



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## **Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance by Susan Leigh Foster (review)**

Ariel Nereson

Theatre Journal, Volume 65, Number 3, October 2013, pp. 442-444 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tj.2013.0095



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v065/65.3.nereson.html>

doubt. Tragedy, according to this view, allows for a more grounded empathetic practice, “an active ethics . . . characterized by skepticism, pluralism, and many other qualities typically associated with a progressive [society]” (3).

This is a book aimed primarily at scholars interested in cognitive approaches to literature, as well as those in seventeenth-century theatre and performance studies. Those in cognitive studies will find Fletcher’s integration of evolutionary theory and ethics particularly intriguing, as well as his argument that tragic performances are especially well-designed to engage our moral sense. While I had some questions about the neuroscientific and historical evidence behind his optimism regarding tragedy’s claim to a cognitive ethics, I deeply appreciate Fletcher’s articulation of a more reciprocal relationship between cognitive science and literature: “Where previous biological critics have focused on science as a means to resolve the problems raised by literature,” he maintains, he “look[s] to literature to resolve the problems raised by science” (xvi). *Evolving Hamlet* complements work in evolutionary theory by Vermeule, Brian Boyd, and others by bringing a renewed focus to ethics, considering in particular how recent scientific studies on the deep emotional roots of our seemingly rational moral judgments and our cognitive prejudices in considering others’ pain and hunger (such as the egocentric bias or the tendency to privilege abstract fairness over a real engagement with suffering) can be applied to seventeenth-century theatre. Fletcher sees tragedy of the period as a special case for teaching audiences to circumvent these ingrained biases, retraining empathetic feeling by presenting figures onstage as they work through these very moral dilemmas. As someone working in literary neuroscience, I would have preferred to see these claims supported more vigorously with regard to specific cognitive experiments. I also would have liked a deeper engagement with critics like Jonathan Kramnick, Suzanne Keen, and Joshua Landy, all of whom have raised important questions about literature’s ability to improve, or “evolve,” society. That said, I came away from *Evolving Hamlet* with richer questions about cognition and theatre, fresh perspectives on seventeenth-century tragedy, and a new awareness of potential connections in evolutionary theory and ethics. If most books dare less, they also achieve less.

Fletcher’s first two chapters discuss how tragedy handles pragmatic doubts about religion and the afterlife. *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*, he claims, allowed audiences to encounter human suffering that remains in the unknowable future (specifically, the impossibility of understanding one’s inevitable death) through an increasingly secular moral frame.

Chapter 2 proposes that tragic drama used neo-Stoic philosophy to invite audiences to consider the problem of mourning another person’s death from shifting ethical perspectives. Chapter 3 fruitfully interweaves seventeenth-century theories of ocular proof, skeptical paranoia, and self-doubt around readings of *Othello*’s adaptation on the Restoration stage. Fletcher’s final chapters take up questions of skepticism, audience engagement, and ethical growth. Although the book could have been enriched by more play between the evolutionary and the historical, particularly for seventeenth-century theories of cognition and ethics, it is in its very engagement with history that Fletcher’s book makes its strongest contribution to evolutionary literary theory. Rather than assuming stable structures of cognition and art over time, as many such critics do, Fletcher suggests that the social neurobiology behind problem-based ethics, as well as the literary practices that engage it, are historically flexible and context-dependent.

Writing a book that aims to integrate seventeenth-century tragedy, evolutionary theory, pragmatism, and ethics is no small task. Like any volume with such ambitions, *Evolving Hamlet* does not always reach its stated goals. (Indeed, to adequately address such big topics would require a second book.) Yet, while the theoretical framework laid out in the introduction seems detached from the more historical chapters, the book’s breadth is also exciting. Whereas similar works, such as Amy Cook’s *Shakespearean Neuroplay* (2010), concentrate primarily on a single theatrical work and on one cognitive theory, Fletcher’s book moves deftly from the late Renaissance through the Restoration, handling topics from Copernican cosmology to Hobbesian paranoia, as well as to a wide range of scientific scholarship on empathy and decision-making. As a result, *Evolving Hamlet* offers a refreshing take on tragedy and performance by using cognitive and ethical theory to reveal insights into literature’s role in everyday life.

NATALIE PHILLIPS  
Michigan State University

**CHOREOGRAPHING EMPATHY: KINESIS IN PERFORMANCE.** By Susan Leigh Foster. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011; pp. 296.

Cognitive science has become a topic of increasing interest in the field of performance studies, and Susan Leigh Foster’s *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesis in Performance* is a notable, dance-focused addition to this growing body of scholarship. Where

much of this scholarship focuses on new scientific models of cognition, Foster's book offers insight into how the body and its movements have been historically constructed through medical and scientific discourses, as well as aesthetic and sociopolitical registers. Providing a rigorous genealogy of three key terms—"choreography," "kinesthesia," and "empathy"—Foster traces the paths these terms have taken from the sixteenth century to the present, showing how these concepts "function together to construct corporeality in a given historical and cultural moment" (13).

Foster's introduction lays out the political stakes of her project, claiming that the intersecting histories of these three terms reveal the assumptions that underlie different subjective responses, including aesthetic valuations, of dance. While she maintains that such understandings and valuations are always culturally and historically specific, Foster also considers the ways in which bodies, and the relations among bodies, allow us to communicate across cultures and through time. She argues throughout that the shifting definitions of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy each implicate our understanding of the other two terms. Foster's goals in demonstrating the intertwined nature of these three terms are to reveal how current conceptions of the body are rooted in prior formulations, and to propose a working framework for understanding how spectators perceptually respond to dance.

Foster's book is divided into three chapters, each focusing on one of her key terms, all of which demonstrate her considerable facility with the archives of dance history and practice. She begins, for example, by tracing the conceptions of space and time underlying dance documentation from Thoinot Arbeau in the 1590s through Raoul Auger Feuillet's system of notation in the early 1700s, observing that, for the majority during this time period, choreography referred to the art of notating dances. This term was revised in the early twentieth century to refer to the act of creating dances (typically performed by a single creative genius). As modern dance moves away from representation, the term is also used to refer to the expression of emotions through an intentional set of movements. Yet these meanings, too, are not without cultural assumptions, and Foster does a neat job of unpacking the racial bias underlying twentieth-century dance critics' use of the term to deny the artistry of African American dance. Foster concludes the chapter with a look at contemporary understandings of the term, considering how choreography has been revised by postmodern practitioners to refer to the philosophy of creating movement for movement's sake—something that often occurs in collaboration and in very different ways in different global contexts.

Foster's chapter on kinesthesia builds nicely on her treatment of choreography, linking the history of chorography, or map-making and map-reading, to different ways of understanding how one inhabits space. As she points out, the term "chorography" was used by John Essex in his English translation of Feuillet in the early 1700s to describe the study of a specific region, its culture and geography. Noting that eighteenth-century chorography invited a new way of viewing space by presenting an ichnographic, or bird's eye, point of view, Foster argues that such renderings of space likewise influenced contemporary understandings of what we call "kinesthesia," or an awareness of the body as it moves through space. Assumptions about nationalism, imperialism, and colonial privilege are implicit in an ichnographic model of spatial awareness, Foster maintains, especially as chorography developed into choreography.

This prehistory allows Foster to show how kinesthesia marked a departure from earlier understandings of spatial awareness by emphasizing the bodily experience of individuals. The term, coined in 1880 by Henry Charlton Bastian, was used to refer to various fitness regimens aimed at rehabilitating bodies enervated by modern life. It was later replaced by the term "proprioception" in medical fields, although kinesthesia retained its influence among psychologists and dance educators in the early twentieth century, for whom it referred to an internal "sense" of the body's physical organization—one that might vary from person to person and culture to culture, whereas proprioception remained universal. As with choreography, Foster reveals the hidden assumptions underlying kinesthesia's supposed universality.

The book's third key term, "empathy," tends to be used with the least rigor in contemporary scholarship, and Foster's genealogical work here is a timely corrective. As she shows, terms such as "sympathy," "sensibility," and "empathy" have been used in different cultures and in different historical moments to refer to an ability to feel what another is feeling, yet always with a difference. Sympathy, for example, was initially ascribed to the privileged classes, whose nobility of spirit was demonstrated through the care of those less fortunate. As Foster notes, this understanding of sympathy provides a model for colonial encounters with cultural difference. In the mid-eighteenth century, sympathy was assigned to the female psyche, where a supposedly weak nervous system attested to feminine delicacy. Foster deftly points out, however, that such beliefs were contradicted by women's actual roles in the domestic sphere. In 1873, the term "empathy" was introduced, appearing first in Germany as *Einfihlung*, to distinguish it from the feminized "sympa-

thy." Thus removed from the domestic sphere, the concept entered the realm of aesthetics, where empathy became fully developed as a theory of artistic reception. Yet, the distinction between these terms and their cultural registers was far from complete; Foster reveals, for example, how class- and race-based assumptions inform twentieth-century dance critic John Martin's formulation of "metakinesis," wherein the ideal sympathetic observer is presumed to be white, male, and elite. Ending with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of empathy and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese's discovery of mirror neurons, Foster shows that empathy as we currently understand it is a pan-human function that is nonetheless grounded in individual experience, thus avoiding a false universality by attributing it to specifically situated bodies.

In her final chapter, Foster knits together these analyses, turning a critical eye toward contemporary performances to consider how they invite their audiences to respond. Among the performances discussed are: Tanya Lukin Linklater's *Woman and Water*; Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta*; Headlong Dance Theater's *Cell*; Jérôme Bel and Pichet Klunchun's *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* and Klunchun's *I am a Demon*; and Lea Anderson's *Yippee!* and KATHY's *Mission/K*. Foster chooses these works because, in various ways, each contests a traditional notion of choreography, and in so doing, creates opportunities for its audience to develop "multiple and diverse" empathic connections to it through distinct kinesthetic experiences (218). Foster's genealogies yield rich, complex readings of these contemporary works, revealing how the three terms are indeed fundamentally interwoven and how their linked pasts bear on new, productive modes of creating and understanding dance. Ending on a hopeful note, Foster concludes that "the dancing body in its kinesthetic specificity formulates an appeal to viewers to be apprehended and felt, encouraging them to participate collectively in discovering the communal basis of their experience" (ibid.).

**ARIEL NERESON**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DANCE: NEW CREATIVE CHOREOGRAPHY IN INDIA AND THE DIASPORA.** By Ketu H. Katrak. Studies in International Performance series. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; pp. 288.

What are labeled as "contemporary Indian dances" emerged in the form of continually evolving

constellations of artistic works dispersed in India and its diaspora around the globe during the 1970s and '80s, with roots stretching back to the early decades of twentieth-century Indian nationalism. I use the plural form, dances, primarily because of the complexity involved in grouping them within a single genre. The term "contemporary" in relation to Indian dance is concerned with a complicated array of intended meanings that are multifaceted, multifarious, and unique to each sociopolitical, economic, geographic, and racially bound artistic constellation—and are in some ways unique to each dancer within the constellation as well.

Ketu Katrak's *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* is an adventurous attempt to analytically weave the threads of selected contemporary Indian dance choreographies around the globe, including India, the UK, Canada, and the United States, into a single study. As Katrak notes in her introduction, the project is charged by the notion of change, intending to reflect the extent to which the traditional Indian dance vocabulary has been transformed "from the inside, along with creatively bringing in other movement styles to make a new hybrid work" (xix). Her primary focus is on changes in the form and content of these contemporary dances in terms of their evocation of "*rasa*," a theoretical term that could be loosely translated as the taste or aesthetic pleasure derived by informed spectators. Her emphasis is on "the *rasa* evoked by the self-reflexivity of contemporary artists" (xxi), which is meant to raise audiences' social awareness of issues like gender inequality, domestic violence, female sexuality, or the need for "challenging stereotypes of sexuality or nation" (ibid.).

The introduction lays down the theoretical framework of the book, providing an elucidation of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary notion of "heteroglossia" as applicable to contemporary Indian dance. Bakhtin conceptualizes the term as a distinguishing feature of the novel, which orchestrates the dialogization of its multiple voices through the social diversity of speech types, conflicting views, and inflectional meanings. Katrak usefully adopts heteroglossia to describe contemporary Indian dance and the dancers' fluid approach to tradition and innovation, referring to the "dialogic" nature of dance in terms of its open-endedness and "the impossibility of closure," the multiplicity of social voices and meanings, and diverse movement techniques and cultural experiences (14). Katrak further invokes the Bakhtinian notion of multivocality to emphasize the hybrid nature of dance's meanings "generated in the interaction between . . . the performer and the audience" (ibid.).