The Balanchine Woman

Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers

*Man is a better cook, a better painter, a better musician, composer. Everything is man—sports—everything. Man is stronger, faster. Why? Because we have muscles, and we've made that way. And woman accepts this. It is her business to accept. She knows what's beautiful. Men are great poets, because they have to write beautiful poetry for women—odes to a beautiful woman. Woman accepts the beautiful poetry. You see, man is the servant—a good servant. In ballet, however, woman is first. Everywhere else man is first. But in ballet, it's the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her.*

—GEORGE BALANCHINE, 1976

*When people say that “Balanchine glorified Woman,” it is generally considered a laudable accomplishment. But in an age of backlash against feminism, when women's efforts toward progressive social change are losing ground to a beleaguered conservatism, "glorification" smacks of regressive sexual politics. Though artists and scholars in art, film, and theater have been deconstructing representations of "Woman" for fifteen years, such work is rarely found in Western theatrical dance. The issues surrounding the ballerina as a cultural icon of femininity have been left virtually unexplored in print and met with impatient, if polite, disinterest in most public discussions.*

If the ballerina has been only a passing subject of critical feminist thinking, the Balanchine ballerina has been strictly off-limits. During his life, Balanchine was enveloped by a mythology that ascribed to him near-mythical inspiration, and now, four years after his death, Balanchine's legacy is generally considered sacrosanct. Yet Balanchine's statements about his idealized “Woman” openly declared their patriarchal foundations. Familiar themes emerge: Woman is naturally inferior in matters requiring action and imagination. Woman obligingly accepts her lowly place. Woman is an object of beauty and desire. Woman is first in ballet by default, because she is more beautiful than the opposite gender.

The Balanchine ballerina is not simply an innocuous, isolated theatrical image. As much as Twiggy or Marilyn Monroe, she is an American icon. When, as in these cases, an artificial construction takes on a “natural” appearance, ideal representations (WOMAN) instead of realities (women) set standards for everyday life.* An iconographic hangover from the nineteenth century, the Balanchine
Theorizing Gender

Ballerina now serves as a powerful but regressive model in a social milieu where women are struggling to claim their own voices.

Balanchine’s choreographic framing of Woman came up briefly at the Dance Critics Association (DCA) seminar on The Four Temperaments (1946) in January 1985. During one session, former New York City Ballet dancer and choreographer Scherzer narrated a movement analysis of her role in the third theme pas de deux, while two students from the School of American Ballet demonstrated.

She told the audience early on that the man “is manipulating the ballerina—controlling her.” At one point, he lifts her straight up and sets her on her tip, on one pointe, her free leg crossed over the bent, supporting leg. She looks up if she is perched in an invisible chair. With one hand he grasps his ballerina’s upstretched arm like the throat of a cello; then he pulls on her free arm, spanning her repeatedly. “You see the boy totally controlling the girl,” Scherzer commented. “He opens her arm [to the] side and then puts her arm in front. He’s doing the port de bras. . . . The boy should appear then to be strumming—playing—a sort of harp or cello. The girl is like an instrument.”

During the later critics’ panel, a member of the audience commented that he found the ballet somewhat misogynistic. Of the five panel members, only two men responded. “I don’t think there’s any misogyny in Balanchine whatsoever,” said David Daniel, a New York Review of Books staff member. “Whenever he has a man manipulate a woman it is pure metaphor.”

Critic Robert Greikov added:

What happens in those three themes, for me, is that man’s support is allowing this woman to be more powerful, more open, and in my sense of looking at it, more beautiful than she could be by herself because she has this . . . human ballet barre—I don’t care what you call it. That man shows her in four arabesques that she couldn’t do by herself, and each one is more powerful than the next because of his assistance or whatever you want to call it—manipulation.

“Nor is there any indication in a Balanchine ballet that a man is making a woman do anything that she doesn’t want to do,” Daniel concluded.

The gap between the choreography and the male rhetoric deserves investigation. The third theme of The Four Temperaments is but a few minutes in the many hours of Balanchine’s repertory, but it is an emblematic starting point for a feminist discourse on ballet. If Balanchine did “glorify Woman,” the question remains: whose idea of Woman is she?

Like the Madison Avenue model, Playboy centerfold, or Hollywood bombshell, Balanchine’s ballerina is part of a “culture [that] is deeply committed to myths of demarcated sex differences, called ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ which in turn revolve first on a complex [male] gaze apparatus and second on domi-

submission patterns. This positioning of two sex genders in representa-
nally privileges the male.” The same questions E. Ann Kaplan asks about cinema can be used to probe the Balanchine ballerina. In the third theme of The Four Temperaments, how is Woman represented? In a dance form that Balanchine called an instant love story, whose desire is being played out? Who occupies the position of privilege?

Balanchine choreographed The Four Temperaments to Paul Hindemith’s 1940 theme with Four Variations (According to the Four Temperaments). The ballet got so much about the four humors as it is about the sometimes sweet, sometimes plaintive music, featuring the comings and goings of piano and strings. The score begins with three themes, each represented by a pas de deux; the subsequent variations are “Melancholic,” “Sanguine,” “Phlegmatic,” and “Choleric.” This was the first of Balanchine’s strain of so-called “modern ballets,” which, though rooted in the classical vocabulary, inverted it, stretching it beyond the boundaries of conventional “good taste.”

The third theme is adagio—a man and woman dancing together in a slow tempo. Its gender system is the traditional one “in which girls perform, supported by male partners.” The couple enters together, and, after a brief foray of the ballerina, the danseur puts her through an extraordinary sequence of precarious moves and off-kilter positions that render her totally vulnerable to his control. It is as if the man were experimenting with how far he could push the ballerina off her own balance and still be performing classical ballet. The extreme to which the third theme exemplifies what a ballerina can look like with the support of her partner makes it an archetypal pas de deux.

A recurring motif is the arabesque, created and used in quite unconventional ways. The danseur lays the ballerina in arabesque against his leaned-back body or swings her around on the pivot of her supporting foot. As soon as an arabesque is formed or even before it is fully formed, the man pulls, lifts, or thrusts the ballerina into another phrase. However innovative the arabesques are, they still serve the traditional purpose of focusing on the ballerina’s leg. The emphasis on the manipulated weight of the ballerina—passive weight, counterweight, displaced weight, the compression of balanced weight, no weight—forces a focus onto the women’s support system: her legs. They are constantly drawn in and then extended outward, further intensifying the visual impact of her dynamic line. And as the couple exits, the man carrying the woman, she reverently unfolds her legs forward, as if she’s rolling out a red carpet for her exquisitely arched feet. Displaying the line of her body, artificially elongated by her toe shoes, is the goal of their joint venture.

Because Balanchine created so many more starring roles for women than men, it is usually assumed that the ballerina is therefore the dominant figure.
But it is not enough to observe that the ballerina is of primary interest; it must be asked how the choreography positions her within the interaction. In the theme of *The Four Temperaments*, the ballerina is the center of attention because she is the one being displayed. The “feminine” passivity that marks this display is a low-status activity in American culture; action is valued as “masculine” for its strength and self-assertiveness. In paintings, in films, in beauty pageants, advertisements, women are constructed as to-be-looked-at; the men are the lookers, the voyeurs... the possessors. Men, on the other hand, are constructed as the doers in films, in television commercials, in sports, in politics, in business. That’s why men who model are often seen as being “effeminate.” As John Berger wrote, “men act and women appear.”

The Romantic ballerina—an important forerunner of the Balanchine ballerina—is similarly seen as dominant because of her legendary celebrity. Both Erik Aschengreen and John Chapman have debunked this myth. Only superficially, Aschengreen argues, did the Romantic ballet in France belong to the ballerina; rather, Romantic ballet was the expression of a masculine society’s desires. “Both *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* are named for the leading female characters, but the heroes, James and Albert [Albrecht], bear the problems of the ballets.” They bear the problems, and they make the choices: they act, while the heroines are acted upon. In *La Sylphide*, for example, James loves, and the Sylphide is loved; James rejects, and Effie is rejected.

Chapman writes about the paradox in which the Romantic ballerina was adored at the same time both she and her stage persona occupied a low status within the social order:

The owned woman, the slave girl, and the harem girl occurred with great frequency in ballet and painting, reflecting the female’s position in Parisian society. Perhaps just as erotic as the harem girl was the supernatural spirit... and she was as free for the taking... Yet the taking was not always so easy, at least on the Opera stage, where wills lured men to their doom and sylphs eluded the most eager grasp. The challenge and danger of the seductive femme fatale only heightened the erotic stimulation. Ballet was well suited to support this image of the female. On the stage real women, as slave girls, spirits or adventurers, revealed themselves to the hungry eyes of the viewer. Off stage in the foyer de la danse, the wealthiest and most influential could mingle with the dancers in highly elegant surroundings. From this sophisticated market-place the rich buyers selected their mistresses... Thus the female who was elevated to the position of a goddess was demeaned to the status of a possession, a sexual object.

The ballerina in the third theme of *The Four Temperaments* is a blend of the Romantic ballerina’s enticing elusive and the contemporary American wom-

Arlene Croce writes that “in Balanchine the ballerina is unattainable simply because she is woman, not because she’s a supernatural or enchanted being.” She is specifically a white, heterosexual American Woman: fast, precise, impulsive. These qualities, exemplified in her modern technical prowess, seduce the male gaze, but the titillating danger—the threat—of her self-sufficient virtuosity is tantalized by her submissive role within the interaction. Much as the Romantic ballerina was a “beautiful danger” because of her narrative association with the erotic and the demonic, the third theme ballerina is a dualistic construction whose “danger” lies in the unattainable Otherness of her “daredevil” technique. And if she is feisty, her surrender is all the more delicious.

In the third theme, the ballerina does momentarily assert herself. After the danseur whirls her posed body seven times on the balance of one pointe, she bursts upward and turns triumphantly, in a split second. So when she does surrender, it is all the more oppressive. For instance, after a bit of typical Balanchine play with the presentation of hands and the intertwining of arms, the ballerina’s arms are crossed over her chest, and her partner holds her hands from behind, like reins. Figuratively and literally, the man has the controlling hand. According to Schorer:

The boy is lowering her arms so that she has to go to the floor, and she goes into a fetal position. It’s like he’s wrapped her up, and now by pulling her arms down she has to go into this teeny ball or form. ... [About the next step in which she extricates herself from this bind], Mr. B. always said, “It should look like a struggle.” From here she has to get her leg out, followed by hips, arms, and the last thing is her head: to “get born,” so to speak. She should be a little bit lower and sort of almost awkward, struggling—but in a graceful way.

Struggling is not “feminine,” but Balanchine’s ballerina makes it so because Balanchine has choreographed it to emphasize the extension of her leg as she steps out of her cocoon. This episode, like the entire pas de deux, has violent undertones. They have to do not only with the physical extreme to which Balanchine stretches the classical vocabulary and the ballerina’s body, but also with its sadomasochistic pattern: man manipulates powerless woman.

The erotic undercurrent in the theme surfaces when the ballerina’s arabesques shoot between her partner’s legs. In another sequence, the ballerina ends up in an elegant sitting position, with bent knees properly together and still poised on her toes. Before repeating the phrase, she briefly looks at him, then coyly lowers her gaze and cocks her head as she frames the sinuous curve of her face with an open palm. Like the Romantic image of the female and the image of a geisha girl in Japanese prints, she is revealing her feminine charms in a demure yet provocative way.
The Balanchine ballerina does have control over her body in the sense that she is a technical dynamo, but a distinction must be made between the athleticism and virtuosity of the steps and the worldview that the choreography expresses. Kirstein says: "Balanchine has been responsible for a philosophy that has treated girls as if they were as athletic as their brothers. He has proved that they can be fiery hummingbirds rather than dying swans, with the capacity of channel swimming." But why is a channel swimmer required for the part of the hummingbird, fiery or otherwise?

In the third theme, the manipulated ballerina looks less like a dominant dynamo than a submissive instrument, both literally and figuratively. Her partner is always the one who leads, initiates, maps out the territory, submerges her space into his, and handles her waist, armpits, and thighs. She never touches him in the same way: she does not initiate the moves. Metaphorically, she makes no movement of her own; her position is contingent on the manipulations of her partner.

By arranging and rearranging the ballerina’s body, the man (first the choreographer, then the partner, and voyeuristically the male-conceived spectator) creates the beauty he longs for. Croce says that “like Petipa, his [Balanchine’s] ballets are more likely to be expressed from the man’s point of view, and he has used the unemotional style of American ballerinas as an object, a created effect.” In the third theme, that objectified, impassive style renders the woman a prop in perversely exquisite imagery. She is a bell to be swung to and fro, a figurine to be shown left and right, or an instrument to be strummed. In what Schoror called the “drag step,” the man literally carries the ballerina on his back. Her legs are lifeless, following after her like limp paws.

As “abstract” as the third theme may be, it is rooted in the very concrete, very familiar code of chivalry. The chivalric tradition gives rise to the rhetoric that a woman is “more powerful, more open and . . . more beautiful than she could be” by herself because she has this . . . man,” as Grekovic put it in the DCA seminar. Edward Villella, one of Balanchine’s greatest male dancers, makes implicit reference to the chivalric code when he explains why he does not feel subordinate to his women partners:

My presenting the ballerina gives me great pleasure and I find it a very masculine thing to do. It’s very masculine to hold a door for a woman or to take her elbow to help her across the street. The male dancer does the same kind of thing. We take the woman’s arm and we take her waist, we lift her and present her. It’s a social as well as a balletic tradition.

Rather than glorifying women, chivalry has been linked to openly subordinating attitudes toward women. Masculine deference such as Villella describes is false, Nadler and Morrow point out, “because it is accorded to women only as far as they subordinate themselves to a narrow stereotype, and remain ‘properly’ submissive.” Women are accorded superficial amenities and ritual etiquettes provided that in important matters they “keep their place.” Positioning women as needy and “deserving” of male assistance, chivalry casts her as “feminine” against the privileged patriarchal “masculine.” Preventing women from venturing out on their own in the name of chivalry precludes women from acquiring knowledge and capability and, therefore, power. Power and prestige accrue to the man.

In the third theme, immediately following the couple’s entrance, the woman ventures out on her own by carving out a big chunk of the stage space as she makes a semicircular path toward a back corner. The ballerina reaches toward a place in the distance, only to be pulled back in by her cavalier, who then restricts her to much smaller portions of floor space. According to Schoror: “It really looks like the boy takes her to make her stop.” From then on, she succeeds in keeping her within arm’s reach.

Pointe work often frames the ballerina as needy of her partner’s help. In the third theme, the danseur is the upright, steadying force for the ballerina as he pulls her off-balance or positions her precariously on one pointe. This movement motif starts with their very entrance. Self-assured and impenetrable, the danseur moves sideways toward center stage with his arms broadly extended in a “T,” stepping quickly up on half pointe and then descending squarely on his heels. When the ballerina follows suit, she steps laterally on both pointes in front of him, but then she gently lunges sideways off pointe, with her arms lifting. He is linear and stable; she is curvaceous and inconstant.

The male door-opening ceremony to which Villella compares partnering a ballerina is a notorious reinforcement of gender asymmetry. Laurel Richardson Walum underlines the importance of this social ritual as a means of perpetuating patriarchal order:

The door ceremony, then, reaffirms for both sexes their sense of gender-identity, of being a “masculine” or “feminine” person. It is not accidentally structured. In a very profound way the simple ceremony daily makes a reality of the moral perspectives of their culture: the ideology of patriarchy. These virtues of “masculinity” are precisely those which are the dominant values of the culture: aggression, efficacy, authority, prowess, and independence. And these virtues are assigned to the dominant group, the males. Opening a door for a woman, presumably only a simple, common courtesy, is also a political act, an act which affirms a patriarchal ideology.

Ballet is one of our culture’s most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony.
behavior. Though the ballerina displays her beauty, power is associated with the masculine values of authority, strength, and independence that her partner, the manipulator, demonstrates. And by her compliance, she ratifies her subordination. The cultural model that Daniel passed off at the DCA seminar as harmless, "pure metaphor" in fact perpetuates male dominance, and the hegemonic result is women co-constituting their own oppression. As Daniel pointed out, Balanchine's ballerinas don't do anything they don't want to: they've bought into the system. Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's most perfect "creation," once said, "I'd kill myself for a man, but I ain't going to kill myself for a woman. I think it works well that way also. It's not that a woman couldn't . . . not that a woman couldn't be president, but I think it works better if it's a man with a very powerful woman behind him."18

Balanchine glorified Woman because her Beauty pleased him, pleased the cavaliers, and pleased the spectators' male gaze. The choreographer made no secret that his ballets were created for the male point of view: "The principle of classical ballet is woman," he said in his tiny backstage office during the second act of Jewels. "The woman is queen. Maybe women come to watch men dance, but I'm a man. . . . The woman's function is to fascinate men."19 Balanchine was a man who liked to watch women. He choreographed representations of Woman that conformed to his male idea of what she should be. In the third theme of The Four Temperaments, the ballerina is not represented as a subject; rather, she is Woman as object of male desire. This pas de deux may be an archetypal courtship, but the desire expressed by their relationship belongs only to the man. About her own desire, the compliant ballerina is silent.

All this is not to single out Balanchine; rather, it is to show that, despite the "ballet is woman" rhetoric, the representational form in which Balanchine worked is rooted in an ideology that denies women their own agency. No matter what the specific steps, no matter what the choreographic style, the interaction structure, pointe work, and movement style of classical ballet portrays women as objects of male desire rather than as agents of their own desire (like the woman in "The Unanswered Question" portion of Balanchine's Ivesiana, 1954). The only way a woman can be truly assertive and independent, from that male point of view, is as a venemous femme fatale (like the Siren in Balanchine's The Prodigal Son, 1929).

The question arises: can women ever represent themselves in classical ballet? During the New York City Ballet's Spring 1986 season, Merrill Ashley danced the adagio in Balanchine's Symphony in C (1947) so assuredly and so bravely that she literally and figuratively left her partner behind. Even when a spitfire ballerina such as Ashley does manage to transcend her choreographic frame, she is still seen against the model of the chivalric pas de deux. Her autonomy in the Symphony in C adagio emerged in spite of the choreography rather than because of it—Woman as the to-be-looked-at Other remains the norm. As long as classical ballet prescribes Woman as a lightweight creature on pointe and men as her supporters/lifters, women will never represent themselves on the ballet stage.

Because ballerinas are smaller and lighter than danseurs, some argue that they are biologically determined to be the supported rather than the supporter. The argument's premise is faulty, as Suzanne Gordon graphically described in Off Balance, for the ethereal look is not an anatomical given.20 Many aspiring ballerinas practically starve themselves to achieve the ballerina image, turning into anorexics and bulimics in the process. Besides, Senta Driver and the contact improvisation dancers have demonstrated that actual weight has relatively little to do with the ability to lift someone.21 Lifting and supporting are much more a matter of how a dancer uses her/his weight, of placement, and of timing.22 And, of course, there is no biological reason for the exclusion of men from pointe work.

But if pointe work, support systems, and weight deployment were shared among individuals rather than divided between genders, the form would no longer be classical ballet. Ballet, as it has been molded since the arrival of the professional female dancer and even before, is based on dichotomized gender difference and, hence, dominance.23 Martha Graham's very early works created a radical vision of strength for women, but today's modern dance is just as gender-dichotomized as ballet. A totally new way of dancing and choreographic form—if that is possible to imagine within the framework of patriarchy—is needed in order to encode a gender-multiple dance. In his effort to verbalize this dream of a future without gender asymmetry, Jacques Derrida talks about "the desire . . . to invent incalculable choreographies."24

[What if we were to approach here . . . the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? . . . As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each "individual," whether he be classified as "man" or as "woman" according to the criteria of usage. . . . Then too, I ask you, what kind of a dance would there be, or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably?]25

Until that dance is created—if it ever is—the solution is not to abolish classical ballet; rather, the only change of seeing "incalculable choreographies" hinges on a concomitant change in the audience. We must learn to look critically—past
William Camargo leaped forward to substitute for a male soloist who had missed his entrance at the Paris Opera in the late 1720s, her fame was ensured. She was admired for her speed and her fiery style as well as her ability to master difficult steps. Voltaire complimented her by saying that she was the first woman to dance like a man. Thus, when the ballerina emerged as a great stage persona, she was defined as difference. For to say that Camargo danced "like a man" was to imply that she appropriated the vigorous style and steps of the danseur rather than sticking with her native feminine abilities.

Those abilities had been quite clearly prescribed. The German dancing master Johann Pasch, for example, had written in his 1907 Beschreibung wahrer Tanzkunst that any sort of technical tours de force such as pirouettes or any movements not graceus or doux were improper for women dancers. Even the radical Camargo had internalized a degree of conventional femininity; according to an obituary, she "did not make use of Gargouillade, which she considered inappropriate for women." Unlike Voltaire—who, however left-handedly—appreciated Camargo's bravura, Jean-Georges Noverre disparaged her lively style, which, he implied, was carefully constructed so that spectators had little time to notice her shortcomings in female form.

In ballet, the female form has long been inscribed as a representation of difference: as a spectacle, she is the bearer and object of male desire. The male onstage—the primary term against which the ballerina can only be compared—is inscribed as a form, but rather as an active principle. As celebrated danseur Yousekevitch wrote only nineteen years ago, "the inborn feminine tendency to show herself physically, combined with the natural feminine movements that are the cornerstone of her dance vocabulary, is to me the golden key to feminine dance." And, he continued, "For a man, the technical or athletic side of dance is a rational challenge. Once mastered, it provides him with the opportunity to display strength, skill and endurance, as well as with the vocabulary and means to achieve creativity." Masculinity is not mere shallow display. Masculinity is the strong jumper, the narrative's driving force, the creator rather than the created.

Yousekevitch's rhetoric is emblematic of ballet discourse as a whole: it is inexplicably rooted in the notion of "inborn" or "natural" gender differences. Across the centuries, these differences have been an unabashed hallmark of classical ballet at every level: costuming, body image, movement vocabulary, training, technique, narrative, and especially the pas de deux structure. Like a thicket grown fat around a fencepost, discourse has entwined itself with stage practice in inscribing gender difference as an aesthetic virtue.

Because of dance's ephemeral nature and because of the relatively recent development of film and video, discourse has been privileged more completely in dance than in other art form. And it is as much in discourse as in the stage practice itself that Woman (and Man) has been trapped. Instead of confronting patriarchy in representation, critical and scholarly writing has only rationalized it, often in the guise of "classicism" and "romanticism." Dance classicism is an ideology devoted to tradition and chivalry, to hierarchy of all kinds—gender, performer's rank, the distinction between types of roles, spectator's placement, stage organization, the canon. Romanticism's emphasis on personal expression also relies on the theatricalized dichotomy of feminine and masculine temperaments.

Few critics and scholars have investigated the patriarchal underpinnings of ballet. This is largely due, I think, to dance's inferiority complex as a "feminine art." Any systemic criticism would undermine the constant struggle to establish dance as a legitimate art form. The first step in creating an alternative discourse is to ask questions—new, difficult, and even disturbing questions. Perhaps it is the only way to present any challenge to the ballerina icon, given that we can never posit who she would be outside of the male constructs that have created her. And it is only by asking questions that "difference"—the seemingly natural and innocent phenomenon in which the ballet discourse is rooted—will be exposed as a socially and politically constructed "opposition." For, as Monique Wittig has pointed out, the primacy of difference is that which constitutes dominance:

[Before the conflict (rebellion, struggle) there are no categories of opposition but only difference. And it is not before the struggle breaks out that the violent reality...}
of the oppositions and the political nature of the differences become manifest. For as long as oppositions (differences) appear as given, already there, before all thought, "natural," as long as there is no conflict and no struggle, there is no dialectic, there is no change, no movement.  

Although there have been obvious historical changes in women's lives during three centuries of ballet, Woman's place in representation has never really changed, because its ideology has never really changed. Whether the surface rhetoric is Théophile Gautier's fetishization of the ballerina, or Lincoln Kirstein's separate-but-equal argument, or Clive Barnes's dancing-is-macho stance, the underlying assumption is of female difference/male dominance.  

Writing during the Romantic period, Gautier's first requirements for ballet were grace and beauty. For him, dancing consisted of "nothing more than the art of displaying beautiful shapes in graceful positions and the development from them of lines agreeable to the eye." He clearly differentiated, however, between female and male participation in this beauty, their respective roles being very narrowly defined. It was fine, he wrote, for men to take action parts—pantomime and character roles—but they were unsuited for the pure dance (i.e., pure display) parts, because these effeminized men: "that specious grace, that ambiguous, revolting, and mincing manner which has made the public disgusted with male dancing." Pure dancing beset a shapely young woman, he believed, but it was beneath men, whose presence intruded on the illusion of the Eternal Feminine being played out onstage. To be female was grace incarnate; strength/action was the male's sole domain.  

Critic Jules Janin in 1840 expressed a similar philosophy, making clear the derogatory feminization of Romantic ballet:  

Speak to us of a pretty dancing girl who displays the grace of her features and the elegance of her figure, who reveals so fleetingly all the treasures of her beauty. . . . But a man, a frightful man, as ugly as you and I, a wretched fellow who leaps about without knowing why, a creature specially made to carry a musket and a sword and to wear a uniform. That this fellow should dance as a woman does—impossible! That this bewitched individual who is a pillar of the community, an elector, a municipal councillor, a man whose business it is to make and above all unmake laws, should come before us in a tunic of sky-blue satin, his head covered with a waving plume amorously caressing his cheek, a frightful danseuse of the male sex, come to pirotette in the best place while the pretty ballet girls stand respectfully at a distance—this was surely impossible and intolerable, and we have done well to remove such great artists from our pleasures.  

Gautier and Janin abhorred men dancing because their participation in this spectacle emasculated Man's unquestioned power and authority. That men were effectively banned from engaging in this display during the height of Romanti-

cism does not bespeak a subordination of men, as many critics and scholars interpret it, but rather an attempt to uphold the man's virile image—his dominance—untainted by the "feminine." It is no coincidence that the cult of the ballerina arose at the same time that the Paris Opera, cut loose into private enterprise, was trying (successfully) to turn a profit by appealing to the rising middle class's desire for entertainment.  

Even though women's newfound pointe work monopolized the balletomane's attention, the men onstage retained dominance in the representation by presenting and displaying (and "creating") these object-forms as their own possessions. And by identifying with these figures, the male gaze of the spectator was active in creating and possessing—and "ogling"—these female creatures. Such is the tone of Gautier's criticism: verbal ogling. He wrote as if each ballerina were but one more specimen in his private collection of femininity—minutely and sometimes cruelly making an inventory of what he considered her every asset and defect. For him, the ballerina embodied his desires. Fanny Elssler, he wrote, "in that hand which seems to skim the dazzling barrier of the footlights, . . . gathers up all the desires and all the enthusiasm of the spectators." And as she gathered them up, she dutifully projected them back.  

The rhetoric of gender differentiation continued into the twentieth century, superficially transformed by supposedly more enlightened times. Much of the discourse of this century unblinkingly posits the equality of male and female on the ballet stage. For instance, Balanchine apologist Lincoln Kirstein wrote in 1939:  

In the best dance theater, there is a polarity of male and female on an equal see-saw of elegance and muscularity. The power of the male for leaps in the lateral conquest of space sets off the softness, fragility, speed and multiplicity of the ballerina's action on pointe and in the sustainment of held, breathless equilibrium. Male dancers make girls more feminine and vice versa.  

Male and female—"power" and "fragility"—are "equal" only insofar as they maintain the asymmetrical equilibrium of patriarchy—which does not offer equality at all. Laundering women for their marginal characteristics, Kirstein and many like-minded writers never question these accepted notions of "femininity," let alone the bipolar opposition which, as Simone de Beauvoir explained, ensnares women in an illusion of complementarity. "Here," she wrote, "is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality in which the two components are necessary to one another." De Beauvoir could just as well have been describing the pas de deux, an emblem of classical gender asymmetry.  

The ruse of ballet's equality-in-difference deconstructed itself by 1978, when New York Post critic Clive Barnes explicitly stated the implicit. Under the headline "How Men Have Come to Rule Ballet's Roost," he wrote:
Male dancing is much more exciting than female dancing. It has more vigor, more obvious power, and an entirely more energetic brilliance. Of course there are different qualities—thank Heaven!—to female dancing, yet there is something about the male solo, its combination of sheer athleticism with art, that makes it unforgettable.  

Female dancing, he implied, is valuable only because it is different; the important—"unforgettable"—qualities are already and exclusively embodied in male dancing.  

Male dancing rose to prominence during the 1970s—at the same time, ironically, that the women's rights movement reached its peak. The shift was accompanied by a lot of "dancing is masculine" propaganda in the press (à la Barnes) and in a spate of books. Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and Edward Villella were hyped as strong, virile, and athletic stars. They, however, were the exceptions that proved the rule. The fervor with which apologists invoked the rhetoric of difference in order to assert male dominance in ballet ironically echoed the very rhetoric—that some activities are "masculine" and others are "feminine"—that had contributed to the "emasculiation" of the art form as a whole. And yet another version of this argument was used in the 1970s to "upgrade" the status of men dancers (masculine = big money = sports = motivation = action = dance).  

Symptomatically, a 1969 issue of Dance Perspectives was devoted to the "Male Image." Anthropologist and kinesics founder Ray L. Birdwhistell introduced the issue by discussing the invented nature of human gender display and concluding that "art is conventional and erroneous when it allows the binary logic of the primary sexual characteristics to determine the rhetoric expressing human interaction." Despite Birdwhistell's visionary critique of gender codes, four danseurs—including Youskevitch—then proceeded to characterize the art form along rigidly "natural" gender lines: female/male, display/action, delicate/strong, emotional/rational, nature/culture.  

The civil rights movement demonstrated that "separate but equal" is impossible and even vicious—that "separate" or "different" underlines and perpetuates inequality. Until the struggle—at least in discourse—breaks out in classical ballet, the political nature of male-female difference remains submerged. This is especially true today, when formerly experimental choreographers are one after the other turning to toe shoes and arabesques for their inspiration. In borrowing from the classical vocabulary, choreographers such as Karole Armitage, Laura Dean, Twyla Tharp, and Moishe Frenkel are not being subversive or transformative. They may mix it up differently, laying their own twist or attitude on top of the classical, but it is essentially the traditional ballet and its ideology borrowed whole, particularly the romantic pas de deux. If choreographers such as these are not going to question themselves, at least the critical discourse can do so.  

But contemporary writing, for the most part, has continued to collude in ballet's representation of Woman. When Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane did some gender-bending of George Balanchine's classic Serenade in their 1985 How to Walk an Elephant, New York Times critic Anna Kisselgoff scolded them for daring to tangle with Balanchine's "ballet is woman" iconography:  

When they take one of the most celebrated and beautiful moments in "Serenade"—a woman in arabesque revolving in place because a man on the floor below turns the leg upon which she stands—and give us a gawky arabesque for a tall slim man, they are not being respectful of either the choreographer or one of his greatest ballets.  

It does matter whether the arabesque in this "quotation" belongs to a man or a woman. Mr. Zane and Mr. Jones might wish to make a valid point about changing attitudes toward traditional gender roles, about men and women sharing the same characteristics. But this was never Balanchine's belief and his well-known credo that "ballet is woman" received one of its firmest statements in "Serenade."  

Kisselgoff's indignation underscores the integral role of Woman in ballet ideology and particularly in its inscription of pleasure. To her, the sacred authority of tradition is never to be desecrated by critical analysis. For what we risk in questioning pleasure is the very loss of that pleasure. But the liberating potential of the inquiry, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, is "the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire."  


To Dance Is "Female"  

I learned a disconcerting lesson recently at a symposium called "Reclaiming or Erasing? How Women Artists Handle Sext Images in Performance": there is very little understanding—even amidst the interested, intelligent people who attended this event—of the vigorous and extensive feminist inquiry that has been going on in the arts for the past decade. It finally hit home why practically no choreographers are investigating issues of women and representation,
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THE BALANCHINE WOMAN: OF HUMMINGBIRDS AND CHANNEL SWIMMERS


1. My thanks to Kate Davy and Debra Sewell for helping me formulate my argument and to the Dance Critics Association for the loan of video and audio tapes from its 1985 seminar on The Four Temperaments.
3. E. Ann Kaplan, Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (London, New York: Methuen, 1983), 29. The pivotal concept of the "male gaze" arises from an examination of the structure of representation, in which the position of the spectator (the gaze) is encoded. Kaplan wrote: "The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (30). Thus, women, too, under patriarchic partake in the acculturated male gaze.
8. Arlene Croce, "Free and More Than Equal," in Afterimages (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 127. Though I make use of Croce's observations for a feminist critique of Balanchine's ballerina, Croce concludes that "for Balanchine it is the man who sees and follows and it is the woman who acts and guides" (126).
14. Ibid., 133.
15. Ibid., 114.

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25. Ibid.

CLASSICAL BALLET: A DISCOURSE OF DIFFERENCE

2. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gender difference was encoded in court spectacles, which adapted social dances in polished and studied form: "Men were assigned jumps and the fancy steps, while the steps for women stressed grace, lightness, and restraint" (Anderson, Ballet and Modern Dance, 25). In the earliest years of the Paris Opera (founded in 1669), women's roles were taken by men in travesty; four ballerinas finally took the stage in 1681 in Le Triomphe de l'amour, among them Mlle. de la Fontaine. She was succeeded as prima ballerina by Marie-Thérèse de Sublgny and then Françoise Prévert. Still overshadowed by the virtuoso men, neither one drew as much attention as Camargo.
4. Ibid., 162.
7. Ibid., 23.
8. The ballet dancer's body image is the product of centuries of patriarchal codification about gender difference. In the classic 1828 treatise on dancing, The Code de Terpsichore, Carlo Biasio wrote:

Men must dance in a manner very different from women; the temps de vigeur, and bold majestic execution of the former, would have a disagreeable effect in the latter, who must shine and delight by lissomé [sic] and graceful motions, by neat and pretty terre à terre steps, and by a decent voluptuousness and abandon in all their attitudes. (49–52)
In contemporary Western society the separation of sex and gender becomes significant when we attempt to make political and economic opportunity relevant to qualifications for positions instead of physical markers with which an individual is born.

However, because a gender role for most people is sexual reproduction, a perceived body in dance, especially when performers appear nude, in anatomically revealing dress, or in stereotypical male or female costume, confounds biological thought and behavior (racial and sexual identity), gender, and the historical relationship of dance and sex. Of course, people express gender signs in situations unrelated to sexual activity, but in adolescent and adult interaction the manifestation that refers to everyday stereotypes and violations of them is most dramatic.

Accordingly, Hanna believes that dance representation is irrelevant in the culture-at-large. And apparently homosexuals and lesbians do not figure into the picture, because, unlike “most people,” their gender role does not follow from sexual reproduction. And apparently all dance is sexually arousing to Hanna.


2. For the past several years many of my ideas have been sparked, challenged, and encouraged by participants in a study group in feminist theory and dance: Ann Cooper Albright, Judy Burns, Marianne Goldberg, Ellen Graff, Carol Martin, and Leslie Satin.


UNLIMITED PARTNERSHIP: DANCE AND FEMINIST ANALYSIS

1. For an explanation of these basic feminisms—liberal feminism, cultural (or radical) feminism, and materialist feminism—see Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (Ann Arbor, Mich., and London: UMI Research Press, 1988).

2. I am concerned here with the issues of American feminist theory. French feminist theory has developed in a different way. Its preoccupation with the uniqueness of the female body—what has been dubbed “essentialism” on this side of the Atlantic—provides provocative reading for scholars in dance studies. For a comprehensive treatment of the concerns and development of both American and French feminist literary theory, see Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London and New York: Methuen, 1986).

3. The campaign took place in both print and broadcasting. One newspaper advertisement, on the back page of the New York Times business section on 26 January 1989, pictured a neatly trimmed mother, with son in sneakers and daughter, in full ballet gear, stiffly attempting a port de bras. “She’s [the new Traditionalist mother] not following a trend,” the copy read, in part. “She is the trend, now being recognized as the most powerful social movement since the sixties.”


6. Feminist theorists are now trying to push further and deeper beyond the theory