

## SKIPPING LIKE CAMELS: OR WHY MEDIEVAL STUDIES NEGLECTS THE DANCE<sup>1</sup>

“The recognition of a true artistic illusion, a realm of ‘Powers,’ wherein purely imaginary beings from whom the vital force emanates shape a whole world of dynamic forms by their magnet-like, psycho-physical actions, lifts the concept of Dance out of all its theoretical entanglements with music, painting, comedy, and carnival or serious drama, and let one ask what belongs to dancing, and what does not . . . . It explains why it is so ancient, why it has periods of degeneration, why it is so closely linked with amusement, dressing-up, frivolity, on the one hand and with religion, terror, mysticism and madness, on the other. Above all, it upholds the insight that dance, no matter how diverse its phases and how multifarious, perhaps even undignified its uses, is unmistakably and essentially art, and performs the functions of art in worship as in play.”

*Suzanne K. Langer (1953)<sup>2</sup>*

I begin this essay with a sigh, and a pronouncement of sorts: dance is dead in the Middle Ages. Dead to us, I mean, not to the Middle Ages. As I scan the bibliographies, I wonder, regretfully, why the page devoted to dance is nearly empty, save for a few pieces here and there on the so-called dance heresy.<sup>3</sup>

Can it be that feminists have not talked loudly enough for academics (and for other feminists, too, by the way) to hear that in the Middle Ages the body was an instrument of change, of rebellion, even of emerging autonomy—and it was especially so, it seems, for women. So where is dance in the avalanche of recent publications on “the body?” Where are the essays, books, and articles wondering about dance and gender, when the word “physicality” is so quick on the lips of just about every North American medievalist?

This essay examines this situation. I don’t have answers, nor do I think the situation can change any time soon. Even so, in my painful awakening to the death of dance in medieval studies, I have a few thoughts to offer to the discussion in this Forum on how the academy, in the editor’s words, “has obstructed studying the artistic contributions of women,” insofar as these contributions concern the dance.

If there is hope for dance to become worthy of academic study—and I would like to think there is—it will emerge out of our very frank and self-conscious wondering about ourselves as academics, about where we stand in our thinking on artistic experience, generally—where private and public realms of emotion merge, where meaning is baffling and ambiguous, and where the science of documentation, of hard evidence and proof, abandons us briskly at the door of the overwhelmingly visceral experience that is art.<sup>4</sup>

I want to explore some possible reasons why the academy has failed to embrace dance. I should also like to share the bits and pieces of evidence that suggest that dance had been a singular part of medieval culture. Lastly, I would offer a thought on where we might turn for help in recovering the art of dance—should we wish to do so. It will be challenging, to stir ourselves up and out of this dim and ancient place. But, seeing anew is like that, as Plato told us in the allegory of the cave so very long ago.

## I. THE FAILURE OF THE ACADEMY TO EMBRACE DANCE

For medievalists, surely the greatest obstacle to embracing dance as a vital part of the culture has to do with the Church's fierce and long-lasting proscriptions against dance. To the medieval clergy, the body's function was to be the "temple of the Holy Spirit," and thus the Christian mind associated dance with Jewish religious rites, with the survival of pagan practices, and, to some, even with the manifestation of black magic. G. G. Coulton, in his *Five Centuries of Religion*, pronounces what I suspect most of us believe when he says that dance "is condemned with striking unanimity by medieval moralists, whether monastic or secular."<sup>5</sup> Such attitudes, however firmly located in "period thought" they might be, do not bode well for the future reception of medieval dance.<sup>6</sup> Medievalists face some good hard work, then, should they wish to disentangle these sorts of moralizing assumptions from the historical reality.

Moreover, what other writing there is on dance in the Middle Ages—and it is scarce indeed—aligns it with madness, lethal illness, and heresy. In a significant article entitled "La Dansomanie de 1374: Hérésie ou Maladie?" Madeleine Braekman explores the "extremely poorly known" movement of a "sect" of dancers in the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> With the utmost care and archival skill, she reviews the documentary sources ("astonishing" in her words) that attest to the origin of the dance mania in nervous ailments, such as epilepsy. She follows the negative reception by the church—more accurately the rejection—of the mania as heresy and exploring the social and economic reasons for the movement. It is a superb piece of research, with issues that should be compelling to our current interest in the interaction between social class and health. Yet, even that potential has been lost, I think because the title of the piece comes up against the door—tightly shut—on dance and the Middle Ages.

Beyond medieval studies and looking more broadly at the role of dance inside the academy, we see that it commonly is relegated to the bottom floor, literally as well as figuratively. As a practiced art form on college and university campuses, dance has, for the most part, had to assert its presence against music (whose place has been established as a serious discipline since at least the nineteenth century), theater (whom dance serves in the guise of movement training), and studio art (with its potential for more aggressively public forms of display).

As a subject of serious intellectual inquiry, dance has fared even worse. Largely this has to do, I think, with the reception of dance as art—its "timing," if you

will. Dance matured in the United States and became fully recognized as a complete art form—a medium unto itself with its own rules and formal language—during a time that would later be received quite coolly by historians of the arts: the middle decades of the twentieth century. This was the Balanchine era, the apotheosis of Martha Graham, and the emergence of Merce Cunningham. This was a time of unbridled expressiveness *and* abstraction. Audiences could not get enough of dance. The Brooklyn Academy came to the fore as a premiere venue for dance, with houses routinely sold out. By the 1960s dance had come of age.

A scholarship, soft spoken and somewhat reticent compared with contemporary criticism in the other arts, began to come forward. The foremost philosopher of dance, Suzanne Langer, whose brilliant studies from the early 1950s had languished on the bookshelves of a few enthusiasts, was suddenly in vogue, and now it was with dance aficionados. Anthologies began to appear—a sure sign of retrospective thinking—such as *What is Dance* by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen.<sup>8</sup> Dance was even making headway into the burgeoning field of anthropology in the 1970s.

Still, the academy remained impervious to dance's powerful presence in the art world. Dance studios, if part of a liberal arts curriculum at all, were tucked away in subterranean chambers and useless basements. Nowhere were there signs that dance had managed to find a home, as an art form to be reckoned with the way painting, poetry, acting, music and—incredibly—even film-making had. The art boom on campuses across America was a very good thing; but not for dance.

In fact, it was dance's emergence as an independent medium—not a prop in musicals or opera, or a facet of the entertainment industry, or a part of the actor's training, but an autonomous art form—that was its doing and its undoing all at once. As academics shifted their stance on art, beginning in the 1970s and certainly vigorously so by the 1980s, they shifted away from dealing with (indeed having the least bit positive thing to say about) anything that smacked of Formalism, of New Criticism, of art-for-art's sakeness. This is part of our legacy and for the present purpose, it hardly needs elaborating here.

The older generation has lived through the rejection of the "art" of art—its aesthetic and transcendent nature, if you will—by the younger generation who now deal with art as an issue of material and/or expressive culture, property, gender economy, and the like. Whatever nuance you may like to give poststructuralist and post-modernist theory, it most certainly is not interested in understanding the purity of distinctive art forms, experienced in all their inexplicably emotional and mesmerizing rawness. We have other tasks to perform now—tasks that disclose the forces of context, tasks that seek for expressions of race, ethnicity, selfhood, power, sexuality, codes of meaning, violence, gender, and masculinist assumptions. The very idea of "a medium," standing all on its own, in isolation from the forces that constructed it, is, in the current way of seeing, myopic.

So there was dance, finally having gotten on its feet. But lo and behold, the very things that made it “dance” were precisely what resisted the academy’s need to construct them culturally: its disruptive, emotionally exciting, and utterly abstract but absolutely physical nature. Timing in the academy is everything. And dance made its entrance about three decades too late. This is why dance has not made much headway even with perfectly sympathetic disciplines, like anthropology. When the social sciences started to frame the problems of the new poststructuralist era, the very idea of an “art form” was discarded in favor of looking for instances of material and expressive culture, in our case, looking at ritual movement—and those cases are completely different from the *artistic* origin and goal of human movement that is the dance.

Where dance might have found a home—and perhaps still can—is in the discipline of the history of art. After all, nothing is quite as visual as dance. We apprehend it with our eyes, and after, with a sort of personal and bodily empathy. We understand dance first and foremost as movement, dynamic movement through time and space, with the body as the instrument. Indeed it is pretty puzzling that art history has managed to avoid “dealing with” dance. After all, movement, dynamism, and the use of the senses are hallmarks of “the Baroque,” that being defined either as a particular chronological style or as a more generalized way of thinking about artistic form.

Moving bodies have not been excluded altogether, I should say. Recently, art history has been quite comfortable in admitting “performance art” to the rank of objects worthy of study. However, “performance art” is definitively *contemporary art*, and in our discipline the conversation between contemporary and traditional art has yet to be struck in full. In other words, though “performance art” is a serious subject of study in contemporary art, the moving body has yet to be adopted by art historians working in earlier ages.

Perhaps it might be useful to recall that the history of art, while working on the visual arts, has rather narrowly defined the terms to mean *things* (in our discipline we like to call them “objects,” which makes perfect sense) that are fixed and stationary—the art that hangs in museums and galleries, that is. Although contemporary theory has rather vigorously and successfully attacked museum culture as an “elitist” institution, it has effected surprisingly little when it comes to what gets to be called a “visual art.” The contemporary situation aside, art *history* still concerns itself with things that hang on walls, stand on pedestals, and live on canvasses. The static, fixed, and immobile “thing” is what my discipline chooses to confer its powers of analysis on—and it does so, fixing “things” even more steadfastly in time by enshrining them in purely historic data. Furthermore, while it may be true that some art historians are comfortable with a relatively high degree of personal interaction with works of art, dance, with its medium in the human body, demands a passionate and yielding sort of physical empathy from the viewer. On this point, I agree with James Elkins, who said that,

[art historians] are content not to feel very much, and . . . many actually distrust strong emotions. They try not to let themselves be manipulated, and they look askance at people who get carried away. For them the eyes are intellectual organs, made for scrutinizing the world, and the mind's business is to keep control of the passions.<sup>9</sup>

To such a culture as art history—with its ingrained habit of loving fixity, emotional detachment, and objectness—moving bodies, no matter how visually exciting they might be, can simply never be the issue, nor can whether the works move us emotionally or not. For what's at stake is the very seriousness and scientific authority of the discipline.<sup>10</sup>

## II. DANCE AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Even to an old-fashioned moralist like G. G. Coulton, it was clear that dance had been a large part of medieval life. So many prohibitions, so many scandals, so much anxiety over dancing can only point to the fervor with which people partook of it. There was dancing on feast days, in taverns and the like. Also, there was something akin to liturgical dance taking place where it was part of worship, but, this, too, was condemned as sacrilege. Medievalists have heavy lifting before them in order to ferret out the diverse sorts of dance that had so disruptively occurred—in ritual, folly, play, civic processions, and especially in the liturgy. Belgian and Dutch historians have begun in earnest to identify the social and cultural milieu of festival processions and activities.<sup>11</sup> Liturgical dance remains, however, quite inadequately understood.<sup>12</sup>

My own work has argued extensively for dance as the paradigmatic form of mystical expression in the late medieval activities of Elisabeth of Spalbeek.<sup>13</sup> Virgin, ecstatic, young holy woman, this extraordinary girl performed her mysticism publicly. On numerous occasions (in print and in lecture), I have claimed that Elisabeth's activity was, by its nature, both artistic and a form of dance. Moreover, I have explored Elisabeth's movements by using movement itself—that is, looking at a contemporary, danced choreography of her *vita*—rather than relying on textual description or text-based analysis alone. Should we wish dance to have a serious place in the academic disciplines (and I would want its home to be in art history rather than theater departments), we must find ways to retrieve the experiential dimension of dance—that it exists in space and time—along with matters of context and genre. Whether or not scholars agree with me, I still contend that many *vitae* of medieval women mystics would benefit—be seen perhaps as less bizarre and as more creative and public—if dance, viewed in this way, were taken as a point of origin for their scholarly explorations.

## III. WHAT TO DO WITH DANCE, THE ACADEMY, AND THE MIDDLE AGES?

Permit me to offer a few points for further consideration. First, dance is different from any other bodily expression. It is formal, practiced, and disciplined. As such, dance, separate from ritual or movement, holds on to its identity as art.

Second, academics should reconsider expanding the nature and the role of art in culture: *art moves people*.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not we like or feel the passions, one of art's primary roles in all of life and at all times has been to stir the passions, give them form, and convey them via the senses to beholders. There is, in our current ideological practices however, no room—let alone any desire—for examining or teaching art that heals, art that moves, art that makes us weep. But if we continue to avoid these effects, we can surely banish forever the potential for having a full and authentic representation of women and art in the academy. It is, after all, the case that dance, both in its associations and in its practice, is almost totally “feminine.”

Retrieving dance (of the sort I call for in this essay) from history is no easy task. But there are people doing this.<sup>15</sup> I'll close by speaking about one. In 1991 Harris Stone published an idiosyncratic little book called, *Hands On/Hands Off: Experiencing History Through Architecture*.<sup>16</sup> It is actually a book about the historic preservation of buildings, but it has a few good points about how dance might help us “experience history.”

Stone wants to understand historic buildings—castles, monasteries, public plazas. He is interested in the continuity between past and present. He sees texts, for instance, “not as something to be read and interpreted, but rather as a tangible object existing in a perceivable spatial volume.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, buildings—as spaces to be moved through—are, in and of themselves, historic records. Stone would have us be physically present to historic structures, running our hands across the ancient stones, touching the surfaces of worn tiles, and ideally dancing through the remnants of space. “The kinesthetic examination of place,” Stone says, “. . . is, I feel, the clearest exposition of the concept of gaining knowledge through personal interaction with the built environment that underlies the approach to Historic Preservation suggested in this book.”

History is enactment; and in this view, only dance can recover that originary and foundational sense of history that is gained by physical participation in the past.

This essay has hoped to call medievalists, especially those working in the academy, to wonder about dance—and to begin building for the future. How full and rich will be our understanding of the Middle Ages when we know more about what motivated people to leave the space of the everyday, and take up temporary residence “on stage,” living out the passions that stirred within, in artful and moving ways.

Praise the Lord/praise him with timbrel and dance/. . . Let every thing that has breath, praise the Lord. Psalm 150:4.

Joanna E. Ziegler  
College of the Holy Cross

1 The reference is from Coulton, quoting Chrysostom: "Where dancing is, there is the devil. God gave us our feet, not that we should thus skip like camels (ital. mine) but that we should make choirs with the angels . . ." (p. 532); and the subtitle is a variation on Francis Sparshott's well-known essay, "Why Philosophy Neglects the Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* 15 (1982): 5–30.

2 Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (Routledge, 1953), 184.

3 For reference to dance heresy bibliography, see below, notes 7 and 11. A still relevant introduction to a number of primary sources on dance as it pertains to religion in G. G. Coulton, n. 5. Interestingly, musicology has kept up with the art of music, gender, and the Middle Ages; see *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*. The literature on medieval dance is thin, however. As a beginning to the study of dance in the Middle Ages, see Martine Julian and Gerard Le Vot, "Approche des danses médiévales," *Avant-scène: Ballet, dance, France* 4 (nov. 1980-Jan. 1981): 108–19; Reinhard Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); John E. Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance, and Drama, 1050–1350* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Timothy J. McGee, "Medieval Dances: Matching the Repertory with Grocheio's Descriptions," *Journal of Musicology* 7/4 (1989): 498–517; Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance and Punishment," *Dance Research* 10/2 (fall 1992): 30–42; Franz Link, *Tanz und Tod in Kunst und Literatur* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), esp. 11–68; Evelyn S. Welch, "Sight, Sound, and Ceremony in the Chapel of Galeazzo Maria Sforza," *Early Music History* 12 (1993): 151–190; Margaret M. McGowan, "The Arts Conjoined: A Context for the Study of Music," *Early Music History* 13 (1994): 171–98; Gertrud Jaron Lewis, "Music and Dancing in the Fourteenth-Century Sister-Books," in *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, Anne Clark Bartlett, Thomas H. Bestul, Janet Goebel, and William F. Pollard, eds. (London: D.S. Brewer, 1995): 159–69; Jonathan J.G. Alexander, "Dancing in the Streets," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 147–62; *Women and Society: A Reader in Women's Studies*, Nirmala Jeyarai and Manuel Shanti (Taminadu, India: Lady Doak College, 2001).

4 In a fascinating study, part interview, part personal reflection, James Elkins explores tears and weeping as a response to painting, including the converse, or why art historians don't cry over paintings, in his *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (Routledge, 2001), with a summary essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 9, 2001): B7–B10. I would like to thank Phil Rule, S.J. for calling my attention to this.

5 G.G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1923), in the index titled, interestingly, "Medieval Puritanism," the section (c) on dance, 531–38.

6 Teresa Berger, *Liturgie und Tanz: anthropologische Aspekte, historischen Daten, Theologische Perspektiven* (St. Ottilien, 1985): 13–29; James Miller, *The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity* (Toronto, 1985); Pierre Riché, "Danses profanes et religieuses dans le haut Moyen-Age," in *Histoire sociale, sensibilités collectives et mentalités. Mélanges Robert Mandrou* (Paris, 1985): 159–67; Jeannine Horowitz, "Les danses cléricales dans les églises au Moyen Age," *Le Moyen Age* XCV (1989): 279–92; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La Raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990): 90–1.

7 Madeleine Braekman, "La Dansomanie de 1374: Hérésie ou Maladie?" *Revue du Nord* LXIII/ no.249 (April-June 1981): 339–55.

8 Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (Oxford University Press: 1983).

9 Elkins, as in note 4.

10 I am grateful to the editors for noting that religious studies, for instance, is now much more sensitive to "affective spirituality"—religion that "makes us weep"—than is art history. As Elkins work shows, art historians are quite upset by the suggestion (proof?) that the power of art to move us may ultimately be what's most important about it as an historical phenomenon.

11 A notable exception is the American Peter Arnade whose splendid work on rituals has imported this superb scholarship to our continent. See his *Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life*

in *Late Medieval Ghent* (New York, 1996). Also see works especially by H. Pleij, but also R. Van Uytven and R. Soly.

12 Jeannine Horowitz, "Les danses cléricales dans les églises au Moyen Age," *Le Moyen Age* 2 (1989) 279–92. The classic study is L. Gougaud, O.S.B., "La danse dans les églises," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 15/1 (1914): 5–22 and 15/2 (1914): 229–45.

13 Joanna E Ziegler "Introduction," *Performance and Transformation*, eds. Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler (New York: 1999), pp. xiii-xxi; idem, "On the Artistic Nature of Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Ecstasy: The Southern Low Countries Does Matter," in Ellen Kittell and Mary Suydam, eds., *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries* (forthcoming); idem, "Mysticism, Theater, and Art: Recognizing the Visual Art of Ecstatic Performance," in *Antwerp Museum voor Kunstgeschiedenis Jaarboek 2000* (forthcoming, 2001).

14 Elkins, note 4.

15 One such example of methodology innovation concerning how to integrate the rather contradictory natures of performance and scholarship is the forthcoming conference, with scholarly anthology to follow, on *Practicing Catholic: Healing and Ritual, Performance and Contestation*, Center for Religion, Ethics, and Culture (College of the Holy Cross, October, 2002), co-organized by Bruce Morrill, S.J., Susan Rodgers, and Joanna Ziegler.

16 Harris Stone, *Hands On/Hands Off: Experiencing History Through Architecture* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991).

17 Stone, 96.

