A GLIMPSE OF THE SPECTRAL WOMAN: ROMANTIC BALLET AND THE GOTHIC

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ABSTRACT

The age of romantic ballet – especially in its focal point, the Paris Opéra between 1831 and 1845 – is known for signalling the rise of the ballerina from entertainer to cultural icon. She was the heroine of fantastic stories in which the surface of reality was cracked, allowing a glimpse of other worlds populated by supernatural female characters; an incarnation of the sublime, idolised by audiences and critics. Yet, there was a brutal contrast between the dazzling perception of the stars and the workaday reality of most ballerinas. Romantic ballets often explored the limited possibilities for women in French society, and sometimes even presented otherworldly alternatives through the use of Gothic elements. This article explores how an image of delicate, spectral femininity was constructed on the Parisian stage and press, and to what extent the characters of romantic ballet – and the women portraying them – could be dancing against that same imagery.

KEYWORDS: Ballet, Romantic Ballet, Romanticism, Gothic, Gender Studies, Ballerinas.

> Now, because of the revolution that has been set in motion, woman is the queen of ballet. She lives in ballet; she dances so naturally there. […] Today, the dancing man is tolerated only as a useful accessory.
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> Jules Janin, *Le Journal des Débats,* 1840 (in Chapman 1997: 232)

The age of romantic ballet – especially in its focal point, the Paris Opéra between 1831 and 1845 – is known for signalling the rise of the ballerina from entertainer to cultural icon. She was the heroine of fantastic stories in which the surface of reality was cracked, allowing a glimpse of other worlds populated by supernatural female characters; an incarnation of the sublime, idolised by audiences and critics. Yet, there was a brutal contrast between the dazzling perception of the stars and the workaday reality of most ballerinas.

The highly conventional choreography and plotlines of romantic ballets offer privileged insight into the construction of gendered imagery and behaviour (Juhasz 2008: 55). They often explored the limited possibilities for women in French society, and sometimes even presented otherworldly alternatives. This article explores how an image of delicate, spectral femininity was constructed on the Parisian stage and press, and to what extent the characters of romantic ballet – and the women portraying them – could be dancing against that same imagery.

CREATORS AND CRITICS AT THE CÉNACLE

A calf-length white tulle tutu; a dimly-lit stage; a fairy-tale heroine on pointe: the imagery of Romantic ballet has become shorthand for ballet itself. While its visual aspects are certainly memorable, its fantastic plots have also endured, and narrative ballets of the tragic and supernatural like *La Sylphide* or *Giselle* are still popular.

Narrative ballet or *ballet d'action*, developed in the eighteenth century, brought about the use of pantomime to portray "human conflicts, sentiments and souls" that the audience could engage with (Weickmann 2011: 55) and an increasingly complex technique. Dancing became a profession that required training; institutions such as the Paris Opéra employed their own *corps* from the poorer neighbourhoods, often from families that were already part of the performing world: it was not a well-rewarded job (2011: 62). From a display of courtly power, ballet became an entertainment – and a morally dubious one at that, since the social and economic status of dancers plummeted as the audience expanded to include the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie. In the Romantic period, action came second to the representation of feelings and psychological states (Bruner 1999: 160): the emotionally-charged narratives of romantic ballet often took the shape of the *conte fantastique* – more specifically, the *ballet fantastique*.

Scholars have found it surprisingly difficult to agree on a definition of Romanticism and the Gothic. Marxist critics have described Romanticism as a "contextually specific worldview, or collective mental structure" which shaped "a cultural protest against modern industrial/capitalist civilization" (Sayre and Löwy 2005: 433-434). This oppositional definition implies a rejection of the previous period; the Enlightenment and Romanticism have been perceived as sides of a dichotomy. However, aspects of Sensibility – passion, sympathy, imagination, independence from authority – and their reflection in art – moving imagery, visible emotions, fragmentation – underlie both periods (Brodey 2005). Many concerns of Romanticism, such as nature in dialogue with the artist, locations transformed by changing light mirroring human relationships or night-time as a site of visions and inward journeys (Furst 2005: 505) certainly crossed over to the stage.

There was also a lively interest in folklore: Sayre and Löwy find in this appreciation some degree of nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past that could lead to resignation, escapism or re-enchantment (2005: 436), or at least a sense of exile from the present. This celebration was linked to growing nationalism, as "the collective consciousness of a nation" was believed to reside "in its religion, language and folk traditions" (Arkin and Smith 1997: 11). National dancing was indeed common in romantic ballets, including in those with fantastic plots. Interestingly enough, "national dancing" more often than not referred to "other" nations (the European periphery and later the Middle East) and not to France (Garafola 1997: 3). The portrayals were simplified and stereotypical, as they

extended the perceived "essence" of a nation to the dancing character. Folk art was lovingly researched and imitated across different media: there was a trend for ballads, fairy tales and *Kunstmärchen*, or crafted tales. "Fairy tale motifs and structures migrate increasingly into other genres" after the 1820s (Lokke 2005: 150), and ballet was no exception.

The Gothic is as slippery a term as Romanticism: it constructs an inverted or mirror image of the present in which traits are distorted and exaggerated, showing "the darker side of awareness" (Howells 1978: 5). It establishes continuity with ideal values of the past, yet it breaks away from them, destabilising any potential narrative of history through its own artifices and distorting practices (Punter 2015: 3). In Gothic stories, individuals are often trapped by secrets, burial, or isolation: they thrive on fragmented and layered texts. The genre is as much about the form as it is about the content, building a "tension between natural and supernatural explanations" (Briggs 2015: 179-80). Coral Ann Howells writes that "having opened up new areas of awareness which complicate life enormously, [Gothic texts] then retreat from their insights back into conventionality" (1978: 6). Due to the genre's ambiguity and artificiality, using it for sociohistorical analysis is complicated: even if a text turns away from its subversive potential, it has already been glimpsed or even laid bare in the open. It may be the theme of a story, and not necessarily its resolution, that is remembered by the public.[1]

While Victor Hugo's preface to *Cromwell* (1827) can be considered both a theoretical basis and a pamphlet for French Romanticism,[2] it was the premiere of his play *Hernani* in February 1830 that brought the current to the centre of the Parisian cultural scene. The event saw Hugo's followers physically fight the defenders of classical conventions in the audience (although few paid attention to the actual text of the play), and it was gleefully reported in the press, confirming Hugo's stardom. While the so-called "Battle of *Hernani*" has often been referred to as the turning point towards Romanticism, academics have described it as simply part of a greater artistic shift. Theatrical conventions were already being broken at the turn of the century, and other playwrights like Musset or Dumas were also writing about the clash between an individual's idealism and the world (Cooper 2005). All in all, "the mock-heroic battle was ultimately not about the triumph of Romanticism over classicism, a foregone conclusion by 1830, but about the emergence of radical artists as a recognizable, collective presence in the public life of Paris" (Gluck 2005: 27). The Gothic

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[1] For a Gothic reading of *Giselle* and its costumes see Baró (2016).

[2] The term "romantique" was used in French for the first time in the preface to a translation of Shakespeare's works by Pierre Le Tourneur in 1776, but did not take hold until later. Distinctively French Romanticism had to wait until the circle around the journal *La Muse Française* had been established in the 1820s, and it included writers such as Alphonse de Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny and Victor Hugo (McKusick 2005).

creeped in with Romanticism: while the first French Gothic novel is considered to be Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoreux* (1772), the genre was mainly developed by Romantics such as Charles Nodier, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Jules Janin, or Théophile Gautier. In 1830 most of these writers were quite young; they represented a cutting-edge artistic current, and they deliberately set themselves apart from mainstream culture. They met in *cénacles*, artistic societies led by the bigger figures like Nodier or Hugo which took the place of the pre-Revolutionary salons.

Joellen Meglin writes that these "young avant-garde writers and fine artists took Romanticism to its countercultural extreme, practicing the frenetic genre, subscribing to Art as a cult, and challenging dominant notions about realism, positivism, material progress, and social utility" (2005: 79). Most of these authors participated in the development of the *conte fantastique*, which was related to other Gothic subgenres: these tales let darkness intrude into daily life, revealing a deeper reality of extreme subjectivity, dreams and doppelgänger (2005: 85). These themes were not relegated to the literary world, but were in fact topics of debate in salons: spirits, spells, alchemy, magnetism and the occult were discussed across society and through different media. Gothic and fantastic elements were found in melodrama, the gestures of which were used in ballet (Arkin and Smith 1997: 22). Romantic writers such as Janin and Gautier had an especially close relationship with the world of ballet, since they wrote librettos and criticism: the Gothic and the fantastic, through the lens of Romanticism, thrived on the ballet stage.

The fantastic elements in their stories and in *Kunstmärchen* were more often than not coded feminine, following Heinrich Heine's association of the folkloric world "with a female realm excluded from and perceived as threatening by official Christian dogma" (Lokke 2005: 151). The feminisation of the supernatural is also obvious in *La Sylphide* (1832); *La Fille du Danube* (1836); *Giselle* (1841), inspired by a poem by Heine; and *La Péri* (1843). The presence of women dancers increased, resulting in the frequent appearance of communities of (spectral) women – sylphs, witches, wilis, nuns – and of *danseuses en travesti*,[3] who increasingly substituted male dancers. Even in non-fantastic stories such as *La Révolte des Femmes* (1833):

> the ballet catered to the Romantic taste for androgynous depictions of women. As voluptuous courtesans were transformed into ascetic warriors, costumes and choreography hinted at hermaphroditic and polymorphous pleasures. Woman's sexuality

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[3] Female dancers as male characters became more common throughout the Romantic period. While the practice is similar to that of so-called "breeches roles" in opera, in which women use their higher vocal register to play young men, it does not have a technical explanation, and may be purely aesthetic.

> rather than her liberation was the subject here […]. Seductiveness and menace were intertwined. (Meglin 1997: 76)

The emotions portrayed by lead ballerinas tended to be negative: "themes of seduction, self-destruction and guilt will recur in a variety of ways" (Meglin 2004a: 111), as their characters "were ennobled yet haunted by tragedy" (243). The fantastic, then, was placed at the crossroads of escapism, melancholy, and politics. The Paris Opéra had "a surfeit of female dancers, many of whom were demimondaine" (Bruner 1999: 160): the more women on stage and the more sexualised their stories, the lower the genre's status.

It would be impossible to consider the impact of ballet in Parisian society without considering its place in critical writing and journalism, as the writing *about* ballet by Janin and Gautier occasionally overshadowed ballet itself. Lucia Ruprecht describes Romantic ballet as "an aesthetic movement both embodied and discursive" (2011: 175). Romantic ballet must be approached through its observers, since the performers did not leave that great a trace – indeed written testimonies and accompanying pictures are most of the documental evidence that remains.

Louis Véron was appointed director of the Paris Opéra, now a private enterprise, in 1831. He started an ambitious process of renovation, redesigning the machinery and effects and insisting on authentic-looking production designs (Marrinan 2009: 256) that answered to contemporary aesthetics. Véron saw the importance of critics, who were "allowed to enter the inner circle at the Rue Lepeletir in exchange for their services as passionate promoters of the silent art", although "few had any real understanding or even appreciation of the choreography and the dancing" (Ruprecht 2011: 176). What they did appreciate, however, were the ballerinas. It was Véron himself who started "the management policy that openly abetted liaisons between the ballerinas and season subscribers by giving the latter access to the Foyer de la Danse", only to then use "his privileged role as an inside observer to regale the public with the immodest ways of the ballerinas", whom he called "poor girls on whom fortune has not yet smiled" (Meglin 1997: 82-83). He ended his run in 1835, having played an important role in the creation of the myth of the Romantic ballerina.

All sections of society attended the ballet: as scores and steps crossed over from ballrooms to the stage and the other way around (Smith 2011: 143), audiences became familiar with the styles, tropes and archetypes of ballet. The status of ballet in hegemonic discourses of the time is certainly complex. As we have seen, writers like Gautier belonged to countercultural groups and were well-aware of their role as harbingers of modernity. The period saw the rise of the inexpensive newspaper with *La Presse*, which began its run in 1836 and erased the division between art and daily life through reviews (Marrinan 2009: 241). Commercial art and literature, which had been on the rise since the beginning of

the decade, were opposed by elitist notions of the role of authors.[4] Gautier and his peers sided with the popular classes and presented themselves as cut off from bourgeois values through an adhesion to popular forms like melodrama.[5] As Gluck points out, "the source of [the Romantic bohemians'] authority and legitimacy came, indeed, not from the difference and autonomy from this matrix of modernity, but from their embeddedness within it" (2005: 64). Their presentation as a separate, misunderstood community of intellectuals was, after all, a performance; if there had been anything subversive in their works, it was only in the artistic sense. It must be pointed out that Romantic ballet criticism did not fully coincide with these authors' youthful experimentation. Instead, it mostly came some years later, when the young men who had met in cenacles were older and economically more stable through their writing for newspapers.

Of Gautier's style it has been stated that he "waxed poetic in the use of language"; his librettos included "actual lines of dialogue as well as cues for pantomime and acting virtuosity" (Meglin 2004a: 69). In his criticism, he appreciated "the much-praised abstract quality of romantic ballet, epitomised in the *ballet blanc*: lightness, evasiveness, transparency and purity, titillatingly embodied by sensual dancers" (as cited in Ruprecht 2011: 180). The language he used for fiction, librettos, and criticism, then, was not very different.[6] The presumption of a male, heterosexual gaze was strong enough to deem male dancers irrelevant. His writing focused on the eroticism of the dance, even stating that:

> It must not be forgotten that the first condition that one should demand from a female
> dancer is that of beauty; she has no excuse for not being beautiful and she can be

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[4] These cultural battles were re-contextualised "from the realm of polemical journalism to that of the popular theatre […] [which] demystified the controversy and transformed it into a mock epic" (Gluck 2005: 42); the controversy was public enough to be fictionalised and lampooned in artistic productions of the time.

[5] The notion of urban, popular culture is certainly complicated. Romantic writers can be said to actively participate in it, since they contested hegemonic values and developed popular forms like the melodrama or the folk-inspired tale. On the other hand, they were in culturally dominant positions. Stuart Hall describes popular culture as "those forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes; which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices", and places it in continuous, tense dialogue with dominant culture (1998: 449). Following that line of thought, Romantic writers could be seen as appropriating popular culture from their dominant position, while at the same time reshaping it.

[6] In fact, that rhetoric could even be applied to his personal life: he fell in love with Carlotta Grisi, the first Giselle, "the living embodiment of his imagined ideal, just as the protagonists did in his stories" (Meglin 2005: 84). Eventually he married her sister, Ernestina. While his passion for Carlotta could be considered anecdotic, it reflects the critics' tendency to speak of their objects in adoring, even possessive terms.

reproached for her plainness, just as an actress can be reproached for her bad pronunciation. (As cited in Clark 1998: 23)

Let us turn, then, to Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and its concept of the "male gaze". While it originally applied to a different medium, it can be useful to frame our approach to Romantic criticism; like cinema, ballet could be said to play on "the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (1975: 6). The woman on stage is indeed "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (1975: 7). Ballets were most often written, choreographed, produced, critiqued and interpreted by men. Mulvey considers the different ways in which visual pleasure is obtained. The gaze, she writes, is "controlling and curious" (1975: 8); male critics wrote about ballerinas in possessive terms and shared their private lives with the wider public. Interestingly, Mulvey describes the fragmentation of the female body by the camera; ballet critics often described the ballerinas' bodies in such terms: "A pretty face, a charming neck, flawless white hands, a very fine leg, a bosom that thrills, an eye that shines, a warm pink mouth, and a white dress that floats in the breeze" (Janin 1833 as cited in Chapman 1997: 218). The critics presented the ballerinas – individually and as a collective – to the rest of society through their writings, since they had the privilege of "insider" knowledge and thus were responsible in great part for their rising to stardom. Their preferences affected the production of new ballets as narrative variety narrowed to heterosexual romances, since the presumption of "a male viewer with heterosexual desire" resulted in "fewer opportunities for same-sex attraction and identification […] the characters and plot represent not just the interplay between external political or social forces, but also conflicting internal aspects of ourselves" (Bruner 1999: 161-162). Therefore, the scope of this "ourselves" was increasingly reduced.

Nevertheless, Mulvey's essay does not match ballet criticism that straightforwardly. The world presented in cinema, she writes, is "hermetically sealed" and "unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (1975: 9). In a ballet performance, however, viewers and performers shared a physical space; while the proscenium arch separated the audience from the unfolding narrative, for a price some of them could access the backstage and meet the performers. Chapman writes that "Janin and his fellow critics relished the feeling that the character portrayed on stage was someone they could love, esteem, and adore" (1997: 203); they blurred the line between character and performer, and thus complicated issues of identification. One of the most notable responses to Mulvey's essay is Teresa de Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender*. As

Paszkiewicz summarises, de Lauretis problematizes Mulvey's unifying vision of Woman, both on screen and as a spectator:

> Teresa de Lauretis (1987) se esfuerza en desligar el concepto de diferencia de esta lógica dualista, teorizando a la mujer como un sujeto múltiple y discontinuo, constituido a través de los lenguajes y las representaciones culturales. […] Esta conceptualización del género, como un conjunto cultural de efectos impuestos sobre el cuerpo, deriva de su teoría del sujeto, que da cuenta de una serie de diferencias, hasta entonces desatendidas por el enfoque basado únicamente en la diferencia sexual. (2014: 36)

Ballet critics were not simply objectifying women, but also exerting their dominance in terms of social class, race and nation, for instance when an "exotic" group was performed on stage in an essentialist, stereotypical manner.

SET IN MOTION

Their characters might die, but some lead ballerinas were almost regarded as deities. Their reach expanded across the city through developments such as posters, press releases, memorabilia and special illustrated volumes. Those books would include portraits of dancers or actresses and showcase their fashion, both in and out of character; their influence in style was also reflected in dress-up dolls and other merchandise. All aspects of their image were discussed in the press, which included gossip columns (Davies Cordova 2011: 116). The dancers themselves began to be seen as commodities, and their image had market value.

It must be underscored that reviews and press columns shaped the cultural discourse around ballet as much – or even more – as the ballerinas themselves did; even when critics glossed over the women in the audience, they still attempted to talk for them. It was said that "women of all epochs have loved the *vaporous*, the *fantastic*, the *ideal*, the *extraordinary* and everything that is of the essence of a coded world that is found only in novels" (as cited in Meglin 2005: 136), but it seems unlikely that any women were asked about it. In a similar line, Gautier set Marie Taglioni and Fanny Elsser as opposites; one was a "dancer for Women", while the other appealed to men (Alderson 1987: 297). In fact, the former carried the burden of an idealised beauty and purity, and thus "she is also a dancer for men – men whose attraction to this attenuation of the flesh both sentimentalizes sexual possession and spares them full acknowledgement of a sexuality they cannot control" (1987: 297). Regardless of what Gautier said, the implication was that all ballerinas were for male consumption.

As ballet considered and reproduced expectations about femininity it became a feminised discipline with the status of a pleasant, "light" art; "an art of specularization, of fixing, of the feminine within the field of the social gaze, and this fixing serves to uphold and mask the unconscious work, both physical and emotional, that femininity is increasingly called upon to perform" (Summers-

Bremner 2000: 99). Nonetheless, if a wide range of Parisian society attended, it follows that the gaze of the audience was not monolithic but diverse in its identifications and desires. Even without full identification with the narratives, female participants cannot be ignored:

> One must also reckon with, in the ballet, the active agency of women performers like Marie Taglioni and Fanny Elssler, as well as the presence of women at the ballet as balletgoers. Indeed, the splintering of perspectives inherent in the fantastic genre was well suited to ballet performance, with its multiple collaborators, ritual-like reenactment, and simultaneous different angles of viewing. (Meglin 2004b: 369)

Romantic ballets, with its stories about arranged marriages, women struggling for power and connection, idealised and marginalised, did represent social concerns as perceived and written by men in culturally dominant positions. The roles and possibilities for women on stage were certainly limited, but the rupturing use of fantasy and the active participation of professional women may have undermined those boundaries and offered alternatives.

In July 1845, at the close of the Romantic period, Marie Taglioni, Fanny Cerrito, Carlotta Grisi and Lucile Grahn danced the *Pas de Quatre* in London. Cesare Pugni composed the score, while Jules Perrot, choreographer of *Giselle* among other Romantic classics, was in charge of the dancing. The piece did not have a plot beyond the showcasing of the dancers, but they articulated the story of romantic ballet all the same. It has been said of the piece that it "represents a pinnacle in the cultivation of the female star" (Ruprecht 2011: 182). All four dancers had portrayed supernatural women while being discussed as earthly beings, and thus were said to embody the "nineteenth-century poetic muse" (Davies Cordova 2011: 119). Interpreting them as only muses, though, undermines their own creative role. Marrinan, for instance, reads Taglioni as one of the virtuosi that Romanticism catapulted into celebrity status, as audiences of the time demanded (2009: 259). As it was understood, artistry was necessarily contextualised and materialised – embodied and performed. Successful ballerinas participated in and actively shaped contemporary discourses about artistry: theirs was possibly the only art in which women took this role as the rule, rather than as the exception.

Offstage, that work was hardly rewarding. Ballerinas often lived in financial hardship, which endangered their ownership of their own bodies – the policies of the Foyer de la Danse have already been discussed. Their costumes already brought them moral condemnation, and they often resorted to sex work. That association even crossed over to the ballets themselves; according to Meglin, the lead character's performance of a cachucha in *Le Diable Boiteux* (Jean Corelli, 1836) has "innuendos of prostitution" (2004b: 324). The character – played at first by Fanny Elssler, the so-called "dancer for men" – dances it in public, and thus she is punished for it; she cannot survive as a subject of pleasure (2004b: 340). Excess

is another concern when discussing the bodies of ballerinas: their movements can be read as excessive; too disciplined, too artificial, too much. Fisher relates this extravagance to nineteenth century histrionic actresses and acrobats, "figures who physically challenged normative female movement style" (2003/2004: 154). The very act of dancing ballet, then, could be read as unnatural or alarming to an extent.

How are we, then, to find feminist potential in the Romantic ballet? Critics and scholars, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, have been particularly wary of ballet, which they perceived as misogynistic and conservative. Evan Alderson wrote that ballet reinforced "regressive cultural stereotypes" by propagating them "as a form of the beautiful" (1987: 291-292). The analysis of art must not only focus on its social message, because that misses its aesthetic power; however, the opposite is also a mistake. Alderson argued that understanding ballet as simply something beautiful but all in all dispensable – as happened during Romanticism and as it is still to an extent perceived nowadays – disguises its tendentious positions. Ballet, he wrote, is "a structuring of social experience which sublimates group interests into a set of justifying ideals" (1987: 291-292); in other words, it was entrenched in the defence of hegemonic groups. It would be a stretch to say that Alderson considered the audience "cultural dopes", to borrow Stuart Hall's (1998) phrase, since he was reasonably concerned with a particular style of critical approach and he was arguing for political, resistant readings of ballet. However, I would argue that this reading does homogenise writers, performers, and spectators; it does not consider the varied pleasures they could have found in that aesthetic experience nor the political implications they might have derived from them. Similarly, other critics pointed out ballet's reliance on controlled, ordered – in other words, disciplined – bodies in a regime that is particularly harmful to women, since it places them under further pressure to achieve a physical ideal (Summers-Bremner 2000: 100). There was a tendency to describe ballet in terms of its victimization of women and the working classes; the costumes and the movement style that depicts these ideal women as barely-there have also been strongly criticized, the pointe shoe most of all. In the twenty-first century, however, feminist readings seem to have shifted to the dancing women themselves. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou for instance find in the control and discipline of ballet a "means of enabling the body to express affective states and thereby experience pleasures – perhaps of a kind that the 'undisciplined' body cannot" (2012: 117). It seems necessary to point out that the dancers they interviewed focused on "challenge and achievement", contradicting the "stereotypical qualities of femininity and passivity" of the characters and texts which were, after all, mainly written by men (2012: 119). Pleasure, as the two scholars explain it, is directly related to the senses and thus to the body – and the dancers' bodies is where most current critical approaches place their focus.

While it is not my objective to delve into the field of psychoanalysis, Summers-Bremner's article on pleasure, dance and femininity from an Irigarayan framework is worth summarising, since it opens up new concepts and readings. As Irigaray wrote: "A woman is more at a loss when she is immobile than when she is moving, for she is fixed in one position, exposed in her own territory" (1989: 136). Nonetheless, that moving body has been effaced firstly by its being denied agency through disciplinary training and choreographic regimes and secondly by being read as "the site of the masculine transcendent or universal" (Summers-Bremner 2000: 92). If women have been associated with passivity and inertness, in moving they can realise their imaginative and thus political potential. This moving state falls between the masculine, transcendent self and the feminine sensible; Irigaray calls it "the sensible transcendental", which is "an idea without a specific sexed referent, but one which enables a reworking of the categories" (Summers-Bremner 2000: 94). The potential of dance for reflection and innovation on gender and identity is thus stated. The focus on pleasure and personal assertiveness is what is of most interest to this article, and the scholar underscores that, continuing: "if the dancer were no *more* than object or instrument there could be, after all, no drive nor desire to dance, no discipline nor artistry, in short, no meaning to dancing at all" (2000: 95-96).

Ballerinas might not choose the stories or characters they perform, but they have a choice in the way they do so. Their performing choices give meaning to the ballet; it is in their moving bodies that room for interpretation is opened. From this reading, then, we can take the importance of the performance itself and its inevitable failure to live up to an ideal; both elements lead us to Judith Butler. Nordera proposes a "dialectical game […] between the autonomy of the dancing body and the text, in which the body, itself in process of becoming text, assumes its own political significance" (2011: 227). In other words, moving bodies can be read in tension with the story they supposedly tell, and therefore they have political significance. After all, ballerinas' bodies tell stories both by performing a character theatrically and through their performance of their own identity; they perform the ballets' narratives and their own, as the perceived close link between themselves and their characters points out. Butler's conceptualisation of performativity and performance is useful to continue this argument. On the one hand, gender is performative. It is a mimetic effect; individuals – subjects who do not precede their gendering – act in imitation of an ideal and in their repetition, they create the "effect of gender uniformity" (1993: 21). Femininity and masculinity are thus constructed as they are performed. On the other hand, a (theatrical) performance implies agency from the performer, who can hyperbolise or satirise gender expectations. This way, it can point to spaces for subversion by showing the gaps and failures in gender norms.

Despite their hardships, ballerinas could still be models for women in the audience, since a professional career – even without stardom – could result in at least some financial stability and independence and even upward social mobility

(Hanna 1987: 25). Of the four dancers of the *Pas de Quatre*, Fanny Cerrito was especially successful as a choreographer (*Rosida*, 1845; *Gemma*, 1854); Lucile Grahn became a prestigious ballet mistress; Marie Taglioni choreographed *Le Papillon* (1860) and became a sought-after teacher. Both Grisi and Taglioni made aristocratic matches. It would take more than a century for ballet to be a viable profession for "respectable" women, though; meanwhile, financially independent women were somewhat improper. The ballets' narratives might make an effort to contain that problem through conservative endings, but some Parisian women articulated their concern over their work and economic situation in their political stances:

> These utopian socialist women viewed association between women as the key to economic independence. […] Thus, the cure for sexual degradation was a social restructuring that would provide a stronger economic base for women. Their vision of women finding strength in union, work, and property ownership was a far cry from a return to the protection of the patriarchal family. (Meglin 1997: 85)

Glossing over the ballerinas' assertiveness in their choice of career, one that required strenuous training and brought little social recognition, also perpetuates the stereotype of helpless victim and eternal girlhood. Textual evidence indeed presented ballerinas as objects and their choices were certainly limited due to their gender and economic precariousness; but their very existence allowed women "to envisage dancing as a career choice, and to perform in a repertoire of narrative ballets that address questions about sexual and gender identity, and socio-political configurations" (Davies Cordova 2011: 125).

There is much research to be done about the participation of women backstage, and it is difficult to know to what extent each performer adapted the choreography to their taste: Did they tweak their mime to give psychological depth to the characters? Did their preferences influence their movements, or did they adhere completely to the official choreography? At this point, we only have contemporary reviews by male writers and what was published in mainstream press, and we are thus blindsided. It seems reasonable to think, though, that ballerinas could have danced their fragile, tragic roles with an ironic edge, perhaps hyperbolising their otherworldliness onto parody, or that they could have used their virtuoso technique to underscore their actual strength and flesh-and-bone reality. Consequently, the tension between theatricality and "real" gender performance becomes central; the fictional worlds portrayed onstage were not so far removed from the audience's reality, and thus they cannot be read as simply an escape route. Romantic writers chose to side with popular forms of urban culture as a radical political statement, bringing the Gothic stepped onstage. If the Gothic is a mirror that distorts reality and can be used to show the cracks and disturbances in individuals and groups, it is a fruitful – albeit ambiguous – genre for social criticism. Gothic scholars draw from Foucault's

concept of "heterotopia", that is, a counter-site in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984: 3). Heterotopias, he argues, are both isolated and penetrable – he refers to the mirror, but I would argue that the space constructed on stage with the *ballet blanc* can be called a heterotopia as well. Foucault writes about two types of such spaces: one is for beings in crisis or liminal states – like the sylphs, witches, brides and wilis – and the other is for "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (1984: 5) – which also applies to those characters. Considering the tragic endings of these ballets, it seems likely that they fill one of the possible functions of heterotopias, "to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (1984: 8).

The material aspects of Romantic ballet – costume, movement – and its textual criticism shaped the construction of a particular fixed icon of femininity: a fragile and girlish one, as idealised as condemned. With their close engagement with the construction and performance of gender roles offstage and onstage, ballerinas were expected to embody the Woman – with all the problems and limitations that entails. Ballet was closely linked with popular culture, establishing a feedback of narratives and aesthetics. This exchange was helped by the fact that writers of ballet also participated in other arts, constructing, upholding and surveying the Romantic ballerina as an icon and as object of the male gaze. The lasting image of the ballerina resulted from the popularity of the *ballet blanc*, codified by *La Sylphide* in 1832. The elements it introduced – the pointe shoe, the tutu, the consequent technique and resulting social reading of the ballerinas bodies both on and offstage – were the tools for the fixation of the type of femininity which was extended to ballerinas in their daily lives. *Giselle*, a decade later, confirmed that image. The Gothic elements in its plot – a concern with heightened emotion, liminal beings, "other", threatening femininity – and especially its presentation of feminine communities outside norms constructed a heterotopia in which the audience saw reflected and distorted their social reality, especially in what regards gender roles and limitations. Nonetheless, that glimpse of possibility was contained by a restorative ending, in which Giselle sacrificed herself and her new community for the sake of her love. Although fantastic ballets like *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* mirrored contemporary concerns about marriage and women's role in society, the whimsy and fantasy of the costumes and movements meant that ballet's poetic images, as Chapman writes, "could be turned by the viewer into whatever" (1997: 200). The potential for subversion in regards to gender, then, is found as much in the performers as in the viewers.

Offstage, ballerinas were condemned by their use and exposure of their bodies in their work. In twenty-first century readings, on the other hand, it is in their embodiment that feminist potential is found, especially in their choices in

performing and in the interpretative ambiguity they can allow. Joellen Meglin, whom I have cited throughout this article, writes about her own research:

> Sometimes I see the humanism – woman as symbol of ultimate beauty, compassion, pleasure, reverie, art itself; sometimes I see the inhumanity – woman as symbol of fiend, vampire, bloodsucker, victim, persecution, war's ravages. As if mired in a *conte fantastique* of my own devising, the meanings do not resolve. (2005: 140)

Davies Cordova, in turn, finds that if not all spectral women died, "the female characters danced through a kind of cultural manipulation. They showed the fragility of their power in such a society, and exposed the male character's retrograde traditions" (2011: 123) – the limited choices for women in July Monarchy Parisian society might be out in the open, but they were not actually challenged. I would conclude at a similar standing point by saying that in the stage of the Paris Opéra, from 1831 to 1845, the audience did find represented the limitations placed on women through fantastic plots and innovative costumes. The writers, producers and critics sided with romantic love before bourgeois interests, but they were not particularly engaged with offering alternatives for women beyond that. However, with all its gendered violence, I would still underscore the importance of the Gothic, first in the representation of these social constraints on women, and secondly in the suggestion of "something more". The supernatural characters popularised by Romantic fairy tales and the Gothic also shaped the idealised femininity represented by the ballerinas; this was constraining, but it brought them stardom and a place in the cultural discourse of their period they may not have had otherwise.

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