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"Dance, Dance Revolution": The Function of Dance in American Politics, 1763-1800

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**“Dance, Dance Revolution”:
The Function of Dance in American Politics, 1763-1800**

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Bachelor of Arts, The College of William and Mary, 2006

**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

Department of History

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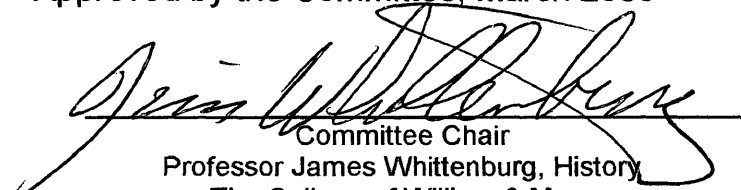
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ABSTRACT PAGE

Dance has long been known to play a significant role in the social lives of men and women in colonial British America, from the governor's palace to the slave quarters. What historians have largely failed to note is the integral nature of dance to the realm of politics and the formation of national identity. In the years preceding the American Revolution, as well as during the war itself, the ballroom became a political space to a heightened degree. While minuets established a clear social hierarchy, country dances broke it down into more democratic forms. Codes of conduct at assemblies allowed attendees (and especially women) to publicize their political allegiances through their dress, behavior, and dance selection. Both the British and the Americans, up and down the eastern seaboard, sought to turn the politicization of the ballroom to their advantage; spectacular fetes such as Howe's Mischianza won local populations to the British cause, while the Philadelphia Assembly prohibited Loyalists from subscribing to its events. Partially in response to British extravagance, the Continental Army characterized its festivities as orderly, economical, and virtuous.

This image of the American persisted into the Federal era, when political rivals again used dance as a form of propaganda. International tensions ran high as France, the Americans' ally, found itself embroiled in a bloody revolution that sent a new wave of emigres fleeing abroad. Many settled in the United States, forging supportive communities and often making a living teaching dance. The rise of the middle class rendered dance a readily-understandable metaphor among a wide swath of the voting population, and two major themes came to the fore: that of dance as a pleasantly rustic wholesome activity in keeping with lauded classical virtues, and that of the social-levelling, chaotic frolic, imbued with vice and dangerous Jacobin principles. The distinction gained significance in the elections of 1796 and finally, 1800, which pitted Federalist John Adams, who favored cultivating diplomatic relations with England, against Republican Thomas Jefferson, who supported ties to France and claimed to represent the common man. An analysis of dancing metaphors that circulated in American newspapers reveals growing discomfort with race relations and with the political aspirations of the lower classes, suggesting the gradual closure of the window of opportunity that independence had proffered.

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This work is lovingly dedicated to my dear friend and fellow dancer,
the archaeologist and NASA scientist
Frank Farmer (1938-2007).

The last time I saw you, I was able to tell you that I'd been accepted into the graduate program here at W&M. I wish you could read this, and I hope I've made you proud.

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This project owes its existence to the continued encouragement and persistence of a number of individuals. I am deeply indebted, first of all, to my advisor Dr. James Whittenburg, upon whose suggestion I took up the topic of eighteenth-century dance. The guidance that he and his wife, Dr. Carolyn Whittenburg, have provided over the course of my time at William and Mary has given me the self-confidence and direction I needed to achieve success. My other committee members, Dr. Paul Mapp and Dr. Dale Hoke, have helped me refine both my research techniques and my writing style, resulting in a more polished work than I could have produced without them.

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Thanks to God, for putting me exactly where I needed to be, exactly when I needed to be there, as usual, and in spite of my frequent protestations. Everything is falling into place.

Finally, it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a master's thesis in possession of a good subject, must be in want of a muse. In that spirit, I am obliged to Jane Austen, for furnishing so many delightful examples of the integral nature of dance to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo society.

**“Dance, Dance Revolution”:
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Introduction: “Begin the Dance”

Throughout history, dance has been integral to the human experience. Whether performed in a rural village as part of a seasonal celebration, in a stately palace ballroom after a coronation, aboard ship in WWII to ease the stress of combat and confinement, or in a pink tutu on a makeshift stage at the age of five, dance has woven its way into rituals of all sorts—fertility, army recruitment, religious ceremony, rites of passage, and more. William H. McNeill advances just such a hypothesis in his Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History. McNeill attaches considerable importance to the power of dance to forge community and identity: “moving rhythmically while giving voice together is the surest, most speedy, and efficacious way of creating and sustaining such communities that our species has ever hit upon. Words and ideas matter, and are always invoked; but keeping together in time arouses warm emotions of collective solidarity and erases personal frustrations as words, by themselves, cannot do.” He credits dance and calisthenics with the power to subtly impose conformity, as in modern-day Asia or, more ominously, in Nazi Germany.¹ However, he restricts the relevance of dance in politics to this same “muscular bonding,” and then only in modern times.

“Popular emotion and the rhythmic muscular expressions of group excitement... seldom affected politics before modern times. Instead, court ceremonies supported the status quo by using a variety of muscular actions that were calculated to express the dignity and power of rulers, and to reinforce appropriate subordination on the part of everyone else... Rhythmic movements sometimes figured in courtly ceremonials but seldom mattered much.”²

Unfortunately, McNeill fails to appreciate the variety of ways in which dance interacted with the political world. Even his portrait of Nazi Germany demands more

¹ William H. McNeill, Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 151-152

² McNeill, p. 101

nuances, for dance need not always “[support] the status quo.” For instance, swing dance provided a community-building shared experience for German youths as they fought the tide of the Nazism that would eventually engulf them. “Playing and dancing to the enemies’ music was an act of rebellion,” writes Matthew Hughes in Inside Hitler’s Germany. “Even the dancing involved, which became more freestyle and spontaneous, was an affront to the regimented Germanic folk dancing favoured by the Hitler Youth.” The “ringleaders” of the *Swing-Jugend* movement would later be sent to concentration camps.³

That spirit of rebellion did not originate with twentieth century jazz. True, dance held connotations of class that may have served a unifying purpose, and in the court of Louis XIV to which McNeill refers, social and political hierarchies were practically indistinguishable. Nevertheless, rivals hardly left their quarrels at the ballroom door, whether in France, Britain, or America, and political factions could exploit the medium of dance to serve their own ends. Particularly in times of national crisis, balls and assemblies provide tantalizing hints—and sometimes outright declarations—of conflicting loyalties and political maneuvering. They reflected the democratizing impulses of the late eighteenth-century amid the American and French Revolutions and provided a scene for power plays between foreign armies and local populations. Furthermore, the popularity of dance made it equally relevant in the post-revolutionary era: it repeatedly featured in written propaganda, transformed into an image of nationhood or profligacy as the author saw fit.

³ Matthew Hughes, Inside Hitler’s Germany: Life Under the Third Reich (Dulles, Virginia: Brassey’s Inc., 2000), p. 65

There has been no better scholar on the intersection of the social and political spheres in the manner I will examine them than Catherine Allgor. Her work illuminating the covert political power women wielded through entertainment has been an inspiration, though I came to it very late in my research. In Parlor Politics, Allgor devotes several paragraphs to dance as it pertains to the forging of political and community alliances in 1820s Washington D.C.: “The ball had subtle effects, taking the electioneering process to a new plane,” she asserts.⁴ Fittingly, she begins her study with the Jefferson presidency, where mine will end. I hope that my own effort will complement her meticulous research, delving deeper into the world of social dance and demonstrating its comparable importance to Allgor’s “parlor.” My essay will attempt to seal the apertures in our historical understanding of dance’s role in politics, with a focus on its impact during America’s Revolutionary and early Federal periods.

It will begin by placing dance in its social context in everyday life in the eighteenth-century. A basic literacy in dance terminology, customs, and etiquette is essential for analyzing the material that will follow. For this, I turn to the research of Kate Van Winkle Keller, whose reconstructions of dance figures and manners constitute some of the finest current scholarship on the subject. I am likewise indebted to John Millar and Lou Vosteen, dance masters and scholars, and to Cecil Sharpe, without whose interest in and documentation of English “country” dance, a revival of the art might never have taken place. As at Versailles, dance’s social function and its political function were intertwined in America, and additional discussion of this will recur throughout the essay.

⁴ Catherine Allgor, Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 182

Subsequently, I will turn my pen to the American Revolution, both the events that led to it and the war itself. Of note in this section will be the supposed British effort to control the American public with entertainment, which helped enable women's participation in the struggle through their conduct in the ballroom. Women, as well as men, made their political sentiments visible with their dress, their choice of dances, and their choice of partners. Some assemblies took a distinctly unfriendly attitude towards members of the opposing viewpoint and sought to shut them out of what had formerly been a public entertainment.

The post-revolutionary period brought a decline in the number of political ballroom anecdotes in newspapers, but the influence of dance continued through other avenues. A heavy French presence in America during and after the war contributed to a rise in the number of professional dancing masters. With competition in the urban centers, dance spread further into rural communities, affirming a connection between dance and republicanism.

As the new nation debated its own character, the French Revolution erupted across the Atlantic. The dangerous and divisive overthrow of Louis XVI and the split in U.S. politics between Federalist and Anti-federalist rendered foreign policy increasingly problematic. As Americans took sides on international issues, they frequently recorded their values in dancing metaphors that could now reach a broader swath of the citizenry. These metaphors might imagine an idyllic rustic revel that symbolized the nation or present a lawless frolic that threatened established social order. In either case, the

recognition of dance as a shared language and a vehicle for national characteristics makes it far more important than McNeill acknowledges with his “innocuous...folk dancing.”⁵

Because I aspired to cover the entire colonial community—and subsequently the new nation—within a master’s project, I have derived the bulk of my evidence from colonial newspapers. Many of those newspapers have been amassed into useful and searchable collections. Mary Jane Corry’s The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783 is available on CD-ROM, and contains every reference to music, dance, and theatre to be found in an array of papers over the course of almost a century. It proved an invaluable resource for the period from the French and Indian War to the Treaty of Paris. A second database, America’s Historical Newspapers, can be accessed online through a number of libraries, and covers the time span of 1690-1922. Even more exhaustive, it includes facsimiles of more than one thousand publications in English, German, and French. While neither of these collections is perfectly complete, each offers a remarkable treasure trove of information and an unequalled window into the print culture of the past.

⁵ McNeill, p. 151

Chapter I: “War’s Alarms”

“Ye Social Powers”¹

Philip Vickers Fithian, in what is perhaps his most oft-quoted statement, once remarked of Virginians that “they will dance or die.”² Beyond its sheer entertainment value, however, dancing served both to divide and unite society: divide, because it revealed the gentility and education of its participants through their manners, deportment, and clothing; unite, because the ballroom, as much as the battlefield, served as a venue to boldly display political affiliations, and did so with little regard to gender and, in some instances, rank. The coming of the Revolution and the necessity of creating an independent country invested the choice to “dance or die” with more significance than Fithian intended. In the ballroom, like minds exchanged ideas and rallied around common causes while foes engaged in verbal sparring or passive resistance. Crossing class and gender lines, dance developed a political dialogue and often a political design. Through an examination of dancing assemblies, military participation, dancing masters, and the involvement of women, I will attempt to demonstrate the cohesive power of the dance in late eighteenth century America and trace its importance in the formation of first political, and later national, identity.

Balls often reflect, as much as they create, a shared experience. Throughout history, dance has lent its celebratory character to all sorts of events and entertainments, and in eighteenth-century America these included spinning matches, meetings of the Sons

¹ All the section headings in this essay are taken from period dances and the songs to which they were performed.

² John Rogers Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian, Kept at Nomini Hall, Virginia, 1773-1774,” The American Historical Review, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Dec. 1899), p. 315

and Daughters of Liberty, peace treaties, alliances, repeals of offensive taxes, and royal birthdays. These invoked the common ground of participation in the homespun movement, membership in special societies, or simply of being or not being British subjects. Numerous small events held in private homes favored attendees who shared ties of kinship or friendship. Dance already possessed political overtones by virtue of the experiences it was used to observe, and it was only a small step to transform it from pastime to political activism. In some cases, it served as a sort of corollary to the various non-importation and non-consumption agreements that characterized the decade prior to Revolution. Like such agreements, dance could function as a cross-class and cross-gender demonstration of solidarity and lend itself to public policing of one's neighbors. More clearly, perhaps, it allowed for political discussion and debate among many parties within a controlled environment or pressured nonconformists by denying them social interaction. Even when intended merely to express relief or joy, dance reinforced alliances, consolidated power, and provided a fresh starting point for people with common goals. By the same token, individual or group action which may or may not have been directly motivated by politics, nevertheless assumed political significance. Thus, in the wake of the 1763 Treaty of Paris, when not a single French dignitary attended a ball scheduled for them and their English social counterparts in London, they had not only expressed their collective indignation but in fact staged a sort of protest or boycott against the unfavorable terms of peace. The newspaper that humorously reported the incident goes on to state that the English took advantage of the French absence by opening the ball with a tune dubbed "Canada Is All Ours."³ Americans would, in diverse

³ Boston Evening Post, 9 May 1763, in Mary Jane Corry, The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783: Text Data Base and Index, (New York, 1997).

ways, follow both approaches—non-participation in dance as well as flagrant politicization of the music and steps themselves. If, as historians such as John Shy have suggested, dueling armies and parties in wartime “contend less with each other than for the support and the control of the civilian population,” dancers—along with those who voiced opposing political positions at similar public events such as theatre and parades—performed important work for the war by debating, cajoling, and upbraiding their partners in the name of political ideology.⁴

“Step Stately”

In order to properly interpret the usefulness of dance as a political conduit in the eighteenth century, it is first imperative to examine the structure of the dance itself. A solid understanding of its purposes in the social lives of middle- and upper-class Americans forms the groundwork for an appreciation of its potential as a scene of political rivalry and exchange.

The “country” dances, epitomized by Playford’s Dancing Master, are most recognizable in the present day as those that appear in the works of Jane Austen. Few sources better illustrate the opportunities dance offered for courtship, class tensions, and misbehavior than her novels. In Austen’s Northanger Abbey, published posthumously in 1818 but written in the closing years of the previous century, Henry Tilney teases Catherine Morland at a ball by drawing a parallel between dancing and marriage: “Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours... You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only

⁴ John Shy, A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence (Ann Arbor, 1990), p. 219

the power of refusal....” Catherine repeatedly objects to the comparison, and Henry at last acknowledges some dissimilarity in the duties belonging to each state: “In marriage, the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman; the woman to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey, and she is to smile. But in dancing, their duties are exactly changed; the agreeableness, the compliance are expected from him, while she furnishes the fan and the lavender water.”⁵ In the context of the novel, this humorous exchange serves to assure Henry of Catherine’s own fidelity, but it contains much information for modern readers. Henry’s tongue-in-cheek descriptions notwithstanding, dances and other public assemblies occasionally permitted the female to take the initiative in a relationship. A striking example of this appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1736:

Advertisement. Whereas a gentlemen, who, towards the latter end of the summer, usually wore a blue camlet coat lin’d with red, and trim’d with silver, a silver-lac’d hat, and a tupee wig, has been often observ’d by Miss Amoret, to look very languishingly at her the said Amoret, and particularly one night during the last session of assembly, at the theatre...; the said Miss Amoret desires the gentleman to take the first handsome opportunity that offers, to explain himself on that subject.
N.B. She believes he has very pretty teeth.⁶

Dances headed a relatively short list of activities wherein men and women interacted in a social environment. Miss Amoret seems to have been fortunate enough to attend regular assemblies in town, but those who lived in rural areas eagerly anticipated balls that would reunite them with friends, family, and prospective marriage partners from the surrounding area.⁷ In many communities, dance was a centerpiece of social interaction.

⁵ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1992), p. 67-68

⁶ *Virginia Gazette-Williamsburg*, 29 Oct 1736 in Corry, *The Performing Arts*.

⁷ “Assembly” is a term often used to describe a ball, concert, or similar gathering for entertainment. Urban areas in particular featured subscription assemblies where, for a fee, interested parties could become members of a group which would meet on a regular basis—usually weekly or bi-weekly—to dance and/or enjoy live music or theatre. Often, the male head of household would purchase a subscription which would then be extended to all female dependents of his household. Strangers and visitors could also be admitted for an evening if properly introduced and paid for by an existing member.

Around the Christmas season, Fithian reported that the Carter family gathered to observe the strict dance lessons that dance master Mr. Christian provided for their children and those of neighboring planters. Other parents likewise attended, and Mr. Christian periodically invited the adults to join in the dances. Between two long sessions of practice, they repaired to the dining room to share a meal. Evening balls and games characterized the rest of the holiday season: “Nothing is now to be heard of in conversation, but the *Balls*, the *Fox-hunts*, the fine *entertainments*, and the *good fellowship*, which are to be exhibited at the approaching *Christmas*.” Even in the privacy of country homes, dance sparked a whirl of social activity, with multiple generations and distant neighbors joining together.⁸

In America, dance gained importance in the mid-eighteenth-century as consumerism led, at once, to class differentiation and to the imitation of social betters on the part of the rising merchant class. Dance masters’ advertisements increasingly offered evening lessons for adults whose professions prevented them from attending during the day, and some inserted revealing asides, such as “the utmost secrecy shall be kept till they are capable of exhibiting in high taste.”⁹ The art of dance became another arena in which to display good breeding, particularly in the minuet, an invention of the French court. Fithian expressed his astonishment at Mr. Christian’s perfectionism when the dance master reprimanded several of his students for faulty performances, but in a society where bungling a minuet might have negative repercussions on one’s social standing and marriageability, such severity must have seemed justified.¹⁰

⁸ Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian,” p. 296-297

⁹ Kate Van Winkle Keller and Charles Cyril Hendrickson, George Washington: A Biography in Social Dance (Sandy Hook, CT: The Hendrickson Group, 1998), p. 18-21

¹⁰ Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian,” p. 296

Contrasting with the formal, showy minuet—a single-couple dance which began with the highest ranking couple and progressed downwards through the social stations—English country dances did not conform to the pre-existing social hierarchy; they were, as Keller has put it, “democratic.”¹¹ Balls traditionally commenced with a minuet and then introduced various other more lively formats, including country dance. Fithian records the order in his diary: “first Minuets one Round; second Giggs (sic); third Reels; And last of All Country-Dances.”¹² A country dance usually takes the form of two long lines, one of each sex. This is the “set.” Partners face one another and number off as first or second couples from the head of the set, near the music, to the foot. They “take hands four from the top,” meaning that each first couple joins hands in a circle with the second couple below it. These subsets of four will be the first to dance together, but as the dance progresses, the first couples will move down the set; the second couples, up it, dancing with new faces each time. When they reach the end, a couple will wait out one repetition and then rejoin as the opposite number, the interim providing an excellent opportunity for conversation, flirtation, and the like. Evidence suggests that, during the eighteenth-century, in a category of three-couple dances called “triple minors,” a neutral couple may have stood below each group of three active couples in the set. Neutrals, like inactives in four-couple dances, would be free to spend an entire repetition of the figures engaged in conversation.¹³ In some dances, the steps involve the neighbors or corners more than the partners, assuring that each participant has an opportunity to interact with every other member of the set. (see fig. 1) Those not inclined to “foot it”—that is, to dance—might take their leisure at card tables or with refreshments. Fithian recorded this behavior with

¹¹ Keller and Hendrickson, p. 21

¹² Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian,” p. 301

¹³ Keller, George Washington, p. 32

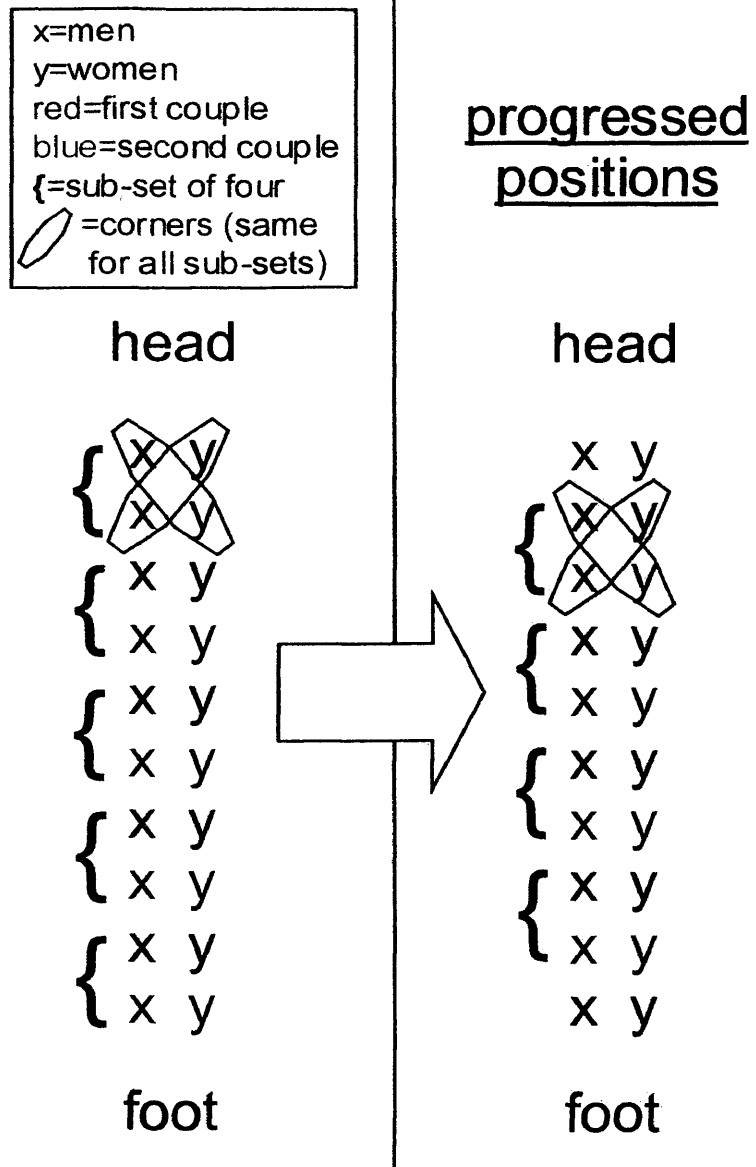
refreshing candor: “all did not join in the Dance for there were parties in Rooms made up, some at Cards; some drinking for pleasure; some toasting the Sons of america; some singing ‘Liberty Songs’ as they call’d them, in which six, eight, ten or more would put their Heads near together and roar, and for the most part as unharmonious as an affronted-----.”¹⁴

Participation at these affairs symbolized not only gentility, but affability as well, and it was upon both qualities that attendees would judge each other. Hence, in Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, the townspeople of Meryton take offense when wealthy visitor Mr. Darcy refuses to dance with anyone but Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst, who are members of his own party and even more insufferable snobs. Because of his exclusivity, “His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped he would never come there again.”¹⁵ Philip Fithian encountered comparable sentiments at a Virginia ball in 1774. When several of the company urged him to dance, he politely declined, having been raised in a household that frowned upon such entertainments; although he greatly admired the performance, he had never learned. One man continued to provoke him on the subject, and Fithian turned the tables, retorting that his antagonist “was ill qualified to direct my Behavior who made so indifferent a Figure himself.” However much he may have objected to being construed as unsociable by virtue of his reluctance to dance, he nonetheless assessed his companions using the same criteria. With some relief, Fithian later remarked that he felt “exceeding happy that I

¹⁴ Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian,” p. 301

¹⁵ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, (Garden City, New York, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1945), p.

Fig. 1



could break away with Reputation” after the events of the evening—that is to say, he felt fortunate to have retained the esteem of the company.¹⁶

Many eighteenth-century dances, particularly subscription assemblies, operated under a given and fairly consistent set of rules. Broadsides of the Providence Dancing Assembly, the Baltimore Amicable Society, the Richmond Assembly, and the Dancing Assembly of Savannah, all published between 1790 and 1792, testify to the universality of these rules throughout the Atlantic colonies. Individual dances often continued until the original top couple returned to that position after progressing down the whole set and back up again. In a crowded room, this could easily mean half an hour would transpire before each dance concluded. At some assemblies, partners might be expected to dance multiple dances together, or even spend the whole evening in one another’s company. When the ball began, partners would be assigned by lots, with a position in the set inscribed on a piece of paper. Those who lost their numbers suffered demotion to the bottom of the set. Usurping another couple’s spot or partner was considered an anathema and just cause for prohibition from further dancing: “If any Lady or Gentleman should refuse to dance with the one they draw, the Managers shall not permit them to dance during the Evening,” cautioned the Providence Assembly.¹⁷ Some sources indicate that, though many of these same rules existed in the Revolutionary period, they were not always enforced, and indeed, it would defeat much of the purpose of the assembly if they were. Dance functioned as courtship and socialization, with interaction between all members of the set and simple, repetitive steps so as not to preclude conversation. This

¹⁶ Williams, “Journal of Philip Fithian,” p. 296, 301-302

¹⁷ “Amicable Society,” (Baltimore, 1791), Early American Imprints, (First Series, no. 46111) <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.wm.edu>>.

ease of communication became one of several key features when dance assumed political purpose.

Dance tunes fall into a number of different categories. Some, written or choreographed by particular dance masters, took on the titles of their creators; “Confesse, his Tune,” “Mr. Isaac’s Maggot,” and “Mr. Beveridge’s Maggot” serve as examples of this type. A “maggot” in this context referred not to larvae, but to a “favorite” or “popular” dance. Many other dances borrowed place names or otherwise alluded to locations: “Hyde Park,” “Shrewsbury Lasses,” “A Trip to Paris.” Some reflected on the romantic entanglements that so often proceeded from dance, such as “Haste to the Wedding” or the less auspicious “I Care Not for These Ladies.” Seasons, animals, beverages, and professions also appeared in dance titles: “Easter Thursday,” “Hunt the Squirril (sic),” “Juice of Barley,” “The Friar and the Nun” (a ribald anti-Catholic folksong). Quite common in this last group were references to the army or navy and their various duties and exploits; for instance, “The Dressed Ship,” “Soldier’s Joy,” “The Soldier and the Sailor,” and numerous others. Dances were often composed specifically to commemorate a triumphant occasion, whether a royal birth, a diplomatic visit, or a battle. As political crises arose and opposing armies took to the field, dances of this variety prevailed and became intrinsic to both sides of the conflict. This pattern was nothing new, but the tradition behind it in no way diminishes its importance as a means of achieving or promoting unity in each successive instance.

“I Care Not For These Ladies”

“Take care what you are about; Do you think you come here for your pleasure?” Thus, rumor has it, bellowed the manager of the Philadelphia Assembly to an unlucky

dancer who had forgotten her turn. Clearly, manager Colonel Mitchell viewed the evening's diversions as something more than a series of pre-set figures stepped by well-dressed pillars of society. But what, if not pleasure, might have tempted the chastened young lady to the ballroom? The observations of the Marquis de Chastellux, who traveled in America between 1780 and 1782, as well as evidence from newspapers and letters, provide tantalizing clues.

Forthright ladies found in the ballroom an arena for expression, not merely a place to see and be seen, but to be seen to adhere to a cause. There, "staunch whig[s]" like Miss Viny of Philadelphia might "set no bounds to [their] liberty." The very bold might display their allegiance on their person. Miss Viny seems to have done so; while Chastellux describes her as a ridiculous coquette painted in "all possible colors," he curiously only specifies "red, white, [and] blue."¹⁸ Upon the occasion of the alliance with France, an agent of Congress in Martinico (Martinique) hosted a ball at which ladies adorned themselves in a manner consistent with the celebration: "Their head dress, a la independence, was composed of thirteen curls, seven on one side and six on the other."¹⁹ In January, 1782, the Connecticut Courant published a selection from a letter supposedly written by an officer in Charleston, in which he detailed the style of ladies' attire. "Even in their dresses the females seem to bid us defiance," he wrote. "The gay toys which are imported here they despise; they wear their own homespun manufactures, and take care to have in their breast-knots, and even on their shoes, something that resembles their flag

¹⁸ François Jean, Marquis de Chastellux, Travels in North-America, in the years 1780, 1781, and 1782: Translated from the French by an English gentleman, Vol. 1 (Dublin, 1787), p. 315-317. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale Group, <<http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.wm.edu>>.

¹⁹ New York Packet, 10 Sep 1778, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

of the thirteen stripes.”²⁰ The homespun movement, which advocated abandoning English goods and relying on cloth produced in America, allowed countless women to participate in the Revolution by spinning, knitting, or wearing homespun. Although the gowns that resulted were often suitable for everyday use, the wealthier members of society could make more dramatic statements by substituting the coarse, drab cloth for the silks and jewels that normally characterized dress at formal balls. “At a ball held at New London on the 1st instant, the gentlemen and ladies appeared dress'd in apparel manufactured in that colony,” announced the Boston Evening Post in 1768.²¹ In so doing, these dancers made a tangible rather than merely ideological commitment to resistance. Spinning bees gained popularity mostly in New England, but the southern colonies too experienced the effects of the movement, as an article from the New York Journal demonstrates: “Williamsburg, Dec. 7. At a grand ball given by the General Assembly, most of the ladies appear'd in dresses of Virginia manufacture.”²² In 1765, the New York Gazette & Weekly Post Boy published a highly doubtful but illuminating letter from a young lady in town to her friend in the country. Its authenticity aside, the scenes it described beautifully encapsulate the political implications of ballroom displays, and they ultimately proved to be not far from the mark:

“I dreamt...I went to a ball dressed in the prettiest and richest brocade that ever your eyes beheld, sure...of carrying all before me...When I found Miss---, and Miss ---...and many others dressed in homespun, surrounded by all the prettiest fellows...I saw those that were in homespun placed nearer the top of the dance...and myself addressed by the manager in these terms: You cannot be surprised madam, that in an American assembly, we should give the highest place to such ladies, as have the greatness of soul, to prefer their country's interest to the vain desire of dazzling the eyes of fools...”²³

²⁰ Connecticut Courant, 8 Jan 1782, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²¹ Boston Evening Post, 25 Jan 1768, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²² New York Journal, 11 Jan 1770, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²³ New York Gazette & Weekly Post Boy, 7 Nov 1765, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

Committed Whig ladies might encounter more political friends than foes in the ballroom during these years, as some major assemblies adopted the same policy as Philadelphia: “tory ladies [and gentlemen] are publicly excluded from this assembly.” So publicly, in fact, that the following sarcastic article appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper in 1780:

A HINT. It is expected that no man, who has not taken a decisive part in favour of American Independence, will in the future intrude on the Dancing Assembly of the city: such characters are either too detestable or too insignificant for Whig Society. The company of those who were so insensible of the rights of mankind and of personal honour, as to join the enemies of their country in the most gloomy moment of the revolution, cannot be admitted. The subscription paper, thro' accident, has been handed to some characters of this description. [signed] W.²⁴

“W,” from the bitter sound of his prose, may have suffered just such an unceremonious exclusion. For some Philadelphians, this was no doubt a severe blow to their pride; for others, a cause for concern, lest their past deeds under the occupation be seen by their friends and neighbors as treasonous. This was by no means an irrational fear, since at various pro-American assemblies throughout the new states, one’s presence was taken to be a sign of one’s patriotism. To be conspicuously absent would arouse suspicion. In 1777, for instance, the press described a Boston gathering thus: “On Friday evening the rejoicings were crowned by a brilliant company of ladies from Cambridge, Boston, and Watertown, who testified their joy and patriotism, by their presence, at an elegant assembly.”²⁵ Massachusetts, too, saw a debate over the exclusion of subscribers based on political affiliation. “The managers of the Assembly, who opposed and voted against inviting the British officers to it,” read one submission in 1778, “are requested to oblige the publick with the names of those who proposed and voted for it, that we may know

²⁴ Pennsylvania Packet, 12 Dec 1780, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²⁵ Continental Journal, 30 Oct 1777, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

who and who are together....”²⁶ This practice bears a striking similarity to tactics employed during periods of non-importation, when violators would often find their names listed in the paper as a warning to them and a discouragement to their clientele.²⁷ At the close of the Revolution, citizens of New York entered the fray with a number of printed references to the politics of the dancing assembly. The first claimed “that a coalition is forming in this city between certain Whigs, and some of the most atrocious and obnoxious Tories, for the purpose of promoting the Dancing Assembly,” and decried the cooperation as “wantonly dancing on the graves of our brave officers, and fellow citizens.”²⁸ No true patriot, the author continued, could stand for such a measure, which would allow traitors to partake of the same privileges as faithful Whigs. The invective provoked a prompt response:

“The publication which appeared in Mr. Holt’s paper of the 20th instant...is without foundation in fact, and an infamous attack upon the characters of gentlemen, who have been as uniform and steady, made as large sacrifices of property, and run as many personal hazards in the pursuit of the happiness and freedom of their country, as the designing knave who dared give birth to that infamous publication. The greatest care has been taken to exclude every character, whose admission could possibly give a pang to a real Whig;—and the author of that publication may be assured, that there are Whigs concerned in promoting the Dancing Assembly, who dare think and act for themselves.....”²⁹

A few days later, another contributor provided his probably disingenuous opinion that “In order to assist Mr. Whig Refugee in effecting a reconciliation of parties,” a number of known Tories should be elected to the legislature, and that “The innumerable benefits we shall derive therefrom, are too conspicuous to need particularizing; a very material one would be giving a precedent to the dancing assembly....”³⁰

²⁶ Independent Ledger, 14 Dec 1778, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²⁷ Barbara Clark Smith, “Social Visions of the American Resistance Movement,” Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., The Transforming Hand of Revolution (Charlottesville, 1996), p. 27-57

²⁸ New York Gazetteer, 24 Dec 1783, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

²⁹ Independent Journal, 22 Dec 1783, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

³⁰ New York Gazetteer, 31 Dec 1783, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

Did the social pressure exerted by these prohibitions pull indifferent or even Tory-leaning assembly subscribers into the patriot fold, at least superficially? In Philadelphia, the case of one Miss Footman suggests so. Of her, Chastellux remarks, “[she] was rather contraband, that is to say, suspected of not being a very good whig....” He applies this term as though it had been bandied about the room as the standard pejorative for disingenuous attendees (and probably citizens in general). Miss Footman may not have been alone in her political persuasion.³¹

Even prior to the formal break with the mother country, the antagonists recognized balls and entertainments as important components of a larger strategy of politicization that also included bribery and patronage. In May 1775, a Connecticut newspaper responded to British legislation with the following claim: “A proclamation is to be given out that it is only the four governments of New-England: But depend upon it, all the colonies are to be treated in the same manner. General Burgoine says, that he will not let New-York know his intentions; but dance and sing with the ladies, and coax the inhabitants to submit. . . .”³² By flirtation, by camaraderie, by nonchalance, an invading force might lull Americans into complacency, or worse, win their allegiance. Indeed, the British army did host a wide array of fêtes and assemblies in occupied New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Newspapers advertised bands, dances, and theatrical presentations starring military officers. In New York, Rivington’s Royal Gazette notified its readers that, due to space constraints, subscription assemblies would be limited to members of the British army and navy, royal government officials, and other prominent socialites: gentlemen non-subscribers and non-residents might apply to attend through

³¹ Chastellux, *Travels*, p. 317

³² Connecticut Courant, 1 May 1775, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

“Major Brigade Amiel,” at the cost of half a guinea.³³ The balls and parties held by British troops after the captures of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, then, were no more celebrations than they were political rallies. Their popularity among the Tory elite did not exclude dissenting guests, however, who might be swayed through sustained interaction with loyal circles. The rumor of Burgoyne’s plan was no fleeting accusation. It had a lasting impact and became permanently inscribed in American memory when John Trumbull recalled seven years later in his epic poem “M’Fingal,” that Burgoyne had entered the country with just that intent: “by songs and balls secure obedience/and dance the ladies to allegiance,” apparently assuming that their husbands would follow.³⁴ “M’Fingal” enjoyed a wide readership in the post-Revolutionary era, and continued in subsequent printings through the nineteenth century.³⁵

If Burgoyne did indeed have such a scheme in mind, he made a critical error of judgment which newspapers perpetuated. He indicated that the army would seek to subdue the colonies by launching an insidious assault on its weakest link—the female population. Trumbull, in his relevant note to a later edition of “M’Fingal,” sets the record straight, quipping “this pleasant mode of warfare” did not meet “with the expected success.”³⁶ Contemporary reports also bolster the contention that the effort largely failed; women could, and did, upset the balance of power in the ballroom through both speech and manners. A humorous anecdote from New York relates how one ball in 1782 was disrupted by a pert young woman, and whether true or not, illuminates ballroom politics.

³³ Royalist Gazette, 13 Mar, 1782 in Corry, The Performing Arts.

³⁴ John Trumbull, “M’Fingal,” (Boston, 1785). Early American Imprints, Series 1: Evans, 1639-1800, no. 19277, p. 88

³⁵ Kenneth Silverman, A Cultural History of the American Revolution, (New York, 1976), p. 296

³⁶ Trumbull, “M’Fingal,” in The Poetical Works of John Trumbull, (Connecticut, 1820), digitized by Google Books, <<http://books.google.com>>, p. 139

As the Boston Evening Post reported the tale, Sir Henry Clinton requested a dance to the martial tune “Britons, Strike Home.” His partner, the ironically named Miss Franks, retorted “Indeed, may it please your Excellency, I think if he was to play---Britons go home! it would be much more pertinent and suitable to the present time.”³⁷ When Clinton approached the girl’s father the next day to complain, he found no sympathetic ear. Mr. Franks’ defense of his daughter—“if you will dance with her, you must e'en put up with her jokes”—attests to a breakdown of deference on two levels: that of an occupied population to British military authority, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper, that of a youthful female to a mature titled male. In a conspicuous role reversal, Miss Franks took full advantage of the freedom afforded women in the ballroom, and Clinton was expected to submit or—according to the custom of the assembly—forfeit the privilege of dancing, perhaps for the entire evening. That a number of colonial newspapers reprinted the story implies that its effect would be widespread; up and down the Atlantic coast, readers understood the political function of dance.

“By a Lady, hearing a gentleman say, he would never dance with a Plain Woman,” read a poem published in the 1790s.

Young Damon vows, nay, hear him swear,
'He'll dance with none but what are fair,'
Suppose we Girls a law dispense,
We'll dance with none but men of sense,
Suppose you should--pray, Ma'am, what then?
Why, Sir, you'd never dance again.³⁸

Women employed this alternate strategy—social snubbing—in South Carolina, where according to the Connecticut Courant, British officers fared no better than in New York.

³⁷ Boston Evening Post, 19 Jan 1782, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

³⁸ Carlisle Gazette, 22 Feb 1792, in America's Historical Newspapers

The same letter from Charleston quoted above complained that at “[t]he assemblies which the officers have opened, in hopes to give an air of gaiety and chearfulness (sic) to themselves and the inhabitants, the women are seldom or never to be persuaded to dance...An officer told Lord Cornwallis not long ago, that he believed if we had destroyed all the men in North-America, we should have enough to do to conquer the women.”³⁹ The men of Charleston likewise did their part, entrenching themselves at the card tables to avoid having to speak to the British.

Whether Tory or Patriot, men recognized and sometimes encouraged female non-compliance to undermine the political opposition. As early as 1768, the Boston Evening Post published a Tory’s entreaty to young women so rich that it deserves to be quoted at length:

Plays, balls, and concerts, are agreable and amusing entertainments; but will you gratify yourselves at the expence of your reputation? For such certainly will be the case when you are conducted to them by persons. . . whose principal character is the love of gallantry and intrigue. Nay, some of whom are profest enemies to the country which gave you birth, and who are even now endeavoring to rob you, your friends, relations and country, of the invaluable blessings of the best constituted government upon earth. Can you know this and yet give them your hand at a ball? Impossible! . . . Leave to the few, very few daughters of interested and designing men, the pleasure of gracing an assembly compos’d of such persons and their slavish abettors. . . .⁴⁰

This author, “Homosum,” evidently doubted the willingness of ladies to forego pleasure in the interest of politics and thus appealed to their sense of decorum and concern for their reputation. What sort of reputation, though, was at stake? Was it strictly their personal virtue which they would besmirch by associating with gallants? Or was it perhaps, as the second half of the passage seems to suggest, likewise their status as loyal English subjects? In veiled terms, “Homosum” warns that dancing with “interested and designing men” threatens above all to pollute the female political identity. He asserts that

³⁹ Connecticut Courant, 8 Jan 1782, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁴⁰ Boston Evening Post, 30 Jan. 1768, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

women, with the simple choice of refusing to participate, can become defenders of their *political* virtue.

Whether Boston's loyal ladies took the hint, it is difficult to determine, but additional articles from November 1768 through February 1769 may represent the rebel ladies' retort. In the first, a Connecticut publication printed news from Boston, relating the amusing circumstance of a failed dance there the previous month: "It is said the officers intended a grand assembly this evening, but the ladies of the town could not be persuaded into the propriety of indulging themselves in musick and dancing with those gentlemen who have been sent hither in order to dragoon us into measures, which appear calculated to enslave and ruin us." As had Homosum, this unnamed author invokes notions of propriety to help justify the political activism of women, but his words leave no doubt of these ladies' motivations or conviction.⁴¹ Nor was this an isolated incident. "Same evening [last Wednesday]," reads the next example, published in the Tory-leaning Boston Chronicle and referring to an entirely different event, "the Assembly for the winter began at Concert Hall; at which, were present, the honourable (sic) Commissioners of the Customs," and diverse officers of the army and navy.⁴² These commissioners, the London-appointed collectors of hated Townshend duties and similar taxes, earned the loathing of multitudes of Bostonians for what were seen as shady practices and self-aggrandizement: searching vessels, hiking fees, tightening England's hold on commerce, and being generally disagreeable.⁴³ Earlier that year, the Massachusetts House of Representatives had execrated them in a list of grievances circulated for approval to the other colonial legislatures:

⁴¹ Connecticut Gazette, 25 Nov 1768, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁴² Gary B. Nash, The Unknown American Revolution (New York, 2005), p. 97

⁴³ Charles M. Andrews, The Colonial Period of American History, Vol. 4, (New Haven, 1938), p. 220-221

. . . [We] take notice of . . . the commission of the gentlemen appointed commissioners of the customs, to reside in America, which authorizes them to make as many appointments as they think fit, and to pay the appointees what sum they please, for whose malconduct they are not accountable; from whence it may happen that officers of the Crown may be multiplied to such a degree as to become dangerous to the liberty of the people, by virtue of a commission, which does not appear to this House to derive any such advantages to trade as many have supposed.⁴⁴

Clearly, whiggish misses would be discouraged from mixing with such individuals, and they made their sentiments known. An article from the Boston Evening Post the following February published (or reprinted) an account of the same Assembly much at variance with the first. “Dec. 14. . . The Commissioners expected they would have been able this evening. . . to have opened an assembly at Concert-Hall, for the winter season,” it reads, tongue-in-cheek, “but the virtue and discreetness of the young ladies of the town, occasioned a disappointment.” In other words, the expected bevy of females either declined to appear or chose not to oblige the commissioners by dancing. The article continues, predicting that the assembly will reconvene the following week “with a small number of matrons of their own core. It must ill become American ladies to dance in their fetters.” These parting shots serve a twofold purpose. First, they convey the impression that the core of Tory feeling contains only a few matrons, married women presumably of middle age and limited spirit. By contrast, they portray patriot women as youthful, unattached, politically-canny, and capable of influencing events. More importantly, they directly relate the act of not dancing to political protest, delivering the inferred ultimatum that the ladies will abstain from dance until freed from the chains of taxation and oppression of which the commissioners are the embodiment.

Judging from yet another reprinted article, dated December 23 but appearing in the February 13 Boston Evening Post, the Commissioners struggled even to recruit

⁴⁴ “Massachusetts Circular Letter to the Colonial Legislatures; February 11, 1768,” The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. <<http://avalon.law.yale.edu>>.

women of their own political temperament the following week. “Never were the gentlemen concern'd more liberal in their invitations, even those ladies who declin'd subscribing had their cards, the neighbouring towns were reconnoitred for females, and the good natured S----r of the B----d was so complaisant as to offer to go to Salem to bring two damsels from thence.” If accurate, this raises the possibility that the Commissioners expanded their search beyond its usual bounds of gentry and middling society and urban geography, and extended it to those who could neither pay for a ball subscription nor easily convey themselves to the venue. Whatever their strategies, they “were finally so successful as to procure from among themselves and their connections, about ten or twelve unmarried ladies, whose quality and merits have been since related with the sprightly humor of a military gallant,” but “the ladies of all ages and conditions [were] so few, that the most precise Puritan could not find it in his heart to charge said assembly with being guilty of the crime of mixt dancing.”⁴⁵ Again, the closing remarks stress the undesirability of those dozen who did attend, implying the presence of women too young, too old, or of questionable character and circumstances. Though the account is comic, it seems clear that the patriotic ladies of Boston had made their point.

Recognizing themselves to be at a disadvantage, the Commissioners and other Tory officials sought to reconcile the population. In a distinctly ironic move, they appear to have adopted the format of a ball to accomplish their ends several years later in 1771. “Boston, Jan 24,” begins an extract from the Connecticut Courant, “On Friday evening last, an assembly was opened at Concert Hall, for the winter season. It is said a large

⁴⁵ Boston Evening Post, 13 Feb 1769, in Corry, The Performing Arts; By “mixt dancing,” the author meant the mixing of men and women together in the dance, which many sermons and religious tracts of the period opposed as contrary to the Bible. For a discussion of religious objections to dancing, please see Oliver Hart’s “Dancing Exploded,” Early American Imprints, first series no. 15848.

number of the principal gentlemen of the town who have been of very different sentiments in the last party disputes are subscribers, and that the assembly was proposed, in order to restore peace, harmony and the blessings of social life.”⁴⁶ Tactfully, these remarks maintain the anonymity of the attendees and employ very hopeful language. However, it is possible to extrapolate from the phrase “restore peace, harmony and the blessings of social life” that in addition to the political machinations of the intervening years, the recalcitrance of the Boston ladies had done its bit to create discord and social isolation for the Commissioners and their allies—the same deprivation reserved for violators of non-importation agreements and other individuals seen as enemies to liberty.⁴⁷

One unusual group of Loyalist ladies made a splash in Charleston when they hosted a ball for British soldiers at a stately home on New Year’s Day, 1782. A splendid affair, it began with the ladies and their gentlemen, adorned in finery, processing through the streets in carriages; it continued with a banquet whose cost was reckoned at £80 sterling and ended at four in the morning after hours of dancing. Pomp and ostentation aside, the celebration can be seen as a clear political, social, and economic statement and a truly revolutionary usurpation of power because all the ladies involved—and none of the men—were black fugitives and slaves. Referred to in the press as the “Ethiopian Ball,” it generated outrage among the white population of Charleston and abroad, gaining attention as it was reprinted by newspapers in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. While it reinvigorated loyalist feeling among the fugitives involved, it

⁴⁶ Connecticut Courant, 22-29 Jan 1771, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁴⁷ For more on the use of social isolation with regard to non-importation violators, please see Barbara Clark Smith, “Social Visions of the American Resistance Movement,” in Ronald Hoffinan and Peter J. Albert, eds., The Transforming Hand of Revolution.

repulsed other segments of society by demonstrating a level of unreason white colonists could not fathom, likely adding to the disaffection of formerly ardent Tories. “Many of those wretches were taken out of houses before their mistresses (sic) faces, and escorted to the ball by these British tyrants,” fumed the popular account. The women were “drest up in taste, with richest silks and false rolls on their heads, powdered up in a most pompous manner.” Not only did these women mix freely with their white, male, social “betters,” they assumed authority within the ballroom—three of them served as the managers of the assembly, roles held simultaneously in Philadelphia by high-ranking Continental Army officers. Hagar Roupell, Isabella Pinckney, Chloe Fraser,⁴⁸ and all other ladies present had appropriated the role of socialite from their former (or current) white masters and mistresses and made it their own, declaring in no uncertain terms their freedom, their equality, their power, and their allegiance to the British cause.⁴⁹ What better way to express the new possibilities life seemed to hold for them than by partaking in entertainments that had come to symbolize the refined urban world from which they had been so long excluded? Whether mocking or sincere, their efforts, and their success, represent a dramatic entrance into white symbolic politics.

“Europe’s Revels”

Thus far, the central topics of discussion have examined the usefulness of balls and assemblies to publicize individual or collective political opinions, but of course, there are other political strategies in which dancing played a part. One such strategy, common among the patriots, condemned the British and their allies for extravagance,

⁴⁸ Another deeply meaningful point to note is that all three of the managers had surnames, a distinction that suggests free status and a growing sense of free identity. For a thorough discussion of the significance of surnames, please see the works of Ira Berlin, in particular Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.

⁴⁹ New Hampshire Gazette, 27 Apr 1782, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

lasciviousness, and general misbehavior at balls. Their attacks provoked a rebuttal in the Boston News Letter in June, 1771:

As an introduction to the last Monday's Boston-Gazette, we are favoured with a fresh variety of scandal, discharged at the first magistrate of this province. . . The public are. . . told that, not only his Excellency the G-----r, the Hon. the Com-----rs, of the C-----ms, Commodore G--b--r, the officers of his Majesty's A--y and N--y, and all the gentlemen and ladies, who celebrated the birth of the King on the evening of the 4th instant at Concert-Hall, were a sett of revellers; + lascivious, lustful, and excessive wine-bibers.

The governor and his companions could, of course, be licentious drunkards at any time, but the occasion of a ball allowed critics to conjure images of a Dionysian frolic and use them as a propaganda tool. In this way, they might damage respect for disliked authority figures and simultaneously claim the moral high ground by painting themselves as righteous, virtuous everymen. It is significant that the complaint arose from a commemoration of the king's birthday, which provided a psychological link between shameful excesses and British tyranny. After defending the innocence of both the royal officials and the dance itself, the governor's champion sought to expose patriot political maneuvering in the conclusion of his piece: "This is sufficient to convince the world, to what pitiful shifts, the enemies of the fairest character in the province are driven, in order to sully his reputation and destroy his influence."⁵⁰

Years later, another Boston patriot condemned dance not merely as the delight of the rich and frivolous, but as the activity of the politically indifferent or inactive. "Blush, B[oston]! Blush," he lamented, "That dance and song oe'r patriot zeal prevail/That whigs and tories. . . Should hand in hand, lead on the sprightly dance." However, his verse belies his own intended message—identifying the participants as belonging to both Whig and Tory factions, he acknowledges the presence of bitter political rivals at public

⁵⁰ Boston News Letter, 13 June, 1771 in Corry, The Performing Arts.

assemblies. By definition, then, these men and women were not apathetic, and quite possibly expressed their loyalties through the medium of the ballroom in the style of Miss Franks in New York.⁵¹

The British Army again came under American scrutiny, from both patriots and loyalists, during General Howe's occupation of Philadelphia and similar occupations elsewhere. The British troops seemed to be following the directive attributed earlier to Burgoyne, to "dance and sing with the ladies, and coax the inhabitants to submit." In Philadelphia, Howe and his men presented numerous plays and entertainments for the population, as did their counterparts in New York, where Clinton's thespians would later earn an amazing £5000 in the 1782 season. In this case, as with Boston, the strategy met with mixed results, enticing some inhabitants while disillusioning others.⁵² Evidently disgusted with Howe's antics—particularly the extravagant pageant and ball called the *Mischianza* in May, 1778—many loyalists complained that the General and his men wasted precious time treading the boards when they ought to have been subduing the Continentals encamped at nearby Valley Forge. Howe's secretary predicted that patriots would "dwell upon the Folly & Extravagance of it with Pleasure," and indeed they did. For their own part, the Continentals contrasted themselves and their restraint pointedly with the British: at General Greene's entertainments, one officer wrote, there were "no *levées* or formal *soirées*, as with the Enemy in the City, only conversation over a cup of tea or coffee. No dancing or amusement of any kind, except singing." Yet, simultaneously at the camp hospital, Dr. James Thatcher hired a dancing master to instruct him and the hospital personnel in the hopes of eventually learning to "figure in a

⁵¹ Silverman, *A Cultural History*, p. 394

⁵² Silverman, *A Cultural History*, p. 412

ball room.”⁵³ Whatever his stated purpose, Dr. Thatcher no doubt recognized the potential of dance to re-energize and re-unify a struggling military force desperately in need of both physical and mental stamina to confront what lay ahead. To look forward to a ball while suffering severe cold in the midst of death and disease called for steadfast faith in the patriot cause, a faith that dance might help to promote through a sense of community and singleness of purpose. Despite the Continentals’ protestations over British extravagance, they too turned to dance to meet their political and pragmatic needs.

To distinguish themselves from the British without eliminating dance and revelry, the rebel Americans stressed the politeness and frugality that attended their fêtes as compared to the debauchery and ostentation they perceived among their adversaries. Chastellux noted that an evening spent at the Philadelphia Assembly in the wake of the occupation had taken on a character of military precision, in stark contrast to the wildness of Howe’s festivities. Mitchell and the other managers won selection to the position by virtue of their “distinguished” ranks in the Continental Army, and Mitchell at least approached his duties as manager no differently than he did his commission. Mentions of order and decorum had previously appeared describing dances, but now they did so with greater frequency, and to these terms patriots added “œconomy.” Since the non-importation and non-consumption agreements of the 1760s and in keeping with jeremiad strains of religious thought, “œconomy,” “industry,” and their variants had become watchwords of patriotic devotion. A spinning match held by twenty ladies of the “best families in Providence” constituted “A laudable example for all ladies in Newport and elsewhere, who purpose (sic) to promote industry, and retrieve from ruin a sinking

⁵³ Silverman, A Cultural History, p. 335-337

country,” proclaimed the Connecticut Gazette.⁵⁴ Careful spending—or at least careful phrasing—deflected charges of mismanagement of time and money. Thus, at a celebration of the victory at Yorktown, patriots found “preparations for a ball in the most beautiful œconomy. After tea the evening was past (sic) in one of the most innocent, graceful and pleasing amusements.”⁵⁵ French nobles and the wife of General Greene graced a Newport assembly which displayed both “elegant[ce]” and “decent gaiety.”⁵⁶ Records of a ball attended by the allied forces in New Hampshire employed similar, politicized language: “The company was brilliant and numerous—harmony, politeness, and cordial friendship, seemed visible in every countenance. A cold collation was provided, which was neat and elegant (altho' not costly)—plenty was mark'd with propriety and œconomy.”⁵⁷ The next year, citizens of Richmond remembered the birth of General George Washington with an assembly, “the œconomy, decorum, and propriety of which could only be exceeded but by the festive mirth and social happiness, which appeared in every countenance....”⁵⁸ Real sacrifices combined with rhetorical strategies allowed American dancers to prove that they, unlike the British, could entertain and be entertained without compromising their personal or political virtue.

“Cornwallis Led a Country Dance”

Howe’s poor handling of his campaign left him open to satirical commentary through one of the very same pleasures he over-indulged in Philadelphia: dance. “London, November 1. [1776] In the country dances published for 1777, there is one called ‘Lord Howe's jig;’ in which there is ‘cross over, change hands, turn your partner,

⁵⁴ Connecticut Gazette, 15 Mar 1766, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁵⁵ Boston Evening Post, 10 Nov 1781, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁵⁶ Connecticut Gazette, 16 Feb 1781, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁵⁷ New Hampshire Gazette, 19 Oct 1782, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁵⁸ Connecticut Courant, 11 Mar 1783, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

foot it on both sides,' and other movements admirable depictive (says a correspondent) of the present war in America."⁵⁹ So a colonial newspaper, reprinting news from England, captured the political spirit of dance. To the best of their ability through fitting titles and steps, dance masters composed new dances that responded to current events, in this case deflecting an uncertain, changeable political and military situation with humor. The political world, as the above suggests, is full of sidesteps, turnabouts, runarounds, and handshakes, and in this way lends itself to a ballroom parody. At this time, all America's formal dance publications arrived from Europe, where a composer of sympathetic sentiments or astute marketing instinct created a product he knew would appeal to the colonists—politics in the form of entertainment.

In post-Howe Philadelphia, the dances performed likewise reflected current, especially military, events, often directly maligning the British. "These dances," wrote Chastellux, "like the *toasts* we drink at table, have some relation to politics: one is called *the success of the campaign*, another, *the defeat of Burgoyne*, and a third, *Clinton's retreat*."⁶⁰ Thus, while attendees might choose to engage in political discourses with their lips, they would be compelled to do so with their feet.

⁵⁹ Continental Journal, 27 Feb 1777, in Corry, The Performing Arts.

⁶⁰ Chastellux, Travels, p. 315

Chapter II: “Elegance & Simplicity”

“Independence Cotillion”

Moving into the post-war years, a variety of elements complicated the use of dance as a vehicle for political opinion. Americans, having shed the label of “subject,” now confronted the question of who would be considered a “citizen,” a word that acquired dangerous connotations during the blood-soaked French Revolution. Newspapers proliferated in a way unknown to the colonies before, and print culture and an increasing number of foreign dance masters helped America combat accusations of cultural backwardness. In this new atmosphere, questions of class, gender, and race were equally, if not more important than they had been prior to independence. There was much in the developing psyche of the free nation that dance could make visible.

The end of the war brought celebrations of all kinds—honoring patriotic citizens, renowned generals such as George Washington, foreign dignitaries, and the French forces whose assistance in the conflict had been so instrumental. Such celebrations, whatever their other features, often included a dance. A multitude of new dances appeared in the post-war years whose titles commemorated the victory and its principle players. Most of these centered on General Washington. During the immediate post-Revolutionary period and the subsequent Federal period, dances relating to Washington included “Saw You My Hero, George” (1779), “The Washington Country Dance” (1785), “Washington’s Resignation” (from the army and the presidency, in 1788 and 1796, respectively), “George Washington’s Favorite Cotillion” (1793), “City of Washington” (1795), Washington’s birthday “The Twenty Second of February” (1799),

and sixteen different dances called “The President,” most of which probably refer to Washington.¹ Other tunes lauded his wife Martha, Lafayette, the Continental Congress, and Von Steuben, among others. Even Bostonians, with their puritanical reputation, earned a mention in a New Jersey paper for their construction of a theatre and their weekly dancing assemblies. In 1784 they performed such pieces as “Push About the Loyalists,” “Saratoga Jigg,” “Sir Henry’s [Clinton’s] Minuet,” and “Mrs. [Lighthorse Harry] Lee’s Fancy.”²

In the absence of life-or-death political factions, dance was no longer a vehicle for conflicting sentiments to the same degree. Many of the colorful ballroom anecdotes that had rallied Americans during the war years disappeared from the press, leaving mostly mundane advertisements in their wake. As ever, disagreements arose over the morality and usefulness of dance, but given the overwhelming number of notices for assemblies and dancing masters that newspapers published, it seems evident that most Americans continued to embrace the pastime and incorporate it into their developing sense of national identity. In that respect, dance retained all of its previous political overtones and acquired some new ones. In many cases, it was the *idea* of dance and what it represented, rather than what transpired in the ballroom, that made it a crucial component of political life.

The thirteen new states had formed a legal entity that required a national character, and popular entertainment could serve this need well. Whether through the rousing parades that celebrated democracy and craftsmanship, the patriotic theatrical presentations, or the inaugural balls that marked the installation of Washington as

¹ Keller and Hendrickson, p. 132-136

² The Political Intelligencer, March 9, 1784, in America’s Historical Newspapers

president, popular festivities sought to unite Americans under a propagandistic, almost paradoxical banner—prosperity, yet simplicity; refinement, yet rustic charm. Favorable accounts of dancing from this period conform to one or the other of each divergent pair. One of the unmistakable examples of this took the form of poetry in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Such merriment does us no harm,
Whatever some bigots advance;
If life has an innocent charm,
'Tis when we unite in the dance.
This cannot religion disgrace,
Its votaries well might attend;
Intemperance here hath no place,
While mirth with morality blend.
So civil and social are we,
In such society join'd,
All are, as observers may see,
By music and dancing refin'd.³

“The contradiction between republican simplicity and genteel elegance was a general problem for many American men of letters trying to conceive a consistent American character,” writes Richard Bushman.⁴ The figure of Washington perfectly embodied these contradictions, being an accomplished dancer and avid theatre-goer as well as a self-proclaimed farmer and disciplined manager of an estate. Hence, the numerous dances that bear his name invoke not only the heroic figure of the Revolution, but the industrious and educated persona he had cultivated since youth.⁵

The idea of dance played a role not just domestic, but in also international politics. Dance symbolism could be widely understood and, as it had for years, it provided the populace with a visual representation of the mysterious political process.

³ Western Star, Feb. 26, 1798, in America's Historical Newspapers

⁴ Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 193. I have attempted to follow Bushman's lead in this chapter with an analysis of short pieces of poetry and literature published in American newspapers.

⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, The Meaning of Independence (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1976), p. 30-31; Judith S. Britt, Nothing More Agreeable (Mount Vernon, Va: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1984), p. 12

What rendered it more important than ever was the newly-independent status of the United States, which assumed a perilously neutral position in a sea of global conflicts: namely, the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. Some viewed the uprising as a tragedy and the demise of Louis XVI as the loss of an important ally. Others saw in the French Revolution the continuation of the American, a domino effect of republicanism freeing mankind one country at a time. Even as they borrowed their ideals and habits from the Old World, Americans wrestled with the questions of what made them distinct and often resorted to defining themselves in opposition to a European other, whether France or Britain. Through dance imagery, rival factions sought to *misrepresent* each other's policies and constituents, often by drawing parallels between them and those of whichever foreign nation seemed most threatening.

“Came Ye O'er Frae France?”

Despite the pride they clearly took in their new-found heritage, citizens of the fledgling nation ironically reverted to their pre-Revolution habit of imitating Europe to prove themselves cultured. Indeed, the 1790s were particularly noted, according to one contributor to the Philadelphia Minerva, for the surfeit of dancing schools springing up like mushrooms. “It is melancholy to observe the prevailing rage for dancing schools,” the author protested, horrified to see young ladies sent to learn dancing before they mastered reading and writing.⁶ In an effort to address common concerns, Alexandre Quesnay de Beaurepaire insisted of his fine arts Academy, “I do not mean to introduce the LUXURIES, manners or fashions of Europe, but only to support a proper decorum....”⁷ As before, Americans adopted new dance steps and fashions from Britain,

⁶ The Philadelphia Minerva, Dec. 10, 1796, in America's Historical Newspapers

⁷ Independent Journal, Jan 1, 1785, in America's Historical Newspapers

but an increasing number of experts and amateurs took additional material from France. The presence of so many French soldiers and sailors in America during the years of the Revolution had sparked a mania for all things French and reinvigorated an appreciation for fancy dances. “French hair dressers, milliners, and dancers are all the *ton*,” a visitor to Philadelphia had observed as early as 1778. “The *Virginia Jig* has given place to the *Cotillon* and minuet-de-la-cour.”⁸ Many dancing masters, both French and English, advertised excitedly that they would teach steps and dances lately seen in Paris, or never before seen in America. “In addition to the dances, usually danced in Baltimore, Messrs. Francis and Warrell... will introduce a new Quadrille, with a variety of new Cotillions and Country Dances,” one advertisement proclaimed in 1798.⁹ When Philadelphians proposed the construction of a new set of Assembly Rooms, they agreed that one of the two card rooms be adaptable to a “Cotillion Room,” as the square shape of the dance made it awkward in the traditional long room setting.¹⁰ Cotillions and other dances on French themes continued to be published through the 1790s, with titles such as “Lafayette Forever,” “City of Paris,” “Spirit of France,” and “Quesnay” (after the aforementioned Academy director).¹¹

It seemed that the French had succeeded in achieving what the British had only hoped to do—win American hearts and minds through politeness and pleasure. A number of influential and dynamic French officers, Quesnay among them, moved in the highest ranks of American society. Washington looked upon Lafayette almost as a son, and Washington’s approval guaranteed approval of the young Frenchman in many

⁸ Quoted in Keller and Hendrickson, p. 60

⁹ Federal Gazette, Nov. 29, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers

¹⁰ Pennsylvania Packet, Dec. 23, 1786, in America’s Historical Newspapers

¹¹ Keller and Hendrickson, p. 97; John Fitzhugh Millar, Country Dances of Colonial America (Williamsburg, Va: Thirteen Colonies Press, 1990), p. 74, 136

American circles. A Frenchman played an instrumental role in what would become a family tragedy for the Shippens of Philadelphia, when Nancy Shippen and Louis Guillaume Otto, Comte de Mosloy, formed a mutual romantic attachment only to be thwarted by her parents' desire for a profitable connection with local influence. During their ill-fated courtship, when Otto composed a piece of music for his sweetheart, he chose to write a minuet—an exclusive dance involving near constant eye contact and unspoken communication. Other diarists throughout America also commented on the prevalence of French trends and people.

In Virginia, the Comte de Rocheambeau and his men made a splash in the parties and social functions following the siege at Yorktown, associating with state officials and more particularly their female dependents. “[T]here is something so flattering in the attentions of these elegant French officers, and tho’ not one in them can speak a word of English, Yet their style of entertaining and their devotion to the Ladies of Y[or]k is so flattering that almost any girl of 16 would be enchanted,” wrote Yorktown resident Mildred Smith. Rochambeau and his men offered the town “every sort of amusement...to enchant the Young, and even the Older,” such that even those with Tory sympathies “almost lost sight of their being French, a people who till then [they] had viewed with national horror.”¹² Although Rochambeau returned to France, other officers remained in America.

With the outbreak of the French Revolution and Toussaint L’Overture’s uprising against sugar planters in St. Domingo, this influx of foreigners to the United States would continue. Beginning in 1780, major U.S. cities saw the publication of French

¹² Quoted in Catherine Kerrison, “By the Book: Eliza Ambler Brent Carrington and Conduct Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 105 (1997), p. 37, 45

newspapers: the Gazette Francoise in Newport, the Courier de Boston in that town, Le Courier de L’Amerique in Philadelphia, and the Gazette Francaise in New York.¹³ Other newspapers contained announcements for French and English lessons and printed pieces in both languages. Mr. Curley in Baltimore headed an “Academie pour la Dance, et pour les Langues Francoise et Angloie.” The latter half of his advertisement, he addressed to recent émigrés. “L’Auteur de cet Ais, en qualite de Professeur de Langue Angloise, prend la Liberte d’offrir ses services a ceux de ses compatriots qui desirent d’apprendre cette Langue,” and promised to put his students in a position to better manage their affairs in an English-speaking country “en □rios mois de tems...qu’un maitre Anglois ne le peut faire en huit mois de tems.”¹⁴ One can conclude that the émigré presence made itself known and visible in the early days of the American republic. Both the novel form of government and the fresh French population that added to its citizenry altered American society.

Among the Frenchmen who made the United States their new home were a flock of dance masters like Mr. Curley. Some counted among their credentials previous service to members of court and vaunted aristocrats; others, the Paris Opera or Ballet. The dance masters’ advertisements further indicate the growth of a French-speaking community in American cities. Baltimore sported a “Frenchtown” according to the Federal Intelligencer, which contained news of dancing classes held in “L’Hotel de la

¹³ A number of issues of all these papers are available in the database America’s Historical Newspapers

¹⁴ The Baltimore Evening Post, Dec. 17, 1792, in America’s Historical Newspapers. Trans. “The author of this advertisement, in his capacity as Professor of the English Language, takes the liberty to offer his services to those of his compatriots who wish to learn that tongue; and after the experience he has acquired in teaching that language with much success for many years, he flatters himself (with deference to Gentlemen English Masters) in three months to put his students in a position to better manage their own affairs in this country, which an English master would be unable to accomplish in eight months.”

Patrie” in that neighborhood.¹⁵ Francophones seem to have supported each other’s efforts and eased the transition from Old World to New. Frenchmen who had succeeded in business offered their establishments for the lessons and gatherings of their newly-arrived countrymen. Mr. and Mme. Gautier, who rented or owned an assembly room in New York, allowed several others to make use of it: a Mr. Gervaise held a dancing and fencing school there, and the dancing masters Bellevue, Brumand, and Barbotteau utilized the space for balls.¹⁶ Also in New York, Mr. Dupart, self-styled as a “Professor of Dancing” and “pupil to the celebrated Gardale at Paris,” set up his dancing academy in a room owned by one Mr. De la Croix.¹⁷ Likewise, Mr. Berault took the ballroom “chez Mr. Lafitte,” and promised satisfaction to all those who put themselves under his tutelage in the art.¹⁸

Some of these men rose to great prominence in their new abodes. Idealistic and ambitious, Alexandre Quesnay taught for four successful years at an academy in Philadelphia before shifting his efforts to New York, and finally, to Richmond, Virginia. The former army officer expressed some disdain for the public, who were “rather inclined to DANCING in preference to any of the more useful branches proposed in [the] ACADEMY,” that is to say music, painting, foreign languages, and eventually science. Nevertheless, he managed to attract the patronage of individuals as lofty as John Page of Virginia and Sarah Bache (daughter of Benjamin Franklin).¹⁹ Several men in his employ would later become prominent dancing masters in their own right: Louis D’Orsière and

¹⁵ Federal Intelligencer, Feb. 24, 1795, in America’s Historical Newspapers

¹⁶ Commercial Advertiser, Nov. 25, 1797, in America’s Historical Newspapers; The Daily Advertiser, Feb. 23, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹⁷ Commercial Advertiser, Dec. 5, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers; State Gazette of South-Carolina, July 3, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

¹⁸ Gazette Française, Nov. 16, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers

¹⁹ Lou Powers, Dancing Masters in Eighteenth-Century Virginia: A Compilation (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series, 1983), p. 41

John Griffiths. Even before the treaty with Britain was concluded, Quesnay's students had demonstrated their skills before General Washington and the French Ambassador. After returning to France to seek additional funding, Quesnay became embroiled in the Revolution as a Jacobin, and his efforts in America floundered. Nevertheless, for five years, he exerted a significant influence on the development of the arts, spreading a taste for ballet and spearheading the first French play ever performed in the United States.²⁰

His countryman Pierre Duport, who fled France after the fall of the Bastille, sprang from highly musical stock; his father had instructed dance at the French court, and he himself served as dance master at the Paris Opera for six years. Setting up a school in Philadelphia, Duport promptly published a collection of dances that must have commanded considerable attention. He enjoyed the distinct honor of having at least two of his compositions performed for President and Lady Washington in 1792, probably when the couple attended a recital or an assembly at his school. Both these pieces were fancy minuets, utilizing complex and theatrical steps in keeping with Duport's established style.²¹

The explosion of dance academies such as these, particularly in urban areas, had the inevitable effect of inciting rivalries. Accordingly, some dance masters based in populous American cities expanded their clientele by traveling what was effectively a dance circuit through outlying towns. "For the accommodation of the young *Ladies* and *Gentlemen* that wish to patronize this School," wrote renowned dance master Mr. Griffiths to the residents of Newburyport, "he will come from *Boston* once a week, and

²⁰ John G. Roberts, "The American Career of Quesnay de Beaurepaire," in The French Review, Vol. 20, No. 6 (May, 1947), p. 463-470

²¹ Keller and Hendrickson, p. 98-99

give two lessons in each week.”²² Later, he also held schools at Pittsfield and Williamstown, and invited clients from Stockbridge and neighboring towns.²³ Others, still rooted in urban settings, welcomed a more significant rural patronage by accepting “all kinds of country produce,” or “provisions at the market prices,” in payment for their services.²⁴ This facilitated a further democratization of dance that, as it coincides nicely with the principles of the new republic, can be construed as political even though it originated partially from economic motivations.

From an article in the Providence Gazette, one may surmise that some sought to profit unfairly from the demand. A few unscrupulous souls operated a swindle, traveling through the region posing as dance masters, only to disappear once they had collected subscriptions. This practice was evidently prevalent enough that professional dancer Mr. Nugent saw fit to provide references when he canvassed support in Providence: “As he understands this town has had Reason to distrust Strangers who profess to teach Dancing, he is happy to have it in his Power to produce satisfactory Testimonials of his Character, and Abilities in the Line of his Profession.”²⁵ Not only did dancing masters vie for pupils, but they also argued over locations. The aforementioned Mr. Bellevue submitted an advertisement to The Daily Advertiser in which he lamented his inability to procure the rooms “where he formerly kept his School,” and inserted a dig at Mr. Duport’s monopolization of the space: “Mr. Duport’s conditions with the owner being that no other dancing master shall teach there.”²⁶ Mr. St. Aivre apologized to his subscribers for

²² Mr. Griffiths published the earliest surviving American-produced dance manual in 1788. See Keller and Hendrickson, p. 16

²³ Essex Journal, March 28, 1792, in America’s Historical Newspapers; The Western Star, Apr. 19, 1795, in America’s Historical Newspapers

²⁴ Connecticut Journal, Dec. 9, 1789, in America’s Historical Newspapers

²⁵ The Providence Gazette and Country Journal, May 21, 1796, in America’s Historical Newspapers

²⁶ The Daily Advertiser, Nov. 28, 1799, in America’s Historical Newspapers

the postponement of his opera after “Mr. Picken, to whom the Assembly-room belongs every Monday, having found it necessary to give a ball yesterday evening, prevented [me] from arranging the theatre and decorations.” St. Aivre proceeded to reschedule his entire season of operas to conflict with Picken’s events. They would henceforth take place “at Corre’s Hotel . . . successively on every Monday.”²⁷

Competition between dancing masters took a fascinating turn in Schenectady in 1798 in an incident that betrays intense professional jealousy. The unrest began when dance master Mr. Danglebert attempted to persuade a collection of gentlemen to register for his school. Evidently, Mr. Danglebert shared his facilities with another dance master, the Mr. Nugent previously encountered in Providence. At Mr. Angus’s rooms, Danglebert instructed pupils in ballet and other dance, and may also have provided music lessons and items for sale, as he later would at a different venue.²⁸ Much to Mr. Danglebert’s dismay, the gentlemen whom he approached as potential clients debated whether they should learn from him or from Nugent. One witness, Reuben Squire, reported the exchange.

“Mr. Danglebert speaking in a foreign language, his interpreter, Mr. McDougal, told the company in his name . . . that he had challenged Mr. Nugent to dance against him for 100 dollars, and that tho’ he had offered to dance in boots against Mr. Nugent wearing pumps, Mr. Nugent was so conscious of his inferiority that he had refused to contend with him.”²⁹ He likewise said many other things tending to depreciate Mr. Nugent, by which I believe he has injured him in his profession.”

²⁷ New York Daily Gazette, Feb. 17, 1791, in America’s Historical Newspapers

²⁸ The Albany Gazette, March 4, 1799, in America’s Historical Newspapers; The Albany Gazette, July 29, 1799, in America’s Historical Newspapers

²⁹ While it is not specified that Mr. Danglebert’s foreign tongue was French, I consider it a safe and appropriate assumption. The article refers to Mr. Nugent’s reply as concerning two men: Danglebert and Le Couteulx, who were perhaps together at the time of the incident. This is probably Louis Le Couteulx, a distinguished Frenchman with mercantile connections who had settled in Albany in 1795. See Frank H. Severance, ed., Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society, Volume IX (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1906), accessible via Google Books at <<http://books.google.com>>

Mr. Nugent apparently retaliated in print, but while Squire's report makes reference to this refutation, the letter does not seem to have survived. Nugent inspired extraordinary loyalty in Squire, however, who ended his complaint with the assertion that, "tho' I do not pretend to much skill in dancing, yet having been for some months a scholar of Mr. Nugent's, I am willing to dance against Mr. Danglebert for one or two hundred dollars."³⁰ Indeed, Nugent had a stellar pedigree, having been a principle dancer at theatres in Boston and Philadelphia and an instructor for at least three years. Despite Squire's worries, Danglebert's *faux pas* did little damage to Nugent's career or, it seems, to his own; both dance masters continued to advertise heavily in the New York/Albany area.

"The Federal Cotillion"

Even as it imitated Europe, the new nation harkened back to the classical age, imagining itself as the successor to the wisdom and politics of democratic Athens and republican Rome. Music and dance—as well as art and architecture—followed suit, playing upon classical themes and looking to the ancient world for inspiration. In his lengthy "Defence of the Constitution of the United States of America," John Adams (the future president) proclaimed that, while Spartan society had its flaws, Americans ought to imitate its forms of physical activity.

Exercises like those established by Lycurgus, running, wrestling, riding, swimming, scating [skating], fencing, dancing, should be introduced into public and private education in America, which would fortify the bodies and invigorate the minds of youth; instead of those sedentary amusements which debilitate, and are taking entire possession of society all over the world. The ladies too might honour some of these

³⁰ The Albany Centinel, Dec. 21, 1798, in America's Historical Newspapers. The wager proposed is so exorbitant that one is tempted to conclude that the challenge was issued in jest or with absolute conviction that Danglebert would decline. Perhaps the dance master did not have that amount to lose, and Squire decided to call his bluff.

entertainments...with their presence and participation, to the great advantage of their own health, and that of their posterity....³¹

According to Adams, then, dance served to improve the vitality of the individual person as well as the body politic. Dancing was accessible to both men and women, to children and adults, and helped guarantee the continued wellbeing of the nation in future generations. As such, it did not represent the dissipation of the European aristocracy, but the virtues of the classical period.

Often, the invocation of dance was not meant literally as in Adams's work, but figuratively. Especially in the 1790s, as a familiarity with the social customs of dance spread, authors adopted dancing metaphors and allegories to make political statements. Some required little background knowledge and thus are as intelligible to the modern reader as to the eighteenth-century, such as this clever tidbit "On the distinction of WHIG and TORY":

O WHAT is a Whig, Sir,----
O what is a Whig?
O what is a Whig and a Tory?
In search of preferment they'll dance the same jig----
And both tell the very same story.

Jigs, unlike country dances or even minuets, were presentation dances that involved only one individual. He or she completed a series of intricate steps, often specifically choreographed to correspond to his or her skills, but sometimes freeform and improvisational as might befit the ambiguities and shifting loyalties of politics.³²

More sophisticated metaphors benefit from a deeper understanding of the subject matter, an understanding that today's readers are without, though their Federal period counterparts were not. A columnist in the Massachusetts Centinel, identified as "Plain

³¹ Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser, Aug. 31, 1787, in America's Historical Newspapers

³² Keller and Hendrickson, p. 22

Truth,” criticized Tories for their behavior both during and after the Revolution, accusing them of “form[ing] connexions with the British parties, and laugh[ing] at the whigs. As soon as the danger was over they *figured* in the political *dance*, have got near the head of the *set*, and think they have a right to call for what tune they please. They have truly made an awkward figure at dancing *yankey-doodle*, and therefore are calling for the *British Grenadier*.”³³ “The British Grenadiers” was one of many country dances derived from the genres of traditional or popular music. As such, it had lyrics that would have readily sprung to mind:

“Then be you Whig or Tory,
Or lukewarm worthless thing,
Be sure that you give glory
To GEORGE our gracious King.
For if you prove rebellious, he’ll thunder in your ears
The tow, row, row di, dow di dow of his British grenadiers.”³⁴

His readers might also have been familiar with a Revolutionary-era revision of these lyrics penned by Jonathan Sewall at the Continental Army camp and published in the highly accessible broadside format. Sewall turned British imagery directly on its head and included the following verse:

Still deaf to mild intreaties, still blind to England’s Good,
You have for thirty Pieces, betrayed your Country’s Blood,
Like Æsop’s Cur you’ll gain, a shadow for your Bone,
Yet find us fearful shades indeed inspired by WASHINGTON.³⁵

Thus, “Plain Truth” selected this particular dance for his metaphor not only because of the value of its title, which referenced a fearsome branch of His Majesty’s armed services, but for the accompanying words and their political message. At once, he

³³ Massachusetts Centinel, March 7, 1787, in America’s Historical Newspapers

³⁴ The Court of Comus: a new collection of three hundred songs, medleys, and cantatas. Dublin: J. Potts, 1763. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.wm.edu>>

³⁵ Early American Imprints, Series 1: Evans, 1639-1800, no. 14918

conveyed his sense of the traitorous, milquetoast character of the Tories and the boldness and patriotism of their opponents.

Not only relationships with England, but loyalties to France, came under fire during the Federal period as nascent political parties devised platforms favorable to one or the other nation's welfare. The Constitution ratification controversy, Shays' Rebellion, the Whisky Rebellion, and other belligerent incidents had exposed weak seams in the fabric of the Republic, while controversial measures such as the Jay Treaty in 1794 divided a populace that had previously seemed united behind a bipartisan president. Despite Washington's entreaties, two distinct philosophies coalesced. Among other aspects of their platforms, Federalists tended to ally themselves with English mercantile interests, while Anti-Federalists or Republicans—with Jefferson and Madison at the helm—championed France's cause. The added factor of the French Revolution made these characterizations all the more potent as propaganda tools.

Though it could be construed as making a republican statement, dance could also be regarded as carrying monarchical messages. When an assembly ball in Philadelphia was delayed in 1793 so that it might coincide with the birthday of President Washington, the change sparked a brief but colorful battle in The General Advertiser, the newspaper of Benjamin Franklin's anti-federalist grandson. "Will this monarchical farce never have an end?" wrote a subscriber, comparing the celebration of Washington's natal day to those of bygone years held for the King and Queen. "Must freemen again be insulted with the pageantry of royalty? If the managers of the dancing assembly are to be amused with the baubles of a Russian or a Prussian court, let them enjoy it, and indeed

monopolize it to themselves, but they are certainly not licensed to impose their follies upon the subscribers.”³⁶

An almost cryptic rebuttal appeared in a subsequent issue. Its author, self-identified as (but possibly not) an Englishman, adopted a satirical, narrative tone as he detailed popular reaction to “subscriber’s” claims. “My sister laugh’d outright at being supposed to intend insulting freemen *by dancing*,” he wrote. Rhetorically, he turned average Americans into judicial bodies: “This same publication being canvass’d this evening at a Barbers shop, *the citizens of the comb* declared unanimously (while I was getting shav’d) ‘that ‘twas a very improper attack.’” He goes on to attribute the following opinion to this company of men:

He thought that the present managers of the Dancing Assembly were as free from servility or sycophancy as any set of men, and that the situations in life and known independence of most of ‘em put such a thought out of sight, except in the opinion of those who were sorry to see success attend what merit had obtain’d... ‘Sir,’ says he, ‘we have been for some weeks tormented with pieces in the newspapers, under different signatures, all tending to make us dissatisfied with the government under which we are so fortunate as to live, one which we contributed to form... Yes, Sir, every freeman in this happy land in the year 1787 assisted to form the present federal constitution... and by his voice he assisted to send members to Congress to found those laws, those happy laws which have from chaos brought forth the present prosperous state of our country... There are amongst us... men who have nothing to lose, are aiming at innovation and hope, by alarming the ignorant, to create doubt, jealousy and disorder, and in the general ruin to reap the spoil.

The company greets the completion of this speech with “a general shout of applause,” for the words “equally mark[ed] the lover of his country and the industrious tradesman.”³⁷

Despite its patriotic prose, this letter presents a quandary. Firstly, it transforms a criticism of the dancing assembly into a question of far greater scope, and even its comic undertones cannot diminish the sense that the author doth protest too much. In many respects, it follows true to form in allying the tradesman with the patriot, the humble with

³⁶ The General Advertiser, Feb 16, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

³⁷ The General Advertiser, Feb 21, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

the exalted. The author, though evidently a gentleman, takes care to remark that he willingly associates with men of all stations in life. Nor does he adopt the scholarly tenor of which he was clearly capable, but instead deploys the conceit of simplicity. However, its publication date in late February, 1793 puts the letter in the midst of a storm of uncertainty and discontent on the international scene. Louis XVI had been placed on trial in France, and the outcome, it was thought, might sound the death-knell for monarchy everywhere. “Great apprehensions of the approaching dissolution of monarchy, are entertained by its warmest advocates,” insisted a Boston paper. “So confident is poor George himself, of soon losing his Crown, that he frequently starts from his slumbers, to inquire of his Wife—if his head is on?”³⁸

Across the Channel in Paris, Louis had already been beheaded, but the news would not reach America until March, and in the meanwhile newspapers printed and reprinted every scrap of information on his fate. Some presented abridged coverage of the debates in the Convention on whether to try, then whether to execute, the king.³⁹ Incorrect reports of Louis’s acquittal and escape flew through the American press, appearing in Philadelphia, Wilmington, New York, Boston, and other significant urban centers.⁴⁰ Extracted letters from Paris reported that “the drum was beaten...inviting the Citizens to signify their wishes for the death of Louis XVI. The drum was followed by a great number of incendiaries, who were stirring up the people against the National

³⁸ American Apollo, Feb. 22, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

³⁹ The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, Jan. 17, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁴⁰ The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register, Feb. 6, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

Convention.... The Section of Marseilles...went still further. They were so audacious as to declare themselves in a state of insurrection.”⁴¹

In this atmosphere, the word “Citizen” carried disconcerting connotations of French rebellion against the very monarch whose funds and troops had won American independence. Certainly, it could be—and often was—employed without any ulterior motive, but as it could also be a highly provocative term, “citizen” must be judged within the context of each individual piece. The author of the editorial in The General Advertiser repeats this word and pointedly connects it to lower elements of society inhabiting a barber shop—a fateful choice indeed, when the French king had just bowed down to an oversized razor. Fateful, too, that the letter was provoked by an invocation of the political power of dance, when a popular dance, the carmagnole, was shortly to become a rallying point for the citizens of France and a frightful symbol for European governments from Belgium to Italy.⁴²

Thus, a number of possibilities present themselves: the content may represent a genuine effort to promote the rustic, republican values of the United States; it may hint at the dangers of egalitarianism lurking beneath patriotic rhetoric; or it may intend to draw the American and French republics into comparison, with the American emerging as the peaceful, commonsensical champion. No matter what its purpose, it illustrates the volatile potential of dance in a time when traditional symbols of aristocracy were undergoing rapid and drastic revision worldwide. A republican in France, J.B. Leclerc, expressed this sentiment in an essay “on the propagation of music in France,” asserted his reviewer. “He supposes,” reads the review, “that were a tyrant to deprive the Paris

⁴¹ The Diary or Loudon’s Register, Feb. 22, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁴² Massachusetts Mercury, April 20, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers; The Federal Gazette, and Philadelphia Evening Post, May 20, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

people of their public shows, their play-houses, concerts, dances &c. any bold genius might, on that account, raise an insurrection, and draw about him 30,000 men, ready to obey his orders. In this opinion he is well founded.” The story, originally circulated in Paris, appeared in a Philadelphia paper a few months later.⁴³

The *carmagnole* made its way across the Atlantic as well. Dancers in Charleston, South Carolina performed it, and its lyrics were printed in translation in a Massachusetts newspaper.⁴⁴ The translation bore little resemblance to the original words, and may have been taken from a later revision that better suited the evolving political struggle. Its mentions of “Dumourier” and “Brunswick” place it securely in the context of 1793-94, a period rife with terror and conspiracy theories. Career army officer Charles-François Dumouriez’s French forces had vanquished the Austrians at the Battle of Jemappes, but allegations of disloyalty later resulted in his exile. Supposedly, he promoted one of two royalist plots to place foreign dignitaries on the French throne, the other of which involved the English Duke of Brunswick.⁴⁵ It may be significant that the *carmagnole* was thought to have been danced at Jemappes in celebration of the Republican victory.

However, the translator may also have consciously tailored his work for an American audience. Its language would likely appeal to their particular sense of liberty without discomforting them with references to brutality and bloodshed. The widely accepted French lyrics to the *carmagnole* involved throat-slitting, burning, and mildly lewd imagery. Considering the high percentage of French immigrants to America, it is reasonable to presume that the correct French lyrics were known, at least to some. The

⁴³ The Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser, Sept. 24, 1796, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁴⁴ North-Carolina Journal, Aug. 7, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁴⁵ Simon Schama, Citizens (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 642, 713, 753, 808

English version, however, recalled the heroism, justice, and personal liberty of a struggle that was at once classical and divinely-sanctioned.

Loud thundering cannons rend the air,
To march ye warlike sons prepare
Heroes of patriot flame
While rushing on to fame,
Dance oh the Carmagnole...
In vain those millions of our foes
In impious union leagued, oppose;
But dangers, death and fire
No slavish fears inspire⁴⁶

Readers in Massachusetts, or any other state, would have responded emotionally to the invocation of slavery that concludes these verses; their own Revolutionary propaganda had regularly charged King George III with enslaving his people through taxes and laws, and ironically, Americans may have feared slavery most because they knew best just what it entailed. Further mentions of laurels neatly tied the translation to notions of classical virtue prevalent in both the American and French republics, presenting those nations as heirs to glories past.

With the French population on the rise and the Revolution debated in the press, it would have been impossible for Americans to dance the Carmagnole in ignorance of its political connotations. That it *was* featured in ballrooms in the United States—and greeted with a spirit of jubilation, according to some sources—indicates the power of the Revolution to sweep along even foreign populations, not merely with rhetoric, but with physical participation. More than when perusing a newspaper editorial, an American who valued the abstract principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity could feel at one with a larger cause in a ballroom. There, he and his companions could express their solidarity with the Third Estate through rousing song and dance, their gathering as much

⁴⁶ The Medley, Dec. 19, 1794, in America's Historical Newspapers

a demonstration as are today's many marches on Washington. Collective actions of this kind would carry all the more importance when the actual reform effort was inaccessible.

The romanticization of the Revolution faded in the southern states as the decade drew to a close, if the paper The Medley gave an accurate assessment. "The current of public opinion is taking a new direction in the southern States. –In places where but a few months since every throat vociferated *ça ira*, and every "fantastic toe" shuffled to the *Carmagnole*: –nothing is now heard but execrations against the whole French nation and government."⁴⁷ While this piece gives no hints as to the cause of public fickleness towards France, other editions prove enlightening. Several failures of diplomacy had characterized the Franco-American relationship during the early months of 1797. America's pro-England Jay Treaty had rankled French authorities for years, while the U.S. had objected to the non-recognition of its ambassador to the Directory government and the seizures of American commercial vessels by the French. In early July, The Medley reprinted a letter from France's Minister of Justice that had further impeded amicable relations: "Let your Government, return to a sense of what is due... to its true friends...and let it break the incomprehensible treaty, which on the 19th Nov. 1794, it concluded with our most implacable enemies, and then the French Republic will cease to take advantage of this treaty which favors England at its expense."⁴⁸ The resulting rupture became known as the Quasi-War, an undeclared conflict conducted at sea. Clear celebration of the existing French government, through word, music, or dance, would understandably decline.

⁴⁷ The Medley, July 21, 1797, in America's Historical Newspapers

⁴⁸ The Medley, July 7, 1797, in America's Historical Newspapers

Interestingly, the word “Carmagnole” took on further political significance in America beyond the dance and popular song. At least in New York, it came to represent a Frenchman with republican sympathies. “Last Wednesday evening, about 7 o’clock,” read a report, “as M. De La Croix, a planter of Hispaniola, was walking very peaceably through Rutger Street, three French Carmagnoles, perceiving he had no cockade in his hat, came behind him with drawn swords, swore they would kill him, struck him on the head and very dangerously wounded him.”⁴⁹ It is entirely possible that the unfortunate De La Croix mentioned here was the same man who later rented his rooms to dancing master Mr. Dupart.

“La Petite Paisanne Cotillion (The Little Peasant Girl)”

The term “country dance” lent itself to what was perhaps willful misinterpretation. Wrote Paul Gemsage for the Columbian Herald:

We have a species of dancing amongst us, which is commonly called *country dancing*...by which we are led to imagine that it is a rustic way of dancing, borrowed from *country people or peasants*, and this, I suppose, is generally taken to be the meaning of it. But this is not the case, for as our dances in general come from France, so does the country dance, which is a manifest corruption of the French *contredanse*, where a number of persons placing themselves opposite one to another begin a figure.⁵⁰

Gemsage failed to attract much audience for his clarification, it seems, in an America ready to embrace the pristine, hopeful, fruitful countryside. A romanticized vision of pastoral life equated the country with virtue and fit perfectly with the new nation’s desired self-image; dance could be employed as a messenger to spread this image. One dancing master, presumably an immigrant from France, both instructed pupils in the French language and advertised the following pageant-like recital.⁵¹ “On the 3d of

⁴⁹ Vermont Gazette, Dec. 27, 1793, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁵⁰ Columbian Herald, June 22, 1785, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁵¹ The Providence Journal, and Town and Country Advertiser, Dec. 18, 1799, in America’s Historical Newspapers

September next... will be performed *The Queen of the Rose, or the Reward of Virtue*; being a Pastoral Divertissement, such as is executed annually at Salency, a small Village of France.” In this “divertissement,” M. Desforges scholars danced two quadrilles, “the first of Pâtres with Garlands, and the second of Shepherdesses with Cerceaux, adorned with flowers.” Also included were a minuet, French cotillions, and a “Theatrical Country-Dance.”⁵² Similarly, Mr. St. Aivre at the City Tavern in New York offered a series of concerts and operas with dancing components, each followed by a grand ball. He and his associates performed *Le Devin du Village* (The Village Seer), *Les Deux Chasseurs* (The Two Huntsmen), *Le Tonnellier* (The Cooper), *La Latiere* (The Milk Maid), a dance entitled *Le Sabottiere* (The Shoemaker), another called *La Jardinier Italienne* (The Italian Gardiner), and even featured “PETER the Indian” whose “performance will be intermixed with curious and striking steps, according to the nicest taste of the French stage dancers.”⁵³ The professional backgrounds of these men and their choice of material contributed to a rise of conscious theatricality in American ballrooms. The same sentimental trends that, in France, produced Marie Antoinette’s cottages and perfumed sheep could, in America, be manipulated to unite the refinement of Europe with the suggestion of a virtuous working and middle class.

Newspaper articles also trumpeted the bucolic pleasures of country gatherings, seeming to equate them with the nation itself. The “country” in “country dance” held a double-meaning. This picture of a country dance appeared in New York, Philadelphia, and several other cities: “On a spacious lawn, bounded on every side by a profusion of the most odoriferous flowering shrubs, a joyous band of villagers were assembled; the

⁵² The Providence Gazette, Aug. 25, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁵³ New York Daily Gazette, Nov. 20, 1790; Feb. 18, 1791; Mar. 10, 1791; and Mar. 30, 1791, in America’s Historical Newspapers

young men dressed in green; youth, health, and pleasure in the air . . .” America stretched westward for unknown expanses, overflowing with nature’s bounty. The vigor of its young men filled it with promise for the future. “Between the arbors seats of moss for their parents . . . who seem to live anew again . . . in their children with the benevolent looks of the noble bestowers of the feast” The nation provided rest for the aging and weary whose valiant deeds had birthed it, and the venerable swelled with pride and hope as they bequeathed their work to a new generation. The author concludes, “[It] filled my eyes with tears, and my swelling heart with a sensation of pure, yet lively transport, to which the joys of the courtly belles are mean.”⁵⁴ With one sentence, the account encourages patriotic sentiments and dismisses monarchism as shallow and frivolous. In addition to its allegorical value, this piece serves as a defense of dance. Innocent revels such as those described were surely appropriate to a republic and in no way indicative of courtly decadence as some might claim. Indeed, country dances could be held high as an embodiment of those qualities that made America great.

It is, perhaps, significant that this piece circulated at the turn of the century, the dawn of a new age in several ways. Not only did the world embark upon a fresh era, but 1800 marked an election year—what would come to be regarded by many as a “Revolution” in American government. After its first printing in 1794, “The Country Dance” was resurrected at least nine times between 1796 and 1801 as tensions mounted over divisive presidential elections, the second of which, in 1800, would be the most contested for two centuries. Thomas Jefferson, candidate for the Republican party, favored agricultural interests and hoped to be considered an advocate for the common man, the “people’s friend,” as one song would phrase it. Adams, on the other hand,

⁵⁴ The Philadelphia Minerva, March 25, 1797, in America’s Historical Newspapers

advocated trade with Great Britain against French interests, a powerful navy, and other measures consistent with a strong centralized authority. The nation held its breath, uncertain until the last moment of which philosophy would capture the laurels of victory. After the electors' votes were tallied, Federalist Adams went down in clear defeat, but Republicans Jefferson and Aaron Burr still vied for the office of President. Thirty-five ballots in the Senate could not break the tie, but the thirty-sixth, with some political maneuvering, favored Jefferson. Power had passed from the Federalist party to the Republican party without violence or significant domestic unrest, and Jefferson would later tout the event as the "Revolution of 1800."⁵⁵

Throughout this process, the propaganda war between Jefferson's supporters and those of his incumbent opponent took on an unusually vicious character, especially in partisan newspapers. Though most papers leaned Federalist, Republicans benefited from a loosely-organized network of printers who shared materials and perpetuated information (and misinformation) with a rapidity that alarmed their Federalist adversaries.⁵⁶ If widely circulated, even a benign portrait of halcyon rural existence might impress upon voters the need to protect and preserve the farms and village communities in which resided—supposedly—the true American spirit. Indeed, the symbolism of "The Country Dance" could have served either party equally well, presenting each as the protector of traditional values regardless of their actual policy. Though it is unclear whether its publishers intended their "Rural Picture" to serve such a

⁵⁵ James E. Lewis Jr., "What is to Become of Our Government?" *The Revolutionary Potential of the Election of 1800*, in James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Revolution of 1800* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 3, 13, 21

⁵⁶ Jeffrey L. Pasley, "1800 As a Revolution in Political Culture," in James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Revolution of 1800* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 126, 138-142

propagandistic purpose, there is no question that it *could* have. The Centinel of Freedom, which printed the piece after the fact, in 1801, was unabashedly Republican. Elijah Russell initially vowed that his publication, The Mirroure, would remain unbiased, but he briefly reneged and re-titled it The Federal Mirror from April 10, 1795 to sometime in early 1797.⁵⁷ His justification for the change leaves some room for interpretation, however, as he claimed to represent “REAL Republicans” and “Friends of THE PEOPLE.”⁵⁸ Samuel Trumbull, editor of the Journal of the Times, declared his paper impartial, despite rumors to the contrary at its inception, and abided by that promise.⁵⁹ Presumably, he was able to draw readers from the full range of the political spectrum who might have read into the vignette what they saw fit.

Satirical writers used the medium of dance to ridicule not only unpopular political positions, but the behavior of those who held them. In the aftermath of the Jay Treaty controversy, an “ode, composed for the Fourth of July, calculated for the meridian of some Country Towns in Massachusetts, and Rye in New-Hampshire,” made the rounds of newspapers in the northeast. The Mohawk Mercury made its mockery two-fold, presenting it as an “Euterpean Rill,” or that which relates to Euterpe, Greek muse of song and lyric poetry. America’s classical pretensions looked foolish when the “Herald of the United States” went on to discuss a rough and rowdy rural dance with startling political overtones.

To day we dance to tiddle diddle;
—Here comes Sambo with his fiddle.
Sambo, take a dram of whisky,
And play up Yankee Doodle frisky.
Moll, come leave your witched tricks,
And let us have a reel of six...

⁵⁷ The Mirroure, Sept. 6, 1792, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁵⁸ The Federal Mirror, April 10, 1795, in America’s Historical Newspapers

⁵⁹ Journal of the Times, Oct. 10, 1798, in America’s Historical Newspapers

Sambo, play and dance with quality
This is the day of blest equality.
Father and *mother* are but men,
And Sambo—is a *citizen*
Come foot it, Sal—Moll, figure in
And, mother, you dance up to him;
Now saw as fast as e'er you can do
And, father, you cross o'er to Sambo.⁶⁰

The democratic attributes of country dance that corresponded so well to revolutionary principles twenty years before take on a more dubious role in this excerpt; no other form of dancing could have expressed it so clearly or been so broadly understood. The author stresses the bridging of gender and racial boundaries that logically accompany “blest equality”: mother has become a man, and a slave musician and a patriarch stand together. “There is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female,” as Paul wrote to the Galatians.⁶¹ Ironically, this highlights the continued inequality and limitations of American society, for these interactions can only take place on Independence Day.

Whether the author considered this lively celebration a dream or a nightmare, however, is ambiguous due to the satirical nature of his poetry. Later in the “ode,” the dancers give a series of toasts, drinking to the French, the guillotine, anti-Federalist Representative Albert Gallatin, Jacobins, James Madison, “southern Demos [Democrats], who represent our brother negroes,” and “confusion to the [Jay] treaty.” Together with the generally uproarious nature of the gathering, these toasts support an interpretation of the piece as Federalist in sympathies. The dancers ride “blundering” beasts and drink themselves “blind,” probably metaphors for their unthinking political lives. Though not portrayed as despicable for their Republicanism, they are figures of fun for whom independence carries none of its nobler connotations. A different portrayal of country

⁶⁰ The Mohawk Mercury, Nov. 22, 1796, in America's Historical Newspapers

⁶¹ The Holy Bible, King James version. Galatians 3: 28, in the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. <<http://etext.virginia.edu>>

life emerges here: a life that is ignorant, inebriated, and disorderly, its democracy bordering on the anarchy of the French Revolution.

Sambo's description as a "citizen" is a particularly revealing moment. The French republican government had recently abolished slavery, its decision ratified in February, 1794. This decision may have significantly altered the course of the famous slave revolt in San Domingue, which had begun in 1791 and developed into a conflict between French, Spanish, and English forces over control of the island. Supplying uniforms and weapons, Spain and England encouraged the insurgents, among them general Toussaint Louverture, in their rebellion against the established authorities. After France committed itself to abolition, however, Louverture reconsidered, and allied himself with the Republic. A number of other revolutionary leaders did the same, although it is possible to make too much of this shift. "The policy of arming slaves probably ensured slavery's destruction," as European powers courted black allies, believes David Geggus. "Thereafter, the international conflict continued to... promote the formation of a black military that would defeat attempts to restore slavery and finally would take the colony to independence."⁶² In America, newspapers and French émigrés continuously refreshed this prominent, ongoing image of slaves as citizens and soldiers.

Sambo's bow is of the musical, not the armament variety; his steps form a dance, not a march. Nonetheless, his and Moll's active and equal participation in the dance with their presumable masters suddenly takes on a much more imminent character. Though the piece cloaks its commentary in heavy satire, its comical scene was no laughing matter to Americans in the 1790s. Many owned slaves themselves, and many others interacted

⁶² David Geggus, "The Arming of Slaves in the Haitian Revolution," in Christopher Leslie Brown, ed., Arming Slaves: from Classical Times to the Modern Age (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 226-229

with émigrés and observed the results of the San Domingue clash in their daily lives: displacement, loss of property, loss of livelihood. Usurpation of place—whether physical or social—lent itself well to representation as a dance. The immediacy of the scenario presented in this poem must have left readers feeling threatened and willing to embrace the party that would prevent such upheaval.

Two months later, a similar poem appeared whose political purpose was less blatant, but which again confirmed the leveling effect of country dance and lampooned America's invocation of the classical. It imagined a "rustick" ball managed "with formality/We'll not have any but the quality," but then achieved comic effect by extending invitations to practically everyone: "the Squire and Lawyer," "Dick Dapperwit the Lady's man," "Benny Bumpkin," "Miss Betty Bilbo...the heiress," "Macaronies" (with mild contempt), and most surprisingly, "Peter Grievous with his black wife." An element of violence surfaces here as the narrator makes an aside to the effect that said wife "ought long since to've had the Jack knife," or presumably, been murdered. The name "Grievous" reflects the couple's miscegenation, and it is only their substantial income that secures an invitation. Despite this unsettling passage, the narrator continues with assurances that the most stoic Greek philosopher would declare this company akin to the angels: "a most seraphick circle!"⁶³ It is an opinion that the author of the piece would certainly not have shared. Once again, truth hides within the caricatures. Simple, primitive country folk do not abide by refined social forms, a fact adeptly illustrated through their interactions in a dance that renders everyone an equal. Comparing *these* Americans and their principles to those of the lofty Greeks is a laughable exercise.

⁶³ The New Hampshire Journal, Sep. 6, 1796, in America's Historical Newspapers

During an era that modern Americans tend to view rosily, political tensions spilled over into every facet of life. Even without the literal battles between Tory and Patriot, dance remained politically-charged with metaphorical wars between Federalists and Republicans. They crossed swords over important ground: nothing less than the character of the new nation that both sides had sacrificed to create. As Americans re-imagined themselves, the French added a new dimension, representing at first the best and then the worst of European culture in a revolution whose lofty principles were spattered with gore. Advertisements for popular French dancing masters, published almost alongside depictions of dancers espousing Jacobin anarchy, highlighted the profound split in American sympathies.

The struggle to define oneself often begins with defining what one is *not*, and this principle held true for Federal America. Racial animosity began to creep into dance rhetoric in a new way. Whereas complaints about the Ethiopian Ball in Charleston in 1782 had conveyed indignation and a sense of betrayal, the language employed in descriptions of Sambo and Mrs. Grievous suggested something more sinister. Sambo was a caricature of ignorance and a warning against social leveling; Mrs. Grievous provoked repugnance, violence, and hints of sexual perversity. The confusion, discontentment, and fear in American politics found release and expression through the medium and symbolism of dance.

Conclusions: “The Merry Conclusion”

Dance cannot be dismissed as merely an incidental entertainment, unrelated to broader political intent. Its influence extending far beyond McNeill’s “muscular bonding,” dance has served as a crucial component of socio-political life and political counter-cultural movements throughout history. The literal or figurative ballroom can be creatively adapted to a variety of uses: a public forum for the airing of grievances, or a battleground for competing political factions. If harnessed, dance wields the potential to function as a tool of oppression, coercion, cohesion, or revolution, as its uses in the late eighteenth century attest.

In British America dance featured prominently in the lives of colonists of all ranks up and down the coast. No one from the governor’s mansion to the slave quarters would have underestimated its social importance. Though the cost and urban location of dancing assemblies may have limited attendance by the middling and lower orders, those admitted to the ballroom gained a rough degree of equality. Balls commenced by reinforcing standing social order as the highest ranking male and female partnered for the minuet, but this hierarchy crumbled as the evening progressed into country dances. The democratic character of English country dance flattened social distinctions, and additional social leveling occurred through the practice of partnering by lots, which might easily result in the complete mingling of classes.

Each attendee at a ball served dual functions of performer and critic. A proficient (or a disastrous) minuet might raise or lower the performer in the esteem of the company. Rising merchants and tradesmen began to enter into realms of fashion and refinement that had once been associated with nobility, pursuing dance lessons during evening hours

and displaying their talents at balls. Lessons were a worthy investment indeed, in a culture where familiarity with dance steps signaled one's sophistication, and a confident performance might open important lines of communication with social superiors. Ballrooms facilitated close, familiar contact and a jury of peers unavailable in any other setting.¹

Unlike most social arenas, the ballroom often accorded women an unusual degree of power. Specifically, they wielded power over their choice of partners, their selection of dances, and their speech. These choices would have been limited under a number of circumstances, as in the case of partners chosen on the lottery system, or of the lady at the top of the set selecting each dance. Additionally, a woman who refused to dance with one man would be considered rude if she then stood up with another. If such rules were rigidly adhered to, a woman, by rebuffing a potential partner, might preclude dancing for the rest of the evening. However, it seems highly unlikely that this eventuality occurred much in practice. Because of the role of the ballroom in courtship rituals, dancers were bound to take some liberties, and women were not only permitted, but encouraged to interact and make conversation with the other members of their set.

"It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth Bennet chides her partner in Pride and Prejudice, "*I* talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples"² Only in the social realm, in many ways a female dominion, were women expected to speak their minds to men; only there could they, like Miss Bennet, literally demand a man's attention.

Women dressed to attract notice and hoped to impress with their grace and presence. A

¹ Bushman, p. xiv, describes the dual nature—performer and critic—of Americans seeking upward mobility through the acquisition of goods and behaviors associated with refinement.

² Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, (Garden City, New York, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1945), 93

woman skilled in all the arts of presentation could become an axis point around which a ball turned. Women who contributed their efforts to the organization of a gathering exerted an even greater influence over its attendees, music, and other diversions such as card rooms and refreshments.

With so many avenues for expression and so much potential for sparring, North American ballrooms on the eve of the American Revolution were ripe to serve as staging grounds for political demonstrations. These might be subtle or glaring, individual or communal, active or passive, but whatever the case, their power was widely appreciated. The ballroom was a venue for winning friends and influencing people, so much so that the British approached it as another variety of battleground. Howe's *Mischianza* and Clinton's theatrical troupes exemplify this endeavor. Women, viewed as conduits to the opinions of men, became particular targets of British attention. Through her decisions at a ball, as well as through her dress and speech, a woman could boldly declare her political loyalties. By boycotting an assembly or declining to dance, a group of women might even—for all intents and purposes—shut down the proceedings.

During the Revolution, many Americans strove to differentiate themselves from the Mother Country, claiming attributes such as frugality and order which Britain was apparently without. The realm of dance had come under attack periodically for at least a century, seen by some ministers as the antithesis of these noble qualities, encouraging opulence, irreverence, and lasciviousness. It seems that the British threat achieved what the ministers could not, for accounts of dancing began to stress the simplicity and decorum of the occasions and, whenever applicable, the homespun gowns and coats of the attendees.

In the wake of revolution, images of dance assumed an equally political, but more abstract purpose. Many dances took as their namesake the illustrious figure of George Washington, who was instantly fêted and fetishized as an embodiment of the collective American character. The general suffused popular culture, becoming a rallying point for the masses; at a time when former colonists pondered their identity as citizens, Washington provided the answer to Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's now-famed query, "What, then, is the American, this new man?"³

Except for the occasional description of inaugural festivities, particularly in Washington's case, balls were not reviewed after the fact with their former pre-war frequency. The dearth of newspaper accounts reporting the events of real assemblies seems counterintuitive and may reflect a shift in the nature of newspapers as America transformed from colonies into a nation. Advertisements for dance lessons, after all, were on the rise, and familiarity with dance steps and structure continued to spread through the countryside. Though political maneuvering undoubtedly still took place in the ballroom, it may be the very ubiquity of dance that made specific reports less noteworthy. Instead, subscribers read of fictitious dances of either a utopian or a lawless bent, depending on the author's politics or nationalist vision. Political propaganda, disguised as poetic or satirical depictions of dance, was now accessible to an even broader swath of the population, especially with the expansion of the newspaper industry.

No shortage of such propaganda circulated in the press as America tried to establish its character both internally and with respect to foreign countries such as France and Britain. Federalists and Anti-Federalists—and later Republicans—competed for the

³ J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer, Reprinted from the Original Edition (Fox, New York, NY: Duffield & Co., 1904), p. 54

role of legitimate heirs to the promise of the Revolution. Unrest in France and the French colonies of the West Indies in the last decade of the century rendered dance unusually potent as a device by which to discredit Republican conceptions of equality and democracy. Due in part to the slave revolts of San Domingue, which drove many French-born Caribbean planters to the United States, the specter of racial tensions began to arise in Federalist rhetoric.

The comparison of the Ethiopian Ball in Charleston in 1782 with the “Herald of the United States,” as reported by New Hampshire’s Mowhawk Mercury in 1796, highlights the new centrality of race. Shared notions of race allowed white Britons and loyalists to design the perfect insult for their rebel counterparts: the Ethiopian Ball, its ladies slaves or fugitive slaves, allegorically thumbed its nose at patriot pretensions and lofty principles, piquing colonists from Georgia to New Hampshire. In the wake of the Jay Treaty and the hostility between supporters of Britain and France in the 1790s, race connoted more than an insult: the image of a fiddling Sambo and frisky Moll seemed intended to link race, dance, and the breakdown of society. It is tempting to wonder whether Rome/America burned behind Sambo as he played! Country dance, in this view, became a metaphor for anarchy and miscegenation. The classical simplicity embraced during the war years served as a counterpoint, however, presenting a pure and orderly portrait of dance from the Republican perspective.

Modern students of history recognize the prominent position that popular culture and the fine and performing arts hold as avenues of political expression. Regarding Francisco Goya’s evocative “The Third of May, 1808,” for instance, an observer would immediately recognize the political statement that inheres in it: Napoleon’s soldiers,

faceless and shadowed, level their bayonets at a desperate Spaniard, a Christ-like figure clad in bright white with his arms outstretched.⁴ Likewise, in the musical realm, Franz Kotzwara's "The Battle of Prague" would give rise to thoughts of patriotism, virtue, and valor among its European listeners in the 1780s.⁵ Both works were presented to an observant public for their consumption and interpretation. These art forms, along with theatre, have long been acknowledged as vehicles for political communication. Dance, though equally deserving of attention, has somehow gone largely unnoticed. What makes dance distinctive is not so much the purpose it served as the way that purpose was executed. Unlike paintings and orchestral masterpieces, where the audience was largely passive, the public actively participated in the creation of ballroom politics. They determined and revised its meaning to suit present circumstances in a way that static art could never accomplish.

⁴ Rose-Marie Hagen and Rainer Hagen, Francisco Goya, 1746-1828 (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2003), p. 57-62

⁵ Richard James Will, The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 190

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