

Mōtiō

Postgraduate Journal for
Dance Practice and Research

Issue 2, 2016

Let the Battle Commence: The Rejection of Female Stereotypes and Construction of Strong, Multifaceted Women in Ninette de Valois's *Checkmate* (1937)

Karolina Romaniszyn-Tong

Abstract: The characters, emotions and concepts ballerinas have explored within ballets have been met with criticism from some feminist scholars. This article proposes that with its two strong female roles, *Checkmate* (1937), by British choreographer Ninette de Valois, presents alternative ideas about female characters in ballet. Concerned with rethinking the images of women commonly depicted in ballet and following the arguments of Alexandra Carter (1999) and Sally Banes (1998), the article reveals that de Valois's choreography does not reproduce negative stereotypical images of the ballerina, such as those proposed by Ann Daly (1987) and Susan Leigh Foster (1996). Instead, female power and agency are embedded within *Checkmate's* narrative and portrayed through the movement vocabulary and dynamic qualities.

Keywords: feminist perspectives, feminist theory, Ninette de Valois, *Checkmate* (ballet), ballet

Citation: Romaniszyn-Tong, K. (2016) Let the battle commence: the rejection of female stereotypes and construction of strong, multifaceted women in Ninette de Valois's *Checkmate* (1937). *Mōtiō: Postgraduate Journal for Dance Practice and Research*, 2, pp.1–13. Available at www.motiojournal.org

Let the Battle Commence: The Rejection of Female Stereotypes and Construction of Strong, Multifaceted Women in Ninette de Valois's *Checkmate* (1937)

Karolina Romaniszyn-Tong

The ballerina has been the subject of much feminist debate. As the ballerina has traditionally been the focus of ballets, which have been predominantly choreographed by men, what she represents on stage has been perceived as problematic. The characters, emotions and concepts women have explored and portrayed in ballets have been seen as supporting stereotypical female roles and 'feminine' traits. The woman has been considered to be at the service of men, be it choreographer or partner. This view overlooks both the strong-minded women with leadership attributes present throughout the ballet repertoire and female choreographers' depictions of women in their ballets.

Ninette de Valois's choreography for the Black and Red Queens in *Checkmate* (1937) is particularly potent in illustrating how ballet can cast aside stereotypical representations of women. Based on the game of chess, *Checkmate* depicts the fight for supremacy between the Black and Red sides. The Black Queen is the ballet's lead protagonist. The sole ruler of the Black side, she manoeuvres to eliminate the Red King. The Red Queen, the secondary lead, is her opponent, fighting to protect her husband and their kingdom. Described as an 'adventurous traditionalist' (Cave & Worth, 2012), de Valois may have followed tradition in *Checkmate* by having the ballerina as the focus, but she is adventurous in her presentation of the women, particularly the Black Queen, interweaving explicit and subtle traits to provide complex ballerina roles. While not created as a feminist ballet, the work appears ideally suited for analysis from a feminist perspective.¹

Within one strand of the feminist debate, the ballerina's roles have been interpreted in a way which constructs over-simplified, one-dimensional, negative images of women and emphasises stereotypes. Particularly forceful feminist critiques of the ballerina by American dance scholars Susan Leigh Foster (1996) and Ann Daly (1987) focus upon 'male gaze' theory and power relations between the ballerina and her male partner. Being an object of male desire, the ballerina

Karolina Romaniszyn-Tong is the Co-Principal of two dance schools, an Early Years Music and Movement Practitioner, and a Tutor for the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing's Contextual Study of Dance Unit. She has a MA in Ballet Studies (Roehampton University) and a BA (Hons) in Dance and Visual Arts (Manchester Metropolitan University). She holds the Advanced Labanotation Certificate. Her notation appears in *Stravinsky Dances* (Jordan, 2007) and *Dancing off the Page* (Duerden & Fisher, 2007).

lacks her own agency, in their analysis. Power is given to the man. He controls and manipulates her. Consequently, they perceive the ballerina as reinforcing stereotypical notions of women as unassertive, passive and oppressed.²

The submissive partner is one of two common opposing stereotypical images of women that ballet has been seen to present. The other, the temptress, is seductive, confident and scheming. Opposing stereotypical images of women have a long history, arguably drawing upon the contrasting roles of the Virgin and the prostitute as depicted in the Bible. It can be argued that ballet has drawn upon these opposing stereotypes more than other dance genres, most famously in the roles of the White and Black Swans in *Swan Lake* (Ivanov/Petipa, 1895).³ Upon first viewing, it is easy to label the two queens in *Checkmate* as depicting these opposing stereotypes, with the Black Queen as a ruthless, heartless, scheming temptress and the Red Queen as a dotting, gentle, timid wife. Their characters are much more complex, however, and worthy of deeper, more enlightening examination.

In the analysis in this article, I follow the lead of dance scholars Alexandra Carter and Sally Banes, who have reacted against the critical feminist narrative. Carter, 'saddened by the ways in which the artistic endeavour of thousands of women performers has been relegated to the dustbin by discourse' (1999:91), responded to destructive feminist writing by asserting that the initially revealing perspective they offered had 'turned into a straitjacket' (1999:91). Carter criticises feminist writing that focuses upon a limited number of works because it results in a narrow concept of what the ballerina on stage may represent and 'negates the richness of the ballet heritage and the diversity of its incumbents' (1999:95). In her view, analysis of ballets can offer positive as well as negative images of women. In her book *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage*, Banes provides alternative readings of the ballerina. Aiming to 'recast canonical dance history since the mid-nineteenth century in terms of a feminist perspective' (1998:1), Banes rejects binary interpretations of women and 'male gaze' theory, and accepts the ambiguity of the text and performance. She adopts 'a woman-centered perspective' to 'retell the story of Western theatrical dancing' (1998:1).

In this article I aim to reveal how de Valois's choreography in *Checkmate* does not conform to negative stereotypical interpretations of the ballerina, such as those proposed by Daly (1987) and Foster (1996). Female power and agency are embedded within *Checkmate's* narrative and portrayed through the movement vocabulary and dynamic qualities.⁴ I also suggest why the two queens behave in what could be viewed as stereotypical ways, by reflecting upon the theme of the ballet, the source material and the characters' motivations. Consequently, I propose that stereotypical traits need not be interpreted in a detrimental way. The queens' less initially identifiable traits are also discussed because they add complexity to their characters, thereby providing a multifaceted image of women that goes beyond that commonly associated with ballet.

Directing the battle: Ninette de Valois

Ninette de Valois's choreography has not been explored or analysed from a feminist perspective, unlike that of many of her contemporaries, for example,

ballet choreographer Bronislava Nijinska (Adair, 1992; Banes, 1998) and the pioneers of modern dance such as Martha Graham and Mary Wigman (Banes, 1998; Manning, 1991). While de Valois did not consider herself a feminist (Genné, 2012), this lack of feminist interest is surprising, considering de Valois's achievements and that she too 'presented herself and her theories of dance at a time when women's opportunities were severely limited' (Genné, 2012:20). A modern career woman, she was driven, had a clear focus and plan, and juggled a professional and private life; she could be viewed as a feminist role model.

Ninette de Valois (1898-2001), originally named Edris Stannus, was an artistic director, choreographer, teacher, dancer, company administrator, writer, and wife to a surgeon. She founded the Royal Ballet, the Birmingham Royal Ballet, and the Turkish State Ballet, and directed the Royal Ballet from 1931 to 1963. In addition, she founded and taught at the Royal Ballet Upper and Lower schools.

While the relationship between de Valois's own life and personality and her choreography for *Checkmate* is beyond the scope of this article, it can be suggested that her complex, multifaceted character is reflected in her choreography. Her contradictory traits have been much discussed (Cave & Worth, 2012). A strong, driven woman, de Valois tended to downplay her achievements (Clement Crisp interviewed in Marks, 1998) and held 'a stereotyped view of male/female roles' (Adair, 1992:112). She praised the pioneering work of woman in the field of dance, but believed ballet's heritage lay in the hands of men. She encouraged the work of male choreographers and was not necessarily fair in her treatment of the women in her company (Crow & Jackson, 2001).

De Valois's creative imagination tended to be ignited by the visual arts, literature, and musical and historical sources. The game of chess, therefore, initially appears to be an unusual source of inspiration. Chess is an intense game of tactics, however, with carefully planned manoeuvres and the tense uncertainty of the opponent's next move. The game is full of drama, and narrative ballets are the bedrock of de Valois's oeuvre. She was not interested in plotless works (Morris, 2006) or displays of technical ability and virtuosity (Neatby, 1934). Instead, she was concerned with exploiting the dramatic potential of dance (Woodcock, 1993), as demonstrated in *Checkmate*. De Valois was also strongly influenced by Central European Expressionist dance (Genné, 2012), references to which are found in her choreography.

As a choreographer, De Valois devised movement in isolation and entered the studio with the ballet all planned out (Farjeon, 1998; Genné, 1996). Immersing herself in appropriate research, she drew inspiration from the source material and subject matter. While it is uncertain how familiar de Valois was with the game of chess (Farjeon, 1998; Walker, 1987), her choreography has clear connections to the game. In addition, de Valois employed Diaghilev's ideal of a ballet as a total art work in which movement, music, and design produce a unified whole, a notion she absorbed while dancing with the Ballets Russes in the 1920s (Genné, 1996). With commissioned music by Arthur Bliss and designs by Edward McKnight Kauffer, *Checkmate* aspires to be a stylistically coherent ballet.

Going against the grain: the Black Queen analysed

Not conforming to the genre's stereotypical power relations in ballet as highlighted in feminist critiques, the Black Queen is given supreme power and allowed to pursue her own aims. As 'the most commanding role on the stage, in the ballet' (Beryl Grey interviewed in MacFarlane, 2007), the Black Queen, the lead protagonist, is the central subject of the narrative. De Valois created what Banes (1998:45) would term a 'woman-centered' story.⁵ Unconventionally, *Checkmate* does not include the Black King. While his absence from the board is not explained, this situation allowed de Valois to choreograph a ballet in which the lead protagonist rejects tradition. An independent woman who reigns alone, the Black Queen is free from the marriage plot (Banes, 1998) during the course of the story. If she wins, her victory is hers alone. The Black Knights, Black Castles and Black Pawns, unlike the characters on the Red side, serve and obey a female's, rather than a male's command. Without a king, the Black side's future rests on a woman's success. According to Carter:

It is not very feminine to fight for power and those who do achieve it, such as the Black Queen in *Checkmate* (Ninette de Valois, 1937), leave us a little uneasy at their singular intent. In order to vanquish the Red King and acquire his territory, she has not only to reject but remove his knight; a kind of Margaret Thatcher of the chessboard, she is unremitting in her ambition. Such an ending, in which an independent woman achieves her desire and retains her independence, perhaps necessarily through the sacrifice of love, is unusual in our dance narratives.

(1996:48)

Carter's reference to Margaret Thatcher provides a useful comparison. To secure leadership of the Conservative party, Thatcher had to overthrow the then-leader Ted Heath; likewise, the Black Queen must dispose of the Red King. If anyone stands in her way, as the Red Queen and Red Knight do, they must die. Like Thatcher, the Black Queen must fight for power and eliminate the opposition. To succeed, she must be confident, commanding, and relentless.

Given her elimination of the opposition in order to secure power, it is unsurprising that the Black Queen has been called 'ruthless' (Lawson, 1976:161) and a 'dark, powerful, ambitious person ... all the way through she's pretty nasty' (Zenaida Yanowsky interviewed in MacFarlane, 2007). As 'it is not very feminine to fight for power' (Carter, 1996:48), the Black Queen goes against the grain.

The Black Queen's entrance

With her body bolt upright, the Black Queen evokes the image of a rigid chess piece. While this illustrates how de Valois drew upon the source material, the Black Queen's posture and entrance movements also reveal her character. From the start, de Valois's choreography ensures that the Black Queen makes her regal

status and presence known: ‘She steps proudly and arrogantly across the board, contemptuously regarding the Red pieces who are assembling against her’ (Robinson, 1949:80). Standing tall, standing proud, she has a fearless, authoritative, arrogant air about her. She ignores the assembled pieces; it is for them to acknowledge her. She holds her body taut because she is implacable and totally confident (Beryl Grey interviewed in Marks, 1998). Her arms too are straight – by her side with the wrists flexed. In performing the *posés passés* travelling across the front of the stage, she does not lower onto the whole foot before executing the next; she remains *en pointe*. The verticality of her body is therefore stressed. When she reaches centre stage, she faces the front, and standing in second position, transfers her weight from side to side. The straightness and rigidity of her legs are emphasised – taut and strong, legs of steel. Later on in the ballet her legs symbolise a weapon of war, daggers.

In the opening section, the Black Queen makes full use of the stage (bar upstage left). Phrases travel on various diagonals and are positioned centre stage; sweeping steps and *ports de bras* cut large arcs through the space. The queen is considered the most valuable piece in chess because it is the only one without restrictions or limits on her movements. Drawing upon this, de Valois’s choreography here reflects the chess piece’s freedom across the board and uses it metaphorically: the Black Queen’s commanding use of space emphasises her status and authority, and presents her confidently and arrogantly to the other pieces. ‘This will be my territory’ is the message she projects. Her strong belief in her ability to succeed is stated again towards the end of the ballet when she dances in front of the abandoned Red King. Again travelling all over the stage, she taunts him that she will rule the entire chessboard.

The Black Queen and her knights

In her dances with her knights, the Black Queen is not glorified, or manipulated by them for their desire; instead her status, authority and ambitious nature are highlighted. Rather than showing the men exercising power over the woman, de Valois’s choreography gives control to the woman. The Black Queen commands the men and expects them to follow her orders. After she enters and positions herself centre stage, her knights move to her side, to serve her, without any literal prompt. She need not summon them; they know their place. At other times, the Black Queen asserts her authority in a forceful manner. While in a tender, sensual embrace with her own knights, she becomes frustrated by the Red Knights ignoring her. She releases contact with the Black Knights and sweeps her arms strongly to either side, gesturing them to move back. Their presence has not assisted her desire to gain the Red Knights’ attention.

While de Valois downplays the men’s ability to assist the woman in the example above, the Black Queen is also supported by her knights in a way which allows her to fulfil her ambitions. They further empower her. For example, they assist her in securing the Red Knight’s affection by raising her high above their heads so that she may toss a rose to him. Supported by her knights, quietly watching on as the Red Knight declares his love for her to the other Red Knight,

she performs a *développé devant en fondu* into a *couru en avant*, *posé attitude penché en fondu*, and *posé relevé en arabesque*, before being raised high and carried off. The partnered vocabulary here also accentuates her characteristics: the forward directness of the movement emphasises her focused, driven nature.

Masculine movements and posture

In exercising power and control, the Black Queen adopts what can be viewed as ‘masculine’ attributes. In this context, ‘masculine’ refers to bold, broad movements that create strong lines and angles, producing an imposing image. For example, she exits the scene with the knights described above with a stag leap. While a stag leap may be performed by both sexes, it derives from the action of a male deer. De Valois appears to imply ‘he’ has caught ‘his’ prey.

Earlier in the same scene, after the Black Queen has gained the second Red Knight’s attention, she steps back into parallel, and with arms by her side, elbows bent behind the body, palms facing up, she walks around in a small circle. The position could be described as an exaggerated military pose. Shortly after, the Black Queen stands on one leg with the other bent in front; her torso is rotated towards it and her arms placed in a *demi seconde* but with the arms bent and the wrists flexed. Her elbows are pulled out to the side, and her fingertips point forward. Here again, the arms create a posture that gives breadth across the chest, forces the chest forward and strongly engages the back and arm muscles. These arm lines, along with other positions and *ports de bras* that create the same effect, produce a threatening stance. These angular poses allude to de Valois’s knowledge of Expressionist dance, but also suggest that de Valois felt that the Black Queen needed at times to adopt a more masculine image to strengthen her role as a leader and to signal that she is a match for any man.

The Black Queen and the Red Knight

In this *pas de deux*, de Valois does not differentiate between male and female through their movement vocabulary, as ballet has been criticised for doing (Aalten, 1997; Foster, 1996). The female dancer is traditionally associated with small, quick movements (Aalten, 1997), intricate footwork, *petit allegro*, *relevés* and *pirouettes en pointe* and supported *adage* that accentuate her leg extensions. The male dancer, in contrast, is associated with expansive, gravity-defying movements, *grand allegro* and ‘impressive turns’ (Aalten, 1997:49).

In *Checkmate*, however, the vocabulary in the *pas de deux* includes *posés de côté*, *posés* in parallel *retiré*, *posés* into parallel first, lunges, *pirouettes* in *attitude*, jumps in *arabesque*, *pas de chats* in parallel, low *grands jetés devant*, *sissonnes*, sideways walks and swivel turns. These travelling, turning and *allegro* steps are not typically strongly associated with either the male or female ballet dancer. Therefore, de Valois could be viewed as choosing ‘neutral’ ballet steps. Furthermore, the two characters dance a significant amount of identical steps in unison. De Valois adopts what could be called a positive sensibility towards gender representation, suggesting an even

match between the two characters. It would be difficult to use this *pas de deux* as an example of ‘male gaze’ and male dominance theories.

Differences in the partnership do, however, occur when one dancer traps and controls the other. Though the Red Knight succeeds in seizing control on more occasions than the Black Queen, when he could be viewed as manipulating her, it is the queen who initiates more of the attacks. She *relevés* in *arabesque* towards him and grabs the wrist of the arm holding his sword, in an effort to take it. On another occasion, she charges towards him, and even though he knocks her sword out of her hand as she jumps, she does not shy away. She is a woman with agency, confident and fearless. Her movement is dynamically strong, energetic and bold, qualities which assist de Valois in creating the image of an assertive woman along the lines Banerjee (1998) argues is visible in Aurora’s character in *The Sleeping Beauty* (Petipa, 1890).

The body as a weapon of war

Royal Ballet Principal Zenaida Yanowsky, reflecting upon the Black Queen’s vocabulary, said, ‘They’re very sharp movements; so immediately you get a sense of distress, a bit of danger’ (in MacFarlane, 2007). Sharp movements which create an air of danger predominate when the Black Queen enters for the battle scene. Focused and determined to succeed, she bursts onto the scene, aiming to unnerve the Red side. With sword in hand, she performs *grands jetés en avant* and *posés relevés* in *arabesque*. Whether the movements are large or small, her limbs shoot out to the relevant place with attack, like arrows. De Valois choreographed movement through which the female body references instruments of war.

Within the context of the battle, the *pointe* shoe itself comes to symbolise a weapon. The most potent example occurs before the Black Queen approaches the Red King for the second time. Stepping up onto *pointe* into second position from a kneeling position, she quickly transfers her weight from side to side while her arms lift upwards. After dropping back down to kneeling, she turns and repeats the steps *en pointe* facing the Red King. Though the stepping up onto *pointe* from the kneeling position looks awkward, it bestows on the movement an aggressive edge. Her feet resemble two daggers stabbing into a surface with effort. The quick transferences of weight – like rapid, light jabs – drill downwards. These movements foreshadow the ending: the Black Queen will stab the Red King. In using the *pointe* shoe to emphasise awkwardness, effort and downward action, qualities associated more with Expressionist dance, de Valois rejects here the *pointe* shoe’s association with upward action and lightness, which consequently portray the woman as weightless (Aalten, 1997). The Black Queen is grounded in her determination.

Contrasting movement qualities

While sharp, direct, strong movements are prominent within the Black Queen’s choreography, she also dances in ways that contrast with them. Within her

opening phrases, she combines taut, vertical and angular movements with sensuous, fluid, feline movements. For example, after *posé passé* in parallel and her transferences of weight from side to side in second position, she lifts her arms up while standing in fourth position: her fingertips, which lead the movement, scoop inwards towards her body, which contracts, creating a forward curve. Lowering from *pointe en fondu*, she extends her fingertips downwards and forward, pulling her into a run into a *posé* in parallel *retiré* with arms bent, elbows next to the body and wrists near the shoulders. The wrists quickly flex so that the fingers point backwards. Her movements resemble a cat stretching and arching. Soon after, she performs *développés* to second with unfolding arms while the upper body tilts back. The successional movements stretch out to the extremities, creating a sensual image. In these and other feline motifs, her hands resemble paws. The wrists constantly flex, circle, lead and/or finish arm gestures, creating stirring, stroking, sinewy cat-like effects.

The Black Queen's contrasting movement qualities are cleverly interwoven throughout the ballet, a choreographic device de Valois employed effectively to develop a complex character. In performing the Black Queen, Royal Ballet Principal Beryl Grey said, 'You ... have to be quite voluptuous and sinister in your movement' (in Marks, 1998). She noted, 'When you come in, first of all, it has to be a rather voluptuous, sensuous movement: it's only later you see this hard, cruel side of her develop' (in MacFarlane, 2007). Grey's comments not only suggest an interweaving of contrasting characteristics, but also that the balance between the contrasting characteristics changes during the course of the ballet. The Black Queen is a clever woman who changes her approach depending upon the situation. In this she reflects her role within the game of chess, which is, after all, a game of tactics, with the queen as the most versatile piece. Her harsher movements remind us that she has 'bite', but as she is aware that she must approach the situation with care, her luscious movements soften the harsher vocabulary. Providing many dimensions to her personality, the choreography supports a complex view of what a woman can be.

Careful analysis of the Black Queen's reactions to the deaths of the Red Knight, Red Queen and Red King reveals variety in her emotions and motives. After stabbing the Red Knight, she turns, walks away and remains with her back to the funeral procession. At first, her reaction appears heartless, but her stance is not imposing. If anything, it projects sadness. She remains still, with feet together, arms by her side, expressionless, a far cry from her later response to the Red King's death, when she relishes her victory. She had to remove the knight to further her advancement; it was not an act of cruelty. Furthermore, she may remain turned away as a sign of respect; she does not wish to gloat over his body. A similar response is seen earlier in the ballet when she disposes of the Red Queen. Rather than battle with the Red Queen, she has her knights remove her opponent from the board so that the Red Queen's execution happens off stage. There is a sense of honour here: a queen would not kill another queen. The deaths of the Red Knight and Red Queen are swift, unlike that of the Red King, whom she teases and torments. It is as if the Black Queen does not wish to hurt them, see them suffer, or cause them anxiety. Instead, she holds them in higher esteem.

Nuanced use of a female stereotype

As in many female roles in ballet, the Black Queen moves in a sensuous manner in an effort to gain the males' attention, in this case the Red Knights', but interestingly not always with success. For example, in the scene where she casts the rose, she steps back while performing a *développé devant en fondu*, with the opposite arm mirroring the unfolding action of the leg; then she steps forward, rotates, and steps into *arabesque*. The movement is repeated to the other side. Swaying back and forth, creating an almost hypnotic effect, she reaches out towards the Red Knights, calling them, but they do not respond. So, the Black Queen shoots forward into an *arabesque en fondu* towards the knight on her left, as she unfolds both arms and leans her upper body and head back. He turns towards her. De Valois has the man respond to the woman when she is forceful and direct, rather than sensuous, undermining the stereotypical role of the 'seductive temptress'.

It is when the Black Queen confronts her greatest challenge – her potential execution – that de Valois draws strongly upon female stereotypes. Captured by the Red Knight during their 'duel', for the first time during the ballet the Black Queen appears to conform to the notion of women as submissive. The Red Knight drapes her over his shoulder, her limbs hanging loose. Her arms flop about while he parades his prisoner. Her yielding is a crafty tactic, however, a means to survive. While she may let the man believe that he is in control of the situation, she continues to direct the course of events. After being lowered, she performs a *grand battement devant* into a deep back bend as her foot lowers onto *pointe*. The forcefulness of the movements combined with the strong back curve creates a sacrificial, almost violent sexual image. Before repeating the *grand battement* to the other side, she straightens and turns towards the knight. Placing her hands on his collarbones, she looks him in the eye, while he places his arms around her waist. Aware that she is his captive, she continues to engage with him in this manner. She aims to 'stir up' his feeling for her so that he will betray his side. She lowers into an almost Christ-like pose, on her knees, performing a deep back bend, with her arms in a wide 'V', palms facing up, slightly cupped. Shaking her head, she offers herself to him. But, unable to strike the woman he loves, the knight seals his fate.

Playing the helpless victim at his mercy, the Black Queen is like a shrewd chess player who leads her opponent 'down the garden path'. No longer his sacrificial victim, she acts lovingly towards him in order to acquire his sword. As she tentatively caresses his body, he lowers his sword. Unaware of her real intentions and tormented by his inability to strike, he easily lets her take the sword. Ashamed, he turns away. In this instance, de Valois could be seen to 'fuel' the stances of Daly and Foster by reverting to a female stereotype, the whore, while the sword could symbolise the phallus. Although the Black Queen has acted in a stereotypical manner to survive, the choreography contradicts their theories by presenting a man, the knight, as uninterested by her seductive actions. The Black Queen does not fulfil his desires; if anything she suppresses them. Because he lowers his sword and then lets her take it, the Black Queen could be seen to weaken the male by castrating him.

Gently tipping the scales: the Red Queen analysed

In her choreography for the Red Queen, de Valois depicts a loyal wife who deeply cares for her frail and vulnerable husband. The Red Queen puts her husband's needs and well-being before her own. Consequently, in her use of space, she is closely tied to him, and her movement is restricted when they dance together. For example, her steps *en pointe* are small because her husband cannot travel fast or far. In curving, or tilting her body forward, reminiscent of the body moving in for a hug, the Red Queen projects an enclosing, loving, soft image, opposed to the Black Queen's seductive and sacrificial back bends and her upright torso, signalling confidence and authority. The Red Queen comes across as an affectionate, slightly shy woman. While these are her prominent characteristics, the Red Queen is also more complex.

The Red Queen responds to the needs of her husband, but she is not submissive. Instead, her responses illustrate how she is his 'rock'. The scales are gently tipped as she takes charge, leading and supporting him within the *pas de deux*, thereby reversing the tradition roles in which the male supports the female dancer. De Valois gives power to the wife: the Red Queen is the 'power behind the throne', leading the Red King so that he may lead his people. Facing her husband, holding his hands, the Red Queen guides him onto the board performing *courus* and *posés en arrière* into *arabesque*. Her leg reaches out behind her, pointing to where she is trying to take him. The leg raises smoothly, without the attack and force of the Black Queen's *grands battements*. The Red Queen is clever: she must be gentle, move slowly and take small steps if she is to make progress. Stopping for a rest and to encourage her husband, she releases contact and indicates with her arm the Red Pawns positioned stage left. His arm mirrors hers, showing a unity in the partnership. In an effort to make him more independent, she at times assists him with only one hand, or tries to make him stand unsupported while still leading him. For example, holding one hand, she turns her body and continues to lead him towards the pawns, her footwork (*couru, dégagé devant en fondu en pointe*) and outstretched arm all gesturing forward. Releasing contact, she performs a traveling *couru* around him. Unable to manage on his own, he slumps forward. In response, positioning herself behind him, she places her arms underneath his and brings him upright, coming to his rescue. With his arms resting upon hers, they continue to progress forward slowly because of her careful guidance. The roles are reversed: instead of the male 'catching' the female dancer, after a jump, *pirouette* or balance, she 'catches' him.

Although the Red Queen takes control of their entrance onto the board, she does not forget her place as the king's consort and subject. Facing her husband and holding his hands, she performs *posés* in *attitude devant en fondu en pointe* from side to side. The movement has the feeling of a curtsy. A little later, positioned behind him, she executes a *port de bras* which has the effect of 'framing' him. In tenderly gazing towards him, she places the emphasis on him. She is not behaving in this way simply out of duty, however; these are loving gestures towards her husband. Unlike the Black Queen's, her movements are both courteous and respectful towards her male partner. By placing the attention on him, however, the choreography provides a further example of how the *pas de deux* reverses tradition.

Like the Black Queen, the Red Queen is not afraid to fight for what she believes in. Initially, she adopts a diplomatic approach. She pleads with the Black Queen not to harm her husband, humbly asking for mercy. While her efforts fall on deaf ears, they provide evidence of the Red Queen as a focused, strong-minded, shrewd woman who decides to take matters into her own hands. The two women are therefore not so dissimilar. In addition, both before and after the Red Queen pleads with the Black Queen, she performs in a manner akin to her opponent. She reveals another side, that she too has bite. Immediately after the Black Queen approaches the Red King and retreats, the Red Queen quickly follows her. Not only does she go of her own accord and run with conviction, but she also stands right in front of the Black Queen. Then, later on, when the Red Queen is at the mercy of the Black Knights, she holds her body taut and performs in a sharp manner with attack. Dragged along the floor in an *arabesque*, her limbs reach outwards. Her arms shoot up to fifth; she turns at speed and performs *grand battement en attitude devant en fondu*. The Red Queen leaves the board fighting.

Conclusion

Feminist scholars such as Daly (1987) and Foster (1996) have criticised the ballet genre for portraying women as being without agency, objects of male desire, and manipulated by men – and as reinforcing gender stereotypes. In contrast, an analysis of the Black and Red Queens reveals that ballerina roles can present multifaceted, complex women and illustrates how female agency and leadership can be strongly conveyed in ballet. De Valois was a strong-minded, driven woman with foresight (Grey interviewed in Marks, 1998), and her choreography for *Checkmate* anticipated the views of some feminist writers (Carter, 1999; Banes, 1998) by re-thinking how ballet could depict women.

The Black and Red Queens are powerful women. At times, their attributes are the same, but expressed differently through the choreography: boldly for the Black Queen, subtly for the Red Queen. Both clearly reject notions of women's primary function as fulfilling male desire. Representing an independent woman, a woman with agency, the Black Queen is without a king and rules her kingdom herself. The woman's desire to rule is at the centre of her narrative. While the Red Queen is responsible for her own actions, her desires are connected to her husband's, as she leads the fight for their kingdom.

Both women have a commanding presence over men. The Black Queen asserts her leadership and authority in different ways: sometimes forcefully, sometimes merely by her presence. Astute and adaptable, she also knowingly uses stereotypical feminine approaches towards men as tactical manoeuvres to secure her triumph. The Red Queen, on the other hand, adopts a gentler approach in order to ensure the man responds in her desired way. When the queens dance with men, equality or unity is stressed. The Black Queen's agency and her desire to win are brought to the fore when she battles with the Red Knight, while traditional roles are reversed when the Red Queen and Red King perform together.

In *Checkmate*, men are presented as mentally or physically weaker, or equal to the women – not superior to them. By having the men both hinder and further

empower the women, de Valois suggests more complex power relations than feminist critiques have ascribed to ballet. Her women may not need men to gain power and fulfil their aims. In addition, men are depicted as posing a threat to women's success, and the women must 'battle' them on both a psychological and physical level.

De Valois's queens, like famous strong-minded women in history and the choreographer herself, reveal an interweaving of contrasting traits. As depicted in *Checkmate*, women are multifaceted and difficult to categorise in stereotypical terms. Although as chess pieces the queens must move from square to square, they do not 'fit into boxes'. Unlike the chessboard, the image of women they present is not black and white.

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Notes

1. Created against the backdrop of the growing threat of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and an impending war in Europe, *Checkmate* has been interpreted as a reference to the political situation of the time (Walker, 1987).
2. In Foster's chapter titled 'The ballerina's phallic pointe', the ballerina on stage is reduced to representing a phallic symbol: 'She is, in a word, the phallus, and he embodies the forces that pursue, guide and manipulate it' (Foster, 1996:1). The ballerina, no matter what era or ballet, is perceived as an object of male desire. Everything she does is for male pleasure. Daly's 1987 article 'The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers' gives an account in the same vein. While Daly does not label all ballet in the same manner, her application of 'male gaze' theory to the *pas de deux* from Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (1946) results in an analysis that focuses on male/female power relations to the detriment of other possible interpretations. The male is seen to manipulate the female. The ballerina, interpreted as an object of desire, is passive, submissive, restricted and controlled by him. Daly (2000) has since declined requests to anthologise her 1987 article because it belongs to a certain era of feminist thinking.
3. The film *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky, made no effort to portray its ballerinas in a different light. Nina (Natalie Portman), gentle, timid, gracious, is considered perfect for the White Swan role. Lily (Mila Kunis), feisty, sensual, alluring, is considered perfect for the Black Queen role. Nina has to find the temptress within her if she is to succeed in dancing the Black Swan.
4. The movement analysis in this article is based on The Royal Ballet's production of *Checkmate* as filmed in 1963 by Margaret Dale for BBC Television, with Beryl Grey as the Black Queen and Deirdre O'Conaire as the Red Queen. No film footage of the original cast is available. While this performance cannot be taken as the definitive version, it is the earliest filmed production available.
5. While Banes does not analyse de Valois's choreography, I have applied some of her principles to the Black and Red Queen roles. These principles are taken from Banes's analysis of *The Sleeping Beauty* in her chapter on the Imperial Russian Ballet.

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