By the beginning of Louis XIV’s reign, ballet de cour (French court ballet) was a well-established and popular feature of the French court, dating back to the late-sixteenth century. The first example of the genre is generally taken to be the Balet Comique de la Royne, written to celebrate the marriage of the Queen’s sister, Mademoiselle de Vaudemont, to a favorite of Henri III, the Duc de Joyeuse, in 1581 and performed in the Great Hall of the Louvre as part of a long series of wedding festivities.¹ The Balet Comique is generally attributed to its principal creator and choreographer, Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx (d.1587), but any single attribution is inevitably misleading as French court ballet was a fundamentally collaborative genre, combining as it did the efforts of choreographers, composers, musicians, dancers, set designers, costume designers, and many others. Like the majority of its successors, the Balet Comique was embedded in a specific context of royal celebration, that is to say of entertainment (or divertissement—such events were often called divertissements de cour), but also, inevitably, of political display. Spectacular magnificence, exhibited in the extravagant costumes, décors, music and choreography, as well as in the sheer scale of the entertainment, was a persuasive means of demonstrating—or rather, performing—the power of the sovereign. The king was understood to be both the driving force behind all such performances and also its privileged spectator. In addition, both Louis XIII and Louis XIV appeared as dancers in a number of court ballets (some of Louis XIV’s roles are examined below).

The content of Beaujoyeulx’s Balet comique also alludes to a more specific political agenda as the evil enchantress, Circé, is opposed to
a virtuous French king. Ultimately the king triumphs, thereby fulfilling and promoting the wider myth of the powerful French monarch who rights wrongs and brings peace to the troubled State. The *Balet comique* is, however, a more accurate reflection of a desired reality rather than of a lived one, a portrait of how things should be rather than of how they were. As Margaret McGowan has noted, “it is interesting to reflect on the fact that Henri III’s reputation for justice and virtue, and his control over political events, were never more precarious than at the precise times when artists exerted themselves to present a picture of their King’s merits and omnipotence” (*Le Balet Comique*, 36). *Ballet de cour* is thus tightly bound up with courtly politics and historical events, but its take on them is often more of an illusion than a reality.

This performance of hypothetical monarchical greatness extended beyond the duration of the ballet itself, as participants and spectators took away with them not only their memories of the event but often also the ballet programs (or *livrets*) that, as will be seen below, offered an acceptable guide to interpreting the spectacle. Official accounts of the great court festivals or *fêtes* in which ballets featured alongside feasts and fireworks, masquerades and mock combats, were written and judiciously distributed around the kingdom and throughout the courts of Europe. The *ballet de cour* was thus not only a means of performing the official history of the reign, but also of diffusing it. It is this broadly political dimension to ballet that explains the willingness of French courtiers (and their kings) to participate in such events. At one level, dance was considered a suitable aristocratic pastime, and a means of developing and then displaying one’s elegance and refinement. At another level, to perform in a court ballet was to please its principal spectator, the king, and to perform alongside him was an even greater privilege and honor. That these amateur dancers were also spectators of French court ballet points to another important aspect of the genre: the porous relationship between audience members and performers, which in turn suggests a further blurring of reality and illusion.

Beaujoyeulx claimed (with a little poetic license) that his *Balet Comique* was the first court spectacle that consciously attempted to unite dance, poetry, and music in an integrated dramatic plot according to the principles of the Académie de Musique et de la Poésie (founded by Baïf in 1570). In its complex mélange of diverse theatrical components, French court ballet was, as Mark Franko has observed, “closer...to twentieth-century performance art than to classical