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The materiality of theory

Print practices and the construction of meaning through Kellom Tomlinson's *The Art of Dancing explain'd* (1735)

In dance books published in Europe in the course of the first half of the 18th century, a recurring image blurs the frontier between two specific spaces commonly attributed, one to the practice, the other to the theory of dancing – the dance room on the one hand, and treatises about dance on the other hand. In all three editions of Feuillet's *Chorégraphie*, one sketch symbolizes the dance room from above, viewed as a large rectangle, in the middle of which a slightly smaller rectangle represents the page from the book[i]. In some other books, the correspondence between the two spaces is even more obvious, as the indications about the dance floor ("the upper end of the room", "the right side of the room[ii]"…) are printed in the margins of the page.

The reader had to understand that this notation did not only make specific the description of the steps and body actions (bend, rise, spring, etc.), but also the course to be taken by the dancer; it was therefore useful to remind the reader that the top of the page symbolized Presence, i.e. the side of the room where the audience is supposed to sit. However, the insistence of the authors on this diagram (which is accompanied by captions and lengthy comments and is sometimes printed twice within the same book[iii]) goes beyond what is strictly necessary to get the notation understood: obviously, the dancing masters signing these works indulged in using the pages of the book as a means to figure out the dancing space. Tomlinson goes one step further when he proposes to see not only the book as a representation of the room, but also the dance floor as a page from some huge book on which one could dance; the reader's landmarks (the title at the top of each page, the beginning and breaking off of the lines[iv]) are superimposed on the cardinal points of the dancer's space. In this manual, magnificent plates represent dancers moving on a paper-floor, on which dances are written in Feuillet notation.

Linking two fields together: the history of dance and the sociology of texts

The superposition, which is both poetical and efficient, of the space of the book with the actual dancing space is only one among several signs of the porosity between dance and writing and of the importance of print as a facet of dancing masters' reflection in the modern era. Stating this leads us, in order to tackle the theoretical production of the dancers of the time, to suggest applying to the history of dance the field of research sometimes referred to as the "sociology of texts[v]". The latter invites us to avoid artificially separating the texts from their material form, that is to consider the meaning inferred by both the form and use of printed objects – which beget the modalities of western culture from modern times onwards. Historians such as Donald McKenzie or Roger Chartier urge us to view formats, layouts, type conventions, text breakdown, engraving techniques, and so on, as so many significant elements: the material quality of printed objects, as well as all the practices developed from them – their production, both by the authors and by all the people involved in the printing process; their circulation; the way the readers make them their own – all make up the meaning and efficiency of the texts; they induce (or at least, they are meant to produce) a specific reading. A book actually produces a specific readership and original uses[vi].

One of the most striking examples of the impact of printing techniques on the theoretical production in dance at the time is Feuillet's *Chorégraphie*. The first two editions of this work give some insight into how printing techniques determine the alterations that may be carried out on a text. Indeed, for the second edition (1701) the publisher used the very same plates that were composed for the first edition[vii] – probably for reasons of cost and time. This constraint had an obvious influence on the improvement of the work: revising a text, in this case, boils down to taking advantage of the blank spaces to make a few additions – sometimes to the detriment of the initial structure of the book[viii]. Throughout the 18th century, the editions, translations, adaptations of the *Chorégraphie* resorted to new layouts and bookmaking practices, which represent so many new reading propositions (the distinction can be made, for instance, between a translation into English whose form is clearly meant for dancing masters, from another, published in the same year, targeting a large audience[ix]).

In the following pages, we will try and approach the stakes of the printed production about dance through a book that may illustrate a number of issues raised by the sociology of texts: *The Art of dancing explain'd*, by a dancing master called Kellom Tomlinson, printed for the author in London in 1735[x]. The author wishes to describe the steps, to

take stock of the practices and the rules of the art of dancing for the benefit of whoever is learning or has learnt to dance, and who might need to revise some of the principles. Tomlinson resorts to explanations in words, but also to Feuillet notation and to illustrations.

This exciting work is regularly referred to by historians as a valuable source of information about how dance steps were executed in England in the first half of the 18th century. We are going to study it from a different angle, focusing on some elements that, at first sight, look essentially formal – but that in fact reveal the specific uses and stakes of this kind of printed object in the 18th century.

Introducing dance into the standard codes of the visual components of books

On opening *The Art of dancing explain'd*, the reader is far from finding a straightforward introduction to dance steps or notation. The book first looks like a series of "tokens" of the printed universe, tokens that appear to frame the dancing master's text carefully.

First comes a frontispiece[xi] showing a rather unusual character: the dancing master-cum-writer. The author is shown sitting at a table, holding a book written in French, and surrounded by sheets of paper covered with musical notes and Feuillet characters of dancing. Below the illustration is a caption: "Mr Kellom Tomlinson, AUTHOR of the Original *ART* of DANCING, Composer, Writer of *DANCES,* and their Music, for the Use and Entertainment of the Public". One could not associate writing, reading and dance more closely. Such an illustration, which is most original in the field of dancing[xii], conjures up the standard image of writers or scholars at their desks: e.g. the portraits of Molière by Coypel, of Diderot by Van Loo or Fragonard[xiii].

This image leads us to draw a parallel between the project of many dancing masters who published treatises in the 18th century and the widespread practice of craftsmen who were then publishing treatises covering all sorts of subjects. For them it was often a strategy, to achieve distinction and social rise by signing a reference book and thus establishing themselves as experts in their field of activity.

Beyond this highlighting of the character of the writer, the book asserts the art of dancing as a relevant element among what was already standard material for books, notably scientific and technical work, whose use is supposed to be methodical. The reader, going through the pages, will first find a presentation stating the contents of the two volumes, then a dedication, the list of subscribers[xiv], a preface, a table of contents, a table of illustrations. Those numerous illustrations (also a specificity of technical and scientific treatises) reveal a carefully designed didactic approach, based on links between text and image, through numerous footnotes referring to various engraved plates.

Tomlinson is far from being the only dancing master using cross references between text and images in his manual. Rameau's *Maître à Danser*[xv] uses images on which small numbers are written, as in anatomy treatises for instance: the text points at specific parts, each identified by a letter or number in the body of the illustration. This does not only give a scientific value to dance. It also enhances some aspects of the illustration, to the detriment of others. Moreover, the reader's eye is led from one number to the next; and so a linear and methodical reading of the image is dictated.

Dance faced with the commercial realities of the world of print

Even before his eye reaches the title page, the reader comes across a strange statement certifying that Tomlinson's work was completed in 1726. The title page underlines the fact that the text is "the ORIGINAL WORK" of the author and that it was designed as soon as 1724 (i.e. before Rameau's *Maître à danser*, which is quite similar to Tomlinson's manual, came out in French). This striking emphasis on the early date and originality of the work will be explained in the preface, which reveals the printed object is full of underlying stakes, putting dance right in the middle of a much larger interplay of practices and exchanges.

Indeed, Tomlinson presents the damage he claims he has endured. Some other unscrupulous writer is said to have meant to take advantage of the publicity started by Tomlinson before the publishing of his own book. Tomlinson states that he has called for subscribers in several newspapers as soon as 1726. Now, in 1728, he discovers an advertisement for Rameau's translated work, a work he had never heard of before:

« *To secure my self in some Measure from the Damage I might receive by this* Advertisement*; I thought it necessary to publish one my self a few Days after, in* Mist's Journal Jan. 27. *To which I prefixed this Motto from* VIRGIL, ---- Tulit alter Honores*; intimating, that another Person had attempted to bear away the Honour of my Invention;*

and I may justly add, the Profit of it too. That this was his Intention is very plain from two Circumstances: the Addition to the Title; and the Alteration of the Form of Monsieur Rameau's *Book. The title of his in the original is onely* The Dancing Master*; to which the ingenious Translator, or perhaps Bookseller, thought proper to add that of mine*, The Art of Dancing explain'd*: The French Original was published in* Octavo*; but the Translation was magnified to a* Quarto, *almost the Size of mine, and yet proposed to be sold at half the Price*[xvi]".

Such bitter statements put into relief the meaning of many "formal" elements of the book and, above all, the problem of competition in the world of books, at a time when intellectual property had not yet been established and when copyright laws had only recently been passed and were not properly enforced[xvii].

Print as a space for dialogue and debate

The competition issue highlighted by Tomlinson hints at a fundamental aspect of print: a book does not stand on its own, it is part and parcel of a larger production with which, whether explicitly or not, it is constantly interacting.

Tomlinson's work is presented as the continuation of other texts (see the use of Feuillet notation), their improvement (Tomlinson assumes that Feuillet notation requires a thorough description of dance steps) or their challenger. But this is not only about intertextuality. For instance, the importance given to the other dancing masters' and dancers' names in Tomlinson's book can be seen as a remote communication with them. It is seldom that dancing masters have the opportunity of jointly teaching or devising choreographies; however, through print (or, more seldom, handwriting), a striking feature of the 18th century is their propensity to communicate, debate, express their differences[xviii].

Significantly, this is when a community of experts emerged, at the level of some cities (Paris, London…) but also of Europe, thanks to exchanges from one country to another. This community might have resulted from the practice of dance itself or from the activity of institutions such as the Royal Academy of Dance in France. As it was, it is through print that it got recognized. From this point of view, what happened in the dance field can be seen as part and parcel of the development of the public debate and individual assessment characterizing the 18th century and accompanying the emergence of a new market for artistic production[xix].

Print as the instrument of the dancing master's financial interest

The influence of the book on the dance world, from the point of view of manufacturing processes, commercial strategies and circulation, has been studied above. Conversely, the art of dancing puts its own stamp on books[xx], bringing about new uses for the written form and print, new types of trade in this environment where dancers were far less active before. Dancing master Pemberton, who became a publisher in London in 1717, is an excellent representative of this phenomenon[xxi].

As for Tomlinson, the book is clearly for him a means to promote his activity, as a dancing master who needs to find his own pupils. He boasts about his own teaching and goes so far as to indicate his prices for lessons. Concerning subscriptions, they are not only a way of raising money, but also of adding legitimacy to his undertaking, through the four pages listing subscribers – their functions are made specific and link them to two spheres of society: on the one hand dancing masters and dancers, providing "professional backing", and on the other hand high society, the houses where Tomlinson was a teacher, providing a "social backing". The latter can also be found in the dedication[xxii] and in the illustrated plates, credited to influential persons whose instructor he has been.

Tomlinson's book is no exception: the bread-winning function of the written production of dancing masters is clearly stated. Thus Feuillet's *Chorégraphie* is primarily a commercial undertaking. It made it possible, for instance, to subsequently publish and sell « new dances » on a regular basis, before the opening of the ball season. This also enabled the author to invite dancing masters to send him musical scores, so that he might design appropriate dances and send them the resulting choreographic scores, "at an affordable price[xxiii]".

The book as an original educational tool for dance

The dancing masters' main innovation in print is of course dance notation, a new printed object which brings about unheard-of practices: Tomlinson's frontispiece highlights the dancing-master-cum-writer, but the pre-requisite of his engravings is the existence of the dancer-cum-reader. From this point

of view, the history of dance practices might open up valuable new vistas to the history of reading – see the instructions to be found in the above mentioned manuals as to how to "hold the book" when deciphering dance notations, or Rameau's *Maître à Danser* (where the caption for some images is printed in curved lines, which means that the reader's eye is led along the same course as that of the dancer's limbs).

Tomlinson is not content with letting the reader discover steps and tracks through notation; he also aims at being specific about appropriate deportments: we have already mentioned the plates[xxiv] showing dancers moving "upon" the notation which seems to be written on the floor (the dance floor and the dancers' course are not seen from above as they usually are in Feuillet notation: Tomlinson's page bears a third dimension with a skyline, sometimes even a vanishing point; the notation is foreshortened to give the illusion of depth). As in Feuillet, the musical score can be found at the top of the page. This superposition of data requires three different, even contradictory[xxv] readings (that of the musical score, that of the choreography, that of the figures – and on top of that, text can also be found: the title and the dedication of each plate). The plates of the second book are devoted to the minuet and allow the reader to see "the whole Dance at one view" – something impossible in the actual performance, where one movement succeeds the other.

Tomlinson goes further: he explains that the illustrated plates are designed to be cut out and "put into frames with glasses"; hanging on the walls, they will act as a reminder for the students. He says that they can be sold on their own – at a lower price than the complete work.

The standard shape of the book is therefore not seen as rigid: the printed object allows for new projects and presentations. The binding in particular can be disposed of; Tomlinson is considering a book that you would no longer leaf through, but that you would take to pieces as it were, in order to spread it and turn it into a kind of pattern or mirror for the scholar. Those engravings can also be used as mere "furniture" – and "very agreable" furniture, too.

That is how an instrumental feature of what Tomlinson meant to be a masterly method can, of his own accord, become mere home decorations. It may seem paradoxical, but, for the author, those engravings, each of them bearing his name, could become advertising posters in the "rooms or closets" of high society mansions. This unexpected use of the book mainly leads us to consider that, for an 18th century man, the careful study encouraged by such a book does not necessarily preclude other types of approaches to print. Consulting such decorations would probably involve less concentration and more permeation, so to speak, through the regular contact with these images; the reader – or the dweller of the place – would end up identifying himself, more or less consciously, to the dancers represented on the images.

The underlying issue is in fact how to induce the dancer's movement through printed words and images, encouraging experimentation with new tools. It is pointless to define the latter as "theoretical" or "practical", to show them as belonging specifically either to the book space or to the dance room: the dance room is liable to aspire the book, which, in Tomlinson's view, literally intrudes into it, covering its walls[xxvi].

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Endnotes

Chorégraphie, Paris, Brunet, 1700 and 1701, p. 33 and Paris, Dezais, 1713, p. 25. Weaver J., *Orchesography*, London, Meere, 1706, p. 34.

[ii] Essex J., *For the further improvement of dancing*, London, 1710, pp. 1-2. Feuillet, *Recueil de contredances*, Paris, 1706. Rameau P., *Abreggé de la nouvelle methode*, Paris, undated.

[iii] *Recueil de contredances*, op. cit. *For the further improvement of dancing*, op. cit.

[iv] "Supposing the whole Floor to be the same Book, and to contain the Matter written in the Page or half Page […]"; "the Lower End of the Page or Leaf is the Bottom of the Room, and the Title above the Presence or Upper End; the Beginning of the Lines, as you read these in *Dancing*, is the left Side, and the Breaking off of the Lines the right", *The Art of dancing explain'd*, London, 1735, pp. 20-21.

[v] McKenzie D., *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, London, British Library, 1986.

[vi] Chartier R., *Au bord de la falaise*, Paris, A. Michel, 1998.

[vii] In the first edition (1700), the text was composed with mobile characters, called types. But the *Chorégraphie* made it necessary for printers to achieve a text-image association: the composer of the pages had to leave blank spaces, where small metal plates would be inserted for images (for which, of course, there were no existing types, and that would have to be engraved). The resulting layout is well spaced-out – very different from the 1713 layout, in which the text itself was engraved: metal plates were expensive and the engraver reduced blank spaces as much as possible.

[viii] P. 18 and at the end of the book: the author wanted to add steps that were not included in the 1700 tables. Those steps belonged to different categories – chassés, jetés, coupés… – but could not be added to the appropriate tables. They became separate steps, put together on specific pages entitled "supplément de pas", making up a distinct part from the rest of the otherwise very methodically structured book.

[ix] While Weaver, in his English translation of the *Chorégraphie* (*Orchesography*, op. cit., 1706), takes up the combination between text and image exactly as it appeared in the French editions, Siris's translation, entitled *The Art of Dancing* (London, 1706), does without the text-image association within the same page: the text refers to illustrations, put together on entirely engraved plates, which requires the reader to go through the book differently – probably less fluidly but more methodically. This approach may apply to Siris's translation which targets a more professional readership, a public that is probably more likely to comply with such rules, whereas Weaver's readership was supposed to be wider. Thorp J., "P. Siris: an early 18th c. dancing-master", *Dance research*, X (2), 71-92, 1992, and Marsh C., *French Court Dances in England, 1706-1740*, PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1985.

[x] In two parts, with copper plates, 159 pp., 30x23 cm (characteristics of the copy available in the Library of Congress). See, in particular, the fac-simile edited by J.-N. Laurenti (Béziers, Société de musicologie du Languedoc, 1989).

[xi] This frontispiece was obviously designed after the rest of the work (it mentions the dates 1753 and 1754). It is to be found in the copy available in the Library of Congress.

[xii] The frontispieces in Rameau's *Maître à danser* and in Essex' *Dancing-Master: or, the Art of Dancing Explained* (London, 1728) show two characters dancing and a violinist – probably the dancing master. However, the frontispiece in Taubert's *Rechtschaffener Tanzmeister* (Leipzig, F. Landischens Erbens, 1717) shows several representations of the dancing master – on one of them he is at his desk (see Tilden Russell's paper in the present collection).

[xiii] Though these authors are not reading, but actually writing.

[xiv] Subscriptions were only emerging in France – they would indeed make the publishing of the *Encyclopédie* possible a few years later – but were already widespread in England.

[xv] Paris, J. Villette, 1725.

[xvi] Tomlinson is here clearly complaining about Essex's translation (*The Dancing-Master: or, the Art of Dancing Explained*, op. cit.).

[xvii] Clair C., *A History of printing in Britain*, London, Cassell, 1965.

[xviii] See for instance Mrs Carol Marsh's paper in the present collection.

[xix] It is the case in the fields of Literature and Art (in France, the "Salon", which is open to everyone, favors debate about artistic production, whereas the rating of artists used to come from the confidential circles of Academies) – this new approach is also obvious in the new conception of the law and of religion. Roger Chartier studies these mechanisms and links the cultural origins of such an event as the French Revolution to them (*Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française*, Paris, Seuil, 1990).

[xx] From this point of view, dance treatises are no different from treatises written by craftsmen, who used their specific knowhow to turn their written production into tools: instruments of debate, of indictment, everyday references (patterns, aide-mémoire).

[xxi] Goff M., "Edmund Pemberton, dancing master and publisher", *Dance Research*, XI (1), 52-81, 1993.

[xxii] To Viscountess Fauconberg.

[xxiii] *Pavanne des Saisons*, 1700.

[xxiv] Engraved by Tomlinson himself.

[xxv] The human figures invite the reader to identify himself to them. Now, identification is exactly what dance notation precludes: it shows a disembodied dance, without any reference to any individual body or interpretation. It is made up of a combination of abstract steps. What is favored in Tomlinson's plates is the human figure rather than the dance notation, if only because the latter is obscured by the silhouettes and their clothes.

[xxvi] Ce texte est disponible en français sur demande (marie.glon@free.fr).

Bibliography

The bibliographical references are inserted in the endnotes. No editor is mentioned when the work was printed for the author, and no pages are mentioned when there were no page numbers in the book or the part of the book from which the quotations come.