Soft-Shed Kisses

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Re-visioning the Femme Fatale
in English Poetry of the 19th Century

By

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INTRODUCTION

The Femme Fatale and the Critics

The femme fatale as a literary and artistic motif has been well-researched by a whole body of critical literature. The woman as the femme fatale is one of the two major representations of femininity in Western culture, side by side with the *donna ideale,* a divine or quasi divine ideal woman.[1] The idea of the fatal woman goes as far back in literature and culture as the personifications of Circe, Salome, Delilah, Lilith, Medea, Medusa and Clytemnestra, and the list is far from complete. The idealisation and the demonisation of femininity can be traced to both the ambivalent myth of the Eternal Feminine and the Christian dichotomy between Eve and the Virgin Mary.[2]

Many critics perceive the femme fatale as the most characteristic and prominent type of femininity in Victorian or even late nineteenth century literature. Virginia Allen traces the development of the concept to the mid-nineteenth century and Nina Auerbach speaks of the fatal woman as an early-Victorian type. In turn, Rebecca Stott, Bram Dijkstra and Patrick Bade scrutinise the late-Victorian incarnations of

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1 Alternatively, the two types can be called an angel and a demon or the *femme fragile* and the *femme fatale,* as recorded by Silke Binias, *Symbol and Symptom: The Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century and Feminist Criticism* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 10, and Andrea Rummel *"Delusive Beauty": Femmes Fatales of English Romanticism* (Bonn University Press, 2008), 9. Generally, the tendency is to polarise the perception of femininity along the lines of the "good" one: docile, meek, dependent and in the service of man and the "bad" one: rebellious, independent, threatening. Another categorisation is offered by Nina Auerbach, who proposes four central types of femininity in Victorian literature: the angel, the demon, the old maid and the fallen woman. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 63.

2 This idea has been noted by Virginia Allen, who writes: "As Mary and Eve stand in opposition, so also do *The Angel in the House,* that popular Victorian image, and terrible Astarte. Each pair represents the ancient dual concept of the Eternal Feminine." *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 6.

the femme fatale.[3] Such perspectives may be traced to Mario Praz, who in his seminal study *The Romantic Agony* (first published in 1933) famously observed that "[d]uring the first stage of Romanticism, up till about the middle of the nineteenth century, we meet with several Fatal Women in literature, but there is no established type of Fatal Woman in the way that there is an established type of Byronic hero."[4] In his view, the situation changes later in the nineteenth century when the femme fatale appears as a dominant representation of femininity. Praz accounts for this shift, concluding that "[t]he male, who at first tends towards sadism, inclines, at the end of the century, towards masochism."[5]

In contrast to the critics who view the fatal woman as a Victorian invention, I argue that the femme fatale is equally prevalent in Romantic poetry, although she is differently constructed. In doing so, I follow a number of studies which have been devoted to the Romantic or even pre-Romantic incarnations of the femme fatale. Barbara Fass is probably the first critic to have treated the subject of the Romantic fatal woman extensively. In her *La Belle Dame Sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* she makes a case for the existence of a type of the femme fatale whom she terms "la belle dame sans merci" in the writings of the Romantic poets from England, France and Germany. In her *Fatal Women of Romanticism,* Adriana Craciun investigates the use of this motif in female writers and Andrea Rummel traces the fatal woman topos to the gothic novel. Silke Binias, in her book on feminist literary criticism and the femme fatale, engages in a series of thought-provoking close readings of chosen texts both from the Romantic and the Victorian periods.[6]

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3 Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Virginia Allen, *Femme Fatale*, Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (London: Mayflower, 1979), Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2008).

4 Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1933; London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 201. Throughout his book, Praz uses only the English form of the phrase, and always capitalizes it; in my usage of the femme fatale/fatal woman term I follow the other scholars (Allen, Bade, Binias), who use the French and the English phrases respectively and do not differentiate them.

5 Ibid., 206.

6 Barbara Fass, *La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1874), Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Andrea Rummel, *Delusive Beauty*, Silke Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*.

This volume interrogates the construction and use of the femme fatale motif in the poetry of canonical male writers of the nineteenth century, starting from the Romantic and continuing with the Victorian authors. Such a scheme allows for the tracing of both similarities and differences in the shaping of their subsequent concepts of the fatal woman, whilst encouraging creative comparisons. Whereas the book does not argue for a uniform, consistent perception of femininity as shared by those poets, it nevertheless attempts to map certain recurring features that allow for grouping their texts together. My chapters investigate a variety of poems in which the femme fatale surfaces as the most important character. Each chapter is devoted to one poet and attempts to demonstrate what is unique about this poet's treatment of the femme fatale motif. Thus, every chapter tells a different story, although they share the same concern and many ideas overlap.

Naturally, I am aware that the femme fatale motif is not limited to the texts by male writers, but it was extensively used and re-adopted by women authors of the time. As Adriana Craciun shows in *The Fatal Women of Romanticism*, this image played an important role in the development of women's poetic identities in the Romantic period. She also contends that the use of femme fatale figures by the female writers was surprising and divergent, far from being only a reactive critique of the "masculinist" assumptions about women. As far as Victorian women authors are concerned, Nicolette Little and Jennifer Hedgecock demonstrate how George Eliot and Mary Elizabeth Braddon question, challenge and subvert the femme fatale topos in their novels.[7] My decision, however, is to limit the scope of my book to the texts of five male poets. While the claim that, at least frequently, fatality—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder is far from innovative, the question my book attempts to answer is not if, but how those canonical poets of the nineteenth century constructed their central female characters as fatal.

The choice of the following poets seemed natural enough. Keats and Shelley represent the poetry of the Romantic period and their use of the femme fatale is both apparent and highly original. In turn, Tennyson, Rossetti and Swinburne are all to some extent influenced by the Romantic views on femininity. Moreover, they are overtly interested in the "Woman Question" and manifest this interest in the diverse ways in which they picture independent or transgressive femininity, and various reactions to it. One issue which calls for explanation is the exclusion here of Coleridge's "Christabel," a text which

7 Nicolette Little, *The Femme Fatale and the Femme Mourante*: *George Eliot, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and the Nineteenth-Century Ideology of Female Beauty* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Dalhousie University, 2007), Jennifer Hedgecock, *Femme Fatale.*

most readers recognize as a classic Romantic poem about the fatal woman. My decision not to discuss it can be straightforwardly accounted for. In each of my chapters I intend to show diversity and/or evolution of particular poets' conceptions of fatal femininity, while "Christabel" is the only text by Coleridge exploring the femme fatale motif in full.[8] Thus, I have decided to limit my research to the texts by Keats and Shelley, English Romantic poets of the second generation.

Defining the Femme Fatale

The generic origin of the femme fatale term is not clear, despite growing interest in the topic of dangerous and powerful femininity, manifest in numerous literary and cultural texts of both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, in writing about film (particularly *noir* cinema of the 1940s) as well as in literary criticism. Virginia Allen, trying to trace the moment in which the term entered the English language, explains: "the phrase 'femme fatale' has appeared since 1900, while many of the images to which authors refer when they use it appeared before 1900. The nineteenth century invented the image; the twentieth century its label."[9] She also speculates that the term may have been coined in popular journalism connected with the theatre and theatrical reviews and that "the fact that the term is French does not necessarily mean that the French invented the phrase."[10] The most commonly accepted definition of the term was given by Mario Praz, who devotes a whole chapter of *The Romantic Agony* to femme fatale figures in literary texts. Praz states that such women have always existed both in mythology and in literature and, though he proceeds by giving examples rather than by definitions, he nevertheless does provide some permanent traits of the fatal woman. He mentions her exoticism, irresistibility, sexual cannibalism, youth and the inexperience of her lovers and identifies the fatal female as a praying mantis, a vampire, a siren or a wanton courtesan.[11] Patrick Bade, writing in 1979, likewise does not attempt to define the term in detail, but describes the femme fatale as "malignant, threatening, destructive and fascinating."[12] Virginia Allen, in corroborating those definitions, adds features which, according to her, are vital:

8 In Coleridge's "Love" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" some femme fatale figures can also be encountered, but their role is not so prominent as it is in *Christabel.*

9 Allen, *Femme Fatale*. viii.

10 Ibid., viii.

11 Praz, *Romantic Agony*, 197-222.

12 Bade, *Femme Fatale*, 9.

> The adjectives so far collected include beautiful, erotic, seductive, destructive, exotic. To these we may add self-determined and independent. In addition, throughout the examples runs the theme of an indifferent and chilling remoteness from human feeling. . . The femme fatale is less human. She is immortal, queen, goddess, and therefore separated from ordinary men and women by a vast gulf. She is not only amorous and lovely, but indulges her sexuality without concern for her lover of the moment, entranced, like Salome seen through the eyes of Des Esseintes. To this list of adjectives must be added the word "barren." . . . The femme fatale, no matter how amorous, does not conceive. Sin alone may feed at her luscious breast. She was construed as the woman who controlled her own sexuality, who seduced men and drained them of their "vital powers," in an exercise of eroticism that had no issue. She was—and is—the diametric opposite of the "good" woman who passively accepted impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, the control and domination of her sexuality by men.[13]

Thus, Praz, Bade and Allen all see sexual cannibalism and predatory instincts as a predominant characteristic of the fatal woman, together with a fascination with death and pain. Besides, they presuppose a willingness to destroy as a primary mover for the femme fatale. Allen makes it particularly clear when she further characterises the fatal woman by her "intent to destroy."[14] Other critics, however, do not see the matter in such a fortright manner. Barbara Fass, while she still perceives the sexual pleasure femmes fatales offer as central, nevertheless differentiates between the type she terms "la belle dame sans merci" and the femme fatale. Her distinction rests upon the claim that: "[t]he femme fatale promises pleasure, specifically sexual in nature; la Belle Dame sans Merci, while offering the same pleasure, also dwells in a land that embodies human dreams of physical perfection and immortality."[15] The main claim of Fass's book *La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* is that "the Romantic writer could independently perceive in the Belle Dame sans Merci story an ideal expression of his plight regarding the dichotomy between art and life."[16] Her argument proves essential for my study, as it points out the affinities between the femme fatale and the muse. John Raymond Miller, in turn, makes an important observation that not all femmes fatales are intentionally evil and proposes a distinction into a "conscious" and "unconscious" subtype.[17]

13 Allen, *Femme Fatale*, 4.
14 Ibid., 34.
15 Fass, *Belle Dame*, 22.
16 Ibid., 18.
17 John Raymond Miller, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti from the Grotesque to the Fin de Siècle: Sources, Characteristics and Influences of the Femme Fatale* (Ann Arbor: Harper, 1974), 80.

Nevertheless, as Silke Binias notes, Miller "does not proceed to analysing closely the various types and their ambivalent portrayals. Similarly to Praz, Miller ends up with two neatly labelled and mutually exclusive drawers for convenient storage of all samples."[18]

Modern studies convincingly argue for the multiplicity of the femme fatale types. Fass's distinction has recently been contested by Adriana Craciun, for whom the Romantic femme fatale is not a symbolic or aesthetic image, but an ideologically charged figure. Craciun investigates the complex relationships of women to power and violence and examines women's violence in the context of larger, political and ideological debates. She also challenges the assumption that feminist criticism should demonstrate that women do not replicate systems of "masculinist" power and violence. Andrea Rummel arrives at a similar conclusion, but she primarily sees the Romantic femme fatale as originating from the Gothic novel and shows the link between the *femme diable* and the *femme diabolique*. The most important book for my purposes, however, is Silke Binias's *The Femme Fatale in 19th Century English Poetry and Feminist Criticism*, the only work I am aware of which attempts a thorough overview of literature dealing with the femme fatale motif. Binias meticulously lists and categorises existing attempts at an all-encompassing definition of the femme fatale as a type and in so doing shows the inadequacy of these ventures. Indeed, generalisations about "what exactly the femme fatale is" often leads to oversimplifications: "because a woman is sexy, she is subversive, she is deadly she is a fatal woman."[19]

After a close scrutiny of the Romantic and the Victorian femmes fatales appearing in poetry and art of the nineteenth century it transpires that the fatal woman is not only an erotic icon or a predatory praying mantis. Her power goes far beyond sexual allure and apart from the authority and control over man's body, she also rules his soul and his imagination. She seems, first of all, indefinable—liminality and ambiguity are vital parts of her charm. Often, although not always, she is destructive, but frequently this effect is not intentional. Moreover, she is not only alluring and irresistible, but her appeal is conditioned by other features: independence, insubmissiveness, elusiveness, unattainability. To this list of divergent qualities some other features may be added and their inclusion demonstrates the purpose of the present volume. I am tempted to turn tables here on the critics who worked hard to produce an exhaustive definition of the fatal woman type. Primarily, it is my conviction that in the majority of the texts which have been selected for analysis in this study one thing is a connecting and stable element: the

18 *Binias, Symbol and Symptom*, 35.
19 Ibid., 41.

femme fatale is a product of a masculine imagination, and not only because the writers of these texts are male. Crucially, the male speakers/characters of these poems persistently want to see the females they describe as fatal. With the exception of a few poems only (Rossetti's "Eden Bower" and "Sister Helen"), the fatality of the remaining so-called femmes fatales is deeply ambivalent, and it can be explained by the speaker's/narrator's wish to perceive these women in such a way. Certainly Lamia, the Belle Dame, the siren woman from "A Sea-Spell," Astarte, Guinevere, Venus from "Laus Veneris" or Dolores can be seen as foul enchantresses, destructive, indifferent females, who look for self-satisfaction and ruin the people surrounding them, but the texts rule out such reductive, one-dimensional readings. Instead, the male voices in these texts attribute fatality, danger, or an intent to destroy to all of the women. Nevertheless, the "blame" can be equally plausibly distributed to the male characters of these poems, who either wilfully succumb to seduction, taking equal part in the courtship, or equally wilfully choose to remain deluded about their situation. Therefore, I propose that there is a strong connection, evident in almost every poem treated in this book, between the motif of the femme fatale and the theme of illusion (frequently self-illusion or even self-delusion). The fatality of Lamia, la Belle Dame sans Merci and the woman of "To—[Time's sea]," depends on the wilful "suspension of disbelief," a determination of the speaker/reader to impute malevolence, harmful intentions and ruthlessness to the female figures without considering how the male characters contribute to their unhappy fate. The same is true about "Alastor," "Soul's Beauty," "A Sea-Spell," "An Orchard-Pit" and "Laus Veneris." All of the female characters in *Idylls of the King*, although charged with selfishness, indifference and cruelty, become fatal mostly because the men they influence want to stay deluded, refusing to recognize the reality for what it is. Noticing this tendency, Diane Hoeveler concludes in *Romantic Androgyny* that " the ambiguities and conflicts between female appearance and reality consistently characterize the femme fatale."[20]

Secondly, I argue against the strict polarisation of femininity into fatal and ideal, the femme fatale and the heavenly muse. While not every femme fatale has to be the muse, every Romantic muse becomes the femme fatale. This stance applies mostly to the texts of Keats and Shelley, but to a certain extent it is also relevant for Rossetti's and Swinburne's poems. As the first two chapters of my thesis demonstrate, the Romantic poets of the second generation customarily fused these categories and the irresistibility of the female defined as the femme fatale in their verse generally rests upon her

20 Diane Long Hoeveler, *Romantic Androgyny: The Woman Within* (University Park: Pensylvania State University Press, 1990), 196.

offering a glimpse into the ideal world. The femmes fatales in Keats and Shelley's poetry function either as muses or as idealised self-projections, offering insight and inspiration to the men they enchant. Moreover, they are irrevocably connected to the themes of poetic creativity; to quote the words of Simone de Beauvoir, such a woman "can hold the keys to *poetry;* she can be *mediatrix* between this world and the beyond: grace or oracle, star or sorceress, she opens the door to the supernatural, the surreal."[21] Frequently, fatal muses are also female embodiments of the sublime.[22] Very much in tune with the Romantic aesthetics, they possess most of the qualities of the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke, such as obscurity, power and terror, while an encounter with them is bound to result in pain intermingled with pleasure. Moreover, the effect they have on the spectator—usually that of total arrest of the male admirer, when he is rendered mute and helpless in front of the awesome presence he cannot fully grasp—is strongly allied to the Burkean concept of astonishment as the primary passion caused by the sublime. Also, in this guise the femme fatale is actually beneficent to men. I am aware of the paradoxical nature of this proposition, yet I hold it true: the ideal/fatal muse prompts the male poet's coming of age and his development. While she can destroy the poet's ego, the result is the emergence of the camelion poet, "having no self": Keats's idea of the poetical character.[23] In Shelley's verse, in turn, only being burned and paralysed by the radiance of the female sublime guarantees poetic creativity. Such fatality, then, is of a different type than commonly understood.

Barbara Fass recognises a crucial thing when she writes about a precursor of Keats's Belle Dame, Alan Chartier's heroine from the poem bearing her name as the title:

> Chartier's Belle Dame sans merci differs from other such ladies of medieval literature only to the degree of her independence and forthrightness. Indeed, she is hardly a femme fatale at all and can only be called such because of her suitor's anguish. But his distress, the reader is led to suspect, is a romantic agony largely self-induced.[24]

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21 Simone de Beauvoir, "Myths: Of Women in Five Authors," in *The Critical Tradition. Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends,* ed. David H. Richter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 1087.

22 Catherine Maxwell, in her book *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), posits the link between the sublime and the femme fatale: "This dangerous beauty, the sublime of art, of painting, of poetry, is like that of the femme fatale who paralyses the enthralled male," 82.

23 Keats's idea of the camelion poet is elucidated in his letter to Richard Woodhouse of 26 October 1818. Robert Gittings, ed. *Letters of John Keats* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 157.

24 Fass, *Belle Dame*, 21.

The majority of the female characters described in this book can be seen in a similar way. Fass's statement applies to Keats's Lamia, Cynthia, the Belle Dame and Moneta, Shelley's Constantia, the Veiled Maid, Emilia and Medusa, Tennyson's Eleänore and, to a certain extent, Guinevere. Rossetti's Sybilla Palmifera, Lady Lilith, Astarte Syriaca and the siren women from "A Sea-Spell" and "The Orchard Pit" as well as Swinburne's Venus and Anactoria can be subsumed under Fass's observation. The suffering they are held responsible for is "a romantic agony self-induced" by the male protagonists (in the case of "Anactoria" by Sappho). Thus, as I hope to demonstrate in the course of this book, most of the Romantic and Victorian femmes fatales are not intentionally evil or destructive. Since they frequently bear the characteristics of the poet's muses, usually it is their absence and elusiveness, and not their presence and conscious wrongdoing, which makes them fatal. The encounter with them is a rite of passage, desired but also feared because of the impact is has on the poet's life.

Finally, while the Romantic or post-Romantic version of the femme fatale is firmly connected with the issues of inspiration and poetic creativity, the Victorian poets show their concern with contemporary social and ideological issues. Tennyson's poetry appears to be primarily a social critique. Contrary to criticism which views Tennyson as hostile to women, it may be suggested that in his early verse and the *Idylls of the King* he unmasks a male fear of women which approaches paranoia. Consequently, he shows how an independent woman is stigmatized as a femme fatale and then accordingly punished. Alternatively, he demonstrates how such a female becomes a scapegoat unreflexively blamed for stripping the appearances from reality which no one wants to discern. Thus, Tennyson's fatal women, particularly from *Idylls of the King*, are the agents of uncompromising truth as opposed to comfortable illusion.

Rossetti's treatment of the theme is essentially conflicted: while his poetry is informed by the Romantic ideas about beauty and creativity, which he similarly embodies in the ideal female, his anxiety and fear experienced in contact with self-sufficient, powerful femininity results in misogynistic and at times grotesque and monstrous, portraits of the femme fatale. Thus, on the one hand, he comes into line with Keats and Shelley, forever pursuing his muse of "The Orchard Pit," "Soul's Beauty" and "A Sea-Spell," at the cost of never ending unfulfilment, longing and even self-destruction. On the other hand, he also exhibits a tendency, visible in such poems as "Eden Bower," "Body's Beauty" and "Sister Helen," to present femininity as essentially destructive and even castrating. To make the picture complete it needs to be noted that when he chooses to attack rather than endorse the common prejudices against female self-sufficiency, he manages to

unsettle the traditional perception of good/bad, saintly/fallen femininity, as his sonnet-painting pairs demonstrate.

In turn, Swinburne's deployment of the femme fatale motif is subversive: its main idea is uncovering the mechanism by which his male speakers denounce the objects of their fascination as fatal and destructive. He superbly abolishes the ideal/fatal distinction and shows that these categories are artificially created constructs. Finally, like the Romantic poets, Swinburne reveals his interest in the relationship between sexuality, religion, immortality and art, and poems such as "Laus Veneris," "Anactoria" and "Dolores" are a perfect expression of this concern.

Methodology: Feminist and Gender Approaches in the Service of the Femme Fatale

Naturally, various uses of the femme fatale figure illuminate a gendered aspect of nineteenth century culture. One problem this book attempts to chart are the diverse ways in which the fatal woman became a coded account of the male conflicts about the sex/gender system of their times. The interest as well as anxieties in relation to gender issues are manifest in both male and female writing, in such diverse tracts as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, John Stuart's Mill *On the Subjection of Women*, John Ruskin's *The Queen's Garden*, Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England*. Likewise, the concern with male and female roles, what is masculine and feminine underwrites all texts extensively treated in the present volume.

Many of the poems I have chosen, particularly those by Rossetti and Tennyson, depict the cultural phenomenon of the intense fear of unbridled femininity, felt in confrontation with women who refused the socially accepted position of, to use Bram Dijkstra's term, "the household nun."[25] Women who rebelled against their perception as being "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation"[26] were often believed to have lost what is essential in their nature—their femininity. Nineteenth century writers and painters openly show their almost obsessive preoccupation with gender roles, with

25 Dijkstra, *Idols*, 11.

26 John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008), 67. In lecture II of his influential treatise, entitled "Lilies of Queen's Gardens" Ruskin discusses the role of reading and education in relation to what he considers womanly mind and virtue, and proceeds to voice his conception of how a man and a woman complement each other.

what is acceptable as feminine and masculine. Female independence, free thinking, the urge to decide about their own life and, worse still, women's attempts to gain financial position independently from men, all clashed with the ideal of modesty, purity, renunciation and servitude embodied in the figure of a submissive angel in the house. If a woman did not fit in the "good" category, not wanting to conform to the requirements that were bestowed upon her, she was quickly denounced either as a femme fatale or as a fallen woman (often both). Moreover, an independent woman was castigated as unfeminine or even openly presented as masculinised. If she appropriated the "male" active sphere, it was only expected that she would next strip men of their potency and undermine their masculinity. The dread of effeminacy looms over the head of the nineteenth century man more menacingly than ever before. This fear is further strengthened by almost uncountable texts published in the Victorian era supporting the claim that the reversal of the existing order, according to which the man is "the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" while the woman turns the home into "a sacred place, a vestal temple"[27] and presides upon it, is not only unnatural, but destructive and catastrophic. Dijkstra recalls the words of another writer, Nicholas Cooke, who as early as 1870 wrote about the degenerative impulse of feminism:

> if carried out in actual practice, this matter of "Woman's Rights" will speedily eventuate in the most prolific source of her wrongs. She will become rapidly unsexed, and degraded from her present exalted position to the level of man, without his advantages; she will cease to be the gentle mother, and become the Amazonian brawler.[28]

In the century of rapid progress and development, the idea of regression was an anathema. The Darwinian theory of evolution and natural selection intensified racist and sexist attitudes because they appeared to have the full support of "nature." This viewpoint is very well visible in the writings of Herbert Spencer, who, using the evidence of craniologists, claimed that the better developed species (white, male) have bigger skulls and, consequently, brains, than the less developed ones (savage, female).[29] In this way, the natural inferiority of women was sanctioned by "scientific" proofs. This strand of thinking continued and it was asserted that wom-

27 Ibid., 66.

28 Nicholas Cooke, *Satan In Society*, (Cincinatti: C.F.Vent, 1870) 86, quoted in Dijkstra, *Idols*, 213. Dijkstra in detail discusses the fear of degeneration brought about by the women's movement for independence in chapter VII of *Idols of Perversity*, "Clinging Vines and the Dangers of Degeneration," 210-34.

29 Dijkstra, *Idols*, 166.

en in their natural development did not progress far on from infancy; that all energy that in the developed male is given to thought, in women is required for reproduction; and even that the brain substance of a male and a female is different. Consistently, these beliefs led to a fear of regression, "a reversion" in the development of species, which Darwin admitted as a possibility in his "Descent of Man."[30] Women going against nature could provoke such regression, and prospective effeminacy became a nightmare which haunted men. This fear found expression in many portrayals of male/female relationships with reversed gender categories, as is the case of Tennyson's "Guinevere" and Rossetti's "Sister Helen" and "Eden Bower;" it is evident in painting women as monstrous, gigantic in size, muscular and physically strong (Rossetti's "Astarte Syriaca") and in the use of military language for describing women (Tennyson's "Kate"). Finally, it manifests itself in the course of thinking chosen by Swinburne's Tannhäuser, who—at least for some time—manages to persuade himself that the sleeping beauty by his side may at any moment mutate into a monster, a panther ready to swallow him whole.

It can be thus safely assumed that all poets whose texts have been selected for a detailed analysis in the subsequent chapters of this book share gender anxieties. Their various poems at once reinscribe conventional gender categories and subvert them, in this way mapping prevalent (and often conflicted) attitudes to these problems in the nineteenth century. Keats's and Shelley's poetry has at its heart issues connected with poetic creation, but they are determined by their concepts of femininity and roles they ascribe to female figures. Rossetti's legacy is to a large extent post-Romantic and his verse in a similar way deals with the questions of artistic creativity, but on the other hand, Rossetti is truly a child of his times, and his views on femininity should be contextualised by the ongoing debate on the "Woman Question." Tennyson's poetry, in turn, is deeply enmeshed in the social conceptions about male and female roles in the household, the changing position of women, the patriarchal attempts at preserving the *status quo*. Swinburne, finally, can be said to have unveiled and deconstructed the ways in which stereotypes about femininity are created. The fear of femininity, as well as the relationship between femininity and the artistic creation are primary concerns voiced in his poetry.

Many critics working with gender are interested in the breakdown of binaries such as male and female. The idea that cultural definitions of

30 Ibid., 166-70, 211. See Dijkstra's chapter "Evolution and the Brain," particularly 160-73. Cf. Jill Conway "Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution," in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age,* ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1973), 140-54.

sexuality and what it means to be male or female are in flux has been widespread in recent decades. Some critics are interested in what it might mean to undo the normative gender conceptions, which, as Judith Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*, can be experienced both in positive and in negative ways. Butler states: "Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a liveable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater liveability as its aim."[31] She further defines gender as "a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing" but also "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."[32] Such views on gender can be extremely helpful for an analysis of nineteenth century poetry. The question of what it might mean to become feminised was a key question for Romantic poets of the so-called second generation and their answers, although riven with tension, generally reflect what Butler calls the positive experience resulting in greater creativity, sympathy and love; this attitude is then emulated in the poetry of Swinburne. On the other hand, the women in the Victorian texts who transgressed the boundaries ascribed to them by social norms were declared unfeminine and seen as destructive and dangerous. The masculinised Lilith from Rossetti's "Eden Bower" or his Syrian Astarte directly threaten the established order, and succumbing to them leads to men's effeminacy and their untimely fall. Similarly, in *Idylls of the King* Arthur can be seen as "unsexed," effeminate because of Guinevere's transgression and, consequently, his fall and degeneration is traced to her unfeminine and improper conduct.

However, gender studies are only one aspect of feminist theory. As feminist criticism addresses itself to the question of male dominance, to an investigation of the complex relationships between sex and power in the patriarchal society and the construction of stereotypes about women, it is only natural that a book on the pervasive representations of the femme fatale must be considered feminist. Images of women in art and literature have been an obvious target of feminist criticism. Two influential books defined and directed the scope of feminist literary criticism connected with the co-called first and second wave of feminism for years. Already in 1949 Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argued for the abolition of the discriminatory double myth of the eternal feminine and many other stereotypes of women, while Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) dealt with negative depictions of femininity in literature and myth as a male strategy

31 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 1.
32 Ibid., 1.

of keeping women out of literary production.[33] Other scholars, like Mary Ellman, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Annette Kolodny, Nancy Chodorow, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have meticulously examined images and constructs of femininity, as well as the strategies and rules of patriarchy existing in literary texts. My study contributes to feminist criticism by proposing a revision of the stereotype of the femme fatale existing in nineteenth century poetry and the equally stereotypical conviction that the canonical male poets propagated misogynistic attitudes towards femininity as a rule.

Since representation is usually connected with sight, the question of looking is of extreme importance in my study. The problem of the gaze is vital for my interpretation of Shelley's poems. Moreover, my reading of Rossetti and Swinburne is facilitated by the theory of the male gaze and the idea of woman-as-sign, that functions in painting, but also in literature. The notion of woman-as-sign was developed in 1978 by Elisabeth Cowie in her essay which appeared under such a title in the first edition of *M/F.* The essay deals with the social production of sexual difference and fuses Levi Strauss's work on kinship structures with semiotic analysis.[34] The notion was next deployed by feminist critics Pollock and Cherry when they wrote the influential text "Woman as sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: the representation of Elisabeth Siddall." As they suggest, "[t]he feminine is located by the textual strategies and ideological formations of art history as the passive, beautiful or erotic object of a creativity exclusively tied to the masculine."[35] In the chapter on Rossetti I want to demonstrate how, on the one hand, he propagates such a representation of femininity by painting women as signs whose signified is not the woman in question but a set of other concepts (the power, dominance, social position, genius, money of the artist who produced it or the owner who bought it) but also how, on the other hand, he expresses distinct uneasiness in relation to this idea, undermining and subverting it in his poetry. Thus, while as an artist he perpetuates the traditional model of femininity in art[36] and frequently

33 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

34 Elizabeth Cowie, "*Woman as Sign*," M/F 1 (1978), 49-64.

35 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge), 91. The essay "Woman as sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: the representation of Elisabeth Siddall," written in collaboration with Deborah Cherry, is included as a chapter in Pollock's book.

36 A notable exception to such a treatment is a painting *Astarte Syriaca,* which evoked very conflicted reactions among the (usually male) critics.

represents women as costly objects to be bought and possessed, as a poet he can be considered much more unorthodox and subversive.[37]

The woman-as-sign notion is inescapably related to the question of the so-called male gaze. The question of looking has been explored by feminist criticism as a morbid activity engaged by men who look at women and reduce them to the object of their voyeuristic fantasy. The male gaze is also inseparably connected with power, as the looker is considered active and dominant, while the looked-at (object) is passive and dependent. Moreover, the visual scrutiny presupposes cognition. In *Feminist Literary Theory: An Introduction*, K. K. Ruthven writes: "It is believed that in the phallocratic order of knowledge perpetuated in our patriarchal society, the kind of 'looking' that results in 'knowing' is likely to be exploitative."[38] Thus, in the theory of the male gaze two things come to the fore: the relation of sight to power and the objectification of the woman who is merely represented to provide visual pleasure to men. The concept of the male gaze can be traced to Laura Mulvey's writing on the cinema. In her well-known article she posits that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."[39] In his book *The Ways of Seeing*, based on the BBC television series, John Berger states in a similar fashion: "[w]omen are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him."[40] The male gaze theory can be applied not only to the visual arts, but also to literature and it is informative for my study in all the texts in which the female comes under the scrutiny of the male eye. Thus, it is exceptionally useful for the analysis of Rossetti's

37 This split of attitudes can probably be in part explained by financial concerns. As noted by his biographers, Rossetti treated painting mostly as a means of earning a living, and frequently recorded his view that, were it not for money, he would devote himself to what he considered his main artistic vocation, that of poetry. Cf. Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1949; London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 422.

38 K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

39 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 837.

40 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), 64.

painting, his sonnets describing women, but it can also be applied, at least partly, to the verses of Shelley, Tennyson and Swinburne.

Finally, my chapter on Swinburne is informed by the concept of the "dread of woman" established by a psychoanalytical psychiatrist, Karen Horney.[41] Nancy Chodorow locates the "political and theoretical origins" of psychoanalytic feminism with Karen Horney, whose theories form the basis "for most of the recent revisions of psychoanalytic understandings of gender and for most psychoanalytic dissidence on the question of gender in the early period as well."[42] In "The Dread of Woman," Horney describes how male fears of castration and dread of female sexuality are projected onto women and the women are objectified in order for men to never have to deal directly with their fear, but only to face the projected "threat" of female sexuality.[43] Creating his dramatic monologue "Laus Veneris," Swinburne cleverly unmasks the dread Tannhäuser experiences in contact with Venus, evident in images of the aggressive female sexuality of the *vagina dentata* kind. Similar concepts are at work in his other poems, such as "Faustine," "Dolores," "Anactoria." Perhaps even more than the other poets discussed in this book, Swinburne's poetry is shaped by the pain/pleasure paradox, and fatal femininity is a perfect expression of this conflict. Moreover, he also uses the stereotype of the femme fatale in order to show how poetry and art become degraded in the world of prude, hypocritical and castigating morality.

While the central parameters of feminist critique: marginalisation, objectification, silencing of the female voice, sexist stereotyping, the view of the woman as Other and male voyeurism are undeniably at work in many of the poems which have been subjected to close readings in this book, what makes these texts interesting, in the majority of cases, is that the narrative strategies are aimed at unmasking and criticising, not endorsing these mechanisms of patriarchal control. This is the crucial issue here, and it goes against Elaine Showalter's reservations about what she terms "feminist critique." Showalter distinguishes two types of feminist literary concern: the first, "feminist critique" which she sees mostly as male-orientated, since it considers the representations, misconceptions and stereotypes concerning women in the works by male authors, and the criticism which deals with literary texts written by women, the authentic female experience. In "Towards a Feminist Poetics" she writes: "If we study stereotypes of

41 Karen Horney, "The Dread of Woman," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 8 (1932), 348-60.

42 Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 2-3.

43 Horney, "The Dread of Woman," 350.

women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be,"[44] which in her view perpetuates a victimised view of women. Her advice, therefore, is to move to female-authored texts instead, to explore the variety and richness of the female writing.

My book endorses the "feminist critique" but I do not think that this approach is unproductive. First of all, I want to show that femininity and femaleness are not marginalised but are chief concerns in the poetry of the nineteenth century written by men. Secondly, the texts I have selected, in general, do more than show that those male authors share Freud's conviction that femininity is a problem and men cannot escape worrying over it.[45] Keats and Shelley bow in front of sublime female power. The Victorian poets, in turn, frequently seem to suggest that if the females are fatal, the problem lies with men and men's attitudes rather than with the women. This ideology informs Tennyson's "lady poems" in which he depicts desperate and violent efforts to control female attempts at independence, as well as his *Idylls of the King*, where he thoroughly unmasks and criticises unwarranted idealism and the immaturity of Arthur. Rossetti's painting-poem pairs "Astarte Syriaca," "Soul's Beauty" and "Body's Beauty" express the artist's conflicted views on the matter, but they also demonstrate a characteristically Victorian attitude to female sexuality: fear mixed with desire. Swinburne, finally, encourages the reader to (psycho)analyse the speaker of his most famous poem about the femme fatale, "Laus Veneris," and shows how and why Tannhäuser is determined (for most of the dramatic monologue at least) to construct Venus as fatal.

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44 Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in Mary Jacobus, ed. *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1979), 27.

45 I refer here to S. Freud's essay "Femininity," in James Strachey, ed. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1965), 102-18, 112. Freud writes: "Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem. When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is 'male or female'?"

CHAPTER ONE

FROM ENCHANTRESS TO MUSE: THE FEMME FATALE IN JOHN KEATS'S POETRY

Introduction: Female Presence in Keats's Verse—a Promise of Permanence or Destruction?

One of the most memorable poetic images ever created is the scene of kissing lovers, immortalised by art in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." As has been noted by Keats's eminent scholars, the central fact in his poetry is the desire for escape from the experience of flux and temporality, which in his later verse is expressed through a recurrent death-wish.[1] This view proves helpful when it comes to discussing the female characters in Keats's poetry, and the femme fatale type in particular. All Keats's fatal women seem to embody and promise permanence, but, at the same time, they threaten the poet/speaker with destruction. Even when not intentionally evil (which is usually the case), they are elusive and potentially dangerous. The encounter with them can be a door to paradise, but may, at the same time, result in despair, agony and dissolution.

Many of the female protagonists of Keats's verse are either presented as femmes fatales or they have the potential to become fatal. A long list of examples includes la Belle Dame sans Merci, Lamia, Circe (who all prove fatal to men), Madeline from *The Eve of St. Agnes* (who would have probably been the reason for Porphyro's death, in both the bodily and spiritual sense), Moneta from *The Fall of Hyperion* (who guards the altar on whose steps many men died), the figures on the imaginary urn in "Ode to Indolence" and, last but not least, the goddess from "Ode on Melancholy." These female figures share a number of important features: first and foremost, they are all liminal, situated between the real and imaginary spheres; as a result, the question whether they offer truth or illusion remains unanswered. Secondly,

1 Walter Evert, *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 25 (note).

the union with them, whether it proves fatal or not, is a ritual of initiation which introduces the man into a sphere hitherto inaccessible. Thirdly, close contact with such a female figure indicates both pleasure (sometimes bordering on ecstasy) and pain, very often leading to, and always conditioning "[k]nowledge enormous" (*Hyperion, A Fragment* III.113). In this chapter I will endeavour to examine some of the feminine figures in Keats's poetry in order to see how the femme fatale topos works in his verse. It is my conviction that Keats's femme fatale type undergoes significant evolution, which begins in his early poems such as *Endymion* and "To—[Time's sea]" further develops in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and *Lamia* and culminates in *The Fall of Hyperion.*[2]

Although many critics have discussed the female presence in Keats's verse, I am not aware of any work which focuses on the change and evolution of the female character in terms of a progression from the threatening femme fatale to the poetic muse offering insight and understanding to the male protagonist. The critic who has come closest to the interpretation I attempt to propose is Karla Alwes with her illuminating *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry*, but her reading of such a crucial poem as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is primarily divergent from my interpretation. Also, Alwes sees Moneta as a different type from both Lamia and the Belle Dame. In her view, they are femmes fatales, while Moneta is a muse.[3] In contrast, I argue against

2 Some parts of this chapter have appeared in print before, albeit in a different form. The paper "From the mere dreamer to the true poet: John Keats's poetic theory in *The Fall of Hyperion,*" in: *Anglica. Tendencies in Literature, Culture and Language,* ed. A. Weseliński (Warszawa: WUW 2009), 45-54 employs analysis of Keats's epic poem included in this chapter, but my emphasis is on Keats's views on poetry and poetic creation. The article "Young man's delusion: fatality in John Keats's *Time Sea* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci,*" in: *Anglica,* ed. A. Weseliński Warszawa: WUW, 2010), 55-65 is a shortened version of a part of this chapter. In "The motif of enchantment and transformation in John Keats's 'Lamia' and its chosen Pre-Raphaelite visual representations," in: *Approaches to Literature,* ed. G. Bystydzieńska (Warszawa: Department of English Literature, UW 2005), 59-74 I analyse the same poem, but over the years my perception of it has changed drastically and the interpretation I propose now clashes with the one in the article. Passages relating to Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne have been included in the article "Discourse of Infatuation in Keats's poems and letters to Fanny Brawne," in American and British Studies Annual, volume 5, ed. Sarka Bubikowa (Pardubice: University of Pardubice, 2012), 9-17.

3 Karla Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry* (Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 163-34 ff.