

UNCANNY ATTRACTIONS: TRANSGRESSIVE DESIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CLASSICAL BALLET

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Classical ballet is an artform built on the representation of the “fantastic” in feminine form: woman as sylph, swan, doll—anything, in short, but a flesh-and-blood human. Women are represented in these “fantastic” ways in most of the nineteenth-century ballets which are still performed: ballets like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*, which have proven so popular and so enduring that they are now the accepted “face” of Western classical dance. My research is concerned with the flocks, hordes and beves of identically costumed and identically proportioned women dancers who, since early in the nineteenth century, have crowded the stages of theatres and opera houses and who continue to attract large audiences year after year.¹ I must state from the outset that the critical focus of my work is very much a contemporary one: I am interested in the nineteenth-century ballets which are *still* performed; in attempting to theorise *why* they are still performed; in the unconscious desires that might be expressed or satisfied through this continuous performance of “sylphness” both on stage and off; in questioning just why it is that flocks of young girls continue to be enrolled in dance classes which are sustained by this industry of “uncanny” femininity.

The present paper offers feminist-psychoanalytic readings of some of the “uncanny attractions” which lie at the heart of nineteenth-century balletic plots: of those “romantic” courtships and couplings between men and sylphs, men and ghosts, men and swans, dolls, and dead—or almost dead—women.² My argument will not only encompass the rather obvious line that these roles confined and continue to confine women’s bodies and the range of culturally acceptable femininity, but also that it is possible to read these performances as in some sense culturally disruptive—that buried within the translucent folds of the balletic plot there are signs of transgressive desire and perhaps of alternative performances. For reasons of space I have chosen to concentrate on two of the best known nineteenth-century ballets: *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*. These narratives contain excellent examples of the kinds of balletic heroines on which this paper concentrates: pale, diaphanous, fleshless creatures whose performances make, paradoxically, immense physical demands upon the real women who undertake them.

This paper argues that at the centre of the narrative of *Swan Lake* there lies not only the rather ordinary, fetishistic desires of Prince Siegfried, but also the abject maternal waters of the swan’s lake itself. Similarly, the reading of *Giselle* offered here is concerned with the nature of the heroine’s “madness,” with *Giselle*’s role as the (dead) bride of patriarchy, and with the links between menstruation and vampirism. I read

¹ Some of the material included in this paper is drawn from my doctoral thesis, particularly chapters four and five.

² The nineteenth-century ballets to which I refer are, in order: *La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Copélia* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Giselle as a female rite-of-passage narrative in which an excessive femininity is performed; a parodic performance which subtly challenges the boundaries of the social order. By peering through the murky waters of the swan's lake, and between the layers of ghostly fabric which obscure the audience's view of the woman dancer, one might also begin to read these "classic," "white" nineteenth-century works from a new perspective.

It is worth noting before proceeding that for each of these still-performed ballets there were others of a similar "diaphanous" nature which have been lost—unrecorded and eventually undanced—for which we now only have pictorial representation. And there were, of course, other kinds of ballets being performed on nineteenth-century stages such as politicised works which showed women in quite different, much more assertive and active roles: *La Révolte*, for example, featured a slave-girl heroine who "led an armed revolt against the Sultan," while another, *Brézilia*, depicted a female society which had "sworn to hate the male sex" (Aschengreen 17). Even though these were very popular in their day, they have also been lost. When many of their more sturdy and more practically attired nineteenth-century sisters were unable to last the distance, the reason why *Giselle*'s hordes of flimsy ghosts or *Swan Lake*'s swans have proven resilient enough to survive the passage into the twentieth century remains an intriguing question.

Swan Lake, *Giselle* and *La Sylphide* are all known as "white" ballets, named for the costumes worn by their central female characters. These transparent costumes, the way in which they move, the way in which they both reveal and conceal the woman dancer's body, are fundamental to both the success of the plot and the successful allure of classical ballet as an artform. The fashion for white diaphanous gowns first emerged in 1831 in what is considered to have been the first "Romantic" ballet, the so-called "Dance of the Dead Nuns," which was actually one scene from Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable*. The following year Marie Taglioni appeared in the premiere of *La Sylphide* in the bell-shaped costume which was to become the standard.³ It is generally agreed that it was with *La Sylphide* that the ballerina first danced on point—that is, on the tips of her toes.

Unfortunately these early tutus—or tarlatan skirts, as they were known ("tarlatan" was the name of the fabric from which they were made)—proved to be highly flammable, and more than one sylph danced to her death amongst the newly introduced gas stage lighting: most notably the ballerina Emma Livry who, dressed in her tarlatan, ran across the stage burning during a dress rehearsal (Clarke and Crisp 49). She had been watching from the wings when her costume brushed against a light. Livry had refused to dip her tarlatan in an anti-inflammatory liquid because she felt that this would have rendered it "stiff" and "dingy" (50). Perhaps the tale of Livry's death has become so mythologised within dance folklore because this image of her running across the stage in her burning costume, and her decision to sacrifice safety for the sake of art, point firmly to a number of issues which lie at the heart of women's involvement in

³ Ivor Guest argues that the emergence of the "romantic" tutu was a much more gradual process (117).

classical dance: here women must always signify otherness, indeed other-worldliness, and ultimately death. The ethereal illusion—the flawless performance of the feminine—must be maintained at all costs.

These costumes, perhaps more than any other component in performance, signify the spectral realm into which the men of the plot will step, usually at their peril; for an encounter with one of these white-clad women spells death or very nearly death for the hero. Such figures are the romantic women whom Karen Swann refers to as insubstantial, otherworldly, “representing love, death and poetry all at once” (83)—figures whose existence on the earthly plane is entirely open to question. These are the roles upon which classical ballet as an institution is built: on the mimicry, on the part of small armies of flesh-and-blood women and girls, of fleshlessness, ghostliness, and, in the second half of the twentieth century, anorexic sylphness. And to return to the point, once again, that these nineteenth-century works are still the most popular ballets in the repertoire, and that when a little girl says, as so many of them do, “I want to be a ballerina,” or “I want to learn ballet,” it is most often these kinds of spectral figures which she has in mind. This is certainly another kind of “romance”: one beyond the boundaries of the plot, yet fundamental to the continuation of the artform.

Conventionally, dance critics have read these “white” narratives as mere “symbolic expressions” (Aschengreen 10). Although never theorised, their “demonic” aspects are at times mentioned, and occasionally a line or two is added about the seductive “state of nonbeing” (Sorell 220)⁴ which the rows of dancing, white-clad women seem to induce in both hero and audience—a state suggesting an *unheimlich* place un-remembered; the first experience of fluid, female space within the womb. Dance commentators are also fond of labelling these balletic encounters between mortal males and supernatural females as “asexual” in nature. In these kinds of analyses, the issue of sexual attraction is buried and desire itself remains an untheorised space. The women’s desire, in particular, is subsumed under this rigid patriarchal plotting.

I want to begin my examination of the ballets themselves with a reading of the romances represented in *Swan Lake*. While this means starting, chronologically speaking, at the wrong end of the nineteenth century (*Swan Lake* was first produced in 1877 and in its revised and now standard form in 1895),⁵ this ballet is undoubtedly the most popular of the nineteenth-century repertoire. It is also, in terms of romance, one of the most interesting: here one finds a prince in love with a bird-woman, then momentarily with another bird-woman, and I would argue that underpinning these more conventional plot manoeuvres there lies an Oedipal romance of fatal proportions.

The narrative of this ballet turns upon the “pure,” idealised love story of Prince Siegfried and the Swan Queen, Odette. On the night before his coming-of-age

⁴ Sorell’s actual words in this (admittedly, reconstructed) account of “The Dance of the Dead Nuns” are: “it was as though one’s own being would tumble into a state of nonbeing.”

⁵ The original production, first performed at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, on 20 February 1877, featured the music of Peter Tchaikovsky, choreography by Julius Reisinger and decor by Shangin, Valtz, and Groppius. The revised production (first staged at the Maryinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, on 27 January 1895) retained Tchaikovsky’s music, but was choreographed by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa, with decor by Botcharov and Levogt.

celebrations, the Prince sights a flock of swans flying overhead and sets off in pursuit, hunting bow in hand. This is an all-female flock who are, in the realm of the story, enchanted maidens—although an interesting point to note here is that we are never actually offered any kind of animal-to-human transformation, since it seems that it is the very *birdiness* of these women which is most alluring. Their uncanny sexuality is not located in any magical transformation, but rather in the fetishistic mixture of flesh and feathers.

Odette and Siegfried fall in love, and dance together, although how he manages to tell her apart from all the other dancing swans remains unexplained. When he urgently needs to be more discerning at later moments in the ballet, his senses fail him. Twice he searches frantically for Odette amongst the white waving limbs, wings and feathers. His eroticised confusion—his momentary loss of self amongst all this femaleness—is an oft-repeated trope in ballet narratives: the hero searches blindly for the heroine in a sea of moving and almost identical female bodies (Jowitt 34, 347). At one other point, during his birthday celebrations in act three, Siegfried’s confusion is at its most patent: an evil black swan-woman—colour-coded by her costume to ensure the audience perceives the binary opposition—turns up at the ball and Siegfried mistakes her for his beloved white swan, Odette. This scene represents one of those occasions in which a single female figure cannot contain the broad and contradictory elements of so-called “feminine” behaviour; the audience is presented with the white swan representing the good, idealised woman and the black swan who is wicked and seductive. Paradoxically, these two kinds of feminine performances are *expected* to be contained within the body of a single dancer, since Odette/Odile is a dual role.

Siegfried and Odile dance together in what has become known as the “Black Swan” *pas de deux*. Odile, who makes a spectacle of herself with her seductive ways, fools no-one but Prince Siegfried with her inferior imitation of Odette. And it is here that Siegfried’s fetish for feathers leads to a wavering of the male gaze. Could this “black” swan-woman really be his beloved? Although he is uncertain, he is nevertheless sure enough after their courtship dance to choose her as his wife. The coda of this *pas de deux* contains the famous thirty-two *fouettés*, the spectacular turning steps which the audience awaits with such anticipation. As one commentator writes of this sequence:

When Siegfried makes his fatal mistake, he does so not only because he fails to see Odile for what she really is—not Odette—but because he has fallen under the spell of her brilliance and vivacity as well. He pledges himself to her immediately after the coda has ended, an action we are to take as a direct consequence of what has just transpired. We are to have no trouble in understanding why someone might get carried away at that moment; we too should see her as dazzling. (Farah 309)

Here Odile’s performance must be “so brilliant and dazzling that black might actually be taken for white” (309) and from a contemporary standpoint it is difficult not to see this colour coding also in terms of racial stereotypes. Siegfried only realises his mistake

when Odette, momentarily played by another dancer, beats her wings outside the palace window. After one more “white” act, and various plot machinations, both of the lovers perish at the bottom of the swans’ lake.⁶

As Barbara Creed points out in *The Monstrous Feminine*, the figure of the double can be seen as “uncanny” because it “disturbs the boundary which establishes each human being as a discrete entity” (53-54). Odette’s double, Odile, acts to disturb Siegfried’s subjecthood; she threatens his sense of separateness by an act of repetition. He is “lost” while swimming in the dangerous waters of the sameness of the swans—within his own inability to tell one from another, and to tell Odette from Odile. In the final act Siegfried once again searches for Odette amongst the sea of female movement, an occasion on which it is perhaps the illusory separateness of his own being for which he might really be said to be looking. In this way, *Swan Lake* can be read as a rite-of-passage narrative depicting a young man’s attempt to free himself from his romance with a very powerful figure: his mother. In the context of the story, Siegfried’s mother rules alone; there is no sign of a father and her power in the “realistic” acts one and three is represented as phallic and perhaps threatening to a young prince struggling towards adulthood. The watery arms of the lake, however, its hypnotic, feathered females and its uncanny depths, draw on the ancient association of women and water. The lake is, I would suggest, a fantastic representation of the parthenogenetic mother, subsuming all conventional romances within its depths.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud argues that the “oceanic” is a particular category of human experience in which the individual feels “limitless, unbounded—as it were, “oceanic” (1). This experience recalls the early stage of childhood in which the infant cannot distinguish between his or her own self and the external world (3-4). Freud suggests that this “oceanic” state is the origin of the religious experience; also the “state” which one experiences when “in love” (3). I have previously suggested that the Romantic “Dance of the Dead Nuns” is reported to have produced something approaching this “oceanic” sensation in its contemporary audience.

Based as it is upon the experience of the “ocean” of intra-uterine existence, of a sense of “self” which is “limitless,” Freud’s formulation of the “oceanic” leaves open the floodgates for a different kind of theorisation of subjecthood—indeed, perhaps a different kind of subjecthood—as Marianna Torgovnick notes in *Gone Primitive*: “Since the ‘oceanic’ stresses feelings of connection and oneness rather than Oedipal rivalry with the father,” Freud cannot allow it to “stand as an important factor in human and cultural evolution” (206). It cannot, perhaps, be allowed to stand at all within phallogocentric culture, except within the “feminised” discourses of romantic love, of art and religion, and in the highly sexualised images of women and water which flow through Western culture.

Barbara Creed’s theorisation of the figure of the archaic mother provides a model for this reading of the swan’s lake-as-mother. Creed argues that a study of cross-cultural mythological material reveals the strong presence of a “generative,

⁶ The ending of *Swan Lake* does, however, sometimes vary, although the one cited is most often used. In the Russian version, for example, both of the lovers survive.

parthenogenetic mother—that ancient archaic figure who gives birth to all living things” (24). Creed cites Julia Kristeva’s extension of

the notion of the Freudian Oedipal mother to include two other faces of the mother: the fecund mother and the phantasmatic mother who constitutes the abyss which is so crucial in the formation of subjectivity. . . . the notion of the fecund mother-as-abyss . . . the cannibalising black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns . . . a source of deepest terror. (25)

In this sense the female swans are the spawn, the offspring of the maternal lake—produced and reproduced in identical form by the parthenogenetic mother who is herself formless. And she will soon re-absorb her own bestial offspring as well as the hero, Siegfried.

According to Creed this archaic figure is constructed within “patriarchal signifying practices” as a “negative figure,” as a “mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia”; a black hole which threatens to “reabsorb what it once birthed” (27). And, most importantly, this archaic womb cannot simply be constructed as “lack” in relation to the penis (27). The womb is “not the site of castration anxiety,” as the female genitals are for Freud, “rather, the womb signifies ‘fullness’ or ‘emptiness’”; most importantly it is always “its own point of reference” (27). For Creed the womb “represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination—blood, afterbirth, faeces” (49). In this ballet I would argue that the abject maternal waters—the powerful fluids of birth and menstruation—threaten the hero at every turn: from the “outside” lake setting which is also the “inside” of the “monstrous” mother; from the “interior” of the mother’s castle which is also the site of phallic (the “external”; the seen; the knowable) power.

The 1841 ballet *Giselle* is divided into two acts:⁷ in the first we have a bucolic setting and a romance between a beautiful young peasant girl, Giselle, and a nobleman in disguise named Albrecht. When the fragile Giselle discovers Albrecht’s duplicity (in addition to the disguise he is engaged to another woman) we are treated by the heroine to a wonderful “mad” scene which is often cited as the dramatic high point of a ballerina’s career. Here, Giselle’s loosened, cascading hair and wide eyes would have been read in heavily eroticised terms by nineteenth-century audiences (MacRitchie 10); in this heightened state, Giselle re-enacts her brief courtship with Albrecht painful moment by painful moment. At the end of this “mad” scene Giselle dies: sometimes she throws herself on Albrecht’s sword, while in other productions it is simply her “weak heart” which claims her. This nameless “madness” of Giselle’s is always presented as the result of her heartbreak. I would, however, argue that not only is this madness

⁷ *Giselle* was first staged at the Théâtre de l’Académie Royal de Musique, Paris, on the 28th of June, 1841, with music by Adolph Adam, choreography by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, and decor by Pierre Cicéri. The story of the ballet was written by Vernoy de Saint-Georges, Théophile Gautier, and Jean Coralli.

“hysterical,” but that the entire episode of her love affair with Albrecht, prior to and even after her death, may be read as a symptom of an earlier, more insidious form of “hysteria.”

Feminist readings of Freud’s analysis of hysteria tend to read the condition as a refusal of the cultural expectations placed upon femininity. As Elizabeth Grosz writes:

Hysteria can be seen as the woman’s rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity (requirements which are humiliating for her insofar as they presume women’s castration). It is a refusal rather than a repression of heterosexuality, and an attempt to return nostalgically to the pre-oedipal, homosexual desire for the mother. (134)

Walter Sorell reads Giselle’s symptoms prior to her “madness” as those of chlorosis, the “green sickness” which, along with tuberculosis, was so “fashionable” throughout the nineteenth century (244); Larry Vincent, a former dancer who is now a medical practitioner, also makes this connection (15-16).⁸ I would suggest that Giselle’s development of the symptoms of chlorosis may be read as an hysterical rejection of the extreme requirements of femininity. In her imitation of an organic disorder, Giselle is able to refuse the path of heterosexual courtship and, presumably, marriage and children (her mother will not allow the girl to “dance” because of her illness). Giselle’s mimicry of an illness is consistent with the excessive behaviour of the hysteric, as is the fact that even while refusing the role of culturally constructed femininity she nevertheless plays one thread of it to the extreme—dying for love and continuing her fidelity in Act II as the perfect ghost-bride.

In Giselle’s excessive overcompliance, in her act of performing the feminine Other to an excessive degree, there lies perhaps a subversive parody which functions as a refusal of her expected role. To quote Grosz once again:

The hysteric thus attempts to “cope” with the demands and expectations of a male-dominated culture which relies on women’s renunciation of their relations to other women, and of their unmediated relations to their own bodies and pleasures, by summoning up an apparently incapacitating “illness” which prevents her from giving satisfaction to men while satisfying herself in a compromise or symptomatic form. Hers is a mode of defiance of patriarchy, not the site of its frustration. In this sense, the hysteric is a proto-feminist, or at least an isolated individual who, if she had access

⁸ Butterworths Medical Dictionary offers the following description of chlorosis:

Green sickness; an anaemic condition seen in women and young girls and thought to have been due to tight corsets, constipation, frequent pregnancies, poor hygiene and diet. It is rarely encountered now, and would appear to have been chronic hypochromic anaemia due to inadequate intake of iron, poor diet and living conditions, and excessive menstrual losses at a time of growth. (296)

to the experiences of other women, may locate the problem in cultural expectations of femininity rather than in femininity itself. The hysteric's defiance through excess, through overcompliance, is a parody of the expected. (135, first emphasis mine)

In the second act of the ballet *Giselle* gains access to the experiences of other women—to a ghostly throng of Other women who prey upon men. Therefore in this reading the entire ballet is an “hysterical performance” which enacts in theatrical terms the heroine's excessive defiance. Such a reading places *Giselle* firmly at the centre of her own narrative. Thus *Giselle*'s overcompliance—the continuation of her “true love” for *Albrecht* even after death—may be read as an integral element of this parody.

Act II is set by *Giselle*'s grave in the forest. At the beginning of the act a number of white figures emerge, moving sideways in a strange unnatural manner. These are the *Wilis*, the “vampires of the dance” (Aschengreen 25), whose ranks the ghost of *Giselle* is about to join. Sometimes these figures are veiled like brides, nuns, or perhaps even corpses: the ease of this conflation suggesting, in the extreme, a lack of differentiation or at least a powerful bond between all three states. This image resonates with *Luce Irigaray*'s “Metaphoric Veil of the Eternal Feminine” (82); these ghostly women are parodies of those “most desirable, the mother[s] still covered over by the veil of the hymen, the mother[s]-to-be” (80), trapped as they are in their eroticised but marriageless state. When the entire female corps de ballet enters in this act it does so like a drove of brides walking down the aisle towards their never-to-be reached defloration; towards their own hysterical haunting. And there is no doubt that the most powerful figure in this landscape is *Myrtha*, the Queen of the *Wilis*, an icy ghost whose display of maternal authority amplifies that of *Giselle*'s “good” mother in Act I. *Myrtha* and her *Wilis* dance to death any men who cross their moonlit path (and there is a full moon, of course). After another of her former suitors has been hurled into the lake, *Giselle* is able to save her “true love,” *Albrecht*, from the murderous intentions of her sister spirits by continuing to dance with him until dawn.

As previously mentioned, some commentators see the character of *Giselle* as part of the nineteenth-century fashion for pale, frail, tuberculoid and chlorotic women. This in turn may be linked to the idea that classical ballet is an artform which, for women, generally performs “illness” rather than “health”—and perhaps ultimately “death” rather “life,” in spite of the athleticism of the dancers themselves. Writing of the heroine of Gothic fiction, *Mary K. Patterson Thornburg* suggests that this figure is, “most feminine at the moment of her death” (41), and perhaps one could suggest that *Giselle* is most feminine beyond death. And here I would highlight, once again, that unsettling conflation of bride, eroticised nun, and white-shrouded corpse which the *Wilis* seem to perform.

But the *Wilis*' deathly “femininity” is also represented as murderous: they have a highly specific agenda—to dance men to death by moonlight. Some combination of the following are always given as justification for their haunting: they have loved to dance; have died prior to their respective weddings; have been betrayed by their lovers; and/or

have committed suicide.⁹ They are “undead” creatures who walk—or in this case dance—only at night, in an inverse of conventional human behaviour. They satisfy their “appetites” upon their victims, with clear erotic overtones; they take the “dance” of heterosexual courtship and break it, transforming it into a dance of separateness, and of death. And their victims are exclusively male. In one sense they are clearly vampires, and this reading is supported by the etymology of their name: as Cyril Beaumont notes, the Slavonic word *vila* means, in fact, “vampire” (19), and Theophile Gautier (51) cites as the inspiration for his second-act libretto for *Giselle* a passage in Heinrich Heine depicting the folkloric Wilis—ghostly figures of Slavonic origin.¹⁰ Although the drawn blood of vampire legends is absent from the surface of *Giselle*, I would argue that its presence infuses the work, entering its very texture.

It has been suggested that vampire legends are residues of the stories once used to explain the phenomenon of menarche (Creed 63).¹¹ Barbara Creed notes that the onset of a girl’s first menstrual period was understood by some ancient peoples to be the result of a bite from a creature, often a bat or a snake, which brought forth blood (64). In repetition these stories themselves take on the function of a rite of passage, an acting out of society’s fear—which still persists in some form—of the “inexplicable” menarche. Such reworking performs, then, a ritualised abjection in which the culture expels “unclean” matter and cleanses itself, renewing the boundaries between self and not-self.

It is not difficult to see the connections between this argument and the second act of *Giselle*, particularly as performance art has such a strong ritualistic component. The young, beautiful Wilis who fill the stage are eternally fixed in their ghostly state at a marriageable age and yet are eternally marriageless, transfixed at the threshold between what has traditionally been seen as one stage of a woman’s development and the next. As Julia Kristeva writes, that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” represents abjection (4); therefore, perhaps figures which dwell on and in these borders are extremely powerful manifestations of abjection—forever toying with and subverting their relation to those boundaries.

I would therefore argue that *Giselle* may be read as an expression of cultural fears surrounding the onset of menstruation. To quote, then, from Barbara Creed’s analysis of the vampire film: “Western societies, of course, no longer have puberty rituals for menarche but perhaps popular culture in the form of the vampire film provides teenagers with a seductive but terrifying view of this important threshold event” (65). From this perspective it is important to recall the classrooms full of pre-

⁹ Compare, for example, the following material: ‘The Wilis are ghostly apparitions of folk-lore, girls who have died betrayed by their faithless lovers on the eve of their weddings’ (Australian Ballet program of *Giselle*, 1986); ‘This is the realm of the Wilis, the spirits of young girls who killed themselves for unrequited love before they were married’ (program of the film of *Giselle*, with the American Ballet Theatre); and, ‘Hilarion . . . has been captured by the Wilis, (the spirits of maidens who loved to dance and who died before their wedding day)’ (Chujooy and Manchester, 405).

¹⁰ See Heine, *Germany Vol II: The Works of Heinrich Heine Vol. VI*, trans. Charles Godfrey Leland. London: William Heinemann, 1892 (139); see also translator’s note (139n).

¹¹ Here Creed cites Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove’s *The Wise Wound: Eve’s Curse and Everywoman*, New York: Grove P, 1986.

pubescent and adolescent girls literally waiting in the wings, dreaming of taking part in the “sacred” ritual of the professional dance performance.

The blood present in this text, then, is not simply the life-giving blood drawn from the victims, but the life-giving blood of women. How ironic that in reading *Giselle* as a female rite-of-passage narrative, one is confronted, in late twentieth-century performance, by the contradictory lived experience of the real young women dancing upon the stage. These are women who have often had their own menstrual cycles postponed or disrupted by the zealous dieting and extreme physical training demanded by their profession (Hanna 7). Yet another event which is invoked by the vampire legend is the woman’s blood loss at the moment of defloration. In this sense the female vampire is doubly abject as blood drawn by her threatens the logic of the symbolic with its implied role reversal: the female vampire draws the man’s blood—literally or, as here, under the veil of an elegant dance-metaphor—enacting upon his body a ritualised, bloody defloration.

And perhaps the fact that the Wilis remain forever arrested at a point prior to marriage is also significant here. This might be read as suggesting that the very “defloration” rites which they celebrate might not be in fact an issue for them; after all their own “dance” is a dance performed amongst women—intruding men are hurled into a nearby lake. Just as the cinema has a tradition of representing lesbian vampires as highly abjected and eroticised figures,¹² so too are the Wilis—those beautiful “vampires of the dance”—deathly and alluring and threatening to the male gaze in their bridal/funereal whites. Perhaps their ultimate abject quality is that they may not require a reason for their haunting, as the slippage in the rationale behind their ghostly dance would seem to suggest.

Which brings me to my final point: the importance within these ballet narratives of communities of spectral, supernatural women. Possibly this is the real “romance” of the ballets: a “romance” between the audience and the “sylph” (after all, who are we most “seduced” by when we watch these works?) and between the female ghosts and swans and sylphs themselves. As I argue elsewhere,¹³ these ballets draw upon folkloric Swan Maiden narratives: narratives which feature groups of uncanny, skin-shedding and shape-changing females who, while bathing or dancing in human form, are captured into marriage by mortal males. These supernatural creatures, however, eventually escape back to their exclusively female tribes, flocks or communities, although this disruptive divorce, and its alternative “romantic” possibilities, has been written out of the surface of the nineteenth-century balletic plot.¹⁴ All too often, the dead female creature closes the plot.

The nineteenth-century ballets examined here—those balletic narratives which have proven the most popular right throughout the twentieth century—offer for the audience representations of a fantastic femininity which, while signifying in one sense

¹² See Creed, 67-72.

¹³ See Carter, “Performing the Feminine,” chapter three.

¹⁴ On the nineteenth-century’s use of the Swan Maiden narrative, see Carole Silver, “‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’: Victorians and Fairy Brides’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 6.2 (1987): 283-98.

limited and highly conventional expectations of femininity, are also encoded with potentially disruptive performances of “the feminine.” Similarly, the “romances” presented in these narratives are more complex and transgressive than they would at first appear: behind the “tragic” romances of Odile and Siegfried, and Giselle and Albrecht, there lies an intricate web of uncanny attractions—of Oedipal desiring, parthenogenetic wombs, hysterical hauntings and abject rites. It is worth stressing once again that, with her virtually continuous performance, the fragile balletic “sylph” has out-lived many other representations of the feminine, and she continues to attract “flocks” of young girls to her art. Perhaps the key to her survival lies in her supernatural, and culturally disruptive attractions.

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