

BOOK REVIEW

The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World: Responses to Greek and Roman Dance. Edited by FIONA MACINTOSH. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 536. Paper, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0199656936.

In the field of classical reception, studies in the history of dance are long overdue. Dance historians have always known that Greco-Roman antiquity has played important and varied roles in the history of dance, but they may not have been particularly interested in viewing these influences as uses and transformations of ancient material. Classicists, on the other hand, may simply not be aware of the role that antiquity has played unless they happen to have a particular interest in dance. Fiona Macintosh's edited collection is thus especially welcome, and readers will learn from it much about a field that has slowly made its way from the margins of the academy (dance) and whose history includes not only frequent receptions of antiquity, but some extraordinary artistic work that re-envision the classical. Contributors include scholars, critics, choreographers, and theatre directors, giving the book a well-rounded perspective. The volume is divided into five sections, each of which I will discuss briefly.

Section I, "Dance and the Ancient Sources" does not attempt to present a systematic account of ancient sources that have been important for the history of dance, but rather offers a sense for how some ancient literary and artistic sources helped to shape that history when they were absorbed in a particular cultural context. Ideas about ancient pantomime, for example, greatly influenced dance reform in the 18th century, especially Jean George's Noverre's development of *ballet d'action*, considered the foundation of classical ballet as we know it today (Ismene Lada-Richards, Chapter 1). In an otherwise delightful essay on the dancing of Fred Astaire, Kathleen Riley (Chapter 5) makes a generally unpersuasive case that Astaire's dancing can be considered the heir of ancient pantomime. Readers will, however, learn much from her account of what was distinctive about Astaire as a dancer. The remaining chapters deal in one way or another with ways that ancient art has figured into the history of dance. A fashion for revivalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are apparent in Maurice Emmanuel's popular book *La Danse Grecque: Antique: D'Après Les Monuments Figures* (1896), which argued that

the technique of classical ballet has a firm foundation in ancient iconography, as well as in the Greek dancing of Isadora Duncan, the Greek frieze look of Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), and the influence of Greek art on Léon Bakst's costume and set designs for the Ballet Russes (Frederick Naerebout, Chapter 2). The Tanagra figurines, with their graceful, body-revealing drapery, served as models for the dance performances of Colette, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Eva Palmer, who all infused this look with their Greek ideal of unifying the body, mind, and spirit (Ann Cooper Albright, Chapter 3). Isadora Duncan studied Greek vases as well for inspiration, as did Lillian Lawler, who wrote influential studies of Greek dance in the 1960s. Strangely enough, the dancing figures found most frequently in Greek vase iconography, komast dancers, had little influence at all on the history of dance until the contemporary period (Tyler Jo Smith, Chapter 4).

It is generally well known that Christianity and the Church Fathers have something to do with the view that dance is somehow distasteful, and even morally questionable. What might be less familiar to Classicists is the role that antiquity has played in shaping various incarnations of The Dangerous Dancer and also in coming to dance's defense. The chapters in Section II, "Dance and Decadence", cover selected materials ranging from archaic Greece all the way through the early 20th century. The biblical figure of Salome did some primal damage to the idea that dance might be respectable in part because she is such a compelling figure and of great interest to many subsequent writers and artists (Ruth Webb, Chapter 6). For the Church Fathers Salome demonstrated that dance and the devil were natural allies, while Flaubert participated in the orientalizing of Salome, who for him portrays exhibition, concealment, luxury, and excess. It was only Oscar Wilde who could see in Salome the combination of sexuality, intelligence, and artistic control. According to Edith Hall (Chapter 7), dance was in fact "under a moral question mark" from the time of archaic Greece. Hall focuses in particular on the fact that she finds no exemplary male solo dancing in Homer or other early sources, and instead finds dance associated with Paris' effeminacy or defensively justified by Socrates for its health benefits. The dance apologists of the 17th and 18th centuries often cited David's dance before the Ark of the Covenant in defense of dance (Jennifer Thorp, Chapter 8), and yet Hall argues that David presents a problematic piece of evidence. When we turn to Edwardian England, it may be no surprise to find out that, partly through the influence of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, dancing maenads hit the stage to signify the liberation of women and champion women's suffrage (Fiona Macintosh, Chapter 9). The leading exponent of this "Greek dance", Maud Allan, was seen as wild, disruptive, and lesbian. Associating

with the Greeks was not, however, always a death-sentence for dance's reputation. Dance apologists of the 17th and 18th centuries often appealed to Lucian, Tertullian, and Roman law to defend dance's value (Jennifer Thorp, Chapter 8), and in early 20th century England the Ginner-Mawer school of dance and drama managed to train women in a health-promoting, self-control-encouraging form of communal "Greek" dance.

While the English masques of the 16th and 17th centuries used Greco-Roman myth in a way entirely familiar to the ancients themselves – namely to help establish the prestige and pedigree of contemporary figures (Barbara Ravelhofer Chapter 10) – choreographers of subsequent centuries move into uncharted territory and uncover surprising interpretive possibilities. Section III, "Dance and Myth", gives us glimpses of Prometheus, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia, transformed by powerful artistic visions. In the 1920s Ted Shawn, one of the great pioneers of American modern dance, presented Prometheus (*Prometheus Bound*, solo dance, 1929) as a model of rational masculinity and part of his project to restore dance as a public art for men (Pantelis Michelakis, Chapter 11). Shawn's Prometheus is hyper-masculine, athletic, and aggressive. By contrast, Eva Palmer's more well known work, *Prometheus Bound* (1927/30), focused on the collective body of the female chorus as a model of utopian community. Martha Graham's body of work includes a sustained reformulation of ancient myth structured by her interest in archetypal patterns, female trauma, the ritualization of movement, and emotional intensity (Henrietta Bannerman, Chapter 13). To take just one example, Graham's *Clytemnestra* (1958) filters the events of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* through the lens of Clytemnestra's memory. More generally, Graham and others have shown us dance's unique possibilities for the dramatization of myth. In this respect especially, the work of Pina Bausch comes to the fore (Alessandra Zanobi, Chapter 12, Nadine Meisner, Chapter 14). Bausch's work, with its emotional intensity, visual ambiguity, and jarring directness, makes a remarkable theatrical impact. Like Isadora Duncan did before her, Bausch viewed Greek tragedy as a model of total theatre that she wanted to recreate. Both women saw in the figure of Iphigenia "the symbol or archetype of woman subject to various forms of patriarchal authority and searching for a measure of autonomy" (Zanobi, 241). Bausch's large-scale piece to the score of Gluck's opera (*Iphigénie en Tauride*, 1778) goes further to find embedded in the myth a notion that Iphigenia occupies a sacred liminal space between puberty and adulthood, as well as a reiteration of the connection between

religion and violence. Like Euripides, Bausch works in an idiom of naturalism that tends to deflate the heroic.

In Section IV, “Ancient Dance and the Modern Mind” we see how choreographers use myth to engage with conceptions of the modern and postmodern. Vanda Zajko’s chapter on Martha Graham’s *Night Journey* stands out because she gives such a full reading of Graham’s notion of the Classical, and because she offers a fresh and sophisticated analysis of Graham’s intellectual preoccupations, moving us beyond the standard Jungian and feminist readings of Graham’s work. According to Zajko, *Night Journey* reworks the Oedipus myth to express Graham’s belief that ancient myth can speak to the modern condition by confronting us with a conception of the Classical centered on collective identity as an alternative to radical individualism, the move inward to a multilayered self, and reaching toward the primitive understood as an anti-urban, pre-verbal, non-linear simplicity (on the idea of dance as prior to speech and rational thought see also Daniel Albright’s discussion in Chapter 15 of Beethoven’s little known ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus*). The ritualization of movement also plays a part here, as it does in much modern dance discussed in this book, beginning from the choreographical work influenced directly or indirectly by the Cambridge Ritualists. Greek myth helped Graham make a major impact on modern modes of perception because she saw how its psychological depth and historical primacy could work together naturally with the non-verbal vocabulary of dance to summon the unconscious and evoke notions of forgotten origins.

The insistence of myth’s relevance also plays a central role in Caryl Churchill and Ian Spink’s postmodern collaborative experiments in total theatre (Richard Cave, Chapter 19). Churchill and Spink are interested specifically in how the notion of Dionysian possession plays out in modern contexts. They aim to animate for their audience feelings of fragmentation and ecstasy, and they see dance as a way to get at what the Greeks *felt* about the Dionysian. Myth functions as a permanent cultural icon, and Churchill and Spink’s Greek-inflected works set the individual in conflict with myth’s archetypes to pose questions and engage the audience without offering reductive answers. Their *Mouthful of Birds* (1986), for example, interpolates the narrative of Euripides’ *Bacchae* into successive scenes of individuals struggling with contemporary forms of possession (alcohol addiction, passion, fear) as it explores the ambiguities of violence as a means to female empowerment. Once again Greek myth finds a natural ally in the medium of dance, here because Dionysian excess addresses non-verbal and irrational elements.

The extraordinary work of choreographer William Forsythe also takes a central and self-conscious interest in the Dionysian and its relationship to the Apollonian (Arabella Stanger, Chapter 18). Forsythe's three part *Eidos: Telos* rewrites the classicism (both balletic and Greek) of Stravinsky and Balanchine's *Apollo*. Forsythe's choreography (cf. Michael Clark's works also discussed in this chapter) breaks down the rational purity of balletic form by inserting Dionysian fragmentation and a new logic of disorder and dynamism. The figure of Persephone appears filtered through Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1988) to express the chaos and delirium of female fury at the approach of death and the coexistence of earth and Hades. The Dionysian preoccupations of these and other contemporary choreographers stand in sharp contrast or reaction to what Susan Jones (Chapter 16) sees as the turn to extreme Apollonian "formal economy and harmonious beauty" in Balanchine's revisions (1979) to his ballet, *Apollo*. On this reading, Balanchine took ballet's emphasis on form and abstraction to an extreme and played out a modernist interest in stripping a particular art form of everything inessential to it. Here, the Greekness of ballet takes shape as an ideal of purity and formal constraint.

The three chapters in Section V, "The Ancient Chorus in Contemporary Performance" discuss innovative theatrical works that in various ways aim to reconnect the audience with the tradition of the Greek chorus. Polish theatre has a long and fascinating history of turning to ancient Greece and in particular to the mystical elements of Dionysian culture and religion. Włodzimierz Staniewski, founder and director of Poland's leading theatre company, Gardzienice, draws on vase paintings and fragments of ancient Greek musical inscriptions to develop his alphabet of gestures (*cheironomia*), a kind of ecstatic language where the chorus aims to reanimate the forgotten spirit "locked in" the remnants of antiquity (Yana Zarifi, Chapter 20). Struan Leslie's collaborative work with Kate Mitchell in British theatre (*Oresteia*, 1999, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 2004, *Women of Troy*, 2007) seeks to restore the full power of the ancient chorus and translate it for modern culture (Struan Leslie, Chapter 21). Leslie is drawn to the ideal of total theatre where the chorus unifies movement, speech, and song and to the political role the chorus can play as a reflection of the diminishing value of radical individualism. His contemporary chorus of Trojan women are 1950s women with handbags and lipstick who use social dance – with male partners missing – to comfort themselves and imply lamentation. *Red Ladies*, a witty and politically charged performance piece which first appeared in Trafalgar Square in 2005, provides a wonderful finale to this book

(Suzy Willson and Helen Eastman, Chapter 22). Suzy Willson, an Artistic Director of the Clod Ensemble, was drawn to the chorus of Greek tragedy because of the way it “can operate in a poetic register, a heightened form involving both music and abstract movement.” In reaction to recent tragic public events like 9/11, Willson also wants to reconnect her audience with the idea of the chorus as witness. *Red Ladies* has no characters except the chorus of identically dressed, retro-chic women who give the impression of ubiquity, solidarity, and mysterious purpose. Peter Oswald’s text for the piece employs classical metaphors to evoke the tragic choruses of antiquity and to raise possibilities for interpreting the Red Ladies as classical figures, which audiences often do.

As a field of classical reception studies, perhaps what strike one most of all about dance is the use it has made of antiquity to support the liberation and self-expression of women. Antiquity might not seem the natural place to pursue such goals, and yet as we see in this volume, dance has repeatedly done so successfully. There is one guiding notion in the book that I think can be misleading, and we find it in the subtitle: “Responses to Greek and Roman Dance”. With a few exceptions, we do not know much at all about the nature of Greek and Roman dance, and the history of dance has responded more frequently to ancient *ideas* about dance, ancient iconography, and mythology, than it has to ancient dancing itself. I would say, then, that the history of dance has for the most part not actually tried to put the ancient dancer on the modern stage. What is admirably demonstrated in this volume, however, is that we can finally begin to see the history of dance as successive attempts to restage and rewrite Greco-Roman classicism.

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