The Eloquent Body: Dance and Humanist Culture in Fifteenth-Century Italy.

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Neville advances early dance scholarship significantly with her text, *The Eloquent Body*, for her research conclusively establishes dance as one of the core humanistic practices of the Italian Renaissance, equal in social importance and intellectual complexity to rhetoric, philosophy, music, etc. The author rightfully identifies herself as one of a second wave of early dance scholars who are moving the field beyond the basic spade work of dance (and music) reconstruction to the investigation of its historical significance. Even though this study examines dance as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a technical puzzle to be unraveled, it represents a superb example of traditional basic research. Neville draws upon classical sources, medieval sources, and Renaissance sources—all quotes being translated into English—to support her argument about the prominent role dance held in the elite society of fifteenth-century Italy. She also sets clear boundaries and a sharp focus for her research, limiting her topic geographically, textually, and chronologically. Moreover, she presents her clear, straightforward thesis in clear, straightforward language—verbs such as “elide,” “confl ate,” and “trouble” never appear in the text. Her boldest venture into the realm of post-modern jargon is the verb “negotiate.”

In six chapters Neville establishes dance as a core humanistic practice. She documents its vital place in elite society. Then she discusses the rhetorical style and philosophical content of the three most important surviving dance manuscripts from this period, showing how they align with the contemporary humanistic paradigm. Finally, the author demonstrates how dance affirmed some of the most treasured ideals of humanistic thinking—intellect, order, and virtue. *The Eloquent Body* includes an index and extensive notes, including many lengthy content notes that might have been better used as sections of the book’s text. Several intriguing appendixes support her text. The first appendix presents a translation of certain sections of an anonymous poem that describes dancing. Neville does not really justify clearly her reason for including this, other than the fact that these particular passages have never been translated before. Her second appendix connects the use of mensuration signs to proportion signs in the dances. This appendix supports her excellent discussion of *misure* in the fourth chapter. Her third appendix includes musical notation and charts of the dance figures for several dances. Early dance scholars and practitioners look to this kind of information as the bedrock of research in the field, and Neville leaves us somewhat disappointed. She includes explanations of the various steps used in the dances, based on the research of David Wilson. Unfortunately, Mr. Wilson’s all-important information exists only in unpublished form, making it difficult for the reader to assess the author’s credibility. If Mr. Wilson’s research in this controversial and difficult area is so convincing to Neville, then one must wonder why it languishes in obscurity, especially in this day and age when hundreds of Web
sites devoted to early dance clamor for our attention online.

Because Renaissance-era court dance is a technically complicated, opaque subject with substantial lacunae in basic knowledge (such as the execution of many steps), this text would be difficult to follow for anyone without knowledge of the subject. The author, nevertheless, works diligently to elucidate her subject. To assist the reader, Nevile wisely elects to use a select handful of fifteenth-century dances as examples throughout her book to illuminate her points along the way. She also provides an appendix (mentioned above) that contains the music, the steps, floor patterns, and floor tracks for these several dances, including one of my personal favorites, "Verçeppe." (I always wish for a book such as this to include a compact disc with all the music recorded for the dances examined.) However challenging the subject might be for novice readers, scholars and practitioners of early dance will follow her discussion with ease and delight, again because she writes so directly and without critical commentary of gender issues or the audience's gaze or of the body foregrounded or decentered. Furthermore, Nevile's scholarly effort deserves high praise because she offers the plainest, most digestible explanation of misure in her chapter entitled, "Dance and the Intellect." Dance scholars such as Ingrid Brainard, Yvonne Kendall, Barbara Sparti, and Julia Sutton have all made valiant efforts to explain this theoretical concept and its relevance to early dance. Nevile succeeds, first of all, because of her plain language, excellent charts, and her ability to explicate music theory to the uninitiated. She also succeeds in explaining misure because she takes the reader through its historical basis in Pythagorean ratios and proportions.

Nevile has labored for many years as a careful, precise, imaginative scholar conducting the basic research of dance reconstruction. Any student of early dance will admire her systematic approach to the analysis of dance structure and her clear, precise notation system. Nevile's scholarship here represents one of the most successful investigations of early dance as a historical phenomenon. As much as a decade ago, writers such as Mark Franko were attempting postmodernish, deconstructionist critiques of early dance. Those analyses were largely unsuccessful without the foundation of fundamental historical research such as Nevile presents in The Eloquent Body. This work should inspire other scholars to follow with similar historical studies of the rest of the early dance canon. Specifically, The Eloquent Body presents itself as a template for future studies of French fifteenth-century dance, sixteenth-century dance in Italy, France, and England, and perhaps some of seventeenth-century dance. Perhaps in a decade or so, the third wave of dance scholars—Franko and the deconstructionists—will truly have their day of clever, virtuosic intellectual unpacking of this field.