

Article

The Rear-View Mirror: Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* as a Historiographical *Uncloseting* of Tchaikovsky's Queer Archive

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Abstract

This article reads Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995) not merely as a refunctionalisation of the classical ballet, but as a historiographical instrument that excavates the queer tensions latent in the Romantic-era ballet. Its premise is that Tchaikovsky's score and the original libretto (1877/1895) already contain the fissures of non-normative desire, sublimated by imperial censorship and the aesthetic conventions of the period. The theoretical framework mobilizes Nick Salvato's concept of *uncloseting*, Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, and a Freudian reading of melancholia. This conceptual map is then applied to Bourne's choreography to show how his production reactivates the repressed archive through male bodies. Three principal axes structure the analysis: the deconstruction of the swan archetype, the Oedipal function of the Queen-Mother as repressive Super-Ego, and the reinterpretation of the Prince's melancholia as the symptom of a structural impossibility. On the basis of these elements, the article proposes the concept of *historiographical uncloseting*, defined as a mode in which performance operates as embodied historical research, reactivating affective archives inaccessible through textual sources alone. Bourne's *Swan Lake* thus becomes a critical instrument for re-reading the queer dimensions of the archive of Romantic ballet.

Keywords: queer theory; performativity; Matthew Bourne; *Swan Lake*; P. I. Tchaikovsky; Romantic ballet; psychoanalysis; queer archive; dance historiography

1. Introduction

Often described as the *Hamlet* of classical dance, *Swan Lake* is among the most frequently staged and widely recognised ballets in the world. It tells a story of love, imperfect and impossible, yet perpetually within reach of any spectator's understanding. Its renown extends beyond the narrative. Tchaikovsky's score has become inseparable from popular culture, recurring in advertisements and memes alike. Such cultural ubiquity has not insulated the work from reinterpretation; on the contrary, it has invited choreographers other than Marius Petipa, who created the most canonical stage version, to rediscover its expressive potential.

One such reinterpretation occurred in 1995, at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, with the premiere of a *Swan Lake* staged by choreographer Matthew Bourne. Through Bourne's artistic intervention, the audience witnesses more than an aesthetic reworking; it encounters a conceptual rewriting, a way of rethinking and staging the body, desire, and the latent representability of the original libretto, through what dance scholar Vida Midgelow terms *reworking* (Midgelow 2007). Bourne's vision of *Swan Lake* unfolds along two registers: the aesthetic and the narrative/structural. On the aesthetic register, the female swans in white tutus are replaced with an exclusively male corps de ballet, bare-chested,



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wearing feathered trousers and executing movements that combine instinctual, animal aggression with vulnerability. This reversal inscribes the production within the scholarship on masculinity in dance. Ramsay Burt has shown how the male dancing body, once made the object of spectacle, unsettles the conventions of a gaze historically trained on the female performer (Burt 1995). On the narrative register, Bourne preserves the central premise of an impossible love, but the love now unfolds between Prince Siegfried and a Stranger, rather than between the Prince and Odette. From its premiere to the present, the production has remained a benchmark in the practice of *reworking*. Through alterations of body, desire, and representability—elements latent in the original libretto—the British choreographer accesses a *queer* vocabulary.

The world staged in Bourne's production is best evoked before any analysis, since many of its elements become legible only when seen as a whole. The action is moved from a fairy-tale kingdom to a modern monarchy that evokes the mid-twentieth-century British court. The Prince, emotionally starved and hemmed in by his mother the Queen (designated throughout this analysis as the Queen-Mother, to mark her Oedipal function), moves through a round of official duties, an unsuitable relationship with a brash, socially ambitious young woman (his Girlfriend), and a humiliating night out at a nightclub, the Swank Bar. Alone in a park at night, he encounters the Swan and a flock danced entirely by bare-chested men, at once tender and menacing, and the Swan becomes the object of his desire. At the Act III ball, a leather-clad Stranger, performed by the same dancer as the Swan, seduces the court and the Queen, and the evening collapses into violence: a shot is fired, the Girlfriend falls dead, and the Prince's grip on reality gives way. The production ends in the Prince's bedroom, where the flock invades and turns on the Swan—who has tried to shield the Prince—and destroys him; the Prince does not survive. The closing tableau then shifts register, from this violence to a visionary image: the Swan reappears, cradling the child-Prince above the bed in a final, Pietà-like reconciliation beyond death.

Visually, the staging cultivates a cold, faintly threatening splendour: oversized, official-looking interiors, with monumental walls and an enormous bed that dominates the Prince's bedroom; rigorously ordered spaces in which every gesture seems surveilled; the nocturnal, feral space of the lake; and, towards the end, clinically white spaces of confinement. The costumes reinforce the same grammar of contrast: the court's protocol dress, the Stranger's leather, the feathered trousers and bare torsos of the swans, who are also marked with a black spot on their foreheads. Against this ground of controlled elegance, the animal physicality of the swans erupts all the more brutally.

In the introduction to *A Queer History of the Ballet*, Peter Stoneley observes that "[f]rom the nineteenth century into the twentieth, ballet provided images, legends, spaces, and institutions through which queer artists and fans could achieve some degree of visibility" (Stoneley 2007, p. 1). By Stoneley's account, this visibility has always existed, but as a "common knowledge" that was simultaneously "hushed up." Bourne's production does not merely acknowledge this condition; it articulates the tension between knowing and being invisible, transforming that tension into representation. More than that, Bourne *performativises* latency, rendering it operative onstage through body and movement, in line with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 1990).

In a similar vein, Kent G. Drummond poses the question: "is this a gay ballet?" (Drummond 2003). His answer is that Bourne constructs an argument according to which the work is *queer* rather than *gay*. What the British choreographer accomplishes onstage, Drummond contends, is the destabilisation of fixed categories of sex, gender, and sexual desire, without anchoring them in any explicit homosexual identity. At the level of representation, in Drummond's view, Bourne has re-gendered the swans and queered the entire system of expectations that defines classical ballet.

These studies by Stoneley and Drummond introduced two important perspectives into the scholarly literature. Stoneley argues that queer visibility is archived within the libretto of the production, while Drummond demonstrates how Bourne destabilises classical categories. My analysis is positioned at the intersection of these two contributions and seeks to address the following question: what is the difference between retrospectively reading the queer subtext of classical ballet and deliberately activating that pre-existing latency? What the two studies offer is, on the one hand, a cartography of the queer condition in *Swan Lake* (Stoneley), and, on the other, an analysis of the effects of denaturalisation (Drummond). What remains unaddressed, however, is the very mechanism by which Bourne transforms queer latency into explicit representation.

In the present analysis, I argue that Bourne's intervention is not merely a reinterpretation but an excavation of an archive latent within the subtext of Tchaikovsky's libretto. In other words, the production functions as a performative historiographical instrument: it does not simply comment on a subtext but renders that subtext operative through corporeality and movement (Butler 1990). The bodies onstage reconstitute and make visible what had been repressed not by mere convention but by the normative structure of imperial ballet itself.

The article is structured in five sections that together account for how Bourne excavates the archive and stages a universe drawn from its subtext. The Section 1 sets out the theoretical instruments and establishes the working concepts: *uncloseting* (Salvato), performative gender (Butler), the dream and melancholia (Freud), and the swan archetype (Jung). The Section 2 is dedicated to the historical context of Tchaikovsky's work, the libretto, and the conventions of imperial ballet. The Section 3 analyses Bourne's production along four coordinates: the Queen-Mother as repressive instance, the Prince's melancholia, the deconstruction of the swan archetype, and the Prince-Stranger relationship. The Section 4 advances the concept of the *rear-view mirror* and argues that the production functions as a historiographical instrument of *uncloseting* applied to the queer archive of the nineteenth century. Finally, the Section 5 recapitulates the contributions of the present study and opens directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Instruments: Performative Gender, Queer Melancholia, and the Swan Archetype

Ballet has functioned as a representational space within which queer artists and spectators have been able to claim a measure of visibility (Stoneley 2007, p. 1). More than that, the queer subtext of ballet is not a contemporary invention but a presence-and-absence binomial that has traversed the very history of the art form:

The connection between homosexuality and ballet has for so long been there and not there, both “common knowledge” and “hushed up”. If, for much of the twentieth century, there was a strong popular perception of a link between ballet and homosexuality, that link was usually denied, suppressed, or ignored by the dance world. (Stoneley 2007, pp. 1–2)

The dialectic Stoneley names here—a knowledge that is collective yet officially unsayable—is precisely what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick formalised one and a half decades earlier as the “epistemology of the closet”: a regime of knowing-and-not-knowing that structures the modern Western articulation of homosexuality as an open secret (Sedgwick 1990). The closet, for Sedgwick, is not a private matter of individual concealment but a public and structural mechanism of representation. Stoneley's “common knowledge/hushed up” is, in this sense, the closet of imperial ballet itself.

The present analysis takes Stoneley's premise as its point of departure—a queer subtext pre-existing in ballet, simultaneously visible and repressed—and proposes four theoretical instruments that allow for a narrative and formal mapping of what Bourne has

staged. The first and the one that frames the entire theoretical apparatus of the article is the operation of *uncloseting*, drawn from Nick Salvato. The second instrument, taken from Judith Butler, is gender performativity, which anchors the analysis in the question of *how* classical ballet has produced and reproduced gender norms via the stylised repetition of bodies. The third instrument is Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theorizations of *dream* and *melancholia*, two concepts that explain the psychic effects of the repression of desire within a normative context, here applied to Bourne's choreographic representation. The fourth analytical resource is provided by another psychoanalytic tradition, C. G. Jung's concept of the archetype, through which I identify the swan as an archetypal figure of duality and sublimated desire—a symbolism the production concentrates in the character of the Swan. These four theoretical concepts are mobilised not exhaustively but selectively, in accordance with their usefulness for understanding the phenomenon Bourne stages and the manner in which the archive is excavated.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes the closet as an epistemological structure that designates the regime of visibility and invisibility through which homosexual culture has been articulated within modern Western societies (Sedgwick 1990). Within this same genealogy, in *Uncloseting Drama*, Nick Salvato develops a corpus of analysis applied to dramatic texts not destined for the stage but written for reading alone—what he, after the eighteenth-century convention, terms *closet drama*. The mechanism by which such texts are transposed into the theatrical medium carries, in Salvato's argument, the term *uncloseting*. This designates a twofold operation: first, performing the text onstage; second, bringing to the surface the queer dimensions concealed within it. To “remove a text from the closet,” in other words, requires bodies; it also requires altering the medium through which the text reaches its audience, since for Salvato *uncloseting* is not an act of critical interpretation but one of embodiment. He argues that certain queer resonances of a text become visible only when an actor inscribes them in their own body onstage. The body of the performer—their skin colour, biological sex, race, and so forth—renders the text into something the text alone could never have been: “the bodies that uncloset this drama reproduce and even exceed such ambivalence in their own complexly gendered and sexual positions” (Salvato 2010, p. 14).

For the purposes of the present analysis, Salvato's theory entails that the text is ambiguous, while the body adds something to the text by virtue of how it exists; the body, accordingly, is not a neutral conduit but an active hermeneutic instrument. From a methodological standpoint, this means that “[i]n performance, sexed and gendered embodiment [...] constitutes an interpretive dimension that mere reading [...] does not usually accommodate” (Salvato 2010, p. 15). In order to retain the working categories of “text” and “body” that Salvato employs and that I operationalise here, these terms must be redefined: the “text” is a written and sonic archive carrying coded sexual ambiguities (Stoneley 2007; Poznansky 1991). The distinction between reading and performance, applied to Bourne's *Swan Lake*, becomes fundamental, since there is no spoken text to be supplemented by the body. The body itself is the medium through which Bourne operates onstage, by way of the dancers who perform. The “excavation” of the queer subtext from the libretto of the classical ballet, therefore, takes place not through critical interpretation but through the body. Matthew Bourne does not “read *Swan Lake* queerly”; he carries out an *uncloseting* through male bodies in feathered trousers.

Ballet may be understood, as a system of repetitions of gender norms (Stoneley 2007, drawing on Butler); this is achieved through the tutu, *pas de deux*, the geometry of bodies, fixed roles, and a specific choreographic design (e.g., diagonals, centre stage, lines, circles). Classical ballet productions, from their premiere to the present day, are largely

revived with their original conventions intact, such that the bodily configurations produce the same order, a scenic mechanism by which a spurious “naturalness” is created:

Ballet manifests this idea that identity is performative, or that it is achieved in time. The work of the dancer at the barre, day after day, over the years, is an obvious example of Butler’s “stylized repetition of acts.” (Stoneley 2007, p. 39)

Butler argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, p. 519). The repetitions, from exercises at the *barre* to each performance, construct the “naturalness” of gender and fix relations between the sexes. Gender does not express an interior essence; it produces one, as an effect of repetition rather than its cause. In Butler’s terms, if gender is instituted through discontinuous acts, then “the appearance of substance” is a construction, hence a performance in which both performers and audience come to believe (Butler 1988, p. 520).

To this theory of repetition, Butler adds a punitive dimension that bears directly on Bourne’s production. Those who do not perform their gender “correctly” are sanctioned:

As a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. (Butler 1988, p. 522)

This is precisely what occurs in the case of Prince Siegfried, who is sanctioned systematically—by the Queen-Mother, by the royal court, by social convention—for his incapacity to perform the masculinity and heterosexuality expected of him.

In order to step outside the “repetition” Butler describes—that is, to open the possibility of transformation—what is required is “a different sort of repeating” (Butler 1988, p. 520). This is exactly Bourne’s mode of operation: he preserves the structure of the ballet but alters the bodies (the female swans become male) and the choreographic vocabulary. This intervention supports Drummond’s argument that the production is not a “gay” representation but a “queer” one, since Bourne does not fix an explicit homosexual identity but destabilises the fixed categories of sex, gender, and desire (Drummond 2003). Within the present analysis, Bourne does not invent a new meaning but repeats a latent meaning differently, and, following Butler’s logic, this repetition can never be a neutral retrieval of what had been hidden. Repetition is never identical to the original; through the very gesture of repeating differently, it produces something that did not exist before. The queer subtext of classical ballet existed as latency (Stoneley 2007), but it becomes an active archive only through the performative reproduction Bourne enacts upon it.

Bourne’s *Swan Lake* opens with a dream that turns into a nightmare, and this opening situates the analysis within a psychoanalytic register from the outset. For Freud, the dream is defined as “an excitation which disturbs sleep” (Freud [1900] 1953, SE IV, p. 234), while the nightmare “is often the undisguised fulfilment of a wish—but a wish which, far from being welcome, has been repressed and rejected” (Freud [1900] 1953, SE IV, p. 580). The manifest content of the Prince’s dream is the Swan (already male), who figures a desire that cannot be expressed within the social reality of the court. The narrative arc of the production unfolds precisely along the logic the dream proposes: Siegfried dreams of what he cannot live, that is, an unassumed desire repressed by social norms and by the Queen-Mother. This psychoanalytic mechanism reveals that the repressed desire (a desire that can be neither expressed nor abandoned) does not remain confined to a nightmare; it settles into a state of melancholia that traverses the entire production.

The concept of mourning continues to position the analysis within the psychoanalytic paradigm. Particularly relevant here are the concepts of *mourning* and *melancholia* as applied

to the Prince. For Freud, mourning is the normal reaction to the loss of a loved object: the subject knows what has been lost and is able to process the loss. Melancholia, by contrast, sets in when the loss is withdrawn from consciousness: the subject suffers but cannot name what has been lost. Freud formulates this distinction as follows: “[H]e knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him” (Freud [1917] 1957, p. 245). The consequence is that “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud [1917] 1957, p. 246). This formulation describes precisely the condition of the Prince in Bourne’s production: he “knows” that something is wrong but cannot articulate the object, since neither his society nor his social position permits his homosexual desire to be named. In the imperial context within which the action takes place, namely the late-imperial Russia of Tchaikovsky’s lifetime, with its censorship and aesthetic conventions, that desire is, moreover, not consciously available, and the loss of the love-object cannot therefore be processed through normal mourning. Through this sequence, the Prince cannot complete the work of mourning, and the result is melancholia—a diffuse state without an apparent object—that becomes the engine of the entire action.

Stoneley confirms this reading—not at the level of theory but at the level of biography and culture—by speaking of Tchaikovsky’s melancholia in similar terms: “[H]e viewed his own personal life with a sense of fatedness, in which his dreams of happiness would always prove to be impossible” (Stoneley 2007, p. 56). Stoneley further relates this biographical fact to the symbolism of the swans, which, he notes “have more generally been used to signify loss and melancholy” (Stoneley 2007, p. 62). Thus, the Prince’s melancholia can be seen not merely as a narrative theme but as the symptom of a structural condition: that of the homosexual within a society that forbids him to articulate his desire.

The third analytical instrument is C. G. Jung’s concept of the *archetype*, mobilised here to anchor the figure of the swan symbolically and semiotically. In his analyses, Jung demonstrates that the unconscious manifests itself not through rational thought but through symbolic images in dreams (Jung et al. 2017, p. 21). The swan is an example of this: “an immaculate bird whose whiteness, strength, and grace constitute a living epiphany of light,” in Chevalier and Gheerbrant’s formulation (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2009, p. 313). In Bourne’s production, however, the swan is figured both as a solar, masculine swan and as a lunar, feminine one. This duality connects with Jung’s concept of the *anima*, that feminine element present within every man (Jung et al. 2017, pp. 33–34). Furthermore, while in Jung we find the symbolic grid of duality, in Stoneley’s account the swan acquires a *queer* valence. For him, the swan is a symbol “peculiarly appropriate to queerness and to ballet,” with its phallic connotations and paradoxical beauty (Stoneley 2007, pp. 61–62).

Through Jung and Stoneley together, then, the swan can be seen not merely as an archetype of the masculine–feminine binomial but as a figure of sublimated *queer* desire. This is what informs Bourne’s construction of the entire narrative and his reconceptualization of the symbol through exclusively male bodies.

3. Historical Context: Sublimated Sexuality, Narrative Conventions, and the Feminine Archetype

To understand what exactly Bourne “excavates” from the libretto’s subtext, a brief contextualisation of the composer’s life and of imperial ballet as a representational mechanism is necessary. In *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man*, Alexander Poznansky sets out to explore the composer’s inner life rather than his music. Such a study constitutes an archival enterprise, and Poznansky’s work becomes especially relevant for the present analysis when he writes: “Tchaikovsky’s lifelong homosexuality is a matter of record. It was acknowledged in print as early as 1934 by Soviet scholars with access to the Tchaikovsky archives at Klin” (Poznansky 1991, p. 36).

Poznansky's study shows how Tchaikovsky navigated constantly between the pressure of social convention and his own nature, documenting the manner in which the composer internalised and performed his social role. The study traces how the composer entertained the idea of "reorienting" himself toward women, but with a double role, masking his real desire and engaging in self-deception. These attempts to remain within heteronormative parameters culminated in 1877, the year in which Tchaikovsky marries, and the year in which he composes *Swan Lake*, a ballet about an impossible love:

I should like by my marriage or, in general, an open affair with a woman to shut the mouths of various contemptible creatures whose opinion I do not value in the least but who can cause pain to the people close to me. (Poznansky 1991, p. 185)

Drummond likewise notes directly that the music was composed by Tchaikovsky, "himself a homosexual" (Drummond 2003, p. 238), and Stoneley confirms a wider context when he speaks of a homosexual milieu in imperial Russia that was "a necessarily secret world" (Stoneley 2007, p. 52).

The composer's interiority is transposed into his music for *Swan Lake*. As Poznansky observes: "The most striking quality of its music is a painful longing for an ideal never satisfied" (Poznansky 1991, p. 173). This quality does not amount to a neutral Romantic topos; it bears the imprint of a concrete personal experience marked by the impossibility of homosexual happiness within an imperial context.

The impossibility of articulating that desire publicly—what, in the Freudian terms discussed earlier, produces melancholia—finds in music a paradoxical space of expression: a space in which emotion can be lived without being named. Stoneley, citing Brett, observes that musical forms attract precisely those who struggle to express their feelings in everyday life, since musical emotion is "unspecified and unattached" (Stoneley 2007, pp. 59–60). Tchaikovsky's music thereby becomes a space of sublimation: an expression of a desire that cannot be spoken publicly but that can be intimated through music.

These observations point to a tension that is reflected not only in Tchaikovsky's music but also in the narrative structure of the libretto, where love is always impossible and the ending tragic. Such a tragic ending was not always the case, however. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Soviet-era productions rejected it for ideological reasons, replacing the lovers' death with the triumph of good over evil (Ezrahi 2012, p. 114). The structure Bourne inherits is that of the original 1877/1895 libretto. The sense of "impossibility" is pronounced in Bourne's *Swan Lake*, and the present analysis proposes a reading in which the choreographer brings to the surface a problematic of those who are excluded, in a gesture of aesthetic outing applied to the archive.

Tchaikovsky's emotional life is reflected not only in his music, but also in the narrative structure he gives the ballet. Wiley notes that the libretto of the classical version of *Swan Lake* had no single author but was rather an aggregate of Romantic balletic conventions—fairy tales, legends, and recurring motifs. "The story was put together from balletic conventions and thus, strictly speaking, had no author" (Wiley 1985, p. 34). The story of *Giselle* was already well known at the time, so the characters and situations of *Swan Lake* are variants of pre-existing types. Prince Siegfried is a variant of Albrecht from *Giselle*, while the swans are variants of the *wilis* or the *sylphides*, as Wiley notes (Wiley 1985, p. 34).

For Tchaikovsky, however, this kind of plot becomes an obsession: an impossible love between an immortal woman and a mortal man, ending invariably in tragedy. Wiley has noted that the composer wrote three large theatre works on this same theme between 1869 and 1873, concluding that it is "possible that he perceived in *Swan Lake* a vehicle more satisfactory than the others to present this kind of love story, which he seemed to find so attractive" (Wiley 1985, p. 36).

The version of *Swan Lake* that has come down to us is not the one Tchaikovsky composed in 1877. The 1895 production (Petipa–Ivanov choreography, with libretto rewritten by Modest Tchaikovsky) transformed the ballet fundamentally, especially through its ending:

Modeste made his most significant changes in Act IV. Siegfried becomes an innocent victim of trickery rather than Odette’s murderer, as he had been in 1877. [...] He and Odette are united in death. (Wiley 1985, pp. 248–49)

In the rewriting of this ending, an important phenomenon takes place: the violence is attenuated and tragedy becomes a form of Romantic sacrifice. Yet the Petipa–Ivanov–Modest version itself was modified over time by various editors and grew progressively more “domesticated.” There were, accordingly, several layers of revision that “tamed” the original text (Wiley 1985, p. 249).

All these modifications produced a narrative grounded in conventional heteronormative logic: a man and a woman love one another, their love becomes impossible because of an external curse (the sorcerer), and the resolution is death together. The 1895 version concealed even further the “fissures” Tchaikovsky had inscribed in the original text, which had been more ambiguous and more violent, making it more appropriate for the imperial court. And it is precisely these fissures, covered by successive layers of revision, that Bourne’s production will reopen with its 1995 staging.

This analysis would not be complete without a brief mention of the manner in which nineteenth-century Romantic ballet constructed the image of the swan onstage. During this period, the female body was subjected to an aesthetics of etherealization. The ballerina did not represent a real woman but an ideal: a spirit, a sylphide. The conventional Romantic ballet was codified as the *ballet blanc*, the ‘white act’ of etherealised femininity. This is the case with *Giselle*, who becomes a *Wili*, and with *La Sylphide*, where we encounter a creature of the air. In terms of stage representation, the body is disciplined, elongated, lifted from the ground onto the points (*pointe*), and thereby unburdened of its weight.

The swan inscribes itself into the same pattern. The character Odette is a cursed princess, but the principle remains the same: an etherealised feminine ideal. Wiley speaks of the swans as “variants of *wilis* and *sylphides*” (Wiley 1985, p. 34)—which is to say, inscribed within the same genealogy of unreal femininity. Stoneley adds a further dimension: “The paradoxical beauty of the swan is largely to do with the fact that it has too much line. With its long neck, it verges on the grotesque” (Stoneley 2007, pp. 61–62). Stoneley’s observation supplements the archetypal dimension discussed earlier (Jung) with an anchor in the concrete stage conventions of Romantic ballet: the swan is paradoxical not only as a symbol but as a body onstage. Its grace borders on the grotesque through an excess of line. The archetype of the swan as disciplined, etherealised femininity is the one Bourne deconstructs by replacing female bodies with male ones, visceral and animal.

4. Matthew Bourne and the Excavation of the Queer Subtext: Body, Gender, and Desire in *Swan Lake*

This analysis of Matthew Bourne’s stage version of *Swan Lake* is not merely a reading of the production as an autonomous entity but as an instrument of *uncloseting*. What in the classical version may be a supposition, may seem absent, or may operate as subtext, becomes articulated in Bourne’s proposal. Through this gesture, he brings to the surface a *queer* subtext that was already present in the archive of the ballet—or, in Ricoeur’s terms, gives voice to a history that must not be forgotten (Ricoeur 2004). I return here to Stoneley’s claim that there exists a connection between homosexuality and ballet that has been simultaneously “common knowledge” and “hushed up.” With the theoretical instruments now in place, the four axes that follow trace this excavation concretely; at each

point, Bourne does not introduce meaning from without but renders operative what the archive already held.

Bourne does not stage a new version of the ballet but rewrites the narrative, retaining both the sequence of action and the form of the four acts. He refunctionalises the story dramaturgically through sharply drawn characters who are no longer carriers of a purely technical vocabulary but are politically charged. His gesture is not one of bringing in something new from the outside; rather, it amplifies and renders visible what was already encoded in Tchaikovsky's music (melancholia, unsatisfied desire—Poznansky), in the structure of the libretto (impossible love, the tragic ending—Wiley), and in the conventions of ballet (the queer connection—Stoneley). Each scene analysed below operates accordingly in this double sense: as a stage moment and as a point at which the archive of classical ballet is opened and reread.

4.1. *The Queen-Mother and the Repressive Super-Ego*

In Bourne's production, the maternal figure becomes an instrument of control and of the social norm through the duties she imposes upon her son. Royal and social obligations, presence at receptions (incomprehensible to a child), initiate the work of repression. Although the Prince longs for a normal childhood, what he receives are norms within which he must inscribe himself, whether or not he wishes to. Freudian psychoanalytic theory holds that the function of the ego consists in the simultaneous satisfaction of the id, the super-ego, and reality (Freud [1900] 1953, p. 116). This compels the Prince to seek a reconciliation between his own desires and the demands placed on him by his mother. Choreographically, this is rendered through a *pas de deux* between mother and son, a relation that reflects the Prince's need for attention and affection that he does not receive, culminating in his rejection by her. This repressive maternal figure is not Bourne's invention: in the classical libretto, the Queen already demands marriage and dictates the Prince's behaviour (Wiley 1985). Bourne amplifies this aspect, transforming the Queen from a narrative convention into a stage instrument of the Super-Ego.

In the wake of this rejection—after the Prince attempts to conform and chooses a girlfriend of his own—his mother rejects her too. The young woman's social class, together with her superficial manner, provoke the mother's dismissal. At the same time, beneath this pretext, what is at stake is the mother's fear that her authority over her son will be undermined. This episode also recalls Tchaikovsky's marriage, discussed earlier.

The pressure on Siegfried reaches a level that destabilises the parameters of his ordinary emotions. As Vida Midgelow puts it:

The representation of the Prince [...] is the antithesis of the male heroic figure. While the narrative is told from his perspective and is focused around his experiences, his presence on stage is often hesitant and overshadowed by his mother, the Swan and the stranger. As if swept by the unfolding events, the Prince fails to understand the behaviour of those around him and is unable to control or understand his own emotion. (Midgelow 2007, p. 54)

This observation ties back to the punitive dimension of Butler's theory and to the circularity of gender performativity discussed earlier.

A third moment in which the Oedipal tension reaches a climax occurs in Act III, in the ballroom scene. Here the Stranger appears, the equivalent of Odile in the classical version, who courts the Queen. Midgelow describes him as follows: "The Stranger is a mysterious figure, clad in black leather, with whom all the women, including the Queen, are enchanted. The Stranger taunts the Prince who, in his turmoil, seizes a gun" (Midgelow 2007, p. 53). In the *pas de deux* between the Stranger and the Queen, the *fouettés* of the classical version are replaced by a sequence of supported turns: where Odile executes her

spins alone, here the Queen cannot sustain them without the Stranger, who partners her through the pirouettes as the two together trace a semicircle across the stage. This shift from solo virtuosity to dependence on the partner's support intensifies the Oedipal relation between mother and son.

One figure has so far remained at the margin of this reading: von Rothbart, the sorcerer-antagonist of the classical libretto, the one who casts the curse upon Odette and who, by passing off his daughter Odile as Odette, deceives Siegfried into pledging his love to the wrong woman. His apparent absence from Bourne's production is not, however, a simple omission but an effect of structure: von Rothbart's dramaturgical function does not disappear but is redistributed across three distinct vectors, none of which is any longer an external sorcerer. That the antagonist function should persist at all is consistent with the choreographer's own sense of dramatic structure, which Bourne describes as habitually built around a couple joined by desire, comic figures, and an antagonist (Bourne and Macaulay 2011, chap. 8). The first is the Stranger, who appears in Act III performed by the same dancer as the Swan, the dangerous double of the desired object, the seductive and predatory face of desire, who places everyone, including the Queen, under a troubling spell. The second is the Private Secretary, the social and repressive face of the same function, the agency of surveillance and manipulation. He too becomes, in the ballroom scene, the agent of lethal violence: at the moment when the Prince draws a gun and turns it on the Queen, it is the Secretary who fires first, and in the ensuing confusion it is the Girlfriend who falls dead; later, he presides over the treatments to which the Prince is subjected. The third vector, and the most disquieting, is the flock itself: the community of swans that, far from protecting the Swan, ends by attacking and destroying him as the Prince looks on in horror. The interdiction that keeps the fulfilment of queer desire perpetually suspended thus no longer issues from a single external source but proves at once social and internal to desire: it is exercised both from without, through the Secretary's repressive apparatus, and from within, through the threatening double of the beloved and through the self-destruction of the community itself.

4.2. *The Prince's Melancholia as Queer Symptom*

The production at Sadler's Wells opens with a dream that places the spectator within a psychoanalytic register from the very first scene, by way of the Prince's dream-nightmare. From this nucleus follow all the interrogations and deconstructions that direct us to read the production from a psychoanalytic angle. The first tableau presents a son in a crisis of (sexual) identity—of desires that are at once latent and conscious—and outlines a psyche that is fragile and misunderstood, all the more so as the body's movements are jagged, chaotic, and violent, marking the scene as a nightmare. The manifest content of the dream presents a male swan, in the background, who moves from a wide and elegant motion into a disordered and chaos-laden one. The swan that appears in the dream is, in psychoanalytic terms, an unmanifested, repressed desire. The nightmare, accordingly, is not merely a stage device of Bourne's invention; it activates what Tchaikovsky had already encoded musically and what Poznansky identified as the desire that is never satisfied (Poznansky 1991, p. 173).

Once she enters his bedroom, the mother attaches no importance to her son's fright; on the contrary, she rejects him. The dream's latent ideas remain unspoken, yet they exist within the child's unconscious, indicating an apparently insignificant event that is overlooked and dismissed by all those who surround the young Prince, the mother in particular. The gesture of dismissing the dream and the mother's indifference to its content become significant at the level of interpretation: the Prince's desire is rejected not only as content but as existence itself. He is not even permitted to name what he has dreamt,

and this binds itself, at the level of theory, to the mechanism of Freudian melancholia: the subject cannot name what has been lost.

Faced with such a situation, and through an accumulation of small additional actions, Siegfried searches for a way out of the palace. In his attempt to obtain a life free of obligations, the Prince arrives at the Swank Bar. Beyond the attempt to obtain a so-called “ordinary” life, this moment marks a cultural shift toward a 1970s–1980s aesthetic, with brief rock’n’roll insertions, sequinned costumes, and illusions to decadent life, all set to Tchaikovsky’s score. The entire scene ends in failure: the Prince does not find the fulfilment of his desire here either. Despair and anguish issue in a brief solo that figures his suffering and his longing for the “dream.” The bar’s logo is a swan, which in the end turns out to be a video projection; the bird begins to fly, drawing the Prince toward the park, where he encounters the Swan again. This is also a space of coded homosexual desire, as Stoneley notes, referring to parks as sites of homosexual encounter from the eighteenth century onwards (Stoneley 2007, p. 49). This setting is not incidental: the Swan leads the Prince toward a space which, in cultural history, is associated precisely with hidden queer visibility.

The dismissed dream, the rejected desire, the failure at the Swank Bar, the loneliness: these are the elements that build the concept of melancholia in a Freudian sense. The Prince is not simply sad; he suffers because he cannot articulate or name the object of his loss. Melancholia, accordingly, is not Bourne’s invention; it is encoded in Tchaikovsky’s music.

4.3. *The Deconstruction of the Swan Archetype: Male Bodies, Animality, and Eroticism*

Act II delivers the most powerful visual impact of the production, since the swans are danced by men. This element retains its double valence: a radical artistic gesture by Bourne, but also the activation of what Stoneley had already identified—the swan as a symbol “peculiarly appropriate to queerness” (Stoneley 2007, p. 61). The element that aesthetically defines this production is a swan danced by a male performer and a corps de ballet composed exclusively of men. Male dancers had appeared as swans before—most visibly in the all-male, *en travesti* parodies that Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo had staged since the 1970s (Juhász 2008)—but Bourne’s gesture differs in kind. Where the Trockadero plays the swan for comedy, his production re-genders it in earnest, as a serious erotic and dramatic figure. This act is dedicated, among other things, to movement, and to the manner in which Bourne uses male bodies to render both the grace of swans and their violence and ferocity. The entire act oscillates between hard, expansive movements punctuated by leaps and movements that signal fragility, and sustained *adagios* danced by each performer, simultaneously figuring love and delicacy.

In Act II, what changes is not only the bodies but the choreographic vocabulary itself, since Bourne does not use the classical idiom but contorts it. As Susan Leigh Foster observes:

these swans do not perform ballet, nor do they execute the well-known choreography of Act II [...] The swan’s vocabulary contorts classical ballet stipulations for bodily geometry. Hips raise with legs; torsos duck and undulate; legs rotate inward and frequently extend at 45-degree angles to side front or side back. Where the ballet vocabulary constantly presses up and away from gravity, in order to inhabit the aerial, the swans give into gravity, then surge up out of its depths on curving pathways reminiscent of the modern dance choreographer Doris Humphrey’s fall and rebound. (Foster 2001, p. 191)

The aesthetic shift Bourne introduces, together with the modification of the choreographic vocabulary, performs precisely what was discussed in the previous section in relation to Butler. Bourne preserves the structure (the music, the acts, the narrative) but

alters the bodies and the movement, producing “a different sort of repeating” (Butler 1988, p. 520).

The representation and function of Odette no longer correspond to those of a cursed princess; rather, the Swan becomes an alter ego of Prince Siegfried. At the level of choreographic language and vocabulary, the Swan-Odette likewise becomes an alter ego of classical dance. Bourne provides the role with the possibility of another performative score, one which the character did not possess in the classical version, since the movements of the Swan-Odette interpreter glide between firmness and fragility. As Middelton notes:

The strength of the Swan does not allow the timidity and panic that Odette feels, neither does this Swan offer an explanation for his swan-man existence. Yet, both this Swan and the rest of the male swans retain the “Otherness” of their predecessors, but claim territories that the conventional Odette is never allowed to occupy. (Middelton 2007, p. 53)

Semiotically, the swans in the production are white but bear a black mark on their foreheads. This mark condenses into a single figure the two swans of the classical ballet—the white Odette and the black Odile, innocence and seduction—which the nineteenth-century work distributes across two female roles. The androgyny, however, arises not from the mark itself but from the male body that performs this feminine swan-figure: it is the masculine body bearing the feminine archetype that produces the androgynous sign. Through Jung, this returns us to the archetypal duality noted earlier, in which the solar/masculine and the lunar/feminine coexist within a single body.

Beyond aesthetics, the substitution of female bodies with male ones is also political: as Middelton argues, “the strategy of cross-casting the swans significantly shifts the reading of the ballet and has the potential to challenge heterosexist frameworks” (Middelton 2007, p. 57). In the same vein, she observes:

This reworking can be seen as a gay love story. While Bourne and others have repeatedly played down the homosexual implication of this cross-casting, the swapping of gender roles is a substantial alteration of the canonical ballet, and it brings to the fore the previously restricted images of gender and sexuality presented on the ballet stage. (Middelton 2007, p. 53)

The point I wish to underline here is that Bourne does not add homoeroticism from outside, since in classical ballet the female body was already a site of controlled male desire and the swan was already “too much line” (Stoneley 2007, pp. 61–62). Bourne, by contrast, alters the register and renders explicit what had been encoded.

4.4. The Prince–Stranger/Swan Relationship: Desire, the Double, and the Negotiation with the Audience

Also in Act II, Bourne constructs the narrative moment in which the relationship between Siegfried and the Swan takes shape as an erotic one. The encounter between the two figures occurs in the park, a space which (as Stoneley notes) has been historically associated with coded homosexual visibility (Stoneley 2007, p. 49). The subject of eroticism is divested of taboo and preconception. What becomes fundamental at this point are the duets between the Prince and the Swan, a “debate” between the natural and the human, problematising, in fact, the natures of eroticism and their facticity. Fascinated by the dance that operates almost as an aphrodisiac, the Prince inevitably falls in love with the Swan; no less inevitable is the drama that will follow from its non-fulfilment.

Visually, the duet enacts this debate as much as it states it, and the choreography is built as a crescendo. At first, the Prince and the Swan are placed at a distance and at different angles of the stage. Each movement, however, draws them closer to one another,

and the first touches occur with a certain fragility, at the threshold between approach and recoil. Gradually, the connection consolidates: the Swan's leaps come to be supported by the Prince's hands, and from the midpoint of the duet the elongated lines of the Swan's arms, in *allongé*, catch, almost seize, the Prince's torso through expansive gestures. The climax arrives through a passing of movement from one dancer to the other and through the merging of the two into a single set of synchronised movements, until the Swan takes the Prince into his arms. The duet as a whole thus constitutes a ritual of discovery and of the articulation of desire: the Prince does not merely feel the attraction toward the Swan but also gives it utterance, choreographically, through this exchange.

The Prince–Swan relationship is not merely a love relationship; it also acquires the function of a relation of projection, since, on the psychological plane, the Swan is what the Prince cannot be. The Prince's ego becomes the Swan, and the Swan becomes the Prince's ego. The sense of freedom is reached precisely here, in the dance between the Prince and the Swan, a point reflected in the official presentation of the production, which describes the Swan as representing “everything that the Prince is not—powerful, masculine and free” (New Adventures 2024). The narrative duality of the Swan/Stranger functions as an object of desire: the Prince longs for what the Swan *is*, not merely for what the Swan can offer him. The choreographer's own testimony supports this reading without dictating it. Asked by Alastair Macaulay to what degree his productions turn on sexual longing, which the critic locates, among other instances, in the Prince's feeling for the Swan, Bourne replies that he regards such desire as “the basis of a good story” (Bourne and Macaulay 2011, chap. 8). This statement returns us to the concept of Freudian melancholia, in which the lost object is not a person but a possibility of being.

Bourne's artistic—and, to a certain extent, discursive—gesture is paradoxical: he brings homosexual desire onstage, but he shows it as still impossible, since the natures of the Prince and the Swan (man versus animal) cannot merge. At first sight, what is at stake is the love between two men, with one of them figured as a swan in pursuit of an ideal love. Through this construction, Bourne interrogates the patriarchal myth, but not fully, since the Swan remains hard to win.

The artistic gesture inscribes itself within the same process of the double, artistic and archival, since the structure of the classical libretto, described by Wiley as an impossible love between an immortal woman and a mortal man (Wiley 1985, p. 36), continues in Bourne's version, though in altered terms. He preserves the impossibility but shifts its valences: the difference is no longer between mortal and immortal, but between desire and social norm.

At the level of representation, this impossibility is built into the ending of the production. Bourne's dramaturgy does not abandon that of classical dance, and the ending captures perhaps the most tragic image of the production—or the one richest in symbols: a dead son, an abandoned mother, but in the second plane a liberation of the Prince found in the arms of the Swan, as in a Pietà arranged on an almost perfect axis, such that the Swan assumes the maternal function. As Midgelow notes:

Rather than performing a radical critique, Bourne enacts and exposes the interdependency of homosexuality on the normative codes that *Swan Lake* represents. His closeted representation of homosexuality serves to mark and ensure the construction of heterosexuality. This is reinforced by presence of femininity in spite of, or perhaps because of, Bourne's efforts to rid *Swan Lake* of the ballerina. (Midgelow 2007, pp. 57–58)

Or, as Drummond emphasises, Bourne does not fix an explicit homosexual identity but destabilises gender categories: the *uncloseting* is real, yet incomplete, since, although desire is brought to the surface, it is not resolved, and the tragic dimension is preserved.

Bourne, then, has taken premises from the classical libretto and refunctionalised them in a homoerotic key, deconstructing thereby the universe of classical ballet: the mother–son relationship, the comprehension of one’s own identity and sexuality, and the relation between individual and society. Moreover, the tragic ending and the gesture of an *uncloseting* that remains incomplete—since desire is brought to the surface but condemned—make Bourne’s production not merely a work of art but a “rear-view mirror” of the nineteenth century. Bourne not only excavates the archive, he shows us why it remained closed for so long.

5. Swan Lake as a ‘Rear-View Mirror’ of the Nineteenth Century

What does “rear-view mirror” mean in the case of this production? The metaphor draws on the concrete use of such a mirror: while the gaze is directed forward, the mirror—placed laterally or in front—offers a perspective on what lies behind. Matthew Bourne’s production functions precisely within these physical parameters. It operates as a mirror that projects back to the spectator the image of the nineteenth century, but from the perspective of the present. The production does not reconstitute the past; it rereads it with instruments the nineteenth century did not have at its disposal: queer theory, psychoanalysis, gender studies. The difference at stake, posed at the outset, is between retrospectively reading a subtext and reactivating a pre-existing latency. Bourne does the latter, drawing the meaning out from within the period’s own imagery rather than imposing it from without.

Bourne’s production retains the imagery of its mid-twentieth-century setting through elements such as the royal court, the ballroom, the costumes, and the social hierarchy—elements that are not decorative but functional, since they recreate the context and provide the frame within which a queer subtext, simultaneously present and censored, can be performed. The scenography and stage design are not modernised in any exaggerated manner; they retain a measured tone, so that the queer subtext appears as already present, in that very context. Bourne does not invent a world; he renders it visible when the entire action of Act II unfolds in the park, and the park accordingly takes on the dimension of a coded homosexual subculture: the “necessarily secret” world (Stoneley 2007, p. 52). Poznansky himself shows that there existed a coded queer language. The Petrolina letters between Tchaikovsky and his brother Modest provide direct evidence of this, with both letters signed “Petrolina,” and Modest addressed in the first letter as “young Tchaichilcha” and in the second as “amiable Modestina” and “dear sister” (Poznansky 1991, p. 141).

At the same time, Poznansky observes that Tchaikovsky was integrated into homosexual circles, but that “his available correspondence contains unmistakable hints of such activities, though little can be established with certainty, owing to the multiple layers of censorship to which the published texts have been subjected” (Poznansky 1991, p. 60). Tchaikovsky himself anticipated, with sadness, that someone “will try to penetrate the intimate world of my feelings and thoughts, everything that all my life I have so carefully hidden from the touch of the crowd” (Poznansky 1991, p. xi). Tchaikovsky’s intuition proves correct: Bourne enters his emotional universe, but not through a textual archive, rather through stage and body.

Bourne’s production does not work with documents but with emotions, with bodies, and with gestures, and the archive it opens is not one of textuality but of affectivity. This distinction corresponds to the one Diana Taylor draws between the *archive*—the enduring materials of documents and texts—and the *repertoire*, the embodied transmission of cultural memory through gesture, dance, and performance. Bourne’s production operates in the register of the repertoire (Taylor 2003, p. 19). Affectivity here is composed of melancholia,

repressed desire, and the impossibility of love. The entire emotional trajectory is sustained by Tchaikovsky's music, since musical emotion is "unspecified and unattached" (Stoneley 2007, pp. 59–60). To this affective universe Bourne gives emotion a corporeal form, thereby rendering it visible.

5.1. *The Impossibility of Queer Love and the Tragic Ending*

The ending of the production is the point at which the classical version and Bourne's version diverge most sharply. In 1877, Siegfried kills Odette; in 1895, Modest provides a new version in which the two are reunited in death, the tragedy redeemed through Romantic sacrifice, and the conventions softening the violence. In Bourne's version, the tragedy is not redemptive. The Prince dies, but not as Romantic sacrifice; rather, as the effect of repression.

In Bourne's choreographic conception, the tragic dimension is no longer the convention of a fairy tale; it becomes the effect of social and visual norms. The tragic ending of the production reflects the tragic ending of homosexual life within an imperial context. Moreover, the tragedy does not arise from the curse of a sorcerer but from the social structure that forbids desire and that determines the individual's incapacity to articulate his own suffering.

5.2. *Performance as a Method of Historiographical Research*

Continuing from the analysis already developed, I want to underline that, through this staging, Bourne's production functions as a historiographical instrument: the body onstage becomes a medium of investigation, and the stage a laboratory of memory. In general terms, historiography works with texts and documents, but Bourne's production works with bodies, gestures, and emotions. He does not describe a past; he performs it, and through this mechanism he renders it accessible in a way that text cannot. Or, in Ricoeur's terms, he gives voice to a history that must not be forgotten (Ricoeur 2004).

Ricoeur's perspective resonates with Rebecca Schneider's argument, though in a sense closer to performance studies. In *Performing Remains* (2011), Schneider argues that a performance does not disappear, but *remains* as "residue" (Schneider 2011, p. 100). Through this "carnal residue"—that is, through body-to-body transmission—affect and reactivation are conveyed. In the context of the present analysis, Bourne's dancers do not *represent* classical ballet; they make it persist through their own corporeality. For Schneider, performance does not disappear at its end, in opposition to the thesis advanced by Peggy Phelan (Phelan 1993); furthermore, its time does not collapse but rather *syncopates*. Extended to Bourne, the male swans onstage do not refer back to the year of the premiere (1895); they reactivate it in the present.

Matthew Bourne's production is not a process of *uncloseting* in the sense Salvato proposes (the staging of a text and the rendering visible of its queer dimensions); it becomes a *historiographical uncloseting*, by virtue of which the reactivation of bodies allows the queer archive of the nineteenth century to remain, through transmission, in the present.

Through this entire artistic gesture, Bourne metamorphoses *Swan Lake* from a canonical work into an open archive. The production is not merely an aesthetic refunctionalisation but an act of *historiographical uncloseting*: it brings to the surface what conventions have hidden, what the body has repressed, and what the music has encoded.

6. Conclusions

I began this analysis with the question: what is the difference between retrospectively reading the queer subtext of classical ballet and deliberately activating that pre-existing latency? The article has demonstrated that Matthew Bourne's production activates precisely

such latency. It excavates a subtext encoded in Tchaikovsky's music (Poznansky), in the structure of the libretto (Wiley), and in the conventions of ballet (Stoneley)—rather than imposing a meaning on it from without.

The analysis contributes to the scholarly literature on four specific points. The first is the reinterpretation of *Swan Lake* as a queer archive of the nineteenth century, not as a closed canonical work but as an open text in which the queer subtext is pre-existing and recoverable. The second is the reading of the Prince's melancholia not as a Romantic topos but as a Freudian symptom of a structural condition: the condition of the homosexual within a society that forbids him to articulate his desire. The third is the articulation of Bourne's production as a historiographical instrument: the "rear-view mirror" that rereads the past through body and stage rather than through text and document; in other words, the concept of *historiographical uncloseting*. Fourth and finally, I argue that Bourne performs a "subversive repetition" (Butler 1988, p. 520) of classical ballet: he preserves the structure, alters the bodies, and thereby activates the latent.

The article has shown concretely how each element of the production functions as a gesture of *uncloseting*: the Queen-Mother, through whom Bourne amplifies the figure of the Queen from the classical libretto, transforming her from narrative convention into an explicitly repressive instance; the Prince's melancholia performatively activating on stage what Poznansky had already identified in the music—an unsatisfied desire that cannot be articulated; the male swans, through whom Bourne destabilises the stylised repetition of the gender norm (Butler 1988), rendering visible what Stoneley had termed the swan's connection "peculiarly appropriate to queerness" (Stoneley 2007, p. 61); the Prince-Swan/Stranger relationship, a male *pas de deux* that operates with a double valence, as erotic moment and as historiographical moment, bringing on stage a desire which, in the nineteenth century, was encoded in music and concealed in parks; and finally, the tragic ending of the production, with the Prince dying as the effect of social repression, not as a gesture of love and, more pointedly, as the absence of gestures of love.

The present research is positioned at the intersection of three fields and is relevant to each of them. With respect to dance studies, the article offers a methodology for a *queer* reading of the canonical repertoire. A classical ballet need not be read solely in the technical terms of choreography or aesthetics; it can also be interrogated as a carrier of subtexts of gender and sexuality. If Vida Midgelow opened this path through the concept of refunctionalisation, the present analysis takes that concept further by way of *uncloseting*. With respect to gender and queer studies, the article demonstrates that the affective archive of the nineteenth century is not lost but recoverable—not, however, through classical textual methods but through performance. In this case, the body onstage becomes the instrument by which an emotion encoded in music and repressed by convention can be brought to the surface: Stoneley identifies the textual archive, while the present study shows that Bourne *performs* it. Finally, for the history of visual culture, the article proposes an extension of the notion of "historical source." The ballet stage is not merely an aesthetic object: it is a medium of investigation, a place in which the images of the past are reactivated, reread, and re-signified. In this respect, the production functions as a "living visual source," in contrast to the fixed image (e.g., a painting or photograph). The three fields converge at the nodal point of *historiographical uncloseting*, which provides a bridge between queer theory, artistic practice, and historical research.

A case such as this one may constitute a lens through which other rewritings of the ballet canon can be analysed. The present analysis, for instance, has not addressed other reinterpretations, such as those by Angelin Preljocaj (see Senkevitch 2021; Şıman 2026) or Alexander Ekman (see Cayul Ibarra 2023). Equally, while this study works with the affective archive through dance, it does not explore what happens when an archive is

accessed through other media (film or painting). These remain open questions for future analyses. What does remain decisive, however, is that Bourne's production demonstrates that the past is never definitively closed and that the body onstage may be the key that opens archives the text alone cannot reach.

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