

Merry Murderers

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The Farcical (Re)Figuration
of the *Femme Fatale* in Maurine Dallas Watkins'
Chicago (1927) and its Various Adaptations

By

Zsófia Anna Tóth

CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my Father

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FOREWORD

ELISABETH BRONFEN

In her book, Tóth compellingly engages with the change in representations of violent and aggressive women, bringing to bear on her discussion 16th century drama and the carnivalesque encounter between the femme fatale and a vice character, who directs the story. Intriguing is the way she, in so doing, addresses the possible reversibility of a tragic disposition into a comic mode. Indeed, she is concerned with uncovering what it takes to stop tragedy, foregrounding the comic mode of cinema, often ignored or treated less seriously than other genres. By shifting her gaze away from Film Noir to the melodrama and the musical, she addresses the imbalanced picture of the power female stars and the narratives their celebrity bodies help sell had in classic Hollywood, as well in New Hollywood. Comedy, one might say, is the genre where women ultimately win against fate, even if the means by which they do so are dubious at best. For this reason, to engage with representations of a violent woman, who emerges not only as a successful player for the American Dream, but does so in such a boisterous and devious manner as is the case in *Chicago* compellingly redresses a cultural oversight. It can be seen as taking to the limit the ‘light’ modernity Barbara Stanwyck (*Lady Eve*) or Claudette Colbert (*Midnight*) came to embody in screwball comedies, over and against Stanwyck’s femme fatale in *Double Indemnity* and Colbert’s melodramatic sacrifice in the first version of *Imitation of Life*.

Most compelling in this study is the analogy Zsófia Anna Tóth draws between theme and rhetorical mode: even while comedy, especially in relation to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, exhibits a subversive force on the level of genre, the murderous woman who uses a celebrity ruse to get away with her crime and get love as well is a subversion of gender roles. That this should be a popular culture type emerging from the late 1920s, which is to say the moment when the Jazz Age moves toward the Depression, sheds light on innovative ways of thinking the “new woman” of Modernism. Equally compelling is her return to the notion of femininity as masquerade because looking back to high Modernism from the position of a theory debate on gender performance that emerged from an artistic

practice of the 1980s also renders visible how gender never was a stable category in 20th century American culture. Rather than being a discovery of late 20th century culture, playing with gender emerges as what late 20th century cultural practices are predicated on.

For Zsófia Anna Tóth the femme fatale, the flapper and the vamp emerge as compelling embodiments of modern notions of androgyny. With the various re-makes of *Chicago* emerging as a particularly poignant site for this cultural afterlife what is at stake is a re-evaluation of the way feminist and cultural theorists have seen the femme fatale as an articulation of both a personal and a cultural death drive, even while linking fatality to issues of feminine subjectivity and agency. Especially the farcical femme fatale can be seen as breaking with the way film scholars within gender studies have tended to see stars as imprisoned in an economy of the gaze that fetishizes them, rendering them symptoms rather than agents of their story. As Tóth insist, maybe it is not so much the moment when the femme fatale dies or chooses death for herself, but when she inflicts death that she assumes her subjectivity. What her book, thus, seeks to do is zoom in on the intervention the farcical femme fatale can offer in a tragic scenario, which, by aligning her with death, also de-animates or reifies her. A small detail proves to be seminal: by foregrounding the color of Roxie's hair, she is able to uncover a strategy of feminine seduction that self-consciously deploys the fetishism attributed to the feminine body in popular culture, even while debunking it.

Particularly convincing is the panoply of intertexts this study unfolds so as to show how the 1920s and 1930s inaugurate a moment of feminine intervention in the cultural sphere by taking on the comic mode. The world of *Chicago* emerges as a festive one in which normality is turned on its head, and as such explains why we ultimately enjoy the success of a heroine whose acts are as objectionable as those of Thackeray's Becky Sharp. At the same time, seeing this world in terms of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, the conjunction between the feminine and death not only raises issues of conventional scapegoating, but does so to illuminate why the heroine is so successful. Equally convincing is the historical intertext that Tóth unfolds in relation to the scapegoat, Hunyak, and the issue of immigration.

In part, our duplicitous enjoyment – we are to surmise – is predicated on the way the *Chicago* adaptations are critical of the very medium they partake in, namely the exaggerated spectacle of popular culture entertainment. As such, they prove to be moments of cultural self-reflection on the part of Hollywood, subverting the value of celebrity culture as much as showing how unstable gender definitions are once they

are explicitly used to perpetrate masquerades. Indeed, one might surmise that if in a film noir like *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale ‘teaches’ her partner that he wants to be duped by the woman and the transgression she promises, then what happens in *Chicago* is that the culture at large is ‘taught’ that it wants to be duped by masquerades of ideal femininity. The farcical femme fatale literally gets away with murder because we want to believe in what we know cannot be true about femininity. We, the audience, are shown up to be fetishists in regard to feminine stereotypes. Where the tragic femme fatale loses at her game (or at least loses her life), Roxie wins perhaps because her appropriation of a mask of femininity that appeals is really only another version of the assimilation demanded of all immigrants by the American Dream. This may explain why the story of *Chicago* emerges with such force at a time when discussion about immigration was – again – virulent in U.S. culture.

By bringing in the vice figure alongside her discussion of the femme fatale, Tóth is able to give even more depth to her cultural excavation, claiming modern vaudeville as a continuation of 16th century theatrical practice. She sees him as subverting the American judicial system, which according to Tocqueville is the bedrock of American democracy, even while including a discussion of the original newspaper articles so as to open up yet another stratum of cultural context; notably regarding the exclusion of women from jury duty until 1957. The masquerade of femininity which the farcical femme fatale puts on display is thus revealed to be an act of cultural self-duping – winning by deploying the very rhetoric used to suppress woman. One might speak of a parody of the law at the time of prohibition’s lawlessness, and indeed Tóth notes, “screwball comedies constituted the subversion of the very system that produced them.”

Most convincing is how in this work of cultural archeology, *Chicago* emerges as a touchstone to understanding a time – namely the late 1920s – which was all about murder and media manipulation, even while in hindsight can now also see it as the linchpin of feminism. Watkins may have foreseen the power of this murder story, but it is Tóth’s achievement to uncover so meticulously how it became the emblem of the American 20th century, even while theoretically speculating both why this is the case and what is at stake, given the fact of this court case’s persistent resonance even today, at the beginning of the 21st century. Ultimately, this book convincingly makes a claim for the way *Chicago*’s cultural survival is emblematic of American modernism. At the same time, it sheds new light on classic Hollywood courtroom dramas, making a case for comedy as a

genre that puts gender on the stand in a trial performed by popular culture itself so as to track the cultural concerns of the 20th century.

INTRODUCTION

“I used to be Snow White, but I drifted.”

—Mae West

In this book, my aim is to discuss how the representation of violent and aggressive women changed throughout the twentieth century in the United States in the field of cinema, visual culture and theatre. My primary object is to investigate the changes and history of the representation of *lethal women* in American culture of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the help of the story of *Chicago*. The focus of my investigation lies in this story, which started its long-lasting existence in the early twentieth century and reached into the twenty-first century through its various revivals. My intention is to examine what ways are open for female criminals and murderers, who are generally personified by the figure of the *femme fatale* in literary and filmic representations (as well as in other branches of visual culture), to evade their customary tragic end. The story of *Chicago* is a perfect example of the rather unique appearance of the *farcical femme fatale*. This name means to denote the *comic-grotesque-carnavalesque*, yet, *satirical femmes fatales* of *Chicago*. I intend to prove that within the various versions of *Chicago* we can find the entire repertoire of the modes of letting a *femme fatale* figure walk away freed and unpunished at the end of a story. The combination of this (originally) tragic figure and the comic results in a very specific occurrence: the *comic-grotesque performance* and *masquerade* of femininity embedded in the events of the *carnival*. This unique figure, the (*carnavalesque*-)*farcical femme fatale*, can manage only the trespassing of all boundaries and limitations without having to pay the price. *Chicago*, in its numerous versions, presents to us this unique occurrence in all her glory.

Hence, I propose that, in *Chicago*, we encounter *farcical femmes fatales* who are the minions of a modern(ized) version of the figure of the *Vice* of sixteenth century drama (and before), and all of their *comic-grotesque performances* and *masquerades* take place in the *heterotopic* space of the *carnival*. Thus, the *femmes fatales* of *Chicago* can walk away freely evading punishment because they are the *farcical refigurations* of the tragic *lethal woman*, in addition, ironically, they are not entirely the central figures of the story because they are governed and directed by a

quasi-central male figure, the *Vice*, who in fact oversees everything, and all this happens in the unique, *heterogenous* and *heterotopic* space of a world turned upside-down and inside out, the *carnival*. The *comic-grotesque performance* of femininity occurs in the temporary revelry of the *carnival*, yet, this time is enough for these women to make use of the suspension of ordinary logic and rules and get away with their crimes and sins. Another possible way of salvation for the *femme fatale* figures is the sacrifice of another human being, who will take the blame for them; this involves the logic of *scapegoating*, which is also to be found in *Chicago*. Accordingly historically, this is actually also part of the rituals of the *carnival*. Additionally, the mode in which this whole story is presented is comic-ironic. All of the versions of *Chicago* were made in a comic genre – generally in the realm of the lower comedic genres to serve as popular entertainment just as *carnivals* do –, and even the 1927 film adaptation, which is a melodrama, contains at least ironic parts. What is more, although the spirit of the *carnival* – what is originally defined by Bakhtin as people's entertainment involving positive energies and regeneration thus excluding the negative humor of satire as a means of criticism – *Chicago* manages to combine both comic-critical modes.

Since the topic of the *femme fatale* is immensely vast – while its discussion as well as the various examples of the manifestation of this female figure being almost inexhaustible – I will concentrate primarily on the different versions of *Chicago* (with additional examples to provide context), and thus trace the steps through the representational history of violent and aggressive women. When discussing such an issue it is inevitable to name and problematize the iconic, essential and eternal image of the *femme fatale* or *lethal woman* or *deadly woman*. Throughout my argumentation I intend to theorize and analyze this eternal feminine/female icon, and my intention is to reveal how the female murderers in the different versions of *Chicago* rework the imagery of the *femme fatale*. My proposition is that the whole question greatly lies in humor and the use of irony while all of the versions belong to the categories of either/or satire, screwball comedy, musical vaudeville and their sister genres accordingly, thus bringing the element of the comic into the elaboration of the issue of *femmes fatales*. I do not intend to write this book about the theorization and detailed discussion of the comic, irony, satire etc.; however, I would like to devote attention to these subjects since in my opinion these all have a central role in how the thematization and handling of *deadly women* occur in the *Chicagos*. The discussion of the comic contributes to the unfoldment of how and to what extent *Chicago* differs from the other works dealing with the *femme fatale* imagery. My analysis and argumentation

thus certainly will involve a historical aspect and overview, while primarily, in the forefront, cinema, theatre, cultural and gender studies will be found with a focus on cultural representations.

Hence, I will discuss the unconventional and uncommon modes of representation of *deadly women* in the different versions of *Chicago* through the elaboration of the comic. Originally, traditionally and most commonly, the central element in the definition of the *femme fatale* is tragedy and the representational methods employed are strongly linked with tragic desire thus combining death and femininity, in addition to female sexuality, within the figure of the *femme fatale*. This is the fundamental imagery of the *lethal woman*, although, in very rare instances it occurs that the *femme fatale* is presented in comic light or through the employment of humor but these are always exceptional cases and not of frequency.

The title of the book also reflects on this comic aspect of the *femmes fatales* of *Chicago* by this slightly paradoxical alliteration: merry murderers. These words refer to the “Cell Block Tango” part of the 2002 film (Marshall 2002a, 21-29 min) as well as the 1976 version (Ebb and Fosse 1976, 17-23). The exact sentence that can be found in both versions is: “And now, the six merry murderesses of the Cook County jail in their rendition of the Cell Block Tango” (Marshall 2002a, 22 min; Ebb and Fosse 1976, 17). Considering that both of these versions are musicals it might easily be an indirect reference and homage paid to a great musical of international acknowledgement: *The Merry Widow* by Ferenc Lehár – which is again a (traditionally) slightly paradoxical image similarly to a murderer. According to Denny Martin Flinn, *The Merry Widow* is considered to be the musical work that has had more productions than any other work of this kind (Flinn 1997, 64; Gál and Somogyi 1959, 380). Gál and Somogyi also add that Lehár created a new style with this operetta and revolutionized the genre (Gál and Somogyi 1959, 375, 380). Similarly, according to the marketing of the 2007 production of *Chicago* at the Ambassador Theater in New York City, *Chicago* has “the longest-running revival in Broadway history;” and Andrew Lamb states that the stage musical, *Chicago* (1976), broke “down musical theatre conventions” (Lamb 2000, 301) while John Bush Jones claims that its success was greatly due to its light entertaining treatment of a heavy issue (Bush 2004, 269). Additionally, John Belton argues that the musical (film), *Chicago* (2002), is also unique and inventive since the conventional and typical structure of film musicals is reworked and recreated here producing a special musical (Belton 2005, 153-154).

Chicago is unique in its treatment of the *femme fatale* theme because while discussing and employing all of the clichés and constitutive elements of the conventional representational logic and tools it still subverts and challenges them through the use of humor, especially irony. Not all of the versions of the story make use of irony to the same level and all of the versions belong to different genres, however, they are all in connection with humor, and the comic aspects are paramount in all of the versions also contributing to, for instance, that they do not end their lives by violent and conventionally tragic means such as suicide, murder or execution. The *lethal women* of *Chicago* get acquitted and get away with murder instead of being punished through the death penalty, which would be their ‘due’ sentence according to the law. Therefore, I will discuss several theories and aspects of humor to present its mechanism. The central theoretical concept I will deal with in detail is certainly Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival, its specificities and implications. Since my proposition is that *Chicago* is a modern (day) *carnival* I will examine how its elements can be found in this work while I will also cite other secondary materials referring to or treating Bakhtin’s idea.

It is undeniably evident that in the different versions of *Chicago* humor has a central role and it is supposedly the most decisive factor in the unique treatment of the *femme fatale* figures, however, there are other theories which also help in the understanding and interpretation of this special tackling, the most pervasive and considerable one is Elisabeth Bronfen’s idea about substituting the *femme fatale* with another Other as a sacrificial lamb that she unfolds in her study entitled “The Jew as Woman’s Symptom: Kathlyn Bigelow’s Conflictive Representation of Feminine Power.” Additionally, I will discuss in detail various works written by Bronfen on *femmes fatales*. In the discussion of the role of human sacrifice and *scapegoating*, I will also rely on other sources, for example, J. G. Frazer or Bakhtin’s own comment on this occurrence within the rituals of the *carnival*.

What also helps these women get acquitted is that they *masquerade* themselves as ‘good women’ through a *performative performance* of ideal femininity. To prove this point I consulted and will cite Joan Riviere’s article entitled “Womanliness as a Masquerade” and Judith Butler’s theory of *gender performativity*, in addition, several other sources that elaborate on these basic concepts, as an example, that of Stella Bruzzi. In the discussion of the figure of the *Vice*, I will primarily use Ágnes Matuska’s article entitled “Haphazardly Ambidextrous,” which concentrates on the ambiguous and dual attributes of the *Vice* since this figure is not exclusively evil but also comic; this will also be backed by, for instance,

M. H. Abrams or Robert Withington. In this part, I will also elaborate on the idea of the humorous handling of the Romantic *homme fatale* figure that is theorized by Mario Praz, and how Billy Flynn can be interpreted as a *humorous homme fatale* as well as a (comic) *Vice*.

The first chapter will discuss the theories and concepts in relation to the *femme fatale*. Here, sub-chapters will concentrate on her different aspects or attributes such as her fatality, the connection between death and femininity, 'her' body and appearance and so on and so forth. Additionally, there will be a short discussion of the historiographic, cultural and mythological roots of this dangerous female figure. In this part, the treatment of the issue of the *New Woman* and the *flapper* will also be found since both of these cultural phenomena and figures are strongly connected to the image and figure of the *femme fatale* or its Americanized version, the *vamp* – that will also be deliberated – since the story historically takes place in this era and the female figures of *Chicago* are not only *farcical femmes fatales* but could also be called *flapper femmes fatales*. The question of androgyny will be examined here, as well, as a result. In the second chapter, the focus will be on the comic and the different ideas concerning the role and functioning of humor. The different (general) comic genres that surface in the case of the various versions of *Chicago* will also be presented while the relationship between gender and humor will be examined. The discussion of Bakhtin's *carnival* will take place in the succeeding, third, chapter. The treatment of the issue of *scapegoating* and human sacrifice will be found here, as well as, a part dealing with feminine images, which will immediately be followed by the discussion of *performativity* and *masquerade* that reproduce and/or rework these images. The succeeding, fourth, part resulting from the previous ones will concentrate on the formation and figure of the *farcical femme fatale* and that of the (comic) *Vice* or the *humorous homme fatale* investigating how these figures appear and function in *Chicago*. In the last part, the fifth chapter – divided into sub-chapters –, the different versions of *Chicago* will be scrutinized and analyzed one by one starting from the original *Chicago Tribune* articles and ending in the 2002 film adaptation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE *FEMME FATALE*

The *femme fatale*¹ is that iconic female image which is connected to the figure of the female transgressor and criminal in literary and filmic works as well as cultural representations. The *femme fatale* is primarily linked to tragedy and tragic desire and ‘her’ fall is inevitable traditionally. A prototypical *femme fatale* is endowed with extremely attractive physicality as well as sharp intelligence. She is generally beautiful, pretty, (often strikingly) clever and intelligent, very deceitful, manipulative, and greatly ambitious. She is usually willing to do anything to achieve her goals and entirely disregards everybody else’s interests and feelings. An interesting fact about the *femme fatale* – and that this figure certainly has always existed in French literature and culture as well – is that, in spite of its name, the term was ‘born’ in England and the most complex and elaborate concept of the lethal woman was created here: “[i]t was not in France, however, but in England, that this type of Fatal Woman found its most complete form” (Praz 1990, 223). In addition, Praz suggests on the basis of the example of Swinburne – who is supposed to be the ‘seminal father’ of this ‘birth’ – that the men who usually create this type of woman only present

“a mere projection of his [their] own turbid sensuality: they [these *femme fatale* figures] have a good deal of the idol about them [...], the phantom of the mind rather than the real human being” (Praz 1990, 227).

Nonetheless, I would add that with the passing of time more and more *femmes fatales* were created who benefited more from the workings of the reality principle, yet, even today, the majority of the *femmes fatales* are of the kind that Praz describes. However, Maurine Dallas Watkins’ *femmes fatales* are not the sort generally created by (the majority of) men.

With much probability, the question of the representation of violent women makes one think of the smoldering temptresses of the silver screen immediately together with the descending/ascending/gliding (sex) goddesses of the film industry as well as the *femmes fatales* of *film noir* or

the *vamps* of early film history. Nevertheless, the picture or rather the image is slightly more complicated. Undoubtedly, readers and viewers (the general public or occasionally even scholars) tend to presume that the representation of violent and evil women can be encompassed in the rather simplistic and one-sided specter of *vamps* or *film noir femmes fatales*, yet, the representational realm of unruly women or of female ‘offenders’ of all sorts is quite complex. It cannot be denied that Theda Bara – as a prominent *vamp* during the early years of cinema – or Barbara Stanwyck – as the prototypical *film noir femme fatale* in *Double Indemnity* (1944) – are outstanding examples of the ‘fallen woman’ providing long-lasting imprints in the representational history of violent/aggressive women, however, one must not disregard the unique, and in contrast to the above mentioned examples, unconventional treatment of this imagery in several of the *Pre-Code* films, for example in *Journal of a Crime* (1934) or *Red-headed Woman* (1932). Not to mention Hitchcock, who presented us some exceptional manifestations of exactly these types of women during the golden years of the *Production Code*, for instance in *Marnie* (1964).

With *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) a great turn occurred in the (mainstream) representation of violent women towards the end of the *Code* era, which was later followed by some specific, uncommon and less-known films of a peculiar and marginal genre: the rape-revenge films such as *Ms. 45* (1981) – in which films, the violated and raped woman sets out on a senseless and vengeful rampage and killing spree. *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) is a curiosity and a unique contribution to the subject matter at hand as a sexploitation film (and not a mainstream product), in which, for example, a woman (the character called Varla) kills a man by merely her bare hands (a rather exceptional and uncommon occurrence) and the film displays graphic violence and explicit sexual content even before the end of the *Production Code* era.

After *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), the next major milestone in the representational history of violent women was *Thelma & Louise* (1991) with its humanistic and realistic approach. However, some other films ought to be remembered of this trend that opened up a new way in the representation of female aggression such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or the *Alien* series – with the first part produced in 1979 – up to the 2002 version of *Chicago* or *Monster* (2003) – just to name a few of the more recent ones. The changes that occurred in the representation of ‘unruly women’ were/are evidently the outcome of second wave feminism (later the third wave), the improvement of the professional investigation of female offenders and female criminality that flourished during the

seventies as an aftermath of the women's movement and all kinds of civil rights movements of the sixties.

However, it must not be forgotten, that *femme fatale* figures have already been present since the beginnings of time, yet, the treatment of this immense issue is not possible within the scope of this book, and even though, I mostly concentrate on the representation of the *femme fatale* in twentieth century American culture and its source in Victorianism, occasionally, there will be references to previous aggressive female figures and venomous women, as well. As Bram Dijkstra also opines: “[n]ot-so-ideal women, of course, had been around ever since that first Fall, and they had been very much in evidence in the annals of culture long before the industrialization of Europe” (Dijkstra 1988, 5). He also adds that male animosity towards women gained its most explicit form during the Middle Ages to provide an earlier example of the negative representation of (not-so-ideal) women: “[s]ome of the *most vicious expressions* of male distrust of, and enmity toward, women can be found in the writings of the *medieval church fathers* [...]” [emphases mine] (Dijkstra 1988, 5). Later scholars and thinkers eagerly quoted these church fathers likewise and “[t]hese tireless purveyors of culture were also forever delving into the large fund of *antifeminine lore* to be found in *classical mythology* and the *Bible*” [emphases mine] (Dijkstra 1988, 5).

Yet, I would make a minor amendment here that *classical mythology* and the *Bible per se* do not primarily and exclusively carry only negativistic examples of and profess hostile attitude toward women by all means; this all happened/happens mostly through the interpretation of these texts and this all depends on who is in the intellectual power position to make the interpretation. The medieval church fathers' mistaken notions and distorted ideology is not so much rooted in the actual sacred texts, not the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus Christ, but Aristotle's corrupted vision of women. He was convinced that women were “incomplete” and they were only “unfinished men” who only provided the “soil” for the male essence as passive receivers (Gaarder 1995, 98). As Gaarder comments,

“Aristotle's erroneous view of the sexes was doubly harmful because it was his – rather than Plato's – view that held sway throughout the Middle Ages. The church thus inherited a view of women that is entirely without foundation in the Bible.” (Gaarder 1995, 98)

According to Gaarder, it was, in fact, Saint Thomas Aquinas who made such a disservice to women that combined Aristotle's philosophy with Christianity since he was the one who “created the great synthesis between faith and knowledge” (Gaarder 1995, 151). This would not have been a

problem in itself but he “also adopted Aristotle’s view of women” and wholeheartedly embraced it by adding that this all is also supported by the Bible, which states that Woman was created out of the Man’s rib (Gaarder 1995, 155). Hence, Aristotle’s personal impairment concerning relationships with women became an intellectual and ideological weapon throughout centuries. Robert L. Daniel is also of the opinion that it was concretely the Christian tradition (formed by the church fathers) that defined and prescribed precisely the male dominated family structure and female subordination in every field of life, and that this all does not originate from Jesus Christ, who treated women with respect and propriety (Daniel 1987, 5).

As a result, as Dijkstra suggests, the ensuing hordes of ideologues carried on Aristotle’s train of thoughts. A rather salient manifestation of this was the pseudo-scientific discourse of the *fin de siècle*: especially the concepts of such (then prominent) scholars and doctors as Dr. Edward H. Clarke, Dr Henry Maudsley and Karl Pearson – who were convinced of ‘the fact’ and thus professed their ‘scientific belief’ – that mental and intellectual work had a debilitating effect on women and their reproductive capacity (Richardson 2004, 241, 244). Such a discourse, obviously, greatly facilitated the interconnection of the figure of the *New Woman* and that of the *femme fatale* (Klein 1992, 87-88), which also resulted in a considerable influence on the representation of women during the early twentieth century, especially in cinematic discourse. As Bram Dijkstra opines,

“[w]ithin this context the movies’ wholesale appropriation of the essential gender dichotomies characteristic of late-nineteenth-century art became a crucial factor in establishing the twentieth century’s visual iconography of the ‘battle of the sexes’” (Dijkstra 1996, 313).

Dijkstra attests that the gender dichotomies of the nineteenth century as well as its representational logic prevailed in the twentieth century and asserts that these still affect us through the visual conventions today:

“As a result, even today many of the visual conventions of nineteenth century art appropriated by the *silents* continue to shape our notions of sexual difference. The *movies* helped turn the metaphors of fin-de-siècle art and science into the *psychological realities* of the *twentieth-century* gender and race prejudice.” [emphases mine] (Dijkstra 1996, 316)

The films of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille were/are also saturated by this tradition resulting in a psychological propaganda one of the main tenets of which being that marital love is the source of a nation’s claim to global significance (Dijkstra 1996, 316-317). This might provide an

explanation for *Chicago*'s sudden 'reformation' or rather 'transubstantiation' in the form of the 1927 film adaptation, where the focus shifts from Roxie and her troubles onto the couple's (lost) happiness that the husband strives to save intensely while the wife as feminine evil destroys everything. Although, even in this version, Roxie gets away with the murder, however, their familial bliss vanishes, which latter issue is not the central concern of any other version of the story, only this one. Dijkstra continues by stating that during the twenties

“[t]wo themes were churned over and over again: man's fateful pollution by the temptations of the sexual vampire and his redemption by the self-effacing love of the female saint” (Dijkstra 1996, 334).

What happens in the 1927 film version of the story can be described with the very same words: after Roxie's 'banishment' the husband is 'redeemed' by the female saint of the film, Katie.

It took several decades to change the approach to the question of female violent behavior. Only during the seventies did some scholars open up the question of women's violence and introduced more views concerning the issue; they advocated the investigation of this subject matter in a different light (after the civil movements of the 1960s). These new researches and studies revealed the fact that women were not different from men in cases of violent and/or aggressive behavior. These theorists thus concluded that the representation of women's violence should not be contrasted with that of the men's criminal attitudes.² The seeds of thought were sewn and slowly even in the representational arena it started to bring forth buds: it became recognized and accepted that not all female offenders are 'evil incarnate' in the form of the prototypical *femme fatale*, which was the 'visible' form, the palpable product and expression of male fears and also of erotic fantasies. By that time it was also acknowledged that not all angelic ladies were so perfectly nice and innocent like the *ingénues* of early film history. (Haskell 1975, 324; Sova 1998, 168)

The film industry, having its roots in that period, builds heavily on the feminine stereotypes prevailing in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This was the time when filmmaking started and thus the representation of gender was strongly connected to and influenced by the Victorian ideals of femininity and proper behavior, which had (as still does have) strong ties with religious dogmas. According to this 'Christian-Victorian' view, the woman had to be a pure lady, the so-called *angel in the house*, and if she did not display such qualities that presented her as an ideal lady or she did not behave accordingly she was labeled as a *fallen woman*. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss this duality primarily concentrating on the

question of female authorship in the given period (Gilbert and Gubar 1980, 3-104). In fact, this duality was also already present in the public consciousness and the artistic productions of the Romantic era (preceding the Victorian one) (Alexander 1989, 18-34; Mellor 1993, 17-39). As Mario Praz also claims concretely about the precedents of the *fallen woman* or the *femme fatale*, “[...] the Romantic and Decadent writers” could not detach themselves from the idea of the “indissoluble union of the beautiful and the sad, [...] the supreme beauty of that beauty which is accursed” (Praz 1990, 31). These writers were so much obsessed with this concept that they elevated the tainted beauty to a pedestal from where she never came down even during Victorianism, and as such, the Romantics greatly contributed to the birth of the actual *femme fatale* during this latter period.

“In fact, to such an extent were Beauty and Death looked upon as sisters by the Romantics that they became fused into a sort of two-faced herm, filled with corruption and melancholy and fatal beauty – a beauty of which, the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment” (Praz 1990, 31).

Praz mentions one of Baudelaire’s evil female characters and she is described exactly the way the *femmes fatales* of later periods are described later, even, for example, during the *film noir* era:

“[...] a demon without pity, [...] a frigid idol, sterile and unfeeling [...], a vampire who pierces the poet’s heart like a dagger and invades his humiliated soul with the violence of a band of demons [...], an inhuman Amazon.” (Praz 1990, 152)

However, the precedents are too many to discuss them in detail in this book as they date back for many centuries and bear the Judeo-Christian heritage with its “Cult of True Womanhood,” and in which the “Victorian Lady” has her ideological base (Daniel 1987, 4-5) together with her antagonistic counterpart, the fallen woman. Janey Place also opines that

“[t]he dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture” (Place 1996, 35).

Clarice Feinman is also of the opinion that, in a large part, “mythology and Judeo-Christian theology” are responsible for relegating women into the categories of “madonna or whore,” and since women seemed to possess “unique powers that made them both necessary and dangerous” by attempting to “come to terms with female sexuality,” men created these

two categories and posited themselves as “protectors of the madonna and punishers of the whore” in accordance with their interests (Feinman 1994, 3-4). In general, their primary interest is to secure – since *pater semper incertus est* – that the outcome of the sexual intercourse is their legitimate heir who rightfully inherits the money, status and position that they acquired (Kelly 2007, 254).

It has to be noted here, that the love of the *femme fatale* is barren, hence, no heir is born out of the sexual intercourse with her which would be the central concern for the patriarchal system. She is (almost) always childless (Harvey 1996, 25 – although she states this about the *film noir femmes fatales*, it is still valid in other periods, as well) or loses her child, and her marriages – if she is married – are always sterile. Hers is a “sterile, cruel love” (Praz 1990, 389). As the *femme fatale* is usually infertile she cannot or does not produce children, hence, her sexuality is only for itself and (possibly) for enjoyment, not for the mighty purpose of reproduction, which is decreed by Christianity as the sole vindication for copulation. This way, she loses the (allegedly) only purpose of a woman, and since she does not ‘fulfill her destiny’ she is not considered a proper woman. Thus, “the *femme fatale* is represented as the antithesis of the maternal – sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production” (Allen 1983, 4 quoted in Doane 1991, 2). In addition, an interesting feature is that the *femme fatale* figure – if she is married – usually has an older husband with whom she lives in an unhappy marriage, and generally, this marriage is sexually dysfunctional likewise (Bruzzi 1997, 139). Sylvia Harvey also opines that, for example, in the *film noir* tradition, there is an “absent family,” and these films do not reproduce the conventional family structure, they are sterile while there is no sexual satisfaction within the marriage bond: “the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another” (Harvey 1996, 22-34).

Similarly to Daniel, Place and Feinman, Praz is also of the opinion that lethal women of all sorts have long populated the public imagination along with mythology and literature because these are (fictional) reflections on real life that has always had aggressive and violent women among its ranks. In addition, he also claims that every period had its *fatal women*, yet, they grew in number when the times were troubled.

“There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and in literature, since mythology and literature are imaginative reflections of the various aspects of real life, and real life has always provided more or less complete examples of arrogant and cruel female characters. [...] Similar companies of Fatal Women are to be found in the literatures of every

period, and are of course more numerous during times in which the springs of inspiration were troubled.” (Praz 1990, 199-200)

He then adds, that certainly, for example, during Romanticism there were also several lethal women to be found, yet, they were not termed as such because there was not “an established type of Fatal Women” (Praz 1990, 201). He immediately explains and defines how a type is created: “it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impression on the popular mind” (Praz 1990, 201), although, it is slightly interesting and questionable that there was no such figure until the middle or the end of the nineteenth century. It might be because the “Byronic superman” (Praz 1990, 205) was still too strong an image and character before that time and only the rise of feminism with the intensified debates of the Woman Question provided that lacking impetus for the creation of ‘the Type of the Fatal Woman,’ and it was not the result of missing prominent *femmes fatales* before.

Nevertheless, the *angel in the house*, who in the United States was named as the *true woman*, was expected and believed to produce that/those legitimate heir/s and conform to the expectations of society. At the turn of the century, in the United States, women were still subject to the role of the ideal woman that nourished the cult of *true womanhood*, which encompassed the characteristics relevant in the case of the “angel in the house:” piety, purity, submissiveness, being domestic and homebound (Daniel 1987, 7-8; Welter 1992, 48-71; Kitch 2001, 17-36). The “angel in the house” and the “true woman” both are linked to the “eternal feminine” image: being submissive, modest, self-less, graceful, pure, delicate, civil, compliant, reticent, chaste, affable, polite (Gilbert and Gubar 1980, 23), “slim, pale, passive,” snowy and immobile in a porcelain-like manner (Gilbert and Gubar 1980, 25).

Generally, the ‘actual fall’ of the fallen woman occurred from the pedestal of grace and decency into the abyss of immorality and sin – the latter being primarily connected to sexuality (before and) during the beginning of women’s emancipation movements when the absolute control of reproduction and material (re)sources was of central importance within the patriarchal culture of the West. While the “angel woman” was not represented in sexual terms the fallen woman definitely was. Additionally, with the threat of syphilis the fallen woman could easily become a lethal one which directly links her to the figure of the *femme fatale* (Richardson 2004, 240-262).

During the Victorian period the fallen woman gained a new coinage: she became the *femme fatale*, the deadly or lethal woman.