

of 'strictly come morris dancing' – or the last man standing after a series of swordplay contests. In some examples of such dances the winner was the fool and his reward a ring or other prize that she held in view throughout the dance. This was not the case here. There is no evidence of the distinctive fool's costume or accoutrements and such a presence would be out of place in the context and apparent purpose of the dance. With or without a fool, the motif of rewarding a champion with a ring has been taken as giving the activity the title of 'ring dance'. Of course, it also aptly describes the dance's circular configuration of men surrounding a 'woman'.⁴⁷ The Westminster dance sounds like a conflation of a morris dance with a ring dance, a hybrid that Forrest describes as a 'ring *morisk*'.⁴⁸

With a degree of licence and the evidence available, it is now possible to reconstruct, cautiously, what happened that day in January.

Early on a cold winter morning in Westminster Palace, Henry VIII, an ebullient eighteen-year-old novice king, gathered in the Painted Chamber with eleven of his loyal and trusted courtiers. Surrounded by religious and secular imagery, all but one of the men changed from day clothes into costumes of short coats, hoods, and hose of Kentish Kendal and the other into the guise of a young woman who held a ring. Across the shoulders of Robin Hood's men were slung their bows. Into their belts they strapped the arrows. In their hands they each held a sword and buckler. A short distance away, the Queen and her female attendants were preparing for the day ahead. Unbeknown to them, the king and men of the court were gathering at the top of the stairwell that led to the Queen's chamber. At a signal from Edward or Henry Guildford, the men, suppressing an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh, crept down the stairs. This is why I doubt they were wearing bells. On arrival at the queen's private door, two alternative entrance strategies are possible. Either the Queen and her retinue were shocked by a sudden cacophony of eleven men rhythmically crashing their swords against the bucklers – there

47. See the engraving by Israel van Meckenem c.1475 illustrating a rigorous and contorted ring dance in Forrest *Morris Dancing* 78. A copy is held by the Staatliche Museen, Berlin. The engraving can be seen online at <<https://www.wga.hu/html/m/meckenem/index.html>>; scroll down to 'Morris Dance'. I am aware that the case for the ring dance as a type of morris is more contentious than I am allowing for here. For a more cautious view that warns against using images as 'accurate renderings of actual morisks' see Forrest *Morris Dancing* 81–2.

48. For reference to the 'ring morisk' see the index entries in Forrest *Morris Dancing* 435. The term 'ring morisk' appears to be Forrest's own.

is no evidence of minstrels being present – who burst one at a time into her chamber, or the men entered the chamber silently to create the ear-shattering noise once they were in place. Hall's reference to the 'sodain commyng' of the dance favours the first alternative. What follows is more conjectural.

It is tempting to believe that the men entered one at a time in the order that Gibson listed them in his account with the king being first.⁴⁹ Such an order would mean that Henry Guildford was the last but one to enter just before William Parr. Such a position seems to disqualify him and his youthful good looks from the role of Maid Marian. As the only 'woman' dancer, who takes centre stage, it could be thought that he/she should come in first or probably last. Who ever played Maid Marian and wherever he came in the queue at the door, it is a fair assumption that he took up a central position in the dancing space to allow the eleven Robin Hood's men to encircle him. Other than observing that each of the 'prototypical characteristics' catalogued by Forrest would fit very well into a ring-morris dance with a martial aspect and weapons as accoutrements, it is not possible to go much further. This is especially so in the context of individual movements involving high leaping and extreme gestures rotating around Maid Marian. What is reasonably certain is that the entertainment included an episode of fighting with sword and buckler. This form of swordplay frequently appears in early Robin Hood material and was used in military training and often featured in tournaments. Each of the dancers would have been familiar with and expert in this style of combat. It is unlikely to have been a free-for-all as in the *mêlée* of a tournament. In the framework of a dance, some element of choreography would have been essential. A clue to its nature lies in the number of dancers. With an odd number of participants ruling out one-to-one contests, there is only one realistic solution. The eleven men form a circle around Marian, a number that must have been a deliberate choice in the planning stage. This implies that in the mind of the organiser, the number required met the demands of the entertainment and not the other way around. Robin Hood's men could have danced something no more complicated than linking-up by holding their own sword in one hand and, depending on sharpness, the tip end of the sword behind them in the other hand and moving around in the manner of a sword dance.⁵⁰ As a preliminary

49. Forrest *Morris Dancing* 274 observes that the entry of dancers in single file was 'normal for the performers of the ring morisk'.

50. For a history of linked sword dancing see Stephen D. Corrsin *Sword Dancing in Europe: A History* (London: Hisarlik Press, 1997).