FEMINISMS AND PERFORMANCE


20 See discussion of Mothers and the audience survey in Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theaters*, pp. 46, and more general background on the company, pp. 166–74.


22 New work in Performance Studies and the BBC is exploring the use of video in teaching about gender and drama. Contact the Faculty of Arts, Literature Department, for details for the new course ‘Approaching Literature’ (forthcoming in 1996) which includes a block on Literature and Gender, with set texts including Susan Gaspell’s *Trifles*, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, and a block on Shakespeare and the Canon, with texts including *As You Like It* and Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*. Both course blocks will include significant broadcast (televisual, video and audio) drama workshops and performances designed for teaching purposes and available along with the co-published textbooks to other universities and to individuals.


26 *Midnight Level Six* was produced in Cardiff in 1992 and then went on international tour. For background information about Magdalen, see Susan Bassnett, *Magdalen: International Women’s Experimental Theatre* (Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1989). Magdalen’s largest festival/gathering to date (September 1992) was documented on video by Peter Hulton of Arts Archives, UK, and in print by Lizbeth Goodman et al. in a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* (1992). The videos and journal documentation will be available for sale, individually or as a set.

27 The Divina Project is a collaborative practical and academic organisation of women in theatre and film, co-sponsored by the University of Turin, Turin City Council and Teatro Settimo: details from Professor Barbara Lanati, Department of English, the University of Turin. The American Women in Theater Program is a division of the Association of Theater Higher Education, with members from all areas of the US and Canada, as well as outside mainland North America.


Bodies of knowledge: dance and feminist analysis

Dance is an art form populated by women. Although those in positions of power such as patrons, sponsors, funders, artistic directors and choreographers of mainstream companies still tend to be men, the executants of dance are primarily women. The images of women inscribed by traditional Western theatre dance forms are synonymous in our society with notions of what it is to be not just female, but feminine. Therefore, as a field which ‘perpetuates some of our culture’s most potent symbols of femininity, Western theatrical dance provides feminist analysis with its potentially richest material’. This chapter explores the relationship of pertinent aspects of feminist theory to dance and exemplifies ways in which this approach can offer new readings of dance works. The emphasis is on analysis, that is, the activity of describing, interpreting and evaluating dance. However, as analysis is also an integral, if less clearly articulated, aspect of choreography and performance, a feminist perspective can significantly influence the making and the doing as well as the appreciating of the art form.

Although the following examples are drawn from theatre dance as practised in the West, a feminist perspective can be applied to the study of dance in all its forms, functions and contexts. Similarly, although this perspective necessarily embraces the ways in which constructs of femininity are formed, it can also offer, in aspects of methodology, if not in motivation, an understanding of how gender in all its cultural manifestations and stereotypes is produced and circulated by dance.

Until recently, dance has tended to escape analytical attention. Unlike music or drama, its ephemeral nature has been compounded by the fact that there has been no score or script to study and therefore no opportunity for repeated access to the work. Further reasons for its neglect include the Western mind-body dualism which privileges
the verbal and the cognitive over the sensory and the physical; the long, unquestioned heritage of ballet which has made its values and its practices almost transcendental; the perceived dependency of dance on other art forms and the low status given to any kind of women's activity. Lack of attention to dance in scholarly discourse can also be attributed to its apparent nature as a realm for experts in its practice and, by association, in its theory. Now, however, dance has become established as a discipline in its own right and open to inquiring minds, as well as questing bodies. Among the many questions raised are those concerned with what kinds of images of femininity are represented in and by dance, and how these images reflect the beliefs and values of specific cultural situations. An examination of these questions may require, for example, analysis of individual works, a choreographic œuvre, a style or a genre.

A feminist approach can radicalise the reading of dance. Furthermore, by exposing connections between dance as an artistic product, process and event which does not simply mirror but actively produces constructs of femininity, it can identify the significant contribution which dance makes to the hegemonic practices of society.

Feminist theory and the interpretation of dance
As the focus of this chapter is on how feminist perspectives can be applied to dance, it does not offer a detailed exposition of the general characteristics of feminist theories. Pluralistic in approach and problematic in the unresolved nature of the debate, these theories do, nevertheless, have commensurate concerns which cohere around the notion that, whilst sex is a biological determinant, gender is a social construct. As such, it is not simply reflected in, but produced by, cultural activity. The arts 'do not simply represent given gender identities or reproduce existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities . . . consequently . . . culture is a crucial arena for the contestation of the social arrangement of gender.' Furthermore, 'the representation of woman as image . . . and the concurrent representation of the female body as the locus of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze is so pervasive in our culture . . . that it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference.'

In other words, an analysis of the ways in which the female body is presented in dance can reveal dominant notions of what it is to be 'female' in particular cultural contexts. These notions are embodied in the image of the dancer which becomes a symbolic location of patriarchal ideology. As Stubbs claims in relation to the portrayal of women in literature, images are not neutral, an 'innocent pictorial guide to reality' but they 'create the world for us; they shape our consciousness.' Images shape the consciousness of the doer and the viewer; the performer, the critic and the audience. While analysis can focus on ways in which women are presented in the dance itself, critical writing can also be examined for its mediation and production of concepts of gender. It is not simply the activities of women in the arts, as either producers or performers, which constitute their image, but how those images are publicly received.

In dance, images present constructs of gender which have 'become petrified in an opposition of so-called "masculine" and "feminine" movement choices' which, it can be argued, are 'social and artistic conventions rather than physical or biological fact.' This perspective refutes essentialism in movement and rejects the notion of the 'natural' body. It argues that codifications of dance arise from social customs and culturally determined behaviours which are embodied and perpetuated in devices such as training systems and the methods and procedures of dance making. As Polhemus' so clearly explains, it is the interrelationship and mutual dependency of culture, gender and dance which makes the latter so richly rewarding for feminist analysis.

All analysis, of whatever dance form, rests on a notion that the symbols and structures of dance can only be read in relation to the cultural practices of society, for 'there is a problem with the position which assumes that the audience can read whatever they want to in a work. This position assumes an ahistorical, apolitical stance which does not take into account the dominant meanings . . . within a structure of patriarchy.'

The meanings that accrue to the symbols of dance, whatever the genre, are no more transcendental or self-contained than those which are produced in any other artistic or social practice. As Shepherd argues in relation to music, not only is its status as a self-referential, socially neutral art form untenable but such a view also obliterates the hegemonic function of music. In parallel, feminist analysis of music, dance or any other art form, does not rest solely in the realm of aesthetics but is a complex interplay between the aesthetic and the social. In order to make any statement about the relationship between dance and society, it has to be assumed that there are shared cultural meanings. A recognition of the specificity of audience members does not negate their shared ideologies; to refute such a premise would invalidate any notion of meaning in the arts at all. It logically follows,
therefore, that if these meanings change historically and geographically then so do notions of what constitutes positive images of women. As Copeland\textsuperscript{22} points out, the sexual politics of Isadora Duncan were very different from those of Yvonne Rainer, yet both have a validity for their time. Similarly, some of the works of Martha Graham, with their powerful, active, self-contained heroines, may seem at odds in a post-modern age which is deeply suspicious not only of the larger-than-life character and the singular psyche, but also of the meta-narratives embodied in mythology and even the manipulative artifice of the theatre experience. However, Graham’s choreography did challenge notions of the passive and passionless woman. Furthermore, the theatricality of her works, and the individuality of her characters, can still speak to us today. Dance analysis, therefore, can not only be alert to negative and disempowering images of women but it can also map out changing notions of feminism itself.

Another form of social, aesthetic and artistic interplay exists in the relationship between the personal motivation of the individual who creates or performs in a work and the public reception of that work. One of the shared methodological concerns of feminist research and other contemporary critical perspectives is that of situating the place of the subject in the construction of meaning. For example, in historical or sociological research, emphasis is placed on how people themselves think and feel about their place in society. Such an approach is problematic, however, in relation to any analysis of representation. Whilst in some respects it may be important to consider what the dance maker or dance performer thinks about her/his work, personal intent or motivation is relatively powerless in the face of the cultural meanings that accrue to images of the female body.

Feminist approaches to dance analysis

A feminist perspective on dance, as on all the arts, can illuminate many facets of its practice. A reconceptualisation of its language; a questioning of how and why its history is recorded; a consideration of how the canon was formed rather than a simple rejection of the dance heritage; a structural examination of its audiences, market, institutions and workplaces, and an analysis of the critical reception of dance, all repay enquiry.\textsuperscript{11} As Wolff claims, in order to understand any form of representation, analysis is required of both texts and artists within the complex system of aesthetic and ideological discourses, institutions and structures in which they reside.\textsuperscript{13} However, whilst in one sense it is not logically possible to consider the artistic product

outside the contextual framework of its production, performance and reception, analysis of the separate components of the dance work can be considered in order to illuminate the totality. It must be stressed that, as with any analytical project, this apparently atomistic approach serves to enhance, not destroy, the holistic experience. It is the interrelationship of these components in space and through time which constitutes the dance itself. No narrative can exist without movement; no movement without its own dynamic qualities, spatial elements and someone to perform it. Some components of the dance may warrant more attention than others, depending on the genre or style of work being observed. In some dances, for example, the narrative and roles played by the female dancer(s) may significantly define her image. In others, it is the qualities of movement which signify aspects of femininity.

The following identification of the key components which, to a greater or lesser extent, may be amenable to feminist analysis is a simplified form of the framework for analysis offered by Adshead.\textsuperscript{17} This comprehensive model embraces the analytic concepts of description, interpretation and evaluation, and enables understanding of the relationship between the text and its context. The components of the dance can be identified as the movement; the dynamic and spatial elements; the dancers; the aural and visual environments and the relationship of these components through time which constitutes the structure, or form, of the dance. The treatment of these components in relation to the theme or subject matter of the dance, and their characteristic selection which constitutes the various genres and styles, offer a focus for feminist analysis.

The subject matter, theme or narrative of dance is an obvious starting point. Indeed, in some critiques of ballet, it is both the start and the finish of analysis. Questions can be raised in relation to the kinds of roles played by women in relation to the narrative: who forwards the narrative and who is its passive recipient? Another approach is to examine how women are portrayed; what kinds of 'characters' are they? Petrushka (Michel Fokine, 1911) is a key work in the twentieth-century dance canon, yet it is rarely pointed out that all identifiable female characters or groups of characters are whores, dimwits or in servicing roles of some kind. How are significant female characters presented in relation to the men in the story; how is the future, the sanity, the very existence of the heroine reliant on the agency of these men? Conversely, consider the ways in which those whose destinies are not bound up with men are identified, as they are in society, as constituting the 'other'; as representing a threat to the psychological
stability of the hero (as the Sylph in La Sylphide, Filippo Taglioni, 1832) and/or to the very stability of society itself (Odile in Swan Lake, Marius Petipa/Lev Ivanov, 1895). However, although rarely read as such, the power of these disrupters of the status quo can be reinterpreted more positively. Consider, perhaps, that in Giselle (Jean Coralli/Jules Perrot, 1841) true moral retribution lies in the hands of the will; it is they and their queen who attempt to dispense justice for criminal acts of neglect and duplicity. It is not very feminine to fight for power and those who do achieve it, such as the Black Queen in Checkmate (Ninette de Valois, 1937), leave us a little uneasy at their singular intent. In order to vanquish the Red King and acquire his territory, she has not only to reject but remove his Knight; a kind of Margaret Thatcher of the chessboard, she is unremitting in her ambition. Such an ending, in which an independent woman achieves her desire and retains her independence, perhaps necessarily through the sacrifice of love, is unusual in our dance narratives. So often based on existing folk tales, myths and legends, they reflect the social and political ideologies embodied in those stories. If the women in Stabat Mater (Robert Cohan, 1975) passively wait and grieve, so do women in the Christian stories told by the fathers of the Church. However, an alternative reading of Cohan’s work, with its all-female cast, reveals a mutually supportive collective. If they cannot change society, at least they can help each other through.

These examples, chosen deliberately from the ballet and modern dance canon, show how a feminist approach to specific narratives can offer different readings of works. If it is not possible to change the grand narratives embodied in our stories we can, at least, look to their origins and their reasons. By uncovering the provenance and the changes through which the most seemingly traditional tales have passed, both the stories and their ‘truths’ become destabilised. If we are aware that in an earlier version of the story of the Sleeping Beauty, the princess apparently bore twins by her prince,16 her virginal image in the ballet can be seen as a parable for its time, not for all times. Similarly, even the profound connections between Indian classical dance forms and their religious roots are now being severed by those who reject the values transmitted in the male-constructed stories of female passivity and servitude. As with the Western classical dance form of ballet, there is a dilemma between acknowledging a long tradition of women’s activity and questioning the forms and functions of that activity.

It is, of course, impossible to disentangle the subject matter and the roles of the dancers from the ways in which these are constituted by the components of the dance. Whether a dance has an ‘exterior’ subject matter, as discussed above, or whether it is concerned with the actions, qualities, designs and structures of the movement itself, it is possible to consider how the actual movement contributes to, or constitutes, the ‘meanings’ of the dance. Questions can be asked, for example, about what kinds of actions are performed by the women and by the men: who lifts, who supports, who leads or guides and who follows, and what is the significance of these actions in terms of notions of dependency and control? Again, there are no simple answers. In ballet, a supported promenade, whereby the male dancer holds the female who is en pointe and leads her around on the pivot of her foot, can be interpreted either as his manipulation of her, or as her using him to achieve and display her technical skills. Movement is always perceived in context and factors such as its qualities, the expressive interpretation of the dancers and the place of the movement within the thematic structure of the dance will all inform debate as to its meanings.

The development of release-based work and contact improvisation has meant that gender specificity and conventional partnering, found in mainstream modern dance as well as in ballet, can be subverted. In these ways of working with the body it is not simply muscular strength but how the body weight is distributed which liberates dancers from the constraints of their physiology. In the early 1990s, dance vocabularies which involved both women and men hurling their bodies through space, crashing into each other and on to the floor, became popular. It could be argued, however, that this ‘Eurocrash’, with its seeming democracy of movement and apparent liberation from more stylised techniques, was merely the imposition of an aesthetic which resulted in a brutalisation of both women’s and men’s bodies.

All movement exists with dynamic or qualitative aspects and with various elements of spatial design; these are the ‘how’ and ‘where’ of dance analysis. Again, although movement is experienced as a holistic composite of action, dynamics and space it is possible to consider these elements separately. For example, what kinds of qualities are demonstrated: who is lyrical, graceful, light and fleet and who is forceful, rhythmic and strong? Although these differences can constrain the potential of the dancers in performance and the choreographic possibilities, in themselves they need not be problematic if assigned equal value. For example, Choréaenium (Leonide Massine, 1933) takes as its theme the interplay of feminine and masculine dance movements and qualities, and celebrates both. In Les Noces (Bronislava...
Nijinska, 1923), blocked groups of women dancers stabbing their pointed feet with forceful intent into the earth, rather than using them to rise up from it, was a radical departure from the qualitative and spatial elements normally associated with this traditional movement of the danse d'école. Karole Armitage (Watteau Duet, 1985) used her pointe as symbol of dominance and aggression. These examples subvert the norm and illustrate how the interpretation of movement is contingent not on the action alone but also on factors such as how, when, where, why, who with and for what purpose it is done. Daly argues that the vocabulary of classical ballet itself is an embodiment of patriarchal ideology which renders it impossible to use for the presentation of positive images of women. However, that vocabulary can, perhaps, be appropriated through a different treatment in a more sympathetic thematic or narrative context.

Two dance works which perpetuate rather than challenge the cultural norms associated with qualities of masculinity and femininity are Troy Game (Robert North, 1974) and the previously mentioned Stabat Mater (Cohan, 1979), both of which were in the repertoire of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre during the same period. Troy Game is a bravado demonstration of masculinity which, although somewhat tongue-in-cheek, celebrates power, strength and 'machismo'. The only character who lightens and speeds up his movement in a flurry of activity, thus taking on feminine qualities, is intentionally comic. Conversely, Stabat Mater, which depicts Mary and a group of women waiting and sorrowing at the foot of the Cross, is an essay in grace and lyricism. The issue at stake in such a comparison is not whether the choreographers should, or even could have explored other qualities of movement, for to have done so would clearly have transformed the meaning of both works. The concern is with how these works, not just in their dynamic aspects but in their overall treatment of the subject matter, embody the cultural status quo inherent in their source material. Furthermore, the potency of our internalisation of gendered movement is realised when imagination is allowed to play with the idea of an all-female Troy Game or an all-male Stabat Mater. Difficulties encountered are not just at the simplistic level of conceiving women in shorts and thongs or men in dresses. The problems arise in transferring not only the subject matter and its psychological import from one sex to another but also in transcribing the movement. The imagination struggles, for example, with allowing women to adopt the purposeful, space-conquering strides, the wide open stances or the confrontational spatial patterning of Troy Game.

The spatial aspects of movement and the situation of the action in the performing space can also be considered for their significance in forming or replicating notions of gender. Experiments of the 1960s and 1970s notwithstanding, most Western theatre dance takes place on a proscenium arch stage which frames the dancer and her body. In ballet, the male dancer dominates the space not only with long travelling patterns which cross and circle the space but also with the amplitude of his movement. The ballerina tends to circle around her own axis in pirouette and crosses the stage with a series of small movements. These are, of course, generalisations, but the male danseur tends to be valued for his skill at occupying the public space of the stage and the danseuse for what she does within her personal kinesphere. Narrative meaning is achieved through another spatial device, that of focus. In Appalachiain Spring (Martha Graham, 1944) the wife's visual and body focus is almost constantly directed at her husband, whilst he surveys the wide open spaces of his new territory. The female acolytes of the preacher relate spatially to him but the preacher himself lifts his eyes upwards to his God. Even in the seemingly democratic world of Duets (Merce Cunningham, 1980), the gender specificity of the actions is compounded by the orientation of the women's bodies and focus to the front and the direction of the male body and gaze to her. These duets resonate with meaning in terms of how the female body is displayed for the male gaze of the audience, with whom her partner is complicit. The spatial orientation of the dancers' bodies in relation to each other is explored in relation to the film musical by Dyer. Although concerned with how this partnering promotes the heterosexual ideal, the resonances of such spatial devices described by Dyer as side by side, mirroring, mutually holding or in relations of dependency are worthy of application to theatre dance.

In feminist writing on dance the area which tends to receive considerable attention is that of the physical stereotype of the female dancer. In relation to a general analysis of dance as hegemonic practice, its significance in the presentation of an ideal feminine beauty is undoubted, though historical examination will demonstrate that these notions of the ideal body change according to the cultural norms of the period. Body image can be subverted but it is a risky business; it could be argued, for example, that Grooslond (Maguy Marin, 1989), which appears to offer possibilities for large and rotund bodies, merely succeeds in parodying them. The Cholmondeleys present real rather than manipulated varieties of body shapes and sizes but although it seemed that they might herald a new age in the body aesthetic, they remain the exception rather than the norm. Unlike the performing arts of many other cultures, the West now associates performance
skills in dance with youth. At least in ballet, dancers can continue to perform by taking on mime roles but in modern and more recent forms there is still little place for the older dancer, man or woman.

One of the obvious signs of gender, in dance as in society, is dress. Costume establishes character, enhances movement qualities, enables or hinders action and defines the body image. It was Isadora Duncan who rejected the wearing of the corset in dance and in fashion generally by rebelling against 'everything it symbolised: the constraints, both physical and psychological, imposed upon women by Victorian culture.'21 The body tight for men and women, so prevalent in British modern dance in the 1970s, reflected the unisex fashions for young people; both the title of Banes’ book Terpsichore in Sneakers (1980) and Redressing the Sylph, the title of a conference on women and dance, indicate that what a dancer wears is not only related directly to the sexual politics of the day but is also a key component for the identification and subversion of gender roles.22 An examination of footwear (or lack of it) in dance also reveals both the aesthetic concerns of a genre and the sexual politics of the time. The confining (or, a moot point, the enabling) ballet shoe; the glamorous, to-be-desired Red Shoes of the 1950s film; the liberating bare foot of early modern dance and the rowdy and aggressive Dr Martens of the 1980s all resonate with meaning about women’s role in society. In dance, feet speak in more ways than one.

The dance accompaniment can also be analysed for the ways in which it endorses feminine and masculine actions and qualities. In ballet, loud, vibrant sounds from brass and wind instruments announce the male solo; tinkling arpeggios or lyrical melodies from the piano or strings accompany the female. For example, in the grand pas classique from Act III of Raymonda (Marius Petipa, 1898), it is possible to guess whether it is a male or female dancer who is about to make her/his entrance simply by the quality of the orchestral sound. Even modern dance works may offer the potential for analysis of not just who is on stage, but who is following the lyrical line of the music and who uses the rhythmic framework.

As the structure of the music can repay analysis so, too, can the overall structure of the dance itself. The common ballet divertissement incorporates a series of female and male solos in which each demonstrates their skills, culminating in a coda of mutual, partnered display. Whilst all the components reinforce traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, the actual structure of the divertissement involves both independence and partnership in a seemingly democratic co-existence. However, this democracy of structure is misleading as the actual context (the dancers’ vocabularies) is hierarchical in its gender specificity. The conscious manipulation and resultant clarity of structure, where a dance builds from discernible beginning to end through such devices as repetition, phrasing and climax, was one of the features of both modern dance and ballet which postmodernists rejected. Through aleatory processes, arbitrary decisions and conceptually-inspired rather than ‘external’ subject matter, the structures of postmodern works lost the traditional ‘closed’ forms of Western theatre dance. The fact that the great majority of choreographers creating work in this way were women is, perhaps, more significant than just historical accident. The French feminist writer, Cixous, called for language that was ‘fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete.’ Furthermore, as ‘the feminine form seems to be without a sense of formal closure . . . without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end or a central focus, it abandons the hierarchical organising principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse’.23

Although the making of links between so-called feminine structures of language and feminine structures of dance is a highly dubious activity in the sense that such comparisons are necessarily rooted in concepts of essentialism and biological determinism, there are interesting parallels to be made. As Shepherd suggests in relation to music, even apparently neutral structural devices are not value free but are laden with meaning and resonance (see Note 22).

**Summary**

Although the different components of the dance, that is, the movement, dynamic and spatial elements, the dancers, the visual and aural environments and the devices which give the dance its structure, can be read in terms of their relationship to culturally determined notions of femininity and masculinity, none of these aspects can be analysed in isolation from each other or from the work in its entirety. Consideration of the artistic, social and historical context of the dance is also essential, for it is the values which society places on certain qualities, the cultural interpretations of movements, sights and sounds, which produce meaning. Polarities of delicate/strong; lyrical/forceful; flexible/direct; inner/outer; passive/active; emotional/rational; natural/cultural; private space/public space can be exposed as facets of the male–female binary construction in which one term, one attribute, one way of being is favoured at the expense of another. As with women’s work in the wider sphere, it is not what they do but the...
values attributed to their actions which define their place in society. Moreover, through analysis, dance can be revealed as not just an artistic product but also as a cultural phenomenon which produces, circulates—and has the potential to subvert—dominant constructs of gender in society.

Notes

4 Early feminist and sociological literature tended to treat gender as an unproblematic concept but, more recently, writers such as J. Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London, Routledge, 1990), have raised questions in relation to the fixed or free-will nature of this construction and the complex relationship between sex and gender.
13 See A. Carter, 'Man as Creative Master, Woman as Responsive Muse', Dance Now, 4:1 (1994), 34–9, for an overview of possibilities for feminist perspectives on dance.