
SIR JOHN DAVIES 1569–1626

Sir John Davies was a law student at the Middle Temple when he wrote *Orchestra, or A Poem of Dancing, Judicially proving the true observation of time and measure in the authentical and laudable use of dancing*. In the next year, 1595, Davies was called to the bar. He had a distinguished legal career, becoming successively Solicitor-General for Ireland, Attorney General for Ireland, and finally, just before his death in 1626, Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench in England. Five years after writing *Orchestra* he published a serious philosophical poem called *Nosce Teipsum* ("Know Thyself"). He is also the author of some amusing parodies on Elizabethan sonnets, his so-called *Gulling* ("Fooling") *Sonnets*.

Orchestra pretends to be a light, even frivolous poem, but it is really a serious expression of some important Elizabethan concepts. (The title has the original Greek meaning, a dance floor.) The idea that dancing was something more profound than a mere art or pastime was not original with Davies; it was, in fact, almost a commonplace. The courtier was supposed to learn to dance, not merely as a social accomplishment, but as a part of his liberal education. Dancing was considered allegorical; as Sir Thomas Elyot said in his treatise on the ideal Elizabethan gentleman, dancing "betokeneth concord." It reconciles and harmonizes such moral and psychological opposites as fierceness and mildness, boldness and fearfulness, arrogance and modesty.

The poem purports to be an account of an episode which for some reason was left out of Homer's *Odyssey*; that classical epic and others were considered by the Elizabethans to be moral and didactic in purpose. In Davies' invented episode, the chaste Penelope, Ulysses' queen, who has been waiting patiently for the return of her husband (although suitors have tried to persuade her that she is really a widow and should therefore remarry), is endowed with special beauty by the goddess Athena. The foremost suitor, Antinous, begs her to dance; she refuses, and an extended debate ensues, in which Antinous claims that the whole universe is organized in a dance—the sun, the moon, the fixed stars, the elements in descending order beneath the moon, the winds, even the rivers and brooks.

The idea that the universe is bound together by a kind of harmony or concord is fundamental in Elizabethan cosmology. The music of the spheres is not accidental, it is functional. More importantly, the physical world and the moral world are alike in this respect. That is why Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* maintains that the man who is not moved by concord of sweet sounds is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils, and why one of the most horrible images of evil in *Macbeth*, to Elizabethan ears, is that of pouring "the sweet milk of concord into hell." *Orchestra* also reflects the other great Elizabethan idea—that of degree or rank, the orderly arrangement of all things in the universe from the highest to the lowest. If Davies had finished his poem, he would have shown Queen Elizabeth surrounded by a dance at court, and this would have seemed to sixteenth-century readers the culminating and perfect image of political order and harmony.

From Orchestra

Where lives the man that never yet did hear
 Of chaste Penelope, Ulysses' queen?¹
 Who kept her faith unspotted twenty year,
 Till he returned, that far away had been,
 5 And many men and many towns had seen;²
 Ten year at siege of Troy he lingering lay,
 And ten year in the midland sea³ did stray.

Homer, to whom the Muses did carouse
 A great deep cup with heavenly nectar filled:
 10 The greatest deepest cup in Jove's great house,
 (For Jove himself had so expressly willed)
 He drank off all, ne let one drop be spilled;
 Since when his brain, that had before been dry,
 Became the wellspring of all poetry.

Homer doth tell, in his abundant verse,
 The long laborious travails of the man,
 And of his lady too he doth rehearse,
 How she illudes,⁴ with all the art she can,
 Th' ungrateful love which other lords began;
 20 For of her lord false fame⁵ long since had sworn,
 That Neptune's monsters had his carcass torn.

All this he tells, but one thing he forgot,
 One thing most worthy his eternal song;
 But he was old and blind and saw it not,
 25 Or else he thought he should Ulysses wrong,
 To mingle it his tragic acts among;
 Yet was there not, in all the world of things,
 A sweeter burden for his Muse's wings.

The courtly love Antinous⁶ did make,
 30 Antinous, that fresh and jolly knight,
 Which of the gallants, that did undertake
 To win the widow, had most wealth and might,
 Wit to persuade, and beauty to delight:
 The courtly love he made unto the queen,
 35 Homer forgot, as if it had not been.

Sing then, Terpsichore,⁷ my light Muse, sing
 His gentle art and cunning courtesy!
 You, lady, can remember everything,
 For you are daughter of Queen Memory;

1. Ben Jonson tells the story that a gentleman upon reading these first two lines summoned his cook and asked him if he had ever heard of Penelope. The cook answered "No," whereupon the gentleman proclaimed: "Lo there the man that never yet did hear / Of fair Penelope, Ulysses' queen."

2. A translation of a line from the *Odyssey*.

3. Mediterranean.

4. Deceives with false hopes.

5. Rumor.

6. The chief of Penelope's suitors in the *Odyssey*. "Jolly": physically active and lively.

7. The Muse of dancing. Her name has four syllables and is accented on the second. "Cunning": learned.

40 But sing a plain and easy melody,
 For the soft mean that warbleth but the ground⁸
 To my rude ear doth yield the sweetest sound.

Only one night's discourse I can report:
 When the great torchbearer of heaven was gone
 45 Down, in a mask, unto the Ocean's court,
 To revel it with Tethys, all alone
 Antinous, disguiséd and unknown,
 Like to the spring in gaudy ornament,
 Unto the castle of the princess went.

50 The sovereign castle of the rocky isle,
 Wherein Penelope the princess lay,
 Shone with a thousand lamps, which did exile
 The shadows dark, and turned the night to day.
 Not Jove's blue tent, what time the sunny ray
 55 Behind the bulwark of the earth retires,
 Is seen to sparkle with more twinkling fires.

That night the queen came forth from far within,
 And in the presence of her court was seen;
 For the sweet singer Phemius did begin
 60 To praise the worthies that at Troy had been;
 Somewhat of her Ulysses she did ween
 In his grave hymn the heavenly man would sing,
 Or of his wars, or of his wandering.

Pallas that hour, with her sweet breath divine,
 65 Inspired immortal beauty in her eyes,
 That with celestial glory she did shine
 Brighter than Venus, when she doth arise
 Out of the waters to adorn the skies.
 The wooers, all amazéd, do admire
 70 And check their own presumptuous desire.

Only Antinous, when at first he viewed
 Her star-bright eyes that with new honor shined,
 Was not dismayed; but therewithal renewed
 The noblesse and the splendor of his mind;
 75 And as he did fit circumstances find,
 Unto the throne he boldly 'gan advance,
 And with fair manners wooed the queen to dance:

"Goddess of women! sith your heavenliness
 Hath now vouchsafed itself to represent
 80 To our dim eyes, which though they see the less,
 Yet are they blest in their astonishment,
 Imitate heaven, whose beauties excellent
 Are in continual motion day and night,
 And move thereby more wonder and delight.

8. I.e., the soft alto ("mean") that sings only the tune ("ground").

85 “Let me the mover⁹ be, to turn about
 Those glorious ornaments that youth and love
 Have fixed in you, every part throughout;
 Which if you will in timely measure move,
 Not all those precious gems in heaven above
 90 Shall yield a sight more pleasing to behold,
 With all their turns and tracings manifold.”

With this the modest princess blushed and smiled,
 Like to a clear and rosy eventide,
 And softly did return this answer mild:
 95 “Fair sir! you needs must fairly be denied,
 Where your demand cannot be satisfied.
 My feet, which only nature taught to go,¹
 Did never yet the art of footing know.

“But why persuade you me to this new rage?
 100 For all disorder and misrule is new,
 For such misgovernment in former age
 Our old divine forefathers never knew;
 Who if they lived, and did the follies view,
 Which their fond² nephews make their chief affairs,
 105 Would hate themselves, that had begot such heirs.”

“Sole heir of virtue and of beauty both!
 Whence cometh it,” Antinous replies,
 “That your imperious virtue is so loath
 To grant your beauty her chief exercise?
 110 Or from what spring doth your opinion rise,
 That dancing is a frenzy and a rage,
 First known and used in this newfangled age?”

“Dancing, bright lady, then began to be,
 When the first seeds whereof the world did spring,
 115 The fire, air, earth, and water, did agree
 By Love’s³ persuasion, nature’s mighty king,
 To leave their first discorded combating,
 And in a dance such measure to observe,
 As all the world their motion should preserve.

“Since when they still are carried in a round,
 And changing come one in another’s place;
 Yet do they neither mingle nor confound,
 But every one doth keep the bounded space
 Wherein the dance doth bid it turn or trace.
 125 This wondrous miracle did Love devise,
 For dancing is love’s proper exercise.

9. The prime mover (or the outside sphere in the old astronomy, which causes all the other spheres to move). The conceit of the motions of the heavenly spheres as a dance is central in the poem.

1. Walk. “Footing”: dancing.

2. Foolish.

3. Love is here the creative, organizing force in the universe, not the blind Cupid of popular lore.

“Like this he framed the gods’ eternal bower,
 And of a shapeless and confuséd mass,
 By his through-piercing and digesting power,
 130 The turning vault of heaven forméd was,
 Whose starry wheels he hath so made to pass,
 As that their movings do a music frame,
 And they themselves still dance unto the same.”⁴

* * *

“Behold the world, how it is whirléd round!
 135 And for it is so whirled, is naméd so;
 In whose large volume many rules are found
 Of this new art, which it doth fairly show.
 For your quick eyes in wandering to and fro,
 From east to west, on no one thing can glance,
 140 But, if you mark it well, it seems to dance.

“First you see fixed in this huge mirror blue
 Of trembling lights a number numberless;
 Fixed,⁵ they are named, but with a name untrue;
 For they all move and in a dance express
 145 The great long year⁶ that doth contain no less
 Than threescore hundreds of those years in all,
 Which the sun makes with his course natural.

“What if to you these sparks disordered seem,
 As if by chance they had been scattered there?
 150 The gods a solemn measure⁷ do it deem
 And see a just proportion everywhere,
 And know the points whence first their movings were,
 To which first points when all return again,
 The axletree of heaven shall break in twain.⁸

“Under that spangled sky five wandering flames,⁹
 Besides the king of day and queen of night,
 Are wheeled around, all in their sundry frames,
 And all in sundry measures do delight;
 Yet altogether keep no measure right;
 160 For by itself each doth itself advance,
 And by itself each doth a galliard¹ dance.

“Venus, the mother of that bastard Love,²
 Which doth usurp the world’s great marshal’s name,
 Just with the sun her dainty feet doth move,

4. In the stanzas here omitted, Antinous continues to debate with Penelope about the divine origin of dancing. As part of his argument, he quotes a speech of Love, persuading men to learn dancing, from which the next eighteen stanzas are taken.

5. I.e., the so-called fixed stars.

6. I.e., the *magnus annus* or “great year,” the length of time it takes all the heavenly bodies to return to their starting points and repeat the original pattern. Davies says the great year is 6,000

years long.

7. Dance.

8. I.e., the end of the world, coming at the end of the great year. The “axle-tree” is the binding axis.

9. I.e., the planets.

1. A lively dance.

2. Cupid, who by calling himself “Love,” steals the name belonging to the great organizing force (“world’s great marshal”).

165 And unto him doth all her gestures frame;
 Now after, now afore, the flattering dame
 With divers cunning passages doth err,³
 Still him respecting that respects not her.

“For that brave sun, the father of the day,
 170 Doth love this earth, the mother of the night;
 And, like a reveler in rich array,
 Doth dance his galliard in his leman's⁴ sight,
 Both back and forth and sideways passing light.
 His gallant grace doth so the gods amaze,
 175 That all stand still and at his beauty gaze.

“But see the earth when she approacheth near,
 How she for joy doth spring and sweetly smile;
 But see again her sad and heavy cheer,⁵
 When changing places he retires a while;
 180 But those black clouds he shortly will exile,
 And make them all before his presence fly,
 As mists consumed before his cheerful eye.

“Who doth not see the measure of the moon?
 Which thirteen times she danceth every year,
 185 And ends her pavan⁶ thirteen times as soon
 As doth her brother, of whose golden hair
 She borroweth part, and proudly doth it wear.
 Then doth she coyly turn her face aside,
 That half her cheek is scarce sometimes descried.

190 “Next her, the pure, subtle, and cleansing fire⁷
 Is swiftly carried in a circle even,
 Though Vulcan be pronounced by many a liar
 The only halting god that dwells in heaven;
 But that foul name⁸ may be more fitly given
 195 To your false fire, that far from heaven is fall,
 And doth consume, waste, spoil, disorder all.

“And now behold your tender nurse, the air,
 And common neighbor that aye runs around;
 How many pictures and impressions fair
 200 Within her empty regions are there found,
 Which to your senses dancing do propound?
 For what are breath, speech, echoes, music, winds,
 But dancings of the air, in sundry kinds?

“For, when you breathe, the air in order moves,
 205 Now in, now out, in time and measure true,
 And when you speak, so well she dancing loves,

3. Wander. “Respecting”: regarding, watching.

4. Lover's.

5. Appearance.

6. A slow, stately dance.

7. Below the moon came the four elements, fire, air, water, earth, in descending order.

8. I.e., the name of “halting god.” True fire is purifying and pure; false fire is destructive lightning.

That doubling oft and oft redoubling new
 With thousand forms she doth herself endue;
 For all the words that from your lips repair
 210 Are nought but tricks⁹ and turnings of the air.

“Hence is her prattling daughter, Echo, born,
 That dances to all voices she can hear.
 There is no sound so harsh that she doth scorn,
 Nor any time wherein she will forbear
 215 The airy pavement with her feet to wear;
 And yet her hearing sense is nothing quick,
 For after time she endeth every trick.

“And thou, sweet music, dancing’s only life,
 The ear’s sole happiness, the air’s best speech,
 220 Lodestone of fellowship, charming rod¹ of strife,
 The soft mind’s paradise, the sick mind’s leech,²
 With thine own tongue thou trees and stones canst teach,
 That when the air doth dance her finest measure,
 Then art thou born, the gods’ and men’s sweet pleasure.

225 “Lastly, where keep the winds their revelry,
 Their violent turnings and wild whirling hays,³
 But in the air’s tralucet gallery?
 Where she herself is turned a hundred ways,
 While with those masquers wantonly she plays.
 230 Yet in this misrule they such rule embrace
 As two, at once, encumber not the place.

“If then fire, air, wandering and fixed lights,
 In every province of th’ imperial sky,⁴
 Yield perfect forms of dancing to your sights,
 235 In vain I teach the ear that which the eye,
 With certain view, already doth descry;
 But for your eyes perceive not all they see,
 In this I will your senses’ master be.

“For lo! the sea that fleets about the land,
 240 And like a girdle clips her solid waist,
 Music and measure both doth understand;
 For his great crystal eye is always cast
 Up to the moon, and on her fixed fast;
 And as she danceth in her pallid sphere,
 245 So danceth he about the center here.

“Sometimes his proud green waves in order set,
 One after other, flow unto the shore;
 Which when they have with many kisses wet,
 They ebb away in order, as before;

9. Bars of music.

1. Magic wand.

2. Physician.

3. Country dances; “tralucet”: translucent.

4. The empyrean, or utmost visible sky.

250 And to make known his courtly love the more,
 He oft doth lay aside his three-forked mace,
 And with his arms the timorous earth embrace.

“ ‘Only the earth doth stand forever still:
 Her rocks remove not, nor her mountains meet,
 255 Although some wits enriched with learning’s skill
 Say heaven stands firm and that the earth doth fleet,
 And swiftly turneth underneath their feet;⁵
 Yet, though the earth is ever steadfast seen,
 On her broad breast hath dancing ever been.

260 “ ‘For those blue veins that through her body spread,
 Those sapphire streams which from great hills do spring,
 The earth’s great dugs,⁶ for every wight is fed
 With sweet fresh moisture from them issuing,
 Observe a dance in their wild wandering;
 265 And still⁷ their dance begets a murmur sweet,
 And still the murmur with the dance doth meet.’ ”⁸

* * *

Away, Terpsichore, light Muse, away!
 And come, Urania, prophetess divine!
 Come, Muse of heaven,⁹ my burning thirst allay!
 270 Even now for want of sacred drink I tine!¹
 In heavenly moisture dip this pen of mine,
 And let my mouth with nectar overflow,
 For I must more than mortal glory show!

O! that I had Homer’s abundant vein,
 275 I would hereof another *Ilias* make!
 Or else the man of Mantua’s² charméd brain,
 In whose large throat great Jove the thunder spake!
 O! that I could old Geoffrey’s muse awake,
 Or borrow Colin’s fair heroic style,
 280 Or smooth my rhymes with Delia’s servant’s file!³

O! could I, sweet companion, sing like you,
 Which of a shadow, under a shadow sing!
 Or like fair Salue’s sad lover true!

5. Davies here shows his awareness of Copernican astronomy, though he uses the older Ptolemaic view for poetic purposes. Milton did the same a generation later.

6. Breasts.

7. Always.

8. Antinous quotes more of Love’s speech, giving further illustrations of how flowers, birds, and other natural things dance to the music of the spheres. Antinous then takes up his own argument again, with a recital of the origin of the various kinds of dance and the practice of dancing by gods and heroes. In answer to a prayer for help, Love comes and presents Antinous with a mirror in which Penelope may see the future and behold dancing at the court of Queen Elizabeth. The rhe-

torical stanzas that follow are Davies’ preparation for a description of the queen, which he left unfinished; Elizabeth was to her subjects a vivid symbol of order and harmony.

9. Urania was the Muse of astronomy but more generally of the heavens, therefore appropriate for divine subjects (here, Queen Elizabeth).

1. Perish.

2. I.e., Virgil.

3. “Geoffrey” is, of course, Chaucer; “Colin” is Spenser (Colin Clout is his name for himself in *The Shepheardes Calender*); “Delia’s servant” is Samuel Daniel, who wrote a sonnet cycle to Delia. None of the references in the following stanza have been explained.

285 Or like the bay, the marigold's darling,
 Whose sudden verse Love covers with his wing!
 O! that your brains were mingled all with mine,
 T' enlarge my wit for this great work divine!

Yet Astrophel⁴ might one for all suffice,
 Whose supple muse chameleon-like doth change
 290 Into all forms of excellent device;
 So might the swallow,⁵ whose swift muse doth range
 Through rare Ideas and inventions strange,
 And ever doth enjoy her joyful spring,
 And sweeter than the nightingale doth sing.

295 O! that I might that singing swallow hear,
 To whom I owe my service and my love!
 His sugared tunes would so enchant mine ear,
 And in my mind such sacred fury move,
 As I should knock at heaven's great gate above
 300 With my proud rhymes; while of this heavenly state
 I do aspire the shadow to relate.

1596

4. Sir Philip Sidney, from his sonnet cycle *Astro-phil and Stella*.

5. Apparently Davies' friend Richard Martin, to whom he dedicated the poem.