo* and the balletti found in the dance treatises is that Cavalieri’s men and women do not dance together as couples but as a group with their own gender. This is not to say that the two groups ignore each other; there are sections of the dance in which the men or the women parade in front of the other group, for example, sections 4 and 5, and 10 and 11. I suggest, however, that the separation of the main performers into two groups along gender lines can be interpreted in another way: the implication is that their spiritual partners are the noble ladies and gentlemen, respectively, of the audience who are watching the performance.

**Choreographic Structure**

Cavalieri has not deviated far from the choreographic structure of the social balletti in this ballo. For example, “O che nuovo miracolo” begins with the sequence of riverenza and two continenze that opens nearly all the dances in Negri’s and Caroso’s treatises. In these dances the figure is often repeated at the end of each parte, but in his ballo Cavalieri has not done this. Instead, at the end of each major section the seven dancers return to their starting positions in the arc formation (see Figure 1, Diagram 1). I suggest that Cavalieri has used this as a method of delineating the sections, and that the reason he has used this method, rather than the static continenze-riverenza sequence commonly found in the social dances, is to keep up the momentum of the dance. Furthermore, in social balletti the continenza, as a sideways step, could also be used by the performers to acknowledge the audience, which surrounded them in close proximity. This subtle movement and eye contact on the part of the performers would be lost on a stage where the audience is on one side only (the front) and at a greater distance from the performing area.
In fact, the only other time Cavalieri has included a riverenza (apart from the opening and final moments of the dance) is at the beginning and end of the fifth part. I suggest that Part V begins with a riverenza because here, for the first time, all twenty-seven dancers are involved in the dance. For the twenty dancers, who until now have been forming a tableau behind the action of the seven main dancers, the riverenza at the start of Part V is equivalent to the opening riverenza at the beginning of the dance. But Cavalieri has also broken the pattern established in the first four parts by ending Part V with a riverenza. The probable reason for this change is that at the end of Part V the seven dancers do not regroup into the arc formation as they do at the end of Parts I through IV. Thus, since one ending signal is absent, Cavalieri has substituted another: a riverenza.

The basic choreographic structure Cavalieri has used in this dance is one of alternation: a sequence of steps is performed by one gender, followed by a sequence performed by the other gender. In the social dances this alternation of step-sequences would often see the women repeating the steps the men had just completed. This alternating sequence is found in dances from Caroso's Nobilità di Dame, for example, in the cascarme "Donna Leggiadria" (pp. 356–7) and "Alta Regina" (pp. 98–100), and the balletti "Bassa Honorata" (pp. 223–6), "Vero Amore" (pp. 326–8), and "Spagnoletta Regolata" (pp. 311–2). In all these dances the man executes a step-sequence in the third tempo that is repeated in the fourth tempo by the woman. Gagliarda sections of the balletti also employed the device of alternating men's and women's mutanze, with the woman either repeating the same step-sequence as the man or the woman performing her own mutanza after the man has performed his. In the balletto "Selva Amorosa," both these options occur, as the woman performs her own mutanza twice, and then for her third mutanza she repeats the steps the man has just performed. Dances that consist entirely of alternating mutanze, first by a solo man and then by a solo woman, are also found in the dance treatises of Caroso and Negri. One example of a dance that has this structure is the "Tordiglione."

In his ballo Cavalieri employs the device of step-sequences performed first by one gender and then by the other, but he adopts the pattern found in "Altezza d'Amore": the step-sequences for the male dancers are different from those for the female dancers. For example,
in each of the second, third, and fourth parts Cavalieri has three alternations of step-sequences for women only and then for men only, to match the six musical sections in each part, and usually the two sequences are entirely different. The repetition of the same step-sequence is not a feature of Cavalieri's choreography and, in fact, occurs only once, near the beginning of the dance in the first parte. It is interesting to note that in Parts II through IV it is the women who begin each parte or, in Part IV, all seven dancers who begin the three sequences of alternation instead of the women, but in Part I, the only occasion where the steps themselves are repeated (i.e., the two trabuchetti, one seguito scorso sequence), it is the men who initiate the sequence, just as in the social balletti.

Floor Patterns

A very important part of any dance is the pattern created by the dancers as they move around the dance space. The floor patterns in Cavalieri's ballo are very similar to those found in the contemporary courtly social dances. Cavalieri used common patterns such as una treccia or una intrecciata (a hay) (Figure 2); two seguiti in volta, in which each dancer creates a small individual circle by turning around one shoulder or the other (Figure 3); the pattern where two dancers come together to meet and take hands and then change places; and a “figure of 8” pattern, in which a dancer first circles around the dancer on one side, and then around the dancer on the other side (Figure 4). The balletto “Fedeltà d'Amore,” for two men and one woman, is one dance that is built around repeated “figure of 8” patterns and sequences of steps in a hay pattern. The first parte ends with all three dancers performing a hay figure, followed by two cinque passi in which the man in the middle of the line completes one half of the “figure of 8” pattern by taking right arms with the woman and circling around back to place; he then completes the second half of the figure by taking left arms with the other man and circling around back to place with another two cinque passi. The second and third parti of the dance also conclude with these same steps and floor patterns.

In spite of the fact that Cavalieri had to adapt the spacious floor patterns of the social dances to the constraints of a raised stage, the
First change  Second change

Figure 2. Two changes of a hay.

Figure 3. Two seguiti in volta.

Figure 4. A "figure of 8" pattern.
patterns he created for the final ballo still resemble those of the non-theatrical dances.* The main difference between the floor patterns in “O che nuovo miracolo” and the majority of the social dances is that in the ballo the action has to take place on a flat plane in front of the arc of seven dancers, with the focus outward in one direction—toward the audience. The circular, square, or rectangular patterns in which the focus and interaction among the performers are inward-looking are not present in this ballo. One example of a social dance built entirely around inward-looking patterns is the balletto “La Battaglia.”¹⁹ As the name suggests, this dance is a mock battle for two couples, with the women pitted against the men. The floor patterns concentrate the attention within the square formed by the four dancers, and the movements are mainly around the perimeter of the square or across the interior of the square, either diagonally or on one or the other of the two axes.†

Many of the social dances for one couple are built around a pattern of the two dancers facing one another, one at the foot and one at the head of the hall. The dancers then parade in front of each other, come together, and change places, often several times during the dance.²⁰ In dances for more than two (like “Dolce Amoroso Foco”²¹) the couples form two lines and face each other on either side of the hall. The creation of a square or of two lines of dancers is not possible, or at least not desirable, when a dance is transposed to a stage. Rather than partners changing places along a perpendicular axis, all the dancers in Cavalieri’s ballo start facing the same direction. They then have to move forward, away from the arc formation, meet, change places, and then return to the arc so that they all face the front of the stage again at the end of the step-sequence.²²

*Ornella di Tondo makes a similar point when she comments that Negri’s “theatrical” dances use the same repertoire of steps and movements as the “social” balletti, but that the former have a precise orientation toward the stage front, a characteristic not found in the balletti choreographed for the ballroom (Ornella di Tondo, “Leggiadria di ballo et di gesti”. Alcune osservazioni sulla danza negli intermedi e nel primo melodramma tra XVI e XVII secolo,” L’Arte della danza ai tempi di Claudio Monteverdi. Atti del convegno internazionale, ed. A. Chiarle [Turin: Istituto per i beni musicali in Piemonte, 1996], p. 212, footnote 69).
†Another dance in which the focus is directed inward is the balletto “Contrapasso Nuovo.” Here, the three couples start in a circle, and most of the floor patterns involve moving around the circumference of the circle (Caroso, Nobiltà, pp. 242–4).
The physical space that Cavalieri had to use for this ballo compelled him, therefore, to modify the floor patterns he created from those commonly found in dances performed only in a ballroom in which the courtiers surrounded the dancers on all sides. The need to orientate the dance toward an audience in only one direction greatly reduced his use of circular floor patterns. This physical constraint not only affected the visual impact of the dance, but also had profound philosophical implications. The theoretical foundation for all the arts in the sixteenth century, including dance, was Pythagorean cosmology and Neoplatonic philosophy, in which number symbolism played a central role. The Pythagorean/Platonic worldview held that reality in some sense consisted of, and was to be comprehended through, numbers. Through this belief that numbers were the principles and elements of all things, philosophers were able to form a unified system, with all parts of nature, including mankind, connected through number and proportion. Musical harmony was seen to be an earthly imitation of the natural harmony, or system of ratios, that constituted the organization of the cosmos. Similarly, for the educated courtier, the dance patterns or figures were regarded as imitations of the movements of the heavenly spheres, and so in Renaissance dance the circle was seen as the “perfect figure,” the “symbol of God, love, concord and eternity.” Any absence or reduction of circular patterns in a choreography, and their replacement by an arc formation, would therefore alter the metaphysical significance of the dance for the audience.

Based on the evidence from Cavalieri’s ballo, I would argue that the theatrical choreographies did not vary greatly from the social dances in late-sixteenth-century Italy. In both genres the step vocabulary used was similar, as was the terminology used to describe the choreographic patterns. The floor patterns created in the theatrical and the social dances were similar, with the main difference caused by the space in which the theatrical dances were performed: a raised stage toward which the audience faced the performers from only one direction.

I would like to thank my colleague Mary Chan, who first suggested I write this article, and Patricia W. Rader, whose comments greatly improved its structure and clarity.
Notes


4. For example, see Fenlon, p. 15, footnote 6.


6. For example, in the opening section the choreography calls for “.2. cangi.” This step is not found in the dances of Caroso and Negri and therefore one wonders if it was a misreading of the step *trango*,...
a common step in the late sixteenth-century balletti. In the Terza Parte the four main ladies perform *i cinque tempi della gagliarda* (i.e., five breves worth of steps). Given the music for these sections and the floor track, one wonders if the word *tempi* might not be a mistake for *passi*, that is, that Cavalieri is asking the ladies to do *i cinque passi*, a standard step-sequence that took only one breve of music.

7. Caroso labels these sections as *tempi* in both *Il Ballarino* and *Nobiltà di Dame*, while Negri uses the term *parte*. In his two balletti, Lupi follows the usage of Caroso (*Lupi, Mutanze di Gagliarda, Tordiglione, Passo è Mezzo, Canario* [Palermo, 1600]).


9. There were a large number of complicated steps described in the dance treatises. Negri, for example, devotes fifty pages to describing *gagliarda* variations, while Lutio Compasso records 32 simple variations, 53 double variations, and 81 complicated variations that take either four, five, or six *tempi* (*Ballo della gagliarda*, Florence, 1560; facsimile edition by “fa-gisis” Musik, und Tanzedition, with introduction by Barbara Sparti, Freiburg, 1995). Prospero Lutij gives 32 *gagliarda* variations in his work, *Opera bellissima nella quale si contengono molte partite, et passegi di gagliarda* (Perugia, 1587 and 1589), while Lupi records almost five times that number—150.


11. Ibid., p. 360.

12. Negri included four theatrical choreographies in his dance treatise: the *brando* “Alta Regina,” performed at Milan in 1598 in honor of the visit of Queen Margarita of Spain; the *balletto* “Il Pastor Leggiadro,” a dance from an *intermedio* for the wedding of the son of the governor of Milan in 1594; and two torch dances, “Austria Felice (Ballo fatto da sei dame)” and “Ballo fatto da sei cavalieri,” which were part of the celebrations for the visit of the couple Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain and Archduke Albert of Austria, on June 18, 1599.
14. For example, see “Altezza d’Amore,” from Caroso, *Nobiltà di Dame*, pp. 172–6.
20. For example, two dances in which this happens are “Furioso Nuovo” for eight (Caroso, *Nobiltà*, pp. 305–8), and “Laura Gentile” (Negri, pp. 209–11).
22. Negri’s two torch dances are also choreographed so that the focus of both the dances is forward. Both dances also feature the semi-circular half-moon formation, so prominent in Cavalieri’s “O che nuovo miracolo.”
23. For a discussion on how the intellectual worldview of an educated member of court circles in the Renaissance would have influenced the manner in which he or she saw and interpreted the dance performed during an Italian *intermedio*, a French *fête*, or an English masque, see James Miller, “The Philosophical Background of Renaissance Dance,” *York Dance Review*, No. 5, 1976, pp. 3–15.
24. For a detailed discussion on the supremacy of numbers in Pythagorean, and hence Platonic and Neoplatonic, thought, see S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, Cal.: The Huntington Library, 1974). For a summary of how Pythagorean and Platonic thought influenced the theoretical principles of dance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Berghaus, pp. 43–70.