

## IN PURSUIT OF THE SYLPH

Ballet in the Romantic period

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A mortal man, consumed with passion for a supernatural creature, attempts to possess her. He loses her for ever. The subject enchanted Parisian audiences of 1832 and sparked a new trend in ballet. But although Filippo Taglioni's *La Sylphide*<sup>1</sup> seemed to strike like a flash of lightning, a number of practical inventions, decisions and developments facilitated the emergence of the aerial ballerina and her ardent partner in tales of gossamer and gloom. Less than a year after the July Revolution of 1830 installed Louis Philippe on the French throne, the Opéra ceased to be court property. Dr Louis Véron, as the new director of what was now a private enterprise with a government subsidy, wished quite naturally to make the Opéra's productions reflect both its new independence and the power of the bourgeoisie that had triumphed the previous summer. He wanted that confident middle class in his audiences. They were already flocking to the boulevard theatres to see fairy spectacles and pantomimes, to see plays that laid on Gothic horror – their effects rendered more magical by improved stage lighting and machinery. The astute Dr Véron could see that the public craved mystery and exoticism, that they would be thrilled to see on the Opéra stage the haunted German valleys and misty Scottish fens that they had long been reading about in ballads by Goethe or Heinrich Heine and in novels by Sir Walter Scott, to see vaporous, beckoning women – firing a man's imagination even as they chilled his flesh with long, pale fingers.

The magical *verismo* of these other worlds offered escape during a period of what must have seemed a dizzying succession of sweeping political changes, particularly in France. The present government's careful middle-of-the-road policies might as easily be swept away. Science was revealing more mysteries than it explained, and religion had lost much of its potency. On the one hand, instability and uncertainty as a condition of life; on the other, a complacent, plodding morality. No wonder that the Parisian public loved to see theatre that made enigma and restlessness thrilling, but at the same time tamed it and contained it through theatrical conventions.

Up-to-date lighting equipment transformed the ballet stage into a fitting habitation for sylphs and other ethereal creatures. According to ballet

historian Ivor Guest, one of Véron's first innovations at the Opéra was the installation of oil lamps with large reflectors to soften and diffuse the light. For the moonlit cloister act of Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable*, he ordered the house lights extinguished. In short, he did everything that could intensify the atmosphere of light and shadow and heighten the effects of trapdoors, wires, veils, explosive powder, smoke machines, waterfalls and other marvels of stage apparatus.

Gradual developments in ballet technique made possible what was generally considered a new style of dancing, one well suited to bring fantasies to life. From Marie Taglioni and other dancers, as gifted if not as innovative, came the lightness and mobility that not only made fantasy flesh, and vice versa, but created a symbol of the unattainable far more profound than most of the ballet plots that made it possible.

Several scholars have wondered whether what we call Romantic ballet was perceived in its heyday as a vital part of the Romantic movement that flourished in painting, sculpture, music and literature. Were the flittings of these dancers truly 'Romantic' in the sense of challenging academic traditions? Was ballet not, they argue, a 'juste milieu' phenomenon that, like some of the middle-of-the-road painting of the day, simply applied a patina of Romantic imagery to traditional theatrics and to the same dance techniques that served neoclassicism? They have observed that even the most ardent of balletomanes, Théophile Gautier, thought that 'dancing is little adapted to render metaphysical themes' (Gautier 1973: 17).

It is true that ballet choreographers that we consider Romantic exploited and developed a traditional vocabulary, but an arch-Romantic like Byron did not deviate from traditional poetic forms either. And the German poet Friedrich Schlegel viewed Romantic poetry as something that would open up 'a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism' (Rosen and Zerner 1984: 17). In all fields of art, it was only pointless academicism that was to be resisted – like the approved genres of painting, and ballet's traditional classifications of male dancers according to physique as *danseur noble*, *demicaractère*, or *caractère*. The choreographers' choice of particular steps within the classical vocabulary and the freer way dancers performed them did indeed 'increase' the range of classicism.

Certainly the general public did not attend the ballet for spiritual enlightenment, and it naturally lapped up spectacle and technical prowess. The *Petit Courrier des Dames* correspondent must have alarmed his Parisian readers when he described a sumptuous production of the colourful ballet *La Gitana* in Saint Petersburg in 1838. There were, he exclaimed, 500 people in the last act's masked ball, 5,000 candles, and 120 chandeliers: 'Is Europe saying the Opéra is no longer the first theatre of the world for art and splendour?' (PCD 1839: 31). When *Giselle* was first seen in London in 1841 in the form of a play – with dances, set to the original Adolphe Adam music, for those dangerous and alluring ghosts, the wilis – a poster

advertised in huge letters what was obviously a major attraction: FIRST NIGHT OF THE REAL WATER!<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the leaders of the Romantic movement in literature and painting – the fiercest balletomanes among them – looked down on ballet even as they delighted in it. It was, they understood, an excuse for watching pretty, lightly clad women disporting themselves. Yet everywhere their prose betrays deeper responses. Writing of *Giselle* in *Les Beautés de l'Opéra*, Gautier luxuriates in his description of the opening of Act II, when the heroine has become a wili: 'And the rising moon that shows through the slashes of the leaves her sweet, sad, opaline visage, does her transparent whiteness not remind you of some young German girl who died of consumption while reading Novalis?' (Gautier *et al.* 1845: 15). If some have considered Gérard de Nerval insensitive for remarking that *Giselle* died of loving dancing too much (Chapman 1978), what more poetic fate could await anyone: the artist dying of excess devotion to art? The Romantic imagery in these ballets goes quite deep, and, whether spectators of the day realized it or not, the dark and mysterious currents within the plots, the edge of morbidity, the hallucinatory visions drew them to the ballet as much as did the acrobatic feats of dancers and their personal charm.

Everyone may have thought, with Gautier, that ballet was suited to express only passion and amorous pursuit, but it is passion darkened by the Romantic preoccupation with the dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Many of the ballets express the despairing notion that a perfect union between man and woman is possible only beyond the grave. Few supernatural ballets ended happily. In Filippo Taglioni's *La Fille du Danube* (1836) and August Bournonville's *Napoli* (1842), the lovers are united on earth because they have proved their incorruptibility – never sullyng their ideals, never swerving in their devotion to each other, no matter how many temptations or gorgeous lookalikes are strewn in their paths.

The heroes of nineteenth-century ballets behaved according to the Romantic ideal of the hero, of the artist. Customs wearied them, and they would brook no restrictions except those that they imposed themselves. Frequently they cast aside attractive women of the correct rank, amiability and certified humanness to pursue their chosen sylph, undine or even a fey and spiritual peasant girl (*Giselle*). The crucial test to which the hero is often put exemplifies a highly Romantic dilemma. Will he be steadfast to his ideal, his true love, and not be taken in by a beguiling facsimile? When young Rudolph in *La Fille du Danube* becomes demented because his beloved (whom he takes to be mortal) has thrown herself into the river, his friends attempt to distract him by a veiled double who dances almost as well as does his darling. Weathering this deception, he plunges into the river and into a lively throng of veiled naiads, who 'dance their mazy fascinations around him' (Heath 1977: 80). But his love has given him a posy, a talisman which helps him to distinguish between truth and illusion. In

Bournonville's *Napoli*, the faithful fisherman Gennaro, searching the grottoes of the sea for his supposedly drowned Teresina, is confronted with a bevy of beguiling sea nymphs, among whom sports his reluctant, magicked sweetheart. The stage image is a familiar one: the lone man threads his way through swirling flocks of identically dressed females, looking searchingly at each one. It persists through *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* into Balanchine's ballets and such modern fantasies as the scene in the 1937 movie *Shall We Dance?* in which Fred Astaire dances perplexedly down a line of fetching women in Ginger Rogers' masks.

True and false confront the ballet hero in subtler forms too. The tragedy of *Giselle* is often presented as arising from a nobleman's thoughtless dalliance with a peasant girl, but there is another possible interpretation: Albrecht and Giselle are soulmates, made for each other, but issues of class prevent him from recognizing this. Certainly the several great performances given in our time by Gelsey Kirkland and Mikhail Baryshnikov brought this to almost unbearably poignant life.

But, although the themes of truth versus illusion, ideal versus real, that pervade so many of these ballets link them persuasively to Romanticism, the choice of subject was not the crux of the matter. According to Baudelaire (Rosen and Zerner 1984: 22), anything could be viewed 'Romantically', and he cited as characteristics of such a vision, 'intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration toward infinity' – all of which distinguished Romantic ballet.

Realism, an instance of 'intimacy' and a feature of much painting, was an integral part of the Romantic ballet worlds too, especially those created by August Bournonville and Jules Perrot. Even in supernatural ballets, they prided themselves on the detail of their crowd scenes, the verisimilitude with which they evoked a Highland revel or a Naples dockside or a village festival. The admittedly theatricalized naturalism, with dances justified by parties or festivals, set off the spirit world where dancing was a given and a metaphor for the restlessness of spiritual longing.

The supernatural ballets also had connections with early-nineteenth-century landscape painting. Although the popularity of this genre of painting reflected the desire to turn to nature as a constant in a bewildering world, the painter – imbuing nature with his own feelings – brought out its mysteriousness, its changeability. The play of light and shadow over a field could suggest conflict among the powers of nature. The mysterious landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich are tranquil, yet disturbing; Hugh Honour (1979: 78) has pointed out how Friedrich occasionally 'painted the foreground in great detail, but sank an immeasurable chasm between it and the distant, almost visionary, horizon, tantalizingly out of reach, creating an uneasy mood of yearning for the unattainable'. And in Turner's sensuous vortexes of light, nature itself becomes a shimmering dreamworld.

The air, earth, fire and water spirits of ballet awakened their lovers to the beauty of the natural world, to that landscape glinting beyond the window. In the second act of *La Sylphide*, the sylph flies to a treetop to bring down a nest for James's inspection and offers him spring water in her cupped hands. The scene must have seemed to contemporary spectators almost a visualization of Victor Hugo's popular poem 'La Fée et la Péri' in which a fairy tries to win the soul of a dying child by promising to reveal nature's secrets.

In considering how these ballets were perceived in their day, one must – as always – allow for individual sensibilities. When Hans Christian Andersen saw the 'Ballet of the Nuns' in Act II of *Robert le Diable* at the Paris Opéra in 1833, he was overwhelmed by the thrilling atmosphere of death, misty female sensuality, forbidden pleasures and religious blasphemy:

By the hundred they rise from the graveyard and drift into the cloister. They seem not to touch the earth. Like vaporous images, they glide past one another. Suddenly their shrouds fall to the ground. They stand in all their voluptuous nakedness, and there begins a bacchanal like those that took place during their lifetimes,  
(Aschengreen 1974: 15)

But for every Andersen, there was undoubtedly a Fanny Appleton (later Mrs Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), who remarked in a letter that the members of the corps de ballet 'drop in like flakes of snow and are certainly very charming witches with their jaunty Parisian figures and most refined pirouettes' (Guest 1980: 112).

Marie Taglioni's style of dancing, so enchanting to audiences, was the result, not just of her sensibility, but of changes in ballet technique. The manual of classical dancing produced in 1828 by the La Scala teacher and choreographer Carlo Blasis shows how the turnout of the hips had increased since the eighteenth century, making it possible for dancers to raise their legs higher, to execute more brilliant beats, to change directions more rapidly and more fluidly. Although dancing of the 1830s would probably not strike us as particularly expansive, it would have seemed to nineteenth-century balletomanes much freer and larger in scale than what they had seen around the turn of the century.

In this development, fashion played a role. When the *ancien régime* was toppled, with it fell the ponderous, ornate and constricting clothes that went with rank and power. The soft slippers and light, loose-fitting dresses and Grecian draperies that came with, or just after, the French Revolution enabled women dancers to increase the range of their movements significantly. By the time corsets returned, the dancers had already changed, and they never looked back. Even before *La Sylphide*, Taglioni was dancing onstage in simple light dresses similar to those her mother made for her to

practise in. As historian Marian Hannah Winter (1974) has remarked, fashion freed dancers' thighs. Ecstatic reviews of the way Taglioni bent from side to side confirm that it made possible some freeing of the torso as well.

Pointe work, so crucial to the image of the supernatural female, was not a new technique in 1832, although it wasn't standard equipment for all female dancers when Taglioni came to the Paris Opéra. (The 1830 edition of Blais's manual doesn't even mention it.) Geneviève Gosselin, people remembered, had danced on her toes in 1815, maybe earlier, and 'grotesque' (meaning acrobatic) dancers of both sexes did pointe work. It was viewed more as a feat than anything else – and often seems to have been performed as one. Engravings of the little company that Filippo Taglioni assembled for the Opéra in Stuttgart later in the 1820s show all the women on pointe. It is during those years that his daughter must have worked on perfecting her own approach – discovering ways to strengthen her feet and rise onto her toes without apparent effort.

Some of the impetus for pointe work might have come from the elaborate 'flying' techniques developed by Charles Didelot. His *Zéphire et Flore* astounded London balletgoers in 1796, Saint Petersburg audiences in 1804, and Parisians in 1815 (when Mlle Gosselin reputedly stood on her toes). It was still a favourite when Taglioni performed it in Paris with Jules Perrot in 1830. Didelot didn't simply fly down some heavenly personage on a cloud to clinch the plot. Any of his dancers might fly by means of individual wires and harnesses. They could take to the air, or be carefully lowered until only the tips of their toes touched the stage floor. For imaginative choreographers and ambitious dancers, it must have seemed natural to wish to echo that effect in passages where it wasn't possible to attach someone to a wire.

Circumstances, then, conspired to produce a style of dance and stage machinery ideal for supernatural subjects. Marie Taglioni's own attributes, her classes with Auguste Vestris in Paris, and her father's taste and inspired coaching defined that style. Not all dancers copied her purity, her coolness or her de-emphasis of athleticism, but they studied her delicate attack, her simplicity, the fluidity of her arms and torso. For example, it was remarked – as if it were a novelty – that she often held her long arms down, gently curved, instead of flourishing them about; one characteristic of the style that August Bournonville perpetuated in Copenhagen is just such a *port de bras* for jumps. It tends to make dancers look lighter and to focus the audience's attention on their nimble feet.

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Dancers have always been praised for 'lightness', but from the 1830s until late in the century, variants of the term saturated the metaphors and similes

of writers on ballet. Light as weightlessness, light as luminosity; in English the same word serves both meanings. But even in languages where the words differ, the meanings intertwine in descriptions of ballerinas. *The Times* in London described Adèle Dumilâtre's dancing as being 'so ethereal ... that she almost looked transparent' (Guest 1984: 92). The delight caused by airy and seemingly effortless dancing, set off by mysterious lighting and gauzy, billowing skirts, seems related to the century's uneasiness about the flesh. Praising the lighting for Perrot's *Eoline*, Gautier raved that it gave the illusion that 'Eoline is only the envelope, the transparent veil of a superior being, a goddess condemned by some fate to live among men' (ibid.: 311). The 'condemned' is telling, and it's interesting that it comes as if automatically from the pen of a cheerful hedonist like Gautier. Insubstantiality, then, is close to godliness.

Lightness in the sense of airiness complements the notion. The buoyancy of the female dancer helped her to embody a spiritual aspiration; the lightness of a male dancer suggested the hero's desires to transcend the limits of the flesh. It could also stand for the winging of his soul as he took on some of the qualities of the sought-after dream. Even the constant motion, the restlessness for which dancers were admired, can be seen as a dissatisfaction with present existence and a yearning for realms beyond. Also, in the Romantic era, the artist-as-rebel was a favoured image. By their apparent denial of gravity, the sylphs and their kin prettily demonstrated their exemption from laws governing human behaviour. So female dancers were enthusiastically compared to birds, butterflies, balloons, feathers, moonbeams, shadows, and criticized for showing too much vigour or attack. Male dancers, generally disprized during these years, succeeded the more they resembled the women in terms of style. It was 'the aerial Perrot, Perrot the sylph, Perrot the male Taglioni' (ibid.: 57).

The lithographers intensified the public's fantasies of supernatural heroines. The ballerinas – even when depicting real if exotic women – seem unstable, elusive. They hover on one improbably dainty toe, not in perfect equilibrium, but leaning slightly forward as if they're just passing through the pose. When shown in midair, their bodies are softly curved, legs barely apart – less as if they'd leapt than as if they'd been blown upward. Some of the poses may be artistic conventions rather than ballet reality but the conventions were dictated by the artists' perceptions of the ballets. And, as refinements of dance technique helped create the airborne images onstage, techniques in lithography developed as if in response. As Charles Rosen and Henry Zerner have pointed out, 'drawing on the surface of the stone made possible subtle nuances of tone and images that vanish at the edges' (Rosen and Zerner 1984: 79). The dancer becomes the glistening focal point in an evanescent and cloudy world.

She may have been an abstraction, but she was unmistakably female. In expressing the ambiguous tensions they felt between reality and spiritual

longing, the ballet librettists and choreographers – almost without exception male<sup>3</sup> – revealed confused emotions in regard to women. On the one hand, almost all the stories were told from the hero's point of view; on the other, the ballerinas dominated the stage. Even in ballets where the hero dreamed the heroine, she was clearly superior to him – enchanting, evasive, unrestricted by his codes, and able to drift about on her toes. Yet she flew into his arms of her own accord. In the thrilling, much-discussed dream sequence in *La Péri*, Carlotta Grisi leaped from the framed platform that contained 'her world' and was bravely caught by Lucien Petipa. The audience marvelled over his strength, but was more excited by her daring, and *The Times* critic commented on some lifts in the same ballet: 'She is supported by Petipa, but seems as if supported by air alone' (Cohen 1976: 85).

Only occasionally in these ballets does a male character obviously dominate a female one. Jules Perrot, a compelling performer as well as a brilliant choreographer, created intriguing demonic roles for himself in several ballets. August Bournonville, working in Copenhagen relatively isolated from Parisian fads, refused to cater to the general dislike of male dancers; like Perrot, he was a good dancer and wanted to perform. The fairy worlds were, as a rule, unbalanced in their populations. Gautier (1845: 17) explained that Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis, had only female subjects, since men were 'too heavy, too stupid, too in love with their ugly hides to die such a pretty death'.

These rather liberated creatures imagined by men stood opposed to the respectable middle-class wife and mother (also, to some extent, a male creation). In *La Sylphide*, James's betrothed, Effie, a woman of real weight and substance, with sensible shoes and domestic talents, is far less vivid than her rival. Despite their supposed purity, the supernatural creatures are *femmes fatales*, representing all that is erotically potent and compelling about women. They offer a double message, beckoning the hero both as the incarnation of an ideal and as a temptress luring him from the straight and narrow. It isn't for nothing that Erik Aschengreen (1974) called his fine monograph on Romantic ballet 'The beautiful danger'.

Balletomanes were awed by the effort it took to appear effortless. In 1839, when Lucile Grahn first performed *La Sylphide* in Paris, the house held its breath to see if she would do Taglioni's 'terrible pas' of Act II, which Elssler had cut: 'C'était une question de vie où de mort' (PCD 1839: 207). And what applause when she triumphed in it! Because the preferred steps for spirits were bounding ones, the labour that went into becoming ethereal was considerable: the quantities of ballottés, brisés, temps-levés, emboîtés, assembles, cabrioles, sauts de basque and ballonés that packed the dances required strong ankles and good wind. It was thanks to Arnalia Ferraris's 'supple and sinewy foot' that she was able to 'beat the *entrechat huit* to perfection' (Beaumont 1938: 225).



In the days before the blocked pointe shoe was perfected, hovering on tiptoe required immense strength. Today's dancer, wearing a blocked and stiffened slipper, stands, in effect, on her toenails, on the very tip of her toe. The vertical equilibrium is so secure that, once up there, she is almost at rest. The ballerina of the mid-nineteenth century was stepping as high onto the toe pads as possible, and could stay there only by exertion of all her leg muscles and a tremendous lift in the body. Yet in 1846, in *Paquita*, Carlotta Grisi thrilled balletomanes by fancy hops 'on the tip of the toe with a turn of dazzling vivacity' (Guest 1980: 254).

In addition, female dancers, along with the men, had to be skilled at balancing on the flat foot or half-toe for extended periods of time. The choreography of the day featured elaborate *adagio* sequences that are uncommon now except in the Bournonville repertory. Standing on one leg, the dancer would revolve smoothly, make one pretty pose metamorphose into another, bend forward or back – all without wobbling. Taglioni is said to have worked for two-hour stretches three times a day with her father while preparing for her debut. Léopold Adice's syllabus of 1859 lists a barre in which exercises are performed one hundred times each. Bournonville dancers hoisted their legs in *grands battements* a total of 320 times. To be secure in *adagio*, a dancer might work at holding one leg in the air for a hundred counts, as Marie Taglioni did. Louise Fitzjames had her maid stand on her hips to increase turnout, and Carlotta Grisi said sourly that those times Jules Perrot stood on her hips while she lay face down on the floor with legs spread were the erotic high points of their liaison. Beginners forced their turnout by standing in a box with braces that could be adjusted via a series of grooves. (No wonder Marie Taglioni was easily able to pass off one of her pregnancies as knee trouble.)

The prose devoted to ballerinas during the heyday of Romanticism makes it clear that spectators found the paradox of a real, and probably available, woman playing an incorporeal nymph a titillating one. Gautier lingers lovingly over descriptions of ballerinas' knees, ankles, breasts, noses and chins. Fanny Cerrito 'knows how to curve and soften her plump arms like the handles of an ancient Greek vase' (Chapman 1978: 33). Classical allusion aside, the sentence is unabashedly sensual.

Besides the enraptured accounts, a beguiling detritus of poems, lithographs, curios and sheet music attest to the fervour dancers inspired. Portraits of the most famous ballerinas of the day assumed curious forms. A 1984 exhibit presented by the Theatre Collection of the Austrian National Library included the following mementoes of the wildly acclaimed Fanny Elssler: a porcelain cast of her left hand, her right foot sculpted in marble, portrait medallions naming her 'Terpsichore's Darling' and images of Fanny and her sister Therese as sylphides painted on a cup and on a pipe. In terms of the souvenirs and verbiage they generated,

dancers – female ones, at any rate – were the rock stars of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

For the unearthly heroines of the ballets, physical union with a mortal posed usually fatal danger. The sylph lost her wings and expired. Alma, the 'daughter of fire', a statue who comes to life by day, faces a vexing dilemma: if she falls in love, she will become a statue for ever. (Seldom was an audience more tantalized by the prospect of a lovely idol falling off her pedestal.) By these standards, the women dancers of the nineteenth century were not very sylphish offstage. Salaries for all but the stars were not high; a well-to-do protector, not hard to come by, was considered by many to be a necessity. Members of the Jockey Club frequented the green room and backstage areas of the Paris Opéra; at Her Majesty's Theatre, the bloods of London could obtain seats in the 'omnibus boxes' on the sides of the stage – the better to ogle, and perhaps to pinch and pass messages. Benjamin Lumley, the director of this theatre when *Ondine* was premiered there, related that backstage one evening when Fanny Cerrito was dancing the lovely 'Pas de l'Ombre', frolicking on the seashore with her newly acquired shadow, Adeline Plunkett aimed a kick at Elisa Scheffer, her rival for the favours of the Earl of Pembroke, missed, broke the cord holding the 'moon' lamp, and temporarily extinguished Cerrito's dance (Guest 1969).

Sometimes, of course, dancers married other dancers or formed liaisons with them – as did Jules Perrot and Carlotta Grisi, Arthur Saint Léon and Fanny Cerrito, Fanny Elssler and (briefly) Anton Stuhlmüller. However, these relationships in no way exempted female performers from the solicitations of others. Young corps dancers were particularly anxious to secure wealthy protectors or husbands. Out of their meagre salaries – often made even smaller by fines levied for various infractions – they had to pay for classes, obtain practice clothes, scheme for advancement. Many came from poor families. In *Les Petits Mystères de l'Opéra* (1844), Albéric Second's satirical look at the backstage world of the Paris Opéra, one *petit rat* wears a capacious pocket under her sylph costume, into which she packs useful objects she's picked up, including a pack of cards, five or six cigar butts, a squeezed half lemon, some cheese, a scrap of soap, and a necklace. Furthermore, she says, the bulging pocket gives her a 'Spanish shape' pleasing to the gentlemen in the stalls. The same girl relates how the dancing master Cellarius lures coryphées – who rank above the girls of the quadrilles – to come to his place the three times a week when they're not performing and partner gentlemen who are ostensibly learning to waltz: five francs to dance with a chair, ten to dance with a *figarante* at the Opéra. Supper on the town afterward, where a girl can gorge ...

Given the lack of birth control, it's not surprising that many female dancers became mothers. Ballerinas often danced well into their pregnancies. Sometimes their offspring accompanied them on their numerous tours or guest appearances. More often, the babies were brought up by

grandparents or aunts or friends. 'Well, Fanny, send the brat to me', Elssler's English friend Harriet Grote wrote cheerfully, when Fanny decided not to take her seven year-old Therese to America. It was four years before Fanny retrieved her daughter (Guest 1972: 67).

The nineteenth-century female dancer would probably not have struck us as looking ethereal, considering her diet, childbearing and the kind of muscles she had to develop. Fanny Elssler, to judge from her pink satin and black lace 'Cachucha' costume, was a woman of medium height with a trim, but not tiny waist and a full, curving bust. A sylph could hardly be ethereal enough in her dancing, but the woman who played her could be too ethereal to suit public taste. Gautier couldn't abide shoulder blades that stuck out ('two bony triangles that resemble the roots of a torn-off wing' – the analogy is revealing). Poor Louise Fitzjames was constantly criticized for her thinness. A caricaturist presented her as a dancing asparagus, and Gautier (1973: 21) said that she wasn't 'even substantial enough to play the part of a shadow'. Being substantial enough to play a shadow ... it might be considered the mission of the Romantic ballerina.

Such ballerinas were among the first to embody abstract qualities, which not all of the spectators who flocked to adore them recognized. These performers didn't *represent* Beauty or Music or Fecundity as had their counterparts in earlier centuries, yet their light, fleeting, ardent dancing could suggest something larger than their stage personas and more ineffable than the roles they played.

Most of the supernatural ballets of the early nineteenth century – along with a host of other ballets of the period – have perished. The only works in this genre that can be experienced today are *Giselle* and the Danish August Bournonville's version of *La Sylphide*, his *Napoli* and *A Folk Tale* (in the last two, the heroines were not supernatural, but were temporarily in thrall to supernatural forces). All have been altered to some degree, and the *Giselle* we see today was largely rechoreographed by Marius Petipa in 1884. The poetic image of a mortal man lured by a filmy female vision into a magical world didn't perish with the decay of Romanticism, however. Transformed by new ideas and new styles in dancing, it bloomed again in Saint Petersburg, and years later in London and New York City. It is with us still.

### Notes

- 1 See original text for fuller discussion of this ballet.
- 2 Playbill for Sadler's Wells Theatre, week beginning 23 August 1841.
- 3 Some of the exceptions are Lucille Grahn, Fanny Elssler's sister Therese; and Marie Taglioni, who choreographed *Le Papillon* in 1860 for her protégée, Emma Livry.