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FATAL WOMAN, REVISITED:
UNDERSTANDING FEMALE STEREOTYPES IN *FILM NOIR*

By

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Danielle LaRae Barnes-Smith: Fatal Woman, Revisited: Understanding Female

Stereotypes in *Film Noir*

Film noir stereotypes female characters through the archetype of the *femme fatale*: the fatal woman or the fatal wife. However, critics are currently re-examining the *femme fatale*. For example, in the second paragraph of *Film Noir's Progressive Portrayal of Women*, Stephanie Blaser and John Blaser write “even when [film noir] depicts women as dangerous and worthy of destruction, [it] also shows that women are confined by the roles traditionally open to them.” With Blaser and Blaser’s understanding of the double nature of the *femme fatale* in mind, can one say that the *femme fatale* generates fear of feminism? Can one read her as a martyr and a heroine? I will examine facets of the *femme fatale* in modern and classic iterations, while contextualizing women’s historical roles in society.

Historically, the *femme fatale* originated as a response to World War II. As Gary Morris notes in the last paragraph of “High Gallows: Revisiting Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past*,” “[she] embodies post-war fears that women, having contributed mightily to the war effort and moved into ‘men’s work,’ might abandon the domestic sphere entirely... and even the most powerful men around her can’t comprehend or control the violent forces she represents.” Additionally, the essay will focus on Phyllis in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, Kathie in Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past*, and Evelyn in Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown*. To include a literary dimension, I will also provide a close reading of Velma in *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler. To comprehend the *femme fatale* and her relationship to women’s roles in Western society, these women must be placed in a broader, historical spectrum. Transhistorical examination of the *femme fatale* will be achieved by examining one of the most prominent characters in Judeo-Christian society, Eve. The close reading of this proto-*femme fatale* will specifically examine her role in *Genesis* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Closely reading the *femme fatale* is important because it contextualizes modern women’s roles, both locally and globally, and aids in the drive towards gender equality.

Film Noir is known to stereotype any non-masculine or non-heteronormative character group. One such stereotyped group is women; this filmic process of stereotyping is accomplished through the *femme fatale*: fatal woman or fatal wife. Can one say that the *femme fatale* generates a fear of feminism? Is she merely a device to push along a male-dominated plot? Or can one read her as a martyr and a heroine who illustrates the plights of women oppressed within a male-dominated society? To approach clarification in regards to this *femme fatale* mystery, I will examine the many facets of the *femme fatale* in modern and classic examples, while contextualizing women's historical roles in society.

History of the *Femme*

Many literary critics and writers have tracked the history of the *femme fatale*. Virginia Allen uses her book *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* to place the *femme fatale* in a global and historical context. Largely, Allen notes the progression of women in art as an illustration of proto-*femme fatale*. Notably, she discusses how Salome, the biblical daughter of Herodias who danced for the Jewish leader Herod in order to win the head of the John the Baptist (Allen 10-11). Salome is depicted in three separate paintings throughout time as a very different woman. The first painting is *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (Figure 1) by Baroque painter Guido Reni. Within the painting she is depicted as modest and youthful. She does not even hold up the head, rather it is presented to her on a platter, held up by a serving boy. In a later painting by French Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau entitled *The Apparition* (Figure 2), Salome is shown as naked, although the details of her genitals are not illustrated. In front of her is the

shining head of John the Baptist from beyond the grave. Salome stands firm and is far more active in this painting than the earlier painting by Reni. The final example of Salome's transition through artistic history that Allen discusses is *J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche, Iokanaan* ("I have Kissed your Mouth, Iokanaan") (Figure 3) by English painter Aubrey Beardsley, which he painted for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*. In this final cited depiction, Salome has fully realized herself as a type of non-erotic *femme fatale*. She holds the bleeding head of John of the Baptist, anger in her eyes, preparing to take her kiss, her hair stands as if composed of snakes, and she exists between two planes of black.

Toni Bentley, a writer and dancer, became fascinated with Salome at a young age, inspiring her to write a book tracking the origins of the Salome myth and four of the most famous portrayals of the figure. In the beginning of her book Bentley discusses Salome's story, which begins in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, although within these accounts she is not even named, and it is not Salome who decides the prize for the dance, John the Baptist's head, but her mother, Herodias. Her appearance is not described nor is the dance she performs that so entrances the leader, Herod (19-20). To this origin, Bentley remarks that "historically, it is highly unlikely that a young girl would have held so much political sway, but Salome's value as an archetype of the castrating woman was born and still thrives today" (19). Salome evolved throughout the ages largely through art, but Oscar Wilde created the prominent figure of Salome in his play *Salome* and "gave [her] what she had heretofore lacked: a personality, a psychology of her own" (28). His play solidified Salome as a *femme fatale* by making John the Baptist her unrequited lover, and making the decision to ask for his head her decision, not her mother's. Wilde also created her dance, the Dance of the Seven Veils, in which Salome is covered with seven different

veils, which she slowly removes. As Bentley tells us, “The passive child Salome of the Bible had been converted by her nineteenth-century fathers into a class *femme fatale* of knowing evil and vicious intent...” (28). Bentley discusses nudity and feminine sexuality throughout her book. In her introduction, she recounts one of her first experiences as a nude dancer.

As I returned the very apparent “male gaze” in the audience at the Blue Angel, I know we shared a unity of purpose. That much-maligned male instinct to look was allowing my fantasy to fly. There was no victimization on either side of these footlights... I then knew what triumph felt like. In that moment, that nameless man, who was every man, was entirely man. Transient power, perhaps, but overwhelming in its force, it fused into my conscious memory and resides there still as a moment of victory over my own inhibitions and every man who wanted to possess me. I was now in full possession of my self (11).

Such sentiment of power through sexuality is one held by nearly every *femme fatale*, and especially the proto-*femme fatale* Salome. However, the naked woman of *Salome* dancing on the stage was not seen as empowering in its time, instead causing some unrest amongst society. The play was frequently banned, but emancipation is always met with unrest. As Bentley writes, “however women were viewed, there remained a problem: both the highly sexed woman and the celibate woman might seek independence” (23), and while the move towards female, and subsequently sexual, liberation was slow, at the beginning of the twentieth-century women could at least find erotic territory on the stage (30).

While art and stage made way for modern *Film Noir*, particularly the cultural figure of the *femme fatale*, it was not until the late 1930’s that true *Film Noir* manifested. However, *Film Noir* has not been static, and neither has the *femme fatale*. In his article *The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition*, Boozer examines how the *femme fatale* has changed from the ‘40s to the ‘90s. He discusses the origins of the *femme fatale* as a

response to “the massive entry of women into the work force [which was] encouraged during the war [and then] was suddenly discouraged at war’s end...” (20) Further he states that “historically speaking, it is also obvious that the woman has had fewer behavioral and income options than her gender counterpart, which partly explains the need for scheming tactics by the seductress in the first place” (21). This early stage in the development of *femme fatale*, when Phyllis would have been current, featured men and women who were largely concerned with finances, both as means of liberation and affirmation. In the era of the *femme fatale* which included Evelyn of *Chinatown*, “she not only appears far less frequently in this New Hollywood or Hollywood Renaissance era, but when she does she is usually the passive or incidental victim rather than active manipulator of her sexual-economic circumstance” (Boozer, 24). In fact, instead of Evelyn causing any fatality, it is her father who destroys the family within this world. After Evelyn’s era, the *femme fatale* regains her sexual intrigue. Boozer says, “The contemporary or post-*Noir femme fatale*, therefore, whether she is killed, fired or gets away, has increasingly come to embody the dynamic of the overlaid sign of commodity fetishism. The male paranoia with the opposite sex in classic noir, which grew up to the realization of women's victimization in the neo-noir era, now begins to recognize the full power of feminine commodification in the post-modern age” (Boozer, 32).

The Case Studies

“I feel as if he was watching me. Not that he cares, not anymore. But he keeps me on a leash so tight I can’t breathe.” (Phyllis, 1944)

Phyllis

Phyllis of *Double Indemnity* (1944) as a *femme fatale* emphasizes some of the human motives of the “fatal wife.” In the beginning, Phyllis is married to an older man who

seems sexually inept given both his lack of presence and the presence of his daughter, who is not much younger than Phyllis. She discusses her relationship to her husband with Walter:

Phyllis: When [his first wife] died, he was terribly broken up. I-I pitied him so.

Neff: And now you hate him.

Phyllis: Yes, Walter. He's so mean to me. Every time I buy a dress or a pair of shoes, he yells his head off. He never lets me go anywhere. He keeps me shut up. He's always been mean to me. Even his life insurance all goes to that daughter of his. That Lola.

Walter: Nothing for you at all, huh?

Phyllis: No, and nothing is just what I'm worth to him.

Walter: So you lie awake in the dark and listen to him snore and get ideas.

Phyllis: Walter, I don't want to kill him. I never did. Not even when he gets drunk and slaps my face.

Walter: Only sometimes you wish he was dead.

Phyllis: Perhaps I do.

Walter: And you wish it was an accident and you had that policy for \$50,000 dollars. Is that it?

Phyllis: Perhaps that too.

Clearly, Phyllis turns to murder not out of monstrous desires but as a final attempt to gain freedom. However, after Walter and Phyllis commit the murder, the movie begins to show Phyllis in a new light. According to code, any deviation from “proper” societal norms would need to be punished, but while Walter and Phyllis both committed the murder Phyllis is punished in a different way than Walter. Walter is shown love and compassion from Keyes, but Phyllis is made weak and evil. It is revealed that she likely murdered her husband’s first wife, she is juxtaposed to Lola who is suddenly more present than before the murder and in a somewhat incestuous relationship with Walter. She does not murder Walter when given the opportunity, claiming that it is because she loves him. Whether or not Phyllis actually loved Walter is up for debate. However, considering that her motivations throughout the film were not concerned with love, it would be counterintuitive for Phyllis to suddenly become “in-love” with Walter. It would

seem then that having Phyllis love Walter would be a method of pushing her back into her gender role before she is met with her demise, thus fulfilling the wants of the censors. Even with her change, is Phyllis still a monster?

It is easy to see the *femme fatale* as a type of monster. She snares her victims, who are almost exclusively men, and leads them to their death, as was the case with Phyllis and Walter of *Double Indemnity*, Velma and Moose of *Farewell, My Lovely* and Kathie and Jeff of *Out of the Past*. Allen also says, “There is a dimension to the meaning of the *femme fatale* suggesting that even though she might die, she will not be obliterated. She will rise to claim another victim, perhaps as one of the living dead, a vampire” (2), which of course is indicative of the early synonym of *femme fatale*, vamp, meant to call to mind a vampire, an evil creature that feeds off life. A new type of horror was developing in the ‘40s and, while modern audiences may not recognize it as so, films like *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* (the filmic version of *Farewell, My Lovely*) would have been horror movies of the time with the *femmes fatales* as their monsters. While the blonde women of these films may not seem like monsters, in defining the female monster of the ‘40s, Jancovich remarks that “this female monster [has] pitted her against female adversary ... an active and independent working woman, but one who is not presented as a home-wrecker” (135). Velma and counterpart Ann clearly fit into this definition.

Velma

Helen Grayle, or Velma, is the *femme fatale* of *Farewell, My Lovely*. Her counterpart is Ann Riordan, the plucky orphan of a police chief who forces herself into the investigation of the missing jade necklace. Simultaneously, Moose Malloy, a giant of a man, is searching for his long-lost love Velma. In true *femme fatale* fashion, Velma

enters into a relationship with the detective Marlowe. In one scene depicting both Ann and Velma, Velma is cold to Ann and glad when she leaves, showing women to be cruel even to their own. On the other hand, when Velma's husband walks in on Marlowe and Velma kissing, Marlowe immediately ceases, feeling fraternal loyalty to someone he does not know, to which Velma responds:

“‘It’s all right. He understands. What the hell can he expect?’

‘I guess he knows.’ [Marlowe says]

‘Well, I tell you it’s all right. Isn’t that enough? He’s a sick man. What the hell—‘
‘Don’t go shrill on me. I don’t like shrill women.’” (222)

Film Noir clearly shows the masculine bonds to be stronger than the feminine. As

Marlowe becomes disenchanted with Velma and learns more of her past, how he sees her changes, “she ceased to be beautiful. She looked merely like a woman who would have been dangerous a hundred years ago, and twenty years ago daring, but who today was just Grade B Hollywood” (307). Regardless of any man’s view of her, Velma is a true *femme fatale* even to the end. Marlowe describes her death, taking away some of the action and placing even her final act in a male’s control. “He stood up and held [his coat] for her like a gentleman. / She turned and slipped a gun out of her bag and shot him three times through the coat he was holding. / She had two bullets left in the gun when they crashed the door. They got halfway across the room before she used them. She used them both, but the second shot must have been pure reflex. They caught her before she hit the floor, but her head was already hanging like a rag” (313-314).

Ann, like Ann from *Out of the Past*, is a proper virgin, or good woman throughout the film as defined by Blaser and Blaser in the second paragraph section entitled *The Good Woman of No Place for Women: The family in Film Noir*:

The good woman often lives in an idealized country setting or in a well-kept apartment... She is filmed using the visual techniques of classical Hollywood

cinema: high-key lighting, eye-level camera angles, and open spaces—free of the disturbing *mise-en-scène* that surrounds the *femme fatale*. And she remains passive, nurturing, and nonthreatening—a redeeming angel for a hero hopelessly tempted by the active, independent, and dangerous *femme fatale*. (Blaser and Blaser)

Ann has most of those traits, from the apartment to the nurturing attitude. She does take on a less gender-normative role by forcing herself into the case after rescuing Marlowe, but masculine forces still constantly dismiss her. Her role is less active than Marlowe's and she is often more of a sounding board. Further, near the end of the novel she childishly admires Marlowe, calling him “marvelous” and “wonderful” (312).

Kathie

Perhaps the most compelling component of the film *Out of the Past* is the three distinct, out of only four present, female characters. There is of course Kathie, the *femme fatale*, Ann, the virgin, and Meta, a secondary *femme fatale*. Kathie is a classic *femme fatale* who, similar to Phyllis from *Double Indemnity*, is trapped in a loveless relationship. Unlike Phyllis, though, Kathie is not even allowed the privilege of marriage, rather she is equated by her lover Whit to a racehorse. Kathie is never physically affectionate with Whit on screen, only with her fallen man Jeff. During the film, Jeff and Kathie have a conversation about Whit:

Jeff: Whit didn't die.

Kathie: He didn't?

Jeff: No.

Kathie: Then, why...

Jeff: He just wants you back.

Kathie: I hate him. I'm sorry he didn't die.

Jeff: Give him time.

Kathie: You are taking me back.

Jeff: There's no hurry.

Kathie: I could have run away last night.

Jeff: I'd find you.

Kathie: Yes, I believe you would. You're glad you did?

Jeff: I don't know.

Kathie: I am.

Jeff: There was a little business, about forty thousand dollars.

Kathie: I didn't take it.

Jeff: How did you know it was taken?

Kathie: It's what you meant. I don't want anything of his or any part of him.

Jeff: Except his life.

Throughout the film, Kathie proves herself to be a *femme fatale* who will stop at nothing for liberation. When she escapes from Whit and Jeff comes looking for her, she seduces him into running away with her. When Jeff's partner comes after them, Kathie kills him.

Jeff: You didn't have to kill him [Frankie].

Kathie: Yes I did. You wouldn't have killed him. You would have beaten him up and thrown him out.

Jeff: You didn't have to do it.

Kathie: You wouldn't have killed him. He would have been against us. Gone to Whit.

At the end of the film, when Kathie is attempting to run away with Jeff back to Mexico, she is not allowed the dignity of outwitting the men of the film. Instead, Jeff turns against her and the police are waiting. But Kathie does not go without a fight. She kills Jeff and is herself killed by police gunfire.

Meta has a very small role in the film. She is a part of a plot to frame Jeff for the death of Eels. In the small role she does play, she comes close to existing outside of male control, but this is, of course, foiled. She even appears to have a relationship with Kathie as Kathie later says in the film, "We can make Meta get [the brief case]. We can make them do anything."

Ann, as opposed to Kathie or Meta, is a perfect "good-girl." She is never overly sexual, dresses modestly, and tries to think the best of people, even Kathie. While Jeff is recounting the long story of his relationship with Kathie, Ann remarks:

Ann: She can't be all bad - no one is.

Jeff: No. She comes the closest.

Ann: Are you going to see her again?

Jeff: Tonight for the last time.

Ann: Then look at her, look at yourself, and be very sure that there isn't even a little bit of love left for her. Then when you find out and you know it once and forever, send for me.

Jeff: I don't have to find out. I know it now. [*they kiss*]

Ann: That's all I wanted to hear.

Obviously Ann serves as the antithesis of Kathie and Meta, but even she is not rewarded in the end. Her lover, Jeff, is killed and she is made to believe that he was running away with Kathie. Thus she falls into another relationship, as she cannot exist without a man.

In his review, *High Gallows: Revisiting Jacques Tourneur's "Out of the Past"*, Gary Morris largely focuses on the film aesthetics of *Out of the Past*. He notes that unlike most *noir* films, *Out of the Past* is partially shot outside in the open as opposed to inside behind venetian blinds. Near the end of Morris' article, he touches on the figure of Kathie, one of the most stereotypical *femmes fatales*. He notes in his final paragraph that Kathie,

Embodies postwar fears that women, having contributed mightily to the war effort and moved into 'men's work,' might abandon the domestic sphere entirely, causing all manner of social mayhem. She's the culmination of the self-consumed, anti-domestic, anti-social female as evoked by Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*... and even the most powerful men around her can't comprehend or control the violent forces she represents.

Further, Scruggs makes an impressive, albeit sometimes overzealous, argument for Kathie embodying the fugitive slave. Stylistically, he cites the use of lighting to darken Kathie. Thematically, Kathie fleeing from Whit, a man who views her as equivalent to a racehorse, can be equated historically to a slave fleeing his or her owner, Scruggs argues (2011). Kathie is not the only *femme fatale* to embody marginalized people. Evelyn in

Chinatown, for example, shows the audience how powerless those without extreme wealth and connections can be made in a purely capitalist society. She is not even granted the satisfaction of murdering her rapist, and is instead killed herself by the police force which is meant to protect. It seems that the *femme fatale* is used to embody marginalized people in order to create a character that was more accessible to the audience.

Other than embodying marginalized people, the *femme fatale* is also able to draw attention to the plight of women, although perhaps not always intentionally. Phyllis and Kathie are each the stereotypically, male-written *femme fatale*. Phyllis longs for the death of her husband so that she can be free and so sexually manipulates Walter for his assistance. Likewise, Kathie longs for freedom. Initially, she takes charge, shooting Whit herself and stealing away to Mexico along with \$40,000. However, as is expected from a male-dominated film, she is unable to escape on her own, needing assistance from Jeff (although this ultimately fails as well). Each of these women are shown to be loveless, childless, monsters only interested in individual gain, largely in terms of finances. It is likely that this was meant to draw attention to the dangers of women in the workforce and the collapse of the domestic, American dream. After all, who will mother if the mothers don't mother? But these hyper-sexualized monsters (Phyllis and Kathie) work against the cause. Phyllis may come off as heartless, but she is also legitimately trapped in a loveless marriage, which does not even grant her a domestic role. Kathie is placed in an abusive relationship with a man who also does not grant her freedom of individuality. The fear of feminism in *Film Noir*, and how such fear dictates gender roles, shows the fear of destroying women and families, not feminism. Similar to Frankenstein's monster

showing that the fear of science, not science itself, destroys a perfectly human being. For *Film Noir* women, it is the male-dominated society that creates the monster.

Evelyn

Indicative of the time, Evelyn is not a classic *femme fatale*. As Boozer wrote in his article *The Lethal Femme Fatale in Noir Tradition*, which traces the history of film's *femme fatale*, "The *femme fatale* as harbinger of sexualized greed is further altered in the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. She not only appears far less frequently in this New Hollywood or Hollywood Renaissance era, but when she does she is usually the passive or incidental victim rather than active manipulator of her sexual-economic circumstance" (24). While she is initially a suspect of her husband's murder, it is soon discovered that she is merely trapped within an unhealthy, incestuous patriarchy. She is one of the few *femmes fatales* shown to have a biological daughter, although her daughter is by no means natural.

Evelyn: She's my daughter.
 [Gittes slaps Evelyn]
 Jake: I said, 'I want the truth!'
 Evelyn: She's my sister...
 [slap]
 Evelyn: She's my daughter...
 [slap]
 Evelyn: My sister, my daughter.
 [slap]
 Jake: I said, 'I want the truth!'
 Evelyn: She's my sister AND my daughter!

She tells Jake that her father raped and impregnated her as a young woman, which was why she fled to Mexico. Hollis joined and cared for her and her daughter/sister in Mexico, which was how she fell in love with him. Her father, Noah Cross, does not pay for his crimes in the film; rather he prospers exponentially. Jake questions Cross about

his motivations, to which Cross responds that he wants to buy “the future.” In the end, Evelyn is not even allowed the satisfaction of revenge. Her shot fired at Cross barely injures him, then she is shot through the eye (calling to mind Oedipus) by the police, and Cross gets away with her daughter/sister (Polanski, *Chinatown*). *Chinatown*'s end illustrates a system where few have power.

Often in *Film Noir*, there is an amount of biblical symbolism. In *Chinatown* the symbolism is clear through the names. Evelyn, of course, is indicative of Eve, but Noah Cross has the most interesting symbolism. “Cross” calls to mind a Christ figure and “Noah” is also the name of the biblical figure who built an ark which saved the human race from a great flood. He is essentially in control of the water, as is Noah in *Chinatown*. It is clear that *Film Noir*, as are many arts, is concerned with the culture of the time, which, in our culture, often includes Judeo-Christian stories and practices.

Eve

Eve is depicted in biblical accounts as a mother and wife, but also the woman who introduced Original Sin into the world. In Genesis, the tale of Eve and the snake is recounted:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’”

And the woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat;

but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.’”

And the serpent said to the woman, “You surely shall not die!

“For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with, and he ate. (3:1-6)

Outside of the incident with the apple, only her male counterpart, Adam, defines Eve. In fact, Adam does not name her Eve until after the fall of man (3:20). Perhaps then it is only through the fall that Eve, and subsequently women, could have even a shred of identity.

There have been many retellings of the biblical fall of man, but perhaps none so famous as *Paradise Lost*. Famed for humanizing Satan, *Paradise Lost* tracks the fall of Satan, the creation of the world and mankind, to the fall of man and the aftermath. However, for the purpose of exploring Eve through the lens of *femme fatale*, one need not look much further than Book IX, in which Eve and Adam consume the fruit. Having separated from Adam, Eve meets the snake who convinces her that the fruit would not cause death, but knowledge, and would bring her closer to God. Eve then “greedily [engorges] without restraint, / And knew not eating death” (791-792). Upon realizing her newfound knowledge, she muses over whether or not to include Adam.

...and give him to partake
Full happiness with me, or rather not,
But keep the odds of knowledge in my power
Without copartner? so to add what wants
In female sex, the more to draw his love,
And render me more equal, and perhaps—
A thing not undesirable—sometime
Superior; for inferior, who is free?
(818-825)

Perhaps no sentiment exists that is more *femme* than the words spoken by Eve in this passage. God and Adam have made it clear to Eve that she is nothing but a companion, a lesser being than Adam: hence why she feels the need, if only temporarily, to deceive her way to equality. She will only be made to pay by God. When Adam partakes of the fruit, he does so with great trepidation, saying “the bond of Nature draw me to my own—“

(956). Eventually, “against his better knowledge, not deceived, / But fondly overcome with female charm” (998-999), Adam eats the fruit. For a while, the pair rejoice, thankful to have knowledge, but when the weight of their deed settles, they begin to blame each other. Turning away from *femme fatale* ways, Eve says she should have never been allowed to leave Adam’s side, which was why it was his fault that they ate the fruit.

Adam tells Eve:

...Thus it shall befall
Him who, to worth in women overtrusting,
Lest her will rule: restraint she will not brook;
And left to herself, if evil thence ensue,
She first his weak indulgence will accuse.

(1182-1186)

It is clear that that a woman left to her own free will and her own devices was seen as a threat to Western people in Milton’s time, as well as our own. Eve truly is a proto-*femme fatale*.

Weaponized Femininity

Miranda Sherwin discusses the themes of masochism specifically in her article *Deconstructing the Male: Masochism, Female Spectatorship, and the Femme Fatale in Fatal Attraction, Body of Evidence, and Basic Instinct*; her conclusions can be applied to larger spectrum of *femme fatale* than just the three films she specifies. She says in regards to *Fatal Attraction*, “on the one hand, [the *femme fatale*] is insane, violent, predatory, and finally, dead. On the other hand, she controls the film’s action until the end...” (182).

This, of course, can be seen in countless *femmes fatales* such as Phyllis, who conspires to murder her husband, and Kathie, who murders Fisher and Whit and attempts to Walter.

Later in the article, Sherwin discusses male and female sexuality. In *Body of Evidence*, the *femme fatale*, Dulaney asks, “What are you going to do, bag the body as a

murder weapon? Exhibit A? It's not a crime to be a good lay" (180) to which the male protagonist, Garret, says "Well, sure, I'd have to have myself indicated" (180). To this Sherwin says: "This last exchange, although flippant, betrays a distinction made by the film between male and female sexuality—for a man, sexual prowess is something to brag about; for a woman, it is a crime" (180).

Sherwin's analyses of the mental state of the *femme fatale* and of male and female sexuality clearly apply to early and modern *femmes fatales*, as well. Even though the *femmes fatales* of these later films are allowed to display their sexuality on the screen, some of the same sexual undertones exist in earlier *Film Noir* like *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past*. While most *Films Noirs* are assumed to be designed from the ever-dictating male-gaze, Sherwin argues that the presence of masochism, as well as liberal sexuality amongst women, indicates a female, not male, gaze. For modern *femmes fatales* "sexual plurality, like the polysexuality depicted in *femme fatale* films, suggests that men and heterosexual intercourse are not necessary to fulfill female desire... man is dependent on an other for sexual satisfaction, while woman is autoerotic and therefore needs no one. This, in addition to castration anxiety, is what woman represents for man: autoeroticism, sexual independence" (177). It is indeed true that *femmes fatales* illustrated such fears of female sexuality, especially female sexuality being defined as separate from the controls of male-dominated society. While earlier *femmes* do not necessarily depict bi- or homosexuality, their open sexuality would certainly have been considered "queer." Phyllis, for example, sleeps with Walter (although the act takes place off screen) which would have naturally encouraged Walter to take her side. In another respect, Kathie in her

first shot wears an outfit with exaggerated shoulder pads, harking to masculinity, indicated that she may have a leniency towards “other” sexualities.

Blaser and Blaser argue in their article that *femmes fatales* actively refuse to participate in a patriarchy, even though such refusal almost always leads to her death. Blaser and Blaser write, “The quintessential *femme fatale* of *Film Noir* uses her sexual attractiveness and ruthless cunning to manipulate men in order to gain power, independence, money, or all three at once. She rejects the conventional roles of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women, and in the end her transgression of social norms leads to her own destruction and the destruction of the men who are attracted to her” (Blaser and Blaser, *Film Noir’s Progressive Portrayal of Women*). The authors continue to argue that the *femme fatale* is not merely a chauvinist device, but also a personification of the need for female liberation and the fears of male oppressors. “Even when [*Film Noir*] depicts women as dangerous and worthy of destruction, [it] also shows that women are confined by the roles traditionally open to them—that their destructive struggle for independence is a response to the restrictions that men place on them” (Blaser and Blaser, *Film Noir’s Progressive Portrayal*).

In *Film Noir’s Progressive Portrayal of Women*, Blaser and Blaser also discuss how marriage is depicted in *Film Noir*. Marriage, if shown at all, is portrayed as unhealthy and confining. In films such as *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past*, “the implication... is that the *femme fatale* is trapped within the male-female relationship and resorts to murder as her only means of escape” (Blaser and Blaser).

Blaser and Blaser also spend time discussing the virginal, good-girl figure that is often juxtaposed to the *femme fatale*. For example, Lola in *Double Indemnity* stands in

contrast to Phyllis and Anne to Velma in *Farewell, My Lovely*. In regards to the virginal figure, Blaser and Blaser remark, “it is the good girl who seems out of place, while the *femme fatale* belongs to [the *Film Noir*] world.” Most notably, Blaser and Blaser argue that the *femme fatale*’s seductive nature promotes a progressive, feminist view of women rather than the opposite, especially when she is contrasted by the virgin. “It is the image of the powerful, fearless, and independent *femme fatale* that sticks in our minds when these movies end, perhaps because she—unlike powerful women in other Hollywood films of the ‘30s and ‘40s—remains true to her destructive nature and refuses to be converted or captured, even if it means that she must die” (Blaser and Blaser).

No Place for Women: The family in Film Noir reemphasizes some of the points that Blaser and Blaser make in their article *Film Noir’s Progressive Portrayal of Women*, such as the *femme fatale*’s refusal to conform to a traditional role even when faced with death, but Blaser and Blaser use this article to further explore marriage and children in *Film Noir*. In regards to children, they say:

Another sign of the sterility of *Film Noir* marriages is the absence of children produced by these marriages. Childless couples are far more common in *Film Noir* than the traditional father-mother-children nuclear family. The husband of the *femme fatale* may have a full-grown child from a previous marriage... but the child’s age implies that the father’s sexual activity is long past and that his current marriage is empty of sexual desire (Blaser and Blaser).

In regards to marriage the *femmes fatales* “[feels] trapped by husbands or lovers who treat them as standard equipment and by an institution—marriage—that makes such treatment

possible. Marriage for the *femme fatale* is associated with unhappiness, boredom, and the absence of romantic love and sexual desire” (Blaser and Blaser).

Later in her book, Allen discusses why she believes the *femme fatale* was so popular in the nineteenth century amongst men and, more importantly, amongst women. She says, “[the *femme fatale*] offered one of the few role models for women in the nineteenth century that combined freedom with fascination and erotic intrigue. By imitating the *femme fatale*, women could imagine that they acquired more than her attractions: her freedom, her sexual independence—and considerable enjoyment. Put another way, she offered a focus of sexual fantasy for women as well as men.” (191) Further, she states “that need for independence clearly indicates that the development of the imagery of the *femme fatale* was associated with the nineteenth century growth of feminism. The years during which the *femme fatale* acquired her essential attributes were also the years during which the female emancipation movement gathered strength. The *femme fatale*, independent of male control, and threatening men, reflects the fears of generations of social thinkers. She was produced by men who felt threatened by the escape of some actual women from male dominance” (191). In *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Allen also discusses Eve as a proto-*femme fatale*. She remarks, “in the Christian tradition, however, Eve is weak rather than willfully evil, a fallen woman more than a fatal one” (6). In discussing Eve, Allen inevitably discusses Lilith, as well. Lilith is the lesser-known counterpart of biblical Eve who, in some versions of the origin story, is Adam’s first wife. In regards to Lilith, Allen says, “Eve, accruing an enormously intensified erotic and lethal power, might be said to have transmuted over several decades

in Lilith—consort no longer of Adam, but of Satan. From inventing Original Sin, and the wages of sin—Death—she determined to seduce men into death” (185).

Modern *Femme*, Modern Stereotypes

The application of the study of the *femme fatale* is far-reaching, even in modern times. Today one would not use the term “vamp” or *femme fatale*. However, the implications of “slut” or “bitch” are the same. We are still living in a time of fear: fear of feminism, fear of gender equality, and fear of sexual equality, thus of course the female monster still lives on. Which is why we must continue to study her. One cannot know a culture without knowing its fiction and its (our) monsters.

Appendix

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



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