

Template for an Exception:

How Archetypes of Genius Mold Choreographers' Biographical Narratives

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"When you're dealing with a genius, you have to be prepared to turn your collar around."¹

This statement comes from Broadway performer George Irving, referring to his experiences with Jerome Robbins, a choreographer known almost as much for his emotional outbursts as for his highly successful musicals. In the case of this genius, the behaviors that one is expected to look past include incessantly berating dancers, sabotaging personal relationships, and even ordering dancers to seriously injure each other onstage. Yet, as troubling as it may be, this sentiment is commonly used in the dance world to justify the concerning behaviors of various “genius” choreographers. The assumptions behind it are rarely brought into question: what about this quality of “genius” seems overpowering that we must passively accept any collateral damage? That we should not try alter its course? That we should—or even that we must put aside our ordinary ethical standards for its sake?

These questions can be answered, at least in part, by looking broadly at development of genius as an idea throughout Western history, during which the genius archetype gradually absorbed characteristics and social status previously held by religious figures. From this history emerges the recognizable archetype of the genius as a male pseudo-religious savior figure who possesses predestined and unlearned abilities (whether due to an innate gift or divine possession) and is unbound by ordinary human codes of morality.

1. Greg Lawrence, *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (New York, NY: Putnam Publishing Group, 2001).

This archetype is not necessarily a realistic description of most individuals who possess outstanding abilities (after all, some great artists are women, highly trained craftspeople, or even respectful human beings). Yet this cultural myth is projected, when possible, upon the narratives of those we consider to be great, shaping their stories to fit the historical mold. Embedded are the assumptions that women are less likely to possess such a gift, that truly great choreographic abilities cannot be developed over time, and that cruel behavior must be accepted as an unavoidable byproduct of true brilliance. Beyond simply shaping our perceptions of established choreographers, this myth has continued practical consequences in the dance world: devaluing choreographic education, disadvantaging aspiring female choreographers, and perpetuating workplace abuse.

By examining the biographies of major genius figures in the history of American modern dance and ballet, we can identify how the cultural archetype has been built around each of them. Mark Morris, Jerome Robbins, and Martha Graham (in spite of her gender) serve as examples of choreographers who have clearly been fit into this traditional framework, while Twyla Tharp, in some regards, provides an alternative model of artistic greatness as developed through practice and hard work. This research brings to light the ways in which the standard genius narrative is artificially constructed, both factually and morally problematic, and thus in need of change.

Background and Methodology

In order to understand how the archetype of genius affects the field of choreography, we must first understand the nature of this myth and how it came to be a part of our discourse. Without denying that individuals of exceptional abilities exist and have always existed, we can recognize that the ways in which we perceive and explain these exceptional individuals has been socially constructed over time. As historian Darrin McMahon explains, “extraordinary human

beings not only define their images but embody them, stepping into molds prepared by the social imaginary and the exemplars who came before . . . however inimitable — however unique — their genius was partly prepared for them, worked out over the course of generations.”² Thus, to understand how we frame genius figures today, we must trace the history of the genius construct in Western history.

The classical precursor to the modern genius archetype was the Greek poet, believed to be possessed by muses or the divine.³ Original creation was thus not seen as inherent to the man himself, nor an act of personal will, but a work of divine forces using the poet as a temporary passive vessel.⁴ There was also some association between madness and creative abilities; Socrates spoke of a “divine madness” that characterized the poet’s moments of inspiration, but we should not overstate any ancient connection between genius and mental illness: this form of insanity, like creativity, was considered a temporary state, and of a different nature than madness caused by disease.⁵ In the fifth century BC, the poet Pindar would place an emphasis on the poet’s innate abilities—those gifted from the gods at birth—which would make them worthy vessels of inspiration.⁶ Yet even as these two ideas of genius—innate gift and momentary inspiration—were placed in dialogue, it remained accepted that the greatest abilities were involuntary and divine in origin, superior to deliberately learned skills, which were associated with other art forms.⁷

During the Roman era, we see this dialogue between spirit possession and inherent abilities in the etymology of the word genius. A man’s “genius” was considered his personal

2. Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xvi.

3. *Ibid.*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 13.

6. *Ibid.*, 16.

7. *Ibid.*

attendant spirit, the source of his individual character, and his connection to the divine world.⁸ At the same time, this term was closely associated, and eventually conflated with “ingenium,” which referred to his inborn nature or talents.⁹ While these terms were not initially limited to exceptional individuals, it became customary to swear by the “genius” of extraordinary men for guidance, and to view such men as mediators between the masses and the divine. With the advent of Christianity, saints, martyrs, and angels would inherit this role of intermediary between ordinary humans and God.¹⁰

In the lay world, the modern notion of artistic genius began to take form during the Renaissance, when the now-Christian notions of divine gift (“divino”) were fused with the idea of inherited ability (“ingenium”) in the image of super-artist figures such as Michelangelo.¹¹ Thus, as the artist ascended in importance, he came to be regarded as a near-immortal figure, certainly human, but closer to God than the ordinary man.¹² Still, the image of *divino ingenio* was not quite the eccentric artist genius we expect today: the artist’s exceptional abilities were associated more with rational skill learning than with fits of inspiration,¹³ and the artist was expected to be a well-regarded member of high society, not a rebel who disregarded social norms.¹⁴

The issue of genius posed a problem for Enlightenment rationalists, who wished to celebrate extraordinary thinkers of history as heroes, but did not accept spirit possession as an explanation for their exceptionalism.¹⁵ Thus, the miracle of genius had to be consecrated within

8. *Ibid.*, 22.

9. *Ibid.*, 23.

10. *Ibid.*, 45.

11. Penelope Murray, *Genius: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 36-37.

12. *Ibid.*, 49.

13. *Ibid.*, 38.

14. *Ibid.*, 49.

15. McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 69.

the man himself.¹⁶ Starting the late seventeenth century, we see the term “genius” used as we know it today: a man doesn’t simply become possessed by genius, or even possess genius abilities, but he himself *is* a genius,¹⁷ and respected figures from history were increasingly described as such.¹⁸

Darrin McMahon attributes the increasing obsession with genius to the “attendant withdrawal of God:” as Protestants criticized the belief in guardian angels, and rationalists brought skepticism to ideas of saints and spirits, people looked for alternative figures to serve as intermediaries between the humans and the spiritual unknown.¹⁹ Further, with an increasing belief in general human equality, geniuses served as exceptions, providing elevated yet accessible figures to look up to.²⁰ Ascribed with powers once reserved for the divine and their servants—original creation²¹ and access to secrets of the universe²²—the modern genius offered someone to worship and follow in the secular world.

As the fascination with genius grew, the debate over its source continued. While empiricists attempted to explain genius abilities in terms of education and experience,²³ this prompted a backlash, defining true genius precisely by its natural and unteachable character.²⁴ During the Romantic era, the notion of genius creation as a moment of involuntary and uncontrollable possession became popular once again, but in a newly secularized form.²⁵ Without muses or angels to serve as the forces of possession, inspiration was described in terms

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 70.

18. Ibid., 71.

19. Ibid., 73.

20. Ibid., 76.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 77.

23. Ibid., 80.

24. Ibid., 24.

25. Ibid., 128.

of vaguely defined energies, passions, a “universal mind,” or “national spirit”—explicitly secular terms that nonetheless imitated the form of religious inspiration and portrayed an even more enigmatic image of genius.²⁶

It was also during the Romantic era that the genius archetype most clearly took on the darker and deviant characteristics we recognize today. Following the form of religious martyrs, suffering and social persecution came to be defining features of the genius’ life, setting him apart from the conforming society.²⁷ This pained existence also included being psychologically tortured, having a dark and brooding nature marked by melancholy and instability.²⁸ Finally, the truly exceptional genius was meant to reject rules in his life as well as his work: the genius was above the law, unrestrained by social norms, and an exception to ordinary standards of morality.²⁹

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attempts to scientifically (or pseudo-scientifically) define genius sought to reinforce its cultural association with madness in psycho-medical terms.³⁰ This scientific endeavor further fueled cultural interest in the idea of genius, but did not replace the notion of inhabiting spirits in popular conceptions.³¹ In fact, in an increasingly secular world, cult-like worship of genius figures³²—often described in quasi-religious language as saints and prophets³³—became a secular form of religion in itself.

While these various models of genius have dominated in different periods—spirit possession (in its more explicitly religious and secular forms), inherent nature, and combinations

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 137.

28. Ibid., 138.

29. Ibid., 144-145.

30. Ibid., 162.

31. Ibid., 187.

32. Ibid., 189.

33. Ibid., 199.

of both—we should not see them as mutually exclusive or restricted to any one period. Often, both of these models will enter the discussion of a single genius, even from a single author, as each has subtly infiltrated the language we use to discuss exceptional figures.

The tradition of genius also carries a particular gender bias. In her 1989 book *Gender and Genius*, feminist philosopher Christine Battersby focuses on the history and contemporary persistence of the Romantic genius archetype, drawing attention to its gendered nature. According to Battersby the genius is conceived of as male, never female, with psychologically feminine as well as masculine qualities.³⁴ Moreover, male sexual energy is treated as a key force of creative brilliance, while female sexuality is considered contradictory with such pursuits. Battersby's model of the psychologically androgynous, sexually-charged male genius is still very much relevant to choreographers' narratives: Mark Morris is perhaps the clearest contemporary representative of this type, characterized as “part diva, part truck driver,”³⁵ with his gender expression and sexuality sensationalized as part of his “rebel genius” image.

It is important to note that the gendered aspect of this archetype notwithstanding, it does allow for some notable exceptions. In the abstract, the archetypical genius is male, but in reality, some women are recognized as geniuses (after all, a category may be biased in favor of men without excluding women completely). For instance, from quite early in her career, Martha Graham was singled out by supportive critics as an independently-thinking genius revolutionizing the dance world, and this distinction has often been used as justification for her emotional and physical mistreatment of dancers. Nonetheless, even her biographer Agnes de Mille, also a successful female choreographer, characterizes Graham's genius as perpetually in

34. Christine Battersby. *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

35. Joan Acocella, *Mark Morris* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 6.

conflict with her biological womanhood,³⁶ demonstrating that even exceptional women are accepted into the genius category with difficulty.

The gendered bias of this genius archetype has real implications for women's careers. Reflecting the association between innate giftedness and maleness, studies of recommendation letters found that female students and faculty were less frequently described with adjectives indicating innate talent (such as "brilliant" and "genius"),³⁷ and more often described with adjectives indicating effort (such as "diligent" or "hardworking").³⁸ Moreover, recent studies have identified that the more an academic field is believed to require innate brilliance over hard work (based on surveys or professor reviews), the fewer women are represented at the highest levels,³⁹ demonstrating how this gender-biased view of innate genius can disadvantage women over the course of their careers. While these studies have focused on academia, with a particular attention to science and medicine, it is not unlikely that similar biases affect artistic fields, such as choreography, that are assumed to rely on innate ability.

Of course, the acceptance of the great artist as psychologically twisted and inevitably cruel has also some very real manifestations—especially in the dance world. Drawing attention to the issue of abuse from an educational perspective, Robin Lakes highlights and dissects the seemingly contradictory fact that many of the most artistically revolutionary and freethinking choreographers have made their classrooms and rehearsals oppressive environments.⁴⁰ She

36. Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991): 201.

37. Kuheli Dutt, "Gender Differences in Recommendation Letters for Postdoctoral Fellowships in Geoscience," *Nature Geoscience* October 3, 2016; Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka, "Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty," *Discourse & Society* 14, no. 2 (March 2003).

38. Trix and Psenka, "Exploring the Color of Glass."

39. Daniel Storage et al., "The Frequency of "Brilliant" and "Genius" in Teaching Evaluations Predicts the Representation of Women and African Americans Across Fields," *PLOS ONE* 11.3 (3 Mar, 2016); Sarah-Jane Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions Across Academic Disciplines," *Science* 347, no. 6219 (January 16, 2015).

40. Robin Lakes, "The Messages Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique, Training and Rehearsals," *Arts Education Policy Review* 106, no. 5 (2005): 3-20.

includes numerous dancers' accounts of highly regarded choreographers engaging in infantilization, harsh body-shaming, emotional manipulation, and physical harm. Focused on the pedagogical implications, Lakes analyzes this behavior in terms of traditions of authoritarianism, but it also fits seamlessly into the stereotypical deviant genius personality: after all, it is not required that the rule-breaking freethinker facilitate freedom in the lives of *others*. These examples may be anecdotal, but the sheer volume of them makes apparent that abusive behavior is a known and accepted—if not always discussed—presence in professional dance. The frequent use of artistic merit or “genius” to excuse such incidents indicates that the genius archetype can be a useful lens for understanding and addressing the issue of abuse in the field of dance.

Of course, culturally embedded beliefs do not necessarily reflect the real nature of exceptional creative ability, and the fields of psychology and sociology provide empirical evidence for the divergence between myth and reality. Research on popular conceptions of genius suggests that many Romantic stereotypes surrounding giftedness remain. In line with the myth of the pathological and deviant genius personality a study on perceptions of gifted individuals among German adults found that giftedness is still largely associated with traits of socio-emotional maladjustment.⁴¹

Yet, research focused on the actual nature of creative ability has often come to conclusions counter to such stereotypes. When put under scientific scrutiny, the assumed link between genius and mental illness has been found to have little empirical support, aside from a few highly publicized studies with small and unrepresentative samples.⁴² Moreover, recent psychological theories of the creative process have highlighted the importance of contextual and

41. Tanja G. Baudson, “The Mad Genius Stereotype: Still Alive and Well.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (March 21, 2016).

42. Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

collaborative factors in creation,⁴³ running contrary to the image of the singularly gifted genius. The focus has turned to developing an "ecological" model, identifying how the factors relating to social, economic, and historical conditions and interpersonal relationships interact with individual characteristics to create optimal conditions for creativity.⁴⁴ For instance, access to mentors and role models and experience with multiple cultural traditions have been identified as factors related to greater creative abilities.⁴⁵ The unit of research has also shifted away from the isolated genius, as case studies have begun to examine the workings of collaborative *groups* known for their outstanding creativity, from jazz ensembles to engineering labs.⁴⁶

With this understanding that popular conceptions of genius do not correspond directly with reality, we must identify how these myths have been artificially inserted into our understanding of history. In the fields of art and science, meta-historical analysis has traced how notable figures have been retroactively reimagined to fit an ideal of genius, through the reshaping of biographical narratives after their death. For instance, in serving the notion of true genius as innate and mysterious, Isaac Newton was transformed after his death from a diligent experimenter to divinely-sparked thinker⁴⁷ and Joseph Hayden from a trained artist to a natural one.⁴⁸ Additionally, the characterization of the artistic genius as a tortured, antisocial, or pathological male figure has been analyzed in both the popular image of Romantic poets⁴⁹ and in

43. Montuori and Purser, "Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth: Toward a Contextual View of Creativity," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 35, no. 3 (July 1, 1995): 69–112.

44. *Ibid.*, 82.

45. *Ibid.*, 94.

46. *Ibid.*, 105.

47. Patricia Fara, "Catch a Falling Apple: Isaac Newton and Myths of Genius," *Endeavour* 23, no. 4 (January 1, 1999): 167–70.

48. Thomas Bauman, "Becoming Original: Haydn and the Cult of Genius," *The Musical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 333–57.

49. Dino Franco Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

more recent biopics of artists.⁵⁰ These deconstructions of genius narratives in other fields serve as methodological models for identifying cultural tropes embedded in our telling of history, how these tropes depart from historical reality, and how they came to be accepted as part of our cultural understanding.

With these examples as models, I have taken on a similar project with four American ballet and modern dance choreographers as the subjects, with attention to how their biographers underscore the narrative of the genius as a pseudo-religious savior who is inevitably destined for greatness (either through innate or spiritual forces) and an exception to ordinary human codes of morality. Mark Morris and Jerome Robbins are two archetypal males in this category—choreographic luminaries whose genius has also been tied to their shocking behavior, whether Morris’ obnoxious public persona or Robbins’ downright emotional abuse. I also examine two female choreographers who have earned the traditionally male distinction of “genius,” albeit in different ways. Martha Graham has very much been categorized within the traditional archetype—as a spiritually guided icon who is entitled to emotional outbursts and abuse of her dancers—although her femaleness is still treated as conflicting with her genius. Twyla Tharp, on the other hand, though she has also been characterized as a genius, deviates from the traditional archetype in offering an alternative narrative of creation based on practice and effort, rather than prophecy.

To sample these choreographers’ public images, I explore popular biographies and personal accounts from dancers who worked with them—with particular attention to ways in which certain narratives are exaggerated, distorted, and framed to fit preconceived notions of genius. While I take a largely historical approach in my research, I do so with attention to the

50. Julie F. Codell, “Gender, Genius, and Abjection in Artist Biopics.” In *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, edited by Tom Brown and Belen Vidal (London: Routledge, 2013).

present implications of the content, as we continue to glorify these historical genius narratives as the standard of choreographic greatness today. By identifying both the constructed nature and negative consequences of these narratives, I hope that we can begin to develop a more equitable, ethical, sustainable, and accurate model of what choreographic talent can look like today--one in which abuse is not inherent in making great dance.

The Dark Age: Setting the Stage for the Savior Genius

A common trope in choreographer biographies is the genius emerging from a “dark age” as the lone figure saving a nearly dead dance world. Logically, there is no reason why this must be the case: it makes at least as much sense that a great artist should emerge out of a period of vibrant artistic development, building upon, drawing inspiration from, or even rebelling against the artists who preceded them. Yet the dark age trope reinforces the exceptionalism of the genius by isolating him from artistic influences, while presenting the artist as a pseudo-religious savior figure ushering in a period of enlightenment. To construct this trope, writers typically will declare the era directly preceding the artist in question to be artistically barren, even if this means overlooking significant aspects of the dance world or dismissing major groups of active artists as historically irrelevant because they do not fit the author’s artistic preferences, or because they are working in a different style than the genius figure.

In this manner, setting the stage for the story of Martha Graham’s modern dance revolution, Agnes de Mille makes the sweeping statement that there was “almost no dancing” in the first two decades of the twentieth century (with Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis as exceptions),⁵¹ blatantly overlooking, among others, the historically influential works of Mary Wigman and the Ballets Russes.

51. Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991), 25.

Marcia Siegel, in her biography of Twyla Tharp, treats the modern dance world during Tharp's choreographic debut as equally hopeless. She states that, modern dance in the 1960s was in "decline" as the "innovative fires" of the original pioneers had "cooled," and finds their successors—including highly celebrated choreographers such as José Limón and Alvin Ailey—were undoubtedly "less innovative."⁵² She also holds the avant-garde "downtown performers" associated with the Judson Church as responsible for this decline, as they abandoned the technique and emotion of this modern dance tradition.⁵³ Although Tharp studied with and was certainly influenced by both classical modern and "downtown" artists, Siegel views their work not as a catalyst for Tharp's, but as a dying landscape that her vital choreographic energy will transform.

Similarly, Mark Morris' biographer Joan Acocella, clearly unimpressed by the postmodern dance movement, depicts the 1970s as a lull in the dance world (though, notably, she points out Twyla Tharp as the only "genius" exception to emerge from the 1960s).⁵⁴ She categorizes innovations in experimental work as more "political theater" than dance, as if to keep the field of true dance clear for Morris' arrival.⁵⁵ Against this background, Morris emerges as the classical modern torchbearer, reviving and continuing the lost legacy of Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limón, and Paul Taylor.⁵⁶

Still, there are cases in which, even with a bit of historical revision, it is difficult to characterize an era as a dark age. In his lengthy tribute to Jerome Robbins in *Broadway, The Golden Years*, Robert Long admits that "the whole postwar period in which Jerome Robbins

52. Marcia B. Siegel, *Howling Near Heaven: Twyla Tharp and the Reinvention of Modern Dance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 7.

53. Ibid.

54.. Acocella, *Mark Morris*, 54.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

emerged was filled with gifted choreographers and choreographer-directors,”⁵⁷ while maintaining that Robbins was always recognized as a standout among them. Yet overall, the assumption underlying this trope is clear: the way to bring about innovation in dance is not to invest in developing a new generation of choreographers but simply to wait for the next savior genius.

Inevitable and Unlearned

Morris—The Prodigy

In a section dedicated to Morris’ childhood and early training, Acocella emphasizes Morris’ child prodigy status to demonstrate that his greatness was innate and inevitable. In addition to directly praising his abilities as a “born performer”⁵⁸ with “rhythmic intelligence,”⁵⁹ she lists the numerous opportunities awarded to him by his first teacher Verla Flowers—featured roles, full scholarships, teaching and performing opportunities⁶⁰—as evidence of his exceptional potential. In reality, many of these opportunities can be commonly awarded for simply being a rare male student in dance, even one of moderate potential, and this extreme level of support and attention from his teacher was likely a contributing cause, just as much as an effect, of his early abilities. Yet in context, these intensive training opportunities are treated exclusively as evidence that others recognized his inborn talent. Further, discussing his first dance teacher’s impression of him, Acocella portrays the “unusual student” Morris not just as highly talented, but also as a precociously mature artist in a child’s body, somewhat like a young prophet figure: “Within the limits of a child's body, he could do almost anything she asked him to, but what seemed to her

57. Robert Emmet Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors: 1940 to the Present* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001), 60-61.

58. Acocella, *Mark Morris*, 23.

59. *Ibid.*, 22.

60. *Ibid.*, 23.

most extraordinary was his power of concentration.”⁶¹ In this description, it is as if Morris, from the start, already sees beyond his young body, beyond the adults teaching him, and beyond his training.

Similarly, Acocella emphasizes Morris’ prodigy status as a teenage choreographer, skilled both in composing complex material and in directing professional dancers in rehearsal (bringing in bits of the implicitly gendered “born leader” trope).⁶² Of course early talents and early choreographic trademarks are real and can be described without pushing a particular agenda; what is more deliberate is the language used to describe these early works. His “young and tentative” early pieces, insofar that they contain key features of his later choreography and music selection are described as “prophetic,” rather than as practice or stages in his choreographic development.⁶³ In retrospect, these apparently good-but-not great dances by a talented choreographer-in-training are re-interpreted as signs of inevitable greatness to come. To legitimize Morris’ recent designation as a genius, genius must be rewritten into his past as inevitable and always present.

Robbins—a Genius of Gods and Demons

With Jerome Robbins too, there is a tendency for biographers to assume that choreographic brilliance such as his must have been present and apparent from the start, even among authors who have not seen his early work. For instance, Robert Long asserts that among the many gifted choreographers of his era, “Robbins was regarded even by his rivals as the one on whom the gods had smiled.”⁶⁴ In this dramatic statement, it is unclear what “beginning” Long is referring to (the beginning of his choreographic career, the beginning of his dance career, his

61. *Ibid.*, 21.

62. *Ibid.*, 33.

63. *Ibid.*, 34.

64. Long, *Broadway*, 60-61.

debut on Broadway, or his birth). In reality, Robbins had a period of little known choreographic experimentation in modern dance venues outside of New York City before he was recognized at all⁶⁵—as exceptional or not—but as a rhetorical gesture, Long finds it important to emphasize that Robbins’ genius always clear and universally acknowledged.

Greg Lawrence, in his biography of Robbins, also makes a point to emphasize the brilliance of his earliest artistic endeavors. Describing Robbins’ first dance performance as a teenager at camp, he highlights without question glowing accounts of his dancing—in particular, a claim from his sister’s friend that he had all the adults of the audience in tears⁶⁶—while rejecting any less favorable reception as misguided. Commenting on a talent scout who found Robbins less compelling than his dance partner, he remarks that this person “failed to recognize Jerry’s talent,”⁶⁷ as if such an error in judgment could not be valid opinion of Robbins’ abilities at the time. For Lawrence, genius is objective and has always existed, and therefore, someone unimpressed with a future luminary must be wrong. He takes the same approach to Robbins’ first choreographic attempts, characterizing some of his early political pieces as masterpieces or “haunting romantic tragedy” based primarily on accounts from his close friends.⁶⁸

In addition, the language of religion and spiritual possession is used to describe Robbins’ abilities. Bob Fosse, a friend of Robbins as well as a prolific Broadway choreographer in his own right, praises Robbins’ abilities by claiming that he “talks to God.”⁶⁹ But even more so than gods, the supernatural figures most often associated with Robbins are demons, as clearly showcased in the title of Lawrence’s biography *Dance with Demons*. Granted, the term “demon”

65. Lawrence, *Dance with Demons*, 32-36.

66. *Ibid.*, 14.

67. *Ibid.*, 15.

68. *Ibid.*, 35-36.

69. *Ibid.*, 233.

is used in a metaphorical sense, describing sources of psychological turmoil, more than a literal religious sense. Yet, this metaphor is chosen for a reason, as these psychological demons are considered to play the same role in the genius' creative process as spiritual demons were once believed to do: the forces torturing the genius are assumed to be the same ones controlling his behavior and driving his art. As Lawrence states, "his creative genius and his demons" are bound to be "hopelessly tangled."⁷⁰

In particular, the "demons" that Lawrence identifies from early in Robbins' life are a conflict over his bisexuality, a tense relationship with his critical father, and an intense fear of failure that may have stemmed from it.⁷¹ Taking something of a psychoanalytic approach, Lawrence attributes many of Robbins' later creations, abilities, and behaviors to these "demons" or sources of unresolved psychological tension.

For instance, he states that Robbins' "driving fear of failure produced work of stunning achievement."⁷² Yet considering how his neurotic perfectionism often caused conflict in artistic collaborations,⁷³ for an artist working in the highly collaborative realm of musical theater, it would be just as fitting to characterize his fear of failure as a roadblock to his great creative success rather than the cause of it. The choice to emphasize the latter is based in an ideology of art coming from dark and tormenting sources.

Lawrence also makes an effort to link Robbins' sexual orientation and creative ability, citing speculations that the "double reality" of living in both the gay and straight worlds offers a particular insight into seeing different perspectives, or that a gay person's "willingness to jettison

70. *Ibid.*, xv.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, 247.

the conventional wisdom in favor of one's own convictions" also made for great art-making.⁷⁴

Granted, this vision of a fearless rule breaker seems odd to associate with Robbins in this regard, given that he was generally ashamed of and private about his sexuality. Nonetheless, Lawrence is committed to the assumption that the “demons” torturing Robbins are also the source of his creativity, and thus, since Robbins considered his sexuality to be one of his biggest demons,⁷⁵ it must have somehow fueled his art.

Also invoking comparisons to traditional spiritual possession, much of the language surrounding Robbins’ working process suggests that the source of his creativity is separate from his ordinary personality. For instance, Lawrence states that "the passions that fired Jerry's creativity seemed to divide his personality onstage and off" (his offstage personality much more humane and agreeable).⁷⁶ Here, “passions” stand in for muses, spirits, or demons--occupying forces, foreign and unrelated to the artist as a person, that overtake the personality and control the act of artistic creation. Even as notions of spiritual possession are translated into secular terms of passions and psychological demons, they still carry the same implications as their religious precursors, characterizing the genius’ creativity as uncontrollable, unattainable by ordinary human efforts, and often harboring a twisted but intriguing dark side.

Graham—Channeling Forces

For Martha Graham, the narrative of her abilities as guided by larger, mysterious forces was a key part of establishing her legitimacy as a genius and a great American artist. Merle Armitage’s 1937 collection of essays on Graham made a clear and deliberate case for Graham’s place as a revolutionary figure in dance history before she was universally regarded as such.

74. *Ibid.*, 86.

75. *Ibid.*, 87.

76. *Ibid.*, 36.

While some authors sought to establish her genius status based on descriptions of her technique or choreography, many focused on the indescribable or spiritual forces driving her as evidence of her unique status.

Roy Hargrave is one such author who speaks of the inexplicable and unteachable nature of Graham's dancing and choreography as the defining factor of her genius. He believes that the rules of Graham's technique are not nearly as important as "the projection of emotion," which transcends rules, "cannot become part of a system of thought or teaching," and thus characterizes genius.⁷⁷ Since Hargrave believes that Graham's genius cannot be described in concrete terms, he presents it as self-evident and speculates on the possible source of genius in general, highlighting both scientific explanations ("disease") and spiritual ones ("cosmically generated force") and maintains a Romantic conception of genius as inherently dark and disordered throughout.⁷⁸ Identifying Graham's "black magic" as distinguishing genius from talent, he asserts the legitimacy of her genius on the basis of its spiritual, irrational, and morally ambiguous character.⁷⁹

The notion of Graham as involuntarily controlled by spiritual forces coincides with the strong push to establish her as a uniquely "American" artist. Particularly in George Antheil's essay, the force guiding Graham is the spirit of the nation, and her genius lies in that she "is one of those extraordinary *mediums* who read quickly and without knowing it present the mental telepathy of the race and concentrate it into the movements of her body."⁸⁰ In addition to invoking a form of nationalism that relies on a vaguely spiritual notion of national character,

77. Merle Armitage, ed., *Martha Graham* (Los Angeles, 1937), 58.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, 76.

Antheil views the genius as a passive vessel, led by larger forces that she cannot comprehend or control.

Years later, in a biography published after Graham's death, Agnes de Mille also promotes a narrative of Graham's artistry as involuntarily guided by spiritual forces. She does so by using religious language; explaining Graham's singular commitment to her career, de Mille writes that "saints do not doubt their own worth," and that Graham saw herself among a chosen few "vessels of higher forces" with "no choice in the matter."⁸¹ Of course, in line with Romantic genius tropes, these higher forces have a dark and morally ambiguous side: de Mille speaks of understanding the "forces and demons that drove this small, bewitching creature to her unmatched achievement."⁸²

In addition to being involuntary and spiritually guided, Graham's genius is also depicted as predetermined and, in some form, preexisting. Describing Graham's early experiences in dance and choreography, de Mille establishes the inevitability of Graham's greatness by asserting her "obvious" abilities even in her unpromising start. De Mille recounts Graham's initial dance training with Ruth St. Denis. Graham, older and less experienced than the other students, was initially described by St. Denis as "hopeless" and "ugly."⁸³ Graham's hard work to overcome her lack of natural ability could easily be interpreted as a successful example of persistence and training. Yet de Mille, assuming that a talent as great as Graham's must have preexisted, declares that St. Denis' apparent disinterest was due to intimidation, since "it was obvious that [Graham's] was a talent that could not be measured at the moment, that there were forces within her personality . . . which she herself could not yet gauge or understand."⁸⁴

81. de Mille, *Martha*, ix.

82. *Ibid.*, xii.

83. *Ibid.*, 52.

84. *Ibid.*

The assumption that Graham's future greatness was "obvious"—despite opinions to the contrary—also appears in de Mille's description of her first choreographic work. She raves about Graham's first concert, crediting her with "astonishing new inventions," and reinstating "aura of importance" in American dance, and states that "it was obvious that Martha was a creator and leader," even though she received generally negative reviews.⁸⁵ Rather than admit that Graham's first attempts at choreography might have been less than brilliant, or that the appreciation of her work could be subjective, de Mille dismisses as "uninformed" reviewers who did not find Graham's greatness "obvious."⁸⁶ By imposing future success on Graham's inauspicious beginnings, de Mille treats Graham's career as not just a success story, but as a fulfilled prophecy.

Thus, with Graham, we see that it is possible for a woman to be accepted into the traditionally male pantheon of genius. Yet, even in the case of such an exceptional figure, womanhood and genius are still treated as conflicting. Even de Mille, a successful female choreographer herself, characterizes Graham's female body and sexuality as obstacles to be suppressed as she follows her path of genius. Describing Graham's infrequent menstrual periods, de Mille places her in a category of women who "denied their sex in the interest of their work," as if the two cannot coexist.⁸⁷ De Mille also considers it an inevitable tragedy that, although Graham was a "highly sexed woman," she was too committed to her art to "give away part of her life" to a partner, presumably what she must do to be fully sexually and romantically satisfied as a woman.⁸⁸ While the male genius' sexuality is considered to fuel his artistic work, the female genius' sexuality is assumed to be perpetually in conflict with it. Thus, while Graham is widely

85. *Ibid.*, 83.

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*, 201.

88. *Ibid.*

considered to be inhabited by forces of genius, her female body remains an imperfect and unnatural vessel.

Tharp's Alternative Model—The Self-Made Genius

Twyla Tharp, on the other hand has championed a model of genius that is not inherent or predestined, but based on drive and discipline. Tharp has certainly come to be considered a genius by many influential voices in the dance world: in fact, Joan Acocella considers Tharp the “only real choreographic genius” to emerge from the 1960s.⁸⁹ Yet, throughout her career, she has resisted the narrative of her abilities as predestined, placing herself outside of the traditional genius archetype. Even as *New York Times* critic Don McDonagh declared Tharp a “genius” in 1974, he acknowledged that she would likely “prefer the professional designation of superb craftsman as more in keeping with her own classical temperament.”⁹⁰ Thus, if the word “genius” can be applied to Tharp, it cannot refer to the traditional notion of predestined genius, but instead presents an alternative model of the “self-made” genius, exceptional only in the level of commitment, time, sweat, and well-developed skills.

This alternative narrative of success was not projected upon Tharp by others, but largely constructed through her own words. In her 1993 autobiography *Push Comes to Shove*, Tharp begins by emphasizing her roots in middle-America farm life, highlighting an attitude of hard work and discipline passed down from her parents, which is the root of her life-long work ethic (as well as her excessive perfectionism).⁹¹ Nor does she present a wildly creative childhood spirit as the seed for her artistic career: in fact, she describes her younger siblings as the eccentric,

89. Acocella, *Mark Morris*, 54.

90. Don McDonagh, “The Dance: Twyla Tharp Offers a New Duet,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1974, 18.

91. Twyla Tharp, *Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992), 9.

“creative” ones in the family and herself, by contrast, as “a grind.”⁹² Yet she does not view this personality as unsuited to a successful life in the arts. She later expresses disdain for “bohemian” types who treat free-spiritedness as the basis of art, since art for her is about discipline and skill, a view she continues to hold throughout her life.⁹³

With the assumption that creativity is a product of work and development, it follows that it is not restricted to the rare innate genius, but can be taught to any dedicated individual. This is precisely the task that Tharp (with co-author Mark Reiter) sets out to achieve in her book *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it for Life*, a widely marketed self-help guide to developing creativity through preparation and regular practice, with her own experiences as a model. Avoiding notions of inspiration as innate to the artist or passively received from divine sources, Tharp encourages “scratching” for inspiration in the world around, an active and deliberate process for those unwilling to wait for a spark of genius. Rejecting the possibility of personal insights as exceptional or innate, she makes sure to specify about important insights: “I didn’t start out knowing this. It came to me over time.”⁹⁴ Nor does she hesitate to point out the failures on her way to choreographic success: she dedicates a section to discussing her least successful ballet and her critical mistakes in it,⁹⁵ and admits that most of her improvised material is not worth using.⁹⁶ To be clear, Tharp has no lack of regard for her own abilities--she clearly presents herself as a success who has found the true path to creative greatness—but she also does not wish to downplay the learning, work, mistakes, and discoveries it took her to get there.

92. Ibid., 31.

93. Ibid., 45.

94. Twyla Tharp and Mark Reiter, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life: A Practical Guide* (New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2005), 99.

95. Ibid., 129-131.

96. Ibid., 213.

Without reducing Tharp's personal approach to her gender alone, we should consider why the alternative "self-made" model of genius may be more appealing to female choreographers overall. Recall that women are stereotyped as hard working rather than gifted,⁹⁷ and are thus less represented in fields that are believed to rely on innate talent⁹⁸ (whether due to self-exclusion or exclusion from employers). By re-framing choreography (or art in general) as a field that requires work over innate talent, it can become more accessible to women.

Tharp's message of success through hard work is not explicitly gender-specific, yet others have considered that it might be particularly relevant to women. In *Howling Near Heaven*, Marcia Siegel's biography of Tharp, Siegel categorizes *Push Comes to Shove* as essentially a "guidebook for women who aspired to a career in the arts."⁹⁹ In fact, Tharp rarely markets her advice toward any gender or profession, but Siegel sees its potential in providing a more approachable model of success for female artists. More generally, Tharp herself hints at a relationship between her bootstrapping attitude and a particular brand of feminism. She states of her mother: "Without being political, she was a feminist. She believed she could get anything done if she worked hard enough."¹⁰⁰ (Though Tharp's attitude toward her mother is not entirely positive, she clearly came to appreciate these particular traits of hard work and strong will in her own life.) Individual willpower is not the obvious definition of feminism for most (especially more "political" feminists focused on dismantling sexism on a systemic level). Yet Tharp's implication—that there is something equalizing in the notion of achievement depending on hard work—makes sense when contrasted to the notion of achievement depending on some mysterious inborn gift that is rarely identified with women. If there has been difficulty fitting

97. Dutt, "Gender Differences in Recommendation Letters"; Trix and Psenka, "Exploring the Color of Glass."

98. Storage et al., "The Frequency of 'Brilliant'"; Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance."

99. Siegel, *Howling Near Heaven*, 226.

100. Tharp, *Push Comes to Shove*, 4.

women into the traditional archetype of genius, Tharp has evaded this conflict with a model of genius not dependent on gender—or any other immutable trait.

Rebel Geniuses—Above the Rules

Morris—The Eccentric Genius

In terms of personality, Joan Acocella glorifies Mark Morris as a genius who is above the rules of ordinary society, particularly in terms of professionalism, self-censorship, and gender roles. Morris is not the most harmful or abusive of the genius choreographers (though he is highly disrespectful at times), but Acocella's description of his more scandalous behavior stands out for the extent to which she dramatically and unapologetically highlights it to build the image of an eccentric genius.

As a critic, Acocella was clearly one of Mark Morris' biggest fans and an advocate for his place among the modern dance greats. The very act of writing this biography in 1993--when Morris was still in his thirties, actively creating work, and relatively undocumented--was a major statement in favor of Morris' genius, not merely reflecting his existing status, but actively shaping and elevating it. Therefore, it is safe to say that the images highlighted in this biography are those that would be considered favorable, or at least not unfavorable, to an image of artistic genius. Thus, it is particularly significant that Acocella leads this admiring narrative not with Morris' strengths as a choreographer, or even with the more agreeable aspects of his personality, but with a display of his most socially unacceptable traits and behavior (ranging from merely unconventional to morally questionable). This provides evidence that a difficult personality is considered not damaging, but highly favorable to a genius' reputation.

Before we see any commentary on his choreography itself, we are introduced to Morris' eccentric appearance, anti-intellectual attitude toward his choreographic process, disregard for

critics, open homosexuality and androgyny, public drinking, uncensored bashing of other choreographers, and poor financial skills.¹⁰¹ This is not to say that Acocella places less significance on Morris' work itself—she dedicates several chapters to thoroughly analyzing and praising his dance making skills and musicality—but rather that the examples of Morris as an irreverent oddball are treated as the appropriate build-up to this analysis, a way to establish his status as a freethinking genius, and thus elevate the brilliance of his work.

It is worth noting the particular role of sexuality and gender performance in the characterization of Morris as socially nonconforming. According to Christine Battersby's characterization of the Romantic genius archetype, a genius must be a male with psychologically feminine as well as masculine qualities—a model that Morris fits and Acocella highlights, frequently circling back to discussion of his homosexuality and effeminacy, and characterizing him (in words borrowed from a French journalist) as “part diva, part truck driver.”¹⁰²

Examining this trope more closely, it is important to make the distinction between normative femininity (how women are expected to behave) and the flamboyant queer male femininity that appears in Morris' characterization. When a male genius such as Morris is described as effeminate, it does not imply that he is reserved, apologetic, obedient, sensitive, nurturing, and domestic, as traditional gender norms dictate that women should be. Rather, Morris' “diva” side is loudly glamorous, unapologetically sexual, and unafraid of the excesses of “camp”¹⁰³ (in his art or his personality). Thus, it is not simply that behaviors seen as acceptable for women are considered markers of genius in men. Rather, forms of feminine expression seen as quite deviant for women—and even more deviant among men in general—are considered

101. Acocella, *Mark Morris*, 5-7.

102. *Ibid.*, 6.

103. *Ibid.*, 67.

appropriately deviant for a special category of brilliant men. Thus, nonconforming gender and sexuality—though it doesn't carry the negative moral implications of public drunkenness or trash-talking—is nonetheless treated as part of the same category of socially deviant expression, considered unacceptable for most people yet acceptable and inevitable for the genius.

In the case of Morris, his eccentricities, like his choreographic talents, are not attributed to any external forces or occupying spirits, but to his innate and innermost personality. Acocella states of both his dances and his other behaviors, “whatever is in him, out it comes.”¹⁰⁴ Later she defends his personality, claiming that “Though he could be a bully, it was not out of meanness. It was the fullness of his nature overflowing.”¹⁰⁵ Even without spirits, this passive explanation of Morris' behavior—an unchecked and honest outflowing of his innate personality—avoids holding the genius as actively responsible for his behavior.

Robbins—The Accepted Abuse of a Genius

Robbins was known for his harsh, targeted outbursts toward performers that reached beyond ordinary limits of professionalism and respect. Even Tony Mordente, a self-proclaimed favorite of Robbins, recalls, “Jerry not only attacked you, he attacked your family, your background, where you lived, how you lived, who you studied with. He never stopped.”¹⁰⁶ He also practiced an extreme form of method acting in which he would sabotage relationships between performers to build dramatic tension. During rehearsals for *West Side Story*, he encouraged actors to divide themselves and maintain the antagonism of rival gangs offstage as well.¹⁰⁷ Nor did his manipulative tactics cause psychological damage alone: Carol Lawrence

104. *Ibid.*, 7.

105. *Ibid.*, 63.

106. Lawrence, *Dance with Demons*, 252.

107. *Ibid.*, 251.

recalls being instructed to hit her costar so aggressively that she caused rib damage, and once the medical issue had been identified, was simply told to beat his head instead.¹⁰⁸

Yet, since Robbins is accepted as an archetypical genius, many former performers and fans alike use his genius to explain, justify, and even glorify his abuse. These justifications can be summarized in three main categories: that the genius is above conventional morality, that cruelty is important in the genius' work, and that cruelty is an involuntary byproduct of creative energies.

Apologists for Robbins claim that because of his inherent superiority, he stands above the moral code of ordinary humans, and therefore cannot be condemned for his behavior. Dancer Ronnie Lee, though he spent his rehearsals with Robbins in "constant emotional turmoil," agrees that he should have given Robbins a moral pass due to his genius, and even takes the blame for his own distress: "I regret that I didn't have the emotional maturity to understand that I was working with...one of the unqualified geniuses of the theatrical century and let myself be used like a dancer should be used by that capable person."¹⁰⁹

Another approach depicts harsh behavior as necessary and productive in generating great art. Lawrence explains how personal bullying was a prerequisite to Robbins' artistic breakthroughs: he would choose one or two performers as "sacrificial victims" to "release himself from a block in the choreography by venting his frustration and rage," a mechanism which became "increasingly integral to his creative process."¹¹⁰ Chita Rivera, who originated the role of Anita in *West Side Story*, also argues that such tactics are useful in improving the performance of those who are targeted. Unsympathetic to complaints about the emotional

108. Ibid., 253.

109. Ibid., 256.

110. Ibid., 76-77.

damage caused by Robbins, she states frankly, "if he hadn't been the way he was, none of those people would have danced the way they did."¹¹¹ In other words, an extreme disregard for the feelings of others is part of what makes art great, improving the work of both the genius choreographer and his performers.

Finally, there is the argument that cruel behavior—whether productive or not—is an involuntary and inevitable byproduct of being possessed by some creative spirit or force. Dancer Yuriko Kikuchi, describing the rehearsals for *The King and I* during which Robbins regularly had the cast in tears, regards his worst behavior as stemming from an alternate state of creative consciousness: "When Jerry was creating, he was in another world, immersed and involved in the instant, and far, far, far from us all. He didn't notice us as human beings, but rather as material he could use and dispose of at will."¹¹²

Thus, Robbins is not held responsible for his behavior while in this creative state, particularly because his harsh working persona is considered to be alien and separate from his ordinary personality. Many of those who recount Robbins' hysterics in the theater make a point of noting that he was a perfectly nice and reasonable person in ordinary life. Lawrence notes that even from his earliest choreographic endeavors, "the passion that fired Jerry's creativity seemed to divide his personality onstage and off,"¹¹³ while Kitty Hawks, the daughter of a performer who testifies to Robbins affable offstage personality, describes the work/life split as "schizophrenic."¹¹⁴ Though the language used to describe Robbins is secular—referring to "states" and "passion" rather than spirits or possession—it is reminiscent of the idea of the

111. *Ibid.*, 255.

112. *Ibid.*, 183.

113. *Ibid.*, 36.

114. *Ibid.*, 281.

genius temporarily inhabited by divine forces, separate from his individual personality, which overtake his ordinary judgment and personality during a fit of inspiration.

Graham—A Sacred Tyrant

Graham too gained a reputation for cruel and unreasonable behavior, frequent emotional tantrums, painful physical corrections, and sexual harassment of male company members. With her as well, genius is often used as an excuse for her behavior, often by simply stating as self-evident that a genius is expected to be selfish and cruel. For instance, when Graham publicly lashed out against her friend and critic John Martin after a less than glowing review in *The New York Times*, Martin accepted as inevitable that “She doesn't really give a damn about anybody else or about friendships. That's what one might expect of a genius.”¹¹⁵ This statement is echoed by dancer Gertrude Shurr, reflecting on Graham’s violent tantrums in the studio: “I thought this was the way Martha had to be because she wasn't a normal human being. She was a genius.”¹¹⁶ With “genius” as an unqualified justification for inappropriate behavior, Graham, as de Mille frankly states, “was not held accountable for conduct other human beings must answer to.”¹¹⁷ There is a both sense of inevitability in these statements—that the genius cannot behave otherwise—and a sense that the genius is above ordinary social codes, and thus does not need to behave otherwise.

When a further explanation is given, the inevitability of the genius’ cruelty is tied to the notion that she is controlled by spiritual forces, and thus, is not a free moral agent. De Mille explains that Graham “had her tantrums because she couldn't draw out of herself all of the devils that she kept inside her.”¹¹⁸ In this state of demonic possession, a tantrum was necessary to

115. De Mille, *Martha*, 233.

116. *Ibid.*, 146.

117. *Ibid.*, 149.

118. *Ibid.*, 146.

“purge” these dark forces and allow for creativity.¹¹⁹ Merle Armitage, without detailing the specifics of Graham’s behavior, similarly attributes her harshness to uncontrollable outside forces. In his characterization of Graham as a “saint,” he says of people in her position: “They are consumed. The power blinds them...One can become cruelly brutal, because nothing else matters.”¹²⁰ The language of such descriptions highlights the moral ambiguity of the forces guiding the genius: it is at once sacred and demonic, creative and destructive, and ultimately, the source of both art and abuse.

Moreover, Graham’s abuse is not only accepted by those who admire her art, but also welcomed by dancers who are willing to become subjects of her cruelty. There are numerous reports of Graham inflicting physical pain in coaching performers: repeatedly hitting a dancer’s head and chest to improve posture,¹²¹ slapping a dancer’s butt into a convulsion to show her how to be an “exciting dancer,”¹²² and hitting her partner before a performance so that he would convincingly express hatred toward her onstage.¹²³ Yet the dancers victimized by such behavior recount these experiences as extreme but important lessons that improved their technique, movement quality, or acting. Even de Mille, who is generally skeptical of directing practices that involve manipulating the emotions of performers for the sake of the performance, praises Graham as uniquely effective in using “savagery” to generate “inspiration.”¹²⁴

This notion that enduring pain necessarily enhances the depth and quality of art is part of the language of pseudo-religious aestheticism, which so often surrounds Graham and her company. If religious intensity has long been associated with Graham’s public image, her

119. Ibid.

120. Armitage, *Martha Graham*, ix.

121. De Mille, *Martha*, 215.

122. Ibid., 236.

123. Ibid., 275.

124. Ibid., 274.

dancers too treated her as a religious icon, often describing her as a god or an object of worship.¹²⁵ For such a figure, it would seem entirely justified to sacrifice the more mundane concerns of physical comfort and mental health. In de Mille's words, "they knew they were to be sacrificial, and they were glad to be."¹²⁶

Thus, if this genius has taken on the role formerly played by saints, or even gods, it follows that the surrounding cult of genius can take on the same dynamic as a religious cult. In fact, de Mille compares Graham's company to a "medieval religious cult" and remarks that "not since the middle ages and the years of cloistered religious have people banded together to work with similar dedication, faithfulness, and sacrifice."¹²⁷ In context, this connection is used to convey a sense of admiration, perhaps with a bit of shock value, but in reality, the dynamics of abuse found in some religious cults are a useful model for how abuse operated in Graham's company. The fervor of serving higher cause, the power of a charismatic leader, and the appeal of a highly selective inner circle draw members in, after which they are willing to cut external ties and commit their lives to the cult and its cause.

Cults demand exclusive loyalty and set up barriers to leaving. According to de Mille, Graham took extreme measures to keep dancers in her company, either by bullying and threatening potential defectors, or through "acts of mesmerism," seducing the young men of her company in particular to fall in love with her.¹²⁸ In these circumstances, followers are willing to endure even unproductive and arbitrary physical and emotional abuse from their leaders. William Carter, one dancer infatuated with Graham, recalls the choreographer ramming her hands into

125. *Ibid.*, 331, 350.

126. *Ibid.*, 125.

127. *Ibid.*, 126.

128. *Ibid.*, 329.

him and giving him death threats, none of which changed the fact that he “worshipped” and “loved” her.¹²⁹

The isolated and possessive nature of the cult dynamic also frequently allows the leader to engage in unquestioned sexual abuse or harassment, as Graham did. Unwilling to accept sexual rejection from her dancer Bertram Ross, whom she called her “fantasy lover” although he was homosexual and clearly uninterested, she retaliated in rehearsal by forcibly distorting his spine and smashing his teeth while ranting about his need to be hurt by a woman.¹³⁰

Recently, we have come to acknowledge patterns of abuse that can be enabled and protected within the structure of an exclusive and isolated set of followers surrounding a highly elevated religious figure. We must also acknowledge that similar behaviors can occur when, through the title of “genius” we confer upon secular individuals that same status of being spiritually elevated and morally infallible.

Tharp—Fewer Excuses

Tharp, however, not having claimed an inexplicable gift or divine spark of genius, does not enjoy the same unconditional justification for irresponsibility or hurtful behavior. That does not mean that her stature has not led others to tolerate her more difficult behavior, but such behavior is not treated as involuntary or inextricably tied to her creativity as with the archetypical genius.

Granted, she wins some admiration for her self-centered persistence, as it relates to drive and individualism. Marcia Siegel characterizes Tharp in the late 1960s, fighting for her preferred order on a program as developing “a reputation for contrariness and ego” with an “imagination

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid., 386.

unimpeded by the rules.”¹³¹ Her self-claimed exceptionalism and disregard for rules bear a resemblance to the archetypical genius, but her pushiness and rule-breaking are treated as a self-chosen strategy for success, not a privilege justified by presumed greatness. Later, Siegel describes how Tharp in the 1990s, already successful and prompted by the deaths of George Balanchine and Graham to reflect on her public persona, “constructed a more formidable, outer-directed presence who had a higher calling, a role to play in the greater scheme of American dance history.”¹³² Indeed, Tharp may be taking on the ego, self-importance, and vaguely spiritual consciousness of a genius figure, but this is treated as a deliberate and recent construction, not a natural and inevitable state that must be written into her past.

Without the archetype of the inevitably cruel genius as an excuse, Tharp is held somewhat more accountable for her treatment of others. In contrast to the unconditional apologetics for the abuses of other genius choreographers among their supporters, Siegel, though very respectful of Tharp’s work, does not defend Tharp from accusations of financially exploiting dancers, when she expects her “heroic volunteers”¹³³ to work, in Tharp’s words, “for the love of it.”¹³⁴ Siegel does not accept the excuse that working with a genius is worth sacrifice, and instead points out Tharp’s hypocrisy in abandoning her early commitment to paying dancers.¹³⁵ Rightly so, the self-made genius is considered a free and accountable moral agent, who can be judged by the same standards as ordinary humans.

131. Siegel, *Howling Near Heaven*, 16.

132. *Ibid.*, 235.

133. *Ibid.*, 247.

134. *Ibid.*, 248.

135. *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Moving Beyond the Archetype

In the profiles of the Morris, Robbins, and Graham, we have observed how the genius has been artificially constructed as an inevitably great, ideally male savior figure who stands above ordinary human moral codes. Yet, as Tharp's self-constructed narrative demonstrates, unlearned and inevitable genius is not the only model of the creative individual. In addition to Tharp's model of creativity cultivated through practice and dedication, recent psychological theories of the creative process have highlighted the importance of contextual and collaborative factors.¹³⁶ In this framework, the success of *West Side Story*, for instance, might be explained in terms of the combination of creative team members from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, or the social issues of contemporary New York—all of which provide more constructive models for future productions than simply waiting to be “saved” by the next Robbins.

Drawing attention to the ways that choreographic ability comes from practice, education, or development—rather than mysterious spirits or abnormal predispositions—encourages dance institutions to take a more active role in advancing innovation in the art form. Rather than simply waiting to be “blessed” by the next genius savior figure, companies can invest in choreographic education programs to foster the next generation of artists. Companies and programs attempting to find fresh choreographic talent can give emerging choreographers repeated opportunities to develop their work and learn from their failures, rather than immediately dismissing those not identified as brilliant from the start. As opposed to a focus on identifying innate brilliance—with the gender stereotypes attached to that judgment—this focus on supporting artists interested in developing their craft may also allow female choreographers more access to the field.

136. Montuori and Purser, “Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth.”

Once we let go of the notion that genius and the toxic behavior associated with it is something preordained, we can look more critically at the ways in which abuse in the dance world is learned and encouraged. Abuse can be more simply explained not as an inherent fact of genius, but as a set of modeled behaviors that choreographers learn either from the previous geniuses they looked up (for instance, Robbins took after his choreographic role model Anthony Tudor in his penchant for psychological manipulation,¹³⁷ and Graham's use of pain as a corrective tool was repeated by her dancer Paul Taylor in his own choreographic career).¹³⁸ By recognizing that the abusive genius archetype is not simply a reflection of reality, but self-perpetuating prophecy, we see that there is the potential—and a responsibility—to end this cycle by choosing to punish, rather than glorify, abuse. Ultimately, recognizing that artists—even exceptionally talented and innovative artists—are freely-acting humans, rather than untouchable God-like figures, holds them morally accountable for their behavior. The genius archetype has led us to believe that the future of the dance field is in the unchangeable hands of fate; moving beyond it, we can recognize that it is actually in the hands of humans, who can choose to make it more artistically vibrant, equally accessible to all, and above all, humane.

137. Lawrence, *Dance with Demons*, 47.

138. Lakes, "The Messages Behind the Methods," 5.

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