Ballet as Theater in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France

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Modern Anglophone audiences use the term “ballet” to refer to both the theatrical performance genre, ballet, and the academic dance form (in French, danse classique or danse d’école) that has become the defining feature of what is today considered a dance genre; in fact, to the detriment of our understanding of ballet’s historical roots, these two elements of balletic tradition have become synonymous with each other.¹ Originally created as court entertainment, ballet was formulated as a fusion of the arts of music, drama, dance, and décors that came together to form a cohesive whole. In other words, dance – now considered essential to ballet – represented only one of its many component parts. In this article I will briefly explore the complexity of the historical link between ballet and the larger cultures of theater and literature and the subsequent concealment of these links, which has resulted in today’s diminished understanding of ballet as a cultural product.

Ballet is deeply engaged with storytelling. In fact, ballets that do not tell stories are often identified on the basis of their pure dance element. In the eighteenth century, narrative was not a new element of ballet. On the contrary, both court ballets and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera-ballets had included narrative elements. Within a pluralistic structure, dramatic narrative was juxtaposed with geometric dance alongside

¹ In modern French, “ballet” has a second definition, “compagnie de ballet” (ballet company) and refers to a “troupe giving choreographic performances (especially of danse classique).” These two uses of the terms, however, are not as easily elided as the term’s two English definitions. (Larousse Dictionary Online, s.v. “Ballet,” accessed November 6, 2015, <www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/ballet>). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
a simultaneous attempt to fuse dance with music, text, machines, and décors into a single spectacle. In eighteenth-century French opera-ballets, dance was integrated into each act of the opera, with each act including a *grand ballet* that brought a large number of performers to the stage. Even according to reformers pushing for ballet that more fully expressed narrative (through an outgrowth of the Aristotelian unity of action termed the unity of design), some opera-ballets included scenes that mixed dance and narrative. But these same reformers argued that ballet needed to become yet more expressive in order to take its place alongside painting and poetry among the so-called imitative arts. Encyclopédiste and theatrical reformer Denis Diderot’s famous rhetorical question exemplifies the view of the reformers:

> I should be glad if someone would tell me what meaning all these dances have, such as the minuet, the passe-pied, the rigadoon, the allemande, the saraband, which follow a set pattern. This man is performing movements of immense gracefulness; in every one of them I see ease, gentleness and nobility; but what is he imitating?2

Despite the push for reforms especially in high theaters, Enlightenment ballet varied immensely in form and content and depended substantially on its performance venue. Ballet was performed in theaters ranging from the Académie Royale de Musique or Opéra, the Comédie italienne, the Théâtre-Français, and fairground and private theaters. Government-sponsored theaters enjoyed a considerably greater number of *privilèges*, or rights to perform works of a certain type. For example, because of the Théâtre-Français’ monopoly on what I will call the traditional French declamatory theater (as opposed to the highly expressive physical theater practiced at the fairgrounds and the Comédie italienne), Parisian performers had already developed innovative ways of conveying narrative without words. These constraints, imposed upon the Comédie italienne and the unofficial theaters, opened a space for ballet to deepen its relationship with narrative; outside the Théâtre-Français, performers were required to perform in monologue, use marionettes to speak, or send scrolls with printed dialogues down from the flies. In order for a performer, rather than a marionette, to appear onstage, he or she was required to use dance or mime in place of verbal expression.3 In other words, in the eighteenth century, theatrical performers had already integrated expressive techniques traditionally belonging to the realm of dance into their performances, connecting the two domains more closely than they have been linked together either before or since.

**Ballet and action**

At the root of eighteenth-century balletic reforms stands Jean Georges Noverre (1727–1810), ballet master and author of *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (1760), the period’s most famous treatise on dance. Noverre, the self-proclaimed creator of the new genre he termed ballet “en action,” in fact drew on a large number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dance treatises as well as a number of relevant articles from Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, most of which were penned by librettist and historian Louis de Cahusac (1706–1769). Noverre’s writings on the ballet en action centered not around dance technique, but on ballet’s poetics understood within the Aristotelian framework of the French classical theater and with respect to the theatrical unities of time, place, and action. In this vein, Noverre proclaimed that ballet needed to include action, or dramatic narrative, in order to be considered an imitative art. In turn, the ballet master based the majority of his proposed reforms on ballet’s narrative construction, with the goal of creating a poetic system that met the needs of genre without entirely sacrificing theatrical convention. Most critical of these reforms for the analysis that follows was the creation of what Noverre termed the “unity of design,” a new theatrical unity that

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essentially encompassed dance scenes as well as narrative ones within the constraints of a ballet’s overarching narrative arc.\(^4\) Ballet en action, in other words, meant narrative ballet, and Noverre proposed that ballet ought to portray stories as complicated as those represented in the discursive, text-based traditional theater, but wagered, like Diderot, that facial expression “is a hundred times more animated, more lively and more precious than that which results from the most impassioned harangue.”\(^5\) Narrative ballet, according to Noverre, was analogous to the discursive theater in what it could express. Extending from this, according to Noverre, the ballet master, more than what we would today call a choreographer, was a poet, in the sense of being a writer of dramatic poetry performed in mime.

Today, however, ballet d’action, as the genre is now generally known, refers to a specific performance practice dating from Noverre’s time. Such ballets are characterized by their pronounced use of mime, sometimes described as rhythmic walking, combined with limited outbursts of dancing, a structure that mimics the operatic juxtaposition of recitative and aria.\(^6\) Despite evident structural similarities, however, Noverre’s ballets differed widely in content, and some were entirely divertissement-based. Even Noverre referred to his individual works using their subgenres, e.g. ballet-héroï-comique, ballet-tragi-pantomime. Indeed, literary scholar Edward Nye points to this issue when he states that in fact the ballet d’action “was not so much a genre in itself as a dramatic practice.”\(^7\) Ballet en action, in short, was the practice of expressing a narrative through a combination of mime and dance.

Although ballet continued to be grounded in narrative after French Revolution of 1789, this paradigm would shift in two major ways in the early nineteenth century. First, with the rise of the professional librettist – Noverre and his contemporaries had considered the writing of the libretto to be a key element of their work as ballet masters – ballet scenarios began to include more figurative language. Second, ballet masters started to create dances in a different mode of choreography that melded structural elements of recitative and aria into a fusion of action and expression freed from the structures of the discursive theater upon which ballet had modeled itself. In other words, this new ballet became more and more purely theatrical, including hints of narrative action even within scenes that had been traditionally reserved for equivalent of aria’s narrative standstill. In many ways, these new ballets continued to resemble their eighteenth-century predecessors in structure. Musicologist Marian Smith has shown, for example, that in addition to the story present in ballets’ libretti, airs parlants (excerpts of popular song or familiar opera performed without the words, but strongly signaling them nonetheless) and instrumental recitative also conveyed narrative.\(^8\) Pantomime continued to express ballet’s narrative with the aid of these musical tools, and dance continued to be used in celebratory or emotional moments.

To read criticism of the Romantic ballet, however, it would seem that a dramatic structural shift had occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Romantic critic and librettist Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) complained regularly about revivals of ballets from before the advent of the Romantic era (dated by either the premiere of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s opera Robert le Diable

\(^4\) Jean Georges Noverre, Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets (Lyon: Delaroche, 1760), 124.


\(^6\) The reference to pantomime as rhythmic walking comes from a passage in the Correspondance littéraire and an article written in the Encyclopédie both by Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm. Grimm explains that “The characters in the ballet-poem will not dance except in the moment of passion, because this moment is truly, in nature, the one of violent and rapid movements; the rest of the action will only be executed through simple gestures, rhythmic walking, more marked, more poetic than normal walking, from which there would not be a means of passing naturally and with truth to the moment of dance.” Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, ed. Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm, 16 vols. (1753–82) (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877–82), vol. 16: 400.


in 1831 or Filippo Taglioni’s ballet *La Sylphide* in 1832). Gautier identified these ballets as the “old” ballet, in contrast to what he termed the “new” ballet.⁹ According to Gautier, *La Sylphide* opened the door to a whole new era in choreography, and through it Romanticism entered the realm of Terpsichore. After *La Sylphide*, *Les Filets du Vulcain* and *Flore et Zéphyr* were no longer possible. The Opéra was given over to gnomes, ondines, salamanders, elves, nixes, wilis, peris, all those strange, mysterious creatures who lend themselves so wonderfully to the fantasies of the ballet master.¹⁰

Gautier is correct in that these wilis, ondines, and peris did begin to appear on the Opéra’s stage around this time, but to state that it was “given over” to these characters is extreme. In reality, these fantastic ballets represented only one of many types of Romantic ballets. Notably, this statement obscures the large number of ballets based in exotic – but earthbound – settings.¹¹ Alongside this change in theme, Gautier also proposed that these ballets represented a new form. Contrasting the two forms, he explains that in *ballet d’action*, “pantomime occupies a larger proportion in it than dancing and that the plot is much more complicated than in a *ballet à spectacle*.”¹² This assumption is more forward-thinking (and perhaps wishful thinking) than actually representative of the majority of the “new” ballets of Gautier’s time. Although it holds for modern interpretations of those Romantic ballets still performed today (with pared down mime scenes), it goes against much research on these productions’ original performances. Just to give one example, Smith points out that *Giselle* (1841) originally contained fifty-four minutes of pantomime and sixty minutes of dancing.¹³ This particular ballet, the libretto for which was authored by Gautier, represented the type that Gautier preferred, despite its subgenre listing as “ballet-pantomime.” Indeed, the labels associated with Romantic ballet (ballet-pantomime, *ballet à spectacle*, *ballet-pantomime-folie*, and even simply ballet) then seem to be just as fluid as those used for what we have since termed – after his usage – the “ballet d’action.”

Gautier attempted to create a dichotomy between old and new by using only a small number of terms to describe a large number of practices on a single spectrum. The combination of his choice of terminology, his marked preference for ballets that included scenes that fused action and expression into evocative dancing, and the widespread citation of his criticism by early twentieth-century dance historians and critics such as André Levinson (1887–1933) has in turn affected the way contemporary viewers perceive ballet as a whole. In other words, Gautier’s privileging of dance over narrative in his now-canonical ballet criticism has erased the nuances of a large array of dramatic practices by subsuming them under a small number of specific genres.

**Ballet as theatrical genre, ballet as dance technique**

Although in English, the word “ballet” has come to replace the term “danse d’école” or “danse classique,” ballets are not dances. They include, and have always included, dances, but ballet, by its traditional definition, is neither dance nor dance technique but rather a type of theatrical performance. This conflation of terms is one symptom of the deficit in our understanding of ballet and dance today, a deficit that obscures ballet’s historical relationship to theater and by extension, to the discursive. This is true for several reasons,

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⁹ Gautier makes the contrast between either “old” and “new” ballet or “ballet d’action” (identified as old ballet) and “true” ballet in reviews in *La Presse* published on September 24, 1838; February 4, 1839; July 1, 1844; July 20, 1846; and January 16, 1855.


¹² Ibid., 59.

¹³ Smith, *Ballet and Opera*, 175.
including Levinson’s dance historical narrative, but also because of the intense focus on “pure dance” today. Gautier’s sharp differentiation between ballet d’action and ballet-pantomime, alongside the values he espoused in his criticism, segregated ballet from the deeply literate world of the theater.

Ballet and theater are tightly related at their roots, and our modern understanding of ballet as formalist and lacking in language is thus anachronistic. Formalism veiled ballet’s relationship to the larger theatrical canon, which is one of the locations from which it has historically derived meaning. Noverre describes his ballet, after all, as a “faithful likeness of beautiful nature,” and a fundamental objective of the ballet master’s project was to make ballet more clearly mimetic.\footnote{Noverre, \textit{Letters on Dancing and Ballets}, 9.} Likewise, the inclusion of ballet within the larger literary sphere allows for the recuperation of the Ancien Régime’s dense understanding of the literary object. During the Ancien Régime, literature as we today understand it had worked together with theater and dance to provide a cohesive performance experience for the spectator. In the nineteenth century, these complementary fields divided into prose and poetry, theater, and dance. Later, dance and opera too became gradually less intertwined with one another. This nineteenth-century perspective (like Gautier’s retrospective reading of the ballet d’action) flattens the literary object such that subfields that would have been considered literary in the Ancien Régime were separated or marginalized.

One of my goals in looking at the transition between ballet of the Enlightenment and that of the Romantic era has been to privilege these multiple strategies of meaning. In the eighteenth century, ballet claimed its status as a high art via the theater. The bourgeois tragedy – undeniably what we would today call a genre of the traditional theater – made its claim to expressivity on the basis of its inclusion of pantomime. The literary was thus not strictly textual. Indeed, ballet, dance, and stories have been loosely and tightly intertwined with each other at various points over the course of ballet’s history. These ties have shifted as our understanding of ballet and dance have shifted, and today’s conflation of terms is one of the reasons for our diminished historical understanding of the genre’s varied permutations. In moving away from the idea of ballet as dance to examine the art form as a performance genre, my goal has been to re-contextualize ballet within its larger cultural matrix. This allows us not only to avoid anachronism and better understand ballet the way it was understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also to recognize how ballet can enrich our understanding of theater and literature broadly speaking.