

MÉLANIE LOZAT
MARINELLA CERAVOLO
DOMINIQUE JAILLARD
PHILIPPE BORGEAUD
GIORGIO FERRI
FRANCESCO MASSA
KARIN SCHLAPBACH
CARMELA MASTRANGELO
ALESSIO QUAGLIA
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Movimenti e funzioni rituali
nel Mediterraneo antico

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STUDI E MATERIALI DI STORIA DELLE RELIGIONI

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Danza, estasi e corpi

Dipartimento di Storia, Antropologia, Religioni, Arte, Spettacolo



Morcelliana

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Sensing through dance in Roman religion

1. *Common opinions at Rome on dance and religion*

Proverbs may be expressions of the most ingrained values and ways of thinking embraced by the society that transmits them. Servius and other witnesses offer two versions of a proverb which underlines the crucial role of dancing in Roman rites and, indeed, in Roman society overall: «*salua res est, saltat senex, or Omnia secunda: saltat senex*»¹. In order to make sense of it, they attribute its origin to a particular situation and moment in time, namely the games dedicated to Apollo in the year 212/211 BCE. On that occasion, a ritual was interrupted by an imminent threat posed by the approach of Hannibal's troupes. Upon learning of the danger, the crowd left the circus hurriedly in order to fight the enemy, only to realise afterwards that they might have invited a bad omen upon themselves by disrupting the ritual. When they came back to the circus, they saw an old man dancing; he had not stopped all along and had thus protected the validity of the ritual.

In this story, the old man's dance is singled out as the element – among numerous others that may have made up the ritual, such as the music that surely accompanied the dance or the placing of offerings on the altar – that assures the proper form of the ritual. It is a shorthand for the rightful execution of the ritual, a *mise-en-abîme* of its more complex functioning, in line with Walter Burkert's view that dance is «ritual crystallized in its purest form»². Dance is the most dynamic and also the most self-sufficient element of a ritual; basically the dancer's body is all that is needed in order to perform it (although specific costumes and props may be added to certain ritual dances, as for instance that of the *Salii*, whose characteristic outfit and weapons distinguished them from other dancers). Dance does not produce or consume anything outside of itself; it is a practice, not a *poiesis*, as Quintilian points out, and therefore can be drawn out indefinitely as if in a time loop³. In the story at hand, the fact that dancing has no goal and no purpose outside of itself is subtly highlighted also

¹ Serv., *Aen.* 8, 110 and *Aen.* 3, 279; the latter version is also attested in *Mim. inc. fr.* 1. Festus p. 326, who identifies the old man as the mime Caius Pomponius, has a lacuna but the verb *saltat* may safely be conjectured. See Z. Alonso Fernández, *La danza en época romana. Una aproximación filológica y lingüística*, PhD Diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid 2011, pp. 83-84; R. Tosi (ed.), *Dizionario delle sentenze latine e greche*, BUR, Milano 2017 (ed. or. 2000), p. 591.

² W. Burkert, *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford - Cambridge (MA) 1985 (tr. J. Raffan; ed. or. *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH, Stuttgart - Berlin - Köln 1977), p. 102.

³ For dance as a "practice", see Quin., *Inst.* 2, 18, 1-5, and K. Schlapbach, *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse. Literary and Philosophical Approaches to Dance in the Later Graeco-Roman*

by the detail that it is an old man who keeps up the dance, i.e. a man who is no longer needed for the practical purpose of pushing back the enemy but who can instead be useful in doing nothing but dance.

The proverb about the old man's dance puts it beyond doubt that dance was a central part of Roman religion⁴. It is both an actual component of religious rituals and a synecdoche encapsulating crucial information about the nature and function of such rituals. This essay argues that the apparently self-sufficient, gratuitous character of dance is constitutive for its inclusion in cultic contexts at Rome. But the following discussion also aims to go further and get a sense of the phenomenology of the experience involved in dancing by turning to two related disciplines, an aesthetics of religion on the one hand and dance studies on the other. They both help to put the spotlight on sensation, a corollary of all physical movement. Sensation may in turn direct awareness and attention; if it is strong enough, it may bring the mind entirely to the present moment. Sensation seems to be identified as central to religion by Servius, whose views on dance are discussed in the first part of this essay. Following that, I develop a number of methodological remarks on the notion of *sentire*, before turning to some poetic accounts of the beginnings of dance which suggest that dance is first of all an expression of physical well-being and agency.

For Servius, who explains Vergil at a distance of four centuries by drawing on received knowledge about ancient Roman culture, the presence of dance in cultic contexts is a matter of course, sanctioned by time-honoured custom. In his commentary on the *Eclogues*, he writes that «obviously the reason why there is dance in religious cults is because our ancestors did not want any part of the body not to feel religion: for song pertains to the spirit, dance to the mobility of the body»⁵.

On this view, which may go back to Varro but perhaps also reflects discussions contemporary to Servius, religious practices derive from the biological and psychological make-up of the human being⁶. While song is attributed to the spirit – surely both on account of its connection with breath and its being part of music, one of the liberal arts – dance is located in the body, encompassing the body entirely through physical movement. Mobility is perhaps the most essential quality of the animated body. In order to take her first

World, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 123. The outfit of the Salii is described by Livy 1, 20, 4, Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* 2, 70-71, and others.

⁴ See the recent overview by Z. Alonso Fernández, *Roman Dance*, in T.A.C. Lynch - E. Rocconi (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Music*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken (NJ) 2020, pp. 173-185; pp. 175-177, who notes that «Roman religious dance continues to be underexplored» (p. 177); K. Giannotta, *Dance vi. Contexts and Forms of Dance in Roman Religion*, in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, vol. 2, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2004, pp. 337-343.

⁵ Serv., *Ecl.* 5, 73: *sane ut in religionibus saltaretur, haec ratio est, quod nullam maiores nostri partem corporis esse voluerunt, quae non sentiret religionem: nam cantus ad animum, saltatio ad mobilitatem pertinet corporis*. All translations are by the author. The line in Vergil is *saltantis Satyros imitabitur Alpheisiboeus*. See Z. Alonso Fernández, *La danza en época romana*, cit., p. 184.

⁶ For Varro as a possible source, see G. Wille, *Musica Romana. Die Bedeutung der Musik im Leben der Römer*, Schippers, Amsterdam 1967, p. 187. It is impossible to substantiate this hypothesis.

breath, the newborn has to widen her lungs to let the air in, and once dead, the body is distinguished by its stiffness and irrevocable immobility. Movement permeates and enlivens the whole body. By deriving dance from this simple empirical reality, Servius draws a straight line from physical movement to sensation and to religious practice, which are linked by the body as their common vehicle. The expression *sentire religionem* and the reference to the mobility of the body suggest that the practices which constitute *religio* are characterised first of all by the sensations they provide, and that physical movement allows for particularly intense sensations. The dancing, then, is a visible expression of *religio* and, crucially, amplifies its experience⁷. While *religio* remains a notoriously difficult concept, we can retain that according to Servius, sensory experience and the focused attention that may accompany it, depending on its intensity, are central to it. Recent comparative studies on the aesthetics of religion reaffirm the importance of sensory experience for religious practices in a variety of cultural contexts⁸.

Servius offers another comment on dance that seems strikingly modern. In a note on *Georgics* 1, 347-350, he makes a distinction between dance as a skill or an art and dance as part of religious practice, and he characterises the latter precisely in opposition to the former. Vergil's passage, which describes a rural thanksgiving festival, reads as follows:

«and let no one apply the sickle to the mature ears before he adorned his temples with a wreath of plaited oak leaves and offered Ceres inexperienced dances and sang songs»⁹.

Servius comments: «“inexpert dances”, that is a dance linked to religion and not coming from any skill» (*motus incompositos id est saltationem aptam religioni, nec ex ulla arte uenientem*). This distinction, which portrays dance associated with religion as a free and spontaneous expression of gratefulness and reverence, may make sense in relation to the passage from *Georgics* but must by no means be taken absolutely. For it is quite in contradiction with what we know about other cultic dances, for instance that of the Salian

⁷ On the notion of experience in relation to Roman religion, see for instance J. Rüpke, *On Roman Religion. Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca - London 2016. Roman religious dance has been interpreted as an intensified form of prayer, see M. Patzelt, *Über das Beten der Römer. Gebete im spätrepublikanischen und frühkaiserzeitlichen Rom als Ausdruck gelebter Religion*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018, pp. 178-213; F.H. Hahn, *Performing the Sacred: Prayers and Hymns*, in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Blackwell, Malden (MA) - Oxford 2007, pp. 236-237.

⁸ See, e.g., J. Corrigan (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008; Id. (ed.), *Feeling Religion*, Duke University Press, Durham 2017; S. Binder, *Die religionswissenschaftliche Teildisziplin Religionsästhetik*, in «Verkündigungen und Forschungen» 64 (2019), pp. 87-101.

⁹ Verg., *Georg.* 1, 347-350: *neque ante / falcem maturis quisquam supponat aristis / quam Cere-ri torta redimitus tempora quercu / det motus incompositos et carmina dicat*. G. Wille, *Musica Romana*, cit., pp. 109-110 lists this reference under the heading of “Bauern- und Winzerlieder”, as well as *Georg.* 2, 386: *versibus incomptis ludunt risuque soluto* (probably an allusion to the Liberalia); *Hor.* c. 3, 18, 15-16: *gaudet invisam pepulissam fossor / ter pede terram*. See also Z. Alonso Fernández, *La danza en época romana*, cit., pp. 224-232.

priests – the famous *tripudium* – which seems to have consisted of traditional patterns of movement and dance figures that had to be learned and reproduced carefully¹⁰. Servius hardly has a strict dichotomy between art and religion in mind, which would be anachronistic. Rather, his comment may point to different degrees of virtuosity and formal definition that characterised dances according to their occasions, functions, and practitioners. In this sense, the rustic dances offered to Ceres surely differed from the dances that a venerable college of priests performed in the city. Servius would probably agree that the latter combined *religio* and *ars*, whereas the former flowed only from *religio*. But if this is right, it might be useful to have a closer look at the rustic dances for the gods described by a number of poets in order to get a sense of the connection between dance and religion. Could it be that the absence of fixed patterns and prescribed techniques – the “untidy” character of such dances according to Vergil and Servius – is especially conducive to discovering hitherto unnoticed dimensions of the body’s mobility, which could in turn intensify a sense of *religio*, or induce strong sensations in the first place?

2. Sensing

Before turning to a set of passages that may offer some clues, a few methodological remarks are in order. First of all, if we want to flesh out Servius’ concise and somewhat obscure idea of “sensing *religio* through dance”, it is important to focus on the body and not to bring in modern ideas of religious feeling as an inner state¹¹. The passage seems to imply that the spirit (*animus*) “senses *religio*”, too, through song, but as far as dance is concerned, Servius offers the additional element of the movement of the body as a privileged way to activate sensation, whereas he does not expand on the mental dimension of this experience. Secondly, physical movement activates proprioception, i.e. the intrinsic knowledge of one’s own body, its physiological states, its variable shape, and its position in and relation to the surrounding space. This knowledge may be articulated in sensations of heaviness vs. lightness, density vs. permeability, obtuseness vs. sensitivity, emptiness vs. fullness, and so on. The sensations that are mapped onto these parameters can of course be brought about by external causes, but the proprioceptive sensations themselves concern one’s own body and not the external causes¹². Proprioception remains largely under the radar of consciousness but

¹⁰ See F. Prescendi, *Trois pas vers les dieux. Le tripudium entre danse et divination*, in K. Schlapbach (ed.), *Aspects of Roman Dance Culture*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart (forthcoming), with further literature.

¹¹ As found for instance in Schleiermacher, for whom feeling is not “an empirical feeling aroused by an object given to the senses” (J. Mariña, *Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto*, in J. Corrigan, *Oxford Handbook*, cit., p. 459; emphasis in the original).

¹² R. Barlow, *Proprioception in Dance. A Comparative Review of Understandings and Approaches to Research*, in «Research in Dance Education» 19 (2018), pp. 39-56; V. Bellan et al., *Integrating Self-Localization, Proprioception, Pain, and Performance*, in «Journal of Dance Medicine & Science» 21 (2017), pp. 24-35; B. Montero, *Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense*, in «The Journal of

is essential for proper motor behaviour and orientation in the space. Proprioception is deeply reassuring and enabling; in fact it is a necessary condition to be able to act and interact with others.

Thirdly, one may wonder, whose body is Servius talking about? It is important to bear in mind that most Romans would participate in rituals as spectators, not as practitioners, even though the rustic dances mentioned above show that in certain contexts larger groups of people could perform dances as an act of veneration. Nevertheless, it is interesting to ask whether the public would also “sense *religio*” more intensely when they saw the dances performed by priests or select groups of Romans (for instance young boys or girls). If physical movement activates proprioception, what happens when we witness others move? The notion of kinesthetic empathy comes to our aid here. The neologism “kinesthesia” was introduced by the physician and neurologist Henry Charlton Bastian in his book *The Brain as an Organ of Mind* (1880). Bastian identified a “Sense of Movement” or a “Kinaesthetic Centre” in the brain, «whereby we are made acquainted with the position and movements of our limbs, whereby we judge of “weight” and “resistance”, and by means of which the Brain also derives much unconscious guidance in the performance of Movements»¹³. The affinity with proprioception is obvious, and in fact Bastian wanted to understand how the largely unfelt impressions provided by the body guide the brain’s motor activity. More recently, kinesthesia has been closely associated with empathy, and the notion of kinesthetic empathy is now widely used in dance studies to describe the mutual interactions between dancers as well as between dancers and spectators¹⁴. Today’s culture is very centred on the eyes and on visibility, with effects of the Platonic association of the visual and the rational still in place¹⁵. But we also know today, thanks to the neurosciences, that we perceive and interpret others’ physical movement not so much by mentally elaborating visual information but first of all through an instantaneous mirroring mechanism of the brain, which provides a physical understanding of the movements we see others perform through what Vittorio Gallese has called “embodied simulation”. If this is correct, the gap between dancing and viewing, between active and

Aesthetics and Art Criticism» 64 (2006), pp. 231-242. The notion of proprioception has barely made its entrance into the field of religious studies. See, for instance, A.L. Funes Maderey, *Philosophy of Mind as a Philosophy of the Body: A Comparative Discussion on Introspective Proprioception and the Subtle Dimensions of Bodily Self-Awareness in Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Advaita Vedānta and Kāśmīr Śaivism*, Ph.D. Diss., University of Hawai’i, Manoa 2016. The term was coined by Charles Scott Sherrington at the beginning of the twentieth century.

¹³ H.C. Bastian, *The Brain as an Organ of Mind*, C. Kegan Paul & Co., London 1880, p. 543.

¹⁴ See S.L. Foster, *Choreographing Empathy. Kinesthesia in performance*, Routledge, London 2011; in regard to Roman dance, Z. Alonso Fernández, Docta Saltatrix: *Body Knowledge, Culture, and Corporeal Discourse in Female Roman Dance*, in «Phoenix» 69 (2015) pp. 304-333; Ead., *Red-antruare: Cuerpo y cinestesia en la ceremonia saliar*, in «'Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones» 21 (2016), pp. 9-30.

¹⁵ B. Brogaard - D.E. Gatzia (eds), *The Epistemology of Non-Visual Perception*, Oxford University Press, New York 2020.

passive participation in a dance ritual, narrows, and we may assume that a spectator's proprioception is also intensified when witnessing others dance¹⁶.

If the neuronal responses to others' physical movement are beyond conscious control, it is clear that dance is all the more powerful, for it physically involves all who are present to it, including the spectators. And all physical states have an emotional quality, the most basic variety of which is its being agreeable or not, independently of a conscious evaluation. The body registers what it likes and does not like even before the mind experiences the emotions of pleasure or pain, and it is in this liminal zone of possibly unconscious sensation that dance starts unfolding its full potential¹⁷.

3. Poetic accounts of the beginnings of dance

Having thus prepared the ground, let us now examine how Roman poets between the final years of the republic and the beginning of the principate imagined the origins of dancing among their rustic ancestors. A set of recurring motifs are relevant for the present discussion. Lucretius, being an Epicurean and fierce opponent of the veneration of the gods, does not relate the first dances to religion but is nevertheless interesting in the present context, perhaps for this very reason, as we will see. In his account of cultural evolution in *De rerum natura* 5, he depicts the circumstances that made the first dances possible after music was discovered by imitating birds and blowing reeds like the wind (5, 1390-1404):

«These things (sc. music) softened the spirits of some and pleased them along with the repletion of food; for then, all things belong to the heart. So they would often stretch out on the soft grass among themselves near a stream of water under the branches of a high tree. With no great means did they hold their bodies in a pleasant state, especially when the weather was smiling and the seasons

¹⁶ V. Gallese, *Visions of the Body. Embodied Simulation and Aesthetic Experience*, in «Aisthesis» 1 (2017), pp. 41-50; Id., *A New Take on Intersubjectivity*, in M. Ammaniti - V. Gallese, *The Birth of Intersubjectivity. Psychodynamics, Neurobiology, and the Self*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York - London 2014, pp. 1-25; V. Gallese - C. Di Dio, *Neuroesthetics: The Body in Esthetic Experience*, in V.S. Ramachandran (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, Elsevier - Academic Press, Oxford 2012 (ed. or. 1994), vol. 2, pp. 687-693; C. Jola - S. Ehrenberg - D. Reynolds, *The Experience of Watching Dance: Phenomenological-Neuroscience Duets*, in «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences» 11 (2012), pp. 17-37; M. Iacoboni, *Within Each Other. Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain*, in A. Coplan - P. Goldie (eds), *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Oxford - New York 2011, pp. 45-57. For a critical evaluation, see G. Hickok, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons. The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition*, W.W. Norton & Co, New York - London 2014.

¹⁷ P. Borgeaud, *Rites et émotions. Considérations sur les mystères*, in J. Scheid (ed.), *Rites et croyances dans les religions du monde romain*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 53, Geneva 2007, pp. 189-222, elaborates on the link between physical movement and emotion (pp. 203-204). On conscious and unconscious emotion, see B. Gelder, *Emotions and the Body*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016, pp. 111-138; on feelings as representations of good or not so good bodily states, see A. Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things. Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures*, Pantheon Books, New York 2018.

of the year painted the green meadows with flowers.
 Then, jokes, then, conversation, then, laughter used to
 be sweet; for then, a rustic muse was strong.
 Then, a joyful exuberance moved them to adorn their heads and shoulders
 with garlands of plaited flowers and leaves,
 and to pace unrhythmically while moving their limbs
 in a rough manner and to beat mother earth with a rough foot,
 which provoked sweet laughter and chuckling,
 because all these new and marvelous things were stronger than»¹⁸.

In this idealised vignette of archaic life, the first, inexpert dances arose in situations that created the necessary conditions – emphasised by the sevenfold anaphora of *tum* which partly insists on their precise nature, partly indicates their remoteness in time – for intense sensory experience. Music and food prepared body and soul, softening the spirits and catering to the most urgent physical need, that for food and drink. In this state beyond the strife for mere survival, “all things belong to the heart” (1391), a phrase that explains the verbs of the preceding line (*mulcebant, iuvabant*), which point to positive emotions. A series of words in this passage detail the sensory dimension of the setting: in addition to softness (*mulcebant, molli*, 1390 and 1392), there is an agreeable climate (*tempestas ridebat*, 1395), various colours (*pingebant viridantis floribus herbas*, 1396), perhaps the sound of water and the shadow typical of a locus amoenus (line 1393)¹⁹. All this contributed to a pleasant environment (*iuvabant, iucunde*, 1390 and 1394), conducive to sociability, relaxation, and touch (lines 1392, 1397). As the emotion builds up to “joyful exuberance” (1400), it eventually finds an outlet in physical movement, which is highlighted with the repetition of forms of *moveo* at the end of lines 1400 and 1401, respectively (*movebat, moventes*). Whereas the jokes, laughter, and conversation remain entirely “rustic” in character (1398), the dancing is the only element that hesitantly gestures toward the refinement of art, as the body, its instrument, is made special for the occasion with the adornment of garlands (1399-1400)²⁰. In fact it is interesting to note that whereas music

¹⁸ Lucr. 5, 1390-1404 : *haec animos ollis mulcebant atque iuvabant / cum satiata cibi; nam tum sunt omnia cordi. / Saepe itaque inter se prostrati in gramine molli / propter aquae rivum sub ramis arboris altae / non magnis opibus iucunde corpora habebant, / praesertim cum tempestas ridebat et anni / tempora pingebant viridantis floribus herbas. / Tum ioca, tum sermo, tum dulces esse cachinni / consuerant; agrestis enim tum musa vigebat. / Tum caput atque umeros plexis redimire coronis / floribus et foliis lascivia laeta movebat, / atque extra numerum procedere membra moventes / duriter et duro terram pede pellere matrem; / unde oriebantur risus dulcesque cachinni, / omnia quod nova tum magis haec et mira vigeabant.* The translations aim to stay close to the Latin and do not make any attempt at elegance.

¹⁹ Dance as part of a rich pluri-sensory environment is discussed by Z. Alonso Fernández, *Dance and the Senses at the convivium*, in K. Schlapbach (ed.), *Aspects of Roman Dance Culture*, cit. (forthcoming).

²⁰ The simple phrase of “making special” for the procedures used to distinguish art and religion from the ordinary is borrowed from T. Habinek, *Ancient Art Versus Modern Aesthetics: a Naturalist Perspective*, in «*Arethusa*» 43 (2010), pp. 215-230; see also the section entitled “The Special” in J. Rüpke, *Pantheon. A New History of Roman Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018, pp. 24-28.

arises through the imitation of birds and other natural sounds, in line with Lucretius' overall emphasis on nature as providing the necessary guidance for cultural progress, dance is characterised from the outset as a cultural activity with no particular model in nature, even if the dancing itself remains clumsy at first. It is without rhythm or elegance, a source of further amusement and laughter (1401-1403), so that sensory experience, pleasant emotions, and physical movement nourish and reinforce each other as if in a circle. The style of lines 1397-1404, which is characterised by various repetitions and polyptota, seems to reflect this simple, as yet unsophisticated attempt at channelling emotional and kinetic energy to give it a special form of expression.

In the absence of the gods as ultimate addressees of the actions described here, the dance's intrinsic motivation which lies in the intense sensations and emotions is all the more emphasised. There is no purpose and no goal outside of the actual performance of the dance, which flows from a specific somatic and emotional state. At the same time, the garlands are an intriguing point of contact with Roman religious practices (see below), so that this passage may still shed light on the type of spontaneous and artless dance that was associated by others with the cult of the gods.

Spontaneous, inexpert dancing among rustics recurs in the elegies of Tibullus and Propertius. Dance is part of the cultural advances brought to the Egyptians by the god of wine, Osiris – the Egyptian pendant of Bacchus – in Tibullus 1, 7, a poem composed on the occasion of Messalla's birthday after his triumph in 27 BCE which celebrated his military successes in Gaul and the Near East. The cultural development of the Egyptians, a "foreign people" (*pubes ... barbara*, 27-28) now under Roman dominion, reflects the civilising power that the god of wine exerts wherever he goes and mirrors similar accounts about the Greeks and the Romans themselves²¹. The agricultural practice of pressing the grapes with naked, "untrained" feet gives way to song and dance (lines 35-52):

«To him (sc. Osiris), the ripe grapes pressed by untrained feet
first gave their pleasant tastes.
That liquid taught them to modulate their voices in song,
and it moved their unknowing limbs towards regular rhythms.
And Bacchus allowed the heart of the farmer, exhausted by great toil,
to be released from sadness,
and Bacchus brings rest to afflicted mortals,
even though their legs resound, stricken by the hard shackle.
You don't have bitter worries and grief, Osiris,
but dance and songs and light love are proper to you,
but varicoloured flowers and a brow garlanded with ivy-berries,
but a yellow mantle flowing down to the tender feet
and Tyrian garments and the pipe sweet with music
and the light box privy to the hidden rites.

²¹ Most prominently in Euripides' *Bacchae* (esp. 274-283).

Come here and celebrate the genius with dances and celebrate the genius with choruses and drench his temples with plenty of wine.
From his shining hair let ointments drip,
and let him wear soft garlands on his head and around his neck»²².

Song and dance, resulting from drinking wine, are associated with positive emotions (freedom from care, love), with special adornments (garlands, clothes, ointments, and scents), and cult objects. The rich sensory experience into which the dancing is embedded involves all five senses, and the emotional benefit is greatly emphasised, in line with traditional portrayals of Dionysiac cult²³. The cultic function of dance is not described in detail, but dance is related to the gods in that it is a divine gift, and the prayer addressed to Osiris (*huc ades et Genium ludis Geniumque choreis / concelebra*, lines 49-50) comprises the god himself as a dancer in the celebration²⁴. His gift of wine transforms the rustics into dancers able to keep the rhythm (*ille liquor ... / movit et ad certos nescia membra modos*, 37-38), and his presence sanctions the cult practice. The transition from “untrained feet” and “unknowing limbs” to the performance of dance and its insertion into a cult setting is overseen by the god himself, and it is quick and smooth, although the adjective *nescia* preserves a shade of ambiguity in that it could perhaps be construed with *ad certos ... modos* (“inept at regular rhythms”, 38)²⁵. The first dances, then, retain an improvised and rustic flavour, and only when the focus is on the god does the vocabulary change and the Greek loan words *chorus* and *chorea* are used (lines 44 and 49). What counts for the “mortals” is not technique or convention but the expansion of their multi-sensory experience through new flavours, movements, visual impressions, haptic sensations, scents. The *cista* containing the cult objects (line 48) is the climax of this tableau, followed by the invitation addressed to the god to join the dance. The strong ties between sensation and ritual is perhaps particularly pronounced in relation to the cult of Bacchus / Osiris / Dionysos, whose epithet *Lyaaios*, the Loosener, is echoed in *dissoluenda* (40), and it is certainly

²² Tib. 1, 7, 35-52: *Illi iucundos primum matura saporis / expressa incultis uva dedit pedibus. / Ille liquor docuit voces inflectere cantu, / movit et ad certos nescia membra modos, / Bacchus et agricolae magno confecta labore / pectora tristitiae dissoluenda dedit. / Bacchus et afflictis requiem mortalibus adfert, / crura licet dura conpede pulsa sonent. / Non tibi sunt tristes curae nec luctus, Osiri, / sed chorus et cantus et levis aptus amor, / sed varii flores et frons redimita corymbis, / fusa sed ad teneros lutea palla pedes / et Tyriae vestes et dulcis tibia cantu / et levis occultis conscia cista sacris. / Huc ades et Genium ludis Geniumque choreis / concelebra et multo tempora funde mero: / Illius et nitido stillent unguenta capillo, / et capite et collo mollia sarta gerat.*

²³ See for instance Eur., *Cycl.* 171-172: Silenus is «a dancer and also one who brings forgetfulness of bad things» (ὄρχηστὺς θ' ἄμα / κακῶν τε λήστικς); Hor. c. 2, 19, 25-26 (of Bacchus): *choreis aptior et iocis / ludoque dictus* (recalling *aptus* in Tib. 1, 7, 44).

²⁴ The anaphora of *Genium* is a conjecture accepted by a majority of editors. On Osiris' love of laughter, song, and dance, see Diod. 1, 18; on his identification with Dionysos, see Hdt. 2, 42.

²⁵ *nescius* is usually not construed with *ad*, but the word order strongly suggests that this reading might not be out of place. *nescius* can of course also mean “unaware”, which adds another nuance in connection with the alcohol.

not a coincidence that this cult also gives ample space to dance, which is so efficient in intensifying sensory experience²⁶.

Bacchus reappears in connection with dancing in Tibullus 2, 1. The following is an extract of a longer development (lines 37-78) on the beginnings of civilisation owed to the innovations granted by the gods (2, 1, 51-56):

«The farmer, sated thanks to the busy plough,
first sang rustic words with a certain foot,
and satisfied, he first modulated a song
on the dry reed, so that he might sing before the adorned gods,
and the farmer, tinged, Bacchus, with red colour
was the first to lead choruses with unexperienced art»²⁷.

The repetition of the cognate words *satiatus* and *satur* in lines 51 and 53 puts a strong emphasis on the need for food, which must first be attended to before song and dance can be cultivated (like in Lucretius). But in addition to highlighting physical well-being as a necessary condition for song and dance, the sonority of these words seems to gesture towards the important place of *satura* in the development of the performing arts at Rome as described by Livy 7, 2 – *satura*, a kind of animated song-dance accompanied by the *tibia* and a further development of initially cruder verses which the *rustica verba* of line 52 might evoke²⁸. The passage is thus in a dialogue with other accounts of Roman literary and performance history, hinting at one of the etymologies of the word *satura*, which may have been related to food according to the grammarian Diomedes²⁹. The purpose of music and dance is declared unambiguously in the *ut*-clause of line 54: to venerate the gods (plural). Bacchus is singled out in the following line; the vocative denotes him as the implicit addressee of the dances led by the farmer. Whereas *certo ... pede* (52) suggests skillfulness in regard to metre and perhaps dance, *inexperta ... ab arte* (56) emphasises once more the newness of dance and the lack of experience on the part of these performers of more sophisticated, choral dances³⁰.

The three poetic passages discussed so far can be complemented with an elegy by Propertius offering a glimpse of a rustic world characterised by hard work, unadorned sanctuaries, and dances performed with naked legs, which the poet imagines his mistress will join as she visits the countryside. The description is stenographic but gains depth through intertextuality with

²⁶ On the tragic stage, choral dance and in particular choral self-referentiality encapsulate ritual performance as a whole: see A. Henrichs, "Why Should I Dance?": *Choral Self-Referentiality in Greek Tragedy*, in «Arion» 3 (1994-1995), pp. 56-111: p. 69.

²⁷ Tib. 2, 1, 51-56: *agricola adsiduo primum satiatus aratro / cantavit certo rustica verba pede / et satur arenti primum est modulatus avena / carmen, ut ornatos diceret ante deos, / agricola et minio suffusus, Bacche, rubenti / primum inexperta duxit ab arte choros.*

²⁸ S.P. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI-X, Volume II Books VII-VIII*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, p. 47 n. 1 and 55-58. Oakley assumes (like many others) that Livy's and Tibullus's source on rustic song and dance is Varro.

²⁹ *Grammatici Latini* p. 485, 30-486, 16.

³⁰ The commentaries explain *inexperta ab arte* as an ablative of manner or of cause.

the poems quoted above, with which this passage shares the sequence of agricultural work followed by dance (2, 19, 11-16):

«There you will watch the oxen plough steadily
and the vine lose its leaves to the instructed sickle;
and there you will offer rare incense to an unadorned sanctuary,
where a young goat will die before the rural hearth;
forthwith you will also imitate the dances with nude legs;
just let everything be safe from a man who does not belong»³¹.

Unlike in Lucretius or Tibullus, here the rustic world is not an early stage of life, let alone in a foreign country as in Tib. 1, 7 which develops similar images, but reaches right into the Roman present³². The dances are described only indirectly, through their insertion into a simple environment and by implicit contrast with the city, which is represented by Cynthia. Sensation and pleasure are evoked obliquely, with the detail of the “nude legs” which may be innocent in the case of the country folk but acquire an erotic undertone when they are Cynthia’s, and with the poet’s wish that no outsider, no man from the city may see Cynthia dancing, which of course conjures up just such an encounter. Nevertheless, the cultic setting in the countryside makes it acceptable in the eyes of the poet for Cynthia to dance in the company of others. Sacrifice and dance are singled out to represent cult actions but, crucially, dance is also the element which allows Cynthia to turn from a spectator into a participant: whereas she watches the farmers work, she becomes part of the rural community by imitating their dance steps³³. Dance is a socialising practice.

4. *Sensory Experience and Agency*

While the passage from Propertius has several points of contact with the ones discussed above, it adds the element of imitation. The notion of imitation suggests, if not precise patterns to reproduce, a model or a style to which the dancer aspires, and the development of an appropriate level of skill. We may assume that the spontaneous dance imagined by the poets is refined via imitation and eventually gives way to specific choreographies³⁴. If the first dances are associated with strong sensations enhanced by the complete

³¹ Prop. 2, 19, 11-16: *illic assidue tauros spectabis arantis, / et vitem docta ponere falce comas; / atque ibi rara ferēs inculto tura sacello, / haedus ubi agrestis corruet ante focus; / protinus et nuda choreas imitabere sura; / omnia ab externo sint modo tuta viro.*

³² Line 12 evokes Tib. 1, 7, 33-34: *Hic docuit teneram palis adiungere vitem / hic viridem dura caedere falce comam*, with the past action of *docuit* now represented by the perfect passive participle *docta* indicating the completed action.

³³ See Z. Alonso Fernández, *Docta Saltatrix*, cit., pp. 312-314; L. Curtis, *Imagining the Chorus in Augustan Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 94-101.

³⁴ Imitation is an important category in the development of Roman performance culture also according to Livy 7, 2, 5. On the distinctness of dance movements in Roman culture, see K. Schlapbach, *Introduction*, in Ead. (ed.), *Aspects of Roman Dance Culture*, cit. (forthcoming).

freedom of physical movement, the introduction of conventional dance figures may have the function to channel and direct sensory experience. Either way, the dance envisaged in the texts discussed here seems to fulfil itself in the sensations it provides. Dance movements characteristically oscillate between freedom and constraint; freedom in that ordinary patterns of movement can be transgressed, and constraint in that dance styles prescribe determinate ways of moving. Among the basic functions of dance is to make these different options, which are provided by the physiology of the human body and regulated by social conventions, perceptible to both dancers and spectators. What counts is that dance always consists of non-necessary movements, whether they are disordinate or harmonious, free or dictated by tradition. Dance movements are by definition arbitrary, both as first explorations of fresh ways of moving and when they are codified by conventional patterns. They are the lived experience, granted by intense and variable sensation, of arbitrariness and agency. The crucial role of dance in Roman religious rituals suggests that one basic function of religious rituals may be to acknowledge human agency in its various forms and to align it with and offer it to the gods.

Dance pertains to the body. But as Lucretius puts it, it arises when bodily needs are attended to and «all things belong to the heart» (*sunt omnia cordi*, 5, 1391). It is at the threshold of nature and culture but is ultimately firmly anchored in culture³⁵. Within culture it serves as an interface between ordinary and special – or ritual – sensory experience. Dance helps at once to distinguish these dimensions and to connect them as a permeable frontier of sorts, or as a living image of the distinction itself.

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the physical and kinetic dimensions of Roman religion through the lens of dance. It takes a proverb and two strikingly “modern” observations on dance and religion in Servius’ commentaries on Vergil as points of departure for this enquiry (Aen. 8, 110; Ecl. 5, 73; Georg. 1, 347-350), which is informed by an aesthetics of religion (Religionsästhetik) and dance studies. Examining a number of poetic vignettes of rustic dances, the essay argues that dance has variable functions: it is both a crucial element in assuring the correct execution of religious rituals and an interface between ritual and ordinary experience; it serves at once to distinguish these dimensions and to connect them as a permeable frontier of sorts. Dance movements may differ from ordinary kinetic behaviour by exploring greater freedom of movement (as in the inexpert dances of rustics, e.g. Tib. 2, 1, 56) or else by imposing determinate patterns (as when Cynthia “imitates” rustic dances

³⁵ From an evolutionary perspective dance is most likely related to mating, which at least for humans is by no means simply a natural activity, as Longus shows so well. See Y. Garfinkel, *The Evolution of Human Dance: Courtship, Rites of Passage, Trance, Calendrical Ceremonies and the Professional Dancer*, in «Cambridge Archaeological Journal» 28 (2018), pp. 283-298; on Longus, dance, and culture, see K. Schlapbach, *The Anatomy*, cit., pp. 201-223.

in Prop. 2, 19, 15). Either way, they make these different options, which are provided by the physiology of the human body, perceptible to both dancers and spectators and help to anchor religious practice in sensory experience.

Questo saggio esamina la dimensione fisica e cinetica della religione romana attraverso la danza. I punti di partenza per quest'inchiesta, che s'ispira all'estetica della religione (Religionsästhetik) e agli studi sulla danza, sono un proverbio e due osservazioni sorprendentemente "moderne" sulla danza nei commenti a Virgilio di Servio (Aen. 8, 110; Ecl. 5, 73; Georg. 1, 347-350). Tramite la lettura di talune descrizioni poetiche di danze rustiche, il saggio sostiene che la danza ha varie funzioni nella religione romana: è al tempo stesso un elemento cruciale della corretta esecuzione dei rituali religiosi e punto di contingenza tra il rituale e l'esperienza ordinaria; contemporaneamente, essa serve a distinguere queste due dimensioni e a connetterle, alla stregua di frontiera permeabile. La danza si distacca dal comportamento motorio ordinario esplorando una più grande libertà di movimento (come nelle danze inesperte dei contadini, p. es. Tib. 2, 1, 56) oppure imponendo degli schemi predefiniti (ad es. quando Cinzia imita le danze rustiche in Prop. 2, 19, 15). Ad ogni modo, la danza rende percettibili queste due opzioni, che sono garantite dalla fisiologia del corpo umano, sia ai ballerini che agli spettatori e ancora la pratica religiosa nell'esperienza sensoriale.

KEYWORDS

Danza, culto, esperienza sensoriale, coreografia, capacità di agire

Dance, cult, sensory experience, choreography, agency

