

*BMCR 2022.10.13*

# Choreonarratives: dancing stories in Greek and Roman antiquity and beyond

Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar, Karin Schlapbach, *Choreonarratives: dancing stories in Greek and Roman antiquity and beyond*. *Mnemosyne supplements: monographs on Greek and Roman language and literature*, volume 439. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2021. Pp. x, 369. ISBN 9789004462472 €119,00.

## Review by

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## Preview

[Authors and titles are listed below.]

*Choreonarratives: dancing stories in Greek and Roman antiquity and beyond* is composed of thirteen essays, a foreword, and an epilogue which puts forward a convincing argument for increased interdisciplinary work between Classics and Dance Studies. The co-editors Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar and Karin Schlapbach lay out the ground for, and aims of, this collaborative project in their introduction. They tell us that much work has been done—but not brought together—on the receptions of ancient Greek and Roman dance (via performance and scholarship), on the one hand, and on the ‘narrative possibilities of ballet and contemporary dance’, on the other (5). Addressing this gap is the volume’s self-identified task. So, together with their collaborators they aim to essay a comprehensive study of dance narrativity from their specific situated angle: from a study of the practices and discourses of narrative dancing in ancient Greek and Roman cultures—and their reception. While *Choreonarratives* is not always an evenhanded set of scholarly interventions, with some authors almost entirely ignoring Dance Studies as a field in their chapters, what the volume does achieve through these well organised and excitingly choreographed, interdisciplinary efforts, is for the most part formidable.

In the excellent epilogue, renowned dance studies scholar Susan Leigh Forster summarises: *Choreonarratives* ‘does not offer a narrative but rather a cornucopia of insights and perspectives on the relationship of narrative to dance’. And certainly the volume is at its strongest and most compelling during chapters such as the dance-studies informed reading of Euripides’ *Andromache* by Sarah Olsen, in which the messenger speech is given a lively analysis, with attention carefully paid to allusions in the text which relate to both kinaesthetic empathy and the possible sites for allusion to

the embodied cultural knowledge of the audience. Across the volume moments like these are frequent, with authors drawing on their knowledge of practice-based research, reception studies, philology, dance history, and theory.

The volume has three main sections: Dance as Medium of Narration; Dancers as Narrators, Narratives of Dance; and Translations and Reenactments. The last section is the strongest of the three, since it is not only the most coherent but it adeptly brings together practice-based research, dance history, and theory. Marie-Louise Crawley's insightful chapter on re-enactment demonstrates how theory can be expressed and interrogated through the body, arguing for an embodied theory that '[resituates] women on the inside of power but on their own terms, and, eventually, [enables] an alternative means of viewing history'. (331) Iris Julia Bührle and Samuel N. Dorf's essays on Shakespeare and Nijinsky both articulate how the historical conditions under which dance is produced affect not only the shape that dance will take but also the reception of that movement, especially when—in the case of Nijinsky's work—it subverts and challenges dominant social codes, normative views on the ancient world, sexuality, and gender norms. Unfortunately however, the colonial politics of an anthropological and analogous approach to dance practice and history are not interrogated thoroughly enough in Yana Zarifi-Sistovari's chapter, 'Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Adapting Euripides' *Hippolytos* as Indonesian Dance Drama'.

Section two is in some ways the most experimental, as it contains three essays on tragic figures (Io, Neoptolemus, Salome) and an essay on contemporary or modern dances, which stage a biographical interpolation of the choreographer. At first glance it would seem perhaps incongruous that contemporary work is discussed in such close proximity to biblical and ancient Greek performance. However, there is a very productive critical dialogue at work through these juxtapositions. The three ancient works actively encourage us to read around and imagine to some extent the relationship between character, body, and movement. These thoughts are set alongside Christina Thurner's work on Meg Stuart and Wayne McGregor and their questioning of the entire hermeneutic of staging a life through movement: 'But how can a body narrate a life, whether one's own or another's? And what can be physically or scenically revealed about how the (or a) life is recounted?' she asks, engendering a set of critical questions to re-interrogate and enhance the previous three readings. I was left wondering, generatively, to what extent dance was a medium in Greek or Biblical contexts, for staging and interrogating the process of telling the story of a life—whether historic or mythical.

Section one makes the case for dance as a medium of storytelling, and in some senses it is, because of this framing, the most predictable. Bernhardt Zimmerman, Sophie Bocksberger, and Karin Schlapbach do good work on their respective case studies to elucidate some of the ways in which bodies make meaning in their historical contexts, but it is perhaps Lucia Ruprecht's engaging reading of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* that prompts us to think more adroitly. Thinking the relationality of the choreographic effects of modernist anti-narrative literature alongside the textuality of dance, Ruprecht makes a convincing case for splicing contemporary dance reception, modernist

literature, and the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin. In this way Ruprecht opens up space for the processual, fluid, and imperfect ways that bodies, text, and meaning relate to one another.

*Choreonarratives* is a formidable, if uneven, set of essays which go some way towards achieving the aims of the co-authors. Yet, it doesn't always go far enough, and some key questions end up unanswered: what are the politics of embodiment and how do they impinge on the relative scenarios the authors discuss, what (alternative) models of knowledge can be/were formed by the interdisciplinary processes which attended to these case studies, and what politics, what power structures enable them? Particularly absent throughout the book is a shared set of methodological or theoretical tools. And an especially noted absence in those terms is Seeta Chaganti's excellent 2018 book *Strange Footing*, which thinks the relationship between medieval poetry and dance. Chaganti's combination of contemporary and medieval material and her theory, not of analogy, but of dynamic integration could have allowed many of the authors to go further in their thinking, and to incorporate a political analysis of the relationship between dance and narrative throughout their work.

Overall, the book builds deftly on previous work in Classics and Classical Reception studies, with an acknowledged debt to Fiona Macintosh (Ed.) (2012) *The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World: Responses to Greek and Roman Dance* and Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann and Fiona Macintosh (2013) *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*. It might have also benefited from more recent work like Fiona Macintosh and Justine McConnell's discussions in *Performing Epic or Telling Tales* (2020) or from some of the chapters in *Epic Performances from the Middle Ages into the Twenty-First Century* (2018) edited by Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell, Stephen Harrison and Claire Kenward—especially the chapters by Tom Sapsford, Marie-Louise Crawley, and Arabella Stanger.

*Choreonarratives* firmly builds from Gianvittorio and Schlapbach's previous work, notably Gianvittorio's edited collection (2017) *Choreutika: Performing and Theorising Dance in Ancient Greece* and Schlapbach's (2017) *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse: Literary and Philosophical Approaches to Dance in the Later Graeco-Roman World*. As such, it might feel like *Choreonarratives* is the culmination of a period of work around dance and classics, a summation even. But thankfully I believe it signals the beginning of a new period of interdisciplinary collaboration between Dance Studies and Classics.

## **Titles and Authors**

Introduction: Narratives in Motion, Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar and Karin Schlapbach

Part 1 Dance as Medium of Narration

Dance and Narrative in Greek Comedy, Bernhard Zimmermann

Narrative Dance: Imitating *Ēthos* and *Pathos* through *Schēmata*, Sophie M. Bocksberger

Making Sense: Dance in Ancient Greek Mystery Cults and in Acts of John, Karin Schlapbach

A Dancer's Discourse: Noé Soulier Choreographs Virginia Woolf, Lucia Ruprecht

## Part 2 Dancers as Narrators, Narratives of Dance

Dancing Io's Life: Hurt Body, Tragic Suffering (Prometheus Bound 561–608), Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar

Narrating Neoptolemus: Dance and Death in Euripides' *Andromache*, Sarah Olsen

Salome's Dance: Heads and Bodies between Narrative and Intertextuality, Danuta Shanzer

Dancing Life Stories: Embodied Auto-bio-narratives, Christina Thurner

## Part 3 Translations and Reenactments

Generic Transformations: Dancing Shakespeare from the 18th to the 21st Century, Iris Julia Bührlé

Gesture as a Means for Portraying Characters in Viennese Mid-18th-century Ballet, Fenböck

The Ballets Russes and the Greek Dance in Paris: Nijinsky's *Faune*, *Fantasies of the Past*, and the Dance of the Future, Samuel N. Dorf

Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Adapting Euripides' *Hippolytos* as Indonesian Dance Drama, Yana Zarifi-Sistovari

The Fragmentary Monumental: Dancing Female Stories in the Museum of Archaeology, Marie-Louise Crawley

Epilogue, Susan Leigh Foster