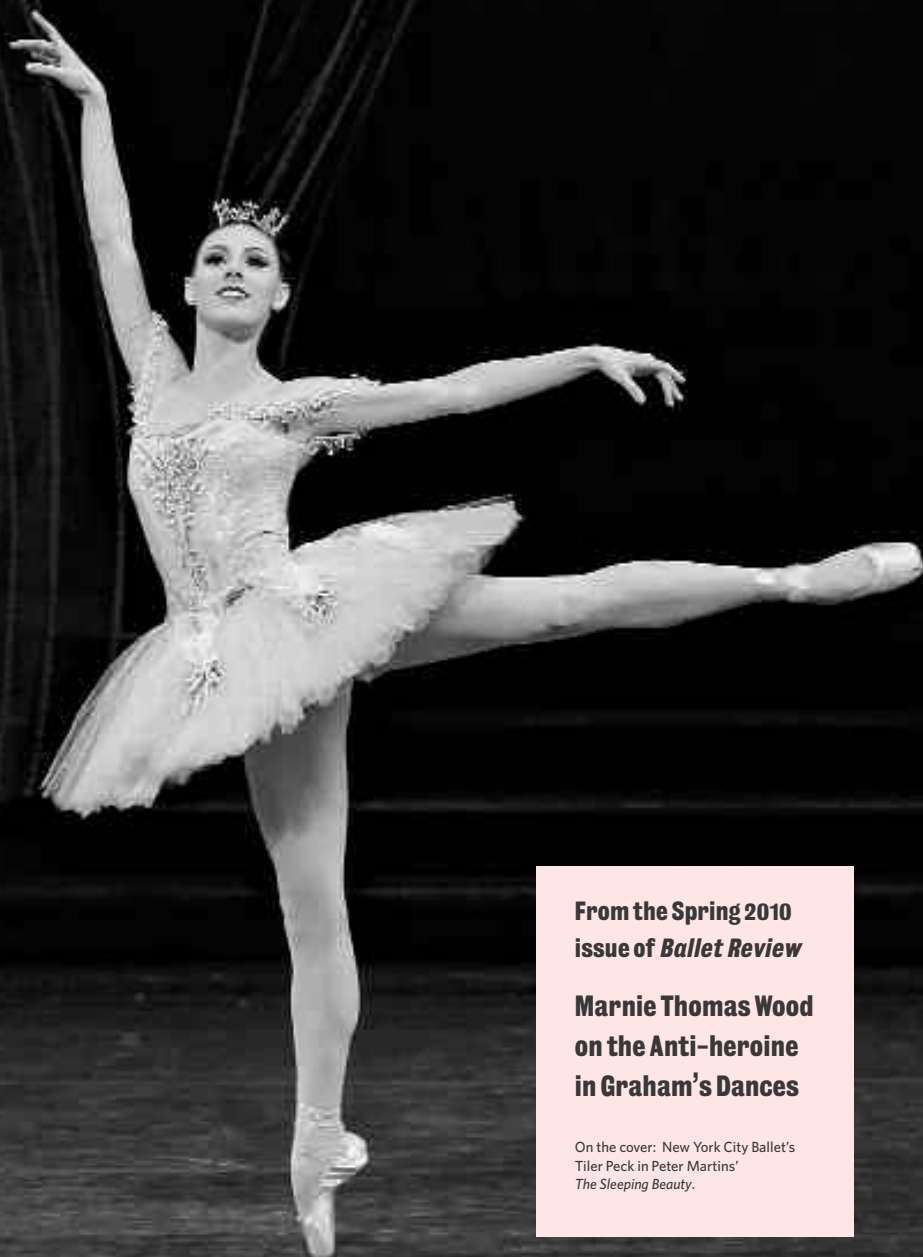


Spring 2010

# Ballet Review



**From the Spring 2010  
issue of *Ballet Review***

**Marnie Thomas Wood  
on the Anti-heroine  
in Graham's Dances**

On the cover: New York City Ballet's  
Tiler Peck in Peter Martins'  
*The Sleeping Beauty*.

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Cover photo by Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet: Tiler Peck  
in Peter Martins' production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

# Celebrating the Graham Anti-Heroine

Marnie Thomas Wood

“Why, why dishonored among the dead?”<sup>1</sup> comes the challenging query from Clytemnestra at the beginning of Martha Graham’s full-evening dance drama of the same title. From that initial grievance Graham unleashes a stunning argument in her seething reenactment of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, seen from the perspective of the murdering adulteress who pleads her suit against condemnation for her hubris, not because she is innocent of the accused crimes, but because her guilt is no greater than the shameless acts committed by gods who are worshipped and by men who are called heroes. Her intention is to gain redemption from a cursed eternity by proving that her conniving acts of destruction deserve appreciation, not censure.

In flashback Graham’s Clytemnestra examines the events that have shaped her destiny, conjuring up a kaleidoscope of vengeful behavior that spells disaster across the broader spectrum of every dysfunctional family and that affects the rise and fall of the human condition throughout history. Deceit, jealousy, faithlessness, cruelty, and murder in the house of Atreus are familiar far beyond this particular Greek example and are forces recognized universally but not necessarily revered or respected. As you watch Clytemnestra make her plea you witness first the audacity of her demand for redemption, followed by her gathering power wielded out of venomous intentions, and concluding in the celebration of a colossal and impressive antiheroine, “a woman recaptured in Clytemnestra’s might.”

One could never plead “by reason of insan-

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ity” to defend this case. The Clytemnestra that Graham reveals is driven by recognizably fallible traits of human nature pushed to inhuman lengths, but never is the character portrayed as having lost her senses or acting in a manner beyond control of her reasoned, if defective, perception. Rather, one begins to understand that Clytemnestra justifies her actions as a fitting response to the corruption waged around and upon her. Graham has positioned her protagonist central in a complex entanglement, dealing as many avenging blows as she receives.

“Rejoicing I killed” sets the tone of Clytemnestra’s explanation as she relives the injustices brought on by Helen’s elopement with Paris, the rape of Troy, Agamemnon’s sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, and his long abandonment only to return home with Cassandra as mistress. Exercising her right to retaliate in kind, Clytemnestra does not play for sympathy as the helpless victim in a compromised situation. She exults in taking her murderous revenge, and a portion of her rejoicing comes from accomplishing this act of equal consequence.

Just as clear, however, is the animal gratification Clytemnestra experiences in the process. A significant part of her rejoicing comes simply from the doing itself. This is where Graham makes her strongest statement for appreciation of human imperfection. As her Clytemnestra brings back remembered transgressions of the mighty as well as the meek from her past, their examples along with her own infractions send the message that power can be gained through violence and clear pleasures derived from the delights of adultery and deceit.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the degree of immediate satisfaction gained in spiteful murder may lead to inevitable destruction, but it indicates the fullness of a character’s engagement in the “practice of living” that Graham consistently applauds throughout her work.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant to note, then, that in the final moments of Graham’s portrait of the unrepentant Clytemnestra, she emerges from damnation in the Greek netherworld stalk-

ing triumphantly across the stage waving branches of victory with the words “Rebirth! Rebirth! Rebirth! Rebirth!” ringing out in acclamation. In the original version by Aeschylus, Clytemnestra does not achieve redemption. It is Graham who finds justifiable restitution emanating from “a seed born in (the) black, black soil” of Clytemnestra’s crimes.

By achieving complete exoneration from her most damnable traits, Clytemnestra represents a kind of culmination in honoring the shameful aspects Graham personified in many of the characters she recreated. On her way to glorifying Clytemnestra evidence of Graham’s fascination with antiheroic instincts appears throughout her career, always depicting an appetite for defiant action and inviting admiration even on the path to utter destruction. Clytemnestra may represent her ultimate step in rendering human failure a principal ingredient of greatness, but hints of this concept consistently fueled Graham’s imagination all along.

Early on in her stark minimalist work *Heretic* (1929) Graham pits her rebellious self against a wall of relentless conventionality imposed by twelve matriarchs who defeat her dissenting voice with unified and unbending resistance. Unlike her presentation in *Clytemnestra* Graham does not resolve this statement of rebellion in redemption. No words are sung to accompany this dance, but it is conducted in a clear conversational exchange, with the dissenter pleading her case phrase, by supplicating phrase literally throwing herself before a judgmental sisterhood that folds its arms, digs in its heels, and rejects each solicitation summarily.<sup>4</sup>

Graham’s double negative in this case neither rewards the renegade nor creates an appealing image of the power emanating from the group. The single voice fails to convince and the society refuses to listen. One does not know whether the mutineer or the conquering group suffers the greater loss at the conclusion. The heretic is destroyed but the righteous band is left locked in unfeeling conformity as terminally permanent as death itself. Here

Graham is already focusing on human failure, but not yet offering a view beyond its destructive force.

Later, when her vision broadened to encompass more complex dimensions of human nature, Graham probed the ancient Greek world with its warring conflicts among humans, gods, and nature where she found a rich field of less than honorable motivations to investigate. In these explorations one begins to find increasing confirmation of how deeply Graham savored flawed behavior and how central it was to shaping her full representation of the human condition.

One of the remarkable personages Graham recreates in her salute to the darkest sources of human motivation is highlighted in her depiction of Medea, the central protagonist of *Cave of the Heart* (1946). After she establishes a binding attachment with her lover, Jason, Graham’s Medea wreaks havoc in every direction when she loses him, destroying everything he might cherish. She poisons her rival then murders her children by Jason in a stunning solo that sends her racing across the stage on her knees, first devouring the snakelike umbilical chord in revengeful rage then disgorging it in rejection.<sup>5</sup>

Medea has no hesitation in resorting to the foulest acts in retaliation for Jason’s deception, but she neither suffers the condemnation that Graham shows us in *Clytemnestra* nor is she struck down like the rebellious spirit in *Heretic*. After her possession of Jason fails, her children and his new lover destroyed, Medea gathers herself into a perpetuating stance of defiance. She dons the sculpted bronze “spider dress” that she plucks from Isamu Noguchi’s set and hovers menacingly at the heart of the scene, swinging her leg in perpetual vibration over the devastation she has wrought. At the conclusion of this portrait, Medea remains the singular sorceress, still conjuring, wrapped in the bewitched desolation wrought by her “Serpent Heart,” Graham’s original title for this work.<sup>6</sup>

It is the strength and weakness of needing to be fulfilled as a woman that makes its



*Night Journey*: Martha Graham and Bertram Ross. (Photo: Martha Swope, MG CDC)

lasting impact felt in Graham's *Night Journey* (1947). The liaison between Jocasta and Oedipus begins as an expression of the pair's natural male-female appetite for sexual fulfillment. Their meeting and mating is conducted in sensual discovery, blindly absorbed in pleasing themselves and one another, ignoring the recurring warnings of the Seer and the curses of the chorus. Once it is revealed that the connection binding the couple is the incestuous link of mother-son, the two punish themselves, Jocasta with suicide by hanging and Oedipus with blindness and self-banishment.

Jocasta's act of hubris is not driven by overt jealousy, rage, or the vengeful destructiveness fundamental to the rampages of Clytemnestra and Medea. She does not display the fierce instinct to defend herself that inhabits Graham's other, more warriorlike females. Jocasta surrenders to the vulnerability of being a woman, her downfall growing out of her en-

deavors to define herself in the consummate role of wife-mother-lover-queen.

She unwittingly jeopardizes achieving that goal by giving in to her desire to give birth when it has been forbidden, tricking her first husband into conceiving a child who will murder him, then wedding and spawning children with her new young lover before recognizing him as her son. Graham's vision projects Jocasta as a female who conspires to find the greatest fulfillment in womanhood then crumples upon the realization that she has inadvertently violated its integrity in the process.

Of all the flaws that haunt Jocasta probably the greatest is regret, which means the indomitable spirit of fighting back that is usually associated with Graham's nonconformists is absent in *Night Journey*. Defeated by the horror of her incestuous act, Jocasta makes no argument to justify herself or reverse her condemnation. Without waiting for retribution

from another hand she submits to an inglorious death by her own. The final gesture of Graham's Jocasta is to strip off her queenly garb and strangle herself with the umbilical cord that has tied her to Oedipus from before his birth to the haunting corruptness of their shared bed.<sup>7</sup>

Graham was always clear in her thinking that the fact that she found the portrayal of beauty and heroism represented only a part of the human experience. An adamant admirer of Carl Jung throughout her life, her work often echoed his observation that the unconscious "contains all aspects of human nature—light and dark, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, profound and silly,"<sup>8</sup> and it was the darker dimensions of the unconscious that actually lent greatness to Graham's anti-heroines.

In examining the sources of conduct propelled by envy, greed, lust, wrath, pride, sloth, and gluttony, these incentives became not the seven deadly sins that Graham's American puritanical upbringing condemned,<sup>9</sup> but seven lively stimuli that could and did actually motivate action. The key words here are *motivate* and *action*. For Graham whatever urged one forward into taking new steps was a commendable attribute that carried the spark of a living force and avoided the staleness of inactivity. In the mid-1930s she was already declaring, "I would rather a thousand times

have a specific antagonism than a cold indifference. In the former, at least, there is a presence of life . . . something to work against. Apathy is like a fog."<sup>10</sup>

This attraction to the defective but driving forces in human nature was not limited to just the characters that she portrayed in a major thrust of her artistic creativity. Graham was equally fascinated by corrupt motivations that surfaced in real life situations, and she was known for responding to adversity often with heightened interest and enthusiasm.

In one rather typical and amusing incident, a crisis arose in the Graham School because the children's class was being seriously disrupted by two of the ten-year-olds' bizarre behavior. One of the young girls was running into the classroom attaching herself to the bar whooping like a monkey throughout the hour and refusing to join the class on the floor. The other was stealing a shoe each week from a different classmate, and several mothers were about to withdraw their sock-footed daughters if the situation couldn't be addressed. Graham was approached and asked what to do about the two problem children. She tilted her head back, lowered her eyes dramatically, and spoke as if she were a goddess reviewing the transgressions of two future Clytemnestras: "Those are the only ones that really interest me," she responded. "The others are just too normal."<sup>11</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Halim el-Dabh, *Clytemnestra* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1958). All excerpts otherwise unattributed are from the singers' text in the musical score.

2. Drawn from personal experience.

3. Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 3.

4. Personal experience as reconstruction coach of *Heretic*. Archival film of original cast courtesy of Martha Graham Center Resources.

5. Martha Graham, *The Notebooks of Martha Graham* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1973), p. 163.

6. *Ibid.* p. 462.

7. Personal experience as dancer in *Night Journey*, and reconstruction coach for the Graham Company, Ensemble, and School.

8. Carl Jung, et al., *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 94.

9. Agnes de Mille, *Martha* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 17.

10. Merle Armitage, *Martha Graham* (Los Angeles, 1937), p. 102.

11. Conversation with David Wood, former principal dancer and rehearsal director of the Graham Company, and faculty member of the Graham School.