Imperial Balls:
the Arts of Sex, War and Dancing
in India, England and the Caribbean
1780-1870

John Cooper

Yale University, History of Art Department
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This (fig. 1) is a painting in gouache on paper by a now unknown Indian artist of the *tawa'ifs*, musicians and officiators of the household of Colonel James *Sikander Sahib* Skinner painted in Delhi in the third decade of the nineteenth century. Among the finely decorated performers present here are three *nautchinis*, or dancing girls, likely to be *tawa'ifs* or hereditary courtesans, two vina players, a tabla player and a cymbal player. Other attendants prepare a *hookah* and possibly *paan*. The canopied enclave placed before a *jaali* screen and herb and fruit garden is a Mughal-derived setting for dance performance. The same Mughal tradition of courtly display accounts for the richly embroidered carpet being painted flush against the picture plane and the encyclopedic differentiation of cloth, jewelry, gesture and social duty also owes much to pictures of Mughal rulers and their viziers immersed in the entertainments which symbolized their enlightened, self-evident, worldly, cosmopolitan, claims to governance.

In an offshoot of the Mughal empire at Lucknow in the 1770s the Nawab of Awadh, Asaf-ud-Dawla, was represented (fig. 2) transacting the business of state reclining in a similar location under a canopy surrounded by courtiers and dancers.

A shift in the type from the 1780s (fig. 3) shows the European mercenary soldier Colonel Antoine Polier adopting the accoutrements of the Nawab from whom he derived most of his power and income. By situating himself before dancers in this position Polier laid claim to a share of prestige and authority in the volatile geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent.

This is the genealogy of Colonel Skinner's painting, but what is different about it is that the axis of vision has been turned 90 degrees, displacing the paramount power from a figure of authority inside the picture to the observer who stands outside of it. The world of Anglo-India is oriented differently in 1830 from what it was in 1780. Who has paramountcy in India now? The picture defers to whoever beholds it, flattering the observer with an image of sovereignty over all this.

This is Colonel James *Sikander Sahib* Skinner, painted by William Melville in 1836 (fig. 4). The son of a Scottish cavalry officer and a high-cast Rajput woman, Skinner knew full well what it was to inhabit an ambiguous position between worlds. Barred from military service with the British, Skinner had begun his military career as an officer in the Maratha Empire under the French general De Boigne. Until its defeat in 1818, the Maratha Empire was the last remaining major threat to British paramountcy in India. After the Second Anglo-Maratha war in 1803 Skinner was offered the command of an irregular cavalry regiment in the British army, which he took and led successfully, obtaining the rank of Colonel and being created a Companion of the Order of Bath in 1828. Throughout his life, Skinner knew how to turn and reorient himself along shifting lines of power.

He is not directly represented in this (fig. 1) image but he is present. The courtesan and the soldier are similar (compare figs. 1 and 4). Both are covered in the ornamental garb of their role and station in Anglo-Indian society. Both bear the heraldry and insignia of their trades. The dancer is posed in one of the first positions of that Islamicizing court dance we now know as Kathak, a finishing posture called a *gat* embroidered with a stylized *mudra* of the hand. Skinner is posed in one of the first positions of academic portraiture, in three quarters view, emblazoned by his uniform, his hand resting upon a sabre, an emblem of the colonial-military state. Her eyes look soporific, absorbed in an auspicious mode of seeing known by dancers as *khumari* in which the *rasa* or aesthetic flavour of the dance is experienced. His eyes are set with all the mytho-military romance of state—both gaze out on the world of Anglo-India, somewhow, as it were, from the same body.

The head and shoulders of the theatre impresario who organized one of the most famous ballet performances in the nineteenth century is depicted here (fig. 5) on the frontispiece of his memoires.

The son of a Canadian Jewish immigrant, Benjamin Lumley was trained as a solicitor and became manager of Her Majesty's Theatre, which was at that time the premier venue for classical dance performance in London, in 1842. This abbreviated resemblance of his figure by Alfred, Count D'Orsay (1847) is enough to qualify him as the image of a respectable citizen. The frankly delineated profile describes an unostentatious face with reasonable features. Being the owner of the means of production Lumley need only be represented as a head and enough of shoulders to display the generic uniform of an entrepreneur. Since it does not work, there is no need for his body to be present.

Benjamin Lumley's livelihood derived to a large extent from the adornment and use of other peoples' bodies which were, like these (fig. 6), fully and ostentatiously visible. This lithograph by the Swiss émigré artist A. E. Chalon RA and lithographer Thomas Herbert Maguire records the celebrated performance in 1845 at Her Majesty's Theatre of a *ballet divertissement* called *Pas de Quatre*. It was choreographed by the resident French dancing master Jules Perrot to a score by the Italian Cesare Pugni and danced by the Swedish / Italian, Neapolitan, Istrian and Danish dancers Marie Taglioni, Fanny Cerrito, Carlotta Grisi and Lucile Grahn.

The print is unusual because it depicts a figure group. Single figure compositions (fig. 7) haloing individual dancers with a Romantic vignette of landscape were more common in the 1830s and 40s. This reflects the structure of state-run theaters such as Paris Opèra and the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet which employed one or two famous dancers to appear in the lead roles of narrative ballets alongside a *corps* of state trained *danseuses* and *coryphées* drawn from an attached school. Her Majesty's Theatre in London was privately run and therefore able to contract, for a limited period, four major dancers (none of them British) to appear onstage without a *corps* for a ballet choreographed by a Frenchman to a score by an Italian. This administrative framework provided Perrot with the opportunity of arranging the four dancers with a non-narrative formal equality and Chalon with the

opportunity of staging them in a multi figure composition novel for the genre and emblematic of the contractual grace effected by Benjamin Lumley.

Pas de Quatre was performed to critical acclaim and brought Benjamin Lumley substantial profits. Lumley was celebrated in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* (September, 1845) for the 'diplomacy' with which he had negotiated a 'quadruple alliance' between four of the most competitive dancers of the early nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, at a time when Britain had emerged paramount over France, and when that succession had relied on a Quadruple Alliance with Austria, Prussia and Russia, the appearance of four splendidly compliant European dancers united gracefully on the British stage naturally evoked the language of diplomacy from enthusiastic critics.

Chalon and Maguire's graphic interpretation of *Pas de Quatre* responds to this evaluation of the dance. The 'quadruple alliance' adorns the dancers with a flag of white gauze and muslin, the ballerinas' competing claims organized diplomatically and with courtly deference and delicately interlinking hands. The coy, suggestive looks of the women record feeling and agency which have momentarily submitted to the absent hold of choreographer, diplomatic impresario, artist, lithographer and publisher. Subtle modulations in posture and gesture couple with a variety of white roses, stage pearls, flounced skirts, bare Raphaelesque shoulders, bodices and styled hair to form a tableau of gracefully poised contractual stillness.

This (fig. 8) is a print of the *Pas de Déesses* produced a year later in 1846 by Benjamin Lumley and Jules Perrot. A similar quartet composition is used by Jules Bouvier who clearly had knowledge of Chalon's earlier print. In Taglioni's place of apotheosis stands Arthur St. Leon suspending a golden ball above the three competing dancers Fanny Cerrito, Lucile Grahn and Marie Taglioni. The apple of gold will be awarded, the podium tells us, 'a la plus belle', thus gratifying the connoisseurial prurience of the male observer on paper. I suggest that the spirit of Benjamin Lumley has transmigrated into the figure of Arthur St. Leon who himself

now occupies the central, elevated position previously held by Taglioni. The *danseuses* exhibit and promote their differing styles of grace and comportment to the judicious male, envoy of the patriarchy which appears in 'the gods', a sublimation of the audience, in a satisfyingly Christianizing hierarchy of apotheosis or assumption which confirms and idealizes the structure of display, competition and cash reward suggested in this composition of pliant dancers.

What more powerful, erotic, quasi-spiritual image could there be in a heavily industrialized, labouring nation in the 'hungry forties' than that of four beautiful white women executing a highly stylized form of inessential movement? Whose kinetic ease seemed to lubricate a social ideal of the miraculously produced fruits of labour without having to perceive any trace of that labour at all as if it had come already completed out of the pure generosity of spirit, ease and bounty of the world to render itself up explicitly for the exquisite pleasure of Benjamin Lumley and writers of the *New Sporting Magazine* to endow it with a golden apple?

This (fig. 9) is another image of a patriarch presiding over the performance of a pliant dancer. It was painted in India by Johan Zoffany in 1783. It is an allegory of colonial music in which differences in native tone and pitch and rhythm are held together by the governing social order of a European family. It shows the family of Elijah Impey, the first Chief Justice of the Calcutta Supreme Court.

Impey's daughter Marian occupies the focal point of the image. She is dancing an Indian dance of short travelling steps and poses in time with the music of the *tabla*, *sitar*, triangle and cymbal players and singers and is dressed in the tight-fitting *churidar*, ankle bells and high waisted translucent overskirt of a *nautch* girl. It is a precarious position for her to occupy. There were strong connections between *nautch* dancing and perceived indecency among Europeans at this time. *Nautch* dancers were likely *tawa'ifs* (hereditary courtesans), who had their social station assigned by caste, who danced for money and male indulgence and who were either kept collectively behind the *purdah* in *zenanas* by wealthy patrons or migrated

between distant centres of patronage like Delhi, Lucknow and Calcutta. All of this makes Marian's dance an imperiling act of cultural mimesis.

In one sense her dance is a mere making light of identity since the classlessness and homelessness of dancing women in India were opposed to the girl's assured place in a colonial dynasty. But in another sense she strikes the overall tone of the basically faulty act of imitation which this commission attempts to pull off. Gillian Forrester has recently noted in her catalogue entry for this painting in the YCBA exhibition that Elijah Impey was at this time embroiled in the impeachment of Hastings, in the charges of corruption and embezzlement that undermined the ruling colonial class's self-evident right to govern and at a time when there emerged an obvious disparity between signs signifying a world of harmony and justice and a reality which was dissonant with inequity. In this light Marian's *nautch* dance could be construed as an embezzlement—as much as an imitation—of Indian culture.

Now I would like to compare this image with another of a European female posed in the attitude of an Indian dancer in a context of judgment by patriarchal figures.

This image (fig. 10) shows a European woman being auctioned on the docks at Calcutta and was made in 1786. It was copied directly by Rowlandson 25 years later in 1811 (fig. 11). The satirical print shows a woman posed in the attitude of a *nautch* girl and inspected by two Indian *babus* who look more like the rotund Turks which populate Rowlandson's erotic images of harems. In the caricatures of both Gillray and Rowlandson an excess of flesh frequently stands in for a gluttony of desire fattened on profit reaped from an unequal social economy. Other women are discarded as unwanted goods, another is weighed on a scale with raw cash, the black boy at the centre of the image links this Anglo-Indian auction of commodities to the circum-Atlantic trade in slaves and the soldiers among the crowd consolidate this as a representation of sex, war and dancing.

Among the paraphernalia scattered in the foreground of Gillray's version are Leake's pills and surgeon's tools for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. The foppish auctioneer stands on a podium of British manufactured birches for flagellation. Beside that is a box marked for 'the instruction of military gentlemen' which is the bibliography of this image. Some of the texts it lists are: Pucelle, Fanny Hill, Crazy Tales, Female Flagellants, and Birchini's Dance.

This (fig. 12) is the text to which Gillray's image refers. Like many works of obscene literature of this period precise details of publication are difficult to find but this volume was printed for George Peacock—very likely a pornographer's pseudonym—in the shadow of one of London's two royal patented theatres, Drury Lane. Madame Birchini's dance is a poem in which a member of the hereditary nobility is taken to Paris by his young wife and whipped by an Opera dancer in order to help improve his performance. The quotations on the frontispiece link the text to other performing arts—the opera—and the literature of enlightenment—Rousseau.

The catalogue (fig. 13) printed at the back of Madame Birchini's dance shows the other sorts of text that circulated alongside it—Tristram Shandy, adultery, flagellation, Ovid, Rochester, Ode to Priapus. Then there is a list of images—including 'A Sale of English Beauties'. Then there is a note which offers discounts to EIC soldiers and merchants. The Gillray and Rowlandson images visualize the Anglo-Indian trade in obscene print matter described in this catalogue which connected dancers, flagellation, merchant traders, soldiers, slavery, obscenity and disease in a colonial economy of sex, war and dancing.

This (fig. 14) is a picture of Marie Taglioni in the role of Zoloe the slave girl in the ballet *The God and the Bayadère* mounted on the front cover of *The Exquisite*. *The Exquisite* was a magazine of 'amatory adventures' published between 1842 and 1844 by the radical printer and agitator William Dugdale under the pseudonym H. Smith from premises on London's notorious Holywell Street. The magazine

frequently featured stories of whipping and chastisement and appealed to the military fops and civilian dandies pictured on its title page. The orientalized proscenium of the frontispiece bears the same Latin motto as Covent Garden Opera House: *veluti in speculum* (as seen in a mirror) surrounded by two high-kicking dancers and is adorned with pirated prints of ballerinas on the first thirty issues of the magazine.

Between 1786 when Gillray made 'A Sale of English Beauties' and 1830 when Edward Alfred Chalon produced this lithograph of the greatest ballerina of the colonial-romantic era, there was maintained an erotic connection between foreign nations, dancing, flagellation and the stage. This (fig. 15) is the hand coloured lithograph from which the *Exquisite* pirate is taken. The print's deep wash of indigo foregrounds the whiteness of Taglioni's stage pearl-drops, short-sleeved bodice, tiered dress, white *maillot* and ivory hands. Her hands and feet are as finely wrought as a piece of stage jewelry. The ornamental details of feet, hands, dress and accoutrements in prints of the ballet are important because it is in these extremities of surface and figure that the dancer's image is defined. Here Taglioni is modeling two different roles simultaneously. She is at once a *bayadère*, a Hindu temple dancer or a dancing slave girl bedecked with superficial effects recognizable to Europeans as signifying an Indian woman and also the most classical of classical white European ballet dancers elevated *en pointe* in an attitude of ease and grace. The elevation rising out of her pointed feet in this print and the look of effortless grace and disalienated ease with which Chalon has rendered her hands and face describe a subject who is free from the heaviness of identities and indeed one whose special grace is to pass between them as the seasons of the theatres require and to maintain all the while a spectacular wholeness of body among the divisions of signs that surround it.

Dancers of the early nineteenth century were, I think, a special kind of subject. This is partly because they so frequently carried and exchanged signs of national sovereignty whilst they danced. They were like clothes horses of imperial

identities. Even though a dancer like Marie Taglioni was and has been since called upon to be an emblem of the aetherial aesthetics of the Sylph and the classic white ballet, the geography of the dance market in the 1830s and 40s required dancers to possess a multi-lingual grasp of choreographic idioms. Here (fig. 16) she is pictured as a sylph, here (fig. 15) the left an Indian, in other prints a gipsy, in others a Spanish or Neapolitan dancing girl. In this right hand print made in New York after a European original, Taglioni is flanked by Carlotta Grisi and Fanny Elssler clothed in Grecian and Spanish garb respectively. That such alliances of nations were exchanged in the practice of ballet and that they were eroticized in and by means of this exchange is stated, I think, in the extreme delicacy of touch between the dancers' hands. What could this manual poignancy signify? In light of the above readings of *Pas de Quatre* and *Pas de Déesses* and *The God and the Bayadère*, I see in these interlacing hands both an image of the gracefulness which erupted at the contact between symbols of colonized lands and a displaced image of the impresario's contractual dexterity.

Perhaps because she was the only one of these three dancers actually to have traversed the space the image reproduces, Fanny Elssler is the most emphatically present of the three dancers here (fig. 16). In 1841 Elssler commenced the first of her two transatlantic tours, performing to acclaim in Havana, Washington and New York. Elssler is dancing the *cachucha* from *The Devil on Two Sticks*. She wears an off-the-shoulder pointed bodice trimmed with yellow gold and black lace. 'The calf length tiered skirt has a pleated top tier trimmed with a deep flounce of black lace held by 'gold' ribbon. Her stockings are patterned and her hair is centrally parted and pulled back into a 'coronet' trimmed with a knot of flowers'.[1] The thickness of decoration on Elssler's black and yellow body signifies the entangled history of the 'Spanish' dance form she, an Austrian, exemplified to American audiences.

[1] For the description of Elssler's costume in this print I rely on the expert museum record produced by the Victoria and Albert Museum London, http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O102393/print/

One of the things that ballet dancing performed on dancers was the exaggeration, inflation and extension of some parts of the body and the radical contraction of others (fig. 17). In 1840 Fanny Elssler embarked upon a tour of the Caribbean and North America. In this souvenir print she is shown dressed for the Spanish *cachucha* dance holding bags of dollars and thalers which a kneeling *putto* (possibly a sublimated image of her American impresario Henry Wikoff) penetrates with his bow and arrow. Her compass-point-like feet cross the globe in an elevated, circum-Atlantic second position.

This (fig. 18) is a picture of Caroline Augusta Joséphine Thérèse Fuchs Comtesse de Saint-James (1806-1901) in an equally Atlantic-sized Spanish bustle. The extremity of her *port de bras* or carriage of the arms is punctuated by the castanets she is shown holding and this poise is mirrored in the deft and wide sweep of her footwork which seems designed to maneuver the inflated shell of her dress in its fullest aspect. In her dancing career Madame Augusta toured performances of the *cachucha*, as well as the Neapolitan dance the *tarantella* around Europe, to New York, Cuba and throughout South America.

The *cachucha* for which Elssler and Augusta were famous was one of a number of Spanish dances which were popular in the 1830s and 40s. In *The Code of Terpsichore* translated into English and published in London in 1830, the Italian ballet master Carlo Blasis stated that 'almost every Spanish dance, such as the *Bolero*, the *Cachucha*, the *Seguidillas*, of Moorish origin, are imitations of the African *Fandango* or *Chica*. They are therefore all marked with that voluptuousness, I might even say obscenity, which characterized their model' (*The Code of Terpsichore* , 17).

A large number of colonial-romantic ballet prints were made of Spanish dancers in the 1830s and 40s. What were the hallmarks of the fashionable Spanish aesthetic? Geography mounted on the body as an inflation of its normal size. Black, yellow and red fabrics. Castanets. Darkness and voluptuousness. Associations with the 'southern'. Genealogical links with 'Moors' and Africa. The voluptuous aesthetic

of Spanish dancing in the first half of the nineteenth century was a product of the colonial world map, Spain being Britain's voluptuous, Catholic, colonial, other and it materialized on the extruded contours and high affect colours of *cachucha* dancers' bodies.

The images of ballerinas dancing and the connoisseurial procedure of differentiating their styles produced strong emotions in the audiences who paid to see them. What was it that produced these emotions? The answer is given encoded in this (fig. 19) piece of coded language called Amphigouri which serves as a lament for the departure of the unnamed writer's beloved from the stage to appear somewhere else for another season. The spread out letters which read like a pathetic sort of wail spell out C-A-R-L-O-T-T-A G-R-I-S-I, twice. Perhaps the most poignant part of the performance was what couldn't be named at all but only spelled out silently in the middle of that most quintessential of balletic qualities: (fig. 20) gRace.

In the history of colonialism there is a connection between representations of the body and representations of land. Dance makes this connection particularly visible. These (figs. 21 and 22) are two images of Kashmir. The two whole-plate albumen prints were part of the *Universal Series* made by Francis Frith &co., one of the largest commercial photographic practices in the UK during the 1850s, 60s and 70s, a time when production costs were being driven down and the postcard format was making mass international circulation possible. There are over 4000 images in the *Universal Series* from Egypt, Japan, Andalusia, China and India. For the most part these works consist of landscapes, topographical views, historic sites and city monuments. Only a very few depict figures.

These photographs were taken at a time when the territory of Kashmir had been the site of fraught struggle between warring factions. In 1819 the Maharaja of the Sikh empire Ranjit Singh took Kashmir from the Afghans. Six years after Singh's death in 1839 the first Anglo-Sikh War broke out, concluding in 1846 with the

Treaty of Lahore which ceded Kashmir to the British EIC as an indemnity of war. Kashmir was then further embroiled in the struggle for succession between Shere Singh, Dost Muhammed and the EIC in the Second Anglo-Sikh war which concluded in 1849. After the uprisings of 1857 the Punjab as a whole entered a period of suzerainty, or indirect rule, by Britain.

The image of the dancer and the image of the landscape are similar. Both are composed by a diagonal structure, the first by an archetypal *nautch* stance, the second by the winding sections of the valley. Both display contrasting areas of light—the sky and water, the white cloth—and expanses of darker volume with detailed passages—the wooded slopes or pebbled river bed and the dancer's jewelry. These are the effects the medium captures well. The values of these images are produced by their composition and detail and, ultimately, by their compliance to the governing equipment of the photographic apparatus. The *Universal Series* extends a form of indirect rule over the dancer and the landscape, a suzerain power which displays the territory of the land and the dancer as indemnities of imperialism.

[both are simply available to be seen and this access cannot be taken for granted. The very visibility of these things conveys difference]

But because this is a dancer dancing we can see genealogies at work in her presence other than indemnity.

In this dancer's dancing remains also the pre-colonial Hindu image of Siva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance (fig. 23). This image of Siva is widely known from the 12th Century onward, especially in Southern India. This aspect of Siva is particularly associated with Cidambaram, the temple complex in Tamil Nadu devoted to Siva Nataraja, a key site in mythological narratives of the origin of dancing in India. Also at Cidambaram are sculpted on the four *gopurams*, or gateways, relief panels depicting the 108 *karanas* (poses) described by Bharata in

the foundational treatise on Indian dancing, the *Natyasastra*. This treatise and the sculpture at Cidambaram together formed primary documents in the restoration of classical dance traditions in the 1930s which has continued to define the Indian dance world until the present day. I am therefore looking at this mid-nineteenth century photograph of a dancer next to Siva as already a postcolonial image because the dancing subject contests the imperial stillness of the photographic medium.

This (fig. 24) is the image of Siva Nataraja printed at the front of Ananda Coomaraswamy's 1924 volume *The Dance of Siva* published in New York. In this position Siva stands like a potent threshold figure to a work of cultural nationalism, heralding Siva's threefold historical work as creator, preserver and destroyer of all that is. In the essay on Siva the Lord of the Dance from this collection Coomaraswamy crafts the signification of the Siva motif with descriptions from Sanskrit literature. He quotes Tirumula's *Tirumantram*: 'The dancing foot, the sound of the tinkling bells, / The songs that are sung and the varying steps, / The form assumed by our Dancing Gurupara— / Find out these within yourself, then shall your fetters fall away' (*The Dance of Siva*, 61). 'Siva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground', writes Coomaraswamy below, the burning ground being the crematorium, 'But what does he destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul. Where and what is the burning ground? It is not the place where our earthly bodies are cremated, but the hearts of His lovers, laid waste and desolate' (*ibid*.).

Could it be that the floor (fig. 21) underneath the *nautch* girl's feet, as much as the valley (fig. 22) of the Kashmir, was a burning ground like Coomaraswamy describes, an ash-coloured place where the world cycles of creation, preservation and destruction of the 1850s were closing under the dancer's feet?

These (figs. 21 and 15) are two images of dancing which cross and connect the worlds of India and England. One dancer's hand displays an ornamental stage gesture, the other's conceals a hidden *mudra*; one dancer's eyes look coyly askance

to the boxes, the other's are fixed on the camera in cold *khumari*; one dancer's feet are elevated *en pointe* and on the cusp of another step, and the other's are poised firm on the floor, having already arrived; both are amplified and extruded by the folds and links of their different cloth and jewels. It is not to absorb these two images into correspondence that I place them together but rather to magnify the effect of such different worldly contexts having somehow caused two dancers, two oceans and two decades apart to strike two attitudes which ghost and grace each other on the verge of resemblance.

End.