

The Power of Fragility Martha Graham, *Clytemnestra*, and United States Cold War Propaganda

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Abstract Martha Graham's modernist dance work, *Clytemnestra*, opened on Broadway in 1958. Celebrated as "a blazing swatch of emotional colours", its Cold War political import became immediately apparent as it toured for the US government. *Clytemnestra* demonstrated not only the cultural sophistication of the US; the dramatisation of emotions in an American modern non-verbal language engaged international audience and diplomatic "hearts" in the US bid for "hearts and minds" in its fight against communism. As a powerful artist, Graham brought her fragility to the stage, which represented the nation in what the government called "the translation effect".

Keywords Cold War cultural diplomacy. Modern dance. United States. Emotions. Power. Fragility.

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In order to work, you have to permit yourself to feel, you have to permit yourself to be vulnerable. When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things. One is the spontaneity that is arrived at over years of training. The other is simplicity, but not the usual kind. It is the state of complete simplicity costing no less than absolutely everything, of which T.S. Eliot speaks. (Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*, 1991)

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Quick now, here, now, always -
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.
(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

1 Introduction

When modernist Martha Graham's three-act ballet, *Clytemnestra*, opened on Broadway in 1958, it was celebrated as "a dramatic canvas with a blazing swatch of emotional colors" (Kisselgoff 1992). As the season continued, the import of Graham's work as an "epic" dance evening of "giant stature", "a masterful piece, poised, authoritative, communicative [...] overpowering" accelerated (Martin 1958a; 1958b). *New York Times* critic John Martin had been setting the modern dance canon with his reviews since 1927, yet by 1958 he had expressed reservations about Graham's choreography and her performing career: Graham's solo breakthrough work, *Lamentation*, was performed by Graham, born in 1894, and celebrated in 1930. The woman and the art followed the trajectory of artistic modernism from ground-breaking during the interwar to "classical" or even "old-fashioned" by the late 1950s. Yet with *Clytemnestra*, Graham broke with modern dance protocol, which presented evenings of episodic pieces or "ballets" presented in "acts" with intermissions, allowing the audience to experience several pieces in an evening from a biblical tale, an abstract piece, or a Greek myth, usually followed by a tale of the United States frontier. As Martin (1958c) wrote,

With *Clytemnestra*, Graham has broken all the rules, left all the definitions limp, pursued her self-determined course with merciless integrity, and opened up not so much as a footpath that anyone else can follow.

With rave reviews from critics at the *Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Women's Wear Daily*, *Variety*, and continuing accolades from the *Times*, the Broadway run was extended to accommodate audience demand and sold-out houses.¹ The Cold War political import of *Clytemnestra* and the emotions it evoked became manifest when Graham and *Clytemnestra* left the United States.

1.1 The Dance of Cold War Diplomacy

Within weeks after the Broadway run, the Graham company left for Israel with *Clytemnestra* to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the new nation (Eshel 2021). In 1962, John F. Kennedy's State Department chose the work as the centrepiece of a goodwill tour to Cold War hot spots Turkey, Greece, and "behind the Iron Curtain" to Soviet bloc nations (Phillips 2020, ch. 4). As the personal became politicised during the Cold War, Graham's import cannot be overemphasized. She would become the only artist whose company represented every Cold War US president globally, from Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955 through a planned tour under George H.W. Bush in 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the US Cold War quest to establish itself as a soft empire, its bid for 'hearts', imagined as containing fundamental and 'universal' human emotions, Graham was a preeminent cultural ambassador because she brought these timeless emotions to the stage with an innovative modern language derived from the body

While numerous historians, including myself, have argued that the US used "the modern dance" as a cultural export to fight the Soviet empire, promote the power of capitalistic modernisation, and assert the cultural sophistication of the United States, all in the context of class, gender, race, and soft empire, the power of emotions inherent in genre has remained understudied.²

During the twenty-first century, the history of emotions has become as fundamental to some historians as race, class, and gender, yet this study applied to the history of public diplomacy is a relatively new field.³ In 2021, the *American Historical Review* published an extensive roundtable on the history of emotions (Eustace et al. 2012), and numerous international institutes have been established at re-

¹ Terry 1958a; Lloyd 1958a; 1958b; *Newsweek* 1958; *The Christian Science Monitor* 1958a; 1958b; *The New York Times* 1958; *Women's Wear Daily* 1958.

² Mills 2017; Croft 2015; Barnhisel 2015; Purkayastha 2014; Prickett 1999; 2010; Morris 2001; Prevots 1998; Caute 2003.

³ Diplomatic practitioners have primarily used the study of emotions to understand efficacy. See Hall 2019; Markwica 2018. Historians of emotions have explored the causal effect of emotions on diplomatic outcomes (Ghalehdar 2021).

nowned universities.⁴ Joseph Nye's study of soft power places "attraction" at the centre of power relations (2008). The sub-field has been extended to the realm of diplomacy because they share the pillars of power, practice, society, culture, and morality (Gienow-Hecht 2009; Graham 2014). The study of emotions in public diplomacy has drawn from diverse fields, including International Relations, Communications, Diplomatic History, Political Theory, and Public Relations, all based in their own theoretical paradigms.⁵

In the case of Martha Graham and the export of *Clytemnestra* as the exertion of soft power, the category of gender in the history of emotions and public diplomacy becomes vital.⁶ While women as diplomats have been explored as agents of imperialism, particularly as missionaries and wives, and studies of masculinity and sexuality have informed studies of the Cold War, this work demonstrates the way in which power becomes framed in the context of fragility when transmitted by a woman as a socially constructed human characteristic that can represent a new empire to promote friendship, compassion, empathy, and thus enable diplomacy. Graham's "indelible, un-ironic language of angst [that] plumbs psychological depths" in *Clytemnestra* demonstrated not only the power of the US; the dramatisation of emotions in an American modern language of non-verbal communication - from rage to guilt, power, and fragility - engaged international audiences and diplomatic "hearts" in the US bid for "hearts and minds" in its fight against communism. Vulnerability and fragility, expressed by a woman, engaged with power relations and enabled Nye's "attraction" through empathy and a bid to "universal" emotions in times of love and international conflict (Bodice 2018; Franco 2014).

⁴ E.g. The Cambridge History of Memory and Emotions Workshop (MEW), University of Cambridge, UK; The Queen Mary Centre for the History of Emotions, Kings College, London; Center for the History of Emotions, London; Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin (Germany).

⁵ Fisher 2010; Fisher, Bröckerhoff 2008; Hayden 2007; 2011; Cull 2008; Ross 2013; Fitzpatrick 2007; Habermas 1985.

⁶ Note that future studies must include the potent issue of race in the performance of *Clytemnestra*: Mary Hinkson, the first African American dancer to be taken into a mainstream modern company by Graham in 1951, Pearl Lang, a Jewish American dancer, and Yuriko, a Japanese dancer hired by Graham from an Internment Camp during World War II, all played the lead role. Graham's casting decisions brought her declaration that "Clytemnestra is every woman" into high relief, particularly in twentieth-century America.

1.2 The Dance of Cold War Diplomacy: Graham as “The Master” Ambadress

By 1958, Graham and her works had been defined in the short historiography of modern dance as a representative of the democratic West and its values. Noting the demise of the early, foundational 1920s and 1930s German expressive dance forms after World War II, the author of the first book to codify the modern dance and its leaders declared, in 1949,

That the American modern dance has shot way past the Central European may be partly imputed to America’s escape from war’s effect. More is the modern dance ascribable to the bright land of its birth - a land where freedom and democracy are ideals [...] a land of mighty projects. (Lloyd 1949, 21)

Because modern dance was free and born of the individual, its foundation in a non-fascist environment seemed self-evident, despite the birth of the form in Germany, its development in Japan, and the lagging interwar American entry into the genre. However, with Graham’s post-war status affirmed as a “ground-breaking” choreographer and performer, she became useful as a Cold War ambassador under the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration. By 1958, Graham had become a trusted global Cold War US messenger. In US-sponsored international press, she had been anointed “the Picasso”, “the High Priestess”, and “the First Lady” of modern dance on tours for the international public. And with *Clytemnestra*, she became reified as “The Modern Master” (Martin 1958b).

Despite her stance as an apolitical artist, which suited paradoxical US Cold War propaganda requirements that demanded a separation between the state and its artists, Graham knew her politics and used its horrific history of war to fuel her works. During the opening scene of *Clytemnestra*, “Rape of Troy”, Graham had coached the women on how to move:

She told a horror story of World War I that was the basis for the painful movement through the groin. She told us that during the war soldiers who were plundering and raping the women took cornstalks and soaked them in fuel - raped the women themselves and then raped them with the cornstalks which were set afire.⁷

Graham brought the experience of wartime female vulnerability and fragility to the stage, which represented the redemptive power of

⁷ Box 10, folder (14).

World War II Axis democracy, and the humanity of the US. When ideology was embedded in art for export, US government strategists called it “the translation effect”. Graham could simultaneously portray power and fragility and cajole audiences to the side of the US, a soft empire, through empathy for those who suffered under the fascists and the power of redemption under the Western watch.

Although vulnerability was politicised in *Clytemnestra* when presented by the State Department as a representation of the US through its artistic empathy, the genius of Graham’s artistry as a political message derived from her passionate drive to represent herself. She believed that by digging into herself, finding the raw essential emotions, the movement vocabulary and choreography that emanated from this quest would thus express a ‘universal’ human experience. Thus, as a masterwork, *Clytemnestra* contained elements of Graham’s biography that she used for her art.

2 Location, Location, Location

For the US, the State of Israel had become an important hot spot. After having toured Asia and the Middle East for Eisenhower between 1955 and 1956 to rave reviews, the company concluded its run in Israel under private funding, but with the full assistance of the State Department, United States Information Agency, and the US embassy in Israel (Rottenberg 2018). Indeed, many dancers and critics did not know that the performances were not US-sponsored, because the support remained seamless when the company left Iran and entered Israel (Phillips 2020). The suspension of direct US funding for the diplomatic tour, combined with covert domestic funding support that was paradoxically visible internationally, speaks to the complex nature of US-Israeli relations in the early Cold War.

The production of *Clytemnestra* demonstrated how US cooperation with artists in the Middle East could lead to the expression of raw emotion and human “truths” through the deployment of the modernist lens. The commissioned score by an Egyptian composer demonstrated these cultural possibilities through cooperation. As the *New York Times* noted, that the gripping score by Halim El-Dabh was an “enormously effective [...] theatrical collaboration” (Martin 1958a). Martin continued, “the orchestra groans and shrieks and mutters and throbs, in timbres as odd as that of the movement on stage and in melodic snatches as inhibited” (Martin 1958a). The State Department representatives in the New York audience surely spotted the possibilities of a cultural-political “translation effect” echoes as diplomatic strategy.

The use of the Greek myths, and particularly Graham’s use of Euripides in *Clytemnestra* after World War II, would have resonat-

ed in Israel. There was historical precedent. In 1940, Albert Camus had used the myth of Sisyphus to write an essay about France as it fell to the Germans, He underscored the “unreasonable silence” of “the universe in response to tragedy” (Zaretsky 2013). The work was translated into English the year before Graham started working on *Clytemnestra* (Camus 1955). In 1944, Jean Anouilh wrote about his adaptation of *Antigone*, performed in Nazi-occupied Paris. Anouilh asked: “Was not *Antigone* an incarnation of the spirit of resistance to tyranny, if not coded encouragement to the French resistance?” He explained that “under the influence of post-modern humanism” coded messages could be embedded in Greek drama (quoted in Krane 2012). In 1947, Primo Levi examined his experience in the Nazi concentration camp through the *pathemathos* in Greek drama (1947). These artists’ modernist approach to Greek myths allowed them to proclaim social and political beliefs in timeless humanistic terms that used emotion to draw the audience to anti-Nazi sentiment in war-torn France, or elicit pro-Western sympathies during the Cold War. Graham followed these modernist writers and dramatists.

After touring in Israel, *Clytemnestra* remained in the company repertory. With critics having gushed that the artist-choreographer-dancer could speak of “unspeakable human truths”, the John F. Kennedy administration sent Graham and her company on a tour of Eastern and Western Europe that featured Graham in *Clytemnestra* (Martin 1958a). Of particular import was the tour’s emphasis on humanistic themes rather than on the propagandistic promotion of America through what the government called ‘Americana’ during the Eisenhower tour.

Numerous authors, including myself, have argued that Graham’s work for the US government was a part of a larger demonstration of US power and empire through cultural exports and soft power, particularly with *Appalachian Spring*, the work set on the Western frontier that promoted freedom and democracy with a Pulitzer Prize winning score by Aaron Copland based on the folk refrain “’tis a gift to be simple; ’tis a gift to be free” (Croft 2015). Yet as demonstrated with the US propaganda strategy towards neutral and non-aligned nations, defined by seductive cultural offerings in place of explicitly pro-American or anti-Soviet products like *Appalachian Spring*, the government strategies became complex, even nuanced during Kennedy’s propaganda Cold War, if not in his actions including the Bay of Pigs invasion. Particularly when arriving in nations that had been colonies of the British, European or Russian empire, the US paradoxically took a stance of “we are like you” as it promoted itself as a new, modern, and softer power embedded in “universal” human history and used its own former position as a British colony that had sought and found freedom through democracy. The State Department and United States Information Agency fought regionally based on analyt-



Maurizio Nardi and Katherine Crockett performing
Martha Graham's. Photo by Paul B. Goode

ical research, polls, and used other strategies learned from Madison Avenue's advertising agencies that were then applied on a local level to promote US values as universal desires, seemingly untethered to politics.⁸ Like all good advertisers, the officials looked to strategies that would tap emotions to bring "hearts" into the fold by tapping into emotions. Frailty has been an overlooked emotion in the history of diplomacy that has traditionally emphasized studies of dominance and assertive power when considering the US as a rising Cold War global player.

8 Advertising Council (1) [Project 101] 1947-1948 Part 1_NARA II RG 59 Entry P 226 Box 1 F 10 Part 1(Pages 2-4).



Pei-Ju Chien-Pott as Clytemnestra. Photo by Brigid Pierce

3 “Universalism”: Greek Mythology, *Clytemnestra*, the Modern Mind, and the Modern Dance

Graham’s *Clytemnestra* is a non-linear evening-length three-act work with a prologue and epilogue based on the Greek myth as interpreted by Euripides. To follow the narrative, Graham’s three-act structure demanded some audience familiarity with the classical story if they intended to follow the full story: the start of the Trojan War; the sacrificial murder of Clytemnestra’s daughter Iphigenia to enable Agamemnon’s army to sail to fight for Helen, her sister; Cassandra’s foretelling of doom (and role as Agamemnon’s lover); the subsequent murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus (Agamemnon’s cousin); the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes and Electra. To complicate matters further, in Graham’s original work one man played two leading roles.

In Graham’s *Clytemnestra*, the woman becomes the central character, like almost all Graham’s works that featured the woman as protagonist with “center stage” wherever Graham was. Graham typically used fractured narratives and in this work the chronology is reversed: it opens with the death of Clytemnestra. Justifying the mod-

ernist narrative move, Graham referenced poet T.S. Eliot in her own writing, asserting the power of the end as the beginning. Eliot wrote in his *Four Quartets*, “We shall not cease from exploration | And the end of all our exploring | Will be to arrive where we started” (Eliot [1943] 2001; cf. Jones 2009; Siegel 1975). The *Clytemnestra* programme notes informed the audience before the curtain rose that the heroine would experience forgiveness and a rebirth from the ashes of war and personal tragedy (Austin 1975, 398).

In Act I, the curtain opens and Clytemnestra is seated in the underworld; she asserts her case to King Hades by reliving the events through memory. As the non-linear, nightmarish drama unfolds, Clytemnestra calls up images of the Trojan War in the “Rape Scene”; she then recalls the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia by her husband Agamemnon. In the next episode, she foreshadows events and depicts Orestes and Electra plotting to murder her as they seek vengeance for her murder of their father, Agamemnon. This is followed by Agamemnon’s return from war with Cassandra, his lover and the prophetess. The Furies anticipate the horrors to come, as yet another memory loop-back encircles the audience. Then Aegisthus plants the seed of Agamemnon’s murder in Clytemnestra’s mind. Electra welcomes her father home, and watches as Clytemnestra seduces Agamemnon into stepping on to a red cloth, reserved for the Gods. As Cassandra foretells of the murders, they take place, again making memory from the present. Helen of Troy laments. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have their drunken celebration.

In the next act, Clytemnestra is haunted with drunken nightmares. Agamemnon’s ghost then inspires Electra and Orestes to avenge his murder. In the final scene, The Messenger of Death takes his place in front of the curtain. In the epilogue, gold bands separate on stage and Clytemnestra is escorted behind them. By acknowledging her guilt through the narration of her memories, Clytemnestra “gains remittance from her dishonour among the dead”, according to one critic who added, “but the regal motions of the dance suggest not only a rebirth, but a coronation [as] Graham dismantles the elements of the myth and reconstructs it to create the ground for her own footing” (Austin 1975, 397).

New York Herald Tribune’s Walter Terry (1958b) equated the dance with such great theatrical tragedies as “the great *Oresteia*”, and Strauss’ *Elektra*. He wrote that the “nightmarish” quality of Graham’s drama derived from her fracturing of the linear story into episodes, flash forwards, all supported by the tenets of Jungian psychology and the “modernist” approach to the mind through psychotherapy (Herzog 2015; Ffytche, Pick 2013; Beer 2008).

Despite the highbrow intellectual knowledge required by an audience to read the episodic narrative presented by Graham in *Clytemnestra*, Graham set out with the intention that only required



Martha Graham. Photo by Martha Swope

the audience to understand human emotional “truths”, saying, “Clytemnestra is every woman” (1991, 26; cf. Thoms 2008; Phillips 2013). According to critics, she succeeded: “*Clytemnestra* is a timeless ritual in which the artist searches through the archaic mind for the remote psychological roots of human savagery and its conquest” (Martin 1958b). As an artist “dealing with the body of established human truths”, Graham offered audiences “terrifying emotional revelation” (Martin 1958b).

With the physical, codified dance technique taught by Graham, the vocabulary used to tell the *Clytemnestra* narrative explained during lecture-demonstrations on government tours and pre-circulated to the elites through a taped film production, Graham embraced the vulnerability of the human body and used this as power to fuel the technique founded on the principles of the individual body, her own. The Graham Dance Technique, as opposed to other modernist techniques named for their founders José Limón or Merce Cunningham, is based on the contraction and release, the movement of the breath inhale and exhale, or of sexual peak and supplication (Bannerman 2010b; Dance Spirit 2009; Merce Cunningham Trust 2022). Perfecting the highly codified Graham Dance Technique allows the dancer to appear out of control as she shakes with fear or jealousy, in angst or passion. Graham wrote: “The awakening starts in the feet and goes up. Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy” (1991, 122). With the perfection of the technique, the story of human life is told because, as Graham repeated again and again, “movement never lies” (122). Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy” (1991, 122).

As Cold War propaganda, the Graham Dance Technique worked in opposition to the French-Soviet ballet, developed and perfected by

the imperial courts, in which the female body is never out of control. Indeed, high physical balletic control often signals narrative despair. From the dance of the Wilis in *Giselle* to the swans in *Swan Lake*, trapped women show physical precision, particularly in arabesque, poised on one leg. Of the classical ballets, one of the few times a ballerina hits the stage floor is during dances of death, as in *Giselle*'s "mad scene". Yet in Graham's works, there are few ballets that do not include falls forward, back falls, or rolls on the floor. Thus, power is offset and framed by its opposite, vulnerability and human frailty. Indeed, always the self-proclaimed thief, Graham borrowed from ballet. Always the apolitical politicised chameleon, Graham stated on diplomatic tours to Soviet bloc nations that her technique "expanded" on classical technique.

4 The Woman as Archetype: Biography and the Making of *Clytemnestra*

Graham used herself and life as she approached all her archetypes in dance. She had been in Jungian therapy and read his works, using the idea of archetypes to connect her own life to a universalised human experience through therapy, which she used in her choreography, and the Graham Dance Technique. She wrote: "Whether it was a dance of consuming jealousy [...] or one of tender love [...] it came so close to real life that at times it made me ill" (1991, 200). Like the individualistic tenets of artistic modernism, the psychoanalytic technique of unpacking the individual mind was anathema to theories of communism, particularly because the individual exploration would lead a universal. The practice of psychotherapy has a nuanced history in the USSR (Marks, Savelli 2020; Miller 1998). Yet Graham's absolute proclamation of the individual experience as the key to the universal, whether through myth and the mind or dance technique and the body, spoke unabashedly to the US assertion that democratic freedom began with the power of the individual.

When Graham choreographed *Clytemnestra*, her professional and personal life were in turmoil. In 1957, after Graham started choreographing *Clytemnestra*, she was invited by the State Department and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, to open Congress Hall in Berlin with a performance of her solo, *Judith*. As a cultural diplomat for the United States, Graham represented the power and freedom offered to the creative individual, and women, as she performed on stage, for the press, and at embassy parties. However, as opposed to ticker tape parades for the star and the Martha Graham Dance Company while on tour for Eisenhower in 1955, in Berlin Graham was received cordially as a solo performer alongside numerous other women who also took the spot-

light, including the African American soprano Ethel Waters, choreographer and legendary Hollywood icon Agnes de Mille, American film star Lillian Gish, and the glamorous Broadway writer, ambassador, and wife of Time-Life magnate Henry Luce, Clare Boothe Luce.⁹ In addition, Graham's performance did not receive her usual standing ovation until she was joined on stage by the German dance pioneer, Mary Wigman, who had been written off in the literature of the field of modern dance in 1949 by the American critics. In Berlin, reviewers complained about Graham's dramatic, old-fashioned modernism. Graham saved her ticket stub for Wigman's company performance that same week, which received critical raves (Phillips 2020, ch. 3). Her partner, Bertram Ross recalled: "When Martha came back to the States - her working rhythm was broken - Martha was going off the deep end".¹⁰ During the making of *Clytemnestra*, Graham's state caused Ross (her Agamemnon), as well as other dancers, to claim that they had essentially created the masterpiece. Ross concluded: "It took quite a while for things to get back on the track - if they ever did".

On a personal level, Graham's body was failing her as a dancer and she consumed more and more alcohol. At the age of sixty-three, Graham was playing young heroines on stage from the bride on the American frontier in the group work *Appalachian Spring*, to the seductress Judith in the solo she had performed in Berlin. Most dancers would have retired at half her age, but Graham persisted as choreographer, company manager, and star. While on tours, Graham's fatigue and excessive drinking had been noted in government reports and her dancers' private letters home. Graham would later admit that when she was faced with crisis, she relied on alcohol.

With failures in her personal life and facing sure retirement, she admitted, "I stayed home alone, ate very little, and drank too much" (237). However broken, she continued to work on her first and only full-evening three-act ballet, *Clytemnestra*, putting herself centre stage as the wronged princess of Sparta in scenes of jealous rage aimed at the seductive young women, and posited *Clytemnestra's* lapse into alcoholic tremors, nightmares and guilt, following her own trajectory.

Graham struggled with envy for the young dancers she had trained to become the beautiful Helen of Troy, Cassandra, or Electra. She referred to the loss of her performing abilities, "the circle of Dante's Hell omitted". She wrote: "My dependency [on alcohol] increased when I began to feel my powers as a dancer leave me"; and concluded: "I turned to alcohol, perhaps more than I should have..." (237-8). Indeed, Graham was often late for *Clytemnestra's* rehearsals, or did

⁹ Box 13, folder (1).

¹⁰ Box 10, folder (14).

not show up at all. The company rehearsed in secret if she did not appear. One dancer recalled that when Graham showed up, “sometimes she would rehearse and get lost. Or sometimes she would rehearse, and it would work. You just didn’t know” (Marni Thomas, interviewed by the Author, 2004). While struggling never to show a hint of frailty, Graham announced, if called, that she had been on the phone to “Washington”, or that her dishwasher was broken. Dancers close to her knew she had never cooked a meal in her Upper East side apartment full of antiques and trinkets collected from the Asian and Middle Eastern tours. Bertram Ross stated plainly, “it was very difficult to rehearse because she would come so drunk” (1994).

5 The Personal Becomes Political: Graham Steals from Herself

Despite the rumours and allegations that Graham had not choreographed her greatest work, *Clytemnestra*, I join other dancers who cite her proclamation: “I am a thief, but I only steal from the best”. She rattled off names: Picasso, Jung, adding, “... and Bertram Ross”. The fact that she relied heavily on her dancers’ movements to stage *Clytemnestra* demonstrates her genius as director and choreographer; she was the impresario who could put the masterpiece together and assemble the pieces from the movement to the set, costumes, music, and herself.

Two scenes were consistently praised by critics as capturing the individual passion that could be understood by the “everywoman” and thus the “everyman” in the audience: the murder of Agamemnon, and the following “Drunk Scene” after the murder between Clytemnestra and her lover followed by her nightmares. In both episodes, Graham drew heavily on herself. As an artist, surely Graham herself would not contest a personal-to-archetypal reading of *Clytemnestra* as self-thievery. Graham called herself “doom eager”, defining it as “the ordeal of isolation, the ordeal of loneliness, the ordeal of doubt, the ordeal of vulnerability which it takes to compose in any medium” (1991, 118). And Graham herself equated her artistic power with fragility: “When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things” (7). In this rumination on this power of human fragility, she made reference to mythology, as she had with her role in *Clytemnestra*:

The Greek myths speak of the spindle of life resting on the knee of necessity, the principal Fate in the Platonic world. The second Fate weaves, and the third cuts. Necessity to create? No. But in some way to transcend, to conquer fear, to find a way to go on. (7)

Graham certainly ‘stole’ and borrowed from artists and her dancers. With her red sheath that she used during the guilt scene, she “stole” from the modernist painter Wassily Kandinsky. Yet the brilliance of the two iconic scenes in *Clytemnestra* speaks to her creative period of distress and personal frailty which brought the Greek myth to the stage as a masterwork.

Graham readily admitted that she knew rage, which fuelled Clytemnestra and her staging of Agamemnon’s murder. Regarding the scene, Graham said:

Clytemnestra is every woman when she kills. Why this is so I do not really know, except that I am a woman. I know that in a woman, like a lioness, is the urge to kill if she cannot have what she wants. (26)

In her past relationship with men, the anger, jealousy and pain Graham expressed had been inspired by her ex-husband’s departure a decade earlier (237-8). Although she took numerous other lovers, she wrote letter upon letter to her Jungian psychiatrist expressing that she could love no one like her former husband, who had left her for younger male lovers. With professional disappointments and a direct confrontation with her own aging body, Graham knew rage.

Of herself, and her legendary temper Graham wrote: “I was capable of great violence [...] I had a very bad temper, very bad. I still have it, though I do not use it often. I’ve learned not to allow myself to indulge in it” (82). Yet she described her own behaviour backstage:

Some anger seized me – and I took one of the bottles and smashed it against the mirror, which shattered into a thousand pieces. I said nothing. [Others] said nothing. I simply gathered my belongings and moved to another mirror. (82)

Graham was known to lash out at dancers verbally, physically punch them, and even seed hatred among cast members in order to create theatrical truth for stage performances. As an artist she said, “I can use my temper, if need be, on occasion” (82).

During the build-up to the murder of Agamemnon in *Clytemnestra*, scenes choreographed by Graham edged on physical violence between the dancers. Ross, as Agamemnon, wrote:

I spun around to face Clytemnestra and her left hand in the shape of a claw struck out at me, like a tigress striking out with its paw. I did the same with my right hand. The rhythm of our walk was no longer an even pulse of side, back, side front. It was erratic like two wild animals stalking each other. Moving forward and then away from each other, feigning blows and clawing at each other jockey-

ing for positions of power. We finally got together and she clawed me in the chest. I writhed and caught myself in the net while Martha stepped forward and did her “I, Clytemnestra” dance.¹¹

During the murder scene,

The red and purple curtains would open, Martha would strike my chest with the huge barbaric bejeweled gold collar with the tip of the blade, I would do my silent scream and reaction, and the curtain would close and open and I would be in a different position and Martha would strike my back and I would react violently and the curtains would close.

After the murder, the curtain opens on the set with what dancers call the “Drunk Scene”.¹² Graham admitted that the loss of her own husband had driven her to drink excessively (1991, 237-8). Regarding Clytemnestra, Graham wrote in her *Notebooks*: “Victim. I, too, a victim” (1973). The scene opens as Graham and her lover share a single over-large golden chalice of wine during the duet. Peggy Lyman, a dancer who Graham coached in her role, recalls:

They abandon themselves in this sort of not really stagger - but there’s an abandonment about it. You know looseness about it that you. Being a little tipsy. And out of control. That kind of sense of, “I know I’ve had a little too much to drink but I don’t want anyone to know it”. You know how you are very careful and you’re walking and your gestures, and that’s that kind of exaggeration that’s in that scene. It’s not a full out [drunk], there’s... there’s an exaggeration - there’s still a sense royalty and power.

Lyman added, “I think one might have had to have experienced themselves” (Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021). Indeed, Graham’s tours had been what the diplomatic corps referred to as the “cocktail circuit of diplomacy”, and Graham had been an early and effective social ambassador, although she had started to abuse alcohol with increasing personal challenges. The balance between drinking at a cocktail party, yet over-drinking and attempting to retain diplomatic composure would have been a reality for Graham.¹³ Although Lyman saw the effects of the alcohol as a metaphor, saying, “I always felt that Clytemnestra was more drunk on power, and the

11 Cf. Bibliography, “Archival Papers”: Ross “Hand-written notes, undated”, b10, f17.

12 Miki Okihara, interviewed by the Author, 2015; Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021.

13 Sichel 2016; Peter Sichel, interviewed by the Author, 2022.

success of ending”, Clytemnestra drunkenness as both truth and allegory would have worked ideally in the personal-as-political Cold War. The experiential power of the scene gave the political metaphor its human quality.

Following the “Drunk Scene”, the curtain opens on Clytemnestra and her lover passed out on the set, with Clytemnestra wrapped in a red sheath. Regarding the colour, Graham recalled a Wassily Kandinsky painting with a streak of red through it writing: “Someday I will make a dance like that”. She wrote: “[Modern] dance followed modern painters and architects in discarding decorative essentials and fancy trimmings. Dance was to be real (1991, 62)” (cf. González García 2020; Bannerman 2010a). Red was Graham’s colour of erotic passion, anger, and jealousy, yet noted that in order to dance the colour, you had to have “vulnerability”. As she recalled, “for *Clytemnestra* I spent many evenings on the studio floor placing great pieces of red material around me” (1991, 62). On colour and abstraction, Graham declared: “Every time you drink a glass of orange juice, you’re drinking the abstraction of an orange. That’s an abstraction to me: the whole effect” (231-2). On alcohol, she said: “I don’t want to dance the spirit of champagne, I want to drink it!” (62).

Reeling from the alcohol and draped in the red cloth, Lyman explains, “Clytemnestra is having a nightmare, and she’s wrapped in this blood and the death and her sins”. Clytemnestra writhes, and then begins to tremble, like alcoholic-induced tremors. Lyman says: “That movement is very spastic. Clytemnestra has to appear to be surrounded and encased in that blood whole time. You can’t separate from the terror or drama or [self] hatred”. Like a post-drunken, inebriated night, the nightmares consume the woman’s mind. And like the symptoms of alcoholism, experienced by Graham at this late stage of her life, Clytemnestra’s physical state, resembles the tremors of advanced stage withdrawal that can occur within hours (cf. Burlison 2016; Nutt 2020). Lyman continues: “She goes into those convulsions. It’s a little, little sharp it’s just an exaggeration of contractions. And it’s very quick sharp exhalations, and... and contractions have a lot of different muscle groups at the same time”. Although Graham had used the tremor and red cloth in other works such as the tale of Medea, Lyman asserts, “[Clytemnestra’s] tremor and the shaking is larger than in other works and it goes on a little bit longer” (Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021). In Ross’ archive, one hand-scrawled scene in a spiral notebook chronicled his discovery of Graham’s near-dead drunken body at home in bed after he broke into her apartment.¹⁴ Graham put her jealousy, rage, and alcoholism on stage to tell the mythic tale of Clytemnestra

¹⁴ Cf. Bibliography, “Archival Papers”: Ross “Hand-written notes, undated”, b10, f17.

as an everywoman. Of *Clytemnestra*, Graham wrote, “saddest of all, I’m my own victim” (1973).

Despite her later proclamation “to stop drinking was easy for me”, after coming close to death with alcohol poisoning, she battled with alcohol for years, perhaps a lifetime. Told that if she continued to drink hidden glasses of whiskey she would die in her seventies, she admitted a desire for a small glass of champagne for the remainder of her life through 1991 (Mikhail Baryshnikov, interviewed by the Author, 2017).

Yet Graham’s own fragility as an aging and alcoholic dancer served her artistically in the making of *Clytemnestra* as she stole from herself to tell a human story. Graham borrowed from the masters, as well as her dancers, but most notably, herself. This self-referential ‘stealing’ can be seen in Graham’s moments of genius in *Clytemnestra*. Despite the high-modernist theatrics of the work, even the twenty-first century post-modern audiences have been gripped by the staging.

6 The Continued Political Import of *Clytemnestra*

Although Graham would never again be hired to perform for the State Department as a dancer after appearing as *Clytemnestra* in 1969 in Portugal, she and her company remained a staple export through the end of the Cold War.

In 1969, she retired from the stage, and almost died in an alcoholic coma, succumbing to Dante’s forgotten circle. Yet Graham and her company rose together like a Phoenix in 1974, with another State Department tour to Asia planned under Richard M. Nixon, who had been Eisenhower’s Vice President during her first heralded tour in the 1950s. She became a diplomatic spokesperson and “Classical Modernist” elder as her young dancers performed. As such, Graham maintained a persona of high command, which represented the possibilities for women in the United States as agents within the capitalistic democracy. Yet her works demonstrated human vulnerability and fragility, thus making power seductive, even “attractive”. In 1975, a critic wrote of *Clytemnestra*:

Must we think politically in order to follow her choreography? Well, Yes and No. Martha Graham disclaims political intent in her dances, but her *Notebooks* reveal a politically active mind. In her notes on *Clytemnestra*, we find quotes from various scholars, George Thompson for example. “The art of tragedy was the product of democracy”, she writes [...] But the dance is no manifesto of a burgeoning democracy, rather an introspective exploration of a woman’s guilts, desires and compulsions. And yet, if by politics we mean the art of balancing the claims of the individual

against those of the community, then her Clytemnestra is a political dance. (Austin 1975, 381)

In 1978, *Clytemnestra* launched the Martha Graham Dance Company as the first modern dance troupe to perform at Lincoln Center's Metropolitan Opera House alongside the grand classical opera and ballet companies which toured globally, including the revered Soviet Bolshoi Ballet. *Clytemnestra* appeared in the Cold War centrepiece of the US performing arts complex that established New York as the "culture capital of the world".⁸ According to C.D. Jackson, Eisenhower's equivalent of a Propaganda Minister and a Director of Lincoln Center, "culture is emerging as a great element of East-West competition. Culture [...] is a word of immense world-wide political significance" (Stern 2012; Janz 1997, 232). De-gendering the word yet acknowledging culture as a part of the women's sphere, Jackson added, "culture, ladies and gentlemen, is no longer a sissy word" (Janz 1997, 232). Graham's *Clytemnestra* was fragile, and certainly also no "sissy", like the grand artist herself.

Clytemnestra's continued political import as an apolitical work of art that spoke to "hearts and minds" came into high relief when the famous Soviet ballet defector Rudolf Nureyev would later assume the leading role of Agamemnon in Graham's work, declaring he had come to the West to find artistic freedom (Foulkes 2002; 2007; Franke et al. 2021). Throughout the Cold War, critics wrestled with the personal versus the political, while Graham's brilliance was the seamless merging of the two in her dance works, seemingly overwriting the paradox of the artist in service to the state.

7 Conclusion

Clytemnestra has continued to be revered into the twenty-first century, despite the company's decision to cut the evening-length work into a single act, to surtitle the events for public consumption (including the use of the quirky phrase "Generational Homicide" to explain the Greek myth), and to even give a short lecture before raising the curtain to explain the story (Martha Graham Dance Company 2022). The pedantic offerings by the Martha Graham Dance Company, and even the 2009 online competition for the best *Clytemnestra* remake, does not rob Clytemnestra of its power to demonstrate Graham's understanding of the human frailties that bond people over time, space, and nationality.¹⁵ Although excerpted and subtitled in-

¹⁵ Sitting in the audience with both Mary Hinkson and Pearl Lang in 2009, two former Graham dancers who played Clytemnestra, offered the Author a perspective on

to a twenty-first century twenty-minute shadow of its former three-act whole, the most critically noted scenes discussed in this article remain in the work over fifty years after it was crafted by Graham. Detractors and celebratory critics alike have called the reset work, “magnificent” with “immediate pertinence”, that showed “spontaneity and immediacy”.¹⁶ It was Graham’s use of her own vulnerability that allowed her power as a diplomat and performer, and charged the choreography with enduring power. She borrowed from those around her, and herself. Graham and *Clytemnestra* have come to define the canon of twentieth-century modernism, and earned her power as a diplomat and performer.¹⁷

During the Cold War, the messaging about US hegemony within the modernist language of dance was not a story of absolute power, despite the classic American and frontier references in some works. In a battle for “hearts and minds”, “hearts” cannot get seduced by the Western side, cajoled, or in the words of Nye, “attracted”, without a demonstration of vulnerability. Through cultural offerings, particularly by a powerful female artist, the US government could claim a fundamental humanity as integral to the democratic modern society and culture, even the culture of capitalism, attached to the pathos of freedom. For Graham and the US diplomats, the personal was political, and the apolitical was political, because both relied on human understanding and communication: power came from the fragility and vulnerability of the individual creative and diplomatic act.

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the original format in the context of the cut and subtitled excerpts. While the twenty-first century rendition of *Clytemnestra* encouraged Lang to characteristically shout out at dancers during the production, Hinkson’s disappointment included her opinion that the best scenes had been kept, and she singled out those analysed in this article.

16 Jowitt 2009; Macaulay 2009; Greskovic 2009; Kourls 2017.

17 Gardner 1993; Chioles 1993; Van Steen 2002; Yaari 2003.

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