

# Performance and Propriety: Tracing Ballet's Evolution from Risqué to Elite

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*This article takes ballet as a case study to demonstrate that, historically, the intersections of law, media, and celebrity culture helped to establish an artform as legitimate in the eyes of the public. It begins by demonstrating how ballet evolved from its naissance in the sixteenth century, then through to nineteenth-century Romanticism, and finally to its presence in our contemporary culture. Two artefacts will help make the case. The first is a piece of text from respected Art critic Leigh Hunt, who drove attention towards ballet by scrutinising some of the artform's leading stars. This attention led to fame for some of the dancers, whose elevated status, in turn, elevated that of the artform. The second artefact is a lithograph of four of ballet's most celebrated Romantic dancers. It further demonstrates the influence that celebrity culture (as this essay will anachronistically refer to it) can have on the British public. The essay argues that there are three eras that present a pattern in ballet's impression on the collective conscious. Each in turn being (in stage parlance) highbrow, then low, then highbrow once more. I'm particularly interested in the ways that ballet recovered its reputation. As an artform, it is as admired as it ever was by participants and audiences alike. The difference is that the contemporary landscape allows for a far more democratic process. Now, ballet is considered a sport and an art reserved for the most discerning of participants – this article argues, however, that today's conception of ballet as a refined activity is not inherited, it is earned.*

In contemporary society, ballet is associated, not only with the height of elegance, but with the proof of the human body's capacity for strength. It is also a source of joy for the fortunate few who experience its beauty, be it up close at a barre, or thousands of miles from a live performance, shared through a digital screen. It is not an exaggeration to say that ballet is on a cultural pedestal. Perhaps it is the artform's multi-dimensional aspect that fascinates; be it found in its intersection of art and sport or witnessed as a platform for cultural exchange. Perhaps it is the halo effect that charms millions who, in accomplished dancers, witness human beings in whom myths live and breathe.<sup>1</sup> This

essay will seek to represent the ideals of the collective conscience through the lens of ballet. To begin, it acknowledges the artform's enchanting effect on audiences – what is popularly known as charisma – for without this effect it cannot thrive. As C. Stephen Jaeger writes, charisma transports 'the enchanted person into a world where human limits are abolished, at least extended far beyond the commonplace... That exhilaration produces ecstasy.'<sup>2</sup> First, the essay will outline the rise of ballet's popularity in the European courts of the early modern period. As a pastime purely for the noble elite, the artform was beyond reproach. Centuries later, however, ballet evolved into a

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<sup>1</sup> Jaeger et al., 1 'Charisma and Art,' *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania), 2012, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

professional field and its reputation fluctuated. I will interrogate the factors that contributed to its revival, particularly through the lens of British culture. Lastly, I will argue that contemporary ballet has reached new levels of elitism, and that several interventions helped protect its reputation enough for the artform to remain the pinnacle of artistic expression.

## The Foundation

According to Jennifer Homans, the creation of ballet (as we know it today) evolved from a tradition found in the Italian courts. Courtiers ‘performed simple but elegant social dances known as *balli* and *balletti*, which consisted of graceful, rhythmic walking steps danced at formal balls and ceremonies, or on occasion stylized pantomime performances.’<sup>3</sup>

It wasn’t long before the fashion was adopted across courts all over Europe, but the practice really took form during the reign of King Louis XIII.

In 1643, by the end of his reign, ‘the stage was elevated several inches from the floor, and wings, curtains, trapdoors, backdrops, and machinery to hoist clouds and chariots into the “sky” were fixed in place.’<sup>4</sup> Throughout his reign from 1610 onwards, ballet evolved into an elevated artform, for which there needed to be a stage (the better to see the elegant dancers).

Moreover, Louis XIII was so enamoured by the artform that he took to designing the costumes, developing his own ballets and, of course, taking a lead role in their productions. This last aspect

gave plenty of opportunity to showcase who was the head of court: after all, the king had to be always the central figure. In addition, the practice of cultivating magnificence was key to the monarch’s influence. Through the king’s endeavours, ballet became an artform to be taken seriously. It enabled viewers to admire the dancers’ physical prowess, a crucial component as the king’s subjects could worship him in a way that was not merely intellectual and spiritual, but material, too. No other monarch appreciated this fact more than the next in line, Louis XIV, who became a more prolific dancer than his father.<sup>5</sup> Homans writes:

*Under Louis XIV, dance became much more than a blunt instrument with which to display royal opulence and power. He made it integral to life at court, a symbol and requirement of aristocratic identity... It was at Louis’s court that the practices of royal spectacle and aristocratic social dance were distilled and refined; it was under his auspices that the rules and conventions governing the art of classical ballet were born.*<sup>6</sup>

It was Louis XIV’s influence that transformed ballet into an organised system that was – and remains – codified, making it usefully repeatable. In terms of the dance practice itself, much has evolved but the principles remain the same. For example, strenuous daily practice was emphasised then as it is now and when it came to performance, costumes were almost as important as the dancers. The technical steps, the costumes, the music and narratives all came together to form a beautiful spectacle that delighted and inspired audiences. Thus, through the lens of the French court, ballet was catalysed

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<sup>3</sup> Homans, *Apollo’s angels: A history of ballet*, (London: Granta), 2011, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

into an artform to which Europe's aristocracy could aspire.

### Working Conditions

Evolving out of Louis XIV's *Académie Royale de Dance*, the Paris Opera Ballet is the world's oldest ballet company, founded in 1669.<sup>7</sup> By the time Edgar Degas (1834–1917) was creating artworks that referenced ballet culture, the medium was well-understood in society as a place where sex work openly took place. Entering the company as young children, dancers who made it into the *corps de ballet* were exposed to the whims of wealthy men whose patronage was the backbone of the company's existence. In the interim between training and professionalisation, the young dancers were known as 'petits rats.' Degas captured one particular petit rat, Marie van Goethem, in the sculpture known as *The Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*. As shown in Figure 1, this name corresponded to a petit rat's appearance and overall status: they tended to be of small stature due to malnutrition, wore tired dance clothes that were likely handed down, and were susceptible to exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

According to Blakemore, 'backstage was a kind of men's club where they could meet and greet other power brokers, make business deals and bask in a highly sexualized atmosphere.'<sup>9</sup> This was so well-known that the ballet world developed a scandalous reputation, as demonstrated in the stigmatisation of the successful ballet dancer as a prostitute. People had trouble believing that a hard-working girl

could find success without the support of a rich personal patron.<sup>10</sup>

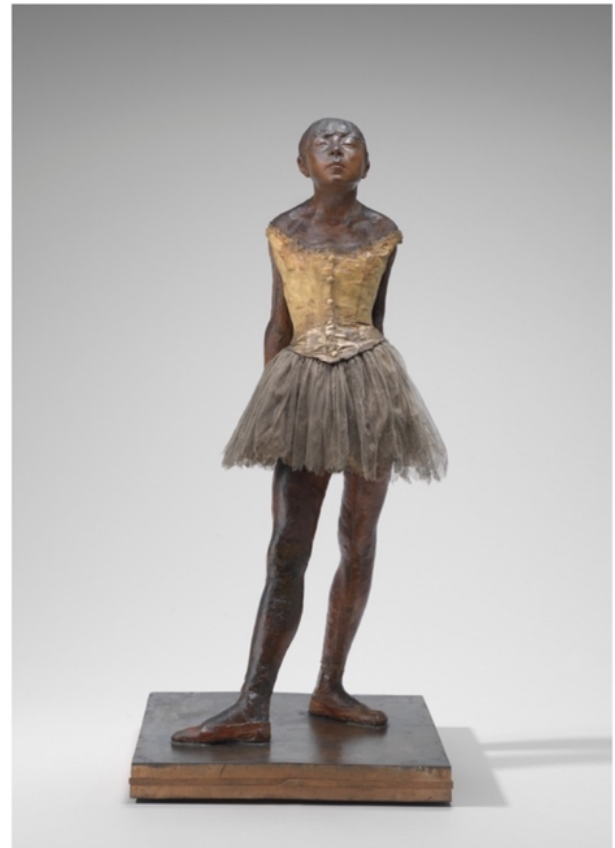


Figure 1: Edward Degas, *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, 1878-1881, 98.0 x 34.7 x 35.2cm (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

### The British Influence

Once ballet moved from the French courts to the international stage, it began its journey of professionalisation as we think of it today. Although this had started in the late seventeenth century ballet became highly valued as a profession around Europe, including Britain, by the twentieth century. This essay will now evaluate the ways that ballet's popularity grew and how its influence affected culture. It will also seek to define the ways in which ballet's

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Reference, online, *Paris Opera Ballet*.

<sup>8</sup> Blakemore, *Sexual exploitation was the norm for 19th-century ballerinas*, history.com, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Coons, 'Artiste or Coquette? les petits rats of the Paris Opera Ballet,' *French Cultural Studies*, 25:2: 2014.

reputation was reformed in the eyes of the British public.

As I argue here, the formality and respectability associated with contemporary ballet culture is not actually a novelty, but a return to the aristocratic grandeur from which it hails. But there is one main difference between the two eras of respectability (the sixteenth century and the twenty-first).

As mentioned, in the age of Kings Louis XIII and XIV, practicing ballet was the pastime of Europe's privileged royals and aristocracy; it distinguished and upheld their status. By contrast, modern day ballet dancers are among the new respected elite; for their dedication is proof of their ambition and athleticism. How has ballet managed to shed its in-between persona, acquired and maintained in the nineteenth century, as a dangerous and sordid profession? I will consider several aspects that turned the profession around and call them 'legitimising factors.'

Legal intervention was one of the first legitimising factors that turned ballet into a respectable artform. In 1843, the Theatre Regulation Act was passed in Great Britain. It ruled that any theatre production (including ballet) that posed a threat to British society and its 'good manners, decorum or the public peace' should be banned.<sup>11</sup> It was around this time that laws around worker's rights were established and working conditions – be they in factories or theatres – were being considered for the first time in England's history. To an extent, the law was useful for cleansing ballet's image in the public eye – though, I believe, not so much in practice but in the notion of protecting

morality. For if the medium was thought appropriate, then by osmosis and association, the practitioners of that medium could surely be thought so, too?

Another legitimising factor was that of kinship. Music halls catered to the more general population of audiences with themes on national pride and popular culture.<sup>12</sup> The empire was a point of pride for the British, and artists and producers knew how to capture the zeitgeist. This is because giving audiences an opportunity to see themselves in productions was, and still is, good for the arts, not least from a financial standpoint. To return to Jaeger's point on charisma, the effect that the arts had on ordinary people was invaluable. Therefore, if ordinary civilians could exit theatres abuzz – that is, with a sense of kinship felt towards the other-worldly beauty they had witnessed – then they were more likely to see ballet in a positive light.

Art criticism also lent itself to the respectability of the medium. As with legal interventions, the fact that ballet was deemed worthy of criticism helped as much in legitimising it as the critiques did. In criticism, it matters who does the criticising as much as the verdict that person delivers. English critic Leigh Hunt (1784–1859) was a gentleman who called Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) friends; they even planned on working together before Shelley's untimely death in Italy.

For two years, Hunt reviewed ballet performances at Covent Garden with an unforgiving eye and brazen honesty that

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<sup>11</sup> Theatre Collection, 'Censorship and the stage,' *University of Bristol Theatre Collection Blog Posts*, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Lehmann, 'Ballet in Britain's Music Halls, 1850-1910,' *Vintage Pointe Ballet in Britain's Music Halls 1850-1910*.

betrayed his passion for the artform.<sup>13</sup> This is evident in one of his critical pieces, where he observed an unnamed ballerina at the Queen's Theatre who twirled 'in a most interminable manner, – all however with sufficient grace. When you expect her to leave off, she seems to begin afresh; and this impression she will repeat; so that it would appear that she might continue forever, if she chose. And at the termination she walks apart, as tranquil and steady as if nothing had happened.'<sup>14</sup> Hunt was an accomplished essayist and poet, thus he understood the arts from both sides, so to speak.

It is through arts criticism that we get to know individual performers. This notion of being introduced to specific artists through the medium of criticism introduces this essay's final category of legitimisation: celebrity. Hunt reviewed Marie Taglioni (1804–1884) in 1832:

*[Her] chief character is a graceful repose. The extreme ease of it is indeed wonderful, especially when we consider the laborious and artificial exercises which dancers have to practice, and which generally produce an indelible stiffness in their manners. Mademoiselle Taglioni winds hither and thither with singular smoothness: she is perfect mistress of her actions, her deportment, her face: she does whatever she pleases. But we cannot help wishing, that she would be pleased to do something more. Dancing, after all, in its greatest repose, is an extraordinary departure from our ordinary style of movement: it can only be supposed warranted by a certain enthusiasm; and in the repose of Mademoiselle Taglioni, there is too much repose.*<sup>15</sup>

Hunt eventually understood Taglioni's individual allure as a dancer, and that her singularity of expression was merely artistic nuance. By expressing the tale in her own way, she was distinguishing herself as a formidable, and most importantly, memorable dancer. Along with the likes of Fanny Elssler (1810–1884), Taglioni's rival, it was the rising celebrity of dancers that elevated ballet's standing in the collective conscious. For crowds love to raise ordinary humans to near godlike status, and once that is achieved it is impossible to associate a deity with anything less than glory. It is not surprising that soon after Hunt's reviews (and Taglioni's precipitous rise), ballet's Romantic era swept the nation.

According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, by the end of the British Romantic era in 1832, women had replaced men as ballet's main dancers, to the point that 'Principles' were considered stars.<sup>16</sup>

The Romantic era's most talented ballerinas were hailed as idols across Europe.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to dancers like Taglioni and Elssler, the Romantic ballerina became an iconic image of an 'otherworldly, ethereal being.' So beloved were Romanticism's ballet dancers that they were immortalised in lithographs. Some lithographs had 'ballerinas poised in flowers, reclining on clouds and floating through the air. Many ballerinas did perform these feats on stage, but with more than a little help from stage technology.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fenner, 'Ballet in Early Nineteenth-Century London as Seen by Leigh Hunt and Henry Robertson,' *Dance Chronicle*, 1.2: 75–95, 1977, p.93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90.

<sup>16</sup> 'Romantic Ballet,' *Romantic Ballet*, Victoria and Albert Museum, Digital Media online, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

One example can be seen in Figure 2., which shows ballerinas in a still version of the *Pas De Quatre* featuring the four most famous Romantic ballerinas at the time: Marie Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi (1819 – 1899), Fanny Cerrito (1817 – 1909) and Lucile Grahn (1819 – 1907). The lithograph is as ethereal as a Taglioni dance scene: the ladies seem like fairies gracing the viewer with magic and beauty for the duration of a brief performance, captured in print. The full skirts that gently flutter, even in stillness, and the rounded curves of the arms imbue the image with a distinctly feminine slant. The flower crowns and tilted port de tête complete this homage to Romantic ideals of femininity.

The penchant that ballet had for aspirational beauty has not gone away since the making of these lithographs. Rather, it has only intensified. Thus, as the stain on the artform's reputation lifted through the legitimising steps listed above, ballet's charm not only remained, but multiplied on an international scale.

To conclude, this essay has demonstrated, through ballet, how performance-based artforms evolved from risqué to elite. It has shown that the intersections of law, the media and the genesis of celebrity culture helped to establish ballet as a legitimate artform in the eyes of the public. The essay briefly explored three eras that represent a pattern in the evolution of balletic arts, journeying, in the public's eyes, from high art to low entertainment and back to high art again. Now, the ballet world encapsulates two of the most revered fields in the world of visual culture: sport and art. Lastly, the essay showed that contemporary ballet's high standing in the cultural landscape is not so much a novelty, but a return to the grandeur established in its aristocratic genesis. The only difference this time is meritocracy.



Figure 2: Lithography by T. H. Maguire after a drawing by A. E. Chalon, *The Pas de Quatre*: Carlotta Grisi, Marie Taglioni, Lucile Grahn and Fanny Cerrito, 1845, 530 x 403mm, given by Dame Rambert. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London). The Pas de Quatre was choreographed by Jules Perrot, to music composed by Cesare Pugni and danced at Her Majesty's Theatre (London, 1845).

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