People know and understand ballet because they watch it or study how to do it or perform it. In more formal terms, they participate in widespread social and cultural structures through which they learn about ballet, thus perpetuating and sometimes altering it. These structures are both institutional (ballet classes, dance schools, companies, performances, film presentations, producing organisations and government agencies) and ideological (beliefs about art, dance, choreography, the body and gender). These structures also exist through time, so that the ways people have created ballet historically affect the present.

In this essay, I would like to talk about gender in ballet. I take 'gender' to mean sets of characteristics and practices attributed to a male or female person as distinguished from either the biological sex or the sexuality/sexual preferences of a person. In order to look at these characteristics and practices, I must consider numerous situations in ballet which define gender, often in conjunction with the definition of other major themes or issues.

I am an anthropologist, but I am also a dancer and I begin my investigation of gender in ballet by using my dance experiences as a case study. The method I employ falls under the category of processual analysis in anthropology, an approach which seeks to show 'how ideas, events, and institutions interact and change through time', often by focusing on a case study. This focus assumes that an individual's particular institutional and ideological experiences necessarily raise issues which are shared and which can serve as the basis for a larger commentary. While an anthropological analysis of this sort cannot typify everybody's encounter with ballet (for, in fact, no 'typical' encounter exists), it can help illuminate the themes and constraints that constitute 'gender in ballet'.

To choose my own experiences with ballet as my case study may seem somewhat unorthodox, though it is not unprecedented. I adopt this approach because it allows me to shift between my memories and comments as a dancer and my analyses as an anthropologist, in a sense using autobiography as fieldwork data.

I will also look at the relationship between my case study and discussion and several other commentaries on ballet and gender in ballet. Accounts by people close to the professional sector of ballet, in particular dancers Toni Bentley and Gelsey Kirkland, provide another perspective. Then, commentaries about gender by several viewers of ballet offer further evidence of the interaction of ideas, events and institutions in the definition of gender.

One of my earliest memories: watching my sister, Linda, take her ballet class. Eight years older than I, Linda epitomised everything I wanted to be when I grew up. She danced with grace and authority; observing her, I was amazed that my own sister, who often took care of me and was like a second mother, could transform into a magical presence. I couldn't wait to begin lessons, and at age three, I started my study of dance in the only ballet school in South Charleston, West Virginia. My enthusiastic, though ill-informed, teacher allowed me to dance in pointe shoes at the age of four. Luckily, I sustained no injuries from this highly risky training. My primary recollection is the exalted, thrilling, physical sensation of walking around on my toes.

My early experience with ballet had little to do with seeing ballet performance, although I must have seen some dancing on film and television. But my most immediate contact with ballet came in the dance class, where learning the techniques satisfied my identification with an important role model and my appetite for moving. The vocabulary of the ballet began to pervade my body, effecting its development and shaping my understanding and perception of movement. I experienced potentially harmful techniques as fun.

Continuing my studies at a dance studio in St Louis, Missouri, at age six, I also learned tap dance 'routines'. Tap delighted me with its rhythmic movements and challenging foot coordinations. However, the pervasive attitude of teachers and parents in the dance studio assigned far greater prestige to the study of ballet – according to this view, ballet was more difficult and it was art, whereas anyone could tap and it was entertainment. I knew these things by what people said and by the structure and
content of the classes. More time, care and energy were given to ballet, whereas the tap routines were taught for very short periods at the beginning or end of a class. In the annual school recitals in which I performed, those who did ballet counted as the most serious, accomplished dancers.

I rarely saw dancing of any sort on stage, live. Television and movies showed ballet, tap and varieties of Broadway/Hollywood dancing (a hybrid of ballet, tap, and vernacular jazz forms), as either short acts in TV variety shows or as danced interludes in musical comedies. The St Louis Municipal Opera presented eight or ten musical comedies in the park every summer, with one yearly concert appearance by ballet stars from New York. Also, every few years, the American Ballet Theatre came to town, and I could then watch a professional company perform complete ballets.

The men in ballet were total oddities to my (girl) child's eyes. No boys studied in my ballet classes, and I had never seen men dancing in a live performance who wore tights. My girlfriends and I giggled at their costumes and briefly admired their leaping excursions around the stage, but we saved most of our attention for the prima ballerinas' overwhelming skill and beauty. I idolised Melissa Hayden and Maria Tallchief.

What ballet did I experience as a white, lower middle class, midwestern, female American child in the 1950s? Ballet was dance for girls, in my mind and it was an art form—a bit rarified and not frequently performed, something to be studied seriously and treated with respect as well as applause and admiration. Because of the highly technical content of my ballet classes, I saw ballet as an individual's craft, and I attuned myself to the skills of the performers.

The fact that I learned to dance by studying ballet meant that I practised a particular set of exercises and movement combinations for fifteen years, and this kinesthetic reference has remained with me through time. Anyone who watches dance may feel kinesthetic identification, simply because all people move their bodies; years of dancing intensify this kinesthetic imprint. For the children who study ballet, an orientation to the technical content of the ballet performance has been inculcated.

As a child watching the prima ballerina on stage, her evocative power for me resided only minimally in the role she played (the Firebird or the Swan Queen)—I never even got the stories straight until I studied dance history as an adult. The ballerina was an admired female (like my sister), a public figure who had achieved technical perfection, a woman of great accomplishment and agency.

Anyone may interpret my response to ballet as a child—I'm sure—that I absorbed—complex—messages—about—movement, behaviour and society. Whatever other kinds of analysis one might make, however, my own conscious, positive identification with the female dancer resonates throughout my dance-viewing experience. I have no doubt that it was a major feature of my attraction to ballet as a child. How many other little girls study ballet and form this cultural identification? Even those who dislike practising ballet, or quit their studies, may still feel awe and admiration for the ballerina. Or, in fact, even girls who never study ballet but who see images of the ballet dancer as an admired woman, may identify positively with the ballerina.

Finally, I understood that ballet was classical dance with a long tradition, something I knew years before I formally studied any dance history. It was counterposed to other kinds of dance which were consequently thought of as less serious, less artful, less worthy of respect. For my family, ballet was a means of giving 'culture' to granddaughters of immigrants living in an area of the country with limited cultural opportunities. Implicitly, in segregated St Louis/America, ballet was a dance for a white audience of social status and different from (superior to) the dance associated with black people and show business. It was some years later that I recognised the truncated way in which I had first learned tap dance, devoid of improvisation, technical intricacy, and historical content.

As a college student in the late 1960s, my dance world transformed. I enrolled in some modern dance classes, initially because they fulfilled a physical education requirement, and any kind of dance seemed preferable to athletics. I quickly realised that modern dance had its own technique(s) which were different from ballet—I first studied in a Wigman-based class, then in a Humphrey-Weidman class, and then in a Graham class—but were challenging, rigorous, and exciting, nonetheless.

My gradual conversion to modern dance had other sources. In adolescence, I had realised that I did not possess a 'ballet body' (very slender and long limbed) and never would, whereas the range of acceptable bodies in modern dance seemed to include
mine. Also, the choreographic ideas of modern dance fascinated me and seemed more in accord with contemporary art, more vital and immediate. Finally, the breadth of representation of gender in modern dance attracted me. The movement vocabularies for individual women and men and for dancers interacting varied far more in modern dance than ballet. The experience of moving in new ways changed my perception and changed me.

As I became involved in the feminist movement, I felt angry and embarrassed by the stereotyping of women in ballet as frail, delicate, beautiful objects, displayed and controlled by men. I perceived the discrepancy between the egalitarian technique of the non-professional ballet classroom, in which women and men practise the same exercises and the predictably differentiated movement vocabularies in most ballet choreography (for which professionals train in special adagio classes, pointe classes, men's classes and so forth). As issues of gender intertwined with my new technical and choreographic interests, I rapidly distanced myself from ballet.

During my career as a modern dancer and improvisational performer, I have occasionally returned to ballet classes, and have even taught several college courses in ballet. My own investigations of movement, choreography and improvisation, however, have largely involved other styles and conventions. I have found that people who do not dance usually assume that I study ballet, in part because they perceive its influence on my movement, but also because they assume that all dancers must study ballet in order to acquire technical proficiency. When I tell people I meet that I am a dancer, 'Are you a ballet dancer?' is the most common question they ask. After that, they often ask if I dance like the performers on the American television show, 'Solid Gold' – Hollywood/jazz style accompanying the latest pop hits. And although I have experienced my ballet training as both asset and liability in trying to perform other kinds of dance, it has carried considerable positive weight in my quest for teaching jobs.

The small, collaborative modern dance group with which I work periodically applies for government grants. The New York State Council on the Arts, one of the agencies to which we have applied, gives away over two-thirds of its budget to three ballet companies, considered as, in the language of government, granting 'primary cultural institutions'. My experience makes it clear that generally within the professional world, as well as popularly, ballet holds a position of cultural and institutional dominance.

What social and ideological processes have been at work in the ballet I have participated in and seen over the last thirty-odd years? Stereotypes of gender which perpetuate representations of women as fragile creatures supported by powerful men are connected to a training system which is extremely technical and rigorous, and is offered to large numbers of children, mostly girls. Furthermore, ballet allows for great achievement in a physical art by female performers, for which they receive public acclaim. These circumstances link female virtuosity and public female role models to a physical practice at once highly technical and highly gendered.

As a performance form, ballet's aesthetic stems from a long and by now respected artistic tradition. It is also simultaneously associated with both a bourgeois, white audience and, through television and film, with a more general popular audience. Since the founding of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, ballet can claim at least some availability to dancers of colour and the admission of modern dance choreographers into ballet companies suggests a contemporary flexibility. Thus, ballet seems both an elite artform connoting bourgeois respectability and an art accessible to large numbers of people. The 'purely technical' emphasis of its teaching contributes to an image of ballet as an art transcending cultural boundaries, a dance that is not 'ethnic'.

Systems of ballet training and performance have gained greater institutional support than any other dance form in numerous countries, support which involves schools, companies, producing organisations, the media and government agencies. Ballet is considered the premier art dance form by governments of Europe, North America, Australia, and the former Soviet Union, and enjoys popularity in many other parts of the world. This institutional support means that ballet's ideas and practices gain cultural power, a power which attaches to the concepts of gender it defines.

Moving from my own history to some accounts of and by ballet dancers presents a clearer picture of ballet's professional practice. I begin with the publication in the early 1980s of books
criticising professional ballet from a social perspective, an event which marked a sudden turn in the dance literature. Until then, biographies and autobiographies of ballet figures tended toward anecdote and romantic adulation of choreographers, other dancers, and the world of ballet in general. Works by L. M. Vincent (1981), Joan Brady (1982) and Suzanne Gordon (1983), however, took the ballet world to task for abuses of dancers, particularly women.

Vincent and Gordon, not dancers themselves but a physician and journalist respectively whose professions have involved them with ballet, criticised the encouragement of what they saw as excessive thinness among female ballet dancers, and claimed a relatively high frequency of anorexia nervosa. Gordon also criticised the infantilisation of dancers, particularly the women; she felt that their training left them susceptible to compliance with the needs of the (male) choreographer even when they were injured or psychologically troubled. Brady’s bitter account of her failed career as a dancer offered her own version of many of the same circumstances which Vincent and Gordon addressed.

Toni Bentley (1982) and Gelsey Kirkland (1986), both successful professional dancers, published personal stories which more acutely exposed the complex position of the female dancer. Bentley, a member of the corps de ballet of the New York City Ballet, described a season with the company, her short departure from performing and her subsequent return. She both loved and hated the demands of her profession, for ballet seemed simultaneously a way to realise herself as a woman and an artist and a way to deny herself as a woman and a person in the world. Yet to be a dancer, Bentley finally accepted what seemed oppressive and returned to the closed world of the ballet company.

Bentley’s book contained a defence of anorexia; ‘The anorexic has absorbed a great knowledge. She has control — some control — over her destiny and has taken responsibility for that destiny’. Bentley also argued against a dancers’ union; ‘Those who loved themselves more than [George] Balanchine have made their stand and demonstrated their lack of faith in him . . . What would have happened if Van Gogh’s brushes one day had refused to be manipulated because they wanted better living conditions?’ Moreover, she portrayed George Balanchine as a kind of human god; ‘We are all his children, but his adult children – his working, dancing, performing children . . . As an apprentice one hears that he needs to see only one demi-plié, and he knows how you dance, how you live, who you are and what your future is’.

While the books by Vincent, Brady and Gordon suggested that more public attention might be paid to the sexism of ballet and that some of the abusive conditions in ballet training and production might be reformed, Bentley’s book presented a different reality. Women’s near-starvation and submission to a male choreographer evidently constituted part of Bentley’s training and outlook, inseparable from artistry and devotion to great performance. Just as asceticism and obedience to spiritual leaders can be an integral part of religious life, so too can such practices be part of dancing.

Gelsey Kirkland’s autobiography, Dancing on My Grave (1986), revealed as extreme an outlook as Bentley’s. Kirkland had been an exceptionally gifted young dancer with proclivities toward self-destructive behaviour in the service of self-discipline. As her career developed, she also cultivated an intense desire to choose her own teachers and coaches and to define her own roles, engendering clashes with male choreographers (notably Balanchine and Baryshnikov) and managers. Serious bouts with drug addiction which, she claimed, were tolerated by producing organisations because she was still capable of performing and drawing large audiences, interrupted her career, which she then resumed in London in 1986 after her recovery.

The professional American ballet community’s angry reception of Kirkland’s exposé would seem to confirm Bentley’s portrayal of that community’s sectarian closeness. For example, Kirkland was among those honoured by the National Rehabilitation Hospital at a benefit in 1987 in recognition of people who overcame handicaps or life-threatening accidents or setbacks. A story about the benefit in the New York Times, headlined ‘[Edward] Villella Asks Forgiveness for Kirkland’, stated that the organiser of the benefit ‘had asked many dancers, choreographers and ballet masters to appear with Miss Kirkland and that Mr. Villella was the only one who accepted’. Villella was quoted as saying that colleagues ‘should forgive Miss Kirkland despite having been offended’. Later, he commented that she ‘drew attention to our world that normally is looked at through
rose-colored glasses’. According to the article, Villella also revealed that ‘he was not taking sides’ and that, in fact, he ‘purposely had not read Miss Kirkland’s book’.

For those inside the ballet world, it seems that Kirkland’s sins of indiscretion lay as much in her sharing her criticisms with outsiders as it did in the criticisms themselves. Whatever the validity or distortion of Kirkland’s accusations, Kirkland seriously violated the rules of a closed society; stepping out of her place as a dancer, a female and an acclaimed insider. Edward Villella could only sympathise with her difficulties by avoiding her book, thereby remaining uncontaminated.

Most spokespeople for ballet seem committed to portraying it as a self-contained world. In a sense, they present it as an organism, a whole whose pieces all fit together. Part of the dominance of ballet as a cultural form rests not only in its historical longevity and institutional entrenchment, but in its professional ideology of exclusivity and completeness. I understand now why I felt at one point that I must totally abandon ballet—once I was either in the ballet world or out of the ballet world. Consequently, professional ballet dancers who write about ballet tend toward extremes of abject loyalty or bitter attack.

Furthermore, ballet’s ideology of completeness mitigates against ‘reform’ of gender representation, because gender makes up one part of a larger fabric. Despite many experiments with gender representation in ballet in the twentieth century, the importance of tradition reinforces the primacy of a nineteenth-century image of gender. Theoretically, one might imagine ballet companies which presented classical works as historical documents, in conjunction with selected modernist and contemporary works which contain radically different and wide-ranging representations of male and female. As currently produced and performed on a professional level, this does not seem to characterise the dominant direction of ballet.

Now to move on to some viewers of ballet, and to analyses of gender which have appeared recently. These analyses have been made in the context of a feminist movement by authors concerned with the relationship between the sociological features and the aesthetic properties of ballet. In a number of instances, the authors have examined the dancing in order to interpret its representation and evocation of gender. This important enterprise constitutes a kind of textual analysis; it stresses the pervasive, long-lasting social symbols which are embedded in the narrative, movement techniques and choreography of ballet.

To summarise briefly, ballet has been seen to stress sexual dimorphism, i.e. difference in the relative sizes of women and men; men virtually always lift and manoeuvre women, embodying strength and exhibiting control over the more fragile ballerina. One of ballet’s central choreographic structures, the pas de deux, evokes romantic, heterosexual love on both a literal and metaphorical level, emphasising opposing characteristics and distinctions between male and female. Contrast in movement vocabularies, narrative roles and costuming for men and women further reinforce these oppositions and distinctions and, as Ann Daly (1987/88) persuasively argues, perpetuate nineteenth-century gender stereotypes of ‘female difference/male dominance’.

The innovations in gender representation that have occurred, particularly in the ballets of the past half-century, remain marginal in the ballet repertory.

An obvious question arises: if ballet is so sexist, why do so many people enjoy it? One obvious answer would be that ballet reflects and reinforces the pervasive sexism of the society in which it exists. While this statement has some truth, it seems unsatisfactory in its sociological reductionism. To what else are they responding? Or, as sociologist Janet Wolff asks, how can work ‘pronounced ideologically incorrect or unsound’ be found ‘enjoyable, technically excellent, or in some other way “aesthetically good”’?

Wolff looks to classical ballet as one of her examples of art with ideologically troublesome content, since many of the major works of the ballet repertory, she says, ‘are based on reactionary and sexist (not to say silly) stories’. In fact, Wolff confesses, her own critical “reading” of those ballets does interfere with [her] enjoyment of their performance, though it is still possible to appreciate skill, design and choreography of parts of the works. Here Wolff implicitly suggests that one can watch a ballet and separate different aspects of its performance. If one rejects or ignores the representation of gender in ballet, one may still enjoy the choreographer’s craft and the dancer’s skills.

To shift back to autobiography for a moment, I have certainly experienced such moments at the ballet. For example, last
spring, a friend visiting from out of town invited me to attend the New York City Ballet. One of the ballets on the programme, Tchaikovsky's 'Piano Concerto Number 2', featured Merrill Ashley. A short time into the dance, I found myself gasping audibly at Ashley's particularly subtle phrasing. Inexorably, it seemed, Ashley brought me into the ballet with her simultaneous appearance of natural ease and deliberate control. The uniqueness of her presence, her awkward, Amazonian grace, invited my attention to the particular qualities of other dancers on stage as well, while the clarity of her movement repeatedly illuminated the choreography. All the performers seemed to me inspired, intelligent and very human.

However, an argument that 'art transcends social content' (which might be deduced from the comments just made) cannot completely satisfy. For at this same performance, I was uncomfortably aware of the expensive perfume that wafted through the theatre and of the virtually all-white audience, a startling contrast to the ethnic and racial mixture of riders on the subway I took to Lincoln Center to see the ballet. I had to shake off these thoughts and make an effort to focus my attention on the stage as the performance began. Then, during the first ballet, a sudden image struck me - that the women's feet were bound, compressed into the stubby ends of their pointe shoes - and I could not help but be distracted every time the ballerinas clip-clopped their way across the stage, their hardened toes striking the ground (like reverse high heels) at every step. Eventually, I gave in to the bizarre image and amused myself with it for some time.

Evan Alderson, in an article entitled 'Ballet as Ideology: Giselle, Act II' (1987) describes yet another viewing experience at the ballet. He discusses being 'seized by beauty' at a crucial moment during a performance. Alderson analyses his response to some detail by investigating the confluence of aesthetic qualities with social values. 'Thinking back on my response,' he writes, 'I realized that I had been hooked on the point of my own desire: I had been "let in" through Albrecht's longing for the absolutely faithful, absolutely unattainable woman whose death he had occasioned, because I share with much of nineteenth-century culture an attraction to what is sexually charged yet somehow pristine.¹¹

Alderson suggests that a conjunction of technical innovations in nineteenth-century ballet, the narrative of Giselle and bourgeois values create the image of the female body of Giselle as ethereal and chaste and at the same time, erotic. Alderson perceives that his own admiration of beauty subtly but powerfully evokes loyalty to a social order. For him, representation of gender and appreciation of craft are linked for and by the viewer.

None of these viewers is 'wrong' from an anthropological standpoint. Natives think and act as natives, which is what Wolff, Alderson and I (a British, Canadian, and American native, respectively) are all doing. Our responses are not merely personal idiosyncrasies or preferences; they engage both the ballet we watch and the ideological and institutional experiences of our lives.

Wolff follows an aesthetic theory about viewing art which allows her to dislike ballet's ideology of gender but appreciate the choreographer's craft and the performers' skills. This theory matches the structure of the ballet itself, which often presents 'pure' virtuosity and can shift its focus among, for example, character, dramatic encounter, musical artistry and athletic display.

Alderson (1987) finds himself responding most strongly to a moment in which techniques and character within the ballet unite to evoke his emotional reaction. His attraction to what is 'sexually charged but somehow pristine' connects the definition of gender in the ballet to Alderson's social experience of gender.

As a viewer, I seem to focus most strongly on the ballerina. Because of my childhood familiarity with ballet technique, as well as my ongoing preoccupation with movement, I am attuned to technical and choreographic artistry and oriented to the agency of the dancers. Because of my distaste for the oppressive representation and evocation of gender, as well as my discomfort with associations of social class, race and aesthetic categorisation that seem embedded in ballet, I often feel disturbed and alienated. Because of my interest in 'other' kinds of movement, I sometimes become bored with the limitations of ballet. My state as a viewer may change many times during a performance.

Do I enjoy the ballet only in those moments which are 'politically correct' and feel distanced from it when partnering or sexist narratives occur? Probably not always. Am I able to separate ideology from craft? Sometimes. At other times, the profusion of thoughts, sensations and associations I have when I watch dance flood over one another. Beauty, distortion, brilliance, silliness,
intelligence, stupidity, power, weakness — the ballerina can embody them all. Positive and negative implications in my own life history are paradoxically linked; I am caught in contradiction (perhaps even perversely attracted by it — art gives licence not always available in other realms of life). As Evan Alderson felt complicity with the desire of Albrecht, I, too, have feelings of complicity with the ballerina, with her dual embodiment of the powerful and the ineffable.

In conclusion, I have tried to illustrate that definitions of gender in ballet pervade not only ballet choreography and performance but many other ideas, events and institutions. I have suggested what some of these might be: the values associated with dance, conceptions of art, the structure of children's and non-professional dance classes, perpetuation of female role models, the nature of ballet technique, the social organisation of ballet audiences, the financial/organisational support of ballet and the hierarchical nature of ballet production.

I have also suggested that these forces come together in particular ways. The technical prowess of the ballerina is often linked to stereotyped practices of gender, uniting images of power to images of being manipulated and controlled. At the same time, the emphasis placed on virtuosity allows one to view ballet on a technical level and ignore or dismiss ideological content. Stereotyped practices of gender are connected simultaneously to acclaimed public figures, an honoured artistic tradition and bourgeois respectability. Ballet appears in so many different kinds of institutions that it may be seen as both popular and elite art. Yet at its professional level, ballet is conceived and organised as a closed and unified tradition, making it resistant to change.

I am in complete agreement with those who urge a social analysis of dance performance which does not dismiss the dance's aesthetic values. In this essay, however, I have chosen to emphasise the point that social content, such as the representation of gender, resides not only within the dance itself but also in the dance's connection to the (aesthetic-social) life experiences of the audience. The anthropological commonplace that dance and life are inextricably related gets easily applied to the people of Bali or Ghana or Morocco; it applies as well to the people who perpetuate ballet. Only through understanding something about those relationships can we understand ballet's cultural power and the problematic nature of gender in ballet.

Notes and References

3. See, for example, the following: E. S. Bowen (1964), J. Briggs (1970), J. Chernoff (1979), J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus, eds (1986), G. Obeyeskere (1981), and R. Rosaldo (op. cit.).
4. Often, of course, I wear both hats at once . . . When is one a participant and when is one an observer in one's own life?
5. I use the word cultural in this case to mean 'high art', a normative judgement, rather than an anthropological term.
7. Ibid., p. 89.
8. Ibid., p. 58.
Many of the ideas for this article grew out of conversations with Evan Alderson, Richard Bull, Ann Daly, Susan Foster, Mark Franko, Susan Manning and George Russell. I thank them for our on-going discussions and in particular Richard Bull and Susan Manning, who read drafts of this article and made valuable suggestions.

Bibliography


‘I seem to find the happiness I seek’
Heterosexuality and Dance in the Musical
RICHARD DYER

Fred and Ginger meet. He fancies her and she’s quite taken with him, but he pesters her too much, or she’s got her own career to get on with, or she thinks he’s married, or he’s promised never to marry. Whatever the reason something keeps them apart, except that when they start to dance... Well, what? It’s heaven, they’re in heaven, but just what is it that makes it so, what notion of happiness is embodied in their dancing?

The impulse of most musicals is towards just such moments of heaven, of grand and glorious feeling. In the unsung, undanced narrative, the characters have all sorts of problems, from raising money for a show to winning strikes (The Pajama Game) and escaping from the Nazis (The Sound of Music); in the numbers they either resolve or get away from these problems. Heterosexuality is at the heart of this. The heterosexual couple are usually the main characters and either the problems are what prevent their getting together (misunderstandings between them, obstacles in their way, like parents, class or nationality) or else their love is the way they escape from problems external to the relationship (intrigues at court, the show going badly, social conflicts). What interests me here is how that heavenly relationship, that heterosexual ideal, is imagined, incarnated in the couples’ dances together.

Our culture seems to have two prevalent models of heterosexuality and its attractions. One might be labelled the Jane Austen model, the idea of complementarity within equality. What makes a heterosexual relationship agreeable is the blending of opposites, the balance of, say, his pride against her prejudice, both sides making up the deficiencies of the other, either through learning from one another or through the creation in the state of