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1

THE ROMANTIC BALLET

La Sylphide, Giselle, Coppélia

The era of the Romantic ballet marks the beginning of women's ascendancy on the dance stage. Themes of the supernatural, exotic folklore, and the quest for the ideal were skillfully realized in the union of scenic effects, diaphanous costumes, shadowy gas lighting, and above all, the expressive use of dance technique, in particular the pointework and lightness of the female dancer, as well as the more earthy, often erotic styles of folkloric character dances. The first major Romantic ballet, *La Sylphide* (1832), according to dance historian Ivor Guest, "sealed the triumph of Romanticism in the field of ballet;" it was, he wrote, "as momentous a landmark in the chronicles of Romantic art as 'The Raft of the "Medusa"' and *Hernani.*"[1] The ballet spawned a range of imitations and variations on the theme of the supernatural. It served as a template, ushering in a period, as the French critic Théophile Gautier remarked, when "the Opéra was given over to gnomes, undines, salamanders, elves, nixes, wilis, péris – to all that strange and mysterious folk who lend themselves so marvelously to the fantasies of the *maîtres de ballet.*"[2] And the relations in the ballets between humans and these fantastic creatures supplied stories that cast female sexuality and its regulation through the institution of marriage in a fresh light.

But it was not only the formal qualities or even the content of these ballets that set the tone of the Romantic era in ballet. The economic and social conditions of ballet production and reception in France had shifted after the 1830 revolution, for the Opéra was converted from a state-owned and -operated institution into a state-subsidized but privately run commercial enterprise. At the same time, the class make-up of the Opéra audience diversified, and the new, predominantly bourgeois, audiences – many of them raised on the phantasmic and exotic spectacles of Paris boulevard melodramas – exerted an unprecedented box-office power.[3] In the 1830s and 1840s, the Romantic ballet flourished, especially in Paris, but also in other European capitals, including London, Milan, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Copenhagen. And it brought to the international dance stage the anxieties and concerns of the bourgeois class – including those regarding women, their role in society, and their sexuality.

La Sylphide

La Sylphide, originally choreographed by Filippo Taglioni to music by Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffer and given its premiere at the Paris Opéra in 1832, was a benchmark in ballet history, and it was also a turning-point in the career of Marie Taglioni, the choreographer's daughter and best student.[4] For Taglioni *fille* created the title role of the airy sprite who seduces a Scottish farmer away on his wedding day, into the mystical forest. The ballet showcased the dancer's mastery of technique, her special ability to mask the effort of physical virtuosity

Plate 1 Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*, Paris (1837). Devéria lithograph, Edwin Binney 3rd collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, The Houghton Library. Courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

in order to appear suitably imponderable and ethereal. Gautier compared her to "an idealised form, a poetic personification, an opalescent mist seen against the green obscurity of an enchanted forest."[5] When she toured Russia in 1837, a critic marveled that "it is impossible to describe the suggestion she conveyed of aerial flight, the fluttering of wings, the soaring in the air, alighting on flowers, and gliding over the mirror-like surface of a river."[6] The role catapulted Taglioni to international stardom, and she became indelibly identified with the character of the Sylphide.

The scenario for *La Sylphide* was written by Adolphe Nourrit. A tenor at the Paris Opéra, Nourrit appeared in the leading male role in Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le diable* in 1831, playing opposite Marie Taglioni in a spectral Ballet of the [Dead] Nuns. For *La Sylphide*, Nourrit had been inspired by Charles Nodier's 1822 novella *Trilby, ou le Lutin d'Argail*, set in an ancient Scottish landscape of lochs, mists, and highlands, in which a fisherman's wife falls in love – lethally – with a male elf.[7] Nodier himself was influenced by Sir Walter Scott's fantastic evocations of a medieval Scotland populated by goblins, witches, and sorcerers.

Although Nourrit's scenario is often referred to as an adaptation of Nodier's story, it is also usually said that the two narratives have very little in common, besides the Scottish setting. For one thing, the gender relationships are reversed in *La Sylphide*. For another, *La Sylphide* makes no reference to religion, while *Trilby* involves an exorcism, a pilgrimage, and a ruined cemetery.[8]

What is not usually acknowledged is that the core theme of Nodier's novella – the fatal subversion of marital relations – becomes even more evident in the ballet. In fact, the transgender representation of the elf as a supernatural female figure in *La Sylphide* also recalls Scott's novels and poems, for both the Sylphide, as a seductive enchantress, and the witch, as a soothsayer with mysterious demonic powers, are reminiscent of Scott's women.[9] The very structure of the choreography in *La Sylphide* emblematically narrates the regulation of marriage by the community. Indeed, if *Trilby* exacts 1,000 years of estrangement for infidelity, *La Sylphide* stands as a cautionary tale, admonishing men on pain of death to marry *inside* their own community and not to be lured *outside* their own folk into a world portrayed as Other and inhuman.[10]

La Sylphide, that is, is based upon a radical opposition of love and matrimony within the group – an event that is portrayed as occurring *inside* a cavernous farmhouse – versus love *outside* the folk – love literally outdoors, in the forest regions of the sylphs.[11] Moreover, this difference is further presented as a choice between humanity (the folk), on the one side, and the inhuman (the Sylphide), on the other. Just as Taglioni herself and ballerinas in general might be seen as seductively drawing gentlemen away from their hearths and the heart of their families, and into the Foyer de la Danse, the Sylphide seduces young James away from his wedding into a realm that he barely understands and that he only inhabits at the cost of self-destruction.[12]

In 1834, the Danish choreographer August Bournonville saw Taglioni's *Sylphide* in Paris. He created his own version in 1836 in Copenhagen, to new

music by Hermann Løvenskjold. It is Bournonville's version that I will analyze here, because I believe that, although it has been altered in obvious ways over the years, it is still the closest we can come to the original Taglioni version.

La Sylphide is a ballet in two acts. The first act takes place in a commodious farmhouse where James Reuben lives with his widowed mother. It is his wedding or betrothal day.[13] But just before the entrance of Effie, his fiancée, and the wedding guests, James, dozing by the fireplace, is visited by a gossamer vision – the Sylphide.[14] She hovers over his chair, dances out her love for him, kisses him, and then, when he wakes and approaches her, disappears up the chimney. Gurn – James's friend and rival – arrives, then the bride, with her women friends. When James notices Madge, the witch, warming herself at the fireplace, he angrily tells her to leave. But she offers to read the eager young women's futures in their palms. Notably, considering the major theme of *La Sylphide*, all of Madge's predictions concern marriage and procreation: the first young woman, Madge predicts through pantomime, will bear many children who will all flourish; the second, children who will die. The third fortune-seeker is a child, who is slapped for her effrontery: she is too young for such stories. The fourth young maiden is surprised to discover (she mimes embarrassment as she touches her abdomen) that she is already pregnant. Madge tells Effie, the fifth maiden, that her happiness lies with Gurn, not James – a shocking revelation. Marriage stories, it seems, preoccupy the women in this ballet.

Effie goes upstairs to get ready for the wedding ceremony; the guests leave, and suddenly the Sylphide appears again, this time in the window. She tells James she loves him and dances with him flirtatiously. She wraps his scarf around herself and seems to beg for his protection. Gurn watches as James kisses the sprite. When it is time for the others to return, the Sylphide hides in James's armchair, and he covers her with a plaid. Gurn tells the others what he has witnessed and pulls the plaid aside, but the Sylphide is gone. All that remains is a bundled scarf. The rest of the guests arrive and dance in various formations, as the Sylphide, visible only to James, flits among them. As the bridal couple is about to exchange rings, the Sylphide snatches Effie's ring from James's hand and dashes out of the house. He runs after her, leaving the wedding guests stunned.

The second act takes place in a misty forest. Madge summons the other witches, who dance around a boiling cauldron, out of which Madge pulls a scarf. The mist clears, and the Sylphide and James appear. She shows him how she lives and introduces him to a bevy of other sylphs. But as they dance together, she constantly escapes his grasp. James seeks advice from Madge, who gives him the scarf and advises him to wrap it around the Sylphide. This, she explains, will make the Sylphide's wings fall off. But when he captures her, the loss of the Sylphide's wings also marks her death. The sylphs carry her aloft, while the wedding procession of Effie and Gurn crosses the stage. As James falls to the ground, grief-stricken, the witch rises over him triumphantly.[15]

Commentators have often interpreted *La Sylphide* as an allegory of the search for the ideal, as represented by the Sylphide.[16] And such an interpretation is

surely borne out in the searching, yearning movements of James, who is so often late in arrival, the sylph having fluttered elsewhere. Yet, it seems that there is also a darker design that is compatible with the incidents of the ballet. It is the story of marriage, of socially licensed sexuality, and of what is possible and impossible, sanctioned and forbidden, with respect to courtship.[17]

The theme of whom one may marry, of course, is a recurring one in Romantic ballet, although it emerges as early as the Pre-Romantic ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1789). It appears, for example, in the major works like *Ondine*, *Alma*, and *Giselle*, as well as in *La Sylphide*. In *Giselle*, the theme of whom one may *not* marry is portrayed most realistically and straightforwardly. One must stick with one's own social class or risk destruction. In *La Sylphide*, perhaps the sylphs represent an aristocratic station to which James ought not aspire. They are certainly *higher* than he, considering their aerial capabilities (not new to this ballet, but nevertheless symbolically potent here). In any case, they, along with the tribe of witches, stand for the Other, for some literally alien group outside what is given as James's natural and appropriate network of affections – so often portrayed as a ring of joyous, folkish dancers.

Within the farmhouse, James is surrounded by his people. And the ballet literalizes the ethnocentric proclivities of peoples to identify themselves as the People and, in consequence, to regard outsiders as not quite human, or, in the case of *La Sylphide*, as downright inhuman – as bewinged creatures sometimes marked by insectile movement and even more generally by "unnatural" movement (i.e., balletic movement which, parenthetically, also connotes aristocratic movement).[18] The action of the ballet, in turn, mobilizes this association of the inside/human/folk in order to cast marriage to outsiders and nonfolk – to sylphs, foreigners, and other nonhumans – as destined to go badly.

So, in terms of its plot, *La Sylphide* is fundamentally about whom one should marry and whom one shouldn't. But it advances this theme in its very structure, not simply in its plot. Symbolically, the ballet presents two options: marriage *inside* the group, which is depicted as human and as sanguine, and marriage or love *outside*, which is portrayed as union with the inhuman and as inevitably tragic. In short, freely borrowing from Lévi-Strauss, one might say that *La Sylphide* is a myth about the regulation of marriage – i.e., it is about whom it is appropriate to marry. Working out the inappropriateness of marrying one of *them* instead of one of *us* – the inhuman rather than a human; the Other rather than a member of the community – not only supplies the thematic motivation for the plot development in *La Sylphide*. It also serves as the basis for the articulation of an overarching choreographic structure of studied and highly connotative contrasts. This is developed in terms of contrasts between the endogamous marriage – within the population of Scots – and the exogamous marriage – between a Scot and a sylph.

In order to analyze the choreographic structure, it will be useful first to discuss the movement structures for the three salient groups in the ballet (the Scots, the witches, and the sylphs). Then I will analyze the choreography for the key individuals (the Sylphide, Effie, James, and Madge) and for their interactions.

In terms of the myth of marriage regulation, the audience is presented with three "tribes," only one of which it is appropriate for humans to marry into, since of the three groups only one is human. Although they have aspects and even steps in common, each of these tribes is marked off by distinctive movement qualities. Even if a particular gesture or step is replicated from one group to another, it does not always have the same look or significance. The same step may be performed in disparate styles, taking on an entirely discrete identity (for instance, both Effie and the Sylphide do rondes de jambes en l'air, but in one case this signals precision and closure, while in the other it suggests weightlessness and porosity). Or, it may be clear that a member of one group is "quoting" the movement as well as the style of another group (as when Gurn flaps his arms and then poses *à la* Sylphide to show the Scots what he has seen, i.e., the Sylphide; or when, in the forest, the Sylphide gestures in the Highland Fling shape and style similar to that seen among the Scots in Act I – right arm held shoulder height, left arm curved solidly over the head – to signal to James her desire to marry him and her willingness to join his clan).

The initial group, the Scots, have two dances in Act I: first, there is the entry of Effie's women friends, and then a dance of the whole community, including both males and females. Each dance is done in a distinctive folkdance style, with allusions to such Scottish dances as the Highland Fling. The women's dance is a brief, brisk ceremonial entry. Two phalanxes of four young women, led by a ninth female dancer, hold their left arms jauntily akimbo in the style we soon come to recognize as characteristic of the Scots. Their right arms, however, hold either the hems of their kilts (suggesting a curtsey) or a gift. They nod their heads or turn them smartly on the beat of the music, and they kick their feet forward as they step, like frisky colts. After the fortune-telling episode and the pas de deux between James and the Sylphide, the women enter in the same formation as before, followed by two phalanxes of men playing bagpipes. Now the entire community dances, making more complex floor patterns, forming and reforming lines, circles, and squares, and dividing up sometimes into couples and sometimes into single-gender groups. Their ability to form these dance figures cooperatively signals their social cohesion.

The dominant movement qualities of the two Scottish dances – earthbound energy, dexterity, and strength contained within limited, hemmed-in spaces – indicate that this is sturdy farming stock. Both men and women wear utilitarian shoes, and the men and women often dance identical steps close to the ground, side by side or facing one another, with arms intertwined or crossed as in a skating formation. At the same time, many of their dance figures are reminiscent of children's games, suggesting a playful spirit of celebration.

We have already seen the delicate Sylphide, wearing a white tulle dress and satin slippers (pointe shoes resembling the dress shoes for evening wear fashionable in the 1830s), dancing alone in a distinctly ethereal, balletic style. When she has danced with James, the two contrasted sharply, and they never touched. Therefore, the folkdance style here, performed by hearty, earthy people wearing

bright jackets and plaid kilts and scarves, strongly connotes, first, that the Sylphide does not belong here; their movement, in Labanalysis terms, is bound, while hers is free. And that contrast, taken literally, perhaps explains why James has become obsessed with her, for she seems to represent a realm outside of, and free from, social constraints. Second, the folkdance style signals that this is a community that dances to the same beat and whose steps and hands intricately interlock – metaphorically, a community with shared values, knowledge, and behavior.

Older adults, marriageable youth, and children all take part in the second folkdance. The designs of the choreography emphasize both the theme of matrimony and reproduction within a closed group and the counter-theme of the runaway bridegroom. Almost all the participants in the dance, even the widowed older adults, are potential brides and grooms. In their dance, they not only celebrate the upcoming nuptials of James and Effie, but also show off their own prowess as prospective mates. That there are several generations in the dance promises continuity; through dancing, the children learn the courtship rituals and are initiated into the community. Moreover, various dance figures seem to symbolize matrimonial union sanctioned by and enclosed within the community, as repeatedly couples are formed and reformed out of small groups as well as the whole. When lines of couples cover the space in criss-cross patterns, or when they break apart to form neat rows, images of domesticated landscapes, plowed fields, and the multiplication both of crops and of progeny arise. When all join hands to form a large circle, the community as a whole contains, but does not subsume, individuals, couples, and families. But within this image of equality and unity, something is amiss. For when the group moves into a quadrille, and Effie changes partners, coming "home" she ends up alone, for James, who has run after the Sylphide, is absent from the "home" position.

The second group to appear are the witches, at the beginning of Act II. More a gang than a community, they dance in a circle but, unlike the humans, make no physical contact with one another. Their gestures are angular, asymmetrical, and mechanical; their hands are perennially twisted and splayed, and Madge's fingers are preternaturally long. Although the witches, too, are strong and earth-bound, they are shown as the opposite of the agile humans. Their movements are jerky and spasmodic as they greet one another, crouch by the cauldron, and pass around cups of infernal brew and bolt it down. Snake-like, they press their bellies to the ground. Although they live in nature, they are anything but natural (in the sense of wholesome). Rather, resembling the grotesque figures in Renaissance antimasques, they are monstrous inversions of humanity.

The third "tribe" are the sylphs. Like the witches, they live in nature in a single-sex community, where there can be no reproduction. In fact, the sylphs seem undifferentiated in many respects besides gender. Their movements are not only identical, but extremely symmetrical. They are dressed identically. They look so much alike – as if they were clones – that James can't find his beloved Sylphide when she disappears within the group. If the farmers and the witches

are earthbound, the sylphs are airborne. If they are strong, the sylphs are lighter than air. Moving up onto pointe and back down again, taking small vertical jumps and mincing steps (bourrées) that make them appear to hover in place and skim rapidly along the ground, they are more like hummingbirds or moths than women. Their arms float upward weightlessly. The music they dance to has no beat, and its instrumentation – a solo flute and harp – sounds wispy and feminine. In contrast to the humans, their gestures and steps are airy and open; their bodies seem boundaryless and permeable.

The contrast among these three groups is even more starkly drawn in the individual members of the groups whose fates are intertwined in the drama and the ways those individuals interact choreographically. The first character we see dancing is the Sylphide. Her motions are as mercurial as her moods. When the curtain opens, she kneels at James's armchair, in the dainty, contemplative pose – her chin resting on her right hand, her right elbow resting on her left hand – from the well-known painting by G. Lepaulle of the original French version of the ballet. She is by turns gracious, cautious, confident, loving, and mischievous; she moves forward and back from James's chair as if to embody some ambivalence about revealing herself to him; she begins with low, small-scale footwork and then opens into space-devouring leaps; above all, she is never fixed in one place. Her back is flexible, and her movement sequences are extremely fluid. And when she dances in her own habitat, in the second act, her hovering (with the help of some unobtrusive stage machinery) turns into flight. In both spaces, James has trouble catching her or finding her (unlike a wife, who's always at home). In contrast to Madge, who often gestures powerfully downward, the Sylphide's tendency is to move up – into chimneys or trees.

Moreover, it is important to note that the Sylphide has a special relationship to the apertures of the house (the chimney, the window, the door), and that Madge, too, is first sighted at the hearth. Both are liminal figures, who straddle cultural boundaries – inside/outside, natural/supernatural. The Sylphide is not only ambivalent, she is also ambiguous. For although she is childlike, seemingly innocent, and fragile, she also has a seductive, perhaps even demonic side. Dance historian Erik Aschengreen has remarked that in certain interpretations of the ballet, the Sylphide "was directly related to the witch Madge" and that the French critic Jules Janin had found the character "both dangerous and enchanting."[19] That the Sylphide and Madge are never simultaneously present on stage may suggest that they are mysteriously related as reverse images.[20]

After the Sylphide vanishes up the chimney, Effie and her friends enter. Although her part largely involves mime, Effie has one small solo dance, which she does to welcome her wedding guests. Where the Sylphide was tentative, Effie is perfectly at home. She plants herself firmly in the center of the room and, as she opens first her right arm, then her left arm in a wide, open gesture of welcome, she turns to each side to survey the room. In an echo of the opening scene, she too kisses James, who has once again fallen asleep in his chair. But he is startled, rather than enchanted, when he wakes this time. After Effie's friends

offer her gifts, she dances. Slowly and deliberately placing her left hand on her hip and her right hand overhead, she performs a few steps of some fancy footwork. Although her leg gestures are similar to the Sylphide's, they seem more mundane. Her crisp delivery, the way her raised foot crosses at her knee or ankle, her close turns, and her sharp changes of direction all give the dance a folkish air. And when her dance ends, she again performs her wide embrace, one arm opening out at a time to include all the guests.[21]

Dancing for her guests, Effie is outwardly directed, presentational in her gestures. Her dancing has a social purpose, just as her sexuality will be channeled toward social reproduction. In contrast, the Sylphide, in her first dance, seems to play by herself and for herself. She touches herself both protectively and provocatively when James approaches her, and although in her second dance she communicates her need for him, it is not clear what form her desire could take. Effie is potentially a mother; the Sylphide certainly is not. In some ways, Effie is sweet and innocent, but she can also be tenacious. She has definite plans for her future, and they include marriage. Furthermore, she will not be a wife entirely dominated by her husband. When James brutally seizes the witch's arm, Effie calms him down, insists that Madge be given a drink of liquor to warm her bones, and begs James to let the witch tell the maidens' fortunes.

A moment before we suddenly see the witch crouching to warm herself at the hearth, James wraps Effie ceremoniously in a plaid scarf, the tartan of his clan. (This scarf, of course, foreshadows another scarf – the poisoned one that serves as the instrument of the Sylphide's death.) When the witch and the guests leave, and Effie goes upstairs to change, the Sylphide returns to the farmhouse, this time through the window. And now, James kneels at her feet. At first she mimes her sadness at James's marriage. But she brightens as she invites James to come home with her to the forest, and her dancing becomes flirtatious. Or perhaps her powers of enchantment are magical; twice she seems to pull James toward the door, but each time he, remembering his vows, resists. She wraps herself in the same portentous scarf that James had wrapped around Effie and looks at him coyly as if to implore him to put her in his fiancée's place during the wedding ceremony. The wedding guests return, do their folkdancing, and the wedding ritual begins, only to be broken when James rushes out the door to follow the Sylphide.

In a sense, James has two broken nuptials. And although each interrupted ceremony takes place in a completely different realm, his two solo dances in the two acts are very similar. He seems literally to jump for joy. And not only does he jump; he jumps high and wide, moving across the stage and taking up so much space that he presses the Scots (in Act I) and the sylphs (in Act II) to the very perimeters of the stage. James also turns while he jumps, executing the most complex steps in the entire ballet.[22] As well, he does rapid, detailed footwork, beating his ankles together and performing entrechats.

However, even though the steps James performs in each solo are similar, they have different meanings in the two different circumstances. In Act I, his solo takes place just after the entry of the wedding guests. It is almost a ritual display of the

Plate 2 Hans Beck as Madge, Valborg Guldbrandsen as Effie, Gustav Uhlendorff as James in Act I of Bournonville's *La Sylphide* (1903). Photograph by Georg Lindstrom. Courtesy of the Royal Theatre Archive and Library, Copenhagen.

bridegroom's favorable qualities. As he holds his arms in a circle above his head (a high fifth port de bras) and then moves the circle downward (a low fifth port de bras), he seems to frame his head and torso, presenting himself as if in a portrait, as if to say "Look how handsome I am, and see how heroic my uplifted chest is!" When he jumps high and turns in mid-air, the community can observe his strength and coordination. When he dispatches his entrechats, they can take stock of his ability for detailed precision, as well as the speed with which he works. His consumption of space signals a distinctively male-coded drive to control territoriality, which in turn connotes power.[23]

In Act II, James performs certain steps slightly differently; for instance, the beats of his ankle resemble the fluttering steps of the sylphs more than the bold, highly controlled footwork of his earlier dance. And he even adopts some of the sylphs' steps. This solo, unlike the solo in the farmhouse, is segmented, its parts alternating with responses from the Sylphide. Thus it is really part of a pas de deux, which, in turn, is sandwiched between group dances by the sylphs. So in the second solo, James seems less to be demonstrating his strength and skills than to be introducing himself, having a challenge dance with his beloved, and then being incorporated into the group.

If James is powerful, here in the forest his nemesis, Madge, proves to be even more so. Crouching by the fire, bending over her cane, or limping toward a seat, in Act I she looks like a helpless old woman, gnarled and crippled. But in the opening scene of Act II, she is in her element. Her arms weave strange incantations over the cauldron's brew. She beckons commandingly for her sister witches to join her. And when they do, her gestures become elated and expostulatory. She thrusts them strongly upward, outward, and downward. She seems, with her arms, to be ranting like a mad scientist or hysterical dictator. The same powerful thrusting gestures later in this act shove Gurn to his knees to propose to Effie, and James to his knees to beg for Madge's help. When James asks Madge's forgiveness for his rude treatment of her in the farmhouse, she draws herself up, gesturing both the pride of one whose dignity was insulted and the exultation of one who will never forgive, but will ultimately achieve her revenge. After the Sylphide's death, the witch lifts her arms above her head and seems to tower over James, showing that she is literally above him.[24] But merely to kill him would not suffice. She pulls him back into semiconsciousness to make him suffer more deeply as he watches the Sylphide's funeral. In the final tableau, she lifts her arms triumphantly as she crouches by James's prone body.

On the one hand, *La Sylphide* operates, in a broad sense, like a cautionary tale, warning that romance outside one's social circle risks destruction and death. Certainly, Bournonville, as well as the Copenhagen society he inhabited, agreed wholeheartedly with that message.[25] But on the other hand, *La Sylphide* indulges forbidden wishes, allowing James to gambol with the woodland sylphs for the best part of the second act before he is killed. In this way, the ballet is reminiscent of so many crime stories whose final moral lesson – that crime does not pay – is preceded by waves of gratifying violence and mayhem. Similarly, *La Sylphide*

admonishes against courtship outside the group, but only after painting it in idyllic colors, thus in the last instance taking back with one hand what it has lavishly entertained with the other.[26]

Marriage, of course, has always been an important social theme in Western dancing. In the Renaissance, amateur ballets were mounted at royal wedding ceremonies, whereas with the professionalization of dance in the eighteenth century, representations of weddings were made part of the ballet itself.[27] With *La Sylphide*, however, an important turn is taken, one which profoundly marks the direction of the Romantic ballet. For in *La Sylphide*, as in many of its progeny, the theme of marriage is introduced, only to be subverted in various ways. If eighteenth-century ballets represented wedding ceremonies, Romantic ballets so often show them undermined. *La Sylphide*'s human marriage plot, like that of so many Romantic ballets, fails. But the human marriage plot is also dysphoric, for it seems James could not have been happy married to Effie. Rather than a celebration of the incorporation of the community, *La Sylphide* explores society's anxiety toward the Other, and perhaps toward the institution of marriage itself.

Giselle

The original version of *La Sylphide* was made two years after the July Revolution of 1830 and the establishment of Louis-Philippe's "bourgeois monarchy." *Giselle*, choreographed nearly ten years later, in 1841, embodies even more explicitly the values of that era, not only in terms of gender politics, but also in terms of class conflict and compromise, expressed through a gendered narrative of doomed love across class lines. Depending on how the role of the hero is played, the first act of the ballet may be read as the story either of a peasant girl's seduction and betrayal by a nobleman or of a tragically futile love affair that violates class boundaries – both well-known themes (the latter at least since Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloïse* [1761]), asserting similarly anti-aristocratic, democratic values.

The theme of seduction and abandonment, most commonly of a lower-class woman by a nobleman, is anti-aristocratic because it is more than simply a sad tale of love disappointed. It is a form of rape, and rape is not simply a matter of sex, but of political power. The European literary tale of seduction and abandonment speaks in sexual metaphors of the acutely asymmetrical power relations between classes. For the imagery of sexual predation not only invokes the libertinage of the ancien regime, but also stands for other kinds of non-sexual predation – for the social and economic exploitation and bondage of the peasantry and working class. Similarly, the theme of true love that is obstructed by class boundaries criticizes the rigidity of hierarchies and social barriers that insist on strictly endogamous and homogamous marriages.

But *Giselle* is also heir to gothic literature, horror tales, and boulevard melodramas. It adds to the familiar earthly tragedy of foiled love a note of the supernatural and of spiritual dis-ease. In its crucial second act, a regiment of female vampire-figures – the Wilis, ghosts of maidens who died before their

wedding days – wreaks revenge on men. But ultimately, class and gender warfare come to an end. An unholy night of terror ends, and with the dawn's light (at the ballet's conclusion) come peace and reconciliation.

Giselle has often been viewed as a story about the universality and transcendence of love, which endures beyond life itself. For instance, Ivor Guest refers to

> the fragility of the heroine, her mind balanced between reason and madness; the hero's love which outlives his passion and stretches out to seek his beloved beyond the tomb; the hopelessness of their love in this life, but the purification which it brings to his soul.[28]

However, there are other ways of understanding *Giselle*. I will argue here that *Giselle* is historically situated and that its love story is tightly bound into its original socio-political milieu. It does not speak of universals, but rather, serves as an allegory for the assertion of bourgeois individuality and as a metaphor for political compromise during a specific period of French history – the era of the "citizen-king" Louis-Philippe, a political regime consciously built on those centrist middle-class principles and rhetoric.

As Evan Alderson has shown, *Giselle* upholds bourgeois values in various ways:

> a woman triumphs, but her power has been channeled in a way that confines male sexual anxiety, subtly condones male aggression, and alleviates male guilt. . . . These same values appear to manifest a deep respect for women (at least for bourgeois wives and daughters) and a profound interest in private experience, especially the domestic emotions. Moreover, they are infused with the sentiment for beauty.

Alderson asserts convincingly that "whatever the avowed social oppositions of Gautier's aestheticism, he has not escaped 'the intolerable world of the bourgeoisie;' he has become its ideologist."[29]

Moreover, as I will argue, *Giselle* represents its heroine as a female nurturer firmly ensconced in the new, private bourgeois domain, turning her back on female community and terrorist feminist activism. The "noble spiritual love" that the ballet celebrates is not the triumph and transcendence of a universal human emotion, but, rather, a political affirmation of the self and of personal agency that is historically rooted, part and parcel of the French bourgeois ideology. Yet, ultimately that individual defiance is muted in a spirit of concession. In the context of the July Monarchy, harmony and reconciliation were less spiritual values than socio-political ones, and *Giselle*'s night of terror that ends with a peaceful sunrise clearly expresses a metaphoric desire for post-revolutionary tranquility – in particular, among women.[30] That the political metaphor is implicit and comes in romantic wrappings – turning inward and speaking of individualized feelings – fits with the new French middle-class preoccupations

regarding private life and a bourgeois view of freedom seen as a personal, rather than political, matter.[31]

The Paris Opéra itself was a site where class and gender had always been dramatized. I have already noted that in 1830 the institution had been converted from a state-owned enterprise to a state-subsidized private business and that the class make-up of the audience shifted accordingly, from predominantly aristocratic to mainly upper-middle class. No longer was the auditorium of the Opéra the haunt of aristocrats (a hierarchical replica of the court) or a hunting ground for social and sexual encounters – a place for the public performance of wealth, power, and erotic allure. However, backstage, a different kind of sexual "market" was established under Louis Véron's directorship in the Foyer de la Danse, where certain privileged men, many of them members of the Jockey Club, could now make assignations with the ballet dancers.[32]

In fact, as historian James H. Johnson has observed, the 1831 remodeling of the Opéra symbolized the management's change of policy and patronage by making the auditorium both visually less ostentatious (and thus less allied to aristocratic tastes) and fiscally more lucrative. Véron disciplined his audiences, forbidding spectators to leave their seats during the performance and dimming the house lights, but there was another, internal discipline – the *haut bourgeois* code of politeness – that transformed audience behavior.[33] And what was seen on the stage changed as well. Johnson points out that

> the underlying political messages of the operas [middle-class audiences] saw there . . . flattered just such [a bourgeois] identity, the identity of the respectable middle, the *juste milieu*, neither royalist nor revolutionary, opposed to religious fanaticism while still vaguely believing, dedicated to honor, allied with order, suspicious of the masses.[34]

It is with this system of morality and behavior in mind that we must analyze *Giselle*'s narratives of seduction, betrayal, madness, nuptial tragedy, revenge, and pardon. It will explain why both Albrecht and Giselle are "saved" – why he is not killed by the Wilis, and why she finally rests in peace in her grave.

Giselle was written by Théophile Gautier and Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges, inspired by two poems: "De l'Allemagne," by Heinrich Heine, and "Fantômes," from *Les Orientales*, by Victor Hugo. It was set to music by Adolphe Adam. Choreographed by Jules Perrot and Jean Coralli, the ballet was created to showcase Carlotta Grisi, the newest rising star of the Paris Opéra ballet, who was equally adept at dancing vivacious, earthy character dances and aerial, otherworldly roles.[35] She combined in one dancing body the best features of the famous rivals Fanny Elssler and Marie Taglioni, whom Gautier had characterized, respectively, as pagan and Christian.[36] In fact, this distinction holds for the entire ballet *Giselle*, for the first act is Christian and the second is pagan, although the styles of dancing are inverted: the first act is *terre-à-terre* and Elssleresque, while the second act is aerial and Taglioniesque.

Plate 3 Carlotta Grisi in *Giselle* (ca. 1844). Lithograph by Challamel. Courtesy of the Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

In the rustic setting of the German wine-country in Act I, we see Giselle's and Loys's cottages in the foreground.[37] In the original setting, a castle loomed in the distance. The gamekeeper Hilarion, who loves Giselle unsuccessfully, discovers that his rival, Loys, is in reality Duke Albrecht in disguise. Giselle and Albrecht enter and dance their vows of love. That they do the same steps in the same style, side by side, seems to imply that they are equal, and perhaps even suggests that there is no sexual hierarchy in this imagined peasant life, for there is no gender differentiation in their dancing here.

When the lovers are interrupted by Hilarion, Giselle rejects him. They are joined by a group of peasant girls, who arrive to take Giselle to harvest grapes. But she leads them all in a merry folkdance. Albrecht joins in; the fact that he is

the only man in the group speaks well for him, for it signals he has been accepted into the community. The young women – the "good sisters" of Giselle's earthly community – skip, hold hands, and look at one another. Their human contact and the angular knees and elbows of their joyous dancing – their *terre-à-terre*, literally earthy dancing – sets them apart from the Wilis, the inhuman "evil sisters" Giselle joins in the second act. Giselle's mother, Berthe, reprimands her for not working and for tempting fate. Berthe recounts the legend of the Wilis, who spirit away girls who love dancing, and she points out that Giselle is particularly vulnerable, for she already has a weak heart.

A royal hunting party enters the scene. The prince asks Berthe to provide them with water and a place to rest. His daughter, Bathilde, is enchanted with Giselle, who immediately confesses to her that she is in love, and Bathilde confides that she, too, is engaged. Giselle, giddy with joy, shows her gullibility and vulnerability in her interaction with Bathilde. While the royal party rests inside Giselle's cottage, a group of peasant youth arrives. They crown Giselle Queen of the Vintage, but in the midst of the merriment, Hilarion reveals Albrecht's deception. The Prince and Bathilde emerge from the cottage, and they recognize Albrecht, who is Bathilde's fiancé. Giselle goes mad, reprising in a tragic, twisted refrain – as if dredging them bitterly from her memory – the steps she had happily danced earlier with Albrecht, and she either dies of a broken heart or kills herself with Albrecht's sword.[38]

Act II takes place in a dank forest, the site of Giselle's tomb. Midnight strikes, and Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, appears, making her dancing rounds of her dominion. The regal, courtly quality of her dancing and the fact that she dances alone establishes her monarchy. She holds two branches of rosemary, an herb that symbolizes remembrance and fidelity. But in her rancorous empire, these are vindictive, rather than benevolent qualities. After marking her territory, she calls forth her subjects, the ghostly virgins, who make their obeisances to her, and they dance in formation. In contrast to the peasant girls, the Wilis dance with elegantly stretched, attenuated limbs. That the slow, beautiful, aristocratic movements in this ballet belong to evil spirits makes them entrancing in the same way vampires are, for they evince a combination of attraction, especially sexual magnetism, and repulsion. At the end of their dance, moving across the stage in arabesque penchée, they look like animals crawling or insects skimming the lake's surface. One is reminded that God condemned the serpent in the Garden of Eden to crawl forever on the earth.

Finally, Giselle emerges from her tomb to be initiated into their cult. She, too, strikes an arabesque and, spinning in a circle, looks like she is out of control, held in the thrall of an external force. For the first time, she does not enjoy dancing, for she is dancing against her will. She is an emblem of power and agency split apart, for if in Act I she experienced freedom of choice with little social power, in Act II Giselle wields the power with which Myrtha imbues her, but has no freedom. Her limp hands, her backwards jumps, the way her arms or head follow the rest of her body give the impression that she has no volition of her own.

Albrecht arrives to mourn Giselle, and her ghost appears to him and dances with him. At first she is elusive, like the Sylphide was to James, but soon their dancing becomes synchronized. Still, if on earth they danced close together and side by side, here they are more distant and cover more space, although when they do come together, he often lifts her. In this aristocratic realm, not only have their genders crystallized as distinct, but he partners her in ways that make her lofty and celestial. He literally elevates her, exalting her in a way he did not when she was alive.

Hilarion also arrives, and the Wilis dance him to death. That he dances constantly and agitatedly, either partnered by all of the Wilis or alone (with none of them), oscillates between suggesting anonymous promiscuous sex and celibacy. Either way, Hilarion is unlike Albrecht, who is faithful to one partner. But when Myrtha signals that Albrecht is the next victim, Giselle defies her, placing herself in front of her lover as if to shield him. She and Albrecht try to take sanctuary near the cross on her tomb, but Myrtha forces Giselle to dance. She does so slowly, as if hypnotically possessed, and her dancing entices Albrecht away from the protection of the cross.

At first Giselle and Albrecht dance an extended adagio. (The Wilis, lined up on either side, do not seem to notice that this kind of dancing will never exhaust their chosen victim.) This seems like a suspended moment, out of time, when instead of moving the narrative action forward, the dancers are pausing to express an emotional quality. It is a private instant of tenderness and intimacy. Then the music and the dancing speed up, and once again their dancing seems to control them, rather than the other way around. Now it is as if what gave them joy in life – dancing together – has become their curse. Giselle beseeches Myrtha, even bringing her the flowers Albrecht had placed on her grave, but the Queen is relentless in her command. From time to time Albrecht falls down, exhausted, but Myrtha repeatedly forces Giselle to entice him back into dancing with her.

But at last, just as Albrecht falls into a final exhaustion, dawn breaks. The Wilis disappear. In the original scenario, Albrecht rose to place Giselle on a mound of flowers, and as she began to be pulled into the earth, the Prince and Bathilde arrived. Giselle left Albrecht forever, gesturing farewell and signaling her wish that he should marry Bathilde. In the modern version, Giselle returns to her tomb, leaving Albrecht alone. In one staging, he gathers up the flowers he had put on her grave and as he backs away from her tomb, drops them one by one. When the last one is gone, metonymically suggesting that Giselle and he are parted forever, he collapses.[39]

Although Act I is set in Germany, its references to the sexual cruelty of an aristocracy that unfeelingly sows its wild oats among the peasants has unmistakable parallels to the French pre-Revolutionary *ancien régime*, as well as to the Bourbon restoration. While *jus primae noctis* and *droit du seigneur* may or may not have been myths, they are nevertheless powerful social images that stand for the untrammeled greed and lust of the nobility. Perhaps Act I of *Giselle* even recalls the Marquis de Sade's many tales of innocent women raped and discarded by

dissolute noblemen. *Giselle*'s first-act narrative also bears similarities to the love plot of Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* (1828), but without the latter's revolutionary setting.

La Muette de Portici, also known as *Masaniello*, sets its story of impossible love against a backdrop of the 1647 Neapolitan uprising against the Spanish. The mute heroine, Fenella, is seduced and abandoned by Alphonse, son of the Spanish duke. Like Giselle, Fenella kills herself; like Albrecht, Alphonse repents. Although a performance of the opera in Brussels is said to have sparked the Belgian revolution of 1830, Johnson points out that its ultimate message was not revolutionary, but politically moderate, for Fenella's brother, the fisherman Masaniello who had stirred up revolution to defend her honor, ultimately rejects political violence. "Scribe's political message is clear: tyranny of either stripe, royalist or revolutionary, is shameful; there are good, if fallible, aristocrats just as there are decent commoners; however necessary, sudden political change is dangerous, so a prudent middle path is best."[40]

In much the same way, despite the potentially anti-aristocratic theme in *Giselle*, by the end of Act I Albrecht appears to be devastated by Giselle's death, and by the beginning of Act II he is genuinely repentant. This in itself mitigates a revolutionary message, but there are other factors – chief among them Giselle's protection of him and our complete lack of sympathy for his rival, Hilarion – that do so, as well.

It is Act II, however, where the main interest of the ballet lies. Indeed, all of Act I seems to exist only as a pretext for the action in Act II, and this factor, too, stresses the palliative aspect of the narrative. (This should not be surprising, since Gautier's original scenario consisted only of a version of the second act.) The folkish character of the dancing (alternating with storytelling mime) and the portrayal of a human community with its divisions between class and gender in Act I give way to a cold, stern, glittering choreography that takes place in a nether world ruled by women devoid of human distinction – or human feeling. In a variation with feminist significance on the vampire legend, where usually men prey on women, here it is the women who indiscriminately drain men of life.

In Gautier's original description, the Wilis were somewhat distinguishable as dancing girls with various personalities and costumes, corresponding to different sorts of ballet character dances, but they still somehow seemed identical:

> First, with a purring of castanets and a swarming of white butterflies, with a large comb cut out like the interior of a Gothic cathedral, and silhouetted against the moon, comes a cachucha dancer from Seville, a gitana, twisting her hips and wearing finery with cabalistic signs on her skirt – then a Hungarian dancer in a fur bonnet, making the spurs on her boots chatter, as teeth do with cold – then a *bibiaderi* in a costume like Amani's, a bodice with a sandal-wood satchel, gold lamé trousers, belt and necklace of mirror-bright mail, bizarre jewellery, rings through her nostrils, bells on her ankles – and then, lastly, timidly presenting

> herself, a *petit rat* [ballet girl] of the Opéra in practice dress, with a kerchief round her neck and her hands thrust into a little muff. All these costumes, exotic and commonplace, are discoloured and take on a sort of spectral uniformity.[41]

Although eventually the Wilis were dressed identically, in long white tutus, even this early scenario suggests their uncanny property of sameness simultaneously linked to their femininity. That they are dancing virgins, after all, is what they have in common, and so their danger itself seems to come from their clone-like features: their female sex and their interchangeability.

The lightness and soft footwork of the Wilis' dancing and their mothlike costumes, added to their clone-like character, gives them, like the sylphs in *La Sylphide*, an insectile quality. So, too, does their vampiric, preying nature and their characteristic horizontal arabesque penchée. Indeed, they seem to be embodiments of – or at least closely related to – the Greek Furies, blood-sucking "virgin daughters of Night" in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, who were perhaps originally figured as pestilent buzzing, swarming flies in ancient myth.[42] The Furies tell Orestes, the matricide:

> No, neither Apollo, nor Athena's strength
> will rescue you, perishing, uncared for,
> knowing in your heart no whereabouts of joy,
> the blood sucked from you, fodder for ghosts,
> a shade.
>
> . . .
>
> Come join the dance; let us join in it!
> for we have made our decision
> to reveal the song of hatred:
> how we, the Furies' regiment,
> administer men's fated lives.[43]

Later, Orestes *is* saved by Athena, just as Albrecht is saved by Giselle's protection, although in the ballet the Wilis simply disappear – instead of being transformed, like the Furies, into beneficent household spirits (the Eumenides).

Surely, however elegant they looked on the ballet stage, the Wilis, that threatening mob of spiteful women, must have called up cultural memories of activist women during the Revolution and the Terror – demonstrating, rioting, and taking up arms.[44] Both revolutionary women and Marie Antoinette were characterized at the time as "furies."[45] As dance historian Joellen Meglin points out, "The Romantic ballet communicated a . . . horror of congregations of women. . . . Women acting in concert were characterized as vindictive, wrathful, and remorseless; they were the fearsome oppressed who would vent their fury in judgment of the oppressors. The *corps de ballet* was a kind of irrational mob taking

justice into its own hands. . . . Like the hellish women agitators of the Revolution, they tried to exert control over other women against their wills."[46]

If those in the audience remembered their Aeschylus as well as they remembered the violence of revolutions, they might indeed have prayed, along with the Eumenides at the end of Aeschylus's play,

> that never in this city shall stir the noise
> of faction, that is never sated with evils.
> May the dust never drink the black blood
> of fellow citizens, in their lust for revenge,
> hunting for murder to answer murder,
> to the ruin of the city.
> Rather let them give joy for joy
> in harmony, a community united.[47]

This message of peace and reconciliation, coming from the tamed Furies, was what French post-revolutionary audiences wanted to hear from women.[48]

But there is another community of women of whom the Wilis would have reminded audiences. The Wilis, a cloistered, hierarchical company of virgins, were in a sense anti-nuns, dedicated to an unholy mission. This reversal of Christian values in an uncontrollable gang of women could connote sexual as well as political danger. For a group of women who only find pleasure in each other's company and go around killing men might well suggest lesbian "perversions," and the idea that nuns indulged in homosexual activities was already a familiar theme in literature at least since the eighteenth century. In the first scene of de Sade's *L'Histoire de Juliette* (1797), for instance, the adolescent heroine is initiated into sapphic love at her convent school during a small orgy involving the abbess and another pupil. De Sade's motives for writing this scene, of course, were anticlerical, as were Diderot's in *La Religieuse*. Meglin argues that romantic literature repeated these themes, but in order to show the perversity of the revolutionary value of fraternity, symbolized now by sororal love: "illicit relations or incest with a sister, be she a sibling or a sister of the convent, were an obsession and sin célèbre."[49]

Suggestions of questionable goings-on in convents were not unfamiliar on the stage of the Opéra, either. Marie Taglioni's first great triumph had come in a scene reminiscent of the dance of the Wilis, the Ballet of the Nuns in Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le diable*. In it, she danced the role of the debauched abbess Hélène, one of the group of lapsed nuns who arise from their tombs at the Devil's behest, throw off their habits, and dance hedonistically. Hélène uses her sexual charms to entice Robert, the Devil's son and a nobleman, into taking a magic talisman that will win him his beloved. The vices the nuns had practiced in their earthly lives are reenacted in the ballet. "Stirring the cold dust from the tombs, they suddenly throw themselves into delights from their past life; they dance like bacchantes, they gamble like lords and drink like soldiers," wrote the reviewer for

the *Revue des deux mondes*.[50] The American Fanny Appleton describes the overall effect of the Ballet of the Nuns:

> It was magnificent and terrific and diabolical and enchanting and everything else fine. The music and the show and the dancing! The famous witch's dance [*sic*], in the freezing moonlight in the ruined abbey, was as impressive as I expected. . . . They drop in like flakes of snow and are certainly very charming witches with their jaunty Parisian figures and most refined pirouettes! . . . The diabolical music and the dead rising from their tombs and the terrible darkness and the strange dance unite to form a stage effect almost unrivalled.[51]

Gautier's description of *Giselle*'s second act shows just how close the Wilis were to the ghosts of the lapsed nuns in *Robert le diable*:

> With her characteristic melancholy grace [Adèle Dumilâtre, in the role of Myrtha] frolics in the pale star-light, which glides over the water like a white mist, poises herself on flexible branches, leaps on the tips of the grass, like Virgil's Camilla, who walked on wheat without bending it, and, arming herself with a magic wand, she evokes the other *Wilis*, her subjects, who come forth with their moonlight veils from the tufted reeds, clusters of verdure, and calixes of flowers to take part in the dance. She announces to them that they are to admit a new *Wili* that night. Indeed, Giselle's shade, stiff and pale in its transparent shroud, suddenly leaps from the ground at Myrtha's bidding. . . . The shroud falls and vanishes. Giselle, still benumbed from the icy damp of the dark abode she has left, makes a few tottering steps, looking fearfully at the tomb which bears her name. . . . All at once, as though she wished to make up for the time wasted in that narrow bed fashioned of six long planks and two short ones, to quote the poet of *Leonore*, she bounds and rebounds in an intoxication of liberty and joy at no longer being weighed down by that thick coverlet of heavy earth.[52]

The image of Wilis as anti-nuns has an anticlerical inflection, but it is recuperated in the Christian quality of Giselle's sufferance and forgiveness of Albrecht.

The Wilis might have recalled yet another group of women for *Giselle*'s audiences: the large numbers of single women, both working class and middle class, who were beginning to cause a number of social anxieties, including those about prostitution, but also about population decline. Feminist historian Claire Goldberg Moses points out that the spinster brought shame on the bourgeois family, that there were extremely limited professional options available to her (partly because she was usually inadequately educated), and that these few opportunities were so competitive and poorly paid they often brought her to the edge of poverty.[53] According to the historian Adeline Daumard, "The old maid

was a burden, useless and disdained. In truth, the older spinster woman, almost always with very limited resources, lived so completely on the edge of society that she hardly even belonged to the bourgeoisie."[54] For the working-class woman, who was even less likely to marry, there were fewer options: back-breaking factory work, domestic service, work convents, and prostitution. Even going to prison was a way for these women to get food and shelter.[55]

The normative expectation, at least for bourgeois women, was that all women would get married in order to channel their sexuality "properly" – but in fact a large proportion did not. For working-class women, prostitution was often the only alternative to starvation, and in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, prostitution – both legal and illegal – flourished. The number of prostitutes in Paris tripled.[56] Therefore what was perceived as the rampant sexuality of single women was a source of enormous cultural anxiety. The Wilis were like a pack of surplus single women – unprocreative old maids (still a sexual threat, since celibacy was as frowned upon in French society at this time as promiscuity) or potential prostitutes.

Indeed, since dancing is often a metaphor for libidinous sexuality, that the Wilis all died from "dancing too much" hints that, while they may have died with their virginity intact, nevertheless, they perished from excess lust. And this suggestion may be borne out in the choreography of *Giselle*. Hilarion, after all, expires because his dancing is not regulated by one partner. As I noted above, he either dances alone (implying celibacy) or is passed along the entire line of Wilis (implying the anonymous promiscuity of illicit sex). Giselle is able to modulate her partner's dancing, and thus to save him; her control of his timing, a metaphor for her efficient management of his sexuality, argues in favor of bourgeois marriage and the new marital values of sexual fidelity.

The character Giselle, of course, hails neither from the French urban working class nor from the bourgeoisie; she is a German peasant. But in the binary established by the ballet, she is "not-aristocratic," and therefore, for the Opéra's audiences, could stand for French bourgeois womanhood. She is not precisely an old maid, since she was engaged to marry in life and died prematurely. Still, the heart of her tragedy is that she could not marry, and that is certainly analogous to the mundane misfortune of the bourgeois spinster.

But at the same time, she is analogous to the working girl. The marriage Giselle had dreamed of could not have taken place in the society she lived in, for not only differences in class status, but also Albrecht's betrothal to another woman kept her apart from her lover. Certainly this was the case for many nineteenth-century French working women who found themselves, if not in love with, at least sexually involved with married men (often their employers) from the upper classes.[57] Since marriage was strictly homogamous in regard to class, these lower-class women could not possibly hope to legitimize either their relationships or the children born of these liaisons.[58] Nevertheless, in the ballet Giselle ultimately does transcend these barriers to become her lover's partner, and this is what allows her finally to rest in peace.

The lovers inhabit two different communities in *Giselle*, and their nuptials seem to be twice broken. But the marriage grid I discussed in the Introduction is more complicated in this ballet than in many others. In the first act, the marriage plot fails both because of Giselle's death and because of Albrecht's elite class origins (as well as his betrothal), and the affective value of that marriage in the human community changes from euphoric to dysphoric when Albrecht's true identity is revealed. In the second act, a new marriage plot in one sense also fails, for Albrecht survives and lives, while Giselle is dead. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, these lovers are not joined in death. Rather, Albrecht will marry Bathilde (at least in the original scenario; in modern versions he is simply alone at the end), although in some way Giselle will also always be "with" him. The affective value of a potential "marriage" between Giselle and Albrecht in the community of Wilis, however, is dysphoric.

Nevertheless, from the author's and audience's point of view, the outcome, although sad, is also euphoric, for Giselle does elude the society of the Wilis and finds peace, while Albrecht survives on earth. And in this sense, their "marriage" does not fail, but actually succeeds – although it only lasts one night. The consummation of that marriage is spiritual, not physical; it is their act of dancing together tenderly while ultimately resisting Myrtha's thrall. Perhaps this complexity of the marriage plot and the oscillation of affect in *Giselle* partly accounts for the ballet's longevity.

Although the ballet is unlike *Romeo and Juliet* in that only one partner dies, in other aspects it resembles Shakespeare's play in ways that are worth examining briefly. Shakespeare's play, too, is often seen as a paean to eternal, universal, transcendent love. And yet, analyzed from a historical point of view, it can be seen as an assertion of the birth of individualism against the feudal epoch. Romeo and Juliet defy the social divisions that forbid their love (between warring families, rather than between *Giselle*'s incompatible classes). Juliet's refusal to comply with the feudal practice of arranged marriages participates in that defiance. The lovers' deaths constitute a tragedy on a personal level, but on a political level they triumph, for they have succeeded in rejecting the outmoded, feudal political system that stifled individual choice in order to further the community's and the family's rigid socio-political codes and interests. Similarly, *Giselle* upholds the right to individual choice, so key to the bourgeois ethos, in the face of hierarchical, autocratic laws regarding both marriage and revenge.

Still, the ending of *Giselle* does not advocate individual rights at the expense of social order, and in this regard, the ballet endorses the political status quo. For finally, as in the bourgeois monarchy itself, there is a *rapprochement* between the aristocracy and its Other. Albrecht, like the French monarchy itself, is not totally absolved of his sins, but rather, he is pardoned; he is reinstated to his former condition, yet – perhaps like Louis-Philippe, or at least like the official images of the citizen-king – somewhat chastened.

As for Giselle, she too is recuperated by the bourgeois domain. Dancing against her will to exhaust Albrecht, yet tenderly ministering to him all the while,

she becomes precisely the figure of the consoling caregiver and partner so prized by the emerging bourgeois domestic ideology, set in direct contrast to the unnatural, vengeful, all-too-public Wilis. She is not just Albrecht's dance partner, but his partner in spirit. She becomes one of the Eumenides, a beneficent domestic presence. And, as flutes and harps accompany Giselle's final descent, not into her grave but into a bed of flowers, she seems to be transformed into an angel, freed from the spell of the vindictive Wilis by the consummation of her union with Albrecht.

Anxieties about marriage and about women's sexuality were widespread in France in the 1830s and 40s. The utopian feminist movement that emerged in the 1830s, in particular the Saint-Simonians, called for sexual equality and love outside of the marriage institution, which – despite the rhetoric of bourgeois domesticity – was often simply an economic arrangement between families and which, although seen as woman's only natural fate, deprived her of all legal rights. Feminists advocated civil rights for women and called for the reform of marriage laws, including divorce.[59] *Giselle* assuages those anxieties. Its heroine deserts the ranks of angry celibates in order to become a protective caregiving figure, and her soul is saved by the consummation that takes place on her other-worldly wedding night. But still, she is dead; female self-sacrifice makes male survival possible. (However, it should be noted here that to many contemporary spectators, death ends existence, but to a large proportion of nineteenth-century viewers, of course, death was a doorway – albeit hedged about with dangers – to a greater spiritual life.) Evan Alderson observes, "the erotic is given and yet simultaneously denied. . . . Ideality . . . both captures and subverts [erotic stimulus] in the interests of sentiment and power."[60] Exogamy raises its ugly head, but is conveniently avoided. The ballet is pro-marriage, asserting that one must have a partner – but at the same time, it reminds us that not just any partner will do. *Giselle* presents an individualistic rebellion against the conventions of marriage, only to soften that message with centrist compromise.

Coppélia and the "decline" of French nineteenth-century ballet

It is interesting to note that *La Sylphide*, the first Romantic ballet, stands to *Coppélia* (1870), arguably the last significant nineteenth-century French ballet, as tragedy does to comedy. Both *La Sylphide* and *Coppélia* set up a conflict between a human community and its potential intrusion by a nonhuman (foreign) Other. In *La Sylphide*, the alien is supernatural, while in *Coppélia* alterity is subhuman, a robot. But whereas *La Sylphide* ends in the destruction of both protagonists, *Coppélia* ends in a successful, euphoric marriage and an incorporation of the human couple into the community. *La Sylphide* involves two sets of broken nuptials, but in *Coppélia* Frantz and Swanilda's wedding vows are happily sealed, and the threat to the joy of the human marriage, in the figure of the mechanical doll, is revealed as lifeless and harmless.

In many ways, the contrast in affect of these ballets is suggested by the state of contemporary French politics, for if the 1830s were a decade in search of stability, the late 1860s were a time of prosperity, confidence, and expansion. But the contrast in affect is also connected to sexual politics and to changing views of the institution of marriage itself. The Second Empire was, after all, the birthplace of the French bedroom farce, as epitomized in the playwright Eugène Labiche's various *ménages à trois*; indeed, his *The Happiest of the Three* was written in the same year as *Coppélia*. This period also saw the triumph of the operetta, which satirized and soufflèd the tragic love plots of grand opera.[61] In Jacques Offenbach's well-known operetta *La Belle Hélène* (1864), Helen of Troy is a bored Parisian housewife whose affair with Paris (the man) is justified for political reasons. Siegfried Kracauer notes that despite the operetta's tone of doom, "it allowed the accent to be put on eroticism and the gospel of pleasure. . . . In 1865 the whole of France was singing: *Dis-moi, Vénus, quel plaisir trouves-tu/A faire ainsi cascader, cascader la vertu?*"[62] Divorce was still illegal in France, but the licentious Second-Empire attitude toward extramarital sex was a far cry from the bourgeois view of virtue and marriage in *Giselle*.[63]

The scenario for *Coppélia, ou La Fille aux yeux d'émail*, written by Charles Nuitter (the Opéra's archivist), was derived from E.T.A. Hoffmann's fantasia *Der Sandmann*. But unlike the male protagonist of the Hoffmann story, who descends into hallucinations and madness as a result of his misdirected love, Frantz – the male protagonist of the ballet *Coppélia* – is rescued by his fiancée from his obsessive attraction to a life-size automaton. In fact, the fiancée, Swanilda, displaces Frantz as the main character of this ballet. It is she who cleverly impersonates the mechanical doll Coppélia; it is she who saves Frantz from losing his soul during Dr. Coppélius's alchemical experiments. With its lively music, by Léo Delibes, and its sparkling choreography, by Arthur Saint-Léon, the original ballet completely changed the meaning of Hoffmann's story. If *Der Sandmann* was dark and macabre, later serving Freud as a prime example of "the uncanny," *Coppélia* was sunny and effervescent – all brilliant surface – and it had a happy ending. That the role of Frantz was originally danced by a woman *en travesti* – dressed in man's clothing – feminized all the dancing and imbued the ballet with a light, bon-bon flavor.

In Act I, which takes place in a town square in Galicia, Swanilda sees a girl sitting on a balcony, reading a book, in a house opposite her own.[64] In Swanilda's efforts to get Coppélia's attention – she dances, prances, and stamps her foot in frustration – we see both the heroine's qualities and those of the automaton. Swanilda is friendly, lively, curious, clever, funny, tenacious, and passionate; all these traits are expressed by her dancing, and especially by the adroitness, speed, and variety of her footwork.[65] The agility of her legs and feet seems to stand for a nimble mind. Coppélia, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of animated. She is motionless, stony, unable to be roused.

When Frantz appears, Swanilda hides. He greets Coppélia; unlike Swanilda, he does not dance, but mimes his salutation to the new object of his affections.

Coppélia suddenly starts up awkwardly from her chair, leans forward, and moves her arms in a stiff, fitful sequence. Dr. Coppélius appears on the balcony. Swanilda expresses her anger at Frantz's infidelity and is joined by her girlfriends – a group in which she clearly is the vivacious leader. Then all the villagers enter and the group dances a joyous mazurka, to fast, lively music reminiscent of a cancan. Swanilda and Frantz quarrel, and Swanilda dances with her girlfriends. Their sparkling, springy allegro footwork, studded with beats and *changements*, in which no movement is held for more than a few seconds, not only stresses their vitality, but also shows Swanilda's emotional resilience. Unlike Effie or Giselle, when Swanilda thinks she has lost her fiancé's love, she takes action to change the situation.

In Act II, Dr. Coppélius leaves his house, dropping his key, and his house is infiltrated from two directions: Swanilda and her friends use the key to steal into the strange doctor's workshop, while Frantz climbs a ladder to enter through the balcony, in order to woo Coppélia. As the girls wreak havoc in the workshop, bringing a variety of automatons to life, Swanilda discovers that Coppélia is only a human-scale doll, a clockwork robot. But Dr. Coppélius enters, and the girls run away. Swanilda hides in the cabinet where Coppélia is kept. Next Frantz enters the workshop, and Dr. Coppélius drugs him. He prepares to transfer Frantz's soul to the body of Coppélia.

When Dr. Coppélius brings his robot daughter out of the cabinet to complete the transfer, Swanilda appears, disguised as Coppélia. She makes the automaton seem to come to life, as her movement become less angularly mechanical, more rounded and fluent. Dr. Coppélius, delighted that his magic seems to be working, but disgruntled at her increasingly wild behavior, commands Coppélia/ Swanilda to dance for him. He gives her a mantilla, and she performs a sultry Spanish dance; he gives her a tartan, and she does a lively Scottish dance. Her coordination is extraordinary, signaling her humanity.

Meanwhile, Swanilda keeps trying to rouse Frantz. Impatient, she becomes unruly, stamping on Dr. Coppélius's book, throwing the objects in the workshop into disorder, and refusing to obey the alchemist's orders. She is like a machine gone out of control, but she is also a most willful, recalcitrant daughter. Finally, as Frantz wakes up, Swanilda brings out the lifeless, unclothed doll – the real Coppélia – and pulls her lover out of the house, as Dr. Coppélius grieves over his inert robot and his lost experiment.

In the (now-lost) third act, Frantz and Swanilda celebrate their wedding, along with the other village couples. The allegorical figures of Dawn, Prayer, Work (in the persons of a spinner and harvest-women), Discord, War, and Peace all dance *divertissements*, and Hymen presides over the group wedding. Finally, Evening and Night appear, guiding the procession of Pleasure.

The contrast between the robot Coppélia's jerky, irregular spurts of movement and Swanilda's rhythmic, animated, highly articulate and well-balanced leg movements and footwork, coordinated with her gracious arm gestures – i.e., the *humanity* of her dancing – serves to highlight graphically which "woman" is more

desirable as a spouse. And the final absorption of the wedding couple into the folk dance figures of the group suggests that the community has ratified this union of human with human.

It is striking that in Act II, Swanilda carries out what might be seen today as a feminist revolution in Dr. Coppélius's workshop, zestily attacking the patriarchal control of the father-figure and flaunting her indocility. When she is disguised as Coppélia, her dancing metaphorically embodies an emancipatory movement from total restriction, dependent on the alchemist's authority, to autonomy, signified by her full range of motion and her impetuous, untameable actions. Yet this sense of freedom is recuperated in the final act, when Swanilda achieves her goal of marriage and reins in her riotous behavior. Thus, as in *La Sylphide*, the audience can enjoy the pleasures of untrammeled behavior, but still arrive peacefully at social harmony by the ballet's end. Still, unlike *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, this ballet represents women's power not as threatening, but as attractive.

The Romantic ballet flourished all over Europe, but especially in France, between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, during the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe, the citizen-king. As I have shown, despite its flirtations with rebellion and its anxieties about social order, the Romantic ballet largely upheld a bourgeois ethos regarding women's roles, women's sexuality, and the institution of marriage. But by the end of the Second Empire in 1870, when *Coppélia* was created, both the political and cultural climates had changed drastically. And so had the ballet stage.

Coppélia marked the end of an era – the conspicuously frivolous Second Empire of Napoleon III. Members of the corps de ballet lifted their skirts to sneak cancan steps into their appointed roles. And after the performances, dandies gathered backstage in the Foyer de la Danse to toast and seduce the ballet girls, in a manner even more flagrant than during the 1830s and 40s. Contemporary observers depict "the man of fashion" in the audience as interested only in the dancer's body, not in the dance. Charles Yriarte, for instance, described the Opéra milieu of 1867, in which even the tragedy of *Giselle* was reduced to frothy "fairylike effects . . . and ethereal *pirouettes*":

> The man of fashion at the Opéra, with his box or his stall, his favourite dancer, his opera-glasses, and his right of entry backstage, has a horror of anything which remains on the bills for a long time, of anything artistic, which must be listened to, respected, or requires an effort to be understood. . . . I wager that eight out of every ten *abonnés* prefer *Pierre de Médicis* to the fourth act of *Les Huguenots*, and *Néméa* to *Guillaume Tell*. And why? Simply because [the dancer] Louise Fiocre shows her limbs in *Pierre*, and her younger sister Eugénie shows much more than that in *Néméa*. . . . To the soothing strains of sweet and lively music your attention can wander from the calves of Mlle Brach or Mlle Carabin to the shoulders of Mme de N——; and during the interval, you can visit

> every box, or receive visitors in your own. That is the real Opéra, the only Opéra possible for this brilliant, light-hearted society.[66]

Novels and memoirs of the period insouciantly paint a picture of the ballet dancer as a *demi-mondaine.* The Comte de Maugny, locating the Foyer de la Danse as the border between the two sexual realms of Paris society, characterized the Opéra dancers as "the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the cream of the *demi-monde.*"[67] Of course, the wanton atmosphere of the ballet as a brothel may partly have been a literary fantasy, for as one writer reflected in *Le Figaro* in 1859,

> There is not one Parisian novel which does not introduce a banker or a man of fashion who keeps a ballet girl of the Opéra. But the *Académie de Musique* barely contains thirty *danseuses,* so that even if the *rats* and supers were included, there would be at least a thousand happy admirers for each of them.[68]

However, as dance historian Lynn Garafola has more soberly observed, the majority of ballet dancers were working-class women, and "poverty invites sexual exploitation, especially in a profession of flexible morals." Garafola ties the peculiar sexual situation of the nineteenth-century French ballet dancer to the bourgeoisification of Opéra during the Romantic era and its specific treatment of the dancer's sexuality as yet one more gratifying commodity to proffer its customers. "In the 1830s . . . the backstage of the Paris Opéra became a privileged venue of sexual assignation, officially countenanced and abetted. . . . For the millionaire libertines of the audience . . . performance [was] foreplay to possession" in the "private seraglio" the Opéra had become.[69] By the time of *Coppélia,* at the twilight of the Second Empire, the ostentatious transformation of the Opéra into a sexual marketplace that included the participation even of the Emperor seems to have become complete.[70]

At the same time, during the 1850s and 1860s, the technical prowess of the ballerina increased enormously, fed partly by the discoveries of Carlo Blasis in Milan and the Italian school of ballerinas who appeared on ballet stages all over Europe. Guest has characterized the Second Empire as one of "decadence" for the French ballet precisely because, as the female dancer grew in status, the male dancer's visibility decreased, until finally "his rôles were even taken from him and allotted to a female dancer."[71] Ballerinas dancing the parts of young heroes in male dress lent the ballets of this period a certain piquancy, as they leavened the style of "male" dancing with their rounded bodies and soft, light movements. For not only did women dance in travesty roles in order to create a homogeneous, feminized bodily style on stage – even during "heterosexual" courtship scenes. The abbreviated male costumes also allowed their legs to be bared nightly to the knee (a degree inconceivable in nineteenth-century daily life) and to become admired artistic – and sexual – objects. As Garafola puts it, "the *danseuse en travesti*

[was] that curious androgyne who invoked both the high poetic and the bordello underside of romantic and post-romantic ballet."[72]

Guest condemns travesty dancing as unnatural in explicitly sexual terms: "The triumph of the ballerina was complete, but the decline of the Romantic Ballet was made certain, for the eclipse of the male – evidenced by Degas' neglect of him in his pictures – could only lead, as in life itself, to sterility."[73] And yet, Guest also mentions in passing that this period saw the emergence of the ballet heroine – that is, of the female dancing protagonist who asserts agency – in works like *La Fonti* (1855), *L'Étoile de Messine* (1861), and *La Maschera* (1864). The intrepid Swanilda, in *Coppélia*, is the epitome of the new ballet heroine.

The innovative technical bravura of the ballerina now made representations of powerful ballet heroines possible. And the corresponding physical softening of the male roles, as danced by women in travesty, simultaneously created representations of less forceful men on stage. As Garafola remarks, male dancers were relegated to roles, like Dr. Coppélius, that required acting and mime, rather than dancing – parts that "could be performed by those long past their prime." She writes, "Men on the ballet stage were fine, it seemed, so long as they left its youthful, beardless heroes to the ladies and so long as they were elderly and, presumably, unattractive."[74]

This "inversion" of gender roles, of course, is foregrounded in *Coppélia*, in which Swanilda rescues her foolish fiancé, originally danced by a woman, through her resourcefulness, ingenuity, and bravado and thus also saves her relationship. Garafola sees the travesty dancer as a symbol of women's sexual exploitation both on stage and off stage at the Opéra. Both the removal of the "obstreperous male" from the ballet of the Second Empire and the suggestion of Sapphic love, she argues, cleared the way of any obstacles to the male spectator's enjoyment of his imagined harem.

Yet it is certainly possible, while agreeing that the ballet dancers were sexually exploited and were often presented on stage to be ogled, to see the dynamic of travesty dancing somewhat differently. For one thing, the presence of other men both in erotic artistic representations of women and in actual brothels has probably never prevented male spectators and clients from being sexually aroused. But more importantly, at least in *Coppélia*, travesty dancing's "liberation of the leg" had a double-edged meaning. It was as important to the history of the emancipation of female bodies as it was to the economy of male pleasure.

Guest recounts an anecdote about a ballet girl, Clara Pilvois, who "dared to introduce the wild gyrations of the cancan into one of Mazilier's rehearsals." The balletmaster "was horrified" and reprimanded the dancer, threatening to replace her if she persisted in this outrageous behavior. There then followed a series of disobedient acts: she ignored his warning, danced the forbidden dance again, and was expelled from the rehearsal. But she pleaded to be reinstated. "'Please, please give me back my *pas*,' she begged. 'If you don't, my mother will die when she hears of it.'" And yet, at the very next evening's performance, "the audience were treated to the curious spectacle of one of the nuns in *Robert le Diable* dancing the

cancan."[75] This dancer's impudence simultaneously catered to the lascivious tastes of the "men of fashion" in the Opéra audience and asserted the female dancer's independence and authority – her autonomy from the male choreographer.

In *Coppélia*, the new-found freedom of the female body on the ballet stage, although formally assigned to the travesty role of Frantz, is taken up in the choreography by Swanilda. Her celebration of the articulateness of the human leg may, in some ways, emulate the irrepressible cancan dancer. And undeniably it catered to the male voyeurism of nineteenth-century audiences. In those respects, her dancing reflected and, indeed, participated in the sexual hedonism of the Second Empire.

But in other ways, Swanilda's celebration of the articulate leg, and by extension, her indomitable spirit, projects the rising tide of feminist activity in France in the last, liberal years of the Second Empire. And it foreshadows not only the powerful female figures on the Russian ballet stage of the 1890s, but also the attempt, in the feminist dress reform movement of the late nineteenth century, to liberate women's bodies in Western culture at large. If the female leg is a symbol of male desire on the nineteenth-century French ballet stage, it is also the sign of female mobility, outside of hearth and home, in the modern arena of public life.

2

THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL BALLET

The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker, Swan Lake

Marius Petipa, the French choreographer transplanted to Russia whose name is synonymous with the Russian Imperial ballet, achieved his greatest success with *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890). A compendium of several earlier styles of ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty* sets forth the canon of the classical ballet vocabulary and choreographic structure.[1] Through its plot and its setting, as well as its bodily codes of decorum, the ballet encapsulates the behavior and values of the courtly hierarchy that produced it. Created in reactionary times in Russia, the ballet expresses deeply conservative royalist politics. Its choreographic form crystallizes a gender-coded division of labor that has come to define classical ballet, and it is the most splendid celebration in the Western dance canon of the wedding theme. Thus, one might presume that it would be relentlessly patriarchal. But ironically, *Beauty*'s world is one in which men nearly disappear and women reign supreme, apparently contradicting the gendered messages of the literary versions of fairy-tales that inspired the ballet.

The ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* was conceived by Ivan Vsevolozhsky, director of the Imperial Theatres from 1881 to 1899, who wrote the scenario, designed the costumes, commissioned the score from Peter Tchaikovsky, and worked closely with Petipa as he choreographed the ballet. Vsevolozhsky wanted to create court ballets as dazzling as those of the French court under Louis XIV, but rather than choosing a classical theme (as Lully might have done), he set his ballet in the time of the Sun King, basing it on a fairytale written by Charles Perrault for Versailles court society. This was a brilliant choice, for Vsevolozhsky thus in a single stroke cross-referenced an array of events and issues. One was the beginning of theatrical dancing as we know it in all the splendor of the French baroque ballet, with its emblems of *civilité*. A second was the royal Russian emulation of the French absolutist court at its zenith. And the third, in a timely way, were various Franco-Russian alliances – from 1755 right up to the treaty being negotiated as the ballet was being made, culminating in the entente cordiale of 1897. Vsevolozhsky looked back – through a French lens – to the eighteenth century in Russia (and the birth of Russian francomania). This period marked a renascence for Russia, a nation that many felt had long slumbered culturally as well as politically. Thus

in *The Sleeping Beauty* Vsevolozhsky not only also invoked the Golden Age of France, but also that of the Russian aristocracy, beginning with the reign, 100 years earlier, of Catherine the Great, Russia's own Louis XIV.[2]

This was not the first time *The Sleeping Beauty* had been adapted to the stage. Nineteenth-century British pantomime and French *féeries* served up melodramatic struggles between good and evil, embellished with magical effects and spectacular transformations, as standard fare, and fairytales provided the perfect plots. *The Sleeping Beauty* had been a favorite subject of these popular genres. It had also been the theme of a ballet by Jean Aumer (with a scenario by Eugène Scribe) in Paris in 1829, several elements from which found their way into Vsevolozhsky's scenario.[3]

Many expected the Russian *Sleeping Beauty* to be no more than a despised *féerie*. But the Petipa–Tchaikovsky ballet proved to be more than a frivolous extravaganza. Although the ballet reaches into the past (evincing a retrospectivism that characterized many strata of Russian culture in the 1890s, from the Imperial Theatres to Diaghilev's World of Art movement) and although it was inspired by an "escapist" dance genre, it is very much a late nineteenth-century entity, and it has entered the canon of serious high art.[4]

The ballet may never, as Slavicist Tim Scholl argues, have been directly intended "to gain court favor."[5] (In fact, Tsar Alexander, a francophobe and a Russian nationalist, simply pronounced it "very nice," to Tchaikovsky's consternation.[6]) But clearly the ballet's narratives of dread – surrounding the safety of royal bodies, the urgency of dynastic succession and survival, and royal alliances capable of banishing all evil from the realm – serve as a striking allegory for the obsessions of the Russian empire circa 1890. This was an autocratic kingdom that had been living under strict martial law since Tsar Alexander II's assassination in 1881. To the courtiers witnessing *The Sleeping Beauty*, subject (like all Russians) to the whims of the bureaucracy and the secret police concerning every matter of daily life, the outlawing of ordinary, necessary items such as needles and spindles would not be at all surprising.[7] In the world of *The Sleeping Beauty*, unreasonably repressive prohibitions are rationalized as benignly motivated and therefore legitimate.

Moreover, the fairytale ballet served, like the literary fairytale in the French court of Louis XIV, a more general ideological function – what fairytale scholar Jack Zipes, in analyzing the literary tales, refers to as "an institutionalized symbolic discourse on the civilizing process" that indoctrinates readers to conform to dominant social codes, including table manners, dress, the regulation of the body, sexual relations, and polite speech. Fairytales, that is, served an important pedagogical and political function, for it was possible in seventeenth-century France to move up from the *haute bourgeoisie* to aristocratic circles. At the same time, childhood began to be distinguished as a separate life-stage and a prime locus for socialization. Thus, the fairytale, alongside other manuals for behavior in the form of books and pamphlets, served as a channel of social and political pedagogy.[8]

The late nineteenth century in Russia was a time of political struggle both internally and externally – a time of simultaneous aspirations to a national, uniquely Russian culture and to hegemony in global politics (especially with regard to Western Europe). In many ways, ballet was isolated from these struggles. But, paradoxically, to emulate the manners and mores – literally, the bodily attitudes – of the foreign French court was, in a complex assertion of autonomous political and cultural identity, to refute the standard epithet of Russian backwardness.[9] It was a way to claim elegance, propriety, courtliness, luxury, and political power as Russian attributes just as much as French ones. (But of course, the eighteenth-century French style was an outmoded view of aristocracy, for no court like that existed in nineteenth-century France.) Indeed, if not for the Tsar, at least for other courtiers, the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* could serve as an imaginative model as well as a marker of royal behavior and hierarchical values, enacting the triumph of order in the realm, and reproducing and reinforcing in a charmed arena values that in reality were constantly questioned and under threat. As dance historian Deborah Jowitt points out, the timely and practical moral of *The Sleeping Beauty* for the Russian courtier was that "a breach in royal courtesy, even to such nasty adversaries as wicked fairies, can allow chaos to upset the orderly flow of events." The world of the court was reflected in the hierarchy of the ballet company: "the ballerina and premier danseur, like the tsar and tsarina, were framed by a select company of soloists (the grand dukes and duchesses) and demi-soloists (court officials, if you like) and by a further stratified corps de ballet."[10] And of course, there was even an imperial court represented on stage, further enhancing the endlessly reflecting mirror images of royal power.[11] Since the Imperial Ballet and the Imperial Theatres were in fact part of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, the tsarist hierarchy of the company was not just symbol, but reality.

A lady-in-waiting to the nineteenth-century Romanov court wrote, regarding the incessant parade of courtly celebrations, ceremonies, and other splendid, obligatory royal displays in vogue since the days of Peter the Great, "Power in Russia is so very complete and majestic while elsewhere, in other countries, only the word remains. Here it bears a religious, and, one may say, supernatural character that acts on the imagination."[12]

The Sleeping Beauty, a ballet about royal power created in the Imperial Theatre for the Russian court, acts on the imagination on multiple levels. Answering complaints that the fairytale theme was trivial (and, furthermore, too foreign), Tchaikovsky's friend Herman Laroche insisted,

> Say what you wish against fairy-tales. You will do away neither with the fact that they have succeeded in taking root in our fantasy in the continuity of generations, nor with the fact that from childhood we became closely linked with them and love them, nor with the fact that we find in them some of the most profound ideas to stir humankind.[13]

In this Laroche echoes Perrault himself, who saw his tales as combining entertainment with moral instruction. "These trifles were not mere trifles . . . they contained a useful moral, and the playful narrative surrounding them had been chosen only to allow the stories to penetrate the mind more pleasantly and in such a manner to instruct and amuse at the same time," Perrault wrote.[14]

The tale – and the ballet – of *The Sleeping Beauty* have been variously interpreted as: a struggle between good and evil; life conquering death; love as the source of life; the perennial passing of the seasons from winter to spring; a related pattern of social and spiritual renewal; the shifting of generations; the survival of the good and the beautiful despite the ravages of time; and the coming of age of a young woman.[15] Although the last aspect might seem the slightest and most mundane, given all those earlier cosmic themes, in fact it looms large when one realizes that it, like the Persephone myth, contains within it not only the story of an individual's maturation, but also the fertility motifs of the seasonal cycle, as well as the themes of life, love, death, renewal, the succession of generations, the passing of time (days, seasons, years), and historical change. (In the ballet, of course, Beauty's name is Aurora – Dawn – signaling a new day.) That is, the macro-themes are contained within what at first glance looks like a micro-theme, and, in fairytale fashion, abstract themes are here given human (or, if not mortal, at least human-shaped) bodies.

That in the ballet an individual woman's story could be fleshed out beyond the one-dimensionality of the literary fairytale and presented as rich, multi-layered, and significant – indeed, as noble – is in itself significant, for several reasons. One is the simple, but striking fact that the biography of a female protagonist could be the central subject of a narrative.[16] Another is that the ballet's authorial team, however unconsciously, restored to a literary fairytale, encrusted with patriarchal accretions, an earlier woman-centered model, told by female storytellers, of an active princess (rather than an active hero and a passive princess).[17] Another, related point is that in an era when women were struggling for political equality, in this ballet a woman-centered world, in which a woman protagonist finds agency and autonomy within a marriage based on mutual love, was represented – again, however unconsciously – as salutary and authoritative. Admittedly, the conventions of ballet had since the Romantic era put women at center stage, for reasons that can only be seen in retrospect as sexist. But for complex reasons, in *The Sleeping Beauty* various historical factors conspired to undermine this legacy of institutional sexism, and to create instead challenging, positive images of female power and autonomy on stage.

The gender of fairytales

Charles Perrault's tales were specifically written for the seventeenth-century French court as gender-coded moral lessons for boys and girls – they were instructions for how to become the perfect aristocrat – and Perrault ended each tale with a moral. The poem that followed his story of *The Sleeping Beauty*

counseled deferred gratification. And indeed, all his tales recommend patience for girls – in regard not only to choosing a suitable marriage partner but also to entering the state of matrimony, as well as in regard to life's never-ending tribulations. In Perrault's original tale, Beauty has a life after marriage, and she encounters more problems. In fact, she has no fancy wedding, but quickly and quietly marries her prince right after dinner on the day he wakes her up, and they go right back to bed. Since the princess is not the least bit tired, she and the prince find other things to do than sleep, which activity results nine months later in a child. The prince keeps their marriage secret from his parents, visiting Beauty from time to time, and they have a second child. Eventually, the prince's father dies, and the prince succeeds to the throne, finally bringing Beauty and her two children home to his ogre (that is, cannibalistic) mother. When the new king goes off to war, the mother-in-law orders first one grandchild, then another, then Beauty to be served up as delectable dishes. Each one is saved and hidden in turn by the cook, but in the final scene of the story, the king arrives home just in the nick of time to rescue Beauty and their children – who, having been discovered still alive by his mother, are about to be thrown into a cauldron full of serpents, toads, and other vile creatures.[18]

Perrault's emphasis on the value of patience conforms with what Zipes sees as Perrault's views of woman in general – that she should be "beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, properly groomed, and [know] how to control herself at all times. . . . She must be passive until the right man comes along to recognize her virtues and marry her."[19] Lilyane Mourey has commented that for Perrault, intelligence in women could be dangerous, and independence even more so, since this could threaten the marriage institution and the family and thus weaken the entire fabric of society. For Perrault, she concludes, personal virtues are completely gender-coded: "Beauty is an attribute of woman, just as intelligence is the attribute of men."[20]

It is this aspect of social indoctrination in and by fairytales to which feminists have objected, and rightly so. In analyzing both the Perrault and Grimm versions of *The Sleeping Beauty*, contemporary feminists have complained that of all the fairytales, this one most drastically endorses female docility and passivity, for what could be more passive than waiting for 100 years for the right man to come along and rescue one? Andrea Dworkin, for instance, castigates fairytales in her book *Woman Hating* for creating negative role models for girls. She writes,

> At some point the Great Divide took place: they (the boys) dreamed of mounting the Great Steed and buying Snow White from the dwarfs: we (the girls) aspired to become that object of every necrophiliac's lust – the innocent, *victimized* Sleeping Beauty, beauteous lump of ultimate sleeping good. Despite ourselves, sometimes knowing, unwilling, unable to do otherwise, we act out the roles we were taught.[21]

In *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye*, a study of various fairytales, psychologist Madonna

Kolbenschlag criticizes *The Sleeping Beauty* for modeling female roles for contemporary women as comatose and catatonic.[22]

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, referring to a different aspect of woman's representations in fairytales – the fairy godmothers and wicked witches who help or obstruct the heroine – posit an "essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman," both of which they find problematic in terms of the social and political status of women.[23] The angel-woman and the monster-woman could correspond to the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse in the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*. (In Perrault's original fairytale, neither the old, wicked fairy who curses the princess nor the young fairy who mitigates the curse is named or described.) They could also correspond to Odette and Odile in the ballet *Swan Lake*.

However, these extreme characterizations of fairytale heroines seem as one-dimensional and stereotypical as the authors declare the tales to be.[24] Most feminists who discuss fairytales do not discuss the literary history of the tales or their history on the popular stage. The claims themselves are universalizing and ahistorical, as well as evincing an elitist class bias, for these authors seem completely unaware of the social history of the production of French literary fairytales: their origins in the world of working-class female storytellers. In the seventeenth century, fairytales became a marginalized literary genre pioneered and dominated primarily by women. Although these women were aristocrats, what they published were the tales told to them by their peasant nurses; in a sense, the tales were co-authored by women across class lines. The *précieuses*' reworkings of the traditional folktales (for aristocratic and bourgeois audiences) were read as criticisms of prevailing social institutions, especially the practice of arranged marriages.[25]

Moreover, many feminists' knowledge of fairytales seems limited to the stories' sanitized, Americanized, Disney versions (which frequently do eviscerate the tales' original meanings). But as the feminist writer Marina Warner has recently argued, in their time these tales were not one-dimensional, but offered messages of female acquiescence *and* resistance, expressing the contradictory, complex aspirations of their female authors (who were privileged in terms of their class status but constrained by their gender) both to change the rules and to maintain the status quo. And these aristocratic authors brought into an official, literary space an underground vernacular oral thread that for generations, within a patriarchal medieval and early capitalist culture, had voiced (from the peasant's perspective) real female antagonisms, reconciliations, exploitations, fears, hopes, and fantasies, as well as an ongoing struggle between classes.[26]

Indeed, given the history of female authorship of these tales, as they passed from the oral to the written tradition and became upwardly mobile in class terms, the attempt by the king in *The Sleeping Beauty* to outlaw spindles takes on new light. It was common practice for storytellers to tell their tales where women gathered together to do monotonous work, such as spinning and laundering. This was a way to entertain the group while they worked in a communal fashion, either in

or out of the home. Hence the terms "to spin a tale," "to weave a plot."[27] The two activities – spinning and storytelling – went hand in glove. Moreover, both before and after industrialization, the textile industry was primarily a women's domain, especially in France. The spinster – that is, the woman with the distaff (a term that has come to mean women's concerns, or simply that which relates to women) – was also the teller of tales. Often, she was seen as merely an old gossip, a chatterbox. But, as Warner points out, the word "gossip" once meant "godmother," and intimated close friendship and caring. To speak of gossip is to speak of informal networks of women's wisdom about "the control of fertility and mortality, through skills like midwifery, and the direction of attitudes and alliances and interests." So it is not accidental that women's gatherings in laundries and spinning rooms gave rise to male anxieties about subversions of the social order.[28] When in *The Sleeping Beauty* the king outlaws spindles, he outlaws spinsters as well. Thus, he tries to stop the spinning of stories by wise old women – in other words, to stop the motion of history – and in this way to prevent the curse from coming true.

To be sure, most feminists have not looked at the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* in formulating their objections to the tale. But some of their arguments are still used by dance writers. Dworkin and the other anti-fairytale feminists may be right about the *plot* of *The Sleeping Beauty*, at least as a literary tale, rather than a danced story. In the literary tale, Beauty is passive; in fact, in typical fairytale fashion neither she, the prince, nor any of the other characters either have much personality or agency. The emphasis is on moving the plot forward, and for that action is required. This counts Beauty, sleeping, out. But the ballet is different, for Vsevolozhsky's libretto changes the plot in significant ways. If the literary plot were the only aspect one considered, one would erroneously conclude that Aurora gets out of bed only to become a catatonic housewife. Yet to look at the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* is a different matter entirely than reading Perrault's tale, for a number of reasons.[29] First, the female characters created by the ballet turn out to be far more complex than those on the page. As well, the authors of the ballet chose not to include the second part of the Perrault tale, in which Beauty and her children are threatened by her cannibal mother-in-law. (Perhaps, anticipating George Balanchine, Vsevolozhsky *et al.* felt that to portray a mother-in-law in dance was just too complicated.[30]) But the choice to end the ballet with an enormous wedding (a celebration that, strikingly, never happened at all in Perrault's version), instead of Perrault's violent post-honeymoon narrative, is in itself meaningful, even though the final wedding was a standard ballet convention. For the wedding scene emphasizes the intertwining themes of mutual love and dynastic succession that in this context are key to the heroine's life-story (as well as providing a more cheerful ending). Aurora, that is, secures a royal marriage based on mutual affection despite the political demands of aristocratic blood. The ballet foregrounds that triumph over the theme of Beauty's moral forbearance (her 100-year sleep and the apparent loss of her children) and the theme of intergenerational strife (the vanquishing of the mother-in-law so the

son's wife may rule the household). In this matter, Aurora exercises extraordinary personal choice in a situation strictly bound by political constraints, and yet she does so graciously, easing the passing of power from the older to the younger generation by choosing the perfect partner.

But most importantly in terms of female agency, when the story of the Sleeping Beauty is staged, especially in dance terms – which *require* action – it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to depict the protagonist as passive and immobile. Even when she sleeps, Princess Aurora dreams – and Prince Désiré sees, in an enchanted vision – that she dances. Now, one could imagine an insipid dancing Aurora. Or even a gentle, ethereal Aurora, on the model of the French Romantic style. But Carlotta Brianza, who first danced the role of Aurora, was one of a new breed of Italian ballerinas who brought to the Russian stage an innovative "steely-toed" technique that stressed physical strength, speed, and force. This bravura technique was terre-à-terre rather than aerial, and it emphasized physicality rather than ethereality. It enabled virtuoso feats – including executing multiple turns and difficult balances, all on pointe – in contrast to the graceful, earlier French style with its softer pointework. That is, both the dancer and the role were virtuoso. It may be partly for this reason that the passiveness, docility, and lassitude that characterize Beauty in the literary version of the tale simply disappear in Petipa's ballet.[31]

Several factors contribute to the image of Aurora as an active woman. Just being a dancing creature already endowed the princess with a certain measure of agency. The original casting choice reinforced that agency by underscoring Aurora's strength and independence. And then the choreography further enhances that agency in very specific ways (which I will discuss). Moreover, the gifts her fairy godmothers give Aurora at her christening turn her into a different kind of woman than Perrault's Beauty, as we will see. Musically, Aurora is associated with the lively energy of the waltz, and her dances are usually in an allegro vivace tempo, signifying a zesty vitality.[32] In fact, Aurora's only passive appearance in the ballet is as a baby in the Prologue. But significantly, there she is represented by a doll, not by a dancer, and the Prologue is only a preface to the action of the ballet. The real beginning of the ballet is in Act I, when Aurora, as a young woman, starts to dance.[33]

But beyond the representation of Aurora, the roles of Carabosse and the Lilac Fairy have been significantly enlarged in the ballet. Indeed, in the transformation of the tale into a ballet, all the female characters – especially the fairies – have been magnified and individualized, given names and personalities. The result of all these elements is that the court of Florestan XIV, Beauty's father, seems to become "a feminine microcosm" (as Arlene Croce described the Prologue and Vision scenes[34]), where women exercise choice and power.

Matrimony is still the glimmering goal, but it is equally so for both Aurora and Prince Désiré, and the structure of their wedding pas de deux seems to promise mutual respect and identical political, as well as domestic power. Of course, it would be anachronistic to expect a female protagonist – especially a princess who

Plate 4 Carlotta Brianza as Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Courtesy of the Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

is an only child – to be entirely liberated from the expectation of marriage, in either the seventeenth-century literary fairytale or the nineteenth-century ballet (or in the "real" world of the twentieth century, for that matter). But that this marriage is arranged by fate (in the person of the Lilac Fairy), rather than by the bridal pair's parents – most particularly in a royal union, where one would least expect personal feelings to be considered – dramatically underscores the utopian theme of marriage reform pressed by the seventeenth-century French *précieuses*, the authors of literary fairytales, who argued that women should marry for love, not for the sake of their father's political, social, or economic interests.[35]

Choreography: the body of meaning

Boris Asafiev, the Soviet composer and music critic, wrote that the four adagios of *The Sleeping Beauty*'s four sections form not only "the musical points of support for the whole course of action" in the ballet, but also the key moments of Aurora's biography so far: "cradle, girlhood, love, marriage."[36] Examining these adagios and their related dances allows us to see how the authors of *The Sleeping Beauty* created a complex story, in which Aurora is both socially constructed, according to fairytale convention, as the "perfect woman," and simultaneously invested with individuality, agency, and a much more full-bodied character than fairytales normally allow.[37]

The Prologue is Aurora's christening scene. As with each act in the ballet, the scene begins with a ceremonial entrance. Catalabutte, the king's master of ceremonies, has checked to make sure the guest list is in order. Among the guests who arrive for the celebration are the princess' six fairy godmothers. They dance an adagio with their suite, and then, in brief individual variations, present their gifts: Candide represents beauty, but also candor, purity, and tenderness; Fleur de farine (wheat flour), grace and energy; Breadcrumb, abundance, generosity, and fertility; Canary, song, metaphorically symbolizing eloquence; Violente, power, passion, and the ability to command; the Lilac Fairy, wisdom, "which in Russian folklore a child will acquire if it is placed under lilacs."[38] (In the 1994 Royal Ballet production, the attributes are listed as: purity, vitality, generosity, eloquence, passion, and wisdom.)

Several of these fairies' attributes are different from those given to Beauty in Perrault's tale, which were: beauty, good temperament, grace, and the ability to dance, play music, and sing. Petipa's princess has these finishing-school traits, but crucially, she also has intelligence, eloquence, passion, and power. Note, too, that as the Russian choreographer Fedor Lopukhov points out, all the good fairies' variations are performed écarté, effacé, and en dehors – the most open positions in the ballet vocabulary. This he compares to a major key in music, contrasting with Carabosse's inward-turning, en dedans, "minor" movements.[39] Everything about the fairies – and thus, at first, Aurora – is open, positive, clear, and straightforward.

The fairies' variations are similar and closely linked, but their attributes emerge, so to speak, in bas-relief.[40] They are extremely virtuoso, containing runs and jumps on pointe, abrupt shifts in rhythm and tempo, and subtle fluctuations in quality of movement. Several of the variations involve running backwards, forming zigzag patterns, or turning, while the hands pantomime the symbolism of the gift's qualities. But the variety among the variations in rhythm, movement quality, and emotional color also shows distinctions. These are bravura miniature, concise dances, averaging a minute long, and it is partly their expressive economy that makes them so striking. Candide dances first; her hands and arms form gentle cradling and then stroking gestures, and her head tilts sweetly, indicating tenderness. Her steps are the most open of all those belonging to the fairies, as when, in the third section of her variation, she repeatedly turns out her body in sharp écarté. She also introduces the arabesque that will become Aurora's signature.

The second fairy, Fleur de farine, runs backward quickly and then turns, like a mill grinding out flour, but her rhythm is "flowing," not mechanical.[41] Her allegro pace creates a rapid stream of movement, like rushing water, and her image of grace is a vivacious one; her gift is dancing itself. Further, her backwards running steps connote confidence. Then Breadcrumb, symbolizing a typical Russian gift for a newborn – promising that she will never go hungry, or, perhaps, that she will be fertile – dances on pointe in a staccato rhythm, as she mimes scattering crumbs to pizzicato strings. These two fairies, as dance historian David Vaughan points out, add a homely Russian touch to the line-up.[42]

Canary flutters her fingers and executes allegro footwork, suggesting flight but also – especially when she holds those fluttering fingers in front of her mouth – the movement of the voice through the air. This image of eloquence is particularly significant in terms of standard social expectations of women. Violente – who may stand for an electrical storm or lightning – is precise and authoritative. She is completely focused and coordinated as she looks, points, and moves to a single position in space. Her emboîté turns further emphasize her precision. And her series of dismissive gestures is firm but done with a smile. She is a perfectly gracious but no-nonsense executrix. It seems these two fairies are also connected, for one aspect of being commanding is oratorical skill.

Originally a mime role, the Lilac Fairy has, since the early twentieth century, become an active dancer who adds her initial gift to those of the other fairies in pure movement terms. Unlike the other fairies, she does not mime the qualities of the attribute she bestows on Aurora. Rather, she abstractly represents wisdom as the largest, most magisterial and noble of all the gifts. She does this by dancing on a grand scale, with balance, poise, and amplitude. Her wisdom is sensuous – *voluptueuse*, as Petipa described the music he ordered from Tchaikovsky. She commands the entire space with her broadly unfolding arm and leg movements. (Arlene Croce once referred to her as "a five-star general."[43]) Her gestures are as long and stretched as possible while still remaining within the canon of beauty. Her spreading arm movements evoke the scent of lilac flowers perfuming the spring air.

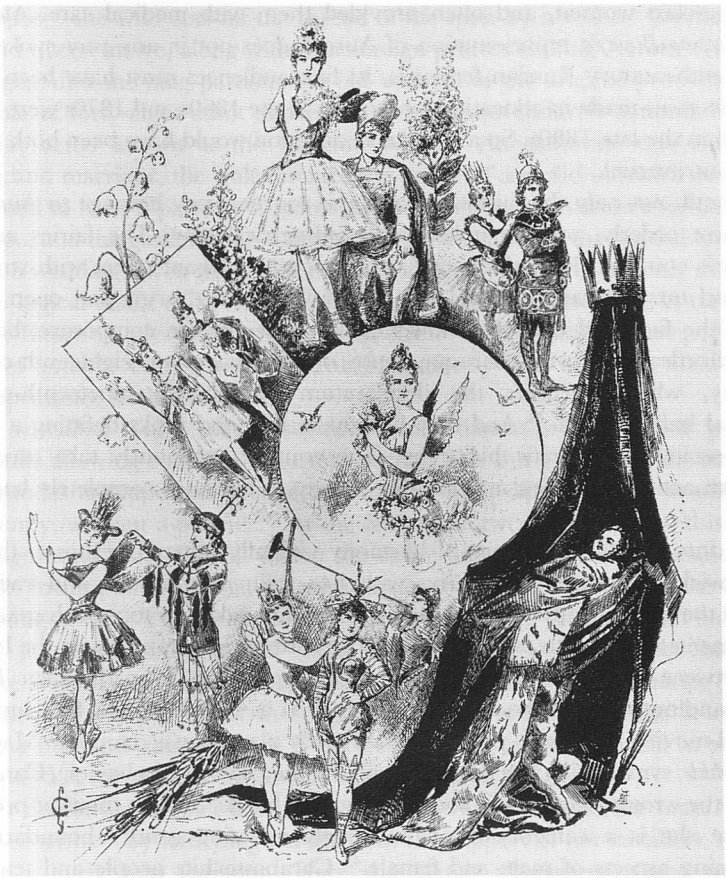

Plate 5 The Fairies and their retinues from *The Sleeping Beauty*, illustration from the Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres (1890–91). Courtesy of the Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

All these gifts come in small packages, but they are crucial to the construction of Aurora's character. Although this first adagio with variations is the only one that does not highlight Aurora as the central dancing figure, it delineates an idea, spread across six bodies, of the Aurora who will become.

Thus the education of Aurora has begun. It is intriguing to note that in the thirty years before the creation of *The Sleeping Beauty*, enormous progress, surpassing that of Western Europe, had been made in the arena of women's secondary and university education in Russia, and, as a result, in the entry of women into the medical, legal, and scientific as well as pedagogical and other intellectual professions. The enlightened gentry and bourgeois women of the mid-nineteenth century, in turn, crusaded for civil and political rights and legal protection for the large Russian population of poverty-stricken peasant and

working-class women, and often provided them with medical care. Although *The Sleeping Beauty*'s representation of Aurora does not in any way evoke those nineteenth-century Russian feminists, its first audiences must have been aware that the gains made in education for women in the 1860s and 1870s were deeply eroded in the late 1880s. So a woman's education would have been both topical and controversial.

Overall, not only the fairies but also the courtiers pay homage to Aurora in the most orderly, precise, polite, and symmetrical way. The fairies and the courtiers comport themselves with an aristocratic, elegant mien, with stretched legs and torsos, straight backs, and gracefully rounded arms that open out to frame the face and body like flower petals. They evince composure, balance, and effortlessness – the baroque sense of *complaisance* or eighteenth-century nobility, which becomes the desideratum of Russian nineteenth-century classical ballet as well.[44] And they line up in files and ranks befitting a highly self-conscious aristocratic hierarchy. The courtiers graciously take turns and perform actions in series, and all their dances unfold in a completely balanced order.

But into this blissful image of harmony violently bursts Carabosse, the old, ugly, wicked, hunchbacked fairy, with her train of monsters and rats. She breaks the polite bodily codes of the courtiers. She takes up too much space; her movements are angular, spasmodic, and grotesque. She transgresses the boundary between female power seen as beautiful and good (as in the Lilac Fairy's commanding presence) and female power seen as ugly and evil. Her turns are inward-moving, enclosed – en dedans. Usually played by a man (like Madge in *La Sylphide*, symbolizing her distinctly unfeminine traits and behavior), Carabosse has all the wrong proportions, above all gigantic hands. She is a monster precisely because she is a category error, seemingly violating gender boundaries by combining aspects of male and female.[45] Carabosse hits people and tears out Catalabutte's hair, for he was the master of ceremonies who left her off the invitation list. Unlike the good fairies, who balance confidently on one leg while dancing, she cannot even balance on two legs, for she walks with a cane. And her "gift" to Aurora is a curse – that the princess will someday prick her finger on a spindle and die. The court recoils.

But ugly and wicked as she is, Carabosse is still a fairy, and she is a relative of the other fairies. The Lilac Fairy acknowledges her with a curt bow. Then, with her authoritative, warm, and solicitous gestures, the Lilac Fairy palliates the curse. Aurora, she pronounces, will not die, but will sleep for 100 years, until a prince awakens her with a kiss. With a sweep of her cloak, Carabosse disappears.

Act I concerns the carrying out of the spell. Another celebration is being held in the palace – Aurora's twentieth birthday party.[46] Catalabutte notices some old women, "gossipers . . . knitting stockings," and orders them to be sent to prison.[47] (But clearly these are not just any old women; they must be the three fates of classical mythology, with Carabosse, who is one of them, aspiring to the role

of Atropos – she who cuts off the thread of life spun by her sister Clotho.) The king and queen arrive, along with four foreign princes seeking Aurora's hand in marriage. After the king pardons the old women, in the original production an ensemble of forty-eight adult dancers and thirty-two children danced the *valse villageoise*, better known as the Garland Waltz.[48] An elaborate celebration of mating and marriage, the waltz creates the image of a world in which everyone is destined to have a partner. It seems joyously to forecast Aurora's forthcoming marriage, and the garlands the couples hold aloft symbolize the nuptial arches of a church wedding. Even the children dance in pairs, signifying not only that they are the logical result of all these adult couples, but also that they, in turn, will become future couples (and parents) themselves.[49] Aurora's suite – her pages and maids of honor – enters, and then Aurora excitedly runs on stage, making her first appearance in the ballet.

The so-called Rose Adagio begins. Aurora dances with the four princes, repeatedly allowing each one in turn to partner her. But ultimately, she executes her attitudes unsupported – balancing in these most difficult poses steadily and confidently, without a partner.[50] At the end of the twentieth century, this is still the longest and most difficult test in the entire ballet repertoire of balance and aplomb. Jowitt points out that "these balances can poignantly suggest the testing of a young princess's maturity and her ability to be calm, gracious, and balanced in her judgment under stress."[51] But beyond her royal poise, the balances connote Aurora's autonomy.[52] According to the original ballet scenario, Aurora announces to her parents at the beginning of this section that she is loath to choose a husband (this reticence is not in Perrault's tale). "I am still so young," she says. "Let me yet take advantage of my freedom."[53]

After demonstrating her independence both by rejecting all her suitors and – in dance terms – by loosening herself from the support of her cavaliers, Aurora dances a lively solo variation. Here she blends all the steps and qualities bequeathed her by the good fairies at her christening: she does Candide's arabesque, for instance, Fleur de farine's pirouettes, Breadcrumb's piqué steps, and Canary's petit allegro. It is as if she is finally, at her coming-of-age party, growing into these attributes and piecing them together for the first time. The fairies live in her, and she is discovering her powers. She also broadens her domain, for in the Rose Adagio, she danced in a small circle, whereas in her solo variation she signals her joy at being alone by taking up more space. But her variation has shadows in it – she has inherited something from Carabosse, as well, for she executes a series of turns in a wide circle, similar in some versions to those performed by the wicked fairy in the Prologue, but now modified to fall within the canon of feminine beauty.[54]

Petipa, writing in his native French, instructed Tchaikovsky to create music for Aurora's entrance in Act I that would be staccato and "*coquet*," a term that has often been translated as "coquettish," but that can also mean smart, stylish, neat. If Aurora is coquettish, it is in a girlish way, not as a *femme du monde*. But it is more confidence and joy than coquetry that Aurora displays in this part of

Act I. She takes pure, unself-conscious physical pleasure in her powers; she is self-celebratory, proud in the positive, Greek sense. In the language of the late twentieth century, she displays strong self-esteem. It's true that she dances with each partner without committing herself to a single choice. She definitely uses the men (although in a polite, not an exploitative way) to help her achieve movements she cannot do by herself. Her dancing shows that she doesn't mind being courted; it's an important step in her growing up and finding new challenges, as symbolized by the dance steps she can now master. But she does not so much flirt as enjoy the group attention. Clearly she doesn't think courting must lead to settling down with one man, despite her father's assignment. ("Do as you know best," he says, "but remember that the interests of the state demand your marriage, in order that you may bear a successor to the throne."[55])

It is obvious that these suitors are not appropriate marriage partners for Aurora. Since she dances and they do not, they seem to occupy different planes of being. It is as if Aurora spoke a different language and realized that the man she chooses to wed should speak that language too. But Aurora's disinclination to marry, beyond that, is not so much coquetry as a refusal to end adolescence and courtship and enter into marriage and motherhood. It is complicated by the fact that hers is not an ordinary love story, because maintaining the continuity of the aristocratic blood lineage is crucial here. Aurora's story is only partly about marrying and having children; it is also about doing one's duty to the crown – to one's own royal family. Although this detail is not shown in the ballet, in the literary fairytale Beauty herself was the only child of a long infertile couple, a factor that lends special urgency to the threat that the dynastic line might end with her. Her role as a woman is always that of a royal woman, a potential queen and the potential mother of kings and queens. So by refusing to marry, she is putting off a solemn and burdensome responsibility and prolonging the pleasures and joys of youth.

Suddenly Aurora sees an old woman with a spindle (or, in some productions, a bouquet of flowers with a spindle hidden in it). Seizing the spindle, Aurora wields it like a scepter as she dances. But then she pricks her finger and, in a passage reminiscent of the mad scene in *Giselle* (as well as Nikia's death scene in Petipa's *La Bayadère* [1877]), she dances brokenly and finally falls down, unconscious. Carabosse, who had handed her the spindle, reveals herself, then disappears in a cloud of smoke as the court grieves. However, the Lilac Fairy appears, to remind the court that Aurora is not dead, but will sleep for 100 years. The Lilac Fairy waves her wand; the courtiers carry the sleeping princess away, and a thicket of trees and lilacs grows up, completely obscuring the palace. The entire court – symbolizing all of society – goes to sleep as well.

In Act II, 100 years have passed. Prince Désiré is hunting in the forest with his courtiers. Like Aurora in Act I, he should choose a spouse, but cannot bring himself to do so. And, since they perform period social dances, while he dances in the more abstract, elegant style of classical ballet, it seems that like Aurora he is waiting to find someone else of the same order of being – someone who speaks

his language.[56] Their compatible dance styles are one signal that Aurora and Désiré are perfectly suited for one another. The Lilac Fairy appears, and she shows him a vision of Aurora, thereby inspiring him to ask the Lilac Fairy to lead him to the sleeping princess. In this adagio and variation, which in many ways resembles the second act of *La Sylphide*, Aurora appears with her companions (or, as they are often referred to, nereids or sea nymphs). They and the Lilac Fairy block the Prince from approaching Aurora, until he declares his love for her. Then, although Aurora occasionally allows Prince Désiré to lift her, she more often runs away from him, slipping out of his reach to lose herself in the formations of the corps de ballet. She then dances a solo variation full of high extensions and *unsupported*, complex turns. It is a metaphor for her articulateness, autonomy, balance, and control, but also for her grief. The entire vision is emotionally stirring and shaded with mystery, due as much to the music as to the choreography of longing.[57] Aurora disappears and, impassioned by this vision, the Prince vows to marry her. He travels with the Lilac Fairy past a fantastic rolling panorama to the castle, awakens Aurora with a kiss, and the entire court comes to life, while the dust and clouds surrounding them magically disappear.

Act III celebrates the wedding of Aurora and Désiré. Various fairytale characters from Perrault's other tales arrive as guests. Since these tales were originally sorted by gender as instructions for either boys or girls, the balance of girls' tales (such as *Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*) and boys' tales (such as *Tom Thumb*, *Puss in Boots*) implies that the folk wisdom necessary to educate both sexes will season this relationship.[58] As well, the fairies of precious stones and metals – gold, silver, sapphire, and diamonds – dance a pas de quatre, suggesting that wealth as well as wisdom, love, and beauty will crown the marriage.[59]

As in the Garland Waltz, the dances serve as wedding encomia. And, as in the christening scene in the Prologue, the dances present Aurora (now jointly with Désiré) with more gifts that will mold character. When the Bluebird dances a pas de deux with Princess Florine and the White Cat dances with Puss in Boots, two more literary tales are invoked in which lovers had to persevere through terrible trials to consummate their love – again balanced in terms of male and female gender, for the Bluebird was a prince given animal form by a wicked fairy, while the White Cat was a princess similarly enchanted; both were eventually saved by love. In both the literary versions of "The Bluebird" and "The White Cat," an ongoing, thoroughly satisfying conversation, rather than physical love (an impossibility, given the lovers' different species while the enchantment is in effect), binds the lovers together in mutual affection and respect. Shared conversation, the dances of Act III seem to say (with John Milton), is the only basis for a marriage.[60] When all the fairytale characters have lined up to perform duets that foreshadow the grand pas de deux of Aurora and Désiré, the union of the heroine and her prince is framed as both natural and inevitable.[61]

The grand pas de deux in Act III, which climaxes the plot of the entire ballet as well as the act, sets forth a very specific idea of marriage. On the one hand, as I've just suggested, it is seen as natural and inevitable, the true destiny of both partners.

Musicologist Roland John Wiley has pointed out that, musically, Tchaikovsky created a constantly interrupted tonal progression toward G major in the entire ballet, such that when the wedding act finally reaches that key, stressing it in the pas de deux in particular, the sense of an ultimate destiny long anticipated and finally achieved is overwhelming.[62] But even though marriage is seen as the ultimate goal in a way that in our culture might be seen as negative and identity-draining for a woman, here Aurora is not made to seem inferior or subservient to Désiré in the dance. On the contrary, she retains and even enhances her autonomy and individuality. It's true that in their variations, the dancers have separate vocabularies – she does complex, brilliant petit allegro, while he takes bounding jumps. But there are also steps both dancers share, especially when they come together in the exuberant, bravura coda of the pas de deux.

The pas de deux begins with an adagio in which Désiré leads and supports Aurora in a turn while she stands on pointe in attitude. They separate, but join together again, and he supports her now in arabesques. Twice he lifts her, sets her down to execute two pirouettes, and then carries her forward. They run to the back of the stage, and make their progress forward punctuated by her double pirouettes. Their movement seems to illustrate the turn-taking and sustenance, as well as the adventure, of partnership. Their mutuality allows her to achieve expressiveness and a fuller sense of beauty.

Although they dance together in synchrony with assurance – again, as if they had been fated all their lives to become partners – they also often separate to dance alone, and at times they even compete good-naturedly. That is, of course, the standard structure of the pas de deux as elaborated by Petipa, but here it takes on a specific socio-political meaning with regard to the shape of the marital union. The lovers' pas de deux is a metaphor for a marriage in which both partners need one another but also enjoy their autonomy. They are interdependent, but they can be independent as well.

There are echoes in the bridal pas de deux of the moments in the Rose Adagio when the man moves away and Aurora stands by herself. In some versions, she bows to her bridegroom (as in the 1964 Royal Ballet film). But after that bow, she dramatically rises on pointe while slowly moving her other leg into passé, then arriving in attitude, to stand majestically alone. She also appears, at times, to direct their mutual path, by choosing directions and movements on her own and expecting him to follow in order to catch or hold her. It seems she will be an assertive decision-maker in their marriage. Aurora's use of the suitors' help in the Rose Adagio to perform movements she could not execute on her own is here taken to a higher degree; supported by her prince, she often does quite risky movements, such as fast pirouettes. The bridal pair's partnership allows Aurora to expand her movement vocabulary and, symbolically, her abilities as a person. The relationship pictured here is an empowering, not at all subservient one. Moreover, some of the lifts and the sense of flight serve as metaphors for sexual ecstasy for both partners, clearly asserting a woman's ability to enjoy sexual pleasure. From the Rose Adagio to the grand pas de deux in Act III, one

can see in the choreography of *The Sleeping Beauty* a progression from the self-confident but still tentative young girl to a mature, intelligent, authoritative woman who is not only ready to marry, but to rule the kingdom.

Certainly there are moments in the pas de deux when Aurora performs movements that are either deferential, as in Fonteyn's bow, or else coded as traditionally feminine, especially in terms of delicacy. I certainly do not mean, by arguing that she has some degree of agency and independence, to say that Aurora is depicted as a "liberated" woman. She still behaves decorously, according to the mores of her time and temper. She exhibits strength, intellect, and power, but she is still constructed as the perfect aristocratic woman – feminine and graceful, as well as regal. She can be demure and modest. But much more important to the ballet is her ability to command space and to display precision, strength, balance, and control – in short, authority. These, of course, are the gifts the fairies bestowed her at her christening. In her last variation, Aurora demonstrates her mastery of their skills, performing a combination of the same hand gestures, precise footwork, turns, and advancing/retreating paths set forth by her godmothers in the Prologue.

The bridal pas de deux is the climax of the ballet, but the act does not end there. Next the entire ensemble joins in a mazurka and apotheosis. For the couple is not simply a pair of individuals (or an individual pair), but is knitted back into the community whose prosperity, along with that of the realm (according to the reigning views of monarchy), depends on their successful marriage and the continuance of the royal line. This isn't just any loving, happy couple finally being mature enough to get together, nor is the community they are knitted back into democratic. They lead the ensemble, and the other characters are clearly their subjects. Not only is marriage seen as natural and inevitable. The view of monarchy shown here is quite benevolent. According to the ballet's ideology, the world has been set aright, in its correct political as well as emotional order, because these lovers have found their proper partners. And that they will have children to continue the bloodline is promised by the dynastic theme echoed in the final musical motif – taken from a song in tribute to Henry of Navarre, Louis XIV's grandfather and the founder of the Bourbon dynasty in France.

Women in *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*

Far from diminishing women, *The Sleeping Beauty*, the apogee of the Russian Imperial ballet repertoire, makes them its core. They take center stage in ways that affirmatively portray them as powerful and autonomous as well as beautiful.

This is not to say that all Imperial Russian ballets treated women this way. By contrast, the two other Tchaikovsky ballets that, like *The Sleeping Beauty*, have remained cornerstones of the Russian Imperial ballet canon – *The Nutcracker* (1892) and the Petipa–Ivanov *Swan Lake* (1895) – feature more conventional representations of women as fragile and dependent on men, even while the ballets still present alternative visions of female authority.

In *The Nutcracker*, the Sugar Plum Fairy (like the Lilac Fairy) is magisterial, the supreme commander of her realm. But she is also delicate, as her special musical instrument – the celesta, with its ethereal tinkling sounds – indicates. And her empire – Confiturembourg, the sugary, pastel Land of Sweets – is metaphorically coded as feminine, even though many of her subjects are male.[63] The ballet is seen through the eyes of Clara, the adolescent girl who receives the Nutcracker as a Christmas present from her mysterious godfather, Herr Drosselmayer. Clara's age partly caused the problem of how a female protagonist could be portrayed on stage, since there is no single sustained adult female figure; Clara is the heroine of Act I, but does not have the ballerina's power to dominate the stage, while she becomes passive in Act II, in the realm where the Sugar Plum Fairy rules.

Obviously what Clara sees is a bourgeois world in which girls train to be nurturing mothers by playing with dolls and boys learn to be brave soldiers. Even in her fantasy, Clara may throw her shoe at the horrible mouse king, but it is the Nutcracker Prince who uses his sword to deal the villain the final blow. Later, a frightening blizzard is rendered tender and beautiful by anthropomorphic – or rather, gynomorphic – ballerina snowflakes. If Act II is metaphorically Clara's wedding feast, she herself is docile and inactive (the scenario describes her as "dutiful"[64]), not dancing but watching the antics of the various candies and other treats, which are crowned by the grand pas de deux of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her consort. It is not clear whether Clara is only a visitor or will some day be a ruler of the realm, for her potential bridegroom-to-be, the Nutcracker, is a prince of the kingdom of sweets, but the Sugar Plum Fairy still reigns supreme.[65] Still, the second act is Clara's dream, not a man's, and through her visions she has grown in wisdom.

This is a utopian child's-eye view of marriage – as Aurora's too, perhaps, might have been at age 8 or 10 – as a cuddly, idle, hedonistic dream of endless gratification. Indeed, it was probably what the early nineteenth-century *baryshnya* – Russian gentry woman – anticipated marriage would be like. As historian Richard Stites describes her, the *baryshnya* resembled "the Southern Belle of the American plantation – sweet and helpless, child-like, and surrounded by the most capacious crinolines – she awaited her first ball, her first dance, her first taste of life." For her,

> life was still a reverie as she wafted between two worlds that she did not know: beneath her, the servants and the serfs . . . beyond her, the world of men, of wars, of [political] "affairs." . . . Thus suspended between girlhood and womanhood, she was enveloped by a sense of malaise and anticipation. . . . The spell could be broken only by a man.

But, Stites points out, as time went by, and the novelty of running her own home and raising her children wore off, "the languid musings of her youth might give way to a bittersweet nostalgia and to a gnawing awareness that something had

passed her by." By 1892, when *The Nutcracker* was made, several generations of Russian feminists and other liberal thinkers had clearly defined that missing "something": it was "life, work, knowledge, freedom, or action."[66] But in the face of thirty years of Russian feminist activism, and at a time when women's advances in education, employment, and other arenas were under attack, *The Nutcracker* restores the dream – or the fantasy – that marriage will be sweet, smooth, and all-fulfilling for women.

In *Swan Lake*, the original libretto states that it was Odette's wicked stepmother, a witch, who cast the spell that changed her into a swan.[67] We never see that stepmother, but there are authoritative women characters on stage – Siegfried's mother and especially Odile, the fraudulent swan. Odile – the most powerful, assertive, and seductive woman in the ballet – is sinister, the daughter of the evil genie von Rothbart, and an impostor whose only purpose is to seduce Siegfried into breaking his vow of fidelity to Odette. Odile's dark costume, as well as her strong, precise movements, her flamboyant virtuosity, and her direct gaze – contrasting with Odette's white costume, soft, feathery steps, lyricism, swooning backbends, and lowered gaze – serve to connote her nefariousness. It is not her feminine aspect that marks Odile as evil; rather, it is her authority, assertiveness, and independence – those consecutive thirty-two fouetté turns on pointe (a step that few ballerinas had then mastered), done entirely without male support – as well as her mechanistic quality that in this context make her mesmerizing and threatening. She is dazzlingly vertical, while Odette's torso swoons and melts. Unlike Carabosse, with her masculine body and her grotesque movements, Odile can be depicted simultaneously as wicked, feminine, and beautiful. She is too direct and assertive – that is what makes us realize (unlike the love-blinded Siegfried) that this is an impostor – but she remains within the canon of female beauty.

Although Odette, the real swan-enchanted woman, ostensibly wishes to free herself from captivity, she also seems submissively resigned to her fate.[68] She clings to Siegfried helplessly in their Act I, scene ii adagio. Unlike Aurora in her grand pas, Odette desperately rushes back into her savior's arms each time they part. And even though the ballerina's dancing in the white swan pas de deux in *Swan Lake* requires every bit as much physical strength as those in Odile's or Aurora's parts, the melting texture of her steps, torso, and pointework – with her footwork constantly broken up by bourrées, changements, and shifts of level – as well as her fluttering arms and volatile, silky style, her self-touching, and her downcast gaze, all create an illusion of feminine fragility (although she does also dance an allegro variation). Odette's vulnerability, indeed her ultimate tragedy, is already inscribed in her first dance. So in *Swan Lake* there is a binary division that sorts women into the categories of wicked and good, expressed in oppositions between active and passive, assertive and yielding, strong and gentle. It is, in many ways, a *fin de siècle* ballet, juxtaposing two technical styles that create two opposite female personalities: a destructive *femme fatale* and a fragile Mélisande. Yet the monster and the angel are wrapped up in a single woman, for one

ballerina dances both roles, suggesting an underlying female dualism. Although the binary good and evil is also present in *The Sleeping Beauty*, both principles there are active and assertive.

It is repeatedly argued that in the ballet pas de deux, the woman is manipulated, touched, handled, held, and displayed in ways that symbolize male sexual desire, without granting equal desire or agency to women.[69] However, these charges are often homogenizing and essentializing, viewing all ballet pas de deux as identical, without taking into account the choreographic distinctions among various pas de deux that give rise to expressive difference. Certainly in the Act I, scene ii adagio of *Swan Lake*, the choreography emphasizes Odette's fragility and her dependence on Prince Siegfried. But the choreography in that duet is entirely dissimilar to both *The Sleeping Beauty*'s and *The Nutcracker*'s grand pas de deux, as well as to Odile's part in *Swan Lake*, where the choreography stresses the woman's autonomy and power. For the most part, by the late nineteenth century advances in pointework and therefore in partnering techniques enhanced the woman's dancing role on stage and reduced the male to a porteur. On the one hand, the supported adagio displayed the woman, but, on the other hand, it also allowed her to expand her vocabulary to include difficult, bravura balances and multiple turns.

The question of female agency

It might be argued that Aurora's agency is a modern state of affairs, that late twentieth-century ballerinas willy-nilly supply an interpretation to their roles that invests the nineteenth-century female characters with more power than earlier dancers did. But both the choreography and the historical record would contradict that argument, for not only are Aurora's independence and energy written into the choreography – as we have seen – but also, both Tchaikovsky and the critics specifically praised Brianza in her performance as the original Aurora for her precision and strength, as well as for her grace.[70]

Beyond Aurora's agency, the roles of the two key fairies – Carabosse and the Lilac Fairy – have been greatly expanded from the literary tale, as I've suggested. Although Carabosse might be seen as the stereotypical wicked witch, as the role has come down to us the Lilac Fairy is not simply an angel, all sweetness and light. She is gracious and good, but she is also extremely commanding. And, as dance historian Giannandrea Poesio observes, the yearning quality of her musical *leitmotif* "suggests something other than just the idea of 'good.'"[71] Between these two fairies, one gets a picture of a completely matriarchal world, the likes of which may never have existed historically, either in Russia or in France, but which certainly exists in the utopian, woman-centered world of many fairytales.

It is true that all-female harems, armies, and other communities also peopled Romantic ballets, as well as nineteenth-century pantomimes and burlesque shows, providing a piquant but fantastical view of strong women as a kind of exotic-erotic thrill. Illustrations from the original production of *The Sleeping Beauty*

suggest that several of the fairies' pages may have been played by women in travesty, hinting at a spicy leg-show style. The female characters wore tutus with relatively short skirts that revealed much of the dancers' legs. The White Cat is coquettish, and various formations of the female corps use the women as decorative detail. But to argue that *The Sleeping Beauty* simply catered to prurient tastes or to a view of women as merely ornamental would be wrong (the latter partly because the male members of the corps were also used decoratively). For one thing, the framework of state and court sponsorship, as well as the comprehensive Russian system of censorship, emphasized the high moral tone of Imperial ballets (as opposed, for instance, to the presentation of *jolies femmes* in different contexts: either ballets performed on the variety stage or popular entertainment dance genres). Further, both the plot and the choreography of *The Sleeping Beauty* support a complex view of women that consistently combines beauty and power in positive ways, unlike burlesques that showed female strength as a freakish deviation.[72] Ironically, many of the same qualities that make Odile wicked in *Swan Lake* make Aurora noble in *The Sleeping Beauty*. What are we to make of this recognition of female authority, which is never permanently coded as either negative or positive, but changes its value from one ballet to another? And what are we to make of *The Sleeping Beauty*'s encoding of autonomy, intelligence, and control as positive feminine attributes?

Surely *The Sleeping Beauty* is not a feminist ballet, as, for instance, one can confidently argue that Nijinska's *Les Noces* was. (Strikingly, however, the Rose Adagio in certain ways foreshadows the reluctant bride theme of *Les Noces*.[73]) But *The Sleeping Beauty* is certainly a ballet that recognizes female agency beyond the circumscribed sphere available to women at the time. As a ballet about a woman destined to ascend the imperial throne – undoubtedly reminding its audiences of the powerful, assertive, and extremely intelligent Empress Catherine the Great – *The Sleeping Beauty* allotted to its heroine *more* brilliance, *more* independence, and *more* command than the ordinary Russian woman – even an aristocratic woman – of the late nineteenth century possessed. Still, it is worth remembering that the ballerina Mathilde Kshessinska, who in 1890 graduated from the Imperial ballet school into the Maryinsky Theatre ballet company and who was soon to dance the role of Aurora, in 1892 became the mistress of the Tsarevich – the future Tsar Nicholas II – and thus wielded enormous political power.

Given the history of women's status in Russia, this depiction is not necessarily the forward-looking, emancipatory step it might seem to late twentieth-century eyes. For in its "*passé*ism," the ballet looks longingly back to a time when women of the gentry class were at the center of Russian courtly political, social, and intellectual life. Perhaps it even invests the frivolity of 1890s Petersburg salon life with greater nobility. But it simultaneously turns its back on the entirely different situation of Russian women in general in 1890.

By then the fervent debate over "the woman question" that had captured the imagination of the socially engaged intelligentsia in the middle of the century had not only been dampened by repression, but also by the rising revolutionary

movements that subsumed women's issues under a larger emancipatory agenda. This was an historical moment when many of the great gains for women won during the 1860s and 1870s, along with other social and political reforms, were rapidly being eroded. Educated women – who were joining revolutionary movements in numbers unprecedented in Western Europe – were now viewed by the government as a dangerous political and social force.[74]

By 1890, it was becoming clear that full legal and economic enfranchisement for various oppressed groups, including women, the peasantry, and the urban working class, would probably be inevitable, though at great cost to the Russian imperial regime. *The Sleeping Beauty* in no way should be viewed as a polemic in the debate on women's rights. But it is timely. How much more pleasant it must have been for the court to turn its back on contemporary feminists and to view, instead, assertive women from an earlier era, from the time of Catherine the Great and Princess Dashkova, head of the Academy of Sciences. In those days, a magical century earlier, Russian women emulated the salon free-thinkers of France.[75]

The course of the nineteenth century had seen shifts in women's status and rights as they, like other social policies, rode the waves of repression and reform. But by 1890, the imperial couple was firmly opposed to female higher education.[76] And the Empress told a visiting delegation of feminists that they would do better to stay home and knit.[77] (In this light, Aurora's ignorance of sewing and knitting takes on new meaning, but surely one of which the authors of *The Sleeping Beauty* were unaware.)

Ironically, the world of ballet, opera, and theater production was one in which the question of a woman's ability to be trained and find work had not been an issue in Russia since the early eighteenth century (however, as in other countries, only rarely did women move through the glass ceiling to appointments of administrative or artistic leadership – although, like Kshessinska, they could manipulate behind the scenes). And although ballet dancers sometimes took rich lovers, the economic situation in the Imperial Theaters created a social system quite different than that at the Paris Opéra. In France after 1830, the ballet dancers were primarily drawn from the working class, and they were employed by a semi-private enterprise that profited by paying low wages to all but the most brilliant stars. As we have seen in Chapter 1, a semi-official system of thinly masked prostitution was practically the only way for a French ballet girl to survive, by supplementing her meager wages with support from a wealthy protector simply for necessities like rent and food. The performance on stage at the Paris Opéra was erotically tinged by the knowledge that the dancers were sexually available after the show. But in the more paternalistic Russian system, once children were accepted into the Imperial Theatrical School, not only was their education and upkeep paid for, but they were guaranteed a government job and then a pension for life.[78] This is not to say that the dancers were never treated like erotic objects by members of the nobility.[79] But the makers of *The Sleeping Beauty*, unlike their peers abroad, lived in a microcosm dominated by women who

were economically independent. These were women who sometimes separated from, even divorced their husbands (as did Petipa's first wife). Indeed, Petipa's mother was an actress and one of his sisters was an opera singer. Both of Petipa's wives and four of his five daughters were dancers; his daughter Marie danced the role of the Lilac Fairy in the original production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.[80] Petipa's situation as a son, brother, husband, and father to working women must certainly have molded his views of women's agency.

The Sleeping Beauty engenders a mixed message, riddled with paradoxes, about women. Its ambivalences are connected as much to social class as to gender. Its views of female beauty are double-edged: on the one hand, it speaks of women's beauty as partly consisting of power, intelligence, and agency, while on the other hand, it celebrates the beauty of purely physical feminine display. Unlike Russian literature and drama, which had explicitly begun to treat marriage as problematic and as oppressive to women as early as the 1840s, *The Sleeping Beauty* presents marriage entirely unskeptically.[81] On the one hand, it respects female power. And yet, on the other, it yearns for a time past when female agency was limited to a small group of women who could command intellectual and sexual authority, without threatening the status quo, only in a narrow, hierarchical, hermetic world.