

Fictions of the Courtly Self: French Ballet in the Age of Louis XIV

ELLEN R. WELCH

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA

Court ballet after the Fronde has been understood as a technique for subjugating nobles, literally and metaphorically keeping them dancing in the monarch's orbit. This essay reconsiders ballet's role in fabricating aristocratic identities under Louis XIV through a reading of the performances of two celebrated English dancers (the Dukes of York and Buckingham) in the *Ballet royal de la nuit* (1653). These performers' status as outsiders and as court celebrities with well-known personalities highlights the dancers' influence over the roles they incarnated on the ballet stage. The body types and especially the self-fashioned social personas of performers were the raw material to which court artists added costume, choreography, and poetic text to create ballet characters. Dancers therefore acted as implicit collaborators in creating their onstage personas. Drawing upon Performance Studies' re-interrogation of the dynamics of subjection and agency in embodied practices, the analysis of the English dancers' unique case allows us to speculate about the degree of autonomy afforded to all noble performers and, more broadly, to consider how ballet expresses the mutual interdependence of sovereigns and nobles in court society.

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Scholarship on early modern court ballet, particularly as practised during Louis XIV's reign, often categorizes dancers into a stark dichotomy: on the one hand, the monarch crafts his splendid self-image through performance; on the other hand, nobles are passively conscripted into enacting a choreography of

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subjection.¹ For performers other than the monarch, dance appears to function chiefly as a form of spectacular submission. Ballet has been described as an essential practice for the civilization of the aristocratic body,² as a ‘technique [...] giving concrete form to the courtier type’,³ and even as a peace-time training regime for noble warriors.⁴ Characterizing dance as a means of aristocratic repression under absolutism, these compelling analyses do justice to the tremendous discipline and hours of training required to produce the virtuosic steps and synchronized choreographies of court ballet. Yet, they also over-generalize in imagining that dance produced a universal courtly body, uniformly subjected to the social, political, and aesthetic constraints represented by Baroque dance. The aristocrats who performed alongside their king were charged with displaying the dignity and humility required by their station. But they performed this role in a variety of bodies — taller and shorter, stronger and weaker, older and younger. Their performances, moreover, were filtered through their diverse personalities. How might imagining and attending to these subtle individuations in noble performance reopen the question of noble autonomy — in ballet, but also, potentially, in their political relationships?

Dynamics of subjection and agency have long animated work in Performance Studies, particularly in examinations of everyday embodied experience. What Marcel Mauss termed ‘techniques of the body’ reflect cultural conditioning, particularly with regard to the expression of gender and social identities.⁵ Yet, as Carrie Noland writes, ‘kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained’.⁶ Physiological difference as well as the profoundly subjective experience of proprioception — ‘a body [...] afforded a chance to feel itself moving through space’ — produce variations in the manifestation of cultural scripts.⁷ Attention to such subtle distinctions may suggest answers to Noland’s question: ‘How does individual human agency exert itself despite the enormous pressure of social conditioning?’⁸

¹ Early seventeenth-century ballet has, of course, been characterized as offering more freedom to the individual dancer as compared to post-Fronde performances. See, for example, Mark Franko’s analysis of the ‘choreographic struggle between dance and text’ in ‘burlesque’ ballets, particularly under Louis XIII, in his *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5. In a different vein, Alison Calhoun explores Louis XIII’s ballet performances as expressions of emotion and interiority in ‘Affective Sovereignty in Louis XIII’s Royal Ballet’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 55.3 (2016), 343–61.

² Georges Vigarello, ‘The Upward Training of the Body from the Age of Chivalry to Court Civility’, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. by Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, 3 vols (New York: Zone, 1989), II, p. 156.

³ ‘Une des techniques qui a le plus contribué à concrétiser le type du courtisan est le ballet de cour’. Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le Roi-machine: spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981), p. 59.

⁴ Kate Van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 103.

⁵ Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1950), pp. 365–72.

⁶ Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 2–3.

⁷ Noland, p. 1.

⁸ Noland, p. 1.

Posing this question about an artistic performance rather than the quotidian rehearsal of gestural routines introduces new complications. Court ballet did, of course, implicate everyday modes of aristocratic embodiment. The discipline of dance trained the noble body to adopt an upright posture and graceful gestures even when offstage.⁹ The physical aesthetic of court culture manifested itself equally in daily performance and in ballet demonstrations. Yet a scripted ballet entailed further levels of control, including choreography dictated by a dancing master and, especially, fictional character roles imposed by the librettist. Despite these multiple layers of constraint, evidence suggests that noble dancers brought significant individual variations in physiology, personality, and expression to their roles. The desire to distinguish oneself at court through displays of virtuosity provided one motive for individuation, as ballet provided a heightened stage for aristocratic self-fashioning.¹⁰ Early modern manuals on courtiership recommended that nobles cultivate dance as one of the ‘ornaments’ of their rank.¹¹ The case of François de Beauvilliers, duc de Saint-Aignan, whose dancing prowess played a role in his appointment as *premier gentilhomme de la Chambre du roi* and elevation to duke, demonstrates how an aptitude for ballet could significantly further a courtier’s career.¹² Casting practices, furthermore, took into account the traits and qualities of individual performers. Noting that the most dignified performers usually received the most majestic roles, Jesuit theorist and ballet historian Claude-François Ménesrier observed that ‘depuis que les Ballets ont été rétablis en France, nos Rois & nos Reines n’ont pris que des personnages illustres de Divinitez, de Heros, ou d’Heroïnes’.¹³ The concern for ‘appropriateness’ seen throughout theoretical writing about ballet is reflected in cast lists that typically assigned the roles of cherubs to child dancers, nymphs to young ladies, and statelier parts to older performers. Except in cases of ‘cross-casting’ against type for comic effect, ballet organizers matched roles to the body and station of the performer.

Finally, starting in the 1650s, ballet libretti often called attention to the social identities of noble dancers, turning the spotlight away from the king toward particular members of his court. Libretti identified performers by name and playfully alluded to facets of their offstage lives such as their rank or marital status, or to physical traits such as age, size or complexion. As Julia Prest remarks, these techniques encouraged the spectator to ‘keep both person and persona in mind simultaneously’ and to

⁹ Sarah Cohen, *Art, Dance, and the Body in French Culture of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 17.

¹⁰ ‘Self-fashioning’ entails a ‘self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process’ and consists in creating ‘a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving’. Yet this creative process takes place, for Greenblatt, within highly limiting constraints imposed by society and culture. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹¹ Margaret McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 17.

¹² Pierre Gatulle, ‘Le Corps guerrier, le corps dansant et l’esprit galant: François de Beauvilliers, duc de Saint-Aignan (1610-1687)’, *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche du château de Versailles* (2013). Available at <crcv.revues.org> [accessed 3 October 2015].

¹³ Claude-Françoise Ménesrier, *Des ballets anciens et modernes selon les règles du théâtre* (Paris: René Guignard, 1682), p. 169.

consider the relationship between the figure represented and the dancer embodying the role.¹⁴ During a ballet performance, the audience had occasion to focus on several individual courtiers in turn and to reflect not only on their physical appearance and dancing ability but also on their personality and status in the courtly community. Throughout these different aspects of ballet production, then, the dancing noble appears not as an anonymous courtier function, an icon of subjection, but as a unique and somewhat active participant in the creation of the choreographic work.

The iconic *Ballet royal de la nuit* (1653) presents an early and especially rich case study for exploring this tension between subjection and autonomy in its creation of roles for noble performers. Famous for producing the most powerful symbol of monarchical supremacy in its casting of the young Louis XIV in the role of the Rising Sun, it also incorporated striking examples of independent, not to say resistant, aristocratic performance. The specific historical conditions of the *Ballet de la nuit*'s staging heightened these tensions. The entertainment depicting the shadowy, sometimes spooky activities of the night was meant to celebrate the end the Fronde. Organized by the king's Superintendent of Pleasures Louis Hesselin, with a libretto by poet and dramatist Isaac de Benserade, the entertainment was divided into four parts, each corresponding to one of the three-hour 'watch' shifts of the night. Over the course of the performance a spectator could witness an array of nocturnal activities: twilight shopping in Parisian boutiques, the 'court of miracles' when 'crippled' mendicants come out to play under cover of darkness, evening entertainments, moon rise, occult activities, and the illusions of dreams. Patterned on a narrative of darkness leading to redemption, the ballet culminated with Louis's star-turn as the sun, allegorizing the triumph of order over disorder.¹⁵ The final scene's celestial imagery announced a new day for the French kingdom and vividly expressed the new era's political relationships, centrally organized around the person of the monarch.

This powerful narrative of monarchical glorification is complicated, however, by the presence of two dancers who stood apart from the domestic political universe. While the ballet worked to bring together the court community after the troubles of the Fronde, it also staged the French court's alliance with the Stuart royal family in exile from Oliver Cromwell's Republican Protectorate government. Two members of the English court — Charles II's brother, James, Duke of York, and his favourite, George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham — danced several roles in the ballet. This spectacular act of French hospitality has been read as a humbling gesture, showcasing the exiles to advertise the dangers of rebellion.¹⁶ Yet the

¹⁴ She continues: 'The performer is always double, appearing on stage as him/herself and in his/her role' (Julia Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006), p. 84).

¹⁵ As Michael Burden points out, however, the quantity of unsettling scenes and the use of the future tense in the poetic text for Louis's final dance portray the restoration of order as not yet fully realized. Michael Burden, 'A Spectacle for the King', in *Ballet de la Nuit: Rothschild B1/16/6*, ed. by Michael Burden and Jennifer Thorp (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2009), pp. 3–8.

¹⁶ Isaac de Benserade, *Ballet royal de la nuit, divisé en quatre parties, ou quatre veilles, et dansé par Sa Majesté le 23 février 1653* (Paris: Robert Ballard, 1653), p. 59. For an analysis of other lines of the libretto that specifically refer to the English Civil War, see Marie-Claude Canova-Green, *La Politique-spectacle au Grand Siècle: les rapports franco-anglais* (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1993), p. 106.

English dancers fit uneasily into the ballet's narrative of monarchical apotheosis. As guests rather than subjects of Louis XIV, and as members of a similar but slightly different court culture, York and Buckingham are singular examples of dancers who do not — indeed, must not — perform subjection to the King of France.

York and Buckingham thus represent exceptional cases of noble performance in Louis XIV's court ballet. Their exceptionality, though, provides an opportunity to rethink and re-theorize the tension between autonomy and subjection underlying aristocratic performance in general. Although their outsider status distinguishes them from the majority of noble participants in court ballet, the basic elements used to create their performances (costuming, choreography, poetry) were no different than those used for French nobles' solo roles. The Englishmen's unique status makes visible the ways in which the building-blocks of ballet performance could be used to evade an enactment of pure deference. This, in turn, raises questions about traditional readings of post-Fronde ballet as a straightforward practice of subjection. Personas inhabited on the stage fused a role created by artists working for the king with the physical form and personality traits cultivated by the individual dancer. Such fusion represents a form of implicit collaboration between monarch-supported artists and singular performers. These collaborative dynamics of role creation, in turn, offer a new possible theoretical model for articulating the subtle interplay of autonomy and subjection at work in the fabrication of the courtly self.

A clear if simple illustration of the interplay between self and script occurs in the performances of the Duke of York. He appeared twice in the *Ballet de la nuit*, once in the final grand ballet as a 'génie d'honneur' (a role with no text attached) and, earlier, in a more substantive role in the seventh entry of the fourth 'watch' of the ballet, depicting the occult activities of the darkest period of the night. Here he plays an 'amoureux transi' on his way with some fellows to consult an oracle about the destiny of his courtships. The character might seem like a less than flattering role for the English duke, suggesting an unmanly timidity inappropriate for the tall, strapping 20-year-old brother of a king. However, the verbal and musical dimensions of the role obviate those concerns. The score for the entry's music — a cut-time melody in F-major — suggests a gracious *gavotte*, a common dance style throughout Europe and one thought to express the moderation and self-assured comportment associated with aristocracy.¹⁷ The music, and the choreography it suggests, would allow York to project grace and confidence on stage.

The verses published to accompany this performance reinforce an image of strength. Composed in the first person, and designed to enhance the characterization

¹⁷ Wendy Hilton notes that the *gavotte*, *bourrée*, and *sarabande* were the most prominent dances used in court ballet in this period (1653-1663 (in *Dance and Music of Court and Theater: Selected Writings of Wendy Hilton* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), p. 37). The particular rhythm of the music for York's role — repeated dotted quarter/eighth note combinations — closely resembles the music for a 'gavotte anglica' or English *gavotte* composed by J.H. Schmelzer for a ballet at the Viennese court in the 1660s or 1670s. Music historians think that the national markers on the different gavottes in Schmelzer's ballet only indicated costume designs rather than 'ethnically' marked dances, but it is possible that this version of the gavotte evoked Englishness for a seventeenth-century audience. Meredith Ellis Little and Matthew Werley, 'Gavotte', *Grove Music Online* <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public/>> [accessed 5 October 2015].

implicit in costume and dance, the verses have the prince's persona declare: 'La gloire seule est ma Maistresse [...] Je veux faire des coups dignes d'elle & de moy'.¹⁸ The brave warrior sentiment expressed in these lines reflects qualities that the duke took care to incorporate in his own public image. As historian John Callow has shown, during his exile in France, York began deliberately fashioning his reputation as a capable soldier and evidently succeeded in convincing French generals such as Turenne of his stalwart valour.¹⁹ York's performance, then, represents a compromise or creative hybrid of interests: French anti-rebellion messaging joined to the self-fashioning agenda of the performer.²⁰

Every featured ballet performance in this era — not only foreign dignitaries' star turns — demanded such collaboration and compromise. The performance of scripted roles in court ballets entailed working with a tension between the artistic requirement to perform 'in character' and a social requirement for the noble dancer to give a virtuosic performance illustrating his personal prowess. This was particularly true in Louis XIV's reign. Whereas Renaissance ballets foregrounded group choreography as the materialization of the mystical energies and patterns of the universe,²¹ or in order to trace out shapes and letters for the spectator to decipher,²² court performances from the mid-seventeenth century onward used dance for the 'privileging of the body as spectacle' and for the demonstration of essential nobility and charisma.²³ Ballet performance served as one arena in which courtiers could distinguish themselves from other aristocrats by exhibiting natural grace and virtuosity.

At the same time as courtly dancers used ballet to perform their own sublimely noble personas, however, they also had to embody the character assigned to them by the script. Character became a crucial poetic element of court ballet in the seventeenth century, as artists and theorists reimagined ballet as a mimetic art. Whereas Renaissance court performance drew on neo-Platonic thought to assert the mystical powers of harmonious music combined with Pythagorean-inspired choreography, seventeenth-century theoretical texts explained how ballet represented nature and conveyed meaning. Nicolas Saint-Hubert's 1641 practical manual *De la manière de composer et faire réussir les ballets*, Michel de Pure's laudatory 1669 work *L'idée des spectacles anciens et modernes*, and especially Ménéstrier's *Des ballets anciens et modernes* and *Des représentations en musique* compared ballet to 'speaking paintings' ('peintures parlantes') or to 'mute theatre' ('comédies muettes').²⁴ Borrowing heavily from Aristotelian dramaturgical theory, they developed a

¹⁸ Benserade, p. 39.

¹⁹ John Callow, *The Making of King James II: The Formative Years of a Fallen King* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 63–64. Unfortunately, James's reputation as a warrior didn't quite live up to reality.

²⁰ For background on casting and choreography in the *Ballet de la nuit*, see Jennifer Thorp, 'Dances and Dancers in the *Ballet de La Nuit*', in *Ballet de la Nuit: Rothschild B1/16/6*, pp. 19–33.

²¹ Margaret McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour en France, 1581-1643* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1963), pp. 24–26, and *Dance in the Renaissance*, pp. 209–28.

²² Franko, pp. 15–30.

²³ Cohen, pp. 13–14.

²⁴ [Nicolas] Saint-Hubert, *La Manière de composer et faire réussir les ballets*, ed. by Marie-Françoise Christout (Geneva: Minkoff, 1993), p. 16; Michel Pure, *Idée des spectacles anciens et nouveaux* (Genève: Minkoff, 1972), p. 210; Ménéstrier, p. 138.

prescriptive poetics for the ballet genre focused on verisimilitude and transparency. Of course, seventeenth-century ballets did not yet incorporate much in the way of plot, taking the form instead of a series of solo or small-group dances connected by theme. For these writers, therefore, the key locus for the representational work of ballet was to be found in the depiction of characters — generally speaking, mythological or allegorical figures or caricatured social types — who conveyed the thematic subject through costume, dance, and poetic text. All aspects of the performance had to support the legibility of the character's identity. When it came to costuming, for example, Saint-Hubert insisted: 'Il faut exactement prendre garde que chacun soit vestu suivant ce qu'il represente [...] Il seroit ridicule de voir un Vigneron vestu en broderie, & un Gentilhomme vestu de toile'.²⁵ Ménéstrier echoed this view: 'Comme le Ballet n'a que des Acteurs muets, il faut que leurs habits parlent pour eux, & les fassent connoistre aussi bien que leurs mouvemens'.²⁶ Appropriate dress guaranteed the verisimilitude of the representation and clearly communicated the 'subject' of the ballet to the audience.

Beyond the costumes they wore, dancers had a responsibility to help represent the character roles they were assigned through posture and movement. Dancers portraying featured characters in ballet relied on 'demonstrative dance' to make vividly present the ethos, intention, and emotional state of their personas. As described by Ménéstrier, demonstrative dance functioned as the choreographic equivalent of *enargeia* in rhetoric. He explains, for example, how dancers express emotional character with movement:

La Colere est fouguese [...] Tous ces mouvemens sont violens, & pour exprimer cette passion les pas doivent estre precipitez [...] Crainte a des pas lents dans les approches, & precipitez dans les retraites, une démarche tremblante & suspendüe [...] Ceux qui sont affligez baissent la teste, croisent les bras, & sont comme ensevelis dans la tristesse [...] Ce sont ces mouvements que les Grecs nommerent *demonstrations*. Et comme dans l'Eloquence il y a certaines figures, qui semblent mettre sous les yeux les choses dont l'Orateur parle, il faut que les mouvemens fassent la même chose dans les Ballets.²⁷

This 'oratorical', expressive function of ballet demands that dancers give themselves over to their characters. As Ménéstrier puts it, they must 'subjugate themselves to represent what must be represented' ('s'assujettir à représenter ce qui devoit se représenter').²⁸ The choice of verb (*s'assujettir*) is particularly resonant, recalling ballet's choreography of political relationships but reframing the dancer's subjection as an artistic rather than political matter. Dancers sacrifice their autonomy in order to express the characters dictated by the balletic script.

Depending on the role, of course, this requirement could be difficult to reconcile with the cultural pressure to perform gracefully. To incarnate the role of a country bumpkin or a drunkard to the standard laid out by Ménéstrier, for example, a

²⁵ Saint-Hubert, p. 19.

²⁶ Ménéstrier, pp. 250–51.

²⁷ Ménéstrier, pp. 161–62.

²⁸ Ménéstrier, p. 163. Lucie Desjardins also glosses Ménéstrier's insistence on the expressive capacities of dance in *Le Corps parlant: savoirs et représentation des passions au XVIIe siècle* (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001), pp. 244–48.

dancer would largely have to leave behind a concern for gracefulness and decorum. The theorist acknowledges this difficulty, lamenting: ‘Aujourd’hui il y a beaucoup de Danses & peu de Ballets, parce que les Danseurs aiment mieux faire de beaux pas & de belles cadences.’²⁹ Aristocratic performers, Ménestrier complains, are in fact refusing to ‘subjugate themselves’ to the artistic requirements of mimetic ballet.

Seventeenth-century court ballet practices often resolved the tension between characterology and the social imperatives for noble dancers by using non-noble, professional performers to play the most awkward, ungraceful roles. In the *Ballet de la nuit*, for example, the parts of the beggars of the ‘Cour des Miracles’ in the fourteenth *entrée* of the first watch were all danced by professionals. This casting choice saved aristocrats from having to compromise their social image with such grotesque costumes and the uncouth movements they suggest. At other times, some compromises could be made with respect to verisimilitude in order to preserve the dignity of the performance. Saint-Hubert described a hypothetical case:

Quelqu’un me dira que si l’on habilloit un cuisinier suivant son mestier, qu’il luy faudroit donner un habit & une serviette grasse, qui feroit mal au cœur à la compagnie; j’ay à responder que l’on le peut habiller avec peu d’ornement, & au lieu de serviette grasse, luy en donner une de tafetas blanc ou de gaze [...] Que l’on ne s’atache dont [*sic*] pas à la richesse des habits, qu’à la propriété & ressemblance, de ce que l’on represente.³⁰

As long as the principle of resemblance was respected, in other words, dancers could be spared from having to incarnate a more disgustingly realistic version of their fictional personas.

Poetic texts written to accompany ballet performances also worked to negotiate the competition between the performer’s social persona and fictional character.³¹ Descriptive verses for featured solo performances, along with the text of the ballet’s *récits* or recitative songs, cast lists, and brief explications of the subject and setting of each scene, were published in libretti, likely distributed to ballet spectators and available more widely to commemorate the performance. Although it is unclear to what extent a ballet’s poet interacted with choreographers, designers, and dancers during the preparation of the spectacle, from the viewer’s perspective, his contribution constituted an important complement to the performance on stage. Benserade’s verses for the ballet libretto follow the tradition established by the previous generation of ballet composers in focusing on characterization. As may be seen in the verses he wrote for the Duke of York’s dance as a bashful lover, Benserade’s texts were usually written in the first person, constituting a verbal self-presentation of the dancing figure in support of the visual cues provided by costume and dance style. They also alluded to the identity of the noble performer giving his or her body up to the fictional role. Verses pointed out the natural affinity between the king and Apollo, or called attention to the ironic distance between a fair princess and the Moorish lady she incarnated on stage. This technique flattered the

²⁹ Ménestrier, *Des ballets anciens et modernes*, pp. 162–63.

³⁰ Saint-Hubert, p. 19.

³¹ For an overview of Benserade’s career, see Charles Silin, *Benserade and His Ballets de Cour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 30–52.

spectators, who recognized the reference to the performer, confirming their status as members of a privileged in-group. More important, this ambivalent approach to characterization allowed noble performers to take on a variety of roles, sure in the knowledge that their public status and self-image would be ‘protected’ somehow by the dance’s poetic supplement. Effectively, this technique afforded noble performers a degree of agency in shaping, however indirectly, the characters they played on the ballet stage. Although their parts were scripted for them and assigned to them by artists patronized by the king, the public personas they devised on a day-to-day basis at court defined the parameters of verisimilitude for the kinds of roles they could be expected to perform, and influenced how those roles would be mediated by the libretto’s verses.

Navigating between the performers’ courtly personas and their characterizations on stage in this way, Benserade provokes an aesthetic and philosophical reflection on the nature of identity and performance. In fact, Benserade’s play with identity in his poetic contributions to court ballets is consistent with his earlier dramaturgical work, reflecting in particular his career-long engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. As a playwright in the 1630s, he borrowed several of Ovid’s stories, whole or in part, to craft the plots for plays such as the tragicomedy *Iphis et Iante* (performed 1634, published 1637) and tragedies *Cléopâtre* (published 1636) and *La Mort d’Achille* (performed 1635, published 1636). Later, he penned the translation, *Métamorphoses d’Ovide en rondeaux* (1676). Although Ovid had served as a source for ballet imagery since the Renaissance, Benserade seldom borrowed from the *Metamorphoses* for material for his ballets. Yet, his approach to characterization bears the hallmarks of an Ovidian understanding of identity, which Wendy Olmsted summarizes as follows: ‘Ovid’s metamorphoses tend to affirm continuity of identity while constructing radical differences between categories such as human and animal, cooked meateater and cannibal’, and, as such, these transformations ‘explore the limits of the human by examining violations of the boundaries between the godlike, the human, and the natural’.³² This exploration of continuity through contrast also typifies Benserade’s libretti, as the ‘transformations’ of courtiers into gods, demons, peasants, animals, and other creatures repeatedly call attention to the consistency of the performer’s persona in spite of his or her costume. His characterizations, in other words, are always multivalent, simultaneously fashioning a fictional role and reifying a social persona created by the performer himself or herself. Seen in this light, noble performance no longer appears as a pure act of subjection to a script commanded by the monarch. Rather, it is a work of collaboration and compromise as the ballet is created out of the raw material provided by noble performers in the form of their self-fashioned personas.

A striking if complex example of the collaboration between artists and dancers required in aristocratic ballet performance emerges in the roles danced by the Duke of Buckingham in the *Ballet de la nuit*. By all accounts, Buckingham brought a singularly large and vibrant persona to the ballet stage. English contemporaries described him as witty conversationalist and hilarious mimic of court

³² Wendy Olmsted, ‘On the Margins of Otherness: Metamorphosis and Identity in Homer, Ovid, Sidney, and Milton’, *New Literary History*, 27.2 (1996), 167–84 (p. 169).

personalities. He was a terrific dancer, like his sister Mary, who performed in masques at Whitehall.³³ As Joseph Roach remarks, Buckingham had ‘it’ — charisma, star-power, a larger-than-life quality that transformed him from mere mortal into a ‘staged role-icon’, at once theatrical and other-worldly.³⁴ Across his lifetime and beyond it, Buckingham inspired an impressive corpus of textual descriptions in both English and French: affectionate testimonials by Aphra Behn, the actress Nell Gwyn, French writers d’Aulnoy and Saint Évremond, as well as scathing portraits by Dryden, Butler, and Pepys. These various ‘after-images’ of the duke both confirmed and ensured his status, in Roach’s words, as ‘an historic exemplar of the It-Effect.’³⁵ In France, Buckingham enjoyed further notoriety on account of the infamy of his late father, the first Duke of Buckingham, who had served as English ambassador to France in the 1620s and, according to rumour, had seduced the French queen Anna of Austria. Although many of the accounts of Buckingham’s character date from the Restoration period, a decade and more after his time at the French court, his participation in the ballet already confirms his image as a playful, seductive, and irreverent character.

Indeed, the fact that he danced not one or two but four separate roles in the ballet confirms that he cut a distinctive figure at the French court. Throughout the evening, he performed as a bandit robbing merchants in the sixth entry of the ballet’s first part, as a fire demon summoned by disordered dreams in the first entry of the fourth part, as a bashful lover alongside the Duke of York, and finally as the ‘Génie de la Paix’ in the final grand ballet. Individually and as a group, these characters expressed different facets of the duke’s public persona. His first dance as a bandit, for example, anticipated his reputation as a roguish figure, while his casting as the ‘genius of peace’ underlined the sanguine aspects of his personality.³⁶

Buckingham’s two featured performances — as a demon of fire and as a bashful lover — develop a more complex expression of the interplay between persona and character thanks to the addition of poetic text. Opening the fourth ‘watch’ of the ballet, the duke’s performance as a demon of fire served as a prelude to a series of scenes devoted to the kinds of dreams thought to be caused by surpluses of each of the four humours.³⁷ The duke appeared in an extravagant crimson costume and horned mask.³⁸ Along with the brilliant red outfit, quick-tempoed music

³³ Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 19.

³⁴ Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 101.

³⁵ Roach, p. 115.

³⁶ The ‘bandit’ role may also have alluded to Ben Jonson’s masque *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, which had been commissioned by the first Duke of Buckingham in 1621 during a period of intense diplomatic contact between England and France. See John H. Astington, ‘Buckingham’s Patronage and *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*,’ *Theatre Survey*, 43.2 (2002), 133–47. Thanks to an anonymous reader for pointing out this connection.

³⁷ Following a prologue featuring figures for sleep, silence, and dreams, Buckingham’s first *entrée* depicted ‘les quatre Démons de Feu, de l’Air, de l’Eau, et de la Terre, qui représentent les quatre humeurs ou temperaments du corps humain: le Colérique, le Sanguin, le Flegmatique, et le Mélancolique, d’où naissent les différents Songes’ (Benserade, p. 51). On seventeenth-century iconology of the humours, see Desjardins, p. 53.

³⁸ The demons appeared ‘laidés et cornus’ according to Loret’s report in Jean Loret et al., *La Muze historique; ou, Recueil des lettres en vers contenant les nouvelles du temps*, ed. J. Ravenel and V. de La Pelouze (Paris: P. Jannet, 1857), vol. 1, p. 353.

starting on an upbeat, suggestive of the lively *rigaudon* dances that were popular in genteel circles in England at this time, worked to characterize the hot-tempered figure.³⁹ Together, music, dance and costume exemplified the kind of expressive performance valorised by Ménéstrier. Yet, as the poetry written for this solo appearance reveals, embodying a fire demon did not require Buckingham to ‘subjugate himself’ to the role. Benserade’s verses asserted the appropriateness of the role for the ardent duke, referencing his reputation as a hyper-masculine ladies’ man: ‘Dégelez-vous à ce grand feu, / Les Belles’, the ‘demon’ invites.⁴⁰ The text cites not only Buckingham’s persona but also his biography:

Ce feu qui fait bien du bruit
N’en fait pas tant que son feu Père
[...]
Sa flamme est assez mesurée.⁴¹

The reference to Buckingham’s father was especially resonant for the French audience because the first duke had been such a notorious figure at the court of Louis XIII for his contentious relationship with Cardinal Richelieu and rumoured romance with the queen. The well-known historical personage here serves as a reference point for the younger duke’s identity. Even though the verse asserts that his is a ‘measured flame’ as compared with his late father’s ardency, underlined by the homonym ‘feu’, the use of the historical figure as an index of fieriness reconfirms the validity of the imagery, pinning that allegorical language to a well-known reality. Through costume, dance, and poetic verse, the role Buckingham incarnates on stage is multivalent, at once a fictional archetype (the demon), the embodiment of a humour (the quality of fieriness), and a historical personage possessing an acknowledged biography and family tree.

The layered texture of the ballet persona comes into focus when measured against Patrice Pavis’s typology of ‘degrees of reality of the character’ in Western performing arts. Although any given dramatic character normally falls into one of the categories Pavis proposes, from simple plot function to full-fledged ‘individual’, Buckingham’s fire demon ticks several boxes all at once.⁴² This complexity goes some way toward resolving the tension between character and social persona. Buckingham’s appearance bears all the hallmarks of a demonstrative performance, illustrating a fictional character and a set of emotions in service of the ballet’s artistic aims. Yet, it also works with and on the performer’s persona, spotlighting his star qualities and refining his public image.

Such multivalence is present, to some extent, in all dramatic expressions of character. The performer’s influence on theatrical character is particularly evident when a

³⁹ Meredith Ellis Little, ‘Rigaudon’, *Grove Music Online* [accessed 3 October 2015]. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public/>. Although England’s popular dance culture was frequently suppressed by Puritan magistrates during the interregnum, ‘dancing was tolerated, and increasingly accepted, within respectable contexts’, particularly in the private balls hosted by the elite. See Bernard Capp, *England’s Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 189.

⁴⁰ Benserade, p. 51.

⁴¹ Benserade, p. 51.

⁴² Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Dunod, 1996), p. 249.

role is inhabited by a well-known actor — a celebrity or a repertory player with a well-known back catalogue of performances. Andrew James Hartley coins the term ‘performative habitus’ to indicate the ‘continuity’ of appearance, gesture, demeanour and other elements of performance maintained by an actor from role to role.⁴³ Pointing out that this ‘habitus’ is constructed as much by the audience’s memories as by the actor and his or her milieu, Hartley offers the concept as an ‘intermediate position between subject and agent’, between scripted character and actor, and thus as a way to theorize character as a collaborative construction.⁴⁴ This model takes on further complexity when transferred to the context of court ballet, where the ‘performative habitus’ was built upon the social habitus of the court and the ‘continuity’ of character traversed not only multiple ballet performances but also quotidian performances of the courtly self.

The force of the social persona of the courtier in the creation of balletic character becomes evident in Buckingham’s subsequent appearance, alongside the Duke of York as an ‘amoureux transi’, which forms a diptych with his previous performance.⁴⁵ The verses for this figure refer to Buckingham’s earlier incarnation of Fire:

Tantôt j’étais de feu, puis dans la même place
Je me trouve de glace,
Par là mes sentiments seront bientôt trahis,
Je n’ai point apporté ce froid de mon pays.⁴⁶

These irony-laden lines play on the literal meaning of ‘transi’ (chilled) to point out the amusing contrast between Buckingham’s previous role as a flirtatious flame and his present appearance as an ‘iced’ or failed lover. The ‘I’ here clearly designates not the character but rather the performer peeking out from behind his various masks, playing on the construct of theatrical illusion. The text reveals how the performer transforms himself from a notorious lover to a hopeless lover, from hot to cold, in a comic version of an Ovidian metamorphosis. Despite the change in outward appearance and demeanour, the verses insist, an essential self — ascribed to the dancer — remains constant. Although Benserade’s ballet libretti often alluded to the contrast between performer and role, here the poet employs a unique variation on the technique of ambivalent characterization. The persona of the dancer himself directly makes this observation about his varying roles, and he points out a disjunction between two fictional character parts rather than the distance between a singular role and his public self. The verses, in other words, take the form of a self-revelatory gesture on the part of the performer, as the voice of ‘Buckingham’ explicates the artifice of performance and unveils the multiplicity of contrasting characters that underpins the comic effects of the court ballet genre.

Giving voice to the performer through this poetic text, Benserade encourages the audience to pay attention to Buckingham’s persona beneath the costume. While the

⁴³ Andrew James Hartley, ‘Character, Agency, and the Familiar Actor’, in *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. by Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 160.

⁴⁴ He goes on: ‘Character [...] is a nexus of the theater’s semiotics of participation’, involving script, actor, and audience, and the memories attached to each (Hartley, p. 174).

⁴⁵ Benserade, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Benserade, p. 59.

fire demon verses highlighted his seductive qualities, these lines recall his Englishness (through the joke about his country's cold weather) and his reputation as a jokester or trickster willing to mock courtly conventions. They portray Buckingham as an outsider, both in terms of cultural difference and, in a more general sense, as someone who stands at an ironic distance from the artifices of court society. In this way, the persona crafted through this series of performances resembles the classic role of the 'rogue, clown or fool', described by Mikhail Bakhtin as characters who temporarily inhabit multiple social 'categories' in order to evade being pinned down into any one of them.⁴⁷ Standing at an ironic remove from the work in which they appear, the rogue, clown or fool exposes conventionality, lays bare the illogicalness of social and artistic norms.⁴⁸ The persona of Buckingham crafted through the startling juxtaposition of diverse roles and the first-person text calling attention to the performer's transformations carries out the fool's function by exposing not only the conventions of ballet characterology but also the conventionality — the pretence of constancy — that underpins the fiction of a courtly self.

Exposing the construction of persona in this way, Buckingham's performance, although singular in many respects, provides a new perspective from which to view theories of court performance derived from the cases of French aristocratic dancers. The carnivalesque dimension of court ballets has been explored by scholars including Mark Franko (examining the staging of sexual transgression in Louis XIII-era performance) and Georgia Cowart (speculating on the subversive possibilities of ballet under Louis XIV).⁴⁹ As Susan Leigh Foster observes, such Bakhtinian-inspired readings have often served as the alternative to the predominant Foucauldian or Eliasian approach to theorizing choreographic practices as essentially restrictive and disciplining.⁵⁰ The roguish, clownish qualities of Buckingham's performance, however, point toward a more nuanced understanding of the ballet's navigation between forces of control and resistance. Buckingham's performance points toward a way of conceptualizing ballet performance that is different from the image of the machine-like courtier dancing deference to monarchical authority. Like other noble performers, his social performance of self exerted an influence on the character roles scripted for him as well as, presumably, on the way he embodied those roles. More profoundly, his performance, the product of efforts and influence by himself, Benserade, and other court artists, demonstrates how the gaps between fictional and social personas or the excess between character and expression — the elusive supplement that Jean Duvignaud calls the 'mana' — had the potential to liberate the performer from his roles and become a site of poetic autonomy.⁵¹

York and especially Buckingham's status, as outsiders at the French court and as 'celebrities' with well-documented lives and personalities, helps to make evident the autonomous dimension of their performances. Yet, the same potential to turn the

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 159.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, pp. 164–5.

⁴⁹ Franko, *Dance as Text*; Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Susan Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 13.

⁵¹ Jean Duvignaud, *L'Acteur: esquisse d'une sociologie du comédien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 277–78.

enactment of scripted roles toward self-fabrication and self-promotion existed, at least in theory, for any aristocratic dancer. The interplay between social self-fashioning and ballet characterization maps out a collaborative model for the poetics of persona that transcends a starker dialectic between freedom and constraint, between autonomy and subjection. Reflecting the ideologies of the monarchical patron but also representing the interests of aristocratic performers and acknowledging the expectations of a courtly audience by striving for verisimilitude, ballet gives material form to the nexus of relationships comprising court society and highlights the mutual interdependence of those roles.

Biographical note

Ellen R. Welch is Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and author, most recently, of *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Email: erwelch@email.unc.edu