

Dancing Devils and Singing Angels

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*nu sich her an dit spiegelglaß
der schonesten schone, der du hoist!
Noch schoner dann noch ye keyn wypp,
sich, ßo schone ist dyn lipp!
man sal uns aber lieren:
ich wyl dich wol denczeren!*

*Ja, vil lieben knecht,
es kommet mer wol gerecht!
du fugest mer freyden gnungk,
du bist woil myn gefug!
du hilffest danczen und singen:
ich wel myt der springen
manchen frolichen sprungk! (ll. 1776–1788)¹*

(Look into the mirror and recognize your beauty! You are more beautiful than any woman at any time. Perceive how beautiful your body is! They should fiddle for us once more, and I shall properly dance with you! – Yes, my dear fellows, it suits me well. You give me more than enough happiness, you match me well. You help me to dance and sing. I shall dance with you and I shall perform many merry jumps.)

The quoted dialogue clearly describes a dance which is neither holy nor even courtly. It's a leaping dance, a kind of dance which during the Middle Ages was regarded as boorish and uncontrolled. The partners of the above quoted dialogue are Lucifer and Mary Magdalene; the dancing scene is part of the *Alsfeld Passion Play*, performed in Alsfeld, Hesse in 1501.² The context of the scene in the play is as follows: Jesus has just freed the Canaanite girl from the demons (Mt 15, 21–28) and has been sharply criticized by the Jews for doing so. At the same instant, the plot shifts to the depiction of Mary Magdalene's worldly life. It is obvious that she is another young woman whom Christ will have to free from demons. The task, however, will be more difficult than it was in the case of the Canaanite girl.

Mary Magdalene acts out in a proud manner: *Maria Magdalena superbo habitu incedit*. – She is guilty of *superbia*, which is Lucifer's sin. Consequently, Mary does not deal with any "regular" demon, but she dances with Lucifer himself – and some other devils in addition, *cum Lucifero et alijs demonibus corisans*. Lucifer manipulates her. He supports her *superbia* by presenting her a mirror, in which she should view her own beauty. Lucifer praises her beauty, and when he has convinced her with his words and with the mirror's image, he asks the demons to play a fiddle – and to help him to induce Mary to follow him by music and by a devilish dance. *Et*

¹ Richard FRONING (ed.), *das Drama des Mittelalters*, vol. II–III: *Passionsspiele*. Stuttgart, 1891–92, pp. 547–864. New edition: Horst BRUNNER (ed.), *Alsfelder Passionsspiel mit den Paralleltexten*. Tübingen, 2002 (Die Hessische Passionsspielgruppe. Edition im Paralleldruck, 2).

² Bernd NEUMANN, *Geistliches Schauspiel im Zeugnis der Zeit. Zur Aufführung mittelalterlicher religiöser Dramen im deutschen Sprachgebiet*, Bd. 1. München, 1987 (MTU 84), no. 3.

sic vigellator incipit vigellare et corisant Luciper cum Maria Magdalena et alii demones. Mary and Lucifer obviously do not dance in a single pair, but in a round dance of devils. One of them, Natyr, whom we most probably ought to identify with the snake from Paradise, is said to be especially close to Mary Magdalene. All the devils are happy about their finding, and they are right in feeling so: Mary is about to help them attracting more people to the devilish dance. She says that she intends to dress and decorate herself for the dance, *ich wel zieren mynen lipp ... und wel auch gern reyen* (ll. 1790–92), which she will perform with everybody, with priests and laymen, *mit pfaffen und myt leyen* (l. 1793). She intends to seduce clerics and other people, all those who can hear her (i.e. the intended mixed audience of the play) with an especially improper dance: a leaping dance, *darumb wel ich springen / und eynt gut litgen singen!* (l. 1794f.). She will sing a „good song“, she says, a song, which is good for her devilish purpose:

Quo finito cantat corzando sola:

*Ich breytte mynen mantel yn die awe:
do begunde mich zu fragen myne frawe,
wo ich ßo lange were gewest.
was wolde sie des?
sal ich mynes jungen
libes nicht gewaldigk synn?
wole mich, wole mich der seligen stundt!
nach freyden wel ich ryngen:
freyde ist mynem herczen kunt
mit tanczen und myt spryngen!
wole mich, wole mich der lieben zyt!
dye blumlyn yn der auwe
der hot mich alßo großßen nyt:
die gesellschaft kan mich erfrawen!* (ll. 1795a–1809)

(After having spoken these words, she sings, dancing alone: “I spread my mantle in the meadow. My lady thereafter asked me where I had been for such a long time. What did she intend by doing so? Doesn’t she trust me that I can master my young body by myself? Lucky me, lucky me, what a happy time I had! I shall search for pleasure; pleasure is well known to my heart when I dance and leap. Lucky me, lucky me, what a lovely time I had! I so ardently long for the flowers in the meadow; I know how to happily enjoy their company.”)

This song clearly is held in the tone of a shepherds’ song. Young Mary’s coat spread in the meadow is a clear image for her sexual experience. Mary Magdalene’s lady obviously understands the meaning and purpose of the girl’s visit to the meadows, while Mary’s angriness about the lady’s assumptions may well serve us as a confession of her sexual intentions and adventures in the meadow. She experienced pleasure when dancing an uncourtly leaping dance (l. 1805).

Et tunc primus miles Herodis descendit de castro ad Mariam Magdalenam salutando eam et dicit:

*Got grüße dich, frewlyn zart!
du bist geborn von hoher art...* (ll. 1809a–1811)

(Thereafter, the first soldier of Herod's troops comes down to Mary Magdalene from the fortified place, greets her and says: "Hail, dear young lady! You are born from a high family ...")

Quickly Mary's song has attracted one of Herod's soldiers. Thus, only a few scenes before the beginning of Christ's Passion, Mary Magdalene attracts those who will torture Christ and brings them into Satan's surroundings. The soldier greets Mary with words alluding to the angelic *Ave Maria*. By this, the play depicts the sinful figure of Mary Magdalene as an antitype of Mary, the mother of God, who again traditionally is understood as an antitype of Eve. Mary Magdalene is a clear image of the fallen man. Devil had tempted her, whereby he used both words and sensual means to stir her pride. He has used the integrative force of the dance. As devil's servant Mary Magdalene offers her wreath, a symbol of her virginity, to the soldier. She goes out for a dance with him in the meadows, and she sings the same song again, while Natyr dances with her maiden. There is no need for any speculation what the scene is about; it clearly is a very sexual scene. Martha tries to warn her sister, but there is no way to prevent her from leading her sinful life – no way for a normal human being to do so. Only God can turn fallen Eve into a holy woman. When Mary hears Christ delivering the Sermon of the Mountain, she immediately converts to a holy life. From now on, she does not even consider any more to dance. Her conversion from the devilish dance to a holy life, initiated by God's words, functions as a leading example for the audience, who also have experienced the temptation of the dance, and have heard the Sermon of the Mountain (in the play).

1. Critical Voices Concerning Dances in Religious Context

The early Church had a mostly critical attitude towards the dance.³ It was said that those who dance cherish heathen godheads and that they allow their bodies rule over their minds.⁴ Repeatedly, the synods prohibited religious dances and/or dances within churches. For example, the Würzburg Synod, 1298 decided upon the sentence: *Prohibeant sacerdotes sub poena excommunicationis choreas maxime in coemeterio vel in ecclesiis duci.*⁵ The synods did not only outlaw dances in sacred

³ Cf. Julia ZIMMERMANN, *Teufelsreigen – Engelstänze. Kontinuität und Wandel in mittelalterlichen Tanzdarstellungen*. Diss. FU Berlin (in preparation); idem, *Gestus histrionici. Zur Darstellung gauklerischer Tanzformen in Texten und Bildern des Mittelalters*, in: Margret EGIDI et al. (ed.), *Gestik. Figuren des Körpers in Text und Bild*, Tübingen, 2000, pp. 71–85; Joachim BUMKE, *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*. München, 1994, pp. 311f. A collection of quotations from early church authorities concerning dances can be found in: C. ANDRESEN, *Altchristliche Kritik am Tanz – ein Ausschnitt aus dem Kampf der alten Kirche gegen heidnische Sitte*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 72 (1961), pp. 217–262.

⁴ Theresa BERGER, *Liturgie und Tanz. Anthropologische Aspekte, historische Daten, theologische Perspektiven*. St. Ottilien, 1985, pp. 24f.

⁵ Würzburg Synod, 1298, quod. *ibid.*, p. 29.

places; in general, they regarded dances with critical eyes. Johannes Chrysostomus⁶ (as we assume) phrased a sentence, which kept being quoted throughout the Middle Ages; it was sometimes attributed to Augustine, sometimes to other authorities. The sentence also appears as a title of different tracts⁷: *Chorea est circulus rotundus, cuius centrum est diabolus*: The dance is a round with the devil in its centre. In his *Homilia in Matthäum* Chrysostomus in fact broaches the issue of dance.⁸ God has not given us legs for vane movements, *ut iis turpiter utamur*, he writes. He rather has given them to us so that we can walk upright, *ut recte gradiamur*; he has not given us legs so that we can jump around like camels, *non ut perinde atque cameli saltemus*, but that we can join the dance of the angels, *sed ut cum angelis choreas agamus*. While the demons dance with their bodies, the only true dance is the dance of the pure spirits. When spirits and souls dance, there is no sign of heathen cult or sensual temptation – there is no sin.⁹ A few years earlier than Chrysostomus, Gregory of Nazianz¹⁰ had sharply criticised any dancing activities. He thereby used a biblical example, which Chrysostomus and many others after him quote again: Salome. Her dance led to the decapitation of John the Baptist. Thus, it is obvious, Gregory and Chrysostomus assume, that the dancing movement is an expression of enmity towards God.¹¹ Satan had made Salome dance, and therefore she performed improper, indecent movements and wrenched her body. She displayed her unbound hair and wore clothes which were rather presenting than covering her flesh.

The negative example of Salome is often used in sermons, tracts and didactic writings against the dance. Salome is, however, not the only negative example of a dancer. As I have mentioned earlier, Chrysostomus also stresses that the dancing movements have their origin in heathen cult. He prove this assumption by referring to the examples of the Golden Calf in *Ex* 32, 19 and of the priests of Baal dancing around an altar in *I Reg* 18, 26–29. In the Bible, Elija mocks the priests for their vain leaping dance around the altar, by which they try to receive an answer from Baal, while the godhead does not show any reaction. They finally become crazy and badly hurt themselves. Elija and Chrysostomus criticize the assumption that a dancer who dances around something holy could force the holy object or the godhead to share its or his power with the dancer.¹² There is only one condition under which Chrysostomus could accept a dance around something that is worshipped: when the centre of the dance truly is holy and when the dancer does not want to force it to share its

⁶ Ibid., p. 25, note 109.

⁷ There for example is a 14th century tract *Chorea est circulus rotundus cuius centrum est diabolus*, which is kept in the Episcopal Library St. Peter, Cod. b X 8/6.

⁸ Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in Matthaeum* 48,3, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* (PGL) 58,491.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Philipp HAEUSER (ec. and transl.), *Gregor von Nazianz, Rede V (wider Kaiser Julian)*, 35. *Des Hl. Bischofs Gregor von Nazianz Reden*. München, 1928 (Bibliothek der Kirchenväter), pp. 185f.

¹¹ Johannes Chrysostomus (cf. note 8).

¹² Cf. Gerardus VAN DER LEEUW, *Phänomenologie der Religion*. Tübingen, 1977, p. 423.

power, but when he humiliates himself in order to praise the Divine. He mentions two examples of this kind of positive dances: the angels' dance around God, and David' dance around the Ark of the Covenant in 2 *Sam* 6, 14–22.¹³ Theological tracts about the dance rather frequently mention David's dance as a positive example of a believer's self-humiliation in front of God.¹⁴ Any dance that appeared as an expression of pride, sexuality and of heathendom, however, was strictly condemned.

There is another reason for a theological condemnation of dances in the middle ages: Dances that were performed on a Sunday could prevent people from attending the mess. A large number of medieval and especially late medieval sermons and tracts on the Decalogue, as well as figurative representations of the Ten Commandments mention the dance as one of the most typical ways of breaking the Third Commandment, i.e. the commandment to respect the Sabbath. In the following, I'll mention two examples for these texts.

(1) The *Heidelberg Illustrated Catechism*,¹⁵ written and illustrated in early 15th century, warns all those who try to respect the Third Commandment that they should avoid to join the *processio des teufels*. They could recognise a devilish dancing procession by the following signs:

*Der tanzen processien des teufils sey
Das sullit ir alle mercken doby
Sy tantzen und springen czu der lincken hant
Dy selbin wege seyn dem teufil woll becant
Dy wege dy do sint czu der rechten hant
Dy kennet got der herre
Dy czu der lincken hant seyn vorkart und sundiclichen sere
Der tantz ist eyn rynk ynd scheibelicht vmbgang
Das mitten yn dem tantze steht, das ist der teufil genant (9^v)*

(The fact that dancing is a procession of the Devil can be recognised by the following signs: People dance and leap to the left. These ways are well familiar to Devil. The ways to the right hand side, to the contrary, are familiar to God our Lord. The left ways are wrong and very sinful. The dance is a circle and round movement circulating around a centre, and the centre is called "devil".)

As a procession, likewise any religious procession or royal entry, the dance urges its participants to set themselves into a relationship to the centre of the procession: the devil. As a round dance, the dance serves as a means to worship the centre of the round: the devil. As a movement to the left, the dance leads into damnation and sepa-

¹³ Gregor von Nazianz (cf. note 10), p. 186.

¹⁴ Cf. Julia ZIMMERMANN, *Histrion fit David ... König Davids Tanz vor der Bundeslade in der Ikonographie und Literatur des Mittelalters*, in: Walter DIETRICH (ed.), *König David. Biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt* (19. Colloquium der Schweizerischen Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften). Freiburg/CH, 2003, pp. 531–561.

¹⁵ Wilfried WERNER (ed.), *Die Zehn Gebote. Beicht- und Sündenspiegel. Farbmikrofiche-Edition der Handschrift und der Blockbücher in dem Cod. Pal. Germ. 438 der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg*. München, 1994. Cf. Johannes GEFFCKEN, *Der Bildercatechismus des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts und die catechetischen Hauptstücke in dieser Zeit bis auf Luther*, vol. I: *Die zehn Gebote*. Leipzig, 1855.

rates from God. In the following, the text enumerates a number of vices that are linked with the dance, which, in the end, leads to a violation of all sacraments. One of the major sins of dancers, for example, is pride, the “mother of all sins”: *Vnd wirt gesetzt an dy sinne / Dy hoffart dy do eyn muter aller sunde vnd missetat* (9^v). Pride is followed by sodomy: *Do begeret man elicher frawen und menner vil serer*. Even those who only observe others dancing, commit sins, since they enviously judge over their fellowmen. Finally, it is a bad excuse to refer to the fact that hundred years ago people also merrily danced, since *Sy haben auch vor hundirt iarin yn dy bitter helle gefarn ... Der tewfil werfft sy alle yn seynen sag* (10^f). Dance is an old sin of which many people have been guilty. Dancers commit fundamental sins during weekdays, but on a Sunday, these sins are even more serious.

(2) In 1416, Johannes Herolt, a famous preacher and the prior of the Nuremberg Dominican Convent, finished his extremely influential, far-spread didactic work *De eruditione christifidelium*.¹⁶ The book explains the Decalogue, the Creed, the sacraments and the seven capital sins. Within the chapter dedicated to the Third Commandment, Herolt reflects over the dance. The Jews’ dance around the Golden Calf, he explains, as well as Salome’s dance (D3^{va}), proof that any dancing movement is an expression of enmity to the Christian faith. The dancers are guilty of all capital sins, primarily of *superbia* (D3^{va}), they violate all sacraments, primarily baptism. The sacrament of baptism includes a refutation of devil; the dance, however, is a *processio diaboli* (D4^{ra}). Dancers also violate the sacrament of marriage, since dancers are guilty of sodomy (D4^{ra}). They violate the Third Commandment, since people use to dance on Sundays. They violate the First Commandment, since they diminish the image of God in themselves by acting like animals (D4^{va}). Finally, dancers worship the devil and allow him to lead them by their hand, likewise as dancers lead each other by their hands (D5^{ra}). Therefore, Herolt claims that Augustine was right in saying:

quilibet saltus qui fit in chorea est saltus ad profundum inferni. Ideo quanto altius in chorea saltauerit, tanto profundius ad infernum cadet. Ergo saltare et alte saltare vt in chorea inferni super ignitos carbones possit saltare et chorisare. Et est magna stultitia sic saltare sicut hircus. (D4^{va})

(Each leap that is performed in a dance is a jump into the deapth of hell. This is why the rule is: The higher you jump in a dance, the deeper you plunge into hell. You jump high and even higher so that you have practised to jump and dance over the burning coals in hell. Therefore, it is very foolish to dance like a buck.)

¹⁶ I quote the early print Straßburg 1509, UB Tübingen, Gb 193.4.

Herolt intensively criticises a leaping form of the dance, since the jumps of a dancer resemble those of a buck. The buck-legged Satyr, however, is a traditional image of the devil. Those who follow the devil are fools.¹⁷

Condemnations of dancers and dancing activities are a commonplace in late medieval moral teachings. As we have seen in the above quoted sample texts, dancers were criticised for worshipping heathen godheads or the devil, and for violating the Commandments, especially the Third Commandment. They were said to commit all capital sins, especially the sins of pride and sodomy. The dancing movement which turns to the left, the jumps and animal movements, were understood as expressions of the devilish quality of the dance. – This is the major reason why courtly dances were mostly held as non-leaping, treading dances, stressing the dancer's control over his body, while the leaping dances were regarded as boorish pleasures leading to sexual excesses.

2. Mary Magdalene's Dance and other Dances in the *Alsfeld Passion*

Could there be a more efficient way to depict Maria Magdalene's sinfulness, her conviction to Satan and her need for redemption than to let her dance a round dance with Satan and the other devils? In the quoted scene taken from the *Alsfeld Passion*, Mary Magdalene is guilty of pride and sodomy. Mary's dances form a clear contrast to the life and the teaching of Christ (who will be tortured by Mary's dance partners). The fact that a sermon converts her, once again stresses the opposition between the (Sunday) sermon and her dancing.

Mary Magdalene is not the only dancing figure in the *Alsfeld Passion*. The standard negative example of a dancer also appears on this play's stage: Salome. While Herod gives his orders for the preparation of the evening meal, the devils or the Jews start to dance: *Et tunc preparant mensam, et interim Judei vel dyaboli corisant.* (897b). The dance of God's enemies is a signal for the devilish quality of the following actions. Herod asks his daughter, *du salt uns danczen und springen* (l. 928). She immediately follows him and dances *dissolutis manibus*, with uncoordinated movements of her hands (l. 937b), *modo subiungendo*: in a subjugate manner, i.e. she bows down like a beast under the yoke. Her subjugate posture forms a blatant contrast to her pride, which is again expressed in her own words, when she sings *wer gesach ye stolczer meyd?* – Her pride has to be understood as sinful *superbia*, as a rebellion against God through the dance. In her song she asks the audience to join her in her sodomy and to enjoy the pleasures offered by girls and women. She and her body, she says, are ready to do the will of the host and his guests (l. 944): This clearly is a sexual offer. Sufficiently, Salome is characterised as a negative figure up

¹⁷ Cf. Manfred LEMMER (ed.), Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*. Tübingen, ³1986, § 61, 5–8: *Aber ich so gedenck dar by / Wie dantz / mit sünd entsprungen sy / Vnd ich kann mercken / vnd betracht / Das es der tüfel hat vff bracht.* (61, 5–8).

to this point. She, however, turns even more negative when Devil has suggested to her mother that she should give Salome the advice to ask for John's head: With the bleeding head in her hand, Salome begins to dance again (l. 1025b): *Et antequam caput dabit matri, cantat canticum saltando et corizando*. Leaping and dancing she joyfully sings about her success of having received John the Baptist's head. She exults that nobody will disapprove her lifestyle any more: Thus, her dance has to be understood as an expression of her submissiveness to the devilish forces. She and the demonic forces assume that they had been victorious over God, while the dance also seems to be a triumph over all those who criticize Salome's way of life, i.e. the fact that she dances. Sathanas, who had been hidden among the feasting community, now reveals himself in his true devilish form and cheers over his success. He thereby very clearly characterises Salome's dance as diabolic and vicious. This should serve as a warning to all those in the audience who had felt attracted by invitation to the dance.

It is little surprising that all other dancing scenes in the *Alsfeld Passion* also serve as very negative, devilish characterisations of the dancers: At the moment when Christ hanging on the cross has promised the good felon to his right that he will soon meet him in heaven, the Jews start to dance, and Synagoga says (l. 5790f.): *Ir herren mer machen eyn lobedancz / dem, der uffhoit den koniglichen krancz!* (Sirs, we shall perform a dance of honour for him who wears a royal crown). *Et sic Judai corizando per crucem cantant*: The Jews follow Synagoga and perform a ring dance round the cross, whereby they sing (ll. 5793f.). Their round dance is the kind of dance which is described in the Old Testament as the heathen form of adoration offered to something holy in the middle of the round. Here, however, it is performed by Jews as a mocking dance. By doing so, the Jews express their conviction that the adoration of Christ was wrong and was adequate to the adoration of Baal or of Satan. The audience of the play, however, knows that the Jews in fact dance around God himself. The Jews are wrong in assuming that they are performing a mock dance, as well as they are wrong in assuming that the crown of thorns was a mock crown, since Christ really is the King of heaven. Their wrong attitude characterises the Jews as Devil's servants. The Jews' song, finally, is as bad as their dance. The mock song of the Jews forms a sharp contrast to Christ's promise to the good felon that he will follow him to paradise *myt engelschem pryße* (l. 5788): praised by the angels singing. Synagogue's mock song sounds like a negative answer to Christ's promise, but soon enough the angels answer to the Jews by praising Christ in their song: *Hic angeli canunt ad laudem Salvatoris* (ll. 5803f.). They sing, but they don't dance.

There are many sung passages in the *Alsfeld Passion*; most of them can be found in the direct vicinity of the Passion sequence. Here it is even more important to carefully distinguish between the angels' and the saints' ceremonial songs, mourning songs of the congregation, and mocking songs performed with a dance by the Jews. Mary, John, Peter and two sisters form a wide circle in which Mary laments her sor-

row, *Maria faciendo longum circulum cum Johanne et Petro et duabus sororibus plangendo cantat* (ll. 5905f.), while the Jews even after Christ's death continue dancing round the cross and sing some incomprehensible lines in Hebrew: *Deinde Judei faciunt coream circa crucem et cantant hebrayce* (l. 6351b). The difference between the mourning group's wide circle and the mocking group's narrow circle is clearly marked by the movement of the evil circle, while the good circle is motionless. Once Christ's death has been stated and they begin to retire, they even do this in dancing movements: *Et tunc Judei recedunt corizando* (l. 6522b). – The dance, all in all, is a sign of God's opponents in the play.

Other Dances in Religious Plays and Processions

In some other Passion plays and also in some Christmas plays dances have a similar meaning. In the Judgement scene of the 16th century Passion play from Freiberg/Hesse, for example, monks and nuns dance in a round before they are condemned to hell.¹⁸ In a report about the 1523 performance of the *Stralsund Christmas Play* we can read that during the time of mess a group of disguised young people was asked to enter the stage, to make some noise and to bring along dogs and People who might not properly understand the Holy Mystery might still join this kind of dance as long as they are not opposed to God. The shepherds are dull, but good-willing followers of the church who join in the praise of God and by dancing around the Ark/the cradle accept the divine law:

*Dar gedantzet, gesprungen, ned so geschickt, effte se mit Legion der Düfel beseten wären. Dat was de Anfang. Dit muste so geschehen, im schyne, alsß de Engel den Hirten die Gebort Christi verkündigenden, und dat men dat Volck wackende heldt, dat se lachen musten.*¹⁹

(They danced and jumped as if they were obsessed with a legion of devils. This was the beginning of the play. It had to be like this, as it seemed, as a background for the angels' annunciation to the shepherds, and also as a means to keep the audience awake, since they had to laugh.)

The wild dance of the unholy people stresses the difference between the world which needs to be saved, and the Saviour. The dance also serves as a means of entertainment as opposed to the rather serious plot. Both these functions of a dancing scene within a religious play might also be responsible for the incorporation of dances into several processions, especially into Corpus Christi processions. The core of a religious procession is either the monstrance or a shrine. All parts of the procession should be somehow directed towards the shrine or monstrance. If there are dancing scenes in a procession, however, the dancers normally dance around a centre different from the

¹⁸ Reinhard BUCHWALD, *Die Freiburger Pfingstspiele*, in: *Mitteilungen des Freiburger Altertumsvereins* 41 (1905), pp. 45–54, p. 48. BUCHWALD calls the *Freiberg Passion Play* a Pentecost play because it was performed on pentecost; contemporary notes, however, call it a Passion play.

¹⁹ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 2648.

core of the procession. Thus, as a ring dance around an “other” centre, the dance within a procession normally characterizes itself as a separation from God. From 1495 until 1523, for example, it is testified that the Munich Corpus Christi procession comprised the Golden Calf,²⁰ and from 1505 on it is witnessed that during this procession boys danced around the Golden Calf. In Ingolstadt, too, a dance around the Golden Calf was part of the Corpus Christi procession, starting with the year 1507.²¹ These dances clearly stand for the negative dance, as opposed to the true adoration paid to the host in the monstrance. The justification for their inclusion into a religious procession can only be found in the fact that Sacred History (which should be depicted in its full richness in a Corpus Christi procession) also includes God’s opponents. In a procession, however, it is even more important than in a play to prevent the audience from feeling attracted to a devilish dance. The dance around the Golden Calf has to be very clearly disapproved. – Unfortunately, the text of the two Corpus Christi processional plays (if there were any) has not come down to us.

In Venlo a sword dance was included into the Willibrord procession in 1521.²² Most probably the dance depicted the holy missionary’s fights against the enemies of God. Such a dancing scene, however, is very different from the worshipping dance around the Golden Calf. Here, the audience may well feel attracted to the dance, which is an expression of the fight between good and evil. The core of the procession was the shrine with the relicts of St. Willibrord; the saint himself was part of the dance – the invisible centre of which, i.e. the object of the fight, was the true religion – or God himself, as opposed to devil, the centre of the worldly dances. Thus, the Willibrord sword dance, very differently from the other dances, is a dance which well intends to use the dance’s integrative power in order to attract the people to a “dance” (i.e. a fight), which is a service to and an adoration of God. It is a “dance” which shall lead to heavenly pleasures.

3. Joseph’s Dance in the *Hessian Christmas Play*

The Willibrord sword dance is not the only positive integrative dance which is described in German religious plays. Either in Friedberg/Hesse or in Alsfeld, in any way very close to the origin of the *Alsfeld Passion*, the *Hessian Christmas Play* was written.²³ It is normally dated towards the end of the 15th century²⁴ or between 1450

²⁰ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 2308–2317.

²¹ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 1954.

²² NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 2690; Martin JANSEN, Kerkelijk drama te Venlo in de middeleeuwen, in: *De Maasgouw* 3 (1881), pp. 513f.

²³ Richard FRONING (ed.), *das Drama des Mittelalters*, vol. III: *Passionsspiele, Weihnachts- und Dreikönigsspiele, Fastnachtsspiele*. Stuttgart, 1892, pp. 902–939.

²⁴ Walter LIPPHARDT, *Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel (Ludus de nativitate Domini)*, in: Kurt RUH et al. (ed.), *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, vol. 3, Berlin ²1981, col. 1197–1200, esp. col. 1197f.

and 1460²⁵, FRONING, however, claims²⁶ that it is identical with the play performed in Alsfeld at Christmas 1517. Judging from the vicinity of place (and possibly of time) between the *Alsfeld Passion* and the *Hessian Christmas Play*, we might assume that the author of the latter knew about the former. He must have known that in the *Alsfeld Passion* any dance is characterized as a devilish opposition against God. As an alternative to the very negative dance in Alsfeld, the Christmas play lets St. Joseph dance around the cradle. Mary asks him to cradle the child, and he answers:

*Ia Maria, das wel ich thun gerne
got unßerm herre
und wel meilichen singen
und gar frolich umb die wiegen springen!* (ll. 167–170)

(Yes, Mary, I will be pleased to do it for God our Lord. I will sing merrily and happily leap around the cradle!)

Joseph does not choose the courtly basse dance. Together with his servant *Sellenfro* he commences a leaping dance around the cradle. The stage direction states: *Et sic servus et Joseph corisant per cunabulum cantando*; they sing the famous song *in dulci iubilo*. – The present scene is a scenic representation of a custom called „Kindelwiegen“, which, as it is supposed, is of Franciscan origin and intends to express the joy about the birth of Christ in a folkloric way. The church didn’t always support this custom. In 1500, for example, the statutes of the Diocese of Kammin (Pomerania) state that the “bad habit” that *chorea et larvorum monstra in ecclesiis tam de nocte resurrectionis, quam etiam festo Navitatis Christi contingunt*: that people dance and wear masks in the churches at Easter Night as well as at Christmas, should be abolished.²⁷ On the other hand there are clerics who defend the “Kindelwiegen”, as for example Georg Winkel, who in 1550 writes in his *Chorbuch der Heiligen Catholischen Kirchen* that the public custom that it shouldn’t be criticized when young people *auff und nidder springen / und mit den henden zusammen schlagen* while the hymn *Resonet* (one of the most famous cradle hymns) is sung at Christmas Eve or also on Christmas Day. This kind of dance, he says, is nothing but an expression of great the joy, *welche alles Volck von dieser Geburt hat und haben sol*.²⁸

Winkel’s explanation for the dance around the cradle is very simple: It is a naive manifestation of joy, likewise the dancing feasts which often took place in the city halls or dance houses of larger towns on the evening of a performance of a religious play. Still, within the religious play itself – and especially in a play written in close vicinity to a play which condemns dance as a devilish agitation – a positive dance needs to be better explained. There has to be more to it than a mere innocent expression of joy.

²⁵ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 3630.

²⁶ FRONING (cf. note 23), p. 903.

²⁷ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 3702.

²⁸ NEUMANN (cf. note 2), no. 3763.

I have mentioned earlier that within the Bible exegesis and the writings of the Fathers, two major positive examples for a dance can be found: the dance of the angels which man should join after his death, and David's dance around the Ark.

a) The Dance of the Angels – a Pattern for Joseph's Dance?

The dance of the angels can rather often be found in religious plays. On the last SITM conference, I have already presented²⁹ one of the most famous examples of an angelic dance on German medieval religious stage: In the *Innsbruck Mary Ascension Play* (2nd half of the 14th century) Mary is lead to heaven by Christ, who asks the archangels to dance a *reygen* with her:

*tochter myn, dez salt due reygen
und tanczen in dez hymmels grale
mit mynen engeln al czue male.
stet uff, ir engel al gar,
ir sult mit uwir frawen clar
tanczen mir czue werdickeyt
mit manchir hande czyrheit.*

Raphael dicit.

*Künig aller gewaldiger herren,
wir wullen vil gerne dir czue eren
tanczen und unser frawen zue prise
und singen manche suße wise. (26, 29–39)³⁰*

(My daughter, therefore you should dance in heaven's round, together with all the angels. – All angels, stand up, you should dance very gracefully with your dear lady and thereby honour me. – Raphael says: Lord of all mighty lords, we shall most willingly honour you and dance with our lady, praise her and sing many sweet songs.)

Here the angels clearly dance in a round, *chorizant* (l. 2456b); this ring dance, however, serves at honouring God and the Lady who is accompanied by the dancing angels. The same kind of dance that on earth, in a worldly context, is regarded as a means to worship devil, is a way to praise God when it is performed in heaven, without the earthly aspects of the human body. In heaven there is no doubt that the centre of the round is not Satan, but the Lord. In heaven there is no conflict between the Commandments and the worshipping dance. – The same kind of angelic round dance could certainly be performed in plays about the Ascension of Christ. In Sterzing there was a complicated machine constructed for the angels' dance on Ascension Day in the middle of the 16th century.

Auf einem Tische war die lebensgroße Statue des Auferstandenen gestellt. Ringsherum strahlten vier blumengeschmückte Engel, jeder mit einem Leuchter in der Hand, auf dem eine brennende Kerze steckte. Jede Figur hing an einem Seil, das vom Himmelsloch herabgelassen war. Sechs Männer auf dem Kirchengewölbe bewerkstelligten den

²⁹ Cora DIETL, The Virgin, the Church and the Heathens: The Innsbruck Ludus de assumptione beatae Mariae virginis, in: *Early Medieval Drama* 10 (2006), pp. 187–205.

³⁰ Innsbrucker Spiel von Mariae Himmelfahrt, in: Franz Joseph MONE (ed.), *Alteütsche Schauspiele*. Quedlinburg/Leipzig, 1841 (Bibl. der ges. dt. Nat.-Lit. 21), pp. 20–106.

*Aufzug. Zwei bedienten den Kran, an dem die Christusfigur hing. Die vier anderen zogen die Engel hoch. Dabei mussten sie fortwährend die Seile drehen, damit die Engel schön um ihren Herrn tanzten.*³¹

(They set a life-size statue of the resurrected Saviour onto a table. Four shining angels, decorated with flowers, were placed around it, each of them holding a candlestick in his hand, with a burning candle. Each figure was attached to a rope which was let down from a hole in the dome. There were six men operating the hoist from the vault. Two of them operated the crane from which the figure of Christ was suspended. The other four lifted the angels. Thereby they constantly had to turn the ropes, so that the angels beautifully danced around their Lord.)

Here again, the round dance of the angels in heaven around God is clearly distinguished from the devilish round dance of worldly people on earth dancing around Satan. The elementary difference between the negative secular and the positive, non-earthly form of the dance is stressed by the fact that the “actors” of the Sterzing dance are statues and thereby do not allow any identification of the audience with the dancers.

As a clear contrast to the dance of the angels in the above mentioned examples, Joseph’s dance in the *Hessian Christmas Play* is performed on earth by living human beings. The angels, however, join in the song which accompanies the dance. This gives the impression that Joseph’s dance is a reflection of the angelic dance. As soon as Joseph and Sellenfroh, Mary and the angels have started to praise the child in their songs, some *virgines* and *cantores* appear and help them glorifying the Lord. They finish their praises with the words: *darumb woln die engel singen / und wer gar frolich umb die wiege springen* (ll. 244f.), *und losset die engel singen: / szo woln wir frolich umb die wiege springen!* (ll. 264f.), *darumb, woln die engel singen, / szo wollen mir frolich umb die wiege springen!* (ll. 278f.). The angels do not dance, but they sing, while the others, figures that appear out of the blue, dance. More and more of these figures which are not involved into the plot appear, until a huge group of dancers fills the stage. Again and again it is stressed how essential the angels’ song is for this dance. By means of the angelic song and the non-active personnel Joseph’s dance is separated from the plot and it is characterized as something different from the negative dances; it is half-angelic, and it serves as both an expression of Joseph’s joy and as a means to praise God.

The nearly celestial dancing scene in the play is followed by a scene which quickly lowers the level to a distinct down-to-earth atmosphere. The shepherds wake up when they hear the angels. After some boorish quarrels about the meaning of the words which they had heard and some complaints about the uncomfortable necessity to get up, they follow the star to the Holy Family. After a few polite words as greetings to Mary, they immediately turn to the child and ask God for active help in their very earthly demands: a good pasture, protection from wild animals, rich provisions,

³¹ Anton DÖRRER (ed.), *Tiroler Umgangsspiele*. Innsbruck, 1957, p. 60.

loß unß wassin gemeyn / dye magenfille gros und cleine: / bonen, erbeis, krichen und linsen, / da sich die meyde mit dinßen (ll. 458–61): „Let everything, small and big things, grow for us which fill the stomach: beans, peas, chickpeas, lentils, which make the girls grow.“ Once they have all articulated their wishes, one of the *cantores* asks for another dance, using the same words as before: *darumb woln die engel frolich singen / und wir umb die wiege springen!* (ll. 539f.). One of the *virgines* answers in the same words (ll. 560f.), and again the angels sing. The boorish shepherds are only interested in their bodily needs and do not understand what the Salvation is about, but nevertheless they are asked to join a dance which could only be without sin if it were free from all bodily aspects and were orientated towards the Lord. Huge differences clash in this scene, and the audience is irritated about the question how to interpret the boorish-angelic dance.

b) David’s Dance around the Ark – a Pattern for Joseph’s Dance?

In the attempt to understand the double-sided dance in the *Hessian Christmas Play*, we might consider the second traditional example of a positive dance as a pattern for it: David’s dance in front of or around the Ark. When the Ark (the most holy shrine and the manifestation of the divine law) is brought into Jerusalem (the City of God), David, who is accompanying and protecting the Ark, dances in front of it. Micha mocks him for doing so, since the dance, she claims, has humiliated him. He, however, justifies the dance insofar as it is no shame to humiliate oneself in front of God. He, however, agrees in the interpretation of the dance as a humiliation.

As to my knowledge, the dance of David has not been dramatised in any German religious play the text of which has come down to us, David’s fight against Goliath being the dramatically much more attractive scene. There are, however, two processional orders from Switzerland and Austria, which mention the *triumphus Davidis*. Whether it was danced or not, cannot be distinguished. What is more important, however, is the custom that in a Corpus Christi procession Old Testament scenes are only acted out when there is a typological connection to a central New Testament scene. The entrance of the Ark into Jerusalem is often connected with Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. While the Ark carries the Tablets of the old Law, Christ is the personification of the New Covenant. The Ark, however, could also be interpreted as a prefiguration of the crib. The sun of God, the most holy, the incarnation of the new law, has come to his people and his country. He is placed into the crib, such as the Tablets were placed into the Ark. Thus, the crib is an antitype of the Ark. Consequently, Joseph, who was chosen to protect the child, is an antitype of David, who was chosen to protect the Ark. David dances around the Ark and thereby praises God and humiliates himself. Joseph dances around the crib. He does not dance a courtly basse dance, but a boorish leaping dance. He thereby humiliates himself and is lowered to the level of his servant and the boorish shepherds – in front of God. By this

his dance clearly becomes an antitype of David's dance and is well justified. People who might not properly understand the Holy Mystery might still join this kind of dance as long as they are not opposed to God. The shepherds are dull, but good-willing followers of the church who join in the praise of God and by dancing around the Ark/the cradle accept the divine law.

c) The Dance of the Maidens and Hosts – a Distortion of Joseph's Dance

Joseph is even more humiliated than before in the following scene of the *Hessian Christmas Play*: Some porridge needs to be cooked for the child.³² Thus, Joseph calls the handmaidens Gutte and Hilgart. They, however, do not fancy working for him and therefore beat the old man badly. While Joseph is being ridiculed, the maidens approach the hosts who had earlier on refused to host the Holy Family and ask them for a dance around the cradle:

Hilgart dicit ad Arnoldum:

*Arnolt, großer wert fin:
duchte dich das ach eyn gute sinde syn,
das uns die engel singen,
so willen wir gar silberlich umb die wiege springen?*

Arnoldus respondit Hilgart:

*Hilgart, du schone wiße mait:
das sal dir von mir sin unvorsait!*

Gutte dicit ad Czolrich:

*Czolrich, duchte dich das nicht gut,
das du mir willest kulen mynen mut,
das uns die engel singen,
szo willen mir och hingen nach springen?*

Czolrich respondit Gutten:

*Gutte, liebe spele myn: das sal auch syn der syn myn!
will es sich nu fugen,
szo springe ich mit der umb die wîge! (ll. 702–714)*

(Hilgart says to Arnold: „Arnold, great and noble host, if you also regard it as an appropriate company when the angels sing for us, shouldn't we decently dance around the cradle?” Arnold answers her: „Hilgart, you beautiful and wise girl, I won't deny you this.“ Gutte says to Ulrich: „Ulrich, wouldn't you deem it good if you cooled my mood: When the angels sing for us, won't we also go there and dance?“ Ulrich answers her: „Gutte, my dear playmate, this is also my will. If the possibility is there, I will dance with you around the cradle.”)

The dance of the maidens and the hosts is still accompanied by the angels' song; nevertheless it appears in a most dubious light: Those who perform a leaping dance here are those who refused to serve God: to host him or to feed him. The dance does

³² Cf. Martin W. WALSH, *Breikocher Josef: The Medieval Origins of a Grotesque Comic Motif in the German Christmas Play*. Paper presented at the 2004 SITM conference in Elx, <http://www.sitm.info/history/Elx/Ponenciespdf/Walsh.pdf>.

not lack any sexual overtones, and therefore it is remarkable that Hilgart uses an ambiguous formulation when she approaches Arnold with the words *duchte dich das ach eyn gute sinde syn*: The word *sinde* could either mean “Gesinde”, “company” or “Sünde”, “sin”. The dance around the cradle thus has suddenly turned from a half-angelic, half-celestial dance, a dance following the pattern of David’s dance to a sinful round dance. The contrast between the maidens’ proud and sexually connoted dance and Joseph’s humble and innocent expression of joy clearly indicates that the main difference between a sinful dance and a holy dance is not the leaping or treading style, but the attitude of the dancers.

Right at the moment when the maidens and hosts start their dance, on the opposite side of the stage, Lucifer convokes his devils, as if the satanic moment were woken up by the sinful dance. The devils have an emergency meeting since Lucifer assumes that the child in the cradle might cause harm to the devils. Several suggestions are brought forward how mankind could be prevented from following Christ. Beelzebub has a resounding idea:

*Herre, ich heiß Beelzebuck:
ich springe den meiden nach als eyn buck
und mach se hippen und geile,
das se kummen an unser seile!
wan se beginne alßo zu springen,
szo werdin dy knecht mit ene ringen
und triben se an eyn ecke,
und beginne se zu federlecken (ll. 760–767)*

(Lord, I am called Beelzebub; I leap after the girls like a buck, and I make them happily leap so that they are fixed to our rope. Namely, when they dance like this, the young men will wrestle with them, they will drive them into the corner and will assault them.)

On one side of the stage two disobedient girls, who do not recognize God, tease two dubious men, who as well did not recognize God, to perform a leaping dance with them, on the other side of the stage this kind of dance is openly interpreted as a dance organised by the devils in order to bind people’s souls to hell. Once again, it becomes obvious that Joseph’s dance was of a very different quality.

At the end of the devils’ conference, Lucifer summarizes his devilish servants’ suggestions:

*Wilch her eyn taubben wechter hat
unnd eynen potterner, der da nicht fro uffstadt,
und eyn ungetruen kelner,
darczu eyn lamen lauffer
und eyn kuch, der da nicht smecket,
dartzu eyn knecht, der sich uber dy frawen strecket
unnd mit er schymmet under der waith,
der haid eynen volkommen halben hußraid! (ll. 821–28)*

(He who has a deaf guardian and a porter who doesn’t get up early and a disloyal cellarer, a lame messenger and a cook without a sense of taste, a servant who assaults the

landlady and plays with her underneath her clothes, he has a totally fozzled household.)

Neglect of one's duties is the major sin by which Lucifer catches man. The two maidens have neglected their duty, when they went dancing instead of helping Joseph. Joseph is one of those people who have a badly misled household. He himself may well dance (with the angels singing), because he, as well as the *puellae* and *cantores*, has linked his dance to a praise of God and a commitment to serve him, while the lazy maidens dance instead of fulfilling their duties.

In the *Hessian Christmas Play* the dance as such does not characterize the figures. Rather to the contrary, the figures characterize their dance. The same leaping dance around the cradle, accompanied by the angels' songs, can either be an expression of adoration, holy joy and self-humiliation or an expression of selfish neglect of duty and of lust, misled by the devils. The maidens do not understand why the angels sing, and they do not see what the centre of the round dance is. Dancing around God without seeing him – a motif that we have already encountered in the *Alsfeld Passion* – is an expression of blindness and alienation from God. The different dances in the *Hessian Christmas Play*, which from the outside perspective appear as one dance, serve at warning the audience to follow the example of Joseph. It is not forbidden to feel and express joy, but it is a diabolic sin to feel joy in the neglect of one's duties towards God. It is not forbidden to dance at all, but to dance a satanic dance.

4. Conclusion: A Lesson of Proper Dancing

Dancing scenes in German religious plays are more than a merely entertaining element to keep the audience awake. The church's critical attitude towards the dance was well known, while the dancing culture was nevertheless wide spread. Especially in towns where the performances were followed by feasts that included civic dances, the dancing scenes in the plays can be understood as offers for identification to the audience. In the play the audience can learn to recognize the thin differentiating line between a diabolic sinful dancing pleasure and a righteous, just and pious expression of joy. The Hessian play group forms a dialogue about the just way of dancing. In very clear pictures the devilish dance is depicted as a dance neglecting or opposing God, neglecting the dancer's duties, promoting the dancer's pride and celebrating the dancer himself. A righteous dance, to the contrary, is an expression of joy which puts God in the first place and celebrates him, while the dancing subject steps back. In a righteous dance the dancer does not try to gain anything for himself, be it pleasure, be it freedom, or be it the power of the circumdanced idol. The dancer's freedom from intention can best be seen in the angels' dance, but a reflection of it can also exist within human life, as it can be seen in Joseph's dance. In a very subtle way the *Hessian Christmas Play* teaches how to dance properly: with Joseph and the angels, and not with the maidens and Beelzebub.