Martha Graham's House of the Pelvic Truth: The Figuration of Sexual Identities and Female Empowerment

Henrietta Bannerman

Martha Graham writes in her autobiography *Blood Memory* that she was bewildered, or, as she puts it "bemused," when she heard how dancers referred to her school as "the house of the pelvic truth" (Graham 1991, 211). We might perhaps agree with Graham that this is not the best description for a highly respected center of modern dance training; neither does it match Graham's image as an awe-inspiring and exacting teacher, nor does it suit the seriousness with which her tough technique is regarded. But the house of the pelvic truth does chime with stories about Graham's often frank method of addressing her students. She is reputed to have told one young woman *not* to come back to the studio until she had found herself a man. At other times she would tell her female students, "you are simply not moving your vagina" (211). Add to this other stories about the men in the company suffering from "vagina envy" (211), and it can be readily understood that the goings-on in the Graham studio gave rise to its nickname, "house of the pelvic truth."

In British dance circles of the 1960s, it was not rumors of the erotic that attracted most of us to Graham's work or persuaded us to travel to New York in search of the Graham technique. There was little in the way of contemporary dance training in Britain at this time, and we had been mesmerized by the beautiful and rather chaste film *A Dancer's World* (1957), in which Graham pronounces:

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> a dancer is not a phenomenon . . . not a phenomenal creature. . . . I think he is a divine normal. He does what the human body is capable of doing. Now this takes time . . . it takes about ten years of study. This does not mean he won't be dancing before that time, but it does take the pressure of time, so that the house of the body can hold its divine tenant, the spirit. (1962, 24)

These words represented the loftier ideals to which, as a young and aspiring dance student, I responded on my first contact with Graham's style. However, when I eventually saw the Martha Graham Company perform live at the Edinburgh Festival in 1963, I was bewildered, and indeed bemused, by what was happening on stage. So immersed was I in attempting to sort out the complications and complexities of dance dramas such as *Clytemnestra* (1958), that the poetic and inspiring words of *A Dancer's World* paled into insignificance. Neither did I notice whether or not the women were moving from their vaginas. Nevertheless, in the few Graham classes that were available in London in the early 1960s, I was introduced to the mystery of the contraction and discovered that as well as the floor exercises, many of the traveling movements were propelled from the pelvic region. I understood that the pubic bone is "the seed of the body" (G. Jackson 1982, 53), and that for Graham's female dancers the pelvic area of the body, vital for procreation and giving birth, houses the core of her movement.

According to Anna Kisselgoff, it was Graham herself who coined the phrase "house of the pelvic truth" since she used the metonym to describe the area deep in the pelvis from which the contraction "always originates" (qtd. in de Mille 1991, 98). This powerful movement has the capacity to generate energy along the spinal column and outward through the limbs to the extremities of hands, feet, neck, and head. Kisselgoff eloquently summarizes the visual effect of Graham's pelvic-centered movement when she explains that, "[w]hile [the contraction] often gives Graham's choreography an explicit sexual tension, the movement itself has broader metaphorical implications" (98). I shall return to these wider implications and to the signifying capacity of the contraction later in this article.

The principle of contraction and release was established during the earliest stages of Graham's career (Horosko 2002, 21–22). These were the years of the legendary all-female group, when the movement vocabulary was so austere and stark that there was little chance that Graham's dances could have been interpreted as either sexual or erotic. It was in the context of Graham's later works, which drew on an expanded movement vocabulary and sexually symbolic sculptures and props, that the pelvic movements came "close to the hip thrusts of intercourse" (Grant 2006).

Within the neutralized context of the dance studio, one aim of the contraction during the floor work is to sensitize the body for emotional expression—the acts of laughing, sobbing, anger, fear, but not necessarily sex. Progressing to the standing exercises and then to traveling phrases, the other major goal is to use the contraction to coil the internal forces into a tight spring so that the concentrated energy when released propels the body outwards into space. The ability to harness the physical strength to produce the contraction is representative of the overall technical demands that the Graham student faces in everyday practice. On the only occasion I remember Graham herself being present at a

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technique class in which I took part, she exhorted us to point our feet using our teacher Mary Hinkson's highly arched instep as the model of a foot sculpted to perfection. Having just escaped from the strictures of ballet and expecting to flex rather than to point my feet, this was an ironic reminder that, as with ballet, Graham technique demanded extreme articulation of each part of the body, including the instep. But then there was the diminutive Yuriko, who despite her small stature was a veritable tigress of a teacher with a body that produced the meanest of contractions. As we went through the strenuous Graham floor work, she constantly exhorted us to lift our "flesh off the floor"—an instruction that put us smartly in touch with the primordial, earthy aspect of Graham's dances.

The physiological manifestation of the contraction and release requires great muscular strength and coordination. The rib and diaphragm area must be lifted high from the hips and the stomach area squeezed tight against the backbone; the lower part of the spine has to be very elastic so that the pelvis is free to tilt under as it leads the hip bones forwards into the deep upper body curve of the contraction. Insufficient lift and too much tilt in the pelvis simply results in the body sagging and slumping.[1] This movement is a very profound physical and emotional experience, as Stuart Hodes recalls:

> From deep in my pelvis I drew my body into a concave arc from hips to head, relishing the sensation of deep muscles working and the surge of force into my bones that seemed to shoot out of my flexed hands and feet. *Release* straightened me like an uncoiling spring. (qtd. in Horosko 2002, 67)

Hodes's male perspective notwithstanding, it is a well-known fact that Graham built her famous technique and early repertory of dances on the female body—principally her own and those of her loyal band of women.[2]

The contraction as described above encloses the vagina and the womb. As I noted earlier, Graham scorned dancers with vaginal muscles too flaccid or insensitive to move their vaginas, and I mentioned a male dancer claiming to have "vagina envy," no doubt because he was unable to obey that particular female-centered instruction. Another factor to be considered vis-à-vis vagina envy is that women are often more flexible in the pelvis than men, and they generally suffer less pain in achieving the contraction. Vagina envy may have represented the male dancer's desire for the type of pelvic flexibility that lends itself best to Graham's style. The female orientation of the contraction raises the question, however, as to the extent to which Graham recast the masculine in terms of her choreography. If the pelvic movement is vaginal or "crotch-sprung," as Mark Ryder calls it (in de Mille 1991, 100), then for her male dancers she countered this feminization with what Tim Wengerd (1991) has described as the "Japanese-warrior" type of movements inspired by Graham's teacher, Ted Shawn, and that she reinvented, for example, for the role of Jason in *Cave of the Heart* (1946). Most often Graham allowed the men to create their own material on the grounds that they were "too different from women" to permit her to portray them accurately." Nevertheless, it was she who shaped the material "to suit her purposes" (Wengerd 1991, 52). Erick Hawkins has observed that Graham failed to create a convincing role for him as King Lear in *Eye of Anguish* (1950) because she "thought through a work using her psyche, her emotions" (qtd. in Horosko 2002, 55). Yet

from 1938 men figured successfully in Graham's dances in roles varying from the zealous preacher of *Appalachian Spring* (1943) and the god-like athletes of *Diversion of Angels* to the desirable Hippolytus of *Phaedra* (1964), the stepson who becomes the irrational object of Queen Phaedra's passion.

While the contraction within certain contexts of Graham's dances presents what Rose Lee Goldberg calls a "brute sexuality" (1994), as I noted earlier, Kisselgoff wrote of the way the movement conveys wider meaning. These broader themes, I suggest, embrace emotional truths associated with human relationships and, in particular, truths that spring from female experience. Moreover, since Graham concentrated on the affairs of women and on the female body as an expressive force, it is likely that her choreography generally, and the contraction specifically, are coded "emotional or sexual" by female audiences more than they are by the male viewer. Does this lead to Graham being described as a feminist? The British scholar Dee Reynolds explains that Graham "associated support for women's liberation with feelings of inferiority, and was insistent that she never wanted to be a 'women's liberationist'" (2002, 13). Graham's strength as a female performer was not allied to her social or political views but to her determination to discover and shape choreographic methods through which to express her identity as an independent and empowered artist.

When discussing Graham's representation of femaleness or femininity, issues concerning the social construction of gender have to be taken into consideration. It has long been understood in feminist scholarship that while one's sex is a biological given announced at, or even before, birth, the acquisition and performance of gender is inculcated through the socializing process. As Judith Butler explains, "whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed" (1990, 8). Under these conditions it becomes evident that the categories of woman, female, and femininity are variable and subject to transformation according to logistical location and changes through time (S. Jackson 1996, 62–63). In the late 1920s and early 1930s Graham redefined the boundaries of what could be thought of as feminine in dance. Rejecting the seductive and illusory as represented, for example, by the orientalism of Denishawn[3] or the weightlessness of ballet, she revealed the materiality of the body by accentuating effort, weight, and force. This is evident in the 1930 solo *Lamentation* (Ardolino 1976; Lockyer and Morris 1991), where the dancer is rooted to the very earth that appears to have molded her. Only the face, hands, and feet are visible in the jersey tube in which her body is encased, and the heavy make-up of the eyes and lips is the sole indication that this figure is gendered female.

In replacing conventional feminine allure with bold and robust women, Graham fostered a modern dance that was capable of keeping pace with the drive and dynamism of the American spirit. She wrote in 1930, for example, "[a]lthough she may not yet know it, America is cradling an art that is destined to be a ruler, in that its urge is masculine and creative rather than imitative" (Graham 1930, 249). In gendering modern dance masculine, Graham takes what might be considered a Freudian position. Freud claimed that women felt inferior because they lack a penis. He wrote in 1925, for example, "she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect, and, at least in holding that opinion, insists on being like a man" (2005, 407). Graham's mascu-

linization of her art and of herself as practitioner countered the weakness of a feminine super-ego, which for Freud rendered women "less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life" and left them too open to the sway of emotional affect (411). The masculinized stance that Graham took overrode the notion of female inferiority and set her on a path that would prevent her from assuming an artistically compliant role, a position that was to bring her into conflict with many of her future collaborators as well as in her romantic relationships. It is also clear that she was intent on repudiating the mimetic, which meant that she was resolutely modernist in rejecting past forms and opening up new territory for a contemporary art of American dance.

Graham's 1930s masculinized aesthetic was aligned with a modernism informed by "a celebration of maleness" (Childs 2000, 24), a perspective that pointed toward the androgyny of *Lamentation* and the sexual ambiguity of the dances of the later 1930s. Her realignment of female sexuality resonates with the modernist views of Virginia Woolf, in particular Woolf's assertion that "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (qtd. in Childs 2000, 165). Graham's 1929 dance *Heretic* (Anon. 1931)[4] embodied both the masculine and the feminine in the way that the phalanx of women lunge out in explosive bursts of terse movement or thump their heels hard against the floor. They level accusations at Graham, a vulnerable but determined figure whose pure white robe throws the dark-clad wall of women into sharp relief. The movements for this group are perfunctory to the point of being mechanical, and their near-masculine strength contrasts with the suppleness and pliancy of Graham's yielding backbends.

Feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter further defined Woolf's androgyny as a "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements" (qtd. in Childs 2000, 165), and these words aptly describe Graham's female pioneer of the 1935 solo *Frontier* (Bryan 1935). In the character of the lone woman, we find an independence of mind, spirit, and physicality gendered masculine, yet the woman is clearly feminine in the way that she stands "small and female in all this space she has engendered" (Hargrave 1966, 57). Louis Horst's score, written for the dance after it had been choreographed, includes a snare drum and a trumpet, and this music signifies the absence of man since the rhythmic drum beat suggests a soldier going off to war (Ardolino 1976).

The correlation between absent fighting man and solitary female guarding the land conflate the masculine and feminine in this one resolute figure. She is masculine when she commands space with a leg perched high up on the wooden fence, or thrusting upwards into the air in kicks that pass shoulder height. She claims and controls the very space she occupies. A rise from the floor accomplished through the mechanism of contraction and release demonstrates the grit and vigor, which conforms to society's norms of masculine strength; yet, as we have seen, this degree of pelvic flexibility resulted from Graham's "female construction" (de Mille 1991, 100). Thus, in *Frontier* Graham uses her female anatomy to produce muscular and virile movement, and thereby she "denaturalizes" society's view of gender distinctions (Butler 1990).

This blurring of gender distinctions took place nevertheless within the normative view of a heterosexual society. Graham's elitist modernist challenge to conventional representations of women as the object of male desire gave rise to several parodies. According to

Graham, the Ziegfeld Follies artist Fanny Brice performed an act that conflated several of Graham's 1930s dances: "at the very end she rushed to the footlights, put her hands out, just as I did in a ballet called *Act of Piety,* and with that wonderful Yiddish accent of hers cried out 'Rewolt'" (Graham 1991, 126–27; Franko 2002, 158–62). The revue artist Cyril Richard and the dancer Charles Weidman impersonated her performance in *Frontier* (Terry 1978),[5] and in more current times the gender ambiguity of *Lamentation* has permitted Richard Move to perform his own version of it as *Lament* (2001). The tendency for Graham to inspire theatrical female impersonators leads to Butler's view that the practice of transvestism is capable of expressing more than the "distinction between sex and gender." It challenges, she says, "at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity" (qtd. in Thoms 2006, 360). If in the 1930s Graham challenged society's notions of what was held to be real about women, then her impersonators force us to question what was "real" about Graham's representation of the feminine and what was constructed in accordance with the artistic context of the 1930s.

It is interesting to compare Graham's staging of a new type of masculinized American femaleness with the avant-garde and controversial German film director Josef von Sternberg's presentation of Marlene Dietrich in a series of films that they made at Paramount studios during the 1930s.[6] While it cannot be argued that the narrative of these films correlate in any way with Graham's 1930s dances, Dietrich's filmic presence chimes with Graham's stage persona. Film scholar Gaylyn Studlar has described the young Dietrich as emanating an "androgynous eroticism highly charged by sexual ambiguity" (1988, 49). The sense of bisexuality implicit within Dietrich's screen image can be aligned with the form of masculinized femaleness that Graham promoted in her dances, and although there is no evidence to suggest that Graham herself was anything less than wholly heterosexual, both Graham as a woman and her stage performances appealed to women. She was admired by women and attracted female support, from the modest financial assistance of Frances Steloff, owner of the Gotham Book Mart, where Graham occasionally worked in the late 1920s (Graham 1991, 108–10), to the grand patronage of the heiress Bethsabee de Rothschild (Graham 1991, 181, 185; de Mille 1991). Graham may never have seen Dietrich's films; neither are there grounds on which to suggest that she was an icon of bisexuality. However, when Studlar writes that von Sternberg's "construction" of Dietrich removed her from being viewed as "the conventionally passive object of male fantasy" (49), she strikes a chord that resonates strongly with Graham's evident foreclosing on the notion that female dancers are destined merely to entertain or to assuage the male gaze.

In dances like *Frontier* Graham embodied a sense of unassailable power that emanates from the female body, an autonomous strength that some might characterize as feminist; but, as discussed earlier in this essay, describing Graham as a feminist runs counter to her own views. In an interview that she gave shortly before her ninetieth birthday, she reiterates that she was never interested in campaigning for women's rights. "I'm delighted to be a woman," she said. "I've gotten everything I wanted from men, so I don't see any reason to exclude them or demonstrate against them" (Tobias 1984, 67).

Despite these protestations it must be reiterated that during the first decade of her

career, Graham excluded men from her artistic world. Her protagonists were most often strong, bold, independent women whose personalities and affairs ran counter to society's expectations. It is more within the domain of female empowerment that Graham displayed feminist tendencies. In establishing herself as a pre-eminent solo artist in the new art of American modern dance, she followed in the footsteps of Isadora Duncan, who espoused what she called a "doctrine of freedom." According to Ann Daly, this principle rested on "the traditionally unacknowledged pleasure of female sexuality [combined] with the mainstream virtue of raising children" (1995, 163–64). Daly claims, however, that Duncan was not a feminist in line with the term as it came into usage in America in 1913—when it was written literally with a capital "F." At that point, says Daly, feminism with a capital "F" "represented a shift from the nineteenth-century 'woman movement,' which called for female involvement in the public spheres of life on the basis that woman's unique moral superiority obliged her to improve society." She continues,

> Feminism, in demanding women's rights, was associated with a broader and more radical philosophy of equality between the sexes in all spheres of life, including sexual freedom and economic independence. Furthermore Feminism was distinct from suffragism, which focused specifically on women's enfranchisement. (1995, 162–63)

That Duncan demonstrated all these aspects of female empowerment through her dance and in her personal life is now well known, although, as Daly points out, she did not participate in any organized women's rights efforts. Delivering the credo for her doctrine of freedom in essays, articles, and speeches, Duncan often focused on the emancipation of motherhood, and some of her words have the ring of militancy about them: "It is [to] the benefit of the State to support all children up to the age of 16," she wrote in 1915. This remark arose from her radical ideas about women's rights to bear children out of wedlock: "When people understand that love cannot be made 'legal' and that every woman has a right to children as a tree has to blossoms and fruit," she wrote, "perhaps some of these horrors of marriage, divorce and prostitution will cease" (qtd. in Daly 1995, 164).

Duncan pointed the way toward women's sexual and social emancipation, and so these were not new ideas to Graham. Moreover, Graham was raised in a fairly liberal household, with her father encouraging her precocious intellectual curiosity and later her theatrical ambitions, and she had no need to adopt a strict feminist position in order to secure equality with her male counterparts (Graham 1991, 25–26). She was also sexually adventurous from a relatively young age (de Mille 1991, 23), although conversely, she seems not to have been awoken to the full potential of her libido until she was in her forties. Graham's love affairs had been doomed to disappointment often because they were with older, married men (de Mille 1991, 59). This was how it went with Horst, with whom Graham enjoyed a long-term relationship. From the mid-1920s until the late 1930s, Horst was at one and the same time Graham's mentor, pianist, composer, and lover (Soares 1992).

Graham enjoyed other amorous interludes along the way, such as a passionate affair with the artist Carlos Dyer (Graham 1991, 160–61). But it was not until 1938, when she was already forty-four, that she fell deeply and genuinely in love. Graham had met the

ballet dancer Erick Hawkins in the summer of 1936; by 1938 they were ardent lovers and he had become the first male dancer to join her erstwhile all-female group (de Mille 1991, 225–30). Barbara Morgan poetically portrays the power of the sexual magnetism that he had for Graham in a photograph. This shows an enraptured Graham, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, and cheek nestling against the bare chest of the tall, manly Hawkins. He looks possessively down at her as their arms, drawn upward, reach toward each other in a gesture expressing ecstatic bliss (1991, 189). Hawkins was the catalyst that turned a style of dancing that, as we have seen, was gendered but sexless in a conventional sense into the very epitome of what might be termed traditional female sexuality, as is evident in an extract from Graham's 1939 company work *Every Soul Is a Circus* (Barzel 1939). Wearing a glamorous white chiffon dress, Graham reclines flirtatiously on a sofa. The dramatic kicks to the side that appeared so virile in *Frontier* have a frivolous, feminine quality in this dance, while her almost heroic flexibility is characterized by a newfound sinuosity as she dances coquettishly around the desirable Hawkins. According to feminist theory, Graham's presentation of herself as a "dizzy woman, flirting and playing parts" (McDonagh 1974, 142) approaches "masquerade," in which "feminine accoutrements are assumed in excess in order to 'hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it'" (Studlar 1988, 70). *Circus,* then, marks a transformation in the style of Graham's representation of femaleness and the feminine. She moves from her performances of the empowered and masculinized females of the pre-1938 works and returns almost to society's feminine "real." Although Graham switches keys at this point in her career, she continues to foreground women; but the theme of her dances and the focus of her movement sensibility are now concerned with expressing the vicissitudes of female desire.

According to Graham, however, the driving power of desire rests on more than the sexual in the way that it is bound up in her attitude to art and to life:

> There is a certain desire one has, a desire that is necessity . . . It's like a child. When a child says, *Now,* nothing else exists, neither the past nor the future. It's *now.* For me this desire is the desire to live, it's the desire for love, it's the desire for work, the desire for a kind of order in the world. It's a burden to have that desire, but it's a great privilege. (qtd. in Tobias 1984, 63)

Thus for Graham as for many great artists, "sex, dancing and life were . . . indivisible" (Grant 2006), and as a consequence female libidinous urges became a central theme in many of her post-1930s dances. From 1938 she developed a heightened theatricality in terms of her growing interest in narrative, in the expansion of her movement vocabulary, and in the scenic elements of her productions (Bannerman 1999), all of which provided a more clearly stated diegetic element to her dances. The combination of a deep love of dancing with a passionate sexual partnership catapulted Graham into a new phase, but this personal/professional relationship also introduced a tension between her physical need for sexual pleasure and the compulsion to remain artistically and personally empowered. This is the theme that I suggest is at the heart of *Dark Meadow* of 1946.

The many layers of thinking, feeling, and memory that constitute the sensibility

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Graham brought to *Dark Meadow* challenged the critic John Martin, renowned for his Sunday column in the *New York Times.* He was at a loss to comprehend what others have recognized as Graham's venture into the mystery of human consciousness (Franko 1996; Kisselgoff 1999), but on reflection he saw that it was a new masterpiece and called it a fertility ritual (de Mille 1991, 268–69; Franko 1996). Although Graham herself preferred not to describe *Dark Meadow* in terms of ritual (see Franko 1996, 44), Martin's view is not entirely unfounded, especially in the light of Lloyd's observation that within the work Graham treats procreation "as a fundamental earth mystery":

> A red cloth in a formally transported bowl signifies the menses. There are ceremonial decorations of the phalluses. A symmetrical, stylized, flowering tree is planted in one; another, the towering central phallus, snaps out by a mechanical contrivance a painted green-leaf branch at the end. (1949, 43)

Others have responded to these images of primitive worship by thinking of *Dark Meadow* as a kind of *Rite of Spring* (de Mille 1991, 269; Coton 1954, 414).[7]

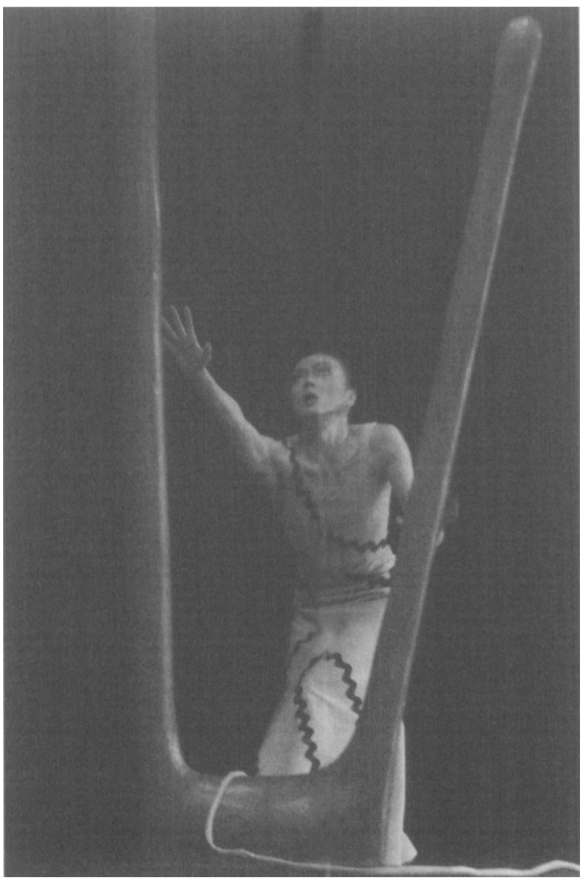
Given that in her program note Graham explains that the dance concerns the adventure and mystery encountered in the pursuit of a quest, it follows that the principal protagonist in *Dark Meadow*—One Who Seeks—searches for something unknown—possibly her sexual motivation. The dominance of the phallus, as represented in Noguchi's rock-strewn landscape, invokes the presence of the vagina, thus throwing into sharp relief the sexual drive of female desire, which, as we have seen, Graham certainly felt for Hawkins. Nevertheless, Graham was not prepared to commit herself fully to the love of any man, and when pressed on this point by her friend and advisor, the mythologist Joseph Campbell, she replied, "If I were to take that step I would lose my art" (qtd. in de Mille 1991, 238–39). *Dark Meadow,* then, is Graham's exploration of her own subjectivity. The male protagonist, One Who Summons, is "a man who displays himself to his destined partner" and is "almost arrogant in his energy" (de Mille 1991, 269). This seems to be a reference to the ambitious and competitive Hawkins, who was not content to remain in Graham's shadow, thereby threatening her sovereignty as an artist. As One Who Seeks, Graham was "self-contained in meditation." McDonagh describes a long solo that she danced with a black cloth as representing "the many things that could cloud the meadow" (1974, 188), suggesting that Graham's libidinous inclinations were always troubled by the checks and balances of maintaining artistic sovereignty.

Graham's intractable sense of control is further borne out by words that she wrote for the final paragraph of the comprehensive notes she made (1973, 167–206): "I will not be released from this bondage until I have released myself. No man can do it for me," she declares (206). These words are prescient of the concluding images that she designed for *Dark Meadow:* He Who Summons, then, is not an integral figure for One Who Seeks. As Tobias writes, "having played his part in the woman's history, [he] rolls away into the wings like a dust ball, but She Who Seeks is left to inhabit the center of the stage alone, seemingly at the threshold of discovery" (qtd. in de Mille 1991, 269).

Dark Meadow is characteristic of many of Graham's future dances in that it presents

a narrative of female sexuality and desire. This theme resurfaces in the Greek triptych (1946–1947) *Cave of the Heart, Errand into the Maze* (Grimm 1989), and *Night Journey* (Kroll 1961)—seminal works in Graham's canon that employ the organizing principle of ancient myth to universalize different aspects of female sexuality, the theme that fuelled *Dark Meadow.* For the first of these powerfully dramatic works, *Cave of the Heart,* Graham distills Euripides's tragic drama, *Medea,* concentrating on the sorceress's murder of princess Creusa, who has usurped her as Jason's wife. By focusing on this aspect of the myth, Graham highlights Medea's insatiable fury at the destruction of her sexual supremacy and thwarted desire. To convey the intensity of her outrage, Medea's first solo features several phrases of dramatic contraction-based movements, such as the *knee-vibrations.* These figure-of-eight arcs of the legs initiated by the pelvic motions of contraction and release combine with phrases of percussive upper body contractions in an agonizing expression of jealousy and hatred. Lying on one side facing the audience, Medea's torso contracts in "sobs" of emotional anguish as she witnesses Jason's adultery with the young princess.

Photo 1. Fang Yi Sheu in Martha Graham's Errand into the Maze. *Martha Graham Dance Company, 2003. Copyright ExploreDance.com/Robert Abrams. Reproduced with permission.*



If *Cave of the Heart* is a chilling portrayal of sexual rivalry, then *Errand into the Maze,* created the following year, concerns a wild sexuality that is both to be feared and tamed. As the curtain rises a woman stands facing the audience. Her sexual turmoil is immediately apparent, as with hands crossed low over her belly her upper body, held taut by the contraction low in her pelvis, contorts in convulsive spasms. It is as though she is both wracked by sexual desire and fearful of its costs. These fears are represented just as much by the sharp, percussive contractions that pierce the viewer's gaze as they are by the terrifying bull creature that she confronts. When finally she succeeds in vanquishing the monster, she gains control over the tumult of sexual terror, which threatens to engulf her. Within the final phrases of choreography, the woman is poised in the midst of Noguchi's wish-bone-shaped sculpture, calmly circling her leg

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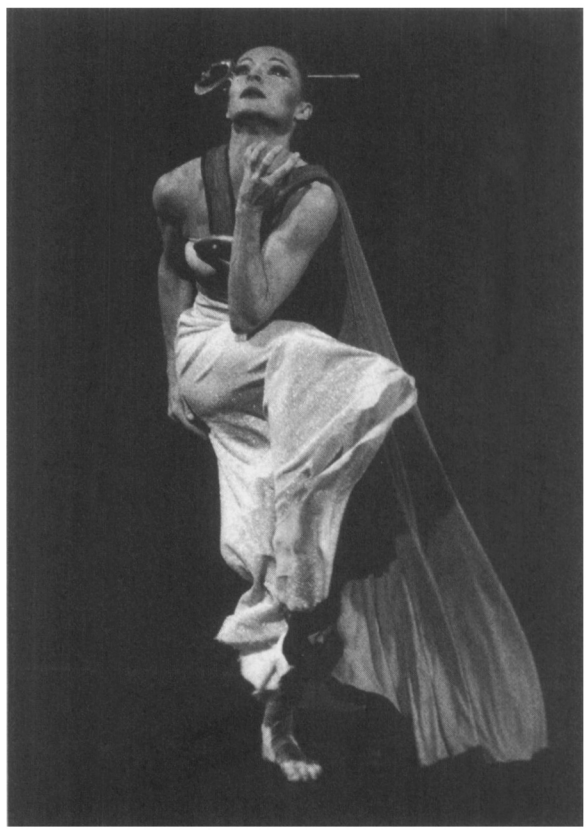
in the contraction-generated *knee vibrations.* Framed within the stage sculpture, which symbolizes the female pelvic bone, it is as though she has banished not only her terror of the beast that assailed her but also the fear of her own sexual lust.

Night Journey, created the same year as *Errand,* presents an even darker aspect of female sexuality. Although the work is based on Sophocles's great tragic drama *Oedipus the King,* Graham presents the story as it is relived in Jocasta's memory. In so doing she focuses on her dual tragedy as Oedipus's mother and wife and the consequences of their incestuous relationship. It is the central duet for Jocasta and Oedipus that best reflects the poignancy of the heroine's situation. As Genevieve Oswald (1983) observes, this duet communicates two kinds of love. It shifts skillfully between sexual passion and a tender, mother-son relationship. For Marcia Siegel, it is "a series of twinings and inversions in which the dancers lapse from poses of lovemaking into poses of mother and child; one moment [Oedipus] straddles [Jocasta] and the next she's rocking him in her lap" (2001, 313). Sally Banes calls the duet "one of the frankest choreographic expressions of coitus in the Western canon" (1998, 160) and provides descriptions and analyses of erotic imagery, which lead to the impression that all one sees on stage is an orgy of sex (1998, 160–62).

I agree with many aspects of Banes's insightful interpretation of *Night Journey,* although I contend that if viewed through the lens of Greek tragedy, a different reading of the work emerges, especially in the way that Graham produces the effect of catharsis. After Oedipus's act of self-blinding, the dance returns to its starting point when Jocasta is on the verge of death. For the final passage she sheds her royal robes, revealing a simple tunic. As she strips herself of the outer trappings of her worldly existence, she arouses feelings very akin to the pity and fear of Aristotelian catharsis, the emotionally cleansing solace produced by the Athenian tragic dramas. Clad only in the light-colored slip, she seems to expose the inner emotions and desires that unwittingly led her to become mother, wife, and lover to Oedipus.

Photo 2. Christine Dakin as Jocasta in Martha Graham's Night Journey *(Martha Graham Dance Company). Photo: Michel Ballantini.*



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Graham does not follow Sophocles in setting up the intricacies of plot established throughout the play, but I would claim that toward the end of *Night Journey* there is an instance of *discovery* accompanied by *peripeteia* as described by Aristotle (Aristotle 1920, 46–47). This discovery occurs at a strategic moment in the dance, when Jocasta and Oedipus are entwined as man and wife within a length of cord. As the women of the chorus finish their prophetic dance of doom around the couple, the seer Tiresias crosses the stage, his staff thudding ominously against the ground. He places himself behind Oedipus and Jocasta and inserts one leg with his foot flexed between them as though reminding the pair of the injuries that Oedipus received after birth. This dramatic leg gesture is the device through which the truth of Oedipus's identity is revealed (discovery), and as Tiresias touches the supporting rope with his staff it falls away, causing Jocasta and Oedipus to collapse forwards, signifying the reversal in their fortune (*peripeteia*). As a consequence of this discovery and its repercussions, the relationship dramatically changes key; emotional tension mounts as events become ever more nerve-wracking, culminating in Jocasta's suicide. The build-up of tension as outlined above surely exceeds Banes's claim that Graham tells the story of *Night Journey* merely "as one of sexual awakening" (163). One cannot overlook Graham's dramatic sophistication, neither can one ignore her unflinching courage in laying bare Jocasta's state of mind.

Graham's dances are informed by her modernist approach, for which she uses the device of the contraction to express the essence or abstraction of a situation or feeling. The contraction is not, therefore, a literal demonstration of the sexual response but functions in a similar way to the objective correlative proposed by T. S. Eliot as a way of "expressing emotion in the form of art" (Cuddon 1998, 605). Since the contraction, like the objective correlative, is an external representation of an internal state of mind, it is a symbolic device. In *Frontier* the contraction is the means by which the pioneer woman demonstrates her Amazonian strength, in *Errand* the contraction expresses the heroine's libidinous trepidations, and in *Cave:* sexual rivalry and betrayal. If there is eroticism to be found in Graham's works and in the way that she presented her female and male dancers, it is, she says, in her glorification of what she found to be "the beauty of the body" and in her enjoyment of what the body "expresses about life" (1991, 211). The contraction is housed in the pelvic area, which for Graham dancers, male and female alike, is the well-spring or core of physical energy. For women this is the center of femaleness, and for Graham it was both the source of all genuine movement and bodily gesture, which, as we have seen, within the context of her range of dances, is an energy that is molded into a formalized method of expressing the intangible and the sensory. Since the contraction is produced from the pubic area of the body, where sexuality is present, it becomes a power that can bestow joy, fulfillment, or the deprivation of desire experienced within sexual encounters. I return, then, to the phrase "the house of the pelvic truth" in order to emphasize that in terms of female empowerment through dance, Graham went further than any of her predecessors or peers in the way that she specifically used the anatomy of the female body. In focusing on the area that houses the viscera and in particular the vagina and the womb, she unleashed a type of primal sexual energy, which drove her as

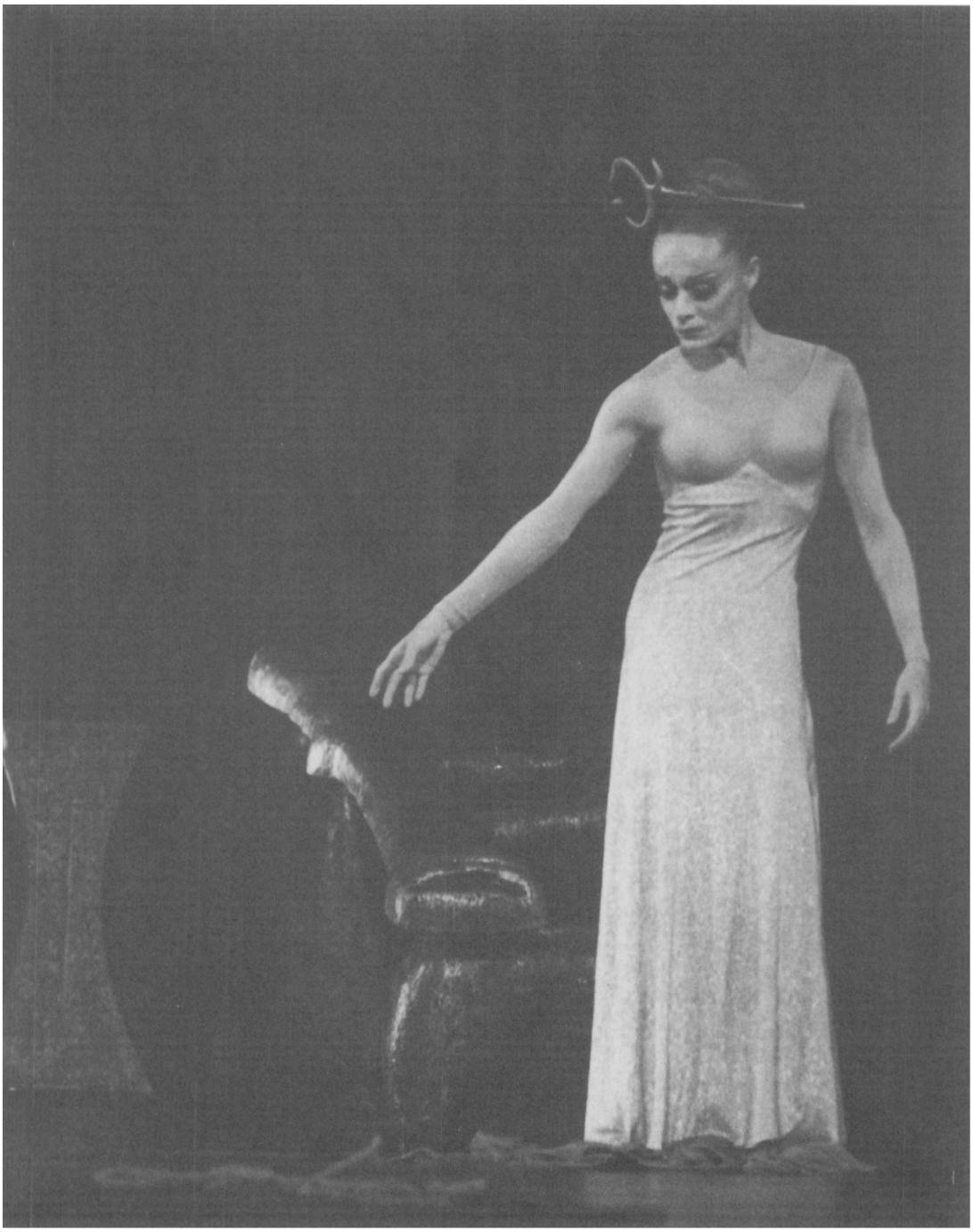

Photo 3. Christine Dakin as Jocasta in the final moments of Martha Graham's Night Journey *(Martha Graham Dance Company). Photo: Michel Ballantini.*

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an artist and as a woman. It is little wonder, then, that the Martha Graham Studio was popularly known as the house of the pelvic truth.

Notes

1. For an explanation of the principle of contraction and release, see Graham (1991, 251).

2. Up until 1935, the dancers in Graham's Group were those who worked with her on a regular basis. For the creation of *Panorama* at Bennington in 1935, Graham included dancers such as Jane Dudley, who at this point was new to her technique. In the years preceding 1935, Graham evolved her ever-expanding movement vocabulary on dancers such as Betty MacDonald, Bonnie Bird, Dorothy Bird, Ethel Butler, Ailes Gilmour, Martha Hill, Evelyn Sabin Mannes, Lily Mehlman, Marie Marchowsky, Sophie Maslow, May O'Donnell, Gertrude Shurr, Lilian Shapero, and Anna Sokolow. See Bell-Kanner (1998, 26) and Bird and Greenberg (1997, 58).

3. Denishawn refers to the school and company run by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn from which Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman emerged in the early 1920s (de Mille 1991; McDonagh 1974).

4. Choreographed for twelve female dancers, Graham's expanded group, many regarded *Heretic* as Graham's first major achievement (McDonagh 1974, 62). The work was modernist in its minimalism since it was performed in a plain setting to Louis Horst's arrangement of a short Breton folk song, which he played eight times on the piano (65).

5. A concert given in 1941, *Portraits of Great Dancers,* included Charles Weidman's impersonation of Graham in *Frontier* (Terry 1978, 97).

6. The movies are *Morocco, Blonde Venus, Dishonored, Shanghai Express, The Scarlet Empress,* and *The Devil Is a Woman.*

7. Irving Kolodin, reviewing the work for the *New York Sun* (1946), compared Graham to the modernist poet Gertrude Stein in terms of the "hypnotic effect" accomplished by Stein's words and Graham's "use of movement and gesture." In touching on Graham's modernism, Kolodin chimes with Franko's much later interpretation of *Dark Meadow* as a fine example of Graham's "aesthetic modernism" (1996, 27). Franko is also amongst those who are more attuned to *Dark Meadow*'s Jungian symbolism and the way in which Graham mined the rich territory of Jung's collective unconscious. However, the dance is sufficiently abstract to warrant different interpretations, and some claim that *Dark Meadow* very clearly addresses sex (Lloyd 1949; Hering and Kourlas 1999; Kisselgoff 1999).

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