

A Time to Mourn, With No Time To Dance:
The Lineage of Biblical Justifications for Anti-Dance Sentiment
from Post-Reformation Europe to Nineteenth-Century America

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Some people see dance as orderly, and therefore moral, while others see it as disorderly, and therefore immoral.¹ So posits dance scholar Ann Wagner, laying out a neat reduction of the history of attitudes toward dance. Unsurprisingly, Wagner complicates this dichotomy in her book *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present*, which focuses on those from the disorderly/immoral side of the argument. Those who have rejected dance for religious reasons have often employed verses from the Bible to justify their views. Opponents to dance have used scripture in three increasingly specific ways to proclaim the sinfulness of dance. They have argued that (1) instances of dance in the Bible differ significantly from the contemporary dance to which they object. This argument focuses on the gender of the dancers and the intention of the dance and typically cites two Biblical verses: Miriam and a group of women dancing in joyous response to the Israelites' escape from Egypt, and David's praiseful dance to God. They have also shown how (2) dance can lead to other non-pious acts and behaviors that prevent its participants from worshipping God fully and properly. Antidance advocates justify this claim by explaining that dance violates the Seventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and the Fourth Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."² Many have also used the example of Salome's dance before King Herod to justify this claim. Finally, those who reject dance have contended that (3) dance

¹ Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 19.

² Exod. 20.14; Exod. 20.8 King James Version.

is a product of a sinful world, a world that pious Christians should avoid. The apostle Paul's admonition "Be not conformed to the world"³ appears regularly in the antidance canon in support of that avowal.

Dance's antagonists took issue specifically with social dance. Dance enjoyed popularity as a social activity both in sixteenth-century Europe and nineteenth-century America; fittingly, the condemnations of dance focused on the social dances of the day. Exclamations decrying the vanity of the "morrice daunce," an English folk dance, are found in Elizabethan England.⁴ Other popular dances of sixteenth- and seventeenth century Europe included courtly dances like the galliard, a "vigorous" couple dance that included high leaps and gestures imitating a courtship;⁵ and the volta, another couple dance "performed with a notoriously intimate embrace;"⁶ as well as "folk" or English country dances that originated in rural England, but later came to be performed at the courts for the entertainment of the upper classes.⁷

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of ballroom dances in America. Stylistically, these dances grew out of the eighteenth century preference for group dances as opposed to coupled dances.⁸ Ballroom dances were practiced in mixed company: men and women danced together, sometimes with dancers trading partners.

³ Rom. 12.2 KJV.

⁴ Elbert Nevius Sebring Thompson, *The controversy between the Puritans and the stage* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), 201; "Morris dance," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9053823> (accessed November 13, 2009).

⁵ "Galliard," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9035903> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁶ "Volta, la," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9075700> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁷ "Dance, Western," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-22109> (accessed November 19, 2009).

⁸ Elizabeth Aldrich, "Western Social Dance," *Library of Congress, American Memory*, 1998, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/diessay0.html> (accessed November 12, 2009).

These dances, which included the waltz, polka, tango, turkey trot, and buzzard lope,⁹ were often dubbed “square” or “round” dances based on the formation of the dancers, who started out facing each other. The popular waltz led reformed American dance teacher William Faulkner to proclaim, “I do not believe that any woman can or does waltz without being improperly aroused,” in his 1892 treatise “From the Ballroom to Hell.”¹⁰ The number of dancing masters, instructional dancing manuals, and retaliative antidance treatises that became available in nineteenth-century America speak to the rising presence of popular dance trends.

Christian ambivalence toward dance seems to date almost as far back as Christianity itself. As early as the fourth century, Basileios, bishop of Caesaria, wrote a criticism of the dancing he observed at a celebration of the resurrection of Christ:

Casting aside the yoke of service under Christ and the veil of virtue from their heads, despising God and His angels, they (the women) shamelessly attract the attention of every man. With unkempt hair, clothed in bodices and hopping about, they dance with lustful eyes and loud laughter, as if seized by a kind of frenzy they excite the lusts of youths. They execute ringdances in the churches of the Martyrs and at their graves instead of in the public buildings, transforming the Holy places into the scene of their lewdness. With harlots songs they pollute the air and sully the degraded earth with their feet in shameful postures.¹¹

Early censures of dance like this one typically described lust-inducing women, practicing a kind of dance associated with paganism. In her essay “Dance: An Agent of Ekstatis,” Ida Chadwick points out that the association, and subsequent condemnation, of both dance and paganism represents a reversal in Christian attitudes. Many early Christians

⁹ J. G. Davies, Lynn Matluck Brooks, Ann Wagner, “Christianity and Dance” *The International Encyclopedia of Dance Online*, 2005 (accessed September 30, 2009); R.A. Adams, *The Social Dance* (Kansas City: R.A. Adams, 1921)

¹⁰ T. A. Faulkner, *From the ball-room to hell* (Chicago: The Henry Publishing Co., c1892), 25.

¹¹ Quoted in Ida F. Chadwick, “Dance: An Agent of Ekstatis,” in *Focus on Dance X: Religion and Dance*, 7-14 (Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1982), 12.

had been former pagans, who worshipped their pagan gods through dance. As Chadwick explains, “people had grown to expect and demand the dramatic and mystic rituals,” leaving the Church Fathers with two possible responses to pagan traditions: “synthesis; [or] violent opposition.”¹² Unsurprisingly, tacit synthesis often garnered a greater number of converts, helping both to spread Christianity across the Greco-Roman world, and to increase the overall population of Christians within preexisting communities. Synthesis effectively gave dance a place in early Christian worship. After this growth period, however, some Church leaders felt the need to mitigate pagan practices. Thus began a longstanding tradition of delineation and self-definition by way of repudiating targeted behaviors and groups. Basileios’ description engages with this tradition; by associating dance with paganism, Basileios created a logic whereby true Christians could not possibly dance.

Renaissance historian Alessandro Arcangeli locates the roots of institutionalized antdance sentiment in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, a meeting of bishops, archbishops, and religious and secular Christian leaders organized by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Palace in Rome.¹³ The Council produced seventy canons, including a formal establishment of annual confession, with associated lists of sins. Dance was deemed to be so scandalous that it was listed in its own category (comparatively, “music” and “theater,” Arcangeli notes, were seldom listed at all).¹⁴ While individuals had been

¹² Chadwick, "Dance: An Agent of Ekstatis," in *Focus on Dance X: Religion and Dance*, 12.

¹³ Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial: The Moral Debate 1200-1600," *Dance Research*, 12, no. 2 (1994): 129; C. Duggan and N.H. Minnich, "Lateran Councils," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Gale), 2003: 350-355.

¹⁴ Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 129; Duggan and Minnich, "Lateran Councils," 350-355; see also Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 6-7.

denouncing dance for centuries, this may have been the first instance of an official Christian rebuke to dance.

Other sporadic denunciations of dance arose among religious moralists prior to the Protestant Reformation: the Cambridge University chancellor John de Burgh composed *Pupilla Oculi*, an instructional guide for priests, between 1380 and 1385, in which he condemned dance as a mortal sin; fifteenth-century man-of-letters Fabritius wrote in his *Destructorium Vitiorum* (1429) that dance contradicted the sacraments.¹⁵ These isolated attacks, however, never gained as much momentum as did the full-fledged religious assaults on social dance that emerged in post-Reformation Europe and subsequently in nineteenth-century America. These two points in history saw religious opponents to dance coalesce to form a unified antdance movement, with systematic approaches to denouncing the practice.

In the eyes of antdance exponents, dance was part of a larger social continuum teeming with impious and immoral behaviors. Dance was guilty by association, as evidenced throughout seventeenth-century treatises on manners and decorum for Reformed Christians. British minister Thomas Hall's admonition against "dancing, drinking, whoring, potting, piping, [and] gaming,"¹⁶ for instance, groups dance with other social and recreational behaviors and traditions that were viewed as morally compromising. In his 1577 treatise, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes. With other idle pastimes*, British minister John Northbrooke also groups dance with other immoral activities: "what undecent behaviour, what boasting, bragging, quarrelling and jetting up and down, what quaffing, feasting, rioting, playing dauncing,

¹⁵ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 8-9.

¹⁶ Thomas Hall, quoted in Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 7.

and dicing...[sic].”¹⁷ This sweeping condemnation of all things that may have been a part of contemporary social gatherings illustrates a degree of fear on the part of reformers.

In the climate of change that surrounded the Reformation, any sinful activity could easily lead to another, and so comprehensive condemnation and a call for wholesale abstinence from dance seemed appropriate and necessary. The disorderliness of dance, its association with other disorderly activities, and its attendant immorality alarmed religious leaders. These men sought to present congregants and skeptics alike with an orderly picture of the world “as it should be,” which for them amounted to a world that they could monitor and control.

Some Reformation-era critics of dance acknowledged that dancing itself was not inherently evil, but rather those who participated in dancing made themselves vulnerable to lustful and therefore evil intentions. This possibility seriously problematized dancing for the pious Christian. Despite noting its intrinsic neutrality, though, some still thought that dance ought to be entirely eliminated. As John Northbrooke argued:

I wish to God we might followe those godly people, men and women, who now and then used dauncing, but yet such as were moderate, chast, honest religious...but we reade not in all the holy scriptures of mingled daunces of men and women together; and therefore not onely the abuse, but also the dauncing itself ought to be taken awaye, and not to be used by anie godly Christian, for that there cometh of it all wantonnesse and wickednesse [sic].¹⁸

This kind of preemptive argument took advantage of the culture of reform, calling for wide-reaching social change to accompany the religious upheaval of the Reformation.

These condemnations drew upon powerful currents of reform that typified both the Protestant Reformation and the fervent Puritanism of nineteenth-century America.

¹⁷ John Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes. With other idle pastimes* (London: Reprinted for the Shakespeare Society, 1843), 11.

¹⁸ Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes*, 154-55.

The so-called “adversaries of dance,” a term coined by Wagner in her eponymously titled book, employed a number of rhetorical tools to serve their purpose, most notably diatribe. The use of diatribe also appears throughout the Bible and in religious commentary on the Bible. Diatribe is a rhetorical device whereby a speaker asks a series of rhetorical or hypothetical questions in order to prove his point. Paul and his imitators use diatribe in many of the Pauline epistles in the New Testament. Antidance preachers appropriate Paul’s powerful method of discourse, using diatribe in their original sermons decrying dance to augment the Pauline message to “be not of this world.”¹⁹

Focusing on the use of scripture by reformers and their ideological descendants, I will discuss how attitudes toward dance during these two periods served not only religious, but also social – specifically domestic, gender-related – ends. The attitude toward dance after the Reformation, as recorded in treatises, newspapers, and other publications, helps us understand the motivation behind this first antidance movement, and also how the ideas were later perpetuated, altered, and appropriated by American Christians who opposed dance in the nineteenth century.

Dance in the Bible: Fuel for the Antidance Fire

Ironically, in the historical debate over the morality and the religious permissibility of dance, both antidance and pro-dance groups use the same passages of scripture to defend their respective causes. Many of these biblical excerpts appear repeatedly throughout the debate, irrespective of author or era. Defenders of dance generally interpret these passages as a vindication of dance; vehemently antidance apologists typically interpret all of them in light of their cause; and others include both

¹⁹ Rom. 12.2 KJV.

perspectives, justifying dance in the Bible and using those examples as a point of contrast for the contemporary, sinful dancing to be condemned. Those engaged in the discourse frequently cite Isaiah 3.16, Exodus 15.20, Romans 12.2, and Matthew 14.3-12/Mark 6.21-29 (two narrations of the same story) to justify either their condemnation or celebration of dancing.

The Book of Isaiah, the most substantial prophetic book in the Hebrew Bible, sets forth a series of predictive oracles, the first thirty-five chapters of which focus on “the moral degeneration of the people and their religious hypocrisy, with warnings of punishment and destruction.”²⁰ Jerusalem, according to the prophecy, “stumbled” because people sinned “against the Lord” in “speech and...deeds.”²¹ The book goes on to detail the punishments to befall various groups and individuals, arriving at Isaiah 3.16:

The Lord said:
Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
and walk with outstretched necks,
glancing wantonly with their eyes,
mincing along as they go,
tinkling with their feet;
the Lord will afflict with scabs
the heads of the daughters of Zion,
and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts.²²

This passage is generally understood as a criticism of the women of the court in Jerusalem.²³ Some interpreters read “mincing” steps and “tinkling” feet as evidence that these women were dancing. Though dancing is not mentioned explicitly, the sequence of events suggests that the kinesthetic expression would cause the immediate punishment of the women and contribute to the immanent downfall of Jerusalem predicted in Isaiah 3.

²⁰ W. Hill, "Isaiah, Book of," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 594-599 (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

²¹ Isa. 3.8 KJV.

²² Isa. 3.16 KJV.

²³ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The stumbling of Isaiah 3.8 unites the women's literal, physical acts with the figurative representation of their moral degradation.

The Book of Exodus narrates the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt, their escape from their oppressors, and the establishment of the covenant between God and the Israelites. Exodus 15.20 relates the narrow escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The verse immediately following the escape introduces dancing: "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances."²⁴ This incident appears to be isolated and almost insignificant; it lasts for only two verses, with no later mention of the dancing. Miriam herself remains unmentioned for the remainder of the Book of Exodus. And yet, this passage has relevance to the antidance movement because of its specificity: the excerpt makes very clear that only women are dancing, and the dancing occurs in direct response to God's miraculous parting of the Red Sea for the Israelites only.

Paul's letter to the Romans focuses on the importance of acting as a community in Christ. He is probably addressing a disparate group of Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ, exhorting them to put aside their differences and conduct themselves as a single community, so as to fortify themselves and avoid internal disharmony. Specifically, he tells the Romans, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."²⁵ Paul's epistle has special significance for the antidance movement, both generally and specifically. Its overall message enforces a pattern of eschewal of the past, an attitude adopted both by the Protestant Reformers in response to the Catholic status

²⁴ Exod. 15.20 KJV.

²⁵ Rom. 12.2 KJV.

quo that preceded them, and the rejection by American Puritans of their increasingly urbane surroundings. Specifically, the language of Romans 12.2 reviles those pastimes that are of “this world” in favor of activities more mindful of God. The popularity of social dance seemed a logical indication that dance was of this world, and therefore forbidden.

One of the most popular and persistent arguments against dance cites Mark 6.21-29 and Matthew 14.3-12, two pericopes that mention dance explicitly.²⁶ These chapters narrate the beheading of John the Baptist, as ordained by King Herod after the request of the daughter of Herod’s brother Philip and sister-in-law Herodias. Neither Mark nor Matthew’s gospel gives a name to Herodias’ daughter, but the first-century historian Josephus calls her Salome, a name that has become important and ubiquitous in antdance literature. According to scripture, Herod orders John’s decapitation because of Salome’s dancing; Herod likes it so much that he promises to grant her whatever she wishes. When Salome asks her mother what to request of the king, Herodias replies, “The head of John the baptizer.”²⁷ Salome returns to Herod and makes her request – a request that is granted only because her dancing “pleased Herod and his guests.”²⁸ This instance of dance had such a profound impact on Herod’s judgment that he willingly had John beheaded. Arguably, dancing subverted the rightful order of Herod’s priorities; according to Wagner’s dichotomy, therefore, dance’s disorderliness made it immoral. Proponents of abstinence from dance read Salome’s dancing as the direct cause of John’s

²⁶ Christine E. Joynes, *Between the Text and the Canvas: the Bible and Art in Dialogue*, eds. J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 146.

²⁷ Mark 6.24 KJV.

²⁸ Mark 6.22 KJV.

death. For religious adherents, any act that would persuade Herod to make such a disastrous decision must surely be evil.

Setting the Stage: The Seeds of Antidance in the Protestant Reformation

Despite acknowledging the seeds of earlier antidance sentiment, both Arcangeli and Wagner agree that a truly quantifiable antidance movement took root firmly in the sixteenth century, the era of the Protestant Reformation. Ignited by the circulation of Martin Luther's invective against the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, the Protestant Reformation changed the course of Western religion by suggesting a radical shift in the way that lay people interacted with religion and with God. Luther's criticisms, and the religious movement that those criticisms fostered, led to the dismantling of structures – starting with the Church – that had provided the single guiding organizational force in Europeans' lives. This sea change was part of both Luther's and the Protestant reformers' agendas; it included erecting clear delineations between their new reformed practices and Catholic practices, which they painted – with varying degrees of accuracy and exaggeration – as outdated and corrupt.

In the process of rigorous self-examination and intentional change, reformers scrutinized everything from the structure of the prayer service to the social behaviors of pious individuals. Sometimes this led to dogmatic and unblinking adherence to certain ideas on the sole basis that they were diametrically opposed to the ideas of the “other.” Arcangeli explains: “The religious changes of the sixteenth century added new vigour to these old polemics...a series of controversies exploded within the various churches...and it became more common for authors on opposing sides to hold contrasting religious

views.”²⁹ Over the course of defining “A Reformed Christian,” reformers found it useful to look to Catholics, and to then define themselves by what the Catholics were not.

While it would be convenient to pit Catholic against Reformed Christian and present all of their beliefs and practices as antithetical, Arcangeli points to a more nuanced reality for the various subsets of reformers:

...on one side stood the advocates of strict moral behaviour, who could compete with Calvinist Puritanism and tried to persuade the secular authorities to intervene with formal prohibitions; on the other – more liberal – side were religious forces like the Society of Jesus, either open to some compromise with secular values or willing to update their propaganda, censured as permissive by both traditional Catholics and Calvinists.³⁰

By recognizing these subtleties, Arcangeli shows that the assorted branches of Christianity that formed after the Reformation engaged with contemporary social issues, including the “dancing question,”³¹ and incorporated their views into the very fabric of their newly formed tenets.

Despite minor distinctions among factions, however, many of the early Reformed Christians were adamant in their use of dance as a point of differentiation between their own practices and ideals and those of Catholics. Christopher Fetherston, a reformed preacher writing in England in the 1580s, emphasized this process of differentiation:

“wee must note regarde what hath been done in times past, wee must mark diligently what God hath coammaunded us to doe, who was before all times.”³² This turning away

²⁹ Arcangeli, “Dance Under Trial,” 133-135.

³⁰ Ibid., 135.

³¹ J.M. Hubbard, *Dancers and dancing; a calm and rational view of the dancing question* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1901).

³² Christopher Fetherston, *A dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lascivious dauncing*, Reprint of the 1582 ed. (Leicester: Guizer Press, 1973), quoted in Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 8.

from the past typified a common Reformation attitude in which religious reform and social reform were synonymous, and allied in their rejection of past practices.

In his article “Elizabethan England’s Other Reformation of Manners,” written in 1996, Edwin Davenport discusses the origin of antidance rhetoric and attitudes. Davenport, a scholar of the popular culture of the English Renaissance, identifies the 1577 treatise by minister John Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes. With other idle pastimes*, as “the first systematic attack on the professional English stage.”³³ Notably, Northbrooke formatted his treatise as a dialogue, a popular form for expounding religious views, modeled after Plato’s dialogues. In Northbrooke’s dialogue, anthropomorphized Youth and Age discuss dance, eventually condemning it (and other social activities) based on “the inability of the dicer or dancer to define the game – the game itself indiscriminately pollutes the player.”³⁴ Northbrooke goes on to argue that the intention of the dancer is the most important factor in determining whether a dance is allowable, or is “vaine, foolish, fleshly, filthie, and divelische [sic].”³⁵

Northbrooke traces the origins of this kind of evil dancing to the story of the golden calf as narrated in Exodus. While waiting for Moses to return from Sinai with the covenant, the Israelites started to worship an idol made from melting their gold jewelry and forming it in the shape of a calf; subsequently they offered it “burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and *rose up to play*.”³⁶ Antidance advocates and biblical scholars alike have generally understood this

³³ Edwin Davenport, "Elizabethan England's Other Reformation of Manners," *ELH* 63 (1996): 255-278.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁵ Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes*, 146.

³⁶ Exod. 32.6 KJV, emphasis added.

“play” as a reference to dance and sexual promiscuity, even orgies.³⁷ Of course, the playing also comes in response to the breaking of the covenant with God, making it doubly iniquitous.

The Condemnation of Dance in the Post-Reformation Period

The revolutionary new ideas of the Reformation placed special emphasis on a personal experience of God, attainable, according to Luther, through scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). Luther translated the Bible from the Latin of the learned into his native German, and in doing so, entirely transformed the layman’s experience of scripture; instead of being told by educated – and increasingly corrupt – clergy what God had said in the Bible, any literate German-speaking man (still an exclusive group, but far more inclusive than clergy alone) could read the words for himself. Luther’s example soon spread – literally, with the help of the recently invented printing press – across continental Europe and into England, resulting in the hugely influential Tyndale Bible in (1535), the precursor to the King James Version of the Bible (1611).³⁸ “To reformers, the Bible provided the one essential means for knowing God in Christ as well as for understanding the nature of sin and its consequences,” Wagner explains.³⁹ These vernacular Bibles resulted in unprecedented access to the holy word.

The Ten Commandments became increasingly ideologically important to reformers, probably because they offered a clear and concise message amid the overwhelming influx of new content made available to the laity through these translations.

³⁷ Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 129.

³⁸ "biblical translation." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9002753> (accessed November 16, 2009).

³⁹ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 53.

Recreations, particularly dancing, were deemed sinful because they “frequently involved a desecration of the Sabbath and an interference with the worship of true believers,”⁴⁰ thereby violating the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” and the Seventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”⁴¹ Reformers throughout the history of antidance arguments in particular have most frequently cited the Seventh Commandment, warning also of the potential for temptations that might lead to forbidden adultery. In his *Exposition of Commaundments* [sic], English bishop Gervase Babington advised against dancing, which carried with it “allurements to uncleannesse [sic],”⁴² that is, temptation to adultery. Andreas Gerardus Hyperius, a Protestant theologian, in one sentence warns against “lascivious dancing, wanton thoughts, or unchaste actions” in his discussion of dance as it threatens to break the Seventh Commandment.⁴³ Clearly, these men construed dance as a seductive act that could interfere with the normally sound judgment of both participants in and observers of dance. This notion naturally aroused a deep suspicion and fear of dancing, stemming at least partially from the difficulty posed to the individual in defining the dance, and not the other way around, as Davenport noted.⁴⁴

William Prynne, a British author and “Presbyterian pamphleteer who took part in virtually every controversy from his first work in 1626 to the Restoration,”⁴⁵ wrote in his *Histro-Mastix*:

⁴⁰ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society*, 4.

⁴¹ Exod. 20.8,14 KJV.

⁴² Mary Pennino-Baskerville, “Terpsichore Reviled: Antidance Tracts in Elizabethan England.” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (1991), 481.

⁴³ Andrew Gerard Hyperius, *The True Tryall And Examination of a Mans owne self...*, trans. Tho. Newton (London: John Windet, 1587), quoted in Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 30.

⁴⁴ Davenport, “Elizabethan England's Other Reformation of Manners,” 268.

⁴⁵ Mary Isabel Fry and Godfrey Davies. “William Prynne in the Huntington Library,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1956): 53-54

Effeminate, lascivious, amorous dancing, (especially with beautiful women, or boys most exquisitely adorned in an infecting womanish dress on the open stage, where are swarms of lustful spectators, whose unchaste unruly lusts are apt to be enflamed with very wanton gesture, smile, or pace, much more with amorous dances) is utterly unlawful unto Christians.⁴⁶

Prynne's attention to gender is another antidance trope that touches on the issue of adultery in the Seventh Commandment, and also calls attention to an underlying Protestant anxiety surrounding sexuality, particularly female sexuality. Prynne's Presbyterianism is notable because it identifies him as a Protestant allied with Calvinist teachings, which are stricter than the Lutheran teachings and emphasize more austere behavior.

The Use of Scripture to Condemn Dance in Puritan America

The historic American response to dance was "overwhelmingly one of opposition," as Richard E. Sturm explains in his review of Ann Wagner's *Adversaries of Dance*.⁴⁷ He goes on to say that the antidance sentiment grew out of the "a peculiar interplay" of four factors: (1) "religious conservatism," (2) "unquestioned stereotyping of what is male and female," (3) "a deep dream of human physicality and sexuality," and (4) "dance as a pleasurable and increasingly irresistible pastime."⁴⁸ Sturm first identifies religious conservatism, a stance that was characteristic of Puritanism. Puritanism in England arose out of the Calvinist teachings of the Reformation and came to the American colonies by way of Puritans who sought to establish a Puritan

⁴⁶ William Prynne, *Histro-Mastix*, quoted in "Style of Belief, Devotion, and Culture," Early Seventeenth Century; Topics: Civil Wars of Ideas: Texts and Contexts (Norton Anthology of English Literature, Norton Topics Online)

⁴⁷ Richard E. Sturm, review of *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present*, by Ann Wagner, *Dance Chronicle* 21, no. 2 (1998): 304.

⁴⁸ Sturm, review of *Adversaries of Dance*, 303-316.

commonwealth.⁴⁹ Puritans in America upheld the idea of church government,⁵⁰ giving primacy to Biblical law, and therefore more weight to their Biblically supported claims that dancing was evil.

The gender component that Sturm next highlights appears continually throughout antdance literature. Repeatedly when citing scripture, authors of American antdance tracts specify that when men and women danced together, it aroused the potential for lust, fornication, and adultery. The subliminal message here reveals a deep suspicion, manifested, essentially, in the total repression of women's sexuality.

The question of "human physicality and sexuality" that Sturm addresses next relates closely to the gender issue, although the sexuality in question was primarily female sexuality and not human sexuality writ large. Salome's story appears persistently in the antdance literature as an example of the dangers of female sexuality. Because her story indisputably includes dance, it was popular among American antdance preachers who sought a concrete example of dancing to refute. The disastrous consequence of the death of John the Baptist as a clear result of Salome's dancing provided a direct cause-and-effect relation that proved extremely useful to the antdance cause. Increase Mather, author of the first antdance treatise published in America (around 1685), refers to Salome as the "accursed and damned Harlot"⁵¹ in *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of the Scriptures*, and the same biblical incident appears when Oliver Hart preached against dancing in Charleston in 1778.⁵²

⁴⁹ "Puritanism." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2009, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9061955> (accessed December 1, 2009)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Increase Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of the Scriptures* (Boston, [1685]; rpt. in *The Mathers on Dancing*, ed. Joseph E. Marks III, Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1975), 47-49, quoted in Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 52.

⁵² Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 91.

Hart associates the “profane” dancing taking place in Charleston with the kind of dancing Salome performed for Herod that ended in the decapitation of John the Baptist.⁵³ Salome herself is disparaged by American pastor N.L. Rice as “an immodest and foolish girl” in Rice’s sermon, *A Discourse on Dancing*.⁵⁴ Reverend William Potts cited the same passage in his 1847 sermon in St. Louis, as did William Meade, an Episcopalian preaching in Virginia around 1855.⁵⁵ These preachers all had the same message: a woman dancing was too risky to allow. Rice summed up the practical application of avoiding this risk by saying that Christians ought to adhere to the “Latin adage ‘*obsta principiis*,’ – resist the beginnings of evil.”⁵⁶

Finally, Sturm conveys the fear of religious opponents to dance that dance would supplant prayer. This argument is closely linked with the antidance explanation as to why dance infringes upon the Fourth Commandment to keep the Sabbath holy; oftentimes dances took place at the same time as church services. This engendered a fear that the traditional church community would dissolve into the surrounding immorality of balls and mixed dancing. In *Light on the Dance* preacher M.F. Ham discusses this issue, and includes an illustration by Will M. Noonan that captures this fear, entitled “Dance Empties Temporizing Preacher’s Pews” (see figure 1).⁵⁷

All of the factors mentioned by Sturm have their origins in the pervasive religious attitude of the Puritans, directly traceable to the Protestant Reformation. Of this lineage Wagner writes that the antidance movement in America “emerged out of sixteenth-

⁵³ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 92.

⁵⁴ N.L. Rice, *A Discourse on Dancing* (Cincinnati: Holland & Hitchler, 1847), 6.

⁵⁵ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 147, 152.

⁵⁶ Rice, *A Discourse on Dancing*, 10.

⁵⁷ Ham, M. F., *Light on the Dance*, 2d ed. (San Antonio, San Antonio Printing Co., 1916), 12.

century Reformation fervor [in Europe].”⁵⁸ Whatever additional factors bolstered the American sense of antagonism toward dance stemmed essentially from the religiously inflected European understanding of dance formed during the Reformation.

American opponents to dance took much of their inspiration from their earlier European counterparts. They carried the tradition of Biblical justification for the condemnation of dance into their treatises and sermons. The legacy of the Reformation emphasis on the Ten Commandments, particularly the Seventh Commandment, persevered. Increase Mather wrote that dancing has the potential to “entice participants to temptation, more specifically to the adultery forbidden in the Seventh Commandment.”⁵⁹ The Puritan commitment to a total lifestyle change from the Catholic, and later American, corruption that surrounded them meant that Puritans felt that they should “avoid all occasions for temptations to the sin of adultery.”⁶⁰ They certainly considered dancing one such occasion. Both Increase Mather and his son Cotton Mather published works disparaging dance, and both called on the Seventh Commandment as a central justification for their arguments.

Mather also picked up on the licentiousness that his European predecessor William Prynne condemned in *Histro-Mastix*. “But who can seriously pray to the Holy God to be with him,” Mather asks, “when he is going to a Promiscuous dance?”⁶¹ Mather’s diatribe cleverly goes beyond Prynne’s, by encouraging the participation of his congregation. The rhetorical structure of Mather’s question asks for the response of his reader/parishioner, so that the participant – who knows the answer is “no one” – might

⁵⁸ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, xiv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶¹ Increase Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn Out of the Quiver of the Scriptures*, in *The Mathers on Dancing*, ed. Joseph E. Marks III (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1975).

add his own voice to Mather's, affirming the antdance point that he makes throughout *Arrow*.

The continuity of language, from an English Protestant to an American Puritan, hints at the lineage that appears throughout American antdance treatises and tracts. The demonstrable focus on scripture in American antdance writing has clear antecedents in the Reformation tradition of interpreting the Bible to guide behavior. Protestant Reformers and American Puritans also shared a parallel notion of reform. Both groups considered themselves separate and apart from the surrounding majority (Catholics in Europe and “godless” non-Puritans in America), and both drew on scriptural themes of separation from a corrupted majority. Like the Apostle Paul in his epistles, spokesmen for the Reformation and for the Puritan cause encouraged their followers to fortify their communities of true believers by separating from mainstream beliefs, peoples and practices. In regards to dance, this meant dissociating themselves from the idea that dance, those who danced, and dancing itself at balls and parties were all permissible.

Another popular antdance line of argument pertains specifically to the construction of a uniquely American Protestantism. The colonial moment in United States history brought with it a sense of importance. Colonialists did not take lightly the responsibility of nation building. The Puritans among them sought to define a religious way of being that would set the example for generations of future Americans. Religious leaders tried to delineate those behaviors that would set apart pious Puritans from sinful outsiders; preachers taught “sobriety and gravity” as desirable Christian values outlined in the Bible.⁶²

⁶² Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 51.

The moral character that leaders of American Puritans sought to cultivate in the congregations was one of perfect piety in accordance with the Bible. In this light, leaders such as Mather justified their antidance exhortations with the lines from Ecclesiastes 3.1 and 3.4: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” By this logic, Mather and other preachers hoped to convey that, with all the wrong in the world, and especially in colonial America, dancing was simply an untimely activity for a devout Puritan.

Separating Exegesis from Suppression of Women: Salome’s Ignored Agency

The popularity and perseverance of Salome’s story in the rhetoric of dance opponents points to the creation and reinforcement of a gender-based moral hierarchy within the Protestant circles that opposed dance. “Dance opponents cast women as either pure and pious or fallen and sinful,” Wagner writes. “If the former, they were to be protected from the dance. If the latter, they were associated with dancing, either as victims of its evils or as perpetrators of its evils by their role as temptress, ‘taxi-dancer,’ or prostitute.”⁶³ Under this rubric, women can fall into one of three categories based on their proximity to dance: (1) an abstainer, and therefore a good Christian woman, (2) a guilty party by association with dance, or (3) a Salome, and consequently, a seductress. These “options” left little room for positive interpretations of dancing in the Bible or the empowerment of women through physical expression celebrated in later feminist readings of the Bible.

⁶³ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 394.

In *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth* (2004), F. Scott Spencer points to biblical figure Judith as a foil to Salome.⁶⁴ The Book of Judith tells of its eponymous character's triumph over Assyrian attackers by decapitating their general. Historically, both Judith and Salome bear the responsibility for the beheading of a powerful male. While both women dance, Salome's dance *causes* the death of John, while Judith's dance *celebrates* a death that stands for the victory of the Israelites. Those religious leaders with antidance agendas had to necessarily minimize and even ignore the empowered character of Judith because of her dancing, so that they can entirely condemn the character of Salome for hers. Here, the role of dance in scripture actually aids in understanding the overarching patriarchy of biblical interpretive traditions. The suppression of dance in early America reflects the more general patriarchal value system also emerging there.

A contemporary feminist reading of Salome's story might raise a new question, as Spencer has: what was Herodias's point of view throughout the narration of Mark 6.21-29 and Matthew 14.3-12? How did she feel about her young daughter performing for Herod? In Matthew's telling, Herodias's voice is only alluded to:

But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. *Prompted by her mother* she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.'⁶⁵

And in Mark 6.24, "The head of John the baptizer" are the only words Herodias utters.

The agency and motivations of both women – for Salome's own perspective is as

⁶⁴ F. Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, "Loose" Ladies, and Women of "the Cloth": The Women in Jesus' Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 48.

⁶⁵ Matt. 6.6-9 KJV.

invisible as Herodias's – lack elaboration or explanation from the authors of these two gospels.

Partial treatment of women appears thematically throughout the history of both Europe's and America's antdance movements. Much as the blame falls on Salome for John the Baptist's death even though Salome's voice is heard minimally, the blame of the ills of society fell largely on women who were not in positions of power to speak for themselves. The voices of antdance preachers are male voices, and their admonitions of women fail to equally implicate men as dancing counterparts or even as willing observers of dance.

Conclusion

In his 1818 sermon entitled “The Nature and Tendency of Balls, Seriously and Candidly Considered,” pastor Jacob Ide summarizes the three main arguments against dance in a single diatribe:

Is it not strange reasoning to plead an ancient religious ceremony, in which a tribute of praise and thanksgiving was rendered to God, in justification of Balls where thoughtless youth are collected for the purpose of hilarity and mirth; where God is neither the object of their song, their affectations, or their thoughts; where his name, instead of being mentioned with devout adoration and praise, is but too often the by-word of their profanity?⁶⁶

He first calls into question the pro-dance argument that endorses dancing based on its mention in the Bible; the social dance to which he and his ideological compatriots objected differed drastically from the dancing in the Bible. Ide's rhetoric must have had his listener nodding along, agreeing that that reason was indeed strange. Next, he indicts

⁶⁶ Jacob Ide, *The Nature and Tendency of Balls, Seriously and Candidly Considered*, (Dedham: M. & W.M. Mann, 1818), 29.

dance as antithetical to proper worship, because in dancing “God is neither the object of [the dancers’] song, their affections, or their thoughts.” And finally, he associates dance and the profanity of the day, implicating the dancers as worldly sinners.

Dance and religion are two constantly evolving cultural forces. During religious antdance movements of sixteenth-century Europe and nineteenth-century America, antagonists of dance set these two forces in opposition to each other. The scriptural justifications for the condemnations of dance reveal a great deal about the social milieu of the two periods, and also provide important benchmarks that help map the lineage of biblical interpretation.

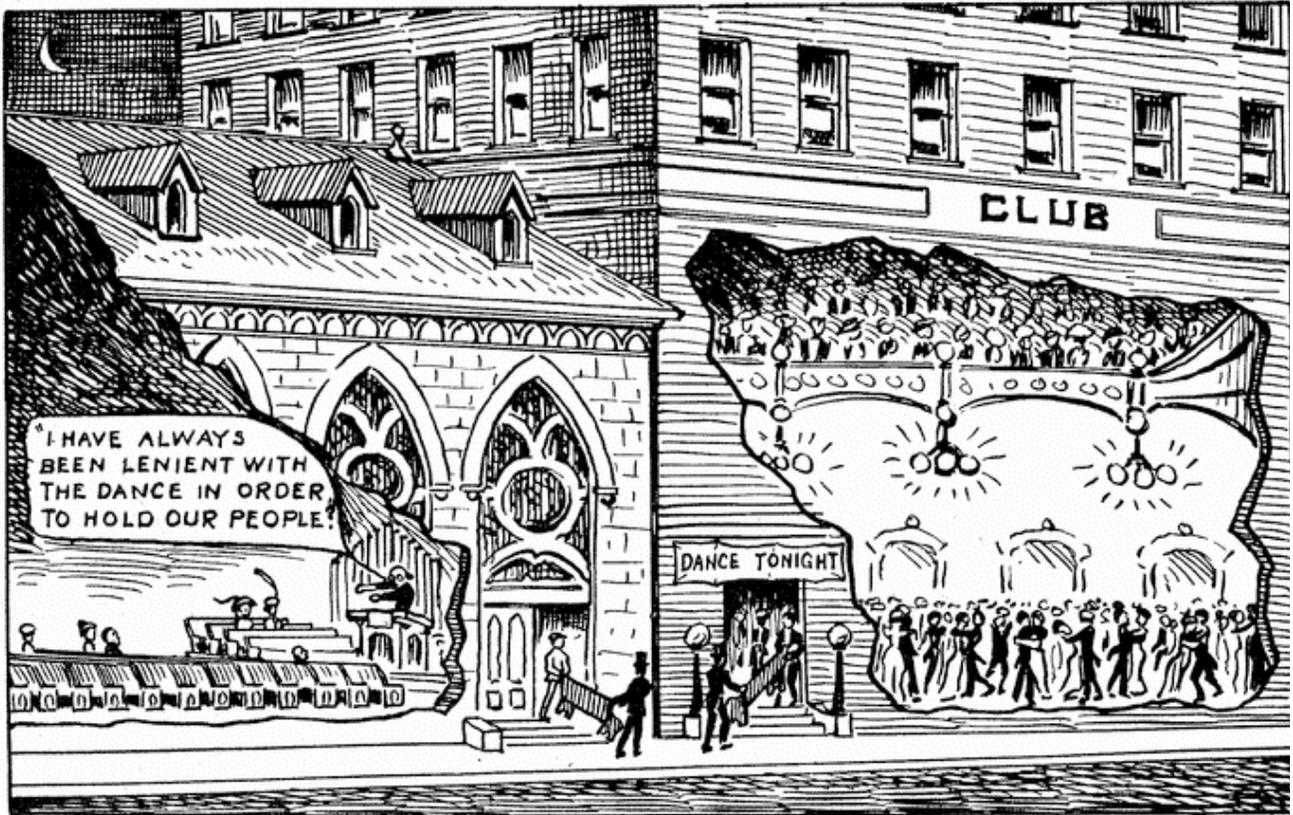


Figure 1: “Dance Empties TempORIZING Preacher’s Pews” by William M. Noonan, from M.F. Ham’s *Light on the Dance*

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