

# Elizabethan Dance Forms and *Much Ado About Nothing*

## Common Dance Forms in the Elizabethan Era

In the 1590s, dance forms were separated by class. For the upper class, dance was frequently performed at the Royal Court and considered to be fantastic exercise for both the mind and the body. The steps were quick and intricate, limiting mastery of these movements to those with access to dance lessons, instructional books, and well-connected social circles. Certain dances, such as the Volta, were considered quite intimate, indicating scandal for some and the opportunity to make social connections for others.

For the lower classes, popular dance styles included Morris Dance, jigs, and Maypole Dance. They were often performed at fairs and festivals, and were passed down through generations and between communities.



Top Left: Cinque Pas, a Royal Court Dance form  
Right: Volta  
Bottom Left: Morris Dance, a popular dance form



Masquerade

## The Treatment of Dance in *Much Ado About Nothing*

In many ways, dance serves as a social catalyst in *Much Ado*, mirroring the intimacy and connection that it brought to the Elizabethan Era. Dance brought women and men in close physical proximity to each other, aiding in the formation of relationships, and it presented an opportunity for women to demonstrate skill and intellect in a society which didn't always allow for this.

During the masquerade scene, Beatrice uses her anonymity to make stinging statements about Benedick without having to accept personal responsibility. In this way, the masquerade as a dance form—and the apparel integral to it—contribute to Beatrice and Benedick's witty rapport and accompanying romantic tension.

Given that dance functions as a physically and socially uniting force, it is no surprise that Shakespeare's characters use the word "dance" as a double entendre. The quotes above hint at more risqué possibilities in the formation and progression of the play's relationships. Note how Leonata opposes Benedick's eagerness for pre-marital "dancing."

## Repositioning Ourselves in the 1920s

By the 1920s, while many dance forms such as ballet continued to be regulated and gatekept, others evolved to welcome the expression of personal style and freedom of movement. The implications of this evolution were vast, ranging from the natural adoption and modification of dance steps within communities to the appropriation and misrepresentation of styles between groups. In places such as the Savoy Ballroom of Harlem, New York, dancers of varying backgrounds came together to enjoy music and movement. Although these spaces were not free of social and political tensions, for the most part they served as testimonies to the unifying role that dance played in society, an effect which Shakespeare's text celebrates and which we honor in our incorporation of the Lindy Hop and the Charleston.

BENEDICK

Come, come, we are friends. Let's have a dance ere we are married!

LEONATA

We'll have dancing afterward.  
(V.iv.111-113)

MARGARET

God match me with a good dancer . . . And God keep him out of my sight when the dance is done.  
(II.i.77-79)



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