

as a commentary on bourgeoisie values and an embodiment of the wish for a peaceful transition to postrevolutionary life. Banes's last paragraph description of Giselle's first dance, when she is fresh out of the grave in the second act, is a vivid reading of body postures as well as a politically astute reading of how the ballet's stage images of murderous women must have evoked memories of activist women during the French Revolution terror. The bodily specificity of dance performance is thus given a bold new significance. *Giselle*, Banes asserts, represents female power as attractive rather than threatening.

In discussing the dancer Loïe Fuller, Banes's achievement is different, but nonetheless significant. She makes clear just how Fuller is important to the canon of dance history because she is "creating a new space and image for women." According to Banes she turned herself into "a desexualized screen on which a spectrum of non-female, even non-human images could literally be projected" (p. 71). Banes's use of "the marriage plot" in analyzing the Ballets Russes' spectacle, *Firebird*, offers an equally fresh reassessment of this often overlooked ballet's symbolism of the Firebird as a manipulative woman who uses her seductive charms to get Ivan to do her bidding politically. The marriage in *Firebird* is not usually thought of as the ballet's dramatic center. Yet once Banes draws our attention to it we realize that choreographically it has always been the climax.

Even the well-excavated terrain of Martha Graham's *Night Journey* gets a fresh reading from Banes who analyses the choreography to persuasively show that it is Jocasta, the mother, whose sexual pleasure is most highlighted in the dance rather than that of Oedipus, her son. Marriage for her, Banes asserts, is a deep sexual rather than spiritual union. In *Lilac Garden* Banes gives what is arguably her most brilliant analysis in the book, positing how recondite meanings in this ballet emerge from the formal movement designs of the passing guests in

the garden, itself a symbol of the natural and deep recesses of the psyche. It is an impending wedding here that sets all of the pain in motion. Tudor's women struggle both within and against the objectifying nature of the male gaze in an effort to obey social norms and yet still define parts of themselves.

Banes's achievement is formidable in *Dancing Women*, and I find her hypotheses convincing because she shows us how to attend to female bodily expressivity and sexuality in a fresh and rigorous manner. In so doing she answers a call for change in dance research that has been building for some time. At the same time *Dancing Women* also offers a model for how to extend the scope of dance analysis and dance history beyond the usual social and formalist concerns. We are brought to a deeper theorization of how cultural and social meanings are given form, propagated and finally challenged through dance. Banes's book invites us to regard how dance has long been located in the world, but how we might now begin to locate the world in dance and female agency at the center of this spiral.

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#### NOTES:

1. Susan Leigh Foster, "Dancing Bodies," in *Meaning in Motion*, edited by Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 235.
2. *Ibid.*, 241.
3. *Ibid.*, 256.
4. *Ibid.*, 235.
5. Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

### III. Bodies, Agency, and Beauvoir

Sally Banes's recent analysis, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage*, is an exemplary model for future feminist criticism of the arts. In the introduction, she

contextualizes her agenda, namely to write a “specifically feminist” history of the artform of dance (p. 1). Her aim is to analyze the dance canon—ballet and modern—in terms of “the marriage plot,” by which she means “the double sense of a narrative and a bourgeois social imperative” of heterosexuality (p. 3). Casting doubt on some commonplace misperceptions, for example that ballet is generally oppressive (the view of Christy Adair, p. 2) or that female dancers are routinely subjected to an objectifying male gaze (Ann Daly, p. 2), Banes offers a careful look at the complexities and ambiguities of dance performance to show that “the general trend over the past century and a half has been toward questioning the values of marriage and monogamy” (pp. 5, 211-214). Most importantly, and the reason why *Dancing Women* is a model for future feminist criticism of *all arts*, is that Banes deliberately avoids bipolar judgments about dancing bodies that are overwhelmingly negative or positive, that is, inflexible indicators of either victimization or celebration.

What she teaches us instead is the practice of looking. This is done by analyzing the “evidence of the works themselves”—the dance texts—as they are situated within their “artistic, socio-political, and economic contexts”; this includes careful interpretation of the various postures and movements of dancers (p. 2). Her perceptions are so acute that we learn to uncover not only the various modes of female representation already operating within the works but also to discover “the ways in which choreography and performance create cultural representations of gender identities” (p. 2). Her close readings of *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *The Rite of Spring*, and Balanchine’s *Agon*, as well as the works of Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Agnes de Mille, lead to the conclusion that the marriage plot generally succeeds, yet in the 1980s and 1990s, women in dance present us with “an evolving vision—stages or steps toward a comprehen-

sive, complex and rounded view of the past, the present, and the future of women’s emergence from patriarchy, not only in dance, but in the culture at large” (p. 231). Given that this “evolving vision” parallels several waves of the feminist movement, one way to use *Dancing Women* is as a tool in classes in the visual arts, feminist philosophy, gender studies, and women’s studies.

**Agency.** Banes’s analysis points out agency on the part of women on three levels: (1) women as moving (dancing), (2) women operating within and controlling space on stage even in ballet where they dance “dependently” with males, and (3) women taking control of space in the fullest sense of the term. This might include eliminating men from the dance stage altogether—thereby taking on the role of choreographer (for themselves and for succeeding generations); building primarily female audiences, marketing their own works, and wresting control over their personal lives in spite of (or because of) their professional careers. The agency of dancing women is particularly acute when compared to other groups within the visual arts, particularly the areas of painting or sculpting.

Even the language is incomparable. Compare the title of Banes’s book—“dancing women”—with a similar phrase: “painting women.” More than likely, when we say the phrase “painting women,” “painting” operates as a verb and not a gerund; it conjures up the image of a male artist painting women where the male is the agent and the female is the passively depicted body on canvas. It may even remind us of the artwork of the male artist, Yves Klein, who actually painted women’s bodies and had the women roll around on canvases at art performances. Because of this, our language more comfortably prefers “women who paint” to “painting women.” Only in the case of “dancing women” does woman’s full agency seem to mesh with “women who dance,” showing that dance is a unique case

among the arts.

Furthermore, unlike women artists in the art world, dancing women have made decisive strides in achieving emancipation from a previously male-dominated system of dance. Although women artists constitute over 50% of students in art schools and numbers of self-declared artists, they are represented in less than 15% of the permanent collections of major museums. (Numbers for women artists of color are even more appalling.) In a recent edition of Janson's art history text—still a standard in colleges and universities—the number of women artists increased only 2.2% (from 4.4% to 6.6%) between 1986 and 1996. Given the imbalance in numbers between women in dance and art, dancing women have much to teach feminist scholars in art history, aesthetics, and political theory about the import of their creative work and how the politics of dance informs gender representations *and* construction within larger contexts of culture and patriarchy.

**Beauvoir.** The notion of “Other” (sometimes assimilated to “Outsider” or “alien”) permeates *Dancing Women*. Although it is self-explanatory to some, a brief explanation in the text would have been helpful to those less familiar with its origins. Even experienced readers of philosophy often need help with Simone de Beauvoir's complex notion; such an explanation might have helped readers to fully understand the impact of Banes's analysis of women's agency, identity, and sexuality in light of this term. It is no coincidence that Beauvoir was writing *The Second Sex* at the same time that the second generation of what Banes calls the Historical, Modern choreographers—Wigman, Humphrey, Dunham, and Graham—were active (the 1920s-1940s). These women were deliberately engaged in adopting “marginal, outsider identities” (p. 124). Given the resurgence of interest in Beauvoir in 1999 upon the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex*, I would encourage schol-

ars to use *Dancing Women* as a jumping-off point to future interrogations and cross-fertilization. Beauvoir's writings on woman as Other—as a sexual being free to pursue both heterosexual *and* lesbian relationships and as a knowing accomplice complicit in a male-dominated society that oppresses women—almost always focused on the issue of love. And love is sometimes, though not always, what marriage plots are all about.

It would be interesting to study comparisons between Beauvoir and dancing women on seduction, marriage (recall Beauvoir never married, refusing Jean Paul Sartre's request yet maintaining a relationship with him for over sixty years), autonomy, monogamy, and sado-masochism (recall its role in Martha Graham's *Night Journey*). Central to Beauvoir's study of love was an investigation of freedom which, unlike Sartre's notorious existential notion of other-as-hell, included the belief that one cannot fully experience love without also experiencing and securing freedom: one's own freedom from oppression, jealousy, and control as well as others'. Banes provides one stunning example of such an unusual relationship: the *pas de deux* between lovers Aurora and Desire in *Sleeping Beauty* of 1890, described as “a metaphor for a marriage in which both partners need one another but also enjoy their autonomy” (p. 58). Further discussions of the marriage plot, its twists and turns, might benefit greatly from reference to Beauvoir's profound thoughts on these topics.

The dancing women chronicled by Banes provide a unique opportunity to study women whose work and personal lives inevitably blend together. As we know, such choices are never unproblematic, but studying these women *in* history may provide examples for discussion and indeed, imitation, that will greatly benefit both men and women of the next generations. The visual documentation of female bodies on stage will surely resonate with our students, especially young women, who may more enthusiastically

embrace the history of feminist thought in this manner.

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#### **IV. Talking Women: Dance Herstories**

Peg Brand made some provocative comparisons between dance history and art history and, inspired by her suggestions, I'd like to speculate on some as yet unexplored or underexplored directions feminist scholarship in dance might take. It seems ironic that, relative to the histories and theories of other arts disciplines, so little feminist scholarship had been done in dance (until quite recently), since it is an art form that prominently features women artists. But perhaps it was precisely because women were already so dominant, and so visible, in dance history that there *seemed* to be no need for feminist retrievals of the sort Brand describes in her comments. For this very reason—the dominance of women in the field of dance in the modern era—it seems (as Brand suggests) that dance studies should be of paramount interest not only to dance scholars, but to scholars of gender and women's history. Whereas the history of fine art is marked by a paucity of acknowledged women artists, dance history teems with the accomplishments of great women performers and choreographers. Dance history complicates the standard histories of women's experience in the arts, and for that very reason it should be studied by feminist historians in all the arts.

Why dance has over the course of the past two centuries definitively become the domain of women—as artists, as critics and scholars, and as spectators—is, I think, a question well worth pondering. It is also worth reflecting on whether, as some have suggested, dance has become a minor art form exactly because it is considered “women's art.”

Like the modern dance choreographers

of the 1930s—predominantly women—about whom I write in chapter five of the book, we late-twentieth-century dance historians, critics, and theorists—predominantly women—have long behaved as if we don't need to address gender issues or feminist themes because we work in such a highly feminized field. Where in literature and the visual arts feminist criticism has flourished for nearly thirty years, it is only in the past decade or so that a feminist discourse in dance studies has developed—partly because in the 1980s a younger generation of choreographers explicitly dealt with feminist themes in their work and partly because at the same time a younger generation of scholars, influenced by feminist work in other disciplines, put feminism on their agendas.

In *Dancing Women*, I limited my project to studying representations of women in major works of the ballet and modern dance canon—that is, of Western high-art theatrical dancing—by both male and female choreographers. This kind of longitudinal analysis and overview had been done both in literary and visual art studies, but not in dance.

Much work remains to be done from a woman-centered perspective in dance studies (including dance history and the philosophy of dance). For instance, soon after Linda Nochlin's pioneering article “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” was first published in 1971, an entire branch of feminist art history was engaged in unearthing forgotten women visual artists. The 1970s saw volumes such as Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson's *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, histories of Western art that sought to recover the work of women (1). A number of studies of women visual artists during particular historical periods, as well as biographies of individual women artists, also appeared during this flush of discovery.

Of course, many critical studies of women choreographers and many biogra-