

AM



61 / giugno 2026

RIVISTA DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI ANTROPOLOGIA MEDICA
FONDATA DA TULLIO SEPPILLI



In copertina: Paul Sescou, *Jane Avril*, ca. 1890, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (<https://nelson-atkins.org/>).



Il logo della Società italiana di antropologia medica, qui riprodotto, costituisce la elaborazione grafica di un ideogramma cinese molto antico che ha via via assunto il significato di “longevità”, risultato di una vita consapevolmente condotta lungo una ininterrotta via di armonia e di equilibrio.



Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica
Journal of the Italian Society for Medical Anthropology

Fondata da / Founded by
Tullio Seppilli

Biannual open access peer-reviewed online Journal

61

giugno 2026
June 2026



Fondazione Alessandro e Tullio Seppilli (già Fondazione Angelo Celli per una cultura della salute) – Perugia

Direttore

Giovanni Pizza, Università di Perugia

Comitato di redazione

Roberto Beneduce, Università di Torino / Sara Cassandra, scrittrice, Napoli / Donatella Cozzi, vicepresidente della Siam, Università di Udine / Fabio Dei, Università di Pisa / Lavinia D'Errico, Università di Napoli "Suor Orsola Benincasa" / Erica Eugeni, studiosa indipendente, Roma / Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Fabrizio Loce-Mandes, Università di Perugia / Alessandro Lupo, Sapienza Università di Roma, presidente della Siam / Massimiliano Minelli, Università di Perugia / Angela Molinari, Università di Milano Bicocca / Chiara Moretti, Università di Milano-Bicocca / Giulia Nistri, Università di Perugia / Cristina Papa, presidente della Fondazione Alessandro e Tullio Seppilli (già Fondazione Angelo Celli per una cultura della salute), Perugia / Elisa Pasquarelli, studiosa indipendente, Perugia / Francesca Pistone, studiosa indipendente, Roma / Ivo Quaranta, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Andrea F. Ravenda, Università di Torino / Elisa Rondini, Università di Perugia / Pino Schirripa, vicepresidente della Siam, Università di Messina / Nicoletta Sciarrino, Università di Torino / Alberto Simonetti, studioso indipendente, Perugia / Simona Taliani, Università di Napoli L'Orientale / Eugenio Zito, Università di Napoli "Federico II"

Comitato scientifico

Naomar Almeida Filho, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasile / Jean Benoist, Université de Aix-Marseille, Francia / Gilles Bibeau, Université de Montréal, Canada / Andrea Carlino, Université de Genève, Svizzera / Giordana Charuty, Université de Paris X, Nanterre, Francia / Luis A. Chiozza, Centro de consulta médica Weizsäcker, Buenos Aires, Argentina / Josep M. Comelles Universitat "Rovira i Virgili", Tarragona, Spagna / Ellen Corin, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Mary-Jo Del Vecchio Good, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Stati Uniti d'America / Sylvie Fainzang, Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale, Paris, Francia / Didier Fassin, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, Francia – Institute for advanced study, Princeton, Stati Uniti d'America / Byron Good, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Stati Uniti d'America / Mabel Grimberg, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina / Roberte Hamayon, Université de Paris X, Nanterre, Francia / Thomas Hauschild, Eberhard Karls Universität, Tübingen, Germania / Elisabeth Hsu, University of Oxford, Regno Unito / Laurence J. Kirmayer, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Arthur Kleinman, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Stati Uniti d'America / Annette Leibing, Université de Montréal, Canada / Margaret Lock, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Françoise Loux, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (Cnrs), Paris, Francia / Ángel Martínez Hernández, Universitat "Rovira i Virgili", Tarragona, Spagna / Raymond Massé, Université Laval, Canada / Eduardo L. Menéndez, Centro de investigaciones y estudios superiores en antropología social, Ciudad de México, Messico / Edgar Morin, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, Francia / David Napier, London University College, London, Regno Unito / Tobie Nathan, Université de Paris VIII, Vincennes-Saint-Denis, Francia / Rosario Otegui Pascual, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spagna / Mariella Pandolfi, Université de Montréal, Canada / Ekkehard Schröder, Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnomedizin, Potsdam, Germania / Ciro Tarantino, Università della Calabria, Italia / Allan Young, McGill University, Montréal, Canada

Comitato tecnico

Massimo Cimichella, Università di Perugia / Alessio Moriconi, Università di Perugia / Stefano Pasqua, Università di Perugia / Raffaele Marciano, Aguplano Libri, Perugia / Attilio Scullari, Digital manager, Perugia

Editor in chief

Giovanni Pizza, Università di Perugia, Italy

Editorial Board

Roberto Beneduce, Università di Torino, Italy / Sara Cassandra, writer, Napoli, Italy / Donatella Cozzi, vicepresidente of the Siam, Università di Udine, Italy / Fabio Dei, Università di Pisa, Italy / Lavinia D'Errico, Università di Napoli "Suor Orsola Benincasa", Italy / Erica Eugeni, independent scholar, Italy / Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Italy / Fabrizio Loce-Mandes, Università di Perugia, Italy / Alessandro Lupo, Sapienza Università di Roma, president of the Siam, Italy / Massimiliano Minelli, Università di Perugia, Italy / Angela Molinari, Università di Milano Bicocca, Italy / Chiara Moretti, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Italy / Giulia Nistri, Università di Perugia, Italy / Cristina Papa, president of the Fondazione Alessandro e Tullio Seppilli (già Fondazione Angelo Celli per una cultura della salute), Perugia, Italy / Elisa Pasquarelli, independent scholar, Perugia, Italy / Francesca Pistone, independent scholar, Roma, Italy / Ivo Quaranta, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Italy / Andrea F. Ravenda, Università di Torino, Italy / Elisa Rondini, Università di Perugia, Italy / Pino Schirripa, vicepresidente of the Siam, Università di Messina, Italy / Nicoletta Sciarrino, Università di Torino, Italy / Alberto Simonetti, independent scholar, Perugia, Italy / Simona Taliani, Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Italy / Eugenio Zito, Università di Napoli "Federico II", Italy

Advisory Board

Naomar Almeida Filho, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasil / Jean Benoist, Université de Aix-Marseille, France / Gilles Bibeau, Université de Montréal, Canada / Andrea Carlino, Université de Genève, Switzerland / Giordana Charuty, Université de Paris X, Nanterre, France / Luis A. Chiozza, Centro de consulta médica Weizsäcker, Buenos Aires, Argentine / Josep M. Comelles Universitat "Rovira i Virgili", Tarragona, Spain / Ellen Corin, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Mary-Jo Del Vecchio Good, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA / Sylvie Fainzang, Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale, Paris, France / Didier Fassin, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France – Institute for advanced study, Princeton, USA / Byron Good, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA / Mabel Grimberg, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentine / Roberte Hamayon, Université de Paris X, Nanterre, France / Thomas Hauschild, Eberhard Karls Universität, Tübingen, Germany / Elisabeth Hsu, University of Oxford, UK / Laurence J. Kirmayer, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Arthur Kleinman, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA / Annette Leibing, Université de Montréal, Canada / Margaret Lock, McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Françoise Loux, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (Cnrs) Paris, France / Ángel Martínez Hernández, Universitat "Rovira i Virgili", Tarragona, Spain / Raymond Maseé, Université Laval, Canada / Eduardo L. Menéndez, Centro de investigaciones y estudios superiores en antropología social, Ciudad de México, México / Edgar Morin, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France / David Napier, London University College, London, UK / Tobie Nathan, Université de Paris VIII, Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France / Rosario Otegui Pascual, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain / Mariella Pandolfi, Université de Montréal, Canada / Ekkehard Schröder, Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnomedizin, Potsdam, Germany / Ciro Tarantino, Università della Calabria, Italy / Allan Young, McGill University, Montréal, Canada

Technical Board

Massimo Cimichella, Università di Perugia / Alessio Moriconi, Università di Perugia / Stefano Pasqua, Università di Perugia / Raffaele Marciano, Aguaplano Libri, Perugia / Attilio Scullari, Digital manager, Perugia

AM. Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica fondata da Tullio Seppilli è una testata semestrale della Fondazione Alessandro e Tullio Seppilli (già Fondazione Angelo Celli per una cultura della salute), Perugia.

AM

Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica
fondata da Tullio Seppilli

Journal of the Italian Society for Medical Anthropology
Founded by Tullio Seppilli



Indice
Contents

n. 61, giugno 2026
n. 61, June 2026

Editoriale

- 9 Giovanni Pizza
Editoriale di AM 61
AM 61 Editorial

Ricerche

- 11 Simone Savasta
*Crisi della presenza e reintegrazione mitico-simbolica
al pellegrinaggio cattolico-indigeno di Lac Ste. Anne
in Alberta (Canada)*
*Crisis of Presence and Mythic-Symbolic Reintegration
at the Catholic-Indigenous Pilgrimage of Lac Ste. Anne
in Alberta (Canada)*
- 45 Donatella Tronca
From Salome to Jane Avril.
Dancing Distress between Religion and Neurology
*Da Salomè a Jane Avril. Danzare la sofferenza
tra religione e neurologia*
- 83 Veronica Buffon, Giuliana Sanò
Temporalità e sindemia occupazionale.
*La salute dei lavoratori agricoli
della Fascia Costiera Trasformata*
Temporality and Occupational Syndemic.
*The Health of Agricultural Workers
in the Fascia Costiera Trasformata*
- 121 Giancarlo Di Gennaro, Andrea Tomasini
*Abitare l'incertezza. L'epilessia nel ciclo aperto
tra corpo, mondo e cura*
*Dwelling in Uncertainty. Epilepsy in the Open Cycle
Between Body, World, and Care*

Recensioni

- 131 Francesco Scotti, *Il Gran Tour di una psicoanalista /
A Psychoanalyst's Grand Tour* [Maria Luisa Algini,
Viaggiare l'età tarda, sul valore della caducità]

Editoriale di AM 61

Giovanni Pizza

Università degli Studi di Perugia
[giovanni.pizza@unipg.it]

Questo numero di AM contiene quattro ricerche e una recensione.

La prima ricerca, di Simone Savasta, riguarda un pellegrinaggio in Canada che è interpretato secondo le categorie di Ernesto de Martino.

La seconda di Donatella Tronca verte sul rapporto tra danza e neurologia attraverso il caso di Jane Avril e il ballo di san Vito.

La terza, di Veronica Buffon e Giuliana Sanò, affronta il tema della violenza lavorativa osservata attraverso il prisma del tempo.

Infine, la quarta di Giancarlo Di Gennaro e Andrea Tomasini tratta la guarigione dall'epilessia da un punto di vista fenomenologico, cioè dal versante corporeo, esistenziale.

Chiude una nuova recensione di Francesco Scotti.

Questo abbiamo fatto col numero 61 di AM.

Buona lettura.

From Salome to Jane Avril

*Dancing Distress between Religion and Neurology**

Donatella Tronca

Università di Bologna

[donatella.tronca2@unibo.it]

Abstract

From Salome to Jane Avril. Dancing Distress between Religion and Neurology

The essay analyses the connection between dance, religion and neurology, starting from the figure of Jane Avril, dancer at the Moulin Rouge, and the disease she was diagnosed with, “St Vitus’s dance”. It explores how nineteenth-century medicine, above all Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital, reinterpreted medieval iconographies of demonic possession by transforming them into clinical representations of hysteria. In this context, dance becomes a symbol of otherness and discomfort, oscillating between disease and cure.

Keywords: dance, hysteria, Jean-Martin Charcot, St Vitus’s dance, Sydenham’s chorea

«Je fus en proie à la danse de Saint-Guy. Prédestination!»:

From demonic possession to cabaret performance

Jane Avril – the stage name adopted by Jeanne Louise Beaudon (1868-1943) – was a dancer at the *Moulin Rouge* who became particularly well-known through the posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (CARADEC 2001). In one of these, inspired by a photograph, Jane sports a long dress with a snake coiled around her body, striking a pose while stretching back (figures 1-2). Such iconography closely resembles the way in which demonic

* This article is part of the research project MUDANZA. *Dancing women, idolatry and rituals: visual culture and cultural history of dance during the long Middle Age* (PID2022-140028NB-I00) financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades of the Spanish government. Thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers, whose insightful comments have helped to improve this article.



Figure 1: Paul Sescau, *Jane Avril*, ca. 1890, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (<https://nelson-atkins.org/>).

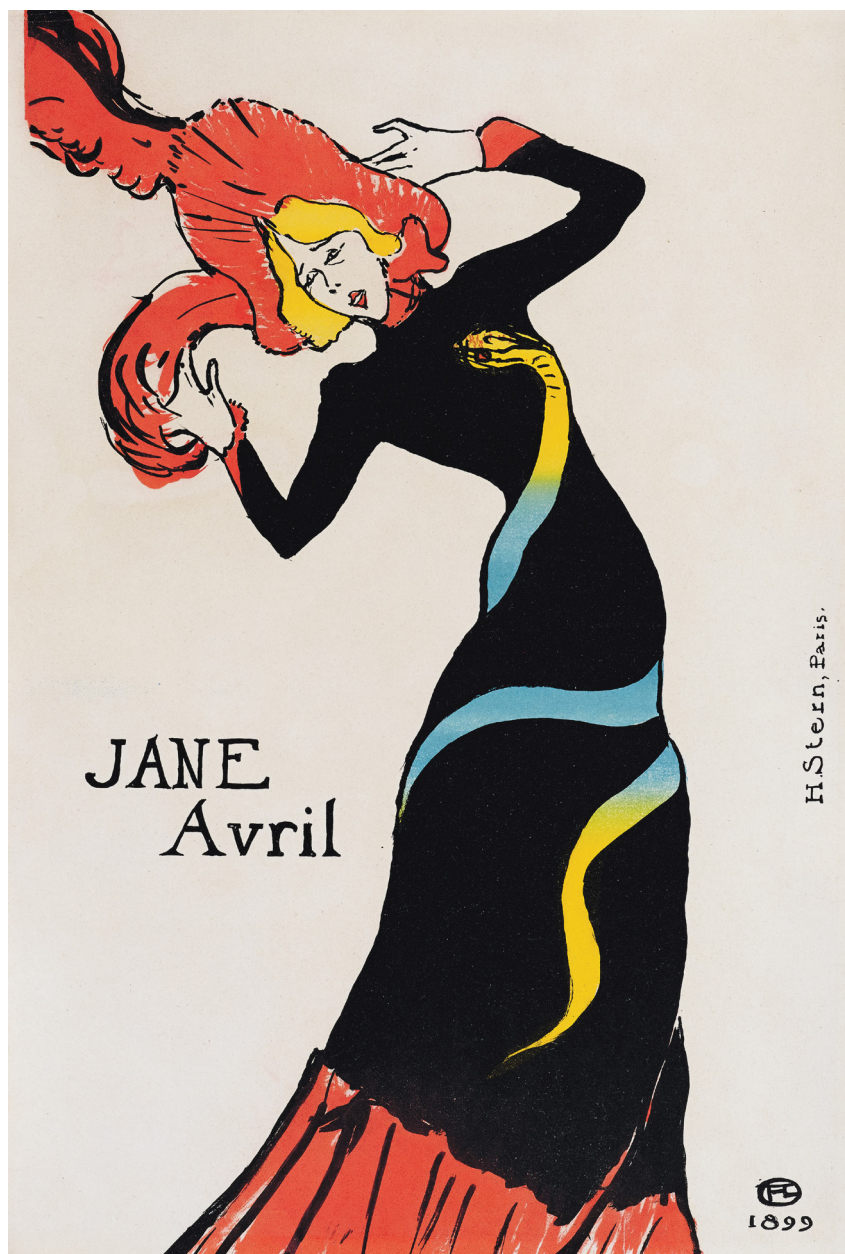


Figure 2: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril*, 1899 (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).



Figure 3: *St Zeno performs an exorcism*, detail on bronze door, twelfth century, Basilica of San Zeno, Verona (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

possession was frequently portrayed in the Middle Ages. It is also highly reminiscent of Salome's biblical dance in front of King Herod at the behest of her incestuous mother, Herodias, in order to obtain the head of John the Baptist (*Mt* 14: 6-12; *Mk* 6: 22-25) (figures 3-4) (BUTTÀ, BELGRANO 2020; TRONCA 2022: 95-99).



Figure 4: *Salome dancing before king Herod*, eleventh century, Christussäule, Dom, Hildesheim (<https://www.bildindex.de/>).

Jane was not so far removed from this realm of darkness. She was part of what was defined as the *demi-monde*, a nineteenth-century concept encompassing the shady, corrupt, and immoral community of prostitutes, actresses, and dancers who lived in poverty despite affectations of splendour. Given that a social satirical chronicle – *Paris dansant, ou Les filles d'Hérodiade, folles danseuses des bals publics* – was published in 1845 (figure 5), it must have been common at the time to draw parallels with Salome. The anonymous author collected poetry, songs, and theatrical dialogue in an eclectic *feuilleton* alongside vivid, ironic descriptions of venues and performers and moralising social comment on the fate of these poor women, prostitution, the lack of job opportunities, and the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Jane Avril,

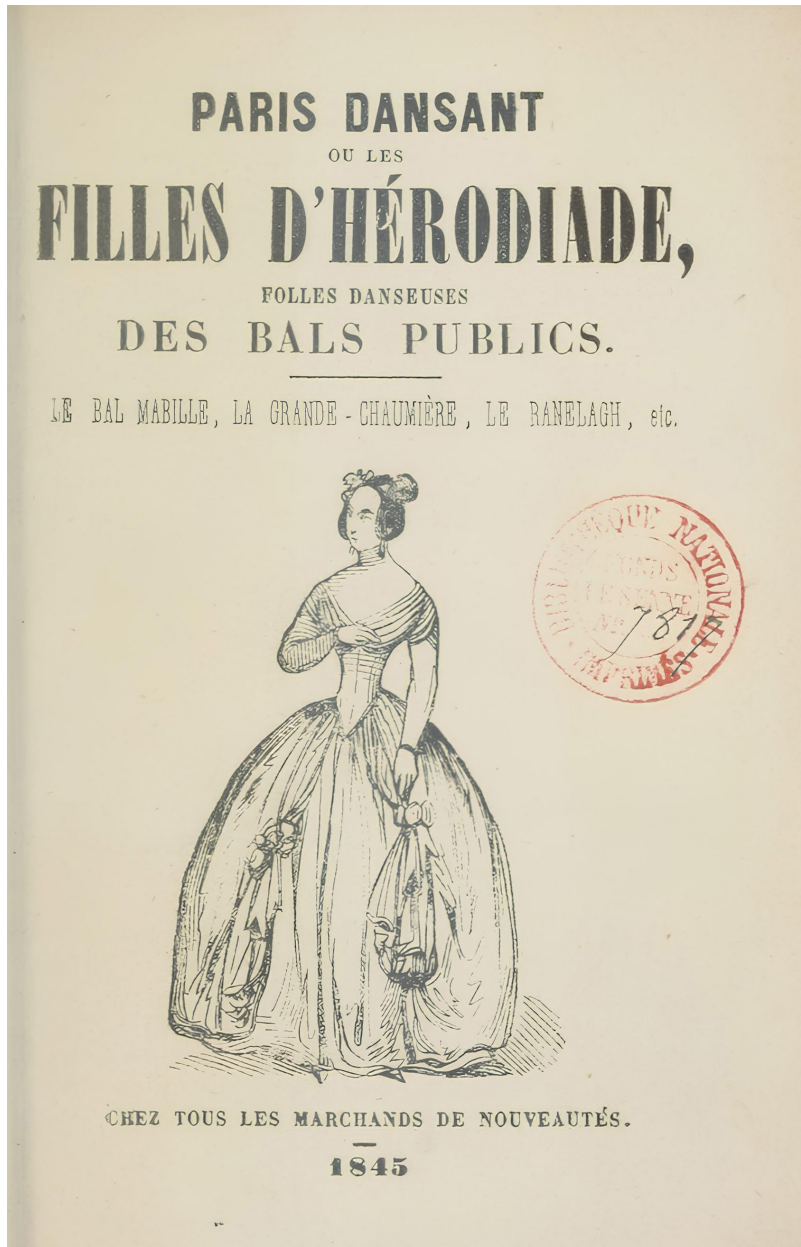


Figure 5: frontispiece of *Paris dansant, ou Les filles d'Hérodiade, folles danseuses des bals publics*, 1845 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>).

moreover, had a history of ill health and was diagnosed with *danse de Saint-Guy* (St Vitus's dance) by Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris (AVRIL 1933: 7; BONDUELLE, GELFAND 1998; GIMÉNEZ-ROLDÁN 2016).

The Salpêtrière became something of a paradox in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, a place where science and spectacle converged with pathology and performance. Under the direction of Jean-Martin Charcot, the institution was transformed from a hospice for the incurable into a crucible of modern neurology where the female body – particularly in hysterical form – was subjected to clinical scrutiny and photography. Yet, as Georges Didi-Huberman compellingly argued in *Invention of Hysteria*, this transformation was not a simple shift from superstition to science (DIDI-HUBERMAN 2003; MICALE 1985; MCCARREN 1995; FURSE 2011; DE MIN 2023). Instead, it involved a complex reconfiguration which channelled religious iconography, medieval demonology, and the aesthetics of martyrdom into the visual and rhetorical apparatus of medical discourse. As already framed by Henri Ellenberger's history of dynamic psychiatry, the Salpêtrière's 'clinical theatre' did not merely document hysteria but codified a repertoire of poses and staging devices that became part of the visual culture of modernity (ELLENBERGER 1994: 89-101). Although now complemented by later iconographic approaches, Ellenberger remains essential as he was the first to historically deconstruct psychiatry and psychoanalysis by highlighting their links to exorcistic healing practices and eighteenth-century mesmerism; he saw Mesmer as a crucial mediator between premodern charismatic cures and the hospital-based spectacularisation of hysteria that culminated at the Salpêtrière under Charcot. Thus, Charcot's *arc de cercle* pre-empted the performative grammar of Jane Avril's arched body, indicating that the hysterical 'sign' operates as a historically learned posture rather than a neutral symptom.

This article explores the persistence of religious and medieval imaginaries in the medical construction of mental disease, focusing on the transposition of the language of dancing disorders – especially when related to demonic possession – into the clinical lexicon of neurology. The nineteenth-century medical discourse on hysteria was deeply embedded in established religious, theological, and visual traditions that had long sought to explain female suffering in terms of spiritual disorder. From the medieval notion of demonic possession to the early modern association of women's bodies with sin, temptation, and divine punishment, the figure of the hysteric was already overdetermined by a dense network of symbols even before entering the clinic. Under Charcot's direction, the Salpêtrière did not so much

dispel these associations as reframe them within a new epistemological regime, one that retained the theatricality, moralism, and visual economy of its religious predecessors.

The patients assumed poses that recalled ecstasies of saints, torments of martyrs, and convulsions of the possessed. The term «attitudes passionnelles», which was used by Charcot and his collaborators to describe the dramatic positions of the body during fits of hysteria, evokes the Passion of Christ and the visual tradition of holy suffering (CHARCOT 1887-1889). Far from being objective medical documentation, these images were steeped in the aesthetic codes of Christian martyrdom and baroque theatricality.

Moreover, the clinical theatre of the Salpêtrière bore striking similarities to religious ritual. Charcot's Tuesday lectures, attended by physicians, artists, and intellectuals, took shape as public ceremonies in which the suffering female body was displayed, interpreted, and canonised. The amphitheatre became a modern cathedral, the physician an exorcist, and the patient a sacrificial figure whose suffering was both diagnostic and redemptive. Like a congregation, the audience was invited to witness the revelation of truth through the body of the other – a truth that was as much moral and aesthetic as it was scientific.

The painting entitled *Une leçon clinique à La Salpêtrière* by André Brouillet was successfully exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in the spring of 1887 (figure 6). It shows Blanche Wittman – one of Charcot's favourite patients – during an attack of what the neurologist called «great hysteria» (CHARCOT 1887-1889). It is important to underline the strong performative aspect of these lectures, which were partly demonstrative/didactic and partly theatrical/spectacular.

Jane Avril wrote in her memoirs: «Charcot often gave his lectures in the large amphitheatre, packed to the rafters, in front of a crowd of luminaries from all over the country. He presented the most interesting cases from his hospital, indulging in numerous striking demonstrations» (AVRIL 1933: 11).

Events such as masked balls illustrate the importance of the performative dimension in Charcot's approach to medical-neurological analysis and treatment. These balls were organised every year during the Carnival period at the Salpêtrière hospital and were a full-blown living pathological museum (figure 7). With regard to the theatrical dimension, Charcot also coined terms such as «clownism» (CHARCOT 1886-1890).



Figure 6: André Brouillet, *Une leçon clinique à La Salpêtrière*, 1887, Université Paris Descartes, Paris (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

He used medieval images of dancers and possessed women to demonstrate the solid foundations of his theories, diagnosing hysteria in the possessed and encouraging the hysterical to pose as if possessed (CHARCOT, RICHER 1887). Both the medieval concept of possession and the diagnosis of hysteria helped to construct a form of otherness spawned by suffering, for which dancing formed a perfect narrative framework.

This article highlights that medical and neurological discourse in the modern era was influenced by historical-religious and historical-cultural discourse on dance, which started in Late Antiquity and took more concrete shape during the Middle Ages, sometimes through images. Although doctors and neurologists accused religion of superstition, backwardness, and savagery, they not only made use of medieval categories (taken from theology for example) but also employed the same imagery, partly through the invention of concepts like “dancing mania”. Charcot made explicit reference to “retrospective medicine studies” in his volume *Les démoniaques dans l’art* (written with Paul Richer), published in 1887 (CHARCOT, RICHER 1887).



Figure 7: Paul-Eugène Mesplès, *Le bal des folles à la Salpêtrière* (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

His examples included a painting by Vittore Carpaccio, completed between 1498 and 1515, in which the Patriarch of Grado heals a possessed man (figure 8). In analysing the details, Charcot claimed that «From the appearance it would seem to be more a case of a young man suffering from chorea (St Vitus's dance) than a patient in the throes of hysterio-epileptic seizures» (CHARCOT, RICHER 1887: 24) (figure 9). He also referred to Bruegel (1575-1625) and his famous procession of St Vitus's dancers (ivi: 34-38) (figure 10). The very fact that these depictions are associated with St Vitus's (or St John's) dancers may depend on Charcot's retrospective readings and projections (PARK, PARK 1990; AUBERT 2005; FRIEDMAN 2010).

This convergence of religion and medicine was not unique to Charcot's clinic; it was part of a broader cultural context with flexible boundaries between science, art, and theology. The *fin-de-siècle* fascination with mysticism, spiritualism, and medievalism provided fertile ground for the re-enactment of medical discourse. In this context, hysteria became the



Figure 8: Vittore Carpaccio, *The Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto*, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

preferred site to resolve the ambivalence of modernity by moving towards the irrational, the feminine, and the sacred. The hysteric was both a relic of the past and a symptom of the present, a figure through whom the anxieties of secularisation, gender, and authority were played out.

The clinical gaze was in no way dispassionate as it was steeped in the visual and rhetorical traditions of Christianity. When it was photographed and displayed, the hysterical body became a new kind of relic, one that bore witness not to divine grace but to the enduring power of religious symbolism in the age of science.



Figure 9: Vittore Carpaccio, *The Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto*, detail, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

The visual and rhetorical strategies developed at the Salpêtrière did not remain within the walls of the clinic. Indeed, they reverberated across the cultural landscape of late nineteenth-century Europe, shaping representations of femininity, madness, and performance in literature, art, and popular culture. Once interpreted through the prism of demonic possession and later reframed within the clinical gaze, the hysterical body found new life in the aesthetic and symbolic registers of modernity. From the medieval mystic to the cabaret dancer, ecstatic or convulsing women continued to fascinate, disturb, and inspire in equal measure.



Figure 10: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The epileptics of Meulebeeck*, after 1564, Albertina, Wien (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

This cultural afterlife of hysteria is perhaps most vividly embodied in the figure of Jane Avril, who transformed her experience of neurological disorder into a distinctive performance style characterised by jerky, spasmodic movements and a theatricality echoing the *attitudes passionnelles* of Charcot's patients. In Toulouse Lautrec's posters and paintings, Avril appeared as a modern-day hysteric: angular, contorted, and enigmatic, her body both expressive and unreadable (figure 11). Far from being at variance, the clinic and the cabaret thus emerged as contiguous spaces in which the female body was manipulated, scrutinised, and aestheticised.

Religious and medical narratives of dancing disorders

Dance is a complex signifier which defies a single definition. When examining historically remote sources, it is vital to contextualise the use of the term on a case-by-case basis with particular reference to the social and



Figure 11: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril au Jardin de Paris*, 1893 (<https://www.wikimedia.org/>).

religious framework. An effective indicator of the mutable nature of dance as a historical, cultural, and religious concept can be seen in the different connotations of classical dance and lap dance in the present-day imaginary. Although they are both forms of dance, their cultural, social, and moral ramifications are diametrically opposed. Changing meanings which incorporate positive or negative judgements have been intrinsic features of descriptions of dance since Antiquity. It has always boiled down to the eye of the beholder. As well as a practice in itself, dance is also a secondary phenomenon variously associated with the musical sphere; while condemned for its theatrical connections, it has also been praised for its liturgical and devotional role.

Dance is also connected to descriptions of states of malaise. Indeed, twenty-first-century neurology uses the terms chorea and ballism in conjunction with a huge range of movement disorders (chorea syndromes). These disorders of the brain, also known as St Vitus's dance, are characterised by an inability to control bodily movements, which consequently become abrupt, rapid, variable, and disorderly (WALKER 2011; MICHELI, LEWITT 2014).

The term chorea comes from the Greek word *choreia*, which means dance. The latter concept has significant Platonic connotations, inasmuch as it was used to refer to the exemplary form of community life in the Ideal City with a perfectly harmonised chorus of citizens who each fulfilled their political and social role without any dissonance, excess, or unauthorised input. Being branded an *a-choreutos* – someone incapable of dancing in harmony with the rest of the community – in Plato's Ideal City was tantamount to an accusation of subverting the political order. Indeed, guilty offenders would be stigmatised and marginalised (PRAUSCELLO 2014: 105–222). In an attempt to understand the transformation of the connotation of dance from a perfect state of health – in individual terms, but also the entire community – to movement disorders in medical contexts from the early modern age onwards, it is necessary to examine the complex relationship between gesture, religion, and disease from a historical point of view. These movement disorders need to be understood in historical terms as the conditions of those who lacked the right physical and mental stability to live within the framework of the collective (or imposed) values of society, whether political, religious or gender-based. The starting point to understand their implications is the self-substantiating cultural-historical category of foundation myths of dance in the Western world. The construction of these myths always involved the introduction of a form of otherness that upset a pre-established order. This otherness, whose arrival was seen

to signal a curse, originated, depending on the historical and geographical context, in supposedly barbarous lands, in the underworld, or was brought by foreigners. It was also inescapably and instinctively linked to the religious and devotional sphere and associated with forms of malaise for which a cure was sought.

Dance serves a dual function in such narratives. On one hand, it is a symptom of distress (the result of a curse or demonic possession, for instance, and therefore in any case the action of an external agent). On the other hand, though, it is also a medicine to exorcise evil, often achieved by reining in a chaotic dance (the malaise) and reinstating harmonic, controllable forms (the cure). This taming process marks the beginning of the mythical narrative constructed to explain and justify the existence of dance.

The mythical narrative scheme also includes so-called choreomaniacs – literally, those with an uncontrollable compulsion to dance. In historiography, these figures have been assimilated with travellers, foreigners, and pilgrims variously associated with religious movements, often found in late medieval chronicles with a clear link to pestilence.

The choreomania narrative focused on people suddenly gripped by a force that was completely independent of their will; they were seized by a fearsome maelstrom of convulsive and usually contagious movements. Depending on the reworking of the mythical narrative, this external agent which manipulated the victims' bodies was variously interpreted as a form of demonic possession, the result of a curse, or an epidemic caused by contaminated grain, water, or other toxic forms. Those drawn into the jubilant frenzy no longer had mastery over their bodies, responded to certain colours (often red), and sometimes even tore their clothes off; ultimately, they were no longer in control of their gestures, which were described as a dance by observers. Choreomania was a form of madness caused by dance, of which dance was also a symptom. The triggering cause – divine, diabolical, biological-medical – changed in relation to the provider of the account.

It could be said, indeed, that the narrator was like a scriptwriter or, perhaps more appropriately, a choreographer, because the event was literally staged like a dance, accompanied by the explanation that best fitted the relevant cultural, religious, political, and scientific values. The dancers themselves did not usually share these values with the observer since they were almost always pagans, sinners, heretics, subversives, paupers, vagabonds, plague victims, foreigners, or simply marginalised members of so-

ciety. From the perspective of medical science in the modern era, these people came from a dark, unscientific, and superstitious Middle Ages and easily fell prey to forms of collective hysteria due to their presumed psychological frailty.

Here's the thing, though. None of this ever actually happened in the Middle Ages.

Choreomania, dancing mania, and St Vitus's dance are categories that were constructed by intellectuals, first in the early modern age and then with more consistency and influence from the seventeenth century onwards (ARCANGELI 2000a, 2000b, 2020). Although historiography and medical treatises have done their best to separate and define choreomania and St Vitus's dance in an attempt to give them more marked historical connotations and concrete form, they are entirely assimilable conditions that have nothing to do with medieval religious experience. Instead, they are related to a modern-era intellectual discourse that superimposed such categories onto an essentially remote Middle Ages – a dark, illiterate, and superstitious dimension – in order to lay claim to a higher level of secular scientific enlightenment. It goes without saying that women played a prominent role in this dark dimension of emotional and psychological frailty which also often featured hysteria (BARTHOLOMEW 1998). Nevertheless, the lexical characteristics of late antique and medieval sources which allow historians to delineate the gestural domains of dance show that there were no accounts of practices or symptoms of malaise such as Saint Vitus's dance or choreomania before the modern era.

The realisation that discourse on dance always derives from a set of narratives produced by the observers is of great methodological significance. It is therefore always extremely risky and misleading – if not totally improper and ahistorical – to attempt to identify any level of objectivity in descriptions of practices provided in sources (ARCANGELI 1998, 2007-2008; TRONCA 2022: 7-13). To an extent, the same approaches used to explore the dynamics of the integration of the divine and the demonic can be applied to the cultural history of dance, especially in its uncontrolled forms (PIZZA 2005: 29-43; CANETTI 2021, 2024).

The observer-based perspective in sources that describe dancing offers a narrative embellished with personal cultural and religious projections. The frequent visionary narratives in the exemplary literature of the late Middle Ages also fit this dynamic of the eye of the beholder. It is therefore necessary to consider that accounts of dance might also have been seen

purely in terms of the medieval vision (ARCANGELI 2000c: 69-105; LEGIMI 2000, 2002; BUTTÀ 2023; BINO 2016). The literary and homiletic genre of *visiones*, which was used by preachers in the late Middle Ages, involved showing believers the beatitude of heaven which awaited the righteous and the terrible punishments of hell to which transgressors would be subjected. As all this assumed a visionary narrative of what would happen in the afterlife, it was not a product of metaphor or non-objective unrealistic imaginings – for preacher and believer alike – because the promise of reward and fear of penance were supposed to guide the conduct of the faithful (MALDINA 2018: 34-60).

When they referred to uncoordinated, chaotic movement described as dance, late antique bishops saw danger of religious and social disorder, medieval preachers perceived signs of curses and demonic epiphanies, while humanist physicians identified symptoms of mental illness. All of them, however, used the same gaze-based form of narrative construction. In any case, the medical-humanistic narrative is not necessarily any more reliable than its predecessors, especially in scientific terms. After all, these narratives were often combined, exerting mutual influence from the late Middle Ages onwards.

The only slight differences were the terms in which the malaise was described and, above all, its cause. With this in mind, historians should be mindful of the risk of likening disorderly gestures described by bishops and preachers to an illness diagnosed by humanists, let alone neuropsychiatrists (DURANTI 2023: 11-44; FOSCATI 2013: IX-XVII; ARRIZABALAGA 2002; CANETTI 2019).

The Myth of Dancing Mania: Historiographical Constructs and Modern Projections

There is no mystery surrounding the birth of the myth of the medical and historiographical category of dancing mania: the publication of *Die Tanzwuth. Eine Volkskrankheit des Mittelalters* in Germany in 1832. Written by Justus Friedrich Karl Hecker, who was born in Erfurt in 1795 and raised in Berlin, where he attained the chair in history of medicine (HIRSCH 1880), the text was translated into English almost immediately by the physician and epidemiologist Benjamin Guy Babington. The question of dancing mania was addressed as follows in the work:

The effects of the *Black Death* had not yet subsided, and the graves of millions of its victims were scarcely closed, when a strange delusion arose in Germany, which took possession of the minds of men, and, in spite of the divinity of our nature, hurried away body and soul into the magic circle of hellish superstition. It was a convulsion which in the most extraordinary manner infuriated the human frame, and excited the astonishment of contemporaries for more than two centuries, since which time it has never reappeared. It was called the dance of St. John or of St. Vitus, on account of the Bacchantic leaps by which it was characterized, and which gave to those affected, while performing their wild dance, and screaming and foaming with fury, all the appearance of persons possessed. It did not remain confined to particular localities, but was propagated by the sight of the sufferers, like a demoniacal epidemic, over the whole of Germany and the neighboring countries to the northwest, which were already prepared for its reception by the prevailing opinions of the times (HECKER 1970: 1).

All the ingredients are there: plague, magic, superstition, demonic possession, juxtaposition of the Bacchic and the Orient, and the popular element portrayed as a wild horde. In a nutshell, the Middle Ages. Or more accurately, the Middle Ages as seen by nineteenth-century scientists.

Since publishing an article, *The Invention of Dancing Mania*, in 2009, Gregor Rohmann has rightly highlighted that choreomania and St Vitus's dance are both academic inventions of the modern age. As a result, he argues, they should be viewed «not as instances of a given medical or religious fact, but first of all as a construction of nineteenth-century scientists» (Rohmann 2009: 15, 2013, 2015). Kéline Gotman's recent comprehensive volume extended its analysis to the present day with further explorations and clarifications of the political and social implications of these constructs, contextualising them within the medical and intellectual framework in which they were invented. She quite rightly suggested that choreography – in the sense of narration and description of dance – should be interpreted as «an act of articulation, one that negotiates a border zone between order and disorder, planned and unplanned motion» (GOTMAN 2018: 3). In accounting for the genesis of this oppositional interplay of order and disorder, which is also reflected in contrasts between East and West, heresy and orthodoxy, and so on, Gotman also underlined the aspect of modernity as a possible starting point, which takes on significance with regard to cases like the so-called French Convulsionaries associated with Jansenism. This religious movement took off in Paris in the 1730s in connection with alleged miracles at the tomb of François de Pâris in the cemetery of Saint-Médard and was characterised by collective forms of hysteria and ecstasy

which took shape in remarkable – and much lampooned – dance-based theatricality. De Pâris was a deacon who had adopted Jansenist views in the controversy related to the condemnation of Pasquier Quesnel's writings by Pope Clement XI in his bull *Unigenitus*; he soon achieved the reputation of a saint and those who experienced convulsions at his tomb pronounced prophecies and cured illness. A royal decree of 1732 ordered the closure of the cemetery in order to curb the displays of religious zeal (GOTMAN 2018: 90-111).

The instrumentalisation of dance took on more marked and effective connotations in the modern era. It should be emphasised, though, that the discourse on dance in every epoch has always been based on a contrast with a form of otherness with wild, ungodly origins (both in the religious and political sense). It is precisely this discourse, already well established in ancient and medieval literature, that also played a decisive role in the later intellectual context which reworked the narrative, first through embellishments and then medicalisation. The earliest examples of this oppositional discourse can be found in the Platonic dichotomy between the *choreia* of the Ideal City and the rejection of Bacchic dancing, as well as in myths that referred to Dionysian rites, where Dionysus was always perceived as a foreign god who invaded and possessed. It can also be seen in the *History of Rome* narrated by Livy, who attributed the first *ludi scaenici* in the city to the arrival of *ludiones* (dancers) from Etruria at a time when the Roman people were afflicted by pestilence (TRONCA 2022: 15-73; GIANVITTORIO 2017; SCHLAPBACH 2018, 2022). The oppositional discourse also had significant repercussions in religion. Augustine of Hippo, for example, described – and condemned – the celebrations held in honour of the dead by the Circumcellions, a group connected to the Donatist schismatic movement. In so doing, his language was not dissimilar to accounts of the eighteenth-century French Convulsionaries (TRONCA 2022: 105). In keeping with this narrative, which could be described as a choreography of dissent and otherness, those who were regarded as choreomaniacs in later intellectual projections were first described as travellers and/or foreigners in medieval chronicles. Furthermore, there were always links to some form of pestilence and various branches of religious heterodoxy (GOTMAN 2018: 51-65). In short, the foundation myths of dance were consistently constructed from a description of otherness that intervened in some way to disrupt a pre-established order. This did not only hold true with regard to modernity. Indeed, the same narrative provided the foundation myth of established order itself (the Greek *polis*, the Roman Empire, religious

orthodoxy, modern medical science, and so on) (TRONCA 2017; SANCHIS FRANCÉS, MASSIP 2017; ARCANGELI 2018). If there had not been a narrative about the generation of disorder, there would not have been one about what constitutes order either.

This invasion of otherness was then brought to heel to some degree and sometimes played a decisive role, such as with the Roman plague, possession in Dionysian rites, and curses in the case of choreomaniacs. In this way, the presence of alterity was ritualised, becoming part of the mythical narrative that justified the existence of the ritual itself. In order to break free from the reified constructs of historiography, they first need to be deconstructed. One way to do this is by analysing the lexicon of sources through historical semantics. The concept of reification is used with full knowledge that both choreomania and St Vitus's dance «[were] never entirely reified; [they have] remained plastic and malleable, slippery and abstruse» because of the lack of sources datable to the Middle Ages and the – literally – turbulent and nebulous nature of these medical and historiographical categories which purported to probe the deepest recesses of the psyche (GOTMAN 2018: 301).

Just to repeat, choreomania and St Vitus's dance did not exist in the Middle Ages. They were categories constructed by intellectuals, first in the early modern age and then more comprehensively and influentially from the seventeenth century onwards. Operating in the general sphere of medicine and the humanities, these intellectuals projected such categories backwards into a variously dark and superstitious age. This also served to underline the supposedly state-of-the-art nature of their work, as well as their revitalised scientific awareness and love of literature from the pre-medieval past, increasingly portrayed as golden, enlightened, and classical. This is immediately apparent from the use of the refined term choreomania, the product of the neo-classical passion for antiquity. The word itself is a Greek calque of a term that is virtually non-existent in ancient Greek and medieval sources. It was used once in *Thesmophoriazusae* (v. 961) (WILSON 2007: 112), but Aristophanes often indulged in wordplay and created neologisms for satirical purposes. In this instance, he parodied Euripides by accusing him of always portraying female characters in his tragedies as madwomen.

Since the studies of Hecker, among others, in the mid-nineteenth century, historians dealing with such issues have adopted these categories because they are convenient and attractive (also in publishing terms), especially

when associated with a little-known dimension depicted as mysterious and magical, and forever oppressed by ecclesiastical institutions. Only rarely have the latter been historicised and contextualised. Indeed, there has once again been a backwards projection of an all-encompassing pan-European institutional sphere from the late Middle Ages and early modern age which in reality did not characterise the early phases of Christianity. Indeed, it could not have done so. Choreomania dancing is therefore often associated with episodes of social subversion (the literal translation of the German term *Tanzwut* is ‘dancing fury’) or forms of popular worship, which are in turn linked to so-called folklore or tarantism (HECKER 1970: 14-30; GOTMAN 2018: 171-195). Folklore too, just like choreomania, is a category invented in the nineteenth century. It was first used in 1846 in a letter sent by William J. Thoms under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton to the British journal *The Athenaeum* (THOMS 1846; EMRICH 1946; BRACCINI 2021). As for tarantism, its supposed medieval roots are heavily indebted to projections of intellectual and medical circles in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (DE MARTINO 2008; DE CARLI 2020). There is certainly no solid basis for these concepts and phenomena in medieval sources, especially with regard to the way in which they have traditionally been interpreted.

Historians generally offer evidence of episodes of choreomania in a variety of chronicle sources from the German-Flemish area – Aachen, Kölnbigk, Erfurt, Köln, Liège, and Strasbourg. Interestingly, the city of Strasbourg lays claim to two episodes of dancing epidemics which occurred exactly one hundred years apart in 1418 and 1518 (BACKMAN 1951; BRAEKMAN 1981; WALLER 2008, 2009). A degree of caution is thus needed, as it was the historians studying these sources who decided that they referred to the same definable and identifiable object, and classified them by applying more recently invented labels. Although this was probably done unwittingly, they nevertheless helped to perpetuate an endless self-narrating story that essentially follows the same script. In any event, the geographical aspect of accounts of choreomania alone makes any associations with tartantism and/or hagiographies of the martyr saint Vitus of Lucania extremely arbitrary (RESTA 2016, 2017), all the more so as the cult of Guy (of Anderlecht?), a holy pilgrim, was widespread in the areas referred to in the chronicles; Vitus, Wido, Guy, and Guido are all closely related names (ROHMANN 2013: 495-624; TRONCA 2024a: 33-37).

The first mentions of St Vitus's dance date back to the fifteenth-sixteenth century in the field of German theology and the medical humanities. The concept of *chorea sancti Viti* was closely associated with the work of Paracelsus and was reinforced through inclusion in collections like the *Lexicon Medicum Graeco-Latino-Germanicum* by the Dutch physician Steven Blankaart, published in Erfurt and Leipzig in 1696. The section on the disorder offered more detailed analysis than other entries (BLANKAART 1696; REKTOR 2003; ARCANGELI 2024). Even if a link between the hagiographical sources and Paracelsus's readings could be identified, though, it would exist on a purely scholarly basis and would reveal nothing about the experiences of Christians in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Any possible influence of religious experience in the work of Paracelsus relates to German and Flemish regions in the fifteenth-sixteenth century where, at least according to sermons, there was a widespread association linking a saint Vitus/Guy – and a saint John – with uncontrolled gestures, which might have been described as a disorderly dance (HEROLT 1598; Arcangeli 2022: 70).

It is therefore important to emphasise that chronicles always included such occurrences in accounts of episodes of religious disorder and practices variously defined as heretical (including the anti-Jewish controversy), pagan, and demonic. Such sources cannot be used to identify any supposed neurological condition, any form of contagious epilepsy, or any form of worship or association with a specific saint due to the thaumaturgical characteristics mentioned in hagiographical texts.

The narratives in these chronicles merely repeat – sometimes literally – the points of the patristic polemic against uncontrolled gestures that lead to disorder. The reason for attributing pestilence to dancers is at least as old as Augustine, who uses the term *pestilentia saltatorum* to describe the hordes of drunken worshippers at Cyprian's tomb in Carthage (*Sermo* 311, MIGNE 1841-64: 38, 1415). This polemic is in turn partly the legacy of the Greek Platonic vision of the Ideal City, described as a harmonious *choreia* from which Bacchic dancing was excluded. At the same time, though, it is also the product of the Roman prejudice against actors and *saltatores*, who were always branded by the stigma of infamy in both social and legal terms (TRONCA 2021a).

From the Platonic choreia to Sydenham's chorea

In late antique and medieval Christian Latin, the Platonic *choreia* became the *corus* (choir) of the liturgical sphere, a perfectly proportioned body that sang and moved in unison. It also came to embody the courtly dimension (GERI 2021). The terms *choreia*, *choros*, and *corte-cortezia* are related to the same Indo-European root **ghor-*, which indicates containment or enclosure and from which the English garden and the Latin *hortus* derive. Christianity embellished the latter term with meaning that is both monastic (a *hortus*, for example, is a monastery garden) and virginal (the *hortus conclusus* in the *Song of Songs*) (CARDINI 1996; KIRFEL 2000; SANTI 2015). Such strictly regulated areas are quite the opposite of what the concept of choreomania assumes. But of course this notion did not exist in the Middle Ages. Instead, the *cortezia* of late medieval courts held very strong semantic kinship with the Platonic *choreia*.

The trope of female choral dancing in the liturgical and devotional realm – a foreshadowing of the dance of the heavenly chorus – featured in the narrative of a form of charisma, with a mystical union that allowed women to enjoy a privileged relationship with God. This female-centred narrative offered a paradigm that was easily subverted with negative connotations, especially with regard to the more general concept of the inferiority of women and performing artists. In this overturned narrative, women who danced were no longer attributed with the ability to communicate with God but became associated with the realm of devilry, magic, idolatry, and damnation. Irrespective of its positive or negative connotations, however, the narrative of female dance was not constructed by women themselves but by their audience. It was therefore inevitably a product of the male gaze.

For Plato, the *choreia* – the forerunner of the Christian *choros* – was the perfect measure of community life. It was based on a system of shared values that identified the perfect inhabitant of the Ideal City, a figure that can be compared to the perfect Christian in the Church's reworking of Platonic anthropology. It is important to underline, moreover, that the Platonic *choreia* was closely related to music, a connection not lost in the Middle Ages, particularly in the courtly realm. Indeed, it was developed further in fifteenth-century Italian courts, also achieving codification in the form of treatises (PONTREMOLI 2011). The idea that the liturgical *corus* has only ever consisted of singing without gesturality is another backward projection, the result of the negative attributes gradually acquired by the other

– much later and certainly rarer – Latin development of the term *chorea*: the noun *corea* and the verb *chorizare*.

It is no coincidence that Latin used the verbs *saltare* and, from the second half of the fifth century onwards, *ballare* and its derivatives *ballatio-ballationes-ballematiae* to attribute negative connotations to gestural displays: an association with pantomime in the former case and a link with violence and hubris in the latter instance, deriving from the Greek verb *ballo*, which means ‘throw’ or ‘fling’ (TRONCA 2021b, 2022: 127-143). In any case, the negative connotation of *corea* has always been due to its progressive association with demonic manifestations and, later, neurological disorders.

The English physician Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689) was one of the first to use chorea as a technical term in his studies and the concept took on numerous forms and characteristics in neurological science at the time. The influence of Sydenham’s research cannot be overestimated, not least because of his close intellectual relationship with his most famous pupil, the philosopher John Locke (MEYNELL 1988, 1990, 1991, 1995; GUIDO 1974; ANSTEY 2011). The description of chorea is found in the work entitled *Schedula monitoria de novae febris ingressu*, first published in London in 1686 (SYDENHAM 1686).

Sydenham’s work can be framed within metaphysical concepts that presupposed the existence of an order and identified illness as its opposite. In particular, mental illness – hysteria and hypochondria – was thought to be triggered by the discombobulation of the spirit. It is important to emphasise that the more general surrounding framework pertained to the melancholic realm, whose central role at the time had already been influenced by Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (SIMONAZZI 2004; GIGLIUCCI 2009; CHIESSI 2019).

The key point here is that the connection between restlessness of body and mind (or spirit) was already well known in the Middle Ages. Figures such as *epileptici*, *melancholici*, and *phraenetici* can be found in medieval medical and religious texts, but also in poetry. For example, lovesickness was described as a form of possession and uncontrolled passion for the fantasy-based image of the beloved. These texts of different genres were sometimes even written by the same authors as there was no separation of disciplines in the Middle Ages, so much so, for example, that Guido Cavalcanti – a love poet – was sometimes described as a *physicus*, or physician (TONELLI 2015: 3-70).

The connection between fantasy and disorderly movement was already extremely apparent in the first medical texts on tarantism, which was classed as a melancholic disorder during the Renaissance; it was precisely the imagination that was thought to induce twitching in the possessed (VERARDI 2022). Although modern-era medicine emphasised the superstitious and obscure nature of religion, it was actually strongly influenced by the religious sphere. Indeed, from at least the patristic era onwards, the Church had highlighted the dangers caused by an obsession with images (both material and immaterial), whereas fantasy and imagination were seen as potential causes of psychological and physical prostration (*melancholia*). Depending on the context, this obsession could be interpreted as an illness, a sin, or a form of love, although single readings were rare and often morphed into hybrid forms. Indeed, the experience of love was described in medieval erotic poetry as a spectral process regarding an obsession with an image, that of the beloved, which became imprinted on the poet's mind through the gaze, describing an erotic narrative that was quite literally idolatrous. This was the incessant and *immoderata cogitatio* theorised by Andrea Cappelano between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century (VINAY 1951; TRONCARELLI 1992). The Aristotelian inspiration for this theory concerned the notion of falling in love as dependent on the vision of a form imprinted on the memory of the love-stricken, who was thus forced into obsessive thinking (AGAMBEN 1977). This is also connected to the broader question of the power attributed to images in the Middle Ages; they were thought to influence the observer and forge a performative bond combining images that were both material and immaterial, such as those related to memory (BINO 2014). In the same way, the performative logic of the image was part of a more general process that affected the Latin West, with the proliferation of miraculous images at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. This led to such images taking on complex connotations and sometimes achieving a comparable status to relics (THUNØ, WOLF 2004; CANETTI 2009; BACCI 2013). The performative image could be rendered both in a positive light – by working miracles – and in a negative way through this system of perception. Working on the basis of unrequitable love that was incomprehensible to reason – essential elements for the very existence of love poetry (REA 2021) –, the inner image that plagued the mind of the love-stricken generated a pathological condition of psychological and physical prostration. This image is very closely linked to the imagination (*imago + actio*), the typical concept and device used in love poetry which best expresses the direct action of the image.

Sources attest that the term *imaginatio* was largely interchangeable with *phantasia* in the Middle Ages (CHENU 1946; FATTORI, BIANCHI 1988). The oldest attestation of the latter dates back to Plato's *Republic* (382e) where it was used to connote deceit. This entirely negative connotation was also adopted in Christian texts which portrayed the devil employing *phantasiae*, above all in his role of tempter. The term was frequently used in hagiographical accounts to underline the hollowness of *phantasiae*; after all, such texts had the precise purpose of providing behavioural models for spiritual edification. In this way, saints had powers of discernment and refused to yield to the temptations offered by images, which thus failed to achieve any power over the soul or indeed over real life (MONACI CASTAGNO 1996).

Devilish trickery – especially the form practised by the noonday demon described by John Cassian as one of the main enemies of monastic life (*De institutis coenobiorum* 10,1; PETSCHENIG 1888: 174; AGAMBEN 1977: 5-14) – was held responsible for the sins of acedia and *tristitia*. According to Gregory the Great, they caused forms of *vagatio mentis* that left victims unable to exercise self-control, obsessed as they were with their own inner fantasies (*Moralia in Iob* 31,45; ADRIAEN 1985; WENZEL 1960; CASAGRANDE, VECCHIO 2000: 78-95; TRONCA 2024c). This form of internal restlessness was triggered in monks, for example, by a yearning for more pleasant monasteries or the memory – an image imprinted on the mind – of far-off family members. It could also have repercussions on the body, taking shape in forms of agitation, impatience, and instability. *Tristitia* and acedia were special forms of malaise in monastic texts as they led away from the sanctity of contemplative life in a comparable way to forms of *melancholia*. Much discussed and analysed in medical and literary texts from antiquity onwards (PULIGA 2017), the latter concept became a fundamental element of love poetry; melancholy was closely linked to imagination with the imprinting of the image of the beloved on the poet's mind, actively exercising power over him (TONELLI 2003; PASERO 2016; GUBBINI 2017; TRONCA 2024b).

There is a consistent link between acedia and the sphere of mourning. Indeed, listlessness is also associated with putrescence (withering away and dying); in etymological terms, *akedia* is the negative form of *kedos*, which, as one of the many Greek terms pertaining to grief, expresses concern for others, especially during collective lamentation (PULIGA 2017: 219-233). Acedia was thus seen as indifference, apathy, and lack of empathetic involvement in grief. By extension, above all in the Christian sphere, although the concept retained its general sense of apathy and lack of collective emotional involvement (especially in monastic communities), it came

to indicate an ongoing state of clearly apparitional individual mourning based a desire to possess the intangible. The self-reflective gratification in this state of mind could also lead to desperation, because ultimately the listless were deprived of God, the supreme good. It was therefore a state of mourning without a real death (AGAMBEN 1977: 39-43). Nevertheless, it did trigger forms of physical unrest comparable to what Alfonso Maria di Nola has defined as «mimicry of mourning» (DI NOLA 1995: 113). This restlessness led to incessant wandering in a never-ending search for the «potential whereabouts of the lost item» (ivi: 12). It is significant to this end that the Greek term *melancholia* was often translated as *furor* – raging madness – in the Latin world from Cicero onwards (PULIGA 2017: 37-42). This illustrates the difficulty of defining these forms of existential malaise and mental alienation, which may be far removed from each other but also share certain traits.

The connection with mourning leads back to the common modern-era projection that places episodes of choreomania in settings such as cemeteries or frames them as responses to traumatic events like plague. Modern-era intellectuals were strongly influenced by medieval attempts to provide answers (and cures) to problems of psychological dissociation and used the same concepts – *phantasia*, *melancholia*, *cogitatio*, *furor* – in their medical lexicon (ARCANGELI 2022: 67; CANETTI 2019). In this way, the religious categories used in theology to describe phenomena of possession were appropriated and reprojected onto the lower classes and marginal groups in society. This happened especially during traumatic times of religious or political unrest, which was also reflected in the bodily agitation of individuals or groups. As a result, the lower classes shaped their identity and built their traditions around this intellectual transference.

In this sense, dance served as an item in the lexicon and imagery of gestural grammar, used by intellectuals in different spheres to describe a relationship between identity and otherness, male and female, and order and disorder. In its various cultural, religious, political, and ecclesiastical contexts, this relationship became an important instrument of bodily self-representation and discipline.

In an incessant repetition of what seems like a pre-written script, the possessed did what was expected by the exorcist, or theologian. In this way, the witch eventually confessed to the inquisitor that she could fly, just as the hysteric struck an arched pose because that was what the psychiatrist required. After that, the source narrated the story that best fitted the cat-

egories applied by historians. However, once it has been established that categories like choreomania and St Vitus's dance are historical-religious and historical-anthropological constructs, historians have a duty to deconstruct them and provide historical contextualisation. If not, the risk is that absolute perspectives will be used to write teleological histories reflecting prefabricated paradigms.

Conclusions: The arc de cercle as a performative symptom

This essay has outlined how images and discourses of dancing distress were transferred from medieval demonology into the clinical iconography of nineteenth-century neurology and ultimately into the realm of popular spectacle. Read through this lens, Jane Avril's arched body emerges as a long-term pivotal element: what was once sanctified or demonised in a religious vision was recoded as a medical sign, then celebrated as a choreographic signature. This continuity should not be understood as conceptual parity between religious and medical epistemologies, nor as a simple survival of premodern beliefs within scientific discourse. Instead, it points to the persistence of iconographic repertoires and performative frameworks, and the recurrent reuse of bodily grammars through which states of distress were made visible, intelligible, and socially legible across different historical regimes of knowledge. The *arc de cercle* – central to Charcot's symptomatology and echoed by Avril's stage persona – does not simply register a disorder; it can be understood as performing a historically learned gesture produced within a dense economy of gazes, expectations and images. The case of Avril and the semantic history of terms like chorea and dancing mania show that categories of disease are stabilised by images as much as by texts. The *arc de cercle* condenses this continuity: a learned pose shifting from exorcism through diagnosis to entertainment, suggesting that neurology and modern spectacle share a common iconographic ancestry.

Having seen that the idea of choreutic disturbance travelled from the philosophical *chorea* to the early modern chorea and finally into the nosology of St. Vitus's dance – reframed by modern neurology yet still haunted by older iconographies of convulsive movement – we may now return to the image that opened this study: the poster of Jane Avril arching backwards. Diagnosed with *danse de Saint-Guy*, Avril occupied the liminal space of convergence between religious demonology, medical nosography, and theatrical performance. Her body – photographed, observed, diagnosed, and

ultimately aestheticised – provides a privileged site for observing the long historical process plotted herein: the transfer of religious and post-medieval imaginaries of dancing distress into the modern neurological and psychiatric gaze. Avril's body, trained and disciplined within the Salpêtrière's visual regime, "knew" how to bend, arch, and convulse in ways that were already meaningful within the diagnostic vocabulary of the time. In this sense, Jane Avril exemplifies the performativity of the symptom. The label *St Vitus's dance* itself acted as a retrospective interpretative frame: a modern pathological category projected onto older imaginaries of convulsive movement and later stabilised within the clinical lexicon. Once displaced from the clinic into the cabaret and into Toulouse-Lautrec's visual universe, the same bodily attitudes – angularity, contortion, rhythmic spasm – were re-interpreted as markers of artistic modernity. While the medieval deviant danced under the sign of the demon and the nineteenth-century hysteric danced under the clinical gaze, Jane Avril danced before the public. This apparent rupture conceals a deeper continuity: images do not merely illustrate medical categories, but actively participate in their own construction, stabilisation, and circulation over time.

Bibliography

- ADRIAEN M. (Ed.) (1985), GREGORIUS MAGNUS, *Moralia in Iob*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, vol. CXLIIIB, Brepols, Turnhout.
- AGAMBEN G. (1977), *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Einaudi, Torino.
- ANSTAY P. (2011), *The Creation of the English Hippocrates*, "Medical History", Vol. 55 (4): 457-478, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300004944> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- ARCANGELI A. (1998), *Per un'archeologia della storiografia della danza: il racconto delle origini*, "Ludica", Vol. 4: 97-99.
- ARCANGELI A. (2000a), *Dance between Disease and Cure: The Tarantella and the Physician*, "Ludica", Vol. 5-6: 88-102.
- ARCANGELI A. (2000b), *Dance and Health. The Renaissance Physicians' View*, "Dance Research", Vol. 18 (1): 3-30.
- ARCANGELI A. (2000c), *Davide o Salomè. Il dibattito europeo sulla danza nella prima età moderna*, Fondazione Benetton Studi e Ricerche-Viella, Treviso-Roma.
- ARCANGELI A. (2007-2008), *La Chiesa e la danza tra tardo Medioevo e prima età moderna*, "Ludica", Vol. 13-14: 199-207.
- ARCANGELI A. (2018), *L'altro che danza. Il villano, il selvaggio, la strega nell'immaginario della prima età moderna*, Unicopli, Milano.
- ARCANGELI A. (2020), *Dissertazioni mediche sul ballo di san Vito, 1675-1875: una proposta di lettura*, pp. 199-211, in DE CARLI M., VINCENTI P. (Eds.), *Pagine d'oro e d'argento. Studi in ricordo di Sergio Torsello*, Kurumuny, Calimera.

ARCANGELI A. (2022), *La danza tra malattia e cura: il medico e la tarantella*, pp. 53-89, in VERARDI D., CAVICCHI C., ARCANGELI A. (Eds.), *Il grande danzatore. Il tarantismo e il potere del ballo nella prima età moderna*, Kurumuny, Calimera.

ARCANGELI A. (2024), *Paracelso, le malattie invisibili e il ballo di san Vito*, "Riforma e movimenti religiosi", Vol. 16: 53-68.

ARRIZABALAGA J. (2002), *Problematising Retrospective Diagnosis in the History of Disease*, "Asclepio", Vol. 54 (1): 51-70, <https://doi.org/10.3989/asclepio.2002.v54.i1.135> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

AUBERT G. (2005), *Charcot Revisited. The Case of Bruegel's Chorea*, "Archives of Neurology", Vol. 62: 155-161.

AVRIL J. (BEAUDON J.L.) (1933), *Mes Mémoires*, "Paris-Midi", 8 Août, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10516191z.image> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

BACCI M. (2013), *L'immagine miracolosa: una categoria storiografica?*, pp. 67-93, in BOESCH GAJANO S., FARRUGIA E.G., PLIUKHANOVA M. (Eds.), *I testi cristiani nella storia e nella cultura. Prospettive di ricerca tra Russia e Italia*, Atti del convegno di Perugia-Roma, 2-6 maggio 2006 e del seminario di San Pietroburgo, 22-24 settembre 2009, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma.

BACKMAN E.L. (1951 [1945]), *Religious Dances in Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, Allen and Unwin, London.

BARTHOLOMEW R. (1998), *The Misogynist Construction of Dancing Mania*, "Feminism & Psychology", Vol. 8 (2): 173-183.

BINO C. (2014), *Immagine e visione performativa nel Medioevo*, "Drammaturgia", Vol. 11: 335-346.

BINO C. (2016), *"To See and to Be Seen". Gaze, Desire and Body in the Christian 'Dramatic'*, "Comunicazioni sociali", Vol. 2: 203-216.

BLANKAART S. (1696), *Lexicon Medicum Graeco-Latino-Germanicum*, Starck, Erfurt-Leipzig.

BONDUELLE M., GELFAND T. (1998), *Hysteria Behind the Scenes: Jane Avril at the Salpêtrière*, "Journal of History of the Neurosciences", Vol. 7: pp. 35-42.

BRACCINI T. (2021), *Folklore*, Inschibboleth, Roma.

BRAEKMAN M. (1981), *La dansomanie de 1374: hérésie ou maladie?*, "Revue du Nord", Vol. 63 (249): 339-355, https://www.persee.fr/doc/rnord_0035-2624_1981_num_63_249_3777 (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

BUTTÀ L. (2023), *Visiones coréuticas: danzas diabólicas en el relato hagiográfico y ejemplar*, "eHumanista", 56: 58-74, <https://www.ehumanista.ucsb.edu/volumes/56> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

BUTTÀ L., BELGRANO A. (2020), *La danse immobile: iconographie et geste chorégraphique au Moyen Âge*, "Perspective", Vol. 2: 121-142, <https://doi.org/10.4000/perspective.20592> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

CANETTI L. (2009), *Rappresentare e vedere l'invisibile. Una semantica storica degli 'ornamenta ecclesiae'*, pp. 345-404, in ANDENNA G. (Ed.), *Religiosità e civiltà. Le comunicazioni simboliche (secoli IX-XIII)*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Domodossola, Sacro Monte e Castello di Mattarella, 20-23 settembre 2007), Vita&Pensiero, Milano.

CANETTI L. (2019), *Terapia sacra: guarire al santuario*, pp. 47-75, in *La medicina nel basso medioevo. Tradizioni e conflitti*, Atti del LV Convegno storico internazionale (Todi, 14-16 ottobre 2018), Fondazione CISAM, Spoleto.

CANETTI L. (2021), *Presenza e incorporazione dell'Altro: scenari della possessione diabolica*, pp. 113-135, in CARIBONI G., D'ACUNTO N., FILIPPINI E. (Eds.), *Presenza-assenza. Meccanismi dell'istituzionalità*

nella 'societas christiana' (secoli IX-XIII), Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Brescia, 16-18 settembre 2019), Vita e Pensiero, Milano.

CANETTI L. (2024), *Tra Dioniso e Cristo. Posseduti danzanti nella Tarda Antichità*, "Antropologia Medica", Vol. 57: 15-36.

CARADEC F. (2001), *Jane Avril. Au Moulin Rouge avec Toulouse-Lautrec*, Fayard, Paris.

CARDINI F. (1996), *Teomimesi e cosmomimesi. Il giardino come nuovo Eden*, "Micrologus", Vol. 4: 331-354.

CASAGRANDE C., VECCHIO S. (2000), *I sette vizi capitali. Storia dei peccati nel Medioevo*, Einaudi, Torino.

CHARCOT J.-M. (1887-1889), *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière*, Progrès médical, Paris.

CHARCOT J.-M. (1886-1890), *Œuvres complètes*, Progrès médical, Paris.

CHARCOT J.-M., RICHER P. (1887), *Les démoniaques dans l'art*, Delahaye-Lecrosnier, Paris, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6492840j.texteImage> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

CHENU M.-D. (1946), *Imaginatio. Note de lexicographie philosophique médiévale*, pp. 593-602, in *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati, Vol. II, Letteratura medioevale*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Città del Vaticano.

CHIESSI A. (2019), *Thomas Sydenham: natura e metodo nella prassi medica*, "Dianoia", Vol. 28: 155-170.

DE CARLI, M. (Ed.) (2020), *Meravigliosi ragni danzanti. Interpretazioni del tarantismo nel Seicento*, Kurumuny, Calimera.

DE MARTINO E. (2008 [1961]), *La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*, Il Saggiatore, Milano.

DE MIN S. (2023), *L'immaginario del gesto isterico nella Francia di fine Ottocento: tra mimo e malattia*, "La Rivista di Engramma", Vol. 205: 69-84, https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=5209 (last accessed on 24 June 2025).

DI NOLA A.M. (1995), *La morte trionfata. Antropologia del lutto*, Newton Compton, Roma.

DIDI-HUBERMAN G. (2003 [1982]), *Invention of Hysteria. Charcot and the photographic iconography of the Salpêtrière*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA-London.

DURANTI T. (2023), *Ammalarsi e curarsi nel medioevo. Una storia sociale*, Carocci, Roma.

ELLENBERGER H.F. (1994 [1970]), *The Discovery of the Unconscious. The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, Fontana Press, London.

EMRICH D. (1946), "Folk-Lore": William John Thoms, "California Folklore Quarterly", Vol. 5 (4): 355-374.

FATTORI M., BIANCHI M. (Eds.) (1988), *Phantasia – Imaginatio. V Colloquio Internazionale del Lessico Intellettuale Europeo* (Roma, 9-11 gennaio 1986), Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Roma.

FOSCATI A. (2013), *Ignis sacer. Una storia culturale del 'fuoco sacro' dall'antichità al Settecento*, SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze.

FRIEDMAN J.B. (2010), *Brueghel's Heavy Dancers: Transgressive Clothing, Class, and Culture in the Late Middle Ages*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse.

FURSE A. (2011), *Making a Spectacle of Herself: Charcot's Augustine and the Hysterical Dance*, pp. 197-210, in BIRRINGER J., FENGER J. (Eds.), *Tanz und WahnSinn. Dance and ChoreoMania*, Henschel, Leipzig.

GERI L. (2021), *Corte*, pp. 45-54, in GERI L., GRIMALDI M., MALDINA N. (Eds.) *La lirica italiana. Un lessico fondamentale (secoli XIII-XIV)*, Carocci, Roma.

- GIANVITTORIO L. (Ed.) (2017), *Choreutika. Performing and Theorising Dance in Ancient Greece*, Fabrizio Serra, Pisa-Roma.
- GIGLIUCCI R. (2009), *La melanconia. Dal monaco medievale al poeta crepuscolare*, BUR, Milano.
- GIMÉNEZ-ROLDÁN S. (2016), *Clinical History of Blanche Wittman and Current Knowledge of Psychogenic Non-Epileptic Seizures*, "Neurosciences and History", Vol. 4 (4): 122-129.
- GOTMAN K. (2018), *Choreomania. Dance and Disorder*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- GUBBINI G. (2017), *Immaginazione e malinconia, occhi 'pieni di spiriti' e cuori sanguinanti: alcune tracce nella lirica italiana delle origini*, pp. 29-39, in SUITNER F. (Ed.), *La poesia in Italia prima di Dante*, Atti del Colloquio Internazionale di italianistica (Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, 10-12 giugno 2015), Longo, Ravenna.
- GUIDO F. (1974), *Luci e ombre nel sistema dottrinario di Thomas Sydenham*, pp. 88-91, in *Proceedings of the XXIII International Congress of the History of Medicine (London 2-9 September 1972)*, vol. I, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, London.
- HECKER J.F.K. (1970 [1837]), *The Dancing Mania of the Middle Ages*, Burt Franklin, New York.
- HEROLT J. (1598), *Sermones de tempore et de sanctis, cum exeporum promptuario ac miraculis beatae Virginis*, apud Antonium Bertanum, Venetiis.
- HIRSCH A. (1880), *Hecker, Justus Friedrich Karl*, in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* XI, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, München-Leipzig, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd116561254.html#adbcontent> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- KIRFEL L. (2000), *I giardini monastici nel Medioevo*, "I quaderni del m.a.e.s.", Vol. 3: 133-142.
- LEGIMI C. (2000), *La danza nel pensiero medievale tra esegesi e predicazione*, "Ludica", Vol. 5-6: 26-52.
- LEGIMI C. (2002), *Il tema della danza nei commenti biblici e nella predicazione medievale*, pp. 285-292, in GAFFURI L., QUINTO R. (Eds.), *Predicazione e società nel Medioevo: riflessione etica, valori e modelli di comportamento / Preaching and Society in the Middle Ages: Ethics, Values and Social Behaviour*, Atti / Proceedings of the XII Medieval Sermon Studies Symposium (Padova, 14-18 luglio 2000), Padova, Centro Studi Antoniani, Padova.
- MALDINA N. (2018), *In pro del mondo. Dante, la predicazione e i generi della letteratura religiosa medievale*, Salerno Editrice, Roma.
- MCCARREN F. (1995), *The "Symptomatic Act" circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis, Electricity, Dance*, "Critical Inquiry", Vol. 21 (4): 748-774.
- MEYNELL G.G. (1988), *Materials for a Biography of Dr. Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689). A New Survey of Public and Private Archives*, Winterdown Books, Folkestone.
- MEYNELL G.G. (1990), *A Bibliography of Dr. Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689)*, Winterdown Books, Folkestone.
- MEYNELL G.G. (1991), *Thomas Sydenham's Observationes Medicae (London, 1676) and his Medical Observations (Manuscript 572 of the Royal College of Physicians of London)*, Winterdown Books, Folkestone.
- MEYNELL G.G. (1995), *Autorship and Vocabulary in Thomas Sydenham's Methodus and Observationes. With an Appendix on Isolating Key Words and Phrases*, Winterdown Books, Dover.
- MICALE M.S. (1985), *The Salpêtrière in the Age of Charcot: An Institutional Perspective on Medical History in the Late Nineteenth Century*, "Journal of Contemporary History", Vol. 20 (4): 703-731.
- MICHELI F.E., LEWITT P.A. (Eds.) (2014), *Chorea. Causes and Management*, Springer, London-Heidelberg-New York-Dordrecht.

- MIGNE J.-P. (Ed.) (1841-64), AUGUSTINUS HIPPONENSIS, *Sermones*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina*, XXXVIII-XXXIX, Garnier, Paris.
- MONACI CASTAGNO A. (1996), *Il diavolo e i suoi angeli. Testi e tradizioni (secoli I-III)*, Nardini, Fiesole.
- PARK R.H.R., PARK M.P. (1990), *Saint Vitus' Dance: Vital Misconceptions by Sydenham and Bruegel*, "Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine", Vol. 83: 512-515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014107689008300814> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- PASERO N. (2016), *Dal fantasma alla visione: percorsi medievali dell'amore*, pp. 17-40, in BARILLARI S.M., DI FEBBO M. (Eds.), *Fantasia e fantasmi. Le fucine medievali del racconto*, Virtuosa-mente, Aicurzio.
- PETSCHENIG M. (Ed.) (1888), IOHANNES CASSIANUS, *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium uitiorum remediis*, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum XVII*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien.
- PIZZA G. (2005), *Antropologia medica. Saperi, pratiche e politiche del corpo*, Carocci, Roma.
- PRUSCELLO L. (2014), *Performing Citizenship in Plato's Laws*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- PONTREMOLI A. (2011), *Danza e Rinascimento. Cultura coreica e "buone maniere" nella società di corte del XV secolo*, Ephemeria, Macerata.
- PULIGA D. (2017), *La depressione è una dea. I romani e il male oscuro*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- REA R. (2021), *Amore*, pp. 15-24, in GERI L., GRIMALDI M., MALDINA N. (Eds.), *La lirica italiana. Un lessico fondamentale (secoli XIII-XIV)*, Carocci, Roma.
- REKTOR I. (2003), *Chorea Sancti Viti in Lexicon medicum anno 1696*, "Journal of Neurology", Vol. 210: 7-9.
- RESTA M. (2016), *Un'ipotesi storico-agiografica per il "ballo di san Vito": la Passio Sancti Viti e le "danze" degli indemoniati, "Vetera Christianorum"*, Vol. 53: 173-184, <https://edipuglia.it/vetera-christianorum-2016-n-53-open-access/> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- RESTA M. (2017), *Note sui "balli" di san Vito: danze, riti e luoghi di culto*, pp. 211-226, in CARNEVALE L. (Ed.), *Spazi e luoghi sacri. Espressioni ed esperienze di vissuto religioso*, Edipuglia, Bari.
- ROHMANN G. (2009), *The Invention of Dancing Mania: Frankish Christianity, Platonic Cosmology and Bodily Expressions in Sacred Space*, "The Medieval History Journal", Vol. 12 (1): 13-45.
- ROHMANN G. (2013), *Tanzwut. Kosmos, Kirche und Mensch in der Bedeutungsgeschichte eines mittelalterlichen Krankheitskonzepts*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- ROHMANN G. (2015), *Dancing on the Threshold. A Cultural Concept for Conditions of Being Far from Salvation*, "Contributions to the History of Concepts", Vol. 10 (2): 48-70.
- SANCHIS FRANCÉS R., MASSIP F. (Eds.) (2017), *La dansa dels altres. Identitat i alteritat en la festa popular*, Afers, Catarroja-Barcelona.
- SANTI F. (2015), *Cultura politica e spiritualità nel Liber de cultura hortorum (Hortolus) di Walahfrido Strabone. Un'ipotesi di lettura*, pp. 71-88, in ERMINI PANI L. (Ed.), *Teoria e pratica del lavoro nel monachesimo altomedievale*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio (Roma-Subiaco, 7-9 giugno 2013), Fondazione CISAM, Spoleto.
- SCHLAPBACH K. (2018), *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse. Literary and Philosophical Approaches to Dance in Later Graeco-Roman World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- SCHLAPBACH K. (Ed.) (2022), *Aspects of Roman Dance Culture. Religious Cults, Theatrical Entertainments, Metaphorical Appropriations*, Franz Steiner, Stuttgart.

- SIMONAZZI M. (2004), *La malattia inglese. La melanconia nella tradizione filosofica e medica dell'Inghilterra moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- SYDENHAM T. (1686), *Schedula Monitoria de novae febris ingressu*, William Kettilby, London.
- THOMS W.J. (1846), *Folk-lore*, "The Athenaeum", 982, cc. 862c-863a.
- THUNØ E., WOLF G. (Eds.) (2004), *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Papers from a conference held at the Academia di Danimarca in collaboration with the Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Rome 31 May-2 June 2003), «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, Roma.
- TONELLI N. (2003), *Stilistica della malinconia: Vita Nova XXIII-XXV e Un dì si venne a me Malinconia*, "Tenzzone", Vol. 4: 241-263.
- TONELLI N. (2015), *Fisiologia della passione. Poesia d'amore e medicina da Cavalcanti a Boccaccio*, Edizioni del Galluzzo per la Fondazione Ezio Franceschini, Firenze.
- TRONCA D. (2017), *L'uso della danza nella costruzione cristiana dell'alterità religiosa nella Tarda Antichità*, "Adamantius", Vol. 23: 205-214.
- TRONCA D. (2021a), *To Be or Not to Be Part of the Vita Scaenica. Religious and Juridical Perspectives on the Status of Dancers and Performers in Late Antiquity*, "Mythos", Vol. 15: 188-203, <https://doi.org/10.4000/mythos.3159> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- TRONCA D. (2021b), *Spumansque Ore Lymphatico Bacchabundus. Dancing in the Christian Iberian Peninsula in Late Antiquity*, "Hispania Sacra", Vol. LXXIII: 89-95, <https://doi.org/10.3989/hs.2021.008> (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- TRONCA D. (2022), *Christiana choreia. Danza e cristianesimo tra Antichità e Medioevo*, Viella, Roma.
- TRONCA D. (2024a), *Coreomania e ballo di san Vito. La dimensione religiosa e l'invenzione moderna delle danze oscure medievali*, "Riforma e movimenti religiosi", Vol. 16: 21-52.
- TRONCA D. (2024b), *L'immaginazione nella Vita nova*, "Le tre corone. Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio", Vol. 11: 11-22.
- TRONCA D. (2024c), *Vagatio mentis: l'ossessione per le immagini tra amore, peccato e malattia*, "Comunicazioni Sociali", Vol. 2: 160-166, https://dx.doi.org/10.26350/001200_000206 (last accessed on 24 June 2025).
- TRONCARELLI F. (1992), «*Immoderatus amor*». Abelardo, Eloisa e Andrea Cappellano, "Quaderni medievali", Vol. 34: 6-58.
- VERARDI D. (2022), *Il grande danzatore. Il tarantismo e i poteri della musica e del ballo nel De Vita di Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 7-31, in VERARDI D., CAVICCHI C., ARCANGELI A., *Il grande danzatore. Il tarantismo e il potere del ballo nella prima età moderna*, Kurumuny, Calimera.
- VINAY G. (1951), *Il De amore di Andrea Cappellano nel quadro della letteratura amorosa e della rinascita del secolo XII*, "Studi medievali", Vol. 17: 203-276.
- WALKER R.H. (2011), *The Differential Diagnosis of Chorea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- WALLER J. (2008), *A Time to Dance, a Time to Die. The Extraordinary Story of the Dancing Plague of 1518*, Icon Books, London.
- WALLER J. (2009), *The Dancing Plague. The Strange, True Story of an Extraordinary Illness*, Sourcebooks, Naperville.
- WENZEL S.S. (1960), *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- WILSON N.G. (2007), *Aristophanis Fabulae*, Tomus II, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Author Profile

After earning degrees in the History of Christianity and Latin Paleography, Donatella Tronca obtained a PhD in Cultural Heritage Studies. Her doctoral thesis – which was awarded the “Barbara Sparti” Prize by AIRDanza (Italian Association for Dance Research) – formed the basis of the book *Christiana choreia. Danza e cristianesimo tra Antichità e Medioevo* (Rome, 2022). She conducts teaching and research at the Ravenna campus (University of Bologna – Department of Cultural Heritage), where she serves on the scientific committee of LABARIANI (*Laboratorio di storia culturale e religiosa “I lunedì degli Ariani”*) and coordinates the international network Eurythmia, dedicated to the study of the cultural and religious history of dance. Her primary research interests lie in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with a particular focus on historical-religious semantics, the history of manuscript transmission, and tangible and intangible Christian cultural heritage.

Riassunto

Da Salomé a Jane Avril. Danzare la sofferenza tra religione e neurologia

Il saggio analizza la connessione tra danza, religione e neurologia, partendo dalla figura di Jane Avril, ballerina del Moulin Rouge, e dalla malattia che le era stata diagnosticata, denominata “ballo di san Vito”. Si esplora come la medicina ottocentesca, in particolare quella di Jean-Martin Charcot alla Salpêtrière, abbia reinterpretato iconografie medievali di possessione demoniaca trasformandole in rappresentazioni cliniche dell’isteria. In questo contesto, la danza diventa simbolo di alterità e disagio, oscillando tra malattia e cura.

Parole chiave: danza, isteria, Jean-Martin Charcot, ballo di san Vito, corea di Sydenham

Resumen

De Salomé a Jane Avril. Bailar el sufrimiento entre la religión y la neurología

El ensayo analiza la conexión entre danza, religión y neurología, partiendo de la figura de Jane Avril, bailarina del Moulin Rouge, y de la enfermedad que le fue diagnosticada, denominada “baile de San Vito”. Se explora cómo la medicina del siglo XIX, en particular la de Jean-Martin Charcot a la Salpêtrière, ha reinterpretado iconografías medievales de posesión demoníaca transformándolas en representaciones clínicas de la histeria. En este contexto, la danza se convierte en símbolo de alteridad y malestar, oscilando entre enfermedad y cura.

Palabras clave: danza, histeria, Jean-Martin Charcot, baile de San Vito, corea de Sydenham

Résumé

De Salomé à Jane Avril. Danser la souffrance entre religion et neurologie

L'essai analyse le lien entre la danse, la religion et la neurologie, à partir de la figure de Jane Avril, danseuse du Moulin Rouge, et de la maladie qui lui a été diagnostiquée, appelée « danse de Saint-Guy ». Il explore comment la médecine du XIXe siècle, en particulier celle de Jean-Martin Charcot à la Salpêtrière, a réinterprété des iconographies médiévales de possession démoniaque en les transformant en représentations cliniques de l'hystérie. Dans ce contexte, la danse devient un symbole d'altérité et de malaise, oscillant entre maladie et guérison.

Mots-clés: danse, hystérie, Jean-Martin Charcot, danse de Saint-Guy, chorée de Sydenham

