

By Audrey Magré (MA 2006)

An Essay Towards an History of Dancing

John Weaver is perhaps best known as the translator of Raoul-Auger Feuillet's seminal treatise on dance, *Chorégraphie*, which appeared under the title, *Orchesography, Or the Art of Dancing*.¹ But his equally important *An Essay Towards an History of Dancing* is generally regarded as the first history of dance written in English.

It marks a profound shift in the prior histories of dance. Weaver is concerned with tracing dance from antiquity to modern times not in order to provide an objective and genealogical history but rather to theorize and elevate dance as an art which perfects humanity. Like the arts of rhetoric, theater, music composition and poetry, the art of dance should reflect nature, imitate nature and simultaneously improve mankind. For this reason, Weaver chooses not to address the "mechanical aspects" of dance such as choreography or orchesography². Rather, he focuses on the metaphysical aspects of dance.

Weaver stresses the importance of virtue, knowledge and decorum of worthy dancers. Mimes and pantomimes and antique dance hold such a prominent space in the *Essay* because they allow him to show that dance in these times was much more than a form of diversion. Whether dance was used for religious worship, the telling of history or mythology or the expressing of decency and artful gestures, it was always connected to the spiritual, social and intellectual bettering of humanity. While approaching dance then, from a more theoretical perspective, John Weaver also theorizes a new relationship between dance and the body. Through regulated and measured motion, the dancer should communicate with his spectator first by pleasing him visually and second by influencing him and instructing him.

An Essay towards an History of Dance was printed in 1712 in London for Jacob Tonson. Today there are only five copies of this book available in libraries world wide. The copy at the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library has book reviews and newspaper clippings referring to other dance treatises and histories glued to the back of the front cover. One the most interesting ones refers to Weaver's translation of Mr. Raoul-Auger Feuillet's *Chorégraphie, ou l'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratif*. While John Weaver is well known for this translation, he surprisingly concludes *An Essay* by attributing the invention of modern orchesography to Mr. Beauchamps, not Mr. Feuillet.

Before Feuillet and Beauchamps, early dance manuals include *Les Basses danses dites de Marguerite d'Autriche* (c. 1490), Fabrito Caroso's *Il ballarino* (1581) and Thoirot's 1588 *Orchésographie*, of which *Les Basses danses* also constitutes the first attempt to formalize European dance notation. The treatises were digitized through the Library of Congress and are available at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dihome.html>.

¹ <http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/weaver/orchesography/> (or put in Library of Congress link)

² Derived from the French *orchésographie* coined in the title of a 16th-century treatise on dance (1588) by one Thoirot Arbeau (pen name of Jehan Tabourot). The word orchesography designates the art of dance, as well as the science of movement and gesture, both in terms of their expressive powers and of their use in the theater.

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Woodcut from Thoirot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* (1588)
http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/arbeau_images.html