

A Giselle for Our Time:
Mats Ek's Post-Structuralist Approach to Romantic Ballet's Pathologized Dancing Female

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INTRODUCTION

Though the traditions of Western theatrical dance have changed dramatically throughout the genre's existence, a selection of narrative ballets from the 19th-century have maintained a position of relevance throughout dance history, thanks to their continuous appearance on stages worldwide. However, these appearances are by no means uniform, and with each restaging of these ballets, the resulting product is always to some extent at the mercy of the choreographer or director. The liberties taken by such artists vary greatly. Some may strive to present a close replica of the original production, while others may choose to modernize the choreography, costumes, sets, or music to fit the tastes or abilities of their dancers, theatres, and audiences. Some may reject nearly every tangible aspect of the original production, leaving only a trace of it noticeable in a theme, a single movement, or simply the title of the new piece. Regardless of how these decisions are carried out, "dancers and choreographers don't exist in a vacuum, however cut off from life their rigorous daily discipline can make them appear to be," as Deborah Jowitt so importantly reminds her readers in *Time and the Dancing Image*.¹ Instead, dancers and choreographers, and the dances that they make, are a product of their time. Though this could happen in any number of ways – from the dancers' training and style, historical references or responses to past choreographic works, or socio-political concerns that find their way onto the stage – it is vital to remember the influence that lived experience has on dance, particularly when the dance in question is a contemporary reworking² of a piece already infused with the influences of its own time, like the 19th-century narrative ballets. In such cases, contemporary productions of these ballets are not only a product of their time in the present, but also of the reactions to the past that infiltrate and devise present-day thought.

This synthesis of history, analysis, and contemporary response is one of the most salient features of the narrative ballets of Mats Ek, a Swedish dancer and choreographer who gained considerable international acclaim in the 1980s for his reworking of the 19th-century Romantic ballet *Giselle*. Born April 18, 1945, Mats Ek began his theatre studies at a young age, but did not begin dancing seriously until his late twenties, when he joined the Cullberg Ballet, a company founded in 1967 by Ek's mother, Birgit Cullberg, as a member of the *corps de ballet*. Ek went on to serve as the Artistic Director of the Cullberg Ballet from 1985 until 1993, and during this period he produced many original works for the company. Ek's *Giselle* was premiered in 1982 by the Cullberg Ballet, and although it was not his first choreographic venture that drew inspiration from previous artistic material (his *Bernardas Hus* from 1978 is based upon Federico García Lorca's play "The House of Bernarda Alba"), it was Ek's first reworking of a pre-existing ballet, and the beginning of a trend that would be continued with his *Swan Lake* in 1987, and *Sleeping Beauty* in 1996. Though each of these productions adheres to some aspects of the original versions (mainly the basic storyline and music), Ek's productions diverge greatly from those of their 19th-century ancestors. Instead of dying of a broken heart, Ek's *Giselle* is banished to a mental asylum; rather than marry a swan princess, Ek's Siegfried would rather stick with his mother; it is not a bewitched spindle, but a drug addict's needle that induces Aurora's deep sleep.

While presenting some version of the traditional narrative ballets might come with the territory for the artistic directors of major ballet companies, Ek's justifications for reworking these ballets, rather than reviving or reconstructing a version faithful to the original, are drawn directly from his desire to make these stories a product of today's time, exposing the manner in which the underlying themes of these canonical ballets are not isolated to the period of their first presentation, but permeate the present day and invite contemporary interpretations and critiques

of the cultural and socio-political climate at large. When speaking in an interview about the original “fairy tale” narratives to which his ballets are connected, Ek described them as “dealing more or less with the same stuff, all of them – life and death and jealousy and revenge, the big issues. But often in cliché way [*sic*]. But they also have, each one of them, a secret door where things happen which you can’t really grasp.”³ It is this hidden component that Ek strives to explore in each of his ballets, and in many cases, the result of the exploration is expressed in nuances of sexuality, gender, and the female body.

The politics of sex and the dancing body pervade Ek’s works, and provide much of the structural and narrative basis for his versions of *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and *Carmen*, among others. Again, Ek traces this inclination back to his dissatisfaction with these ballets in their original forms. As he explained in an interview, “I have always been very upset about how the classical tradition, not the technique in itself but the classical tradition, is diminishing women or female possibilities. How they are sort of cut down to minimum [*sic*], or something fragile, light, ethereal and elevated. And that’s not my experience of women.”⁴ His frustration with these ballets occurs because Ek sees these antiquated, 19th-century female characters as a product not of his time, though they are still being passed off as such in the frequent revivals of ballets like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* by companies worldwide. When looking to the women around him, particularly his mother Birgit Cullberg, renowned choreographer and founder of the Cullberg Ballet, and his wife Ana Laguna, who originated the majority of lead female roles in his ballets, Ek speaks of them as being much more than the acquiescent playthings of the male gaze: “They show another side,” he says, “quite another potential, which I want to definitely use.”⁵

But to say that Ek’s works simply “use” this other potential implies that it is employed as only a supporting feature, a tool for mining the confidence or strength of his female characters

that has thus far been hidden by the “classical tradition.” This is by far an understatement, for many of Ek’s critical reworkings, including *Giselle*, *Carmen*, *Swan Lake*, and *Bernardas Hus*, are defined by a radical expansion of the female character’s physical, intellectual, or social potential, alongside an exploration of the social structures defied by this expansion. Using Ek’s 1982 masterpiece *Giselle* as a case study, I examine how Ek’s ballet exposes the societal ills that systematically repress, pathologize, and punish the behavior of women. With his reworking, Ek presents a post-structuralist, feminist-infused reading of the traditional story of *Giselle*, a reading that is very much in conversation with the discourse surrounding the modern woman’s liberation from hegemonic social expectations, representations, and doctrines, in accordance with feminist theory since the latter-half of the twentieth century. With this in mind, I argue that Ek utilizes the political climate of the late-twentieth century in his setting of *Giselle* to substantiate his dissatisfaction with the present-day socialized view and treatment of women, both within the context of the ballet tradition, and in Western society at large.

Critical reactions to Ek’s production of *Giselle* have varied greatly, but most reviewers have latched on to Giselle’s characterization as the source of controversy in Ek’s version. Anna Kisselgoff has accused Ek of “[m]isreading Romanticism’s own dark flirting with the escapist” when designing his *Giselle*: “Giselle is a village idiot. Already mad, she has no use for a mad scene.”⁶ While Clive Barnes acknowledges Ek’s choreographic translation of *Giselle* as “[a] feminist view, perhaps,” he dismisses this reading as unimportant, reasoning that the plot is one modern audiences are used to finding in antiquated texts, “simply that of Woman’s traditional and time-worn betrayal by Man.”⁷ Though each of these critics offer insight in regards to the difficulty of modernizing a ballet that represents for many viewers a very specific time in dance history, they tend to overlook the significance of the work in relation to broader shifts in

European philosophical and cultural thought. In particular, there are several potential connections between Ek's choreography and post-structuralist critique that are essential to a complete understanding of Ek's work. Post-structuralist thought is concerned with deconstructing and exposing the falsity of binaries, models, and structures that are taken for granted in social conduct. For Ek, the structure at large is often gender, and many of his works, both reworkings and original concepts, include elements that contribute to the destabilization of gender. In *Swan Lake*, the dancers performing as swans are rendered as genderless characters; in *Bernardas Hus*, the role of the mother is played by a man; in *Solo for Two*, the partners enact the oddities of domestic gender roles. In Ek's *Giselle*, destabilizing gender means taking on the social norm of female sexuality and desire as less acceptable than that of its male counterpart, particularly in how this relates to the binaristic gender- and sex-role expectations that audiences have come to associate with the on-stage relationships of the 19th-century ballets. Given the conflation of sex and male pleasure with the ballerina and the experience of viewing a ballet that occurred during the Romantic era, it is advantageous that Ek chose ballet as his means of studying this phenomenon, and I argue furthermore that Ek's modernization of *Giselle* is still very much sympathetic to the cause of Romanticism in the original production. Ek's works do not offer explanations or solutions for the underlying causes of female oppression, their contribution to the feminist dialogue is nonetheless valuable. By revealing the dystopian extreme that results from unrelenting social jurisdiction over the female mind and body, Ek's *Giselle* suggests that the undermining of female potential and agency is disturbingly normalized, and means certain social death for any female persona unable to assimilate to these strictly enforced criteria.

THE ORIGINS OF *GISELLE* – THÉOPHILE GAUTIER AND THE ROMANTIC BALLET

Evaluating Théophile Gautier's original libretto, the story of *Giselle* is far more than a tragic love story. Though the plot begins in the earthly, mortal world, realism quickly gives way to a distinctly foreign and mystical realm in the second act. The original version of the ballet, which premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1841 with choreography by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, is centered around the fates of two main characters: Giselle, an innocent peasant girl, and Albrecht, a nobleman-in-disguise. In Act I of Gautier's libretto, Giselle, who is frail but still loves to dance, is courted by Albrecht, who has disguised himself as a peasant; when this ruse is revealed and Giselle discovers that Albrecht is already engaged to a noblewoman, she dances herself to death in a fit of madness. The second act takes place in the land of the Wilis, ethereal spirits of women who were betrayed by their lovers and died before the consummation of their marriages. The Wilis are a vengeful group, spiteful towards the men that caused them this unhappy demise. Giselle is the most recent addition to the community of Wilis, and when an unassuming Albrecht wanders into the forest to visit her grave, Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis, assigns Giselle the tasks of dancing Albrecht to his death. Despite the tragic consequences of her death, Giselle cannot bear to bring harm to Albrecht, so she dances with him cautiously and slowly, protecting him from the other Wilis desperate to whirl him to his death. Giselle manages to keep Albrecht alive through the night, and with the dawn, the Wilis return to their graves, allowing the exhausted Albrecht a chance to escape. As they part, Giselle gives Albrecht her blessing to marry his noble fiancée and find happiness with in the realm of the living.

With this work, Gautier took on the Romantic writer's burden, the "problem of saying the unsayable,"⁸ by using dance and gesture as a vehicle for covert social critique of the French political climate during the Romantic era. What makes *Giselle* unique from other 19th-century

ballets (including *La Sylphide*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*) is at least partially due to the interaction of Romanticism and the French political climate. When the Opéra lost state funding after the July Revolution of 1830, Louis-Désiré Véron took it upon himself to keep the Opéra afloat by making it a hotbed for bourgeoisie culture.⁹ But while Paris's wealthy filled the opera house's seats, its poor filled the stage: aside from the grandest ballet stars, most ballet dancers, particularly the *corps de ballet* members, made little money from dancing, and what money they did make was used to pay for daily classes, practice clothing, and shoes. The social differences between these classes led to a problematic relationship between the dancer and her audience, and the dynamic of "a lower-class woman dancing for an upper-class, largely male audience"¹⁰ mirrored the rise of the bourgeoisie at the expense of many peasant and impoverished urban communities following the French Revolution and subsequent political turmoil. In the context of Gautier's *Giselle*, the betrayal of an innocent peasant by a greedy noble can be read as Gautier's symbolic expression of the harm done by the bourgeoisie, ironically packaged for the consumption of the very group it criticized by nature of its presentation at the Opéra.

Herein lies the entrance of Romanticism in Gautier's story: if Romanticism is "a reaction against established [moral] authorities" and a movement that "stressed passion, the individual, fantasy, the supernatural, and transcendence,"¹¹ then its influence is nowhere as powerfully felt in Gautier's libretto than by the inclusion of an elaborate death sequence prior to the opening of a *ballet blanc* in Act II. When she learns of Albrecht's prior engagement, Giselle decomposes into a fit of hysteria, and while different ballerinas have portrayed this descent with varying affects (rage, physical illness/weakness, or even a passive slipping away from the reality of being alive), an aspect of psychosis is almost always included. Albrecht's betrayal has affected first and

foremost Giselle's psyche, and the death of her body is merely the result of losing her sanity. Perhaps, then, Giselle's death is not a death in the typical sense that holds death as finality; instead, Giselle's death could symbolize a psychological transcendence from mortal reality to incorporeal distress, symbolized by her awakening in the land of the Wilis at the opening of the second act to begin the *ballet blanc*.

Visually, a *ballet blanc* is a recurring motif in ballets from the Romantic and Imperial Russian periods, identifiable by an all-female chorus of dancers, dressed in white and performing in unison. A *ballet blanc* may feature female soloists, but the emphasis is typically on the ensemble's overall uniformity. According to Peter Stoneley, this representation of an all-female community was likely interpreted by its viewers as an "erotic spectacle."¹² Since there were no male dancers on stage to claim the ballerinas, they were there, in a sense, to be claimed by their male audience. In the case of *Giselle* specifically, this community of women, the Wilis, is united by their desire for sexual fulfillment, or even sexual revenge. In this case, if the Wilis represent erotic lust and personal fulfillment – two ideas reminiscent of Romanticism's rejection of popular morality in favor of the individual's desires – Giselle represents the converse. She denies herself a sexual experience for the sake of saving Albrecht's life, and in doing so, places the happiness of the man who betrayed her before her own. The nuances of this story make Giselle out to be Romanticism's example of transcendence gone wrong – though her actions might be moral according to antiquated sexual politics, her decision against taking advantage of Albrecht leads to her continued sexual repression, symbolized by her continued stay in the land of the Wilis while Albrecht returns to the mortal world.

MATS EK'S *GISELLE* – DEVIANT SEXUALITIES AND THE ROOT OF FEMALE MADNESS

While Giselle has been the subject of countless analyses by writers and choreographers alike, many (if not most) contemporary interpretations of the ballet acknowledge the underlying themes of repressed female sexuality and female subjectivity embedded in the narrative. These two themes are particularly apparent in the second act: though the Wilis are women who have been prohibited from normal sexual activity because of death, one in particular (*Giselle*) is still the object of male sexual desire. Mats Ek's 1982 production of *Giselle* for the Cullberg Ballet is no exception – Ek's version grapples head-on with both of these themes, leaving very little left unsaid in regards to his opinions on the systematic repression of female sexuality, a topic that has been widely discussed in feminist theory and psychology since the mid-twentieth century. Though Ek's production stays true to the historical tradition of *Giselle* in some respects – he uses Adolphe Adam's score and maintains the basic structure of Gautier's narrative – his interpretation and treatment of *Giselle*'s predicament is intentionally and tragically modern. By setting the second act of his production in an all-female psychiatric asylum, Ek presents his critique of the association of female social and sexual deviance with psychiatric madness and hysteria, and the resultant suppression of such behaviors by means of the rehabilitative institution. Through his characterization of *Giselle* as a woman obsessed with denying her infertility, Ek demonstrates and criticizes the contradictory social conditions that require women to conform to oppressive sex- and gender-role expectations in order to be legitimized as social females, while simultaneously reprimanding, and eventually dismissing, any women who dare to display their willingness for sexual contact.

The opening of Ek's production is rather ominous: the curtains open on a dark stage, upon which a single dancer lies, writhing and straining against a tether around her waist,

connecting her to an unknown force hidden offstage. This initial image establishes the predominant theme in Ek's work – the control and repression of the female body and agency by external forces. Moving into Act I, the mood lightens as the stage lights come up to reveal Marie-Louise de Geer Bergenstrahle's colorful, cartoonish backdrop of a country landscape, complete with two tree-topped hills that conspicuously resemble breasts. Soon enough, it becomes apparent that Giselle is unlike the other women in her town. Ek's Giselle is capricious, leaping across the stage in a pink skirt and bare feet, wildly throwing her legs in the air. The other women, however, are stoic, dressed in black, and, most importantly, each of these women is the keeper of a large egg – a blatant symbol of fertility, motherhood, and a successful reproductive encounter. The women roll the eggs onstage and proudly sit upon them, smiling all the while as they display their bounty for their male partners. The couples dance a joyful *pas de huit*, while the partner-less Giselle tries to squeeze herself between the couples and join the dance. When Hilarion, Giselle's suitor from her country village, presents her with a red circular pillow with a smiling face drawn on it, she throws it angrily to the ground. Unable to menstruate, this is a cruel reminder of the smiling children she will never have.

Menarche – the experience of first menstruation – is widely regarded as the sign of female maturity – a universal event and undeniable identifier of the female body.¹³ Herein lies Giselle's tragic flaw – as a non-menstruating female, Giselle is unable to produce children, thereby rendering her incapable of fulfilling her community's gender role expectation that all females become mothers, and that “sexuality, fertility and the maternal instinct are one.”¹⁴ As a result, Giselle is denied access to her own identity as a woman, which is reflected in Ek's choreography. Though she dances intermittently with Albrecht in the first act, the fact remains that Giselle is without an egg, without the capacity for motherhood, and in the end, the

partnership does not last. Attempting to compensate for her short-comings, Giselle aggressively pursues Albrecht – another deviation from historical sex-roles which place the female as the subordinate half of the couple.¹⁵ She repeatedly pulls Albrecht’s waist to her, attempting (sometimes successfully) to guide his pelvis towards her own. She lifts her skirt, opens her legs in a wide second position plié, displaying her sexual availability. For the female to pursue the male – to seek sexual contact – is an obvious transgression of the female gender role, and as a consequence, by the end of the act, her fellow townsfolk have surrounded Giselle, holding her down with their two-pronged pitchforks. Though this symbol is surprisingly violent, the fact of the matter remains that if death will not remove Giselle, as in Gautier’s libretto, then this responsibility falls to human forces.

What, then, becomes of Ek’s Giselle? Similar to Gautier’s *ballet blanc*, Ek’s second act takes place in an all-female community, with the members all wearing an identical white uniform. However, unlike Gautier’s Wilis, Ek’s Wilis, including Giselle, are patients in a psychiatric asylum. This theatrical choice says much about Giselle’s community. Removing the sexually deviant Giselle from the community is Ek’s reflection of the way in which aggressive female sexuality and deviance from sex-role expectations have become pathologized, regarded as proof of “madness,”¹⁶ and grounds for institutional intervention. In 1972, psychologist Phyllis Chesler released her seminal work critiquing popular psychology’s treatment of women, entitled “Women and Madness,” in which she wrote, “What we consider “madness”...is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype.”¹⁷ “Their behavior is “mad,”” she continues, “because it represents a socially powerless individual’s attempt to unite body and feeling.”¹⁸ This analysis of “madness” is applicable to Ek’s Giselle – she is powerless in the sense that as an infertile woman, she is not granted the full

identity of a woman in her community, since she is not able to participate in their egg-rolling dance. She is a marginalized being, and in an attempt to overcome this social dismissal, she seeks the notice of Albrecht by means of active and assertive sexual pursuit. But, with this act of sexual agency, Giselle has transgressed the very sex-role boundaries to which she desires to conform – she wants partnership, just like all the other women, but is punished for her “mad” methods. Given these conditions, Ek’s staging of Act II in an asylum draws an explicit connection between Giselle’s “madness” and the pathologization of sexual deviance.

PATHOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL BODY – MICHEL FOUCAULT IN CONTEXT

As documented by Chesler, the pathologization of madness has long been associated with the female body. As Michel Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie has led to the separation of sex and pleasure in the social discourse. In a time when human labor capacity fueled production, it was impossible that this capacity for labor (i.e. the workforce) “be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits” and still maintain maximum economic output.¹⁹ As a result, sex “moved into the home” and became reduced to its only acceptable, economically efficient form, “the serious function of reproduction.”²⁰ With the pleasurable act of sex now dissociated from reproduction, Foucault identified two distinct figurations of sexually compromised females – the “hysterical woman” and the “Malthusian couple.” The hysterical woman archetype arose from the integration of the female body “into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it.”²¹ The female body is the guarantor of reproduction, meaning she cannot be a sexual body, since reproduction is not the same as sex. With the female body now made to respond to the needs of a social body “whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure,” the immense “biologico-moral” responsibility

placed upon a woman to safeguard the survival of the social body caused her to develop into the image of the nervous Mother, constantly worrying for the safety and security of her family, making her particularly prone to hysterical displays of anxiety, fear, or frustration.²²

The hysterical woman makes up one half of Foucault's Malthusian couple, the most basic unit of socialized procreative behavior. Seeing as reproduction was then conflated with productivity in the economic sphere, the ability of couples to produce children becomes their responsibility to the social body. With fertility now a determinant of socio-economic value, the Malthusian couple was socially motivated to reproduce, and were supported in their endeavor by "a medical socialization carried out by attributing a pathogenic value – for the individual and the species – to birth-control practices."²³ With socially acceptable sexual activity now reduced to reproduction, sex for any other reason became taboo. Rather than "make room for illegitimate sexualities," two sites were reserved, out of the way of the rest of the social body, for these deviants – the brothel and the mental hospital.²⁴ Though the hysterical woman is frequently associated with the Mother figure, she could also be the failed Mother – a hysterical woman, not unlike Ek's *Giselle*, whose anxiety is a product of her inability to fulfill her responsibility to the social body. Since sex without the intent (or possibility) of reproduction constitutes an "illegitimate sexuality," the failed Mother is thereby reduced to pathology, disqualified from participation in the social body, and sentenced to the asylum.

SEX, DEATH, AND THE *BALLET BLANC* – THE ASYLUM AS AN ANALOGY FOR SOCIAL DEATH

The second act of Ek's *Giselle* can be read as a poignant response to this discourse on the function and dysfunction of the female in the social body. By replicating the transition from society to the asylum in his production, Ek demonstrates the way in which *Giselle's* attempt to

fulfill the female sex-role of reproductive body is mistakenly identified as hysteria, and punished as an “illegitimate sexuality.” Once inside the asylum, however, the viewer is confronted with an extreme image of the hysterical women – a woman who has become a hysteric because institutionalization has denied her access to the social body she has been programmed to support. At the beginning of Act II, a new set is revealed. Numerous singular cartoon body parts – an eye, an ear, a finger, a breast – litter a dark backdrop painted to look like an empty room, with the mysteriously closed door prominently placed in the center. Perhaps the image is Freudian, with the door serving as the censor that keeps these sexualized body parts imprisoned.²⁵ Or, perhaps the body parts are sex disembodied – without a reproductive body to unite them, they remain dormant, unable to cooperatively activate.

As the music takes on a frantic, ominous tone, a lone dancer, dressed in a white hospital gown, runs onstage. She is obviously frightened, looking over her shoulder as she sprints across the stage. Suddenly, she freezes in terror at the sight of something offstage, and as she attempts to flee, she is confronted by Myrtha, the asylum’s nurse and the symbol of institutional regulation. As the stage begins to populate with more and more patients dressed in the pure white uniform (a symbol of their virginity, a garment that will never be soiled by menarche), a common pose circulates repeatedly throughout their dancing – in a seated position with her arms supporting her from behind and her feet flexed, the dancer spreads her legs to about shoulder width and deeply bends her knees in an obvious reference to a position of childbirth.

The dancers next form a tight group, and together, open their mouths wide in an ambiguous yet intensely emotional expression – is this a muted cry of orgiastic ecstasy, or a silent scream of unforeseen pain? Either way, the uniform performance of the gesture indicates its contrivance; whatever feeling is supposed to come from this attempted vocalization is only

approximated by these patients. Amidst the frenzy of leaps and battements, the red pillow from Act I reappears, and as one dancer clutches it to her abdomen, there is a moment of repose as she drops into a wide second position *plié* and undulates her pelvis. The moment ends as she shoves the pillow inside her gown, as Giselle did in the previous act. The dance phrases in this section tend towards Ek's typical choreographic style – high extensions, flying jumps, extreme mobility in the upper back and rotation of the hips, and a strong contrast between weight into the floor and into the air. Within the context of the asylum, this hyper-mobile, expansive body movement is rather useful in personifying madness and chaos. Throwing their limbs wildly into the air and arching their backs in extreme curves, the dancers move as if their bodies have a mind of their own, personifying the out-of-control physical image associated with that of psychological hysteria.

While the appearance and characterization of these women as asylum patients is determined by the particularities of Ek's plot and setting, they must also be recognized as the members of the *corps de ballet* that comprise the *ballet blanc*, a group which has historically been heavily nuanced with mystical eroticism. Ek's mental patients are Gautier's Wilis recontextualized. In 1841, the year in which *Giselle* received its premiere at the Paris Opéra, the members of the *corps* were essentially forced to participate in a system of *prostitution légère* (legalized prostitution) in order to make ends meet. This system, which was established and supported by the Opéra, connected the *corps de ballet* members with wealthy (and often obsessive) patrons of the ballet, called balletomanes, who might choose to sponsor their careers in return for favors ranging from sexual companionship to a few sequins off the dancers costume or a special glance from the stage. Regardless of what shape this exchange took, these women all held in common the covert understanding that their position as a member of the *corps de*

ballet connected them with sexual availability.²⁶ However, during the mid-1800s, promiscuity carried with it the deadly threat of syphilis, and, as Felicia McCarren argues in *Dance Pathologies*, this danger translated directly onto the stage in *Giselle*, with the Wilis representing “many of the nightmares about female sexuality made evident in contemporary attitudes towards prostitution.”²⁷

The Wilis here must be thought of as having a double identity – that of the human dancer playing the Wili, and that of the ghostly female character she plays. While on stage, the dancer represented for her male audience a real erotic potential, one they could pay for after the show; a whole group of these women onstage offered an opportunity for anonymous voyeuristic pleasure, a “scopophilic”²⁸ experience for the male viewer, willingly provided by these women under the condition of their presenting themselves to an audience as dancers. As a character, however, the Wilis represent a version of death that is laced with sexual tension. The Wilis are women who died before the consummation of their marriages, and these women “seek out in death what they missed out on in life.”²⁹ But, since the literal job of a *corps* member involved sexual liaisons and the threat of deadly disease, the danger of sex becomes symbolized by the dangers of dancing. Though the Wilis wear white tutus to represent their purity, their infatuation with any male body that comes their way suggests that “beneath the veil of discipline and sanctity, women have a sexual appetite”³⁰ which can only be fulfilled by “dancing” this man to his death. It is important to note that though the Wilis may be able to momentarily mingle with mortal men, like Albrecht, it is only when they are approached in their own realm that this contact with the human world can occur. The Wilis are confined to the graveyard and active only at night, making their prospects for human interaction rather slim and accentuating their position as outcasts.

Like the Wilis in Gautier's *Giselle*, Ek's Wilis inhabit a realm separated from that of normal human life. Furthermore, in both iterations of this other realm, the desire for sexual interaction is of paramount concern. But, in Ek's version, the Wilis are not literally dead. Instead, their banishment from the social body – which above all praises women for their ability to produce life – results in the asylum patient's social death. Ek's asylum is akin to the Wilis' graveyard, for in both locations, the inhabitants go unnoticed by society at large, save for the infrequent moments when someone (a target male) either seeks them out or stumbles upon them. Once Giselle is relocated to the asylum, she is denied access to the male reproductive system, thereby rendering her sexually non-existent.³¹ But, since the female's reproductive value is analogous to her social value, the non-reproducing female's social existence is likewise defunct.

In her analysis of *Giselle* from *Choreography and Narrative*, Susan Leigh Foster argues that Giselle and the Wilis are dismissed from human sexual and social life because their demise comes during the transition of control over their sexual identities between masculine parties. Writing about Gautier's version of *Giselle*, Foster notes how Giselle's "unclaimed, unchanneled sexual energy" has been brought forth by the promise of marriage, but "[I]legally, she is in transition between her father's and her husband's jurisdictions."³² Because Giselle's sexuality has been unleashed, she cannot die an innocent child; because her sexual appetite is left "unchanneled," she is restless, even in death, with an excess of "sexual energy." The same can be said of Ek's Giselle: as an "unclaimed" female in a community that highly values reproductive partnerships, she exists in social purgatory. She is either too old or too aware of her social expectation for reproduction to escape scrutiny or feign innocence, but she is physically unable to find a channel for this sexual motivation, since she cannot find a husband-figure under whom to exercise this socially instilled sexual need. Without a male figure to complete her

partnership, Giselle is considered a social extravagance, unneeded and unwanted, for she serves no social function. In the opinion of the social body, it is easier to send her away than to reorganize the social order to accommodate her incongruence.

RECLAIMING THE FEMALE DANCING BODY

In calling to attention Ek's Giselle's position as a sexual free-agent, she is also identified as a threat. Her existence as a female sexual being unchecked by a corresponding male is a direct affront to the hegemonic power structures outlined by Foucault that relegate female bodies to the position of passive acceptors of the social body's reproductive needs. As previously noted, this is also the root of Giselle's "madness" – in terms of her community's social structure, she should be powerless, but somehow she has managed to assert herself over Hilarion (later on in Act 1, it is revealed that he was the one holding Giselle by a tether) and instead pursue a relationship with Albrecht. But, this is only one explanation for Giselle's identification as a threat; another stems from the way in which she has thwarted the male gaze. Originally defined by Laura Mulvey in the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the male gaze results from the construction of a gender dichotomy in which the male figure is the active viewer of the passive female figure. The female figure is reduced to an image that can be manipulated and fetishized to fit the scopophilic cravings of the male audience.³³ The reason for the female figure's manipulation lies in her visible sexual difference. It is a story of have and have-not: because her body lacks a penis, her body exists opposite the male body. Since the penis is identified as the central proponent of male sexual pleasure, the default reading of the female body in opposition to the male therefore defines her as pleasure-less, or a symbol for castration.

Herein lies the male's need for manipulation of the female image – rather than allow the woman to represent a threatening, pleasure-less symbol of castration, the male gaze changes the female figure, “[building] up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself,” until the point of fetishization, when her image is reduced to only those features that sexually stimulate the male viewer. This image of the woman is “reassuring rather than dangerous,” according to Mulvey, because it re-endows the female body with the capacity for male pleasure while simultaneously asserting that all sexual pleasure is male pleasure. In relation to the classical ballerina's body in particular, Susan Leigh Foster has described the fetishization of the dancing female body as the identification of a “ballerina-as-phallus” paradigm, with the straight, stiff line of the ballerina in her pointe shoes and supported by her male partner embodying male sexual pleasure.³⁴ In the traditional ballet partnership (the one that Ek so disliked), the female dancer in the hands of the male dancer projects the male's control over a sexualized body that was historically put on display for masculine scopophilic pleasure. While Foster's analysis is purposefully provocative, she is sincere in her acknowledgement of the ballerina's historical function as a sexual object at the mercy of her male admirers.

Though Mulvey's analysis was written under the auspices of film theory, her discussion of the male gaze is strikingly appropriate in the discussion of *Giselle*, the *ballet blanc*, and the history of balletomania in which *Giselle* was originally presented. By claiming the bodies of specific *corps de ballet* members as their own personal viewing objects, the balletomanes of mid-19th century Paris were able to justify their scopophilic experience at the ballet as an assertion of masculinity, despite that somewhat homoerotic nature of the setting (a group of men who gather to experience a sexual rush).³⁵ Due to their lowly position, the impoverished dancers had no choice but to submit themselves to the male gaze in return for patronage. When dancing

the roles of the Wilis, their characterization as women who died with unfulfilled sexual appetites likewise complies to the preferences of the male gaze, identifying them as willing sexual objects seeking male attention.

But yet, Ek's Giselle is different. Rather than submit to the male gaze, as Gautier's Giselle does when she becomes a Wili, Ek's Giselle appropriates the power of gaze for her own purposes. To use Mulvey's proposition as a lens for analysis, Ek's Giselle clearly represents the threat of castration, but without the prospect of fetishization because she lacks sexual potential. In Ek's world, she is infertile, and therefore, non-sexual. Given her community's equation of reproductive potential with sexual desire, Ek's Giselle cannot be the object of the male gaze because her body does not provide the material for eroticization. And yet, despite this reasoning, Ek's Giselle is an overtly sexual being. According to the rules of the male gaze, Giselle should be a sexual nobody. Instead, Ek has her blatantly propositioning Albrecht for sex (it is Giselle that initiates their first *pas de deux* by basically dragging the reluctant Albrecht onstage), showing him that she still has the capacity for sexual desire, just not reproduction. In the first act, she holds Albrecht close to her and together they take a deep plié in second position, undulating their hips in synchrony, just as the other egg-bearing couples do. When she presents Albrecht with the red pillow from under her skirt, telling him that this is the only "child" they will have, he accepts it with compassion, and Giselle performs a sequence of grande jetés and cartwheels to express her joy. In Albrecht, she has found a partner whose desire for her does not originate from the principles of the male gaze.

What is important in this partnership is Giselle's agency. Looking at the world from Giselle's point of view, she takes the power of the male gaze and turns it on its head: she is the viewer, and Albrecht is viewed. Albrecht is fetishized as Giselle's ideal male partner – just as

Mulvey's camera might zoom in on a starlet's lips or legs, Giselle's choreography frequently draws attention to Albrecht's pelvis. She crawls between his legs, kneels down to rest her head on his hip, and makes a point of lining her pelvis up with his on several occasions. By using Albrecht to affirm her sexual relevancy, Giselle has refuted the axiom brought forth by the male gaze that dictates male sexual pleasure as the only form of sexual pleasure. By escaping the supremacy of the male gaze, Giselle has usurped a sliver of power, disregarding the expectations of femininity and directly threatening the sexual hierarchy of the social body. As Chesler writes, this is evidence for the conviction of madness. Giselle's appropriation of gaze can be aptly described, to again use Chesler's words, as a "socially powerless individual's attempt to unite body and feeling," otherwise known as "madness."³⁶

Based solely on the theories and images outlined in this analysis, it may seem that Ek's production of *Giselle* presents a thoroughly dismal, harsh, and hostile environment to the viewer. In actuality, the overall affect of Ek's *Giselle* is rather the opposite. Though it is clear to the viewer that something is amiss with both Giselle (Ana Laguna, Ek's wife and Cullberg Ballet prima who originated the role, played her with a wide-eyed, consuming expression in the first act³⁷) and her situation (by the end of Act 1, she is, after all, pinned down with pitchforks in a particularly violent display by the men of her community), the production exudes an ironically light-hearted mood. Save for Hilarion, the dancers do not let on that they are in the wake of tragedy. What should be the zenith of chaos – the "mad scene" at the end of Act 1 – is instead a highly organized, almost ritualistic dance for everyone on stage except Giselle. With Giselle seated on center stage, her back to the audience and her head in her hands, the ensemble (both men and women) dances in unison, orbiting around the dejected woman until they form a circle that encloses her completely. When even Albrecht joins in, her alienation is undeniable. The

synchronous, circular aspect of this dance gives it the sense of a nefarious folkdance – the high degree of order suggests that this dance has been taught, practiced, and enacted before. As with any folkdance, it originates from some communal agreement that this moment merits a dance, and unfortunately for Giselle, that moment comes when the social body convenes to recognize her as a threat and excise her presence.

Dance is an art form heavily identified with the female body, especially in its Western theatrical form; when speaking of theatrical dance, “dancer” is often synonymous with “ballerina,” the female ballet body. It makes sense, then, that dance could be used as the vehicle for identifying and projecting dissatisfactions with female representation, as Mats Ek has done with his *Giselle*. To return briefly to critical reactions to Ek’s production, some reviews have presented Ek’s take on *Giselle* as decisively problematic. In her discussion of Ek’s reworking, Vida Midgelow calls into question Ek’s characterization of Giselle and the Wilis, arguing that “the representation of women as psychologically unstable, and as unable to control their sexual desires, may also reinforce negative images of women.”³⁸ Midgelow’s reaction, while not unexpected, is precisely the reason that a feminist reading of *Giselle* is needed. Midgelow writes from the position of Foucault’s social body – she sees Giselle’s overt sexuality as an affront to the heteronormative gender- and sex-role expectations that require women to be reproductive instead of sexual and enforce this rule by casting deviant women as “negative images” of what social female should aspire to be, and pathologizing their behavior as “psychologically unstable.” Rather than see Ek’s *Giselle* as the revelation of “another potential” for the dancing woman (as Ek desired to do with his reworkings), Midgelow’s critique reverts back to the restrictions of hegemonic social order, and misses the very point that Ek hoped to make. But, Midgelow’s critique also shows that Ek’s work has succeeded: with his *Giselle*, he has created a piece that

challenges the socio-sexual hierarchy's abject repression of female sexuality, as Midgelow has pointed out. By aggravating critics in the real world with his sexual politics, Ek proves that the demonization of sexually inclined females is not a product of his setting, but a reflection of contemporary society's own discomfort with the disruption of hegemonic socio-sexual expectations.

A *GISELLE* FOR OUR TIME: THE MEANING OF ROMANTICISM IN MATS EK'S PRODUCTION

After its 1982 New York premiere, *The New York Times*' dance critic Anna Kisselgoff rejected Ek's interpretation of *Giselle*, referring to his changes as "[m]isreading Romanticism's own dark flirting with the escapist."³⁹ Arguably, Ek's post-structuralist approach to the Romantic escaped Kisselgoff at the time. Now, more than thirty years later, with the advent of post-structuralism a feature of historical context, she and other critics might approach this work quite differently. In an interview regarding his production of *Swan Lake*, Ek was asked if he considered his production a "de-romanticizaion;" he responded by saying, "That depends on what you mean by 'romantic.' If you mean 'pretty and sweet,' well, no, they're not part of it. But if you mean what 'romantic' signified from the beginning - something wild and illogical, something to which you can't respond with your reason - then, absolutely, this is a romantic ballet."⁴⁰ His definition of Romanticism in this response speaks volumes to his interpretation of *Giselle*, the ballet that has come to represent all of ballet's Romantic period, as a Romantic ballet for our time, one that uses a post-structuralist approach to deconstruct the meaning of the social female.

In much the same way that Ek's *Giselle* is a post-modern response to the ballet tradition, Gautier's libretto was a Romantic reaction to industrialization, aristocratic rule, and the

Enlightenment's championing of reason over emotion or desire. Including a *ballet blanc* alongside Giselle's descent into hysteria provided Gautier a method for depicting the inherently sexual nature of a dancer's life at the Paris Opéra, while simultaneously chastising the bourgeois elite that put her there. In this sense, Gautier's *Giselle* was a mirror, albeit a foggy one, that used dancing to reveal a social critique to the very people with which it took fault. When Giselle goes "mad," she transcends reason and finds herself in a world that defies logic – a world where death does not constitute the end of earthly activity. By using his characters to undermine the supremacy of reason, Gautier is suggesting that there is not one logical, truthful explanation for the story of *Giselle*, but many possible interpretations, if the viewer can only see past the surface-level description of *Giselle* as a story of tragic love. Indeed, the fact that *Giselle* and the *ballet blanc* are interpreted today on the basis of sexual and socio-economic themes is evidence for Gautier's success as a Romantic author, one who found a way of "saying the unsayable," even if it took many years for these alternate meanings to be articulated.

If covert social critique is taken as the intent of Gautier's original production, then Mats Ek's *Giselle* is truer to its inspiration than most critics (and viewers) would give it credit. Visual and choreographic differences aside, Ek's *Giselle* is, like Gautier's *Giselle*, a reaction to the socio-political climate in which it was created, using dance as a mirror to reveal the flaws not of individual characters, but of the society that created their archetypes. As Giselle's community changes its view of her from innocent woman to sex-obsessed pathological hysteric, Ek confronts his viewers with the realization that Gautier tried show over one-hundred years before: it is contemporary society that is at fault for the ills represented onstage, not the individuals that are victimized. Ek's *Giselle* represents what Midgelow described as a "negative image of women" because society says so, and herein resides the basis for Giselle's pathologization.

Nowhere in Ek's choreography does Giselle prove herself to be a danger to herself or others because of her psychological state, which would usually be thought of as the grounds for institutional intervention. The only danger Giselle presents to her community lies in her circumvention of one social norm (repressed female sexuality) in order to adhere to another (partnership and motherhood), and this transgression of her community's established social reason is enough to justify her dismissal to the asylum.

Though Gautier's Giselle declined her opportunity to be a Romanic heroine, perhaps Ek's Giselle sees her through after all. By transcending the boundaries of social reason for the sake of individual desire, Ek's Giselle takes on the cause of Romanticism, but through a post-structuralist lens. Disregarding the binary that describes men as sexual and women as reproductive, Ek's Giselle acts in a way that is just as "wild and illogical" as her own community's violent exiling of her to the asylum for having only tried to meet their standard of heterosexual partnership. By challenging the structures that relegate women to the position of acquiescent supporters of the social body, Ek's work reveals how the diminishment of female potential extends far beyond the 19th-century ballet tradition. In deconstructing the role of the ballerina – ballet's dancing woman – in *Giselle* as it relates to her place in her community both on and off the stage and using dance to facilitate a critique of the pathologization of women, Ek proves that the spirit of Romanticism is still at the forefront of his reworking of the ballet. In the end, Mats Ek's *Giselle* is undeniably a *Giselle* for our time, a Romantic ballet reworked to present a contemporary iteration of the need for "saying the unsayable," and perhaps, like Gautier's *Giselle*, a production that will only be fully understood in the years to come.

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² I will use the term “reworking” rather than “revival” or “reconstruction” when talking about Ek’s works because I find the latter two terms imply an attempt to present a dance close to the original. “Reworking,” on the other hand, more closely describes the creative interpretation of these narratives and the reinvention of their contexts which makes Ek’s versions of these ballets so different from their original versions. See also Vida Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³ Regina Heidecke and Reiner Moritz, *Keeping Dance Alive: A Portrait of the Choreographer Mats Ek* (Insight Media, 2000).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anna Kisselgoff, “BALLET: CULLBERG ‘GISELLE’,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1982, sec. Arts.

⁷ Clive Barnes, *The New York Post*, November 11, 1982..

⁸ Felicia M McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁹ Ibid, p. 72.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (New York: R, 2007), p. 24.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Iris Marion Young, “Menstrual Meditations,” in *On Female Body Experience “Throwing like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Karen van Ulzen, “Not Quite Modern Ballet,” *Dance Australia* 51 (January 1990): 45.

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, Constance Borde, and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, *The second sex* (London: Vintage, 2010). See also Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* for a discussion of power in sexual relationships.

¹⁶ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York, N.Y.: Avon, 1972).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1978).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 104.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, p.4.

²⁵ I say these body parts are sexualized because they can all be associated in some way with the sensations of sex, or could be used to insinuate or suggest ideas of sex (especially the finger and breast).

²⁶ McCarren, *Dance Pathologies*, p.70ff.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 70.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 78.

²⁹ Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (New York: R, 2007), p. 30.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 25.

- ³¹ Thinking back to Foucault, since female sexuality is restricted to reproduction, if reproductive potential is taken away, she no longer has a connection to sex.
- ³² Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography & Narrative : Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington :: Indiana University Press,, c1996.), p. 243.
- ³³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.
- ³⁴ Susan Leigh Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," in *Corporealities* (N: Rou, 1996), 1–24.
- ³⁵ McCarren, makes a similar argument in *Dance Pathologies*, stating that balletomania prompted an "implicit male bonding in the scene of the viewing," in that taking part in the scopophilic viewing of women confirmed a man's membership in the sexually dominant group (the group that does the viewing) to the other men in his presence.
- ³⁶ Chesler, *Women and Madness*, p. 56.
- ³⁷ This impression is taken from a recorded version of Ek's *Giselle* from 1987 that was originally produced for TV and has since become commercial available in DVD format. Mans Reutersward, *Giselle* (Arthaus Musik, 2009).
- ³⁸ Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-narratives and Alternative Bodies*, p. 19.
- ³⁹ Kisselgoff, "BALLET."
- ⁴⁰ Allan Ulrich, "Cullberg Ballet ON THE CUSP. (cover story)," *Dance Magazine* 76, no. 10 (October 2002): 36.

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