

Gender Narrative in Matthew Bourne's Version of Swan Lake

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Abstract: This dissertation analyses Matthew Bourne's version of Swan Lake from the perspective of gender narrative because it creatively uses a male as the swan, showing the connection between the work and social gender norms through the narrative of gender perspective, breaking the unequal status of the two genders under the traditional conception of hegemony, opposition, and binary framework, and providing a new choreographic idea for dance choreographers. Therefore, this paper will discuss the three aspects of gender image, narrative strategy, and gender consciousness, using the gender narrative theory extended by feminist narratology through Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity," the concept of "masculinity," Yu Ping's structural elements and structural forms of dance theatre creation. Freud's psychoanalysis analyzes how Matthew Bourne designed the plot of the dance theatre by constructing and using gender images and ultimately conveying the gender consciousness contained in it. Finally, the above analysis explores the gender constructed in the dance drama, the values pursued in work, and the transmission of gender awareness.

1. Introduction

From a historical perspective, Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake did not appear out of nowhere; his work was preceded by much attention to creating narratives from the perspective of gender in theatre, an approach intended to break down stereotypes of gender and provide audiences with a fresh perspective. For example, through the exaggerated multiple role-playing and cross-gender performativity of two pairs of characters, Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark* examines the intricacy of female and male stereotypes and clichéd patterns of female and male behavior [1]. This highlights the performative element of gender-specific behavior and the surrounding discourses, which allow the characters to "experiment with cultural emblems of traditional gender identity and upset societal conventions." In the 1980s and 1990s, Roberta Williams portrayed characters with alternating gender perspectives in the *King's Quest* games [2]. But most of these games followed Disney's lead by focusing on female figures rather than on male heroes. Meanwhile, I found parallels between Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake and Michael Cunningham's *A Wild Swan and Other Stories* in the portrayal of character gender. In his work, he shows three distinct male personalities, each expressing a distinct way of being masculine. The story is influenced by early feminism, and the male characters he portrays contradict the masculine ideal. These examples above demonstrate the use of gender image reversal in plays, games, and novels and have guided my analysis of gender portrayal in Matthew Bourne's version of Swan Lake. However, the gender perspective narrative is still a new creative approach to creating dance theatre. Matthew Bourne's version of Swan Lake, as a dance theatre, incorporates the creative technique of gender narrative. This innovative choreographic device is of research significance.

2. Undoing Gender Norms: the Shaping of Subversive Gender Images

Christa states that traditional views of gender, influenced by masculocentrism, show men as strong, with words like control, power, and authority used to describe positive images of men. On the other hand, positive images of women are usually shown as soft and naive. However, in Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake, the prince, the swan, and the female characters are not crystallized by traditional gender

concepts; they are influenced by the social context of the dance drama as well as the plot, gradually dissolving gender norms and reinventing their identities step by step according to the plot, playing and re-enacting their roles [3]. In *Swan Lake*, the prince is vulnerable, the swan is fierce, the queen is strong, the prince's girlfriend is vulgar, and even the woman at the court ball is sexy and hot compared to the brave and handsome prince, the soft and elegant swan, and the noblewoman in the classical ballet version. This reconceptualization of gender roles in *Swan Lake* subverts traditional expectations of male spectacle and female objectification. It visually conveys to the audience a modern sense of gender that is very different from the traditional view of gender. In my view, this modern gender consciousness dismantles traditional gender norms. Butler's perception of gender norms in her book 'Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity ' comes from her understanding of the 'norm.' After analyzing Lacan's symbolic position, Foucault's 'social norms,' and Ewald's definition of norms, Butler finds that by seeing norms as having the power to constrain all social phenomena, "norms internalize anything that wants to go beyond them." When this perception of the 'norm' is placed within the context of gender norms, we can see that gender norms, through the practice of physical performance, constantly repeat and invoke discourses of power to create understandable and legitimate gender spheres, which constitute what we understand by the term gender. *Undoing Gender* is about releasing the coherent, bound-together aspects of the body, masculinity/femininity, sexuality, etc., created by gender norms to be able to choose more freely so that sexual minorities can be understood and acknowledged. This is an attempt to explore how Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* impacts traditional notions of gender and communicates the gender consciousness behind the work.

3. Structure Building: Choreographic Strategies from a Gender Perspective

Marion Gymnich argues that gender-conscious narratology can provide innovative insights into how narrative structures produce meaning. Meanwhile, Lewis C. Seifert, in his study *Enchanted Eloquence: Fairy Tales by Seventeenth-Century French Women Writers*, relies on psychoanalysis and structural analysis to identify patterns of masculinity in the story [4]. The perspectives of the two researchers here provide ideas for my analysis of the strategies used to create the gendered narrative of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*. Analysing Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* from the perspective of gender narratology allows for an analysis of not only gender imagery but also the construction of the structure.

According to Huang Zhi, choreographic strategy refers to the artistic creation strategy of the choreographer to achieve the progression of plot and emotion through the design of the structure of the dance drama [5]. In Yu Ping's 'Structural Elements and Structural Form in Dance Drama Creation,' he argues that the 'structure' of a dance drama is the arrangement of the basic elements of a dance drama, the composition of the elements, and the final formation of a relatively stable composition style, i.e., the structural form of a dance drama. Therefore, the structure of a dance drama should be grasped in terms of structural elements and forms. The structural elements of a dance drama include story elements, plot elements, stylistic elements, and narrative elements. The structural form consists of time division at the macro level, section design at the meso level, stage movement at the micro level, and syntactic treatment at the sub-micro level. The whole performance is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Choreographic Strategy of *Swan Lake*

Macro level: spatio-temporal segmentation	Meso level: dance clip design	Micro level: stage blocking	Sub-micro level: syntactic processing
The young prince's bedroom	Solo dance by the swan leader	Appearing at the head of the prince's bed symbolizes the dream and creates a sense of oppression.	The swan motive appears as a symbol of great male power.
The palace	Group dance of the servants	Group dance around the prince, highlighting his centrality	Stiff movements
Royal duties	Group dance of the crowd	Group dance below/behind, prince above/in front, highlighting the prince's majesty	x

	Group Dance of Mothers and Soldiers	Soldiers surround the mother, highlighting her position of authority	Flirtatious and provocative movements set the scene for a flirtation with an unknown guest later
	Prince and Girlfriend Duo Dance	x	The movement is light and cheerful, showing the prince's happiness at finding his true love.
An opera house	Group Dance	x	The elegance of royalty versus the crudeness of girlfriends
The prince's private quarters	Prince's Solo	The corner of the stage creates a sense of isolation and inferiority	x
	The Prince's Dance with his Mother	The prince always tries to approach his mother, who is trying to hide	Lifting oriented
A seedy club	Guest Group Dance	x	Vulgar social dance moves
	Swan Group Dance	The prince is in the front area, and the swan is at the back of the stage, creating an intertwined sense of dream and reality.	Repetition of the swan motive, symbolizing the masculine power of the swan
A city park	The Swan Leader and the Prince's Duo	Prince, after the head swan	Prince mimics the swan's head collar, moving from cautious to spacious and free.
	Group Dance of rest of swan	Mostly linear scheduling, mimicking the path of a swan flying over	Contrast with the prince and contrast with the freedom of the swan
	The prince, the swan leader, and the rest of the swans dance together	A duet between the prince and the swan leader alternates with the rest of the swans, after which the prince blends into the swans	Prince imitates the swan's movements
	Prince's solo	x	The movements are light and cheerful, showing the prince's happiness and relief.
The royal ball	Guest Group Dance	Group dance as a base, highlighting the prince and his mother	The movement is graceful and dignified
	Strange guests dancing in a group with the women present	Strange guests take turns dancing in pairs with the women present	The movements are provocative and aggressive
	Group Dance	x	Movements that imitate the form of a swan, some of which are aggressive
	Strange guest dancing with mother duo	x	Elegant but ambiguous movements
	Strange guest dancing with Prince duo	Repeating the dance route of the strange guest with his mother suggests that this is just a figment of the prince's imagination.	The swan moves with repetitive motives and is full of aggression.
	Group Dance	The prince is at the center, surrounded by guests, mothers, and strangers. The prince is a symbol of worldly oppression	x
The prince's bedroom	Medical staff dances with mothers in a group.	A triangular dispatch, giving a sense of oppression and symbolizing worldly authority	Rigid and uniform movements
	A flock of swans dancing	The swan surrounds the prince, symbolizing the prince's siege by the contradictions of worldly views and his perceptions.	Aggressive movements
	Prince's Solo + Head Swan's Solo	x	Repetition of the swan motive, symbolizing the masculine power of the swan
	The prince, the swan leader, and the other swans dance together.	The rest of the swans form a barrier separating the chief swan from the prince, symbolizing worldly oppression	The repetition of the motive of the head goose and the contrast between the flock and the prince, and the prince's quest for freedom

4. The Pursuit of Values: the Transmission of Gender Awareness

Butler argues that gender can be conceptualized as a performative repetition of culturally required behaviors and expressions that challenge the notion of gender as an internal or natural state of being

[6]. At the same time, Foucault argues that gender can be read as a truth that emerges from the power structures surrounding sexuality. Sexuality is intricately linked to gender as an identity and a 'social institution.' Therefore, gender identity is influenced and conditioned by social institutions. However, dance is a medium through which traditional gender identities can be broken down. The emergence of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* brought the long-hidden ambiguity in society between Queer and the performing arts officially to the stage. As Susan Leigh Foster says, dance is a key area through which our gender identities can be revealed, explored, subverted, and transcended. Amy Swanson echoes this sentiment, arguing that the difference between verbal framing and staging suggests that contemporary dance can potentially be a platform on which non-conformist expressions of sexuality and gender can be constructed and performed.

Therefore, in my study of Matthew Bourne's version of *Swan Lake*, the study of gender goes beyond the biological perspective of masculinity and femininity and, more importantly, explores the social gender constructed in the dance, i.e., the socio-culturally shaped composite representation of the division of roles, social expectations and behavioral norms of men and women [7]. At the same time, the gender consciousness I wish to explore in this thesis is not simply the perception of the biological sex of men and women but also the perception of gender relations in society. In the play, Matthew Bourne shows the audience how the gender roles of particular characters are actively or forcibly transformed by the combination of the surrounding environment and the characters through the construction of different gender images of the prince, the swan, and the female characters, thus showing the expression of sex and gender that Matthew Bourne wishes to construct and perform in *Swan Lake*. On the other hand, in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, he magnifies the contradiction between social perceptions of gender and individual perceptions of gender, strongly impacting the audience's traditional notions of gender and making them think about gender issues in society.

5. Conclusion

The narrative of Matthew Bourne's version of *Swan Lake* from a gender perspective innovates the gender attributes of the characters in the classical ballet *Swan Lake* by eliminating gender norms to create new gender images, using clever narrative strategies to establish new gender relationships, constructing a new gender society, overturning the unequal status of the sexes in the hegemonic, antagonistic, binary framework of the traditional view of gender, and empowering each gender. Even It gives each gender and species the right to love and makes the audience see and think about gender/sex/sexuality in society in a new way. At the same time, Matthew Bourne brings queer culture to the stage for the first time, putting male dancers in the middle of the stage and cleverly hiding same-sex love under the roof of "gender parody," allowing the audience to be in deep contact while watching, but at a comfortable distance at the end of the show, a clever way to make the audience accept and not resist at the same time. This is a clever way of making the audience receptive but not resistant and offers a new way of thinking about choreography for queer choreographers.

In my analysis of the portrayal of gender in *Swan Lake*, I draw on Butler's 'Dismantling Gender' to explore how Matthew Bourne's portrayal of the character attempts to subvert traditional notions of gender by dismantling gender norms, creating a different conception of gender from the traditional hegemonic, oppositional and binary framework. Secondly, in analyzing the narrative strategies in *Swan Lake* from a gender perspective, I use Yu Ping's 'Structural Elements and Structural Forms in Choreography' to analyze and tabulate the plot of *Swan Lake*, followed by Butler's 'Gender performativity' to analyze the plot and explore the transformation of the prince's gender identity builds the overall structure of the dance, the transformation of the swan's 'gender role' reinforces the conflict in the dance, and the 'flatness' of the female characters drives the development of the plot. I conclude by analyzing the values pursued in Matthew Bourne's version of *Swan Lake*, exploring his attempt to create a new gendered society within the context of ballet as a medium, exploring the common sentiment of transcending gender consciousness and the desire for equal gender rights in the dance.

In addition, Matthew Bourne's portrayal of the emotions of sexual minorities in this dance drama is worthy of study and reflection, as well as his hyper-gender awareness and the quest for gender equality. Although he draws on the threads of same-sex relationships to drive the plot forward, I do

not see vulgarity or vulgarity in his work; sex and love are initially the primal instincts of all human beings. Here, I hope that through this dance drama, more people in the society can show more respect and concern for the queer community. As more and more people speak out for this community, as more and more artists communicate their gender awareness through their artworks, and as more and more audiences watch the work and reflect on it, it shows that society is progressing and becoming more and more tolerant. I want to end with a quote that I liked from the drag show QUEENZ: "All we can do in society is to allow people to be what they want to be, to choose their own colors and shine."

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