

# A near myth

KATHLEEN RILEY

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Mark Franko **MARTHA GRAHAM IN LOVE AND WAR** The life in the work 231pp. Oxford University Press. £18.99 (US \$29.95).

978 0 19 977766 2 In Mark Franko's own words, this is not a biography of Martha Graham, but rather "a historically contextualized and biographically informed analysis of her work

between 1938 and 1953, arguably her most productive period". The book is subtitled "The life in the work", and Franko examines details of Graham's private and interior life only insofar as they illuminate her aesthetics, her creative methodology. Crucial to this examination is the figure of Erick Hawkins, the first male dancer to join Graham's company.

Fifteen years her junior, Hawkins was nevertheless the most potent influence on her artistic development in this period, as co-creator, confidant, competitor, and briefly her husband.

Franko provides a fuller, more balanced appraisal of Hawkins's contributions to Graham's career, as well as his professional aspirations and personal insecurities, than most conventional biographies.

Franko focuses on four works - *American Document* (1938), *Appalachian Spring* (1944), *Night Journey* (1948) and *Voyage* (1953) - which represent three distinct phases of Graham's choreographic evolution: the dramaturgical, the mythographic and the psychodramatic. In 1938, Graham rejected myth as an ideological instrument of Fascism (she had declined an invitation to perform at the Olympic festival in Berlin in 1936), and instead gave corporeal voice to her anti-Fascism in the form of a utopian Americana, "encrypted" with Left-oriented politics. During the 1940s, she gradually and successfully embraced myth, however, and in particular the transgressive otherness of Greek tragic heroines (notably Medea and Jocasta). Much less successfully, in the 1950s, Graham again eschewed myth, this time in a perilously self-revelatory attempt to dramatize her Jungian quest for "individuation" and to reconstruct her state of mind in the immediate aftermath of her separation from Hawkins.

Franko mentions in passing that Graham choreographed the Chorus of Archibald MacLeish's play *Panic* in 1935. Surprisingly, however, he omits, in his otherwise thorough investigation of her relationship to myth, to note that this was a Greek chorus and that the model for *Panic* was Sophocles' *Oedipus*. And while this brief collaboration predates the period of Franko's primary focus, it is arguably an important piece of background to an understanding of Graham's own reconceptualization and feminization of the *Oedipus* myth thirteen years later. According to MacLeish, Graham "was crazy about [*Panic*]. She thought that's the way you ought to write a play". In MacLeish, Graham had an example of a Popular Front poet who drew on classical mythology to critique the modern American experience and whose call to creative action in his essay "The Irresponsibles" (1940) anticipated her own. Closer attention to modernism's prevalent use of classical myth might have modified Franko's view that "myth, which had been appropriated as a Fascist mode of representation, was a definite liability to a progressive American artist".

In his re-evaluation of Martha Graham, Franko has made extensive use of her Notebooks and correspondence, and of recorded oral histories. These sources give us valuable insights into her autodidacticism in all its profusion and chaos,

as well as her modernity. We gain an appreciation of how her work was ahead of its time but also profoundly shaped by, and responsive to, it. And we learn about the myth of Martha Graham herself, her resentment of her own commodification - and also her complicity in it.

As a cultural study, however, *Martha Graham in Love and War* would be more valuable if it were more accessible to an educated lay readership and if there were greater contextualization, especially of Anglo-American modernism. For example, one question that might have been explored is whether there was a connection between Graham's interest in heroic personification and individuation and a wider interest on the part of literary modernists such as W. B. Yeats (whose influence on Graham Franko acknowledges) in the rebirth and apotheosis of the self.

The father of ballet d'action in the eighteenth century, Jean-Georges Noverre, said: "Dancing is possessed of all the advantages of a beautiful language". Martha Graham, too, equated choreography with the act of writing, describing dance as "the writing of a soul's journey". The best dancing, of whatever genre, tells us a story, illuminates a character or psyche, enables us to see the inner workings of music in motion and, above all, touches us at an intensely human and elemental level. Yet it is an unfortunate irony that so much of the academic discourse about dance is heavy-footed. Franko says that Graham's use of utopia in *American Document* "was designed to make people think, but not to bog them down". His analysis of Graham is well-researched and well-considered, innovative in focus and provocative in its conclusions, but too often the reader is bogged down in his leaden prose and by a use of jargon that alienates and obfuscates, divesting words of any dance-like eloquence, vitality or precision.

His book is a far less compelling portrait of the woman dubbed "the Picasso of dance" and of the modernist milieu in which she lived and created than it could have been.

Another consequence of Franko's at times impenetrable prose is that we can become alienated from the subject. His attempts to deconstruct and elucidate sometimes render Graham's methodology even more arcane. More positively, one could say he contributes to a healthy ambivalence about Graham's achievement - on the one hand, admiration for her intellectual curiosity, her passionate and audacious vision, but, on the other, a sense of estrangement from the self-absorption and self-mythologizing that obviously fuelled her creations and the Graham persona.