

# KENNETH MACMILLAN'S *MANON*: BUTCH BALLERINAS AND DANCING RAPE

**Laura Briggs**  
Independent scholar

## **Abstract**

British choreographer Kenneth MacMillan famously introduced narratives of rape and sexual assault to the ballet stage. One such ballet, *Manon*, has become a modern classic, performed in the repertory of dance companies worldwide. Through a feminist and queer lens, this article choreographically analyzes *Manon*'s third act, shedding light on its troubling portrayal of sex work, butch women, and sexual assault. The modern relevance of *Manon* and other MacMillan ballets invite us to question the place of these works in the #MeToo era of ballet.

## **Keywords**

ballet; Kenneth MacMillan; feminism; butch aesthetic; sexual assault

## **Biography**

Laura Briggs graduated with honors from Emory University with a B.A. in Dance & Movement Studies. Their research interests lie at the intersection of contemporary dance, literature, and queer/trans identity and experience. Currently, Laura performs with ImmerseATL under the direction of Sarah Hillmer and works as a freelance choreographer and scholar. Most recently, they created a full-length piece *Karass* based on the Kurt Vonnegut novel *Cat's Cradle*.

## **Contact**

lbriggs925@gmail.com

In light of the Harvey Weinstein revelations and their repercussions, hard questions become even harder. Does the aesthetic beauty of ballet tame and make palatable the violence we see onstage? Or does it show us aspects of human behavior we shy away from, especially in an opera house? Do we judge the subject matter or the art, and are they different things? (Roslyn Sulcas, 2017, on Kenneth MacMillan's *The Judas Tree*)

## Introduction

Originating from Tarana Burke's 2007 'MeToo' workshops, the phrase became a viral movement in October 2017 following allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein (Hillstrom, 2019; Tambe, 2018). Like many other industries, the ballet world deeply felt the campaign's effects. Highly publicized examples include New York City Ballet (NYCB) artistic director Peter Martins, who resigned in January 2018 after being accused of sexual misconduct and physical/verbal abuse (Pogrebin, 2018). Later in the year, NYCB's School of American Ballet graduate Alexandra Waterbury alleged that male dancers in the company exchanged nude photos of her and other female dancers with each other and donors. Waterbury's lawsuit stated that the "fraternity-like atmosphere" at NYCB "permeates the Ballet and its dancers and emboldens them to disregard the law and violate the basic rights of women" (Cooper & Pogrebin, 2018a, p. C1). As a result, former principal dancer Chase Finlay resigned, and NYCB fired two others, Amar Ramasar and Zachary Catazaro (Cooper & Pogrebin, 2018b). In *The New York Times* article *Two Critics Reflect on Ballet's #MeToo Moment*, dance critic Gia Kourlas (2018) laments that this news is far from groundbreaking—instead, she positions the allegations as a new iteration of a long misogynistic tradition in ballet. Dance scholars have argued over this troubling relationship between ballet and its treatment of women (choreographically and institutionally) for years, where ballerina depictions range from a passive, objectified female to a complex, empowered powerhouse (Banes, 1998; Daly, 1987; Fisher, 2007; Jordan & Thomas, 1994; Foster, 1996; Novack, 1993; Thomas, 2003). Media and dance scholarship continues to assess both off-stage and on-stage gender dynamics, yet certain ballets continue to circulate regardless of problematic narrative content. One example is Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* (1974).

The ballet *Manon* is based on Antoine François Prévost's 1731 novel *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* ('Manon'). The ballet's plot deviates significantly from the novel, taking the attention away from the love story and emphasizing the protagonist's greed and promiscuousness. The first act of MacMillan's version finds Manon preparing to join a convent when her brother, Lescaut, decides instead to sell her to the wealthy Monsieur G.M., who has offered to pay Lescaut generously for his sister's hand. Instead, the young woman runs away with Des Grieux, a charming but impoverished university student. The lovers live in peace for a while, but Manon eventually abandons Des Grieux for the promise of a grandiose and luxurious life with the wealthier man. The second act sees Manon at a glitzy party, torn between her love for Des Grieux and her fixation on wealth. Des Grieux tries to win Manon back by cheating in a card game, but he is exposed, and a fight ensues. Lescaut is eventually shot and killed, and Manon is arrested and deported to Louisiana as a prostitute. During Act III, the scene in New Orleans opens with a group of wealthy citizens waiting at the

dock. The jailer enters to greet an incoming ship holding the exhausted and sickly Manon, Des Grieux, and a group of banished prostitutes. It does not take long for the jailer to target Manon; he invites her into his quarters and rapes her. Des Grieux rescues Manon, stabs the jailer to death, and carries Manon off into the swamp. She dies on the journey, leaving her faithful lover in anguish. Notably, the rape scene and the jailer character do not appear in Prévost's original novel.

*Manon* has become a staple of the Royal Ballet repertory, where in 2018, the company performed it for the 266th time to open their season (Parry, 2018). The three-act work is cemented in the canon of twentieth-century ballet, but what are the implications of *Manon*'s popularity in the modern era of the #MeToo movement? In this article, we will examine MacMillan's seminal ballet *Manon* through choreographic analysis with a feminist and queer theoretical framework. *Manon* exemplifies MacMillan's choreography at large that frequently exploits sexual assault and violence against women. In looking closely at *Manon*'s third act, we uncover layered misogynistic themes that intersect class and gender: the use of the butch aesthetic to further degrade the poor female characters, a disturbing rape scene, and a narrative 'resolution' that centers on the male perspective. Many frame MacMillan's choreography as breaking barriers in ballet; we claim it simply reinforces them.

### **MacMillan: A Ballet 'Rebel'**

British choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan served as the Royal Ballet's artistic director from 1970 to 1977 and remained the company's chief choreographer while acting as American Ballet Theatre's associate director from 1984-1989 (MacMillan Estate, n.d.a). A 1983 profile of MacMillan by journalist Rachel Billington (1983) labels the choreographer a "rebel" (para. 5) and an "outsider" (para. 6), saying that he was tired of the ballet status quo. He strived to create emotion-driven dances, where the performers are not used like "typewriter keys" but instead as "human beings" (para. 4). MacMillan's image as an outsider and his desire to showcase the ballerina's humanity portray the choreographer as a foil to his contemporary George Balanchine, who was infamous for abstracting the ballerina into mere lines and shapes.

Diverging significantly from the previous Artistic Director at the Royal Ballet, Sir Frederick Ashton, MacMillan established a reputation of being a progressive figure in ballet by repeatedly tackling psychoanalytical, sexual, and violent topics in his ballets as opposed to creating lighthearted, lyrical works (Sulcas, 2017). He became notorious for his ability to use ballet to elucidate the darker, more visceral human emotions. *Isadora* (1981) impacted audiences with its "harsh, beautifully ugly exposition of grief" (Crisp,

2007, p. 189). *Valley of Shadows* (1983) portrays the Nazi occupation and the grisly reality of concentration camps.

But of all the twisted and horrific parts of human nature that MacMillan exposed onstage, he returned to sexual assault and violence against women as a central theme in many of his works. For instance, his full-length work *Mayerling* (1978) depicts sexual violence against women. *The Invitation* (1960) exclusively centers on rape and sexual manipulation, and *The Judas Tree* (1992) tells of gang rape, murder, and suicide. These MacMillan ballets provide a glimpse into the darkest parts of humanity through an art form that typically paints the ballet dancer as an object of pleasant fantasy, infantilization, and transcendent otherness (Gray & Kunkel, 2001). As such, some dance critics like Zoe Anderson (2004) question if MacMillan's narrative and choreographic choices are truly revolutionary:

At his best, MacMillan could, as Mason [Royal Ballet Artistic Director] puts it, 'get inside people's heads;' he could be explicit and psychologically acute, full of insight into relationships and societies. At other times, he was caught by his interest in disturbing subjects for their own sake. He returned again and again to rapes, to brothel scenes, to sex and violence, sometimes without the perception that can make his greatest ballets compelling. The rape scene in *Manon* is strangely blank; it victimises the heroine without telling us anything more about her. (para. 10)

Anderson's (2004) observation that *Manon*'s rape scene lacks "perception" (para. 10) refers back to the notion that MacMillan has little ownership over the stories he tells. Looking further into the ballet's plot and its protagonist, one only finds additional evidence to back this claim. The lack of characterization of Manon through her sexual assault suggests that MacMillan utilized dark and disturbing images frivolously, for their own sake rather than for the sake of developing a multidimensional narrative.

### **Manon: "A Nasty Little Golddigger"**

Since its initial run, reviews of *Manon* have shifted towards a more pleasant view of the choreography, storyline, and structure of the ballet. However, the character of Manon was largely disliked by critics from the very beginning. In an early review of *Manon*'s premiere at the Royal Ballet, Mary Clarke (cited in Macaulay, 2019) provided a scathing opinion in *The Guardian*: "Basically, Manon is a slut and Des Grieux is a fool" (para. 12). *Morning Star*'s Jane King (cited in Macaulay, 2019) echoes Clarke's sentiments saying the ballet was "an appalling waste of the lovely Antoinette Sibley, who is reduced to a nasty little diamond digger" (para. 12). Prevalent in these initial reviews is a sense of disgust for the title character, who is written off as a one-dimensional, morally corrupt miser. *Manon* crossed the pond later in the same year to premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House. Clive Barnes (1974) of the *New York Times* wrote of dancer Jennifer

Penney as Manon, “Miss Penney is a gorgeous looking girl, and her rather prim, picture-book beauty—so different from the inner voluptuousness of the role’s creator, Antoinette Sibley—provides the key to her interpretation of Manon as a young woman who retains her essential innocence through everything” (para. 4). Barnes’s (1974) idea of “essential innocence” (para. 4) contradicts the ‘slut’ of the English reviews, leading to the notion that perhaps different ballerinas impact audience impressions of Manon’s personality.

Dancers’ perspectives on *Manon* seem to reflect the critics’ disapproval of Manon, although the role is revered among ballerinas for its technical and artistic prowess (Macaulay, 2019). Antoinette Sibley, one of the role’s creators, thought of Manon as a girl “who allowed it all to happen to her” (cited by MacMillian Estate, n.d.b, n.p.). This passive interpretation of Manon left its mark on modern renditions of the character. In 2004, Royal Ballet star Tamara Rojo performed as Manon. In a video interview by *Dance Media* (2009), Rojo says of her character, “I find Manon to be a very simple soul—a young girl that has to survive, and her only gift or skill is how beautiful she is and the fact that she understands men.” Remarkably, Rojo centers the ballet’s men in her discussion of Manon’s personality, echoing Sibley’s embodiment of Manon as a helpless and reliant victim. In contrast, MacMillan’s website highlights an overtly feminist portrayal of Manon by Sylvie Guillem:

Sylvie Guillem’s guileful Manon used her sexual allure to survive in a male-dominated world. Des Grieux’s misfortune was to have strayed into her path just as she was discovering her power. Where other Manons die as desperate victims, limp as rags, Guillem fought on, defying death itself. (MacMillian Estate, n.d.b, n.p.)

This reading evokes Manon as the hero of the story, whereas Des Grieux becomes the one with misfortune’. In this portrayal of the title character, Manon is no longer a ‘slut’; she is an empowered woman and a survivor. How much can the dancer’s interpretation of the character truly affect the ballet’s message though? Can someone like Guillem dance Manon into a feminist character or will the narrative and choreography continue to prevent such potential?

The remainder of this article analyzes the ways *Manon*’s choreography and story embodies inescapable misogynistic views. In focusing on the third act, we examine how gestures, costuming, the use of the butch aesthetic, and choreographic choices of space and levels construct problematic power dynamics that intersect gender and class. While many claim MacMillan’s strongest asset as a choreographer was his ability to make ballet ‘real’, we question the social implications of canonized narrative choreography that perpetuates sexism through its unresolved display.

## **Ballet Slippers and Prostitutes**

The curtain rises on the third act of *Manon* as five couples mill about the dock at the port of New Orleans. The dancers' upright body posture and crisp costuming signals the audience that the characters are upper-class. The women in this ensemble flirt harmlessly with their male counterparts, who meander at the fringes while their lovers dance in an intricate canon. They rarely move in unison, except in an impressively timed *pas de deux* section, where the men step in to gently lift their partners. The eye contact and partnering drip with heterosexual attraction. The classical vocabulary they perform is as unaffected by the grimy, industrial setting as their pristine white costumes.

The docked ship begins to unload its passengers; the air onstage thickens. A long queue of prostitutes trickles onto dry land. Immediately, the prostitutes' status is marked, distinguishing them from their upper-class counterparts. They wear ragged, drab dresses that leave collarbones and arms exposed. While the upper-class female characters don the typical pointe shoes worn in classical ballet, the prostitutes wear brown flat shoes.

From a standpoint of class delineation, the flat shoes in this context represent a demotion of the impoverished sex workers from adult to juvenile status. After all, flat shoes are traditionally worn by young female dancers before they gain the strength and technique to dance on pointe. The removal of the prostitutes' pointe shoes shortens the line of their legs; their movements are less intricate and mature. The entire scenario of the dock scene strips the prostitutes of their adult power—they are perpetually surveilled by the jailer and disciplined for any behavior that breaks from the group or demonstrates agency. This infantilization mirrors the societal notion that poor people are incapable of taking care of themselves and “require ‘supervisory’ programs to guide them towards self-sufficiency” (Ben-Ishai, 2012, p. 151). This supervision can take many forms in social policy. Some agencies require adults receiving aid to stay in work or school. Homeless shelters and addiction recovery centers increasingly set rules for their residents and test for compliance (Mead, 1997). In short, paternalism relies on the close policing of the dependent person. In *Manon*, we see the prostitutes closely supervised, deducing them to a childlike dependence that demeans and others them.

This section's choreography mirrors the social stigma that comes with being a sex worker. Throughout their dance, they throw their heads back in anguish and then forward in shame. They begin to faint one by one, descending with a limp body posture that emphasizes weakness and fragility. The use of the low level is also a taboo in classical ballet, where the female dancer typically stands erect unless supported by a male dancer. The elite characters who open the third act of *Manon* never stoop close to the ground; instead, they mill about and stare down at the fallen prostitutes with

curiosity and disgust. The gaze only moves in one direction, drawing a stark power dynamic between the citizens and the prostitutes.

The differential treatment of unison and group movement distinguishes the poor from the rich and leaves room for an alternative reading of the classism in the ballet. The upper-class dancers execute an intricate canon, weaving between one another while avoiding unison movement. The prostitutes, on the other hand, are quite literally chained together as a single super-organism, leaping across the stage with hands clasped together. The dancers assist one another when one begins to falter, embody collectivism through clasped hands, physical support, and close proximity. Their interdependence and physical connectedness represent their concern for the group's well-being. Later in the dance, the prostitutes form two concentric circles facing inward, using their bodies to shield each other from the jailer's predatory hands. This moment can be interpreted as a glimpse of a feminist streak in the ballet. The embodiment of protection—women looking out for other women against violation by men—invites an opportunity to empower the group of poor women. Even as their independence is taken away from them, their interdependence remains unfazed by oppression. Interdependence has long been a pillar of feminism. Gloria Steinem, leader and spokeswoman for the American feminist movement, once said, "We had our declaration of independence, and now we need a declaration of interdependence" (cited in Mead, 2013, para. 3) This feminist principle is embedded in the choreography itself—the clasped hands, the concentric circles, the use of physical bodies as protection—in order to demonstrate the prostitutes' sacrifice of the individual and commitment to one another.

### **Short Hair and the Butch Aesthetic**

Masculinizing women has a long history on the ballet stage, rooted in the phenomenon of the travesty dancer (a female dancer performing as a male character). The travesty dancer's reign in France spanned from about 1830 to 1850, at a time when men were ballet's primary patrons and funding was scarce and privatized; she offered a 'masculine' alternative for dance critics and viewers who harbored disdain for actual male dancers (Garafola, 1985). As dance historian Lynn Garafola (1985) states, travesty dancers "donned breeches and skin-tight trousers that displayed to advantage the shapely legs, slim corseted waists, and rounded hips, thighs, and buttocks of the era's ideal figure [...] the *danseuse en travesti* brazenly advertised her sexuality" (p. 37). Dance scholar Fenella Kennedy (2017) agrees that the travesty corps de ballet performers were making no attempt to disguise their sex: "[t]his status depended on their mastery of ballet technique, their physical attractiveness, and their compliance with behavioral norms within their social setting" (p. 207). However, Kennedy (2017) argues

that some soloist travesty roles actually provided dancers with greater opportunity, fame, and agency. This suggests the possibility of a ballerina who does not meet the expectations of performing hyperfemininity, yet still maintains her power, independence, and sensuality. In fact, this dancer's ability to master a portrayal of masculinity makes her more appealing and talented. The solo travesty dancer did not become a pure sexual object, even as her corps de ballet counterparts became synonymous with prostitution and poverty.

In the modern era, the travesty dancer has been phased out of performance, but some scholars argue the 'butch' ballerina still remains in the public eye. Rooted in the lesbian subculture of the twentieth century, 'butch' serves as both an identity term and an aesthetic, emphasizing characteristics that are normally associated with masculinity (Case, 1988; Halberstam, 1998; Nestle, 1992). Society frequently chastises butch females for not adhering to normalized feminine standards and for combating the male gaze. One witnesses a similar form of disciplining on the ballet stage. For instance, dance scholars Jane Feuer (2001) and Clare Croft (2014) separately note ways critics have discursively punished non-conforming ballerinas. While Feuer (2001) hones in on NYCB's Merrill Ashley as "the most 'butch' of all Balanchine's dancers" (p. 386), Croft (2014) focuses on NYCB's Wendy Whelan, whose perceived lack of femininity at times has even placed her in an animalistic, non-human category. Whelan has described herself as being 'animal-like', but dance critics have taken their comments a step further (Croft, 2014). *New York Times* critic Eric Taub called Whelan "an acquired taste: extremely thin and muscular with astonishingly long limbs, Whelan often strikes first-time viewers, especially those accustomed to more conventional dancers, as odd to the point of freakishness" (cited in Pogrebin, 2004, para. 13). Both Ashley and Whelan have endured gender policing by dance critics and scholars due to their body types, facial appearances, movement qualities, or their interactions with male partners onstage.

The third act of *Manon* recalls the travesty dancer and the butch ballerina in the dance of the prostitutes, with their short hair, flat shoes, and turned-in feet. These dancers unveil the guise of the historic travesty dancer. No longer does the audience have to infer that the masculine dancers onstage are available sexual objects for consumption; instead, their butch masculinity is equated with their status as consumable sex objects. Their short hair directly symbolizes their sexual availability. At the same time, *Manon* herself is a foil to the *corps de ballet* by maintaining her pointe shoes and her feminine sensuality, akin to Kennedy's (2017) image of the solo travesty dancer.

A ballerina's hair is usually pinned up into a bun, especially in classical dances. MacMillan, however, makes the prostitutes' short hair a focal point of the costuming. Short hair, like the flat shoe, is still typically confined to the realm of the male dancer. I



argue that long hair pulled back into a bun is an essential part of the idealized feminine, yet boyishly asexual, aesthetic that is the unspoken uniform of the female ballet dancer (Gray & Kunkel, 2001). This hairstyle simultaneously reinforces the femininity of the ballerina and erases it by hiding the long hair from view. The lack of flexibility within hairstyles also reinforces the idea that the ballerina is not an individual, but part of a larger machine. Conformity in size, shape, skin color, and hairstyle must all be cultivated within the *corps de ballet* (Gray & Kunkel, 2001).

In lesbian subculture, a boyish short haircut is arguably the hallmark of the butch aesthetic (Halberstam, 1998). By wearing a short, masculine hairstyle onstage, MacMillan's prostitutes rebel against the gendered hair conventions of ballet much in the same way that butch lesbians rebel against gendered hair conventions. However, both groups are societally stigmatized by doing so. Queer women are the targets of discrimination, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence far more often than their heterosexual counterparts (Brown & Herman, 2015). Butch women in particular are erased from, and misunderstood within, narratives surrounding sex among queer women. Because of their masculine presentation, they are mangled into the existing heteronormative framework of sex, which assigns the role of 'man' to the butch woman in a lesbian pairing (Crawley & William, 2017). This limited understanding of queer identity leads to stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination aimed at butch lesbians because these women do not conform to the aesthetic standards created by heterosexual men. By subverting these standards, butch women make themselves both sexually undesirable and unavailable to heterosexual men.

MacMillan draws a physical comparison between the sex workers in his ballet and butch women in order to equate the sexual undesirability of the prostitutes to the undesirability of butch women. MacMillan reinforces the butch masculinity of these characters through their hair and distinguishes them from the rest of the female dancers in the ballet, othering them much in the same way that butch women are othered through appearance. By visibly 'butching' the prostitutes, MacMillan implies that the butch aesthetic relates to an undesirable, oppressed status.

The choreography of the prostitute *corps de ballet* in *Manon* embodies the shame and restriction that the haircut imposes. First, they grab the back of the head to shield their faces and their hair. Then, they clasp their hands low to open up the soft skin on the inner arms and gaze upward. The closed-in posture is immediately indicative of shame—possibly regarding their hair. The female dancer's face becomes invisible. She hunches over, cowering in the loss of her own femininity. In contrast, the upward-looking posture reveals vulnerable parts of the body like the forearms and neck. This pose binds the hands together, rendering the dancer incapable of action; it evokes

powerlessness and submission. Both postures emanate shame and vulnerability from the dancers, reinforcing MacMillan's association between the masculinized woman and the undesirable. The choreography lingers on this state of helplessness; the prostitutes with their heads in their hands are only as valuable as their ability to please the jailer, echoing the way in which ballerinas are only as valuable as their ability to please an artistic director, and women are only as valuable as their ability to please men (Gray & Kunkel, 2001).

Manon herself is a foil to the rest of the prostitutes by maintaining her sexuality and agency, despite her haircut. She has the same haircut as the rest of the prostitutes and executes the same vulnerable, powerless postures. However, she remains attractive to her lover and the jailer in the third act, as demonstrated by the choreographic meat of this act, the two *pas de deux* with Manon. In the final moments of the ballet and her life, Manon's lover Des Grieux caresses her face and hair, unfazed by the grotesque haircut. His unconditional love and desire shows that Manon has preserved her sexual allure and power over men. The audience glimpses one final image before the curtain falls of Des Grieux clutching Manon's face, his hands tangled in her hair. She has somehow subverted the notion that only long-haired, virginal femininity is worth worshipping on the ballet stage. In some ways, Manon defies the connection between masculinization and powerlessness that MacMillan reinforces in the prostitutes' dance. She uses her technical and sexual prowess even after being stripped of status and reaffirms her own sexuality and agency, similar to the way that solo travesty dancers were able to surpass their own objectification by gaining independence and power through their technique (Kennedy, 2017). However, this agency is still contingent on her attractiveness to the men around her. The dichotomy between the treatment of Manon and her prostitute *corps de ballet* alludes to the special treatment allotted to sexually alluring women even if they have broken norms or laws—in colloquial terms, this is referred to as 'pretty privilege', a term coined by Janet Mock in a 2017 article in Allure Magazine. Manon's pretty privilege exempts her from the stigma felt by her cohort and allows her to remain dignified in her dying moments.

### **Erect and Limp Bodies**

The middle of Act III finds Manon isolated with the jailer in his quarters. Ashamed, she buries her head in her hands to hide her haircut. She attempts to grovel to the jailer, who is clearly more interested in her body than her pleading. He makes several attempts to capture her before finally hoisting her up into a clumsy horizontal lift; she kicks and jabs, then sinks down into the floor with resignation. The jailer follows her and a tense, non-consensual *pas de deux* ensues with both dancers at a low level.

In a climactic moment of aggressive male display, the jailer rolls Manon over with his knee and mounts her, caressing down her extended leg. Hunched over, defeated, completely powerless against him, she crawls from between his legs. The jailer grabs Manon by her shoulders and forces her onto to her knees with his back to the audience. The only parts of Manon that remain in view are her limp, splayed arms. Almost her entire body becomes invisible during the rape. The jailer looks upward in pleasure—an ironic nod to the upward focus, previously the prostitutes’ marker of helplessness. Her attacker convulses in orgasm and Manon collapses, her disheveled and broken face appearing between his legs.

The rape ends with Manon forced back up into a *sus-sous*, and the jailer shoving a diamond bracelet on Manon’s wrist as ‘compensation’ for her services. Then, Des Grieux enters heroically and starts beating and stabbing the jailer while Manon lies motionless, strewn to one side of the stage like a discarded doll. After the jailer’s defeat, Des Grieux dances a passionate solo, agonized over his violent act. His impressive jumps, turns, and balances display his technical, masculine prowess, shaken more by his internal moral conflict than by his lover’s brutal rape. The two lovers flee the scene, but Manon is not long for this world, and the ballet quickly closes after a final *pas de deux*.

The rape scene in *Manon* makes no appearance in the novel upon which the ballet was based. Therefore, the assault is completely superfluous to the story’s narrative, inviting the audience to wonder why MacMillan decided to include it in the first place. The scene rids the protagonist of the little agency she had left and makes her completely dependent on Des Grieux for her safety and even her personhood. The invisibility of the rape and Manon’s subsequent stillness completely pulls the audience focus away from her body’s form. The jailer’s sheer stature shields Manon from view, save her resigned, lifeless arms.

Des Grieux’s multifaceted and impassioned subsequent solo, which directly follows the assault, mourns his lover’s rape while also wrangling the guilt of stabbing another man. There is no solo to broadcast Manon’s grief or trauma; in fact, Des Grieux largely supports her from this point until the end of the ballet. Manon’s visual absence reinforces the scene’s focus: the rape’s consequences on the two men. Her sexual assault seals her fate as a helpless object, whose only solace is the man who remains faithful to her. This sentiment is echoed in Rojo’s dismissal of Manon as a “simple soul [...] whose only gift or skill is how beautiful she is” (*Dance Media*, 2009), and Anderson’s (2004) keen observation that the rape “victimises the heroine without telling us anything more about her” (para. 10).

Interestingly, Manon retains her pointe shoes for the duration of the third act, even as her cohort of prostitutes change into flat shoes. From a practical standpoint, the pointe shoe identifies Manon as the leading lady in a crowd of identically-dressed dancers. However, it also allows her to dance in a manner perceived as feminine, rescuing some of her stolen womanhood even in her imprisonment. The title character is still able to show off her lines, skitter ethereally across the stage, and most importantly, dance in a classical *pas de deux*. MacMillan employs the pointe shoe to allow Manon to dance with her male partners and as a symbol of her continued desirability. Even as the jailer brutally assaults Manon, his eyes fixate on the shoe. Mounted on top of her, he brings her leg upwards, caressing her thighs and resting his cheek against the side of her pointe shoe in a moment of total ecstasy. After the assault, he drags Manon back up to pointe; in this moment of suspended *arabesque*, she embodies both her female desirability and the prison of female submission and objectification.

Finally, the choice to depict the act of fellatio is notable. Kenneth MacMillan never shies away from graphic portrayals of rape, but the choice to display forced oral sex especially demeans Manon. In one study about young women's opinions of fellatio compared to cunnilingus and vaginal intercourse, women were more likely to associate negative emotions like boredom and disgust with fellatio, and less likely to associate positive emotions like fulfillment and excitement (Malacad & Hess, 2010). In MacMillan's choreography, this sex act places her in a submissive physical position, while also allowing the jailer to avoid looking at Manon's face during the rape. The jailer remains standing in complete domination of her, then drags her back up onto her pointe shoes to dangle diamonds in her face. The *sus-sous* itself is also a violation of Manon's bodily autonomy, the gems a symbol of her status as sexual commodity to the jailer and the society at large. MacMillan's decision to include the jailer's orgasm in the choreography also invites the audience to ask about the benefit of the scene. A disturbing display of pleasure in a ballet wrought with pain and poverty, the orgasm underscores the completely skewed power dynamic between Manon and her captor.

### **Feminist Ballet: An Inescapable Reality**

Manon Lescaut and her tragic story continue to reside in the repertory of ballet companies around the world, celebrated as one of the twentieth century's finest works. *Manon* has become one of British ballet's most popular exports—Paris Opera Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, Australian Ballet, American Ballet Theater, Bolshoi Ballet, and Mariinsky Ballet have all performed *Manon*. The ballet's messages surrounding gender, class, and sexual assault are especially salient given the ballet's continued popularity and praise. MacMillan recedes ballet further into its problematic narratives by

sharply delineating class and social status, utilizing the butch aesthetic to signify powerlessness, and brutally portraying the title character's assault.

The modern relevance of *Manon* and other MacMillan ballets invite us to refer back to Kenneth MacMillan's reputation as a man who delivered ballet into the modern era by expanding the range of narratives available on the ballet stage. While his fixation of violence, moral depravity, and rape has certainly expanded narrative range, the modernity of this approach is questionable. Feminist ballet has become less of a fantasy and more of an inescapable reality, with choreographers like Katy Pyle and Deborah Lohse reinventing the ballet structure, canon, and aesthetic to include queer and feminist perspectives (Alterowitz, 2014). *Manon's* eminent place in the ballet canon becomes more and more perplexing.

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