# Patriarchy in Eclipse

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## *The Femme Fatale and the New Woman in American Literature and Culture 1870-1920*

By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library



ISBN (10): 1-4438-7651-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7651-3

For Angela, whose love and care, I have appreciated beyond words.

Angela,

Like a gondola of green scented fruits
Drifting along the dank canals of Venice,
You, O exquisite one,
Have entered into my desolate city.

(Richard Aldington “Images”)

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is a single task done in isolation. I have been fortunate, not being particularly graced with computer skills, to have had the help of several people who have managed to make a difficult task slightly easier. I would like to thank my son, Valens, for getting me started on the road to completing the text in a form that made it possible for my longtime friend and colleague Michel Pharand at Queen's University to be able to edit and read over the text. His sound commentary has been invaluable. I need to thank my unswerving and loyal administrative assistant at the American University of Greece, Tina Paraskevopoulou, for her sage advice and keeping me sane when the printing of the book looked hopeless. I thank my colleague, Despina Makri, our Department Head of Information Technology at the College, for her sage advice on the secrets of Word. When the mysteries of Word proved well beyond my grasp, I was always able to call upon the patience and expertise of Angeliki Pasvanti to show me the arcane secrets of this amazing, but illogical tool for editing the final submission. To Richard Collin, my academic mentor and fellow teacher for thirty five years, thanks for storing all my information. My sister helped me find photos of some of the paintings and writers referred to in the text; this was very helpful, Sis! Finally, my appreciation to all my students, friends, and family who have listened to me go on probably ad nausea about femme fatales in literature and life. To my wife, I have tried to give my thanks in my Dedication and Epigraph.

# INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1790s, a promising young British apprentice was studying French, painting, and chemistry in the picturesque seaside town of Penzance. As the story has it, he became romantically involved with Nancy, a refugee from the fiascoes of the French Revolution. The two shared a passionate relationship that led to a number of love sonnets written by the young man to his ladylove, but eventually an emotional separation brought the romantic liaison to a tragic close. One of the poems that survived this curtailed affair was entitled "The Irish Lady."

Apparently, a local legend triggered this poem, and the narrative reads as follows. Just off the coast of Land's End in Cornwall there was a strangely shaped rock formation known as the "Irish Lady." During the late seventeenth century, when Protestants were persecuting Catholics, an Irish vessel was shipwrecked on the rock; everyone aboard was killed save a beautiful young woman, who was spotted sitting alone on the crest of the formation despite the terrible storm raging around her. No one could reach her because of the turbulent weather, and after a few nights of terrible suffering, she was washed into the sea and drowned. However, when the winds and the waves were high, local fishermen often noticed her sitting loftily on the rock with a rose in her mouth, luring unsuspecting sailors to madness or death.

So when our young poet, the future scientist Sir Humphrey Davy, wrote a poem about the lures and wiles his Nancy used to keep their love vibrant, he remembered the folk tale of the beautiful Irish lady, Theora, and borrowed various aspects of her allure in Nancy's depiction, for he was unable to shed the deleterious impact her memory had on him and his work. His description of Theora is classic femme fatale:

> Where yon dark cliff o'ershadows the blue main,
> Theora died amidst the stormy waves,
> And on its feet the sea-dews wash'd her corpse.
>
> Young was Theora; bluer was her eye
> Than the bright azure of the moonlight night;
> Fair was her cheek, as is the ocean cloud
> Red with the morning ray. (Paris 28)

There is little doubt that Nancy enjoyed causing mayhem in young Davy's life, and she nearly succeeded in compromising his dedication to scientific inquiry, which would have delayed many of his discoveries by decades. Clearly, the femme fatale happily wreaks her ruin with impunity.

The femme fatale has always lurked around unsuspecting men. Literary historians and critics have noted her influence throughout time. Many claim she is there in the guise of Lilith, Adam's first wife, who he rejected because she refused to become subservient to his wishes. Apparently, she was willing enough to wander off into serene corners of Eden until perhaps someone more amenable turned up. This siren of Hebrew myth makes her first major literary appearance in Goethe's *Faust.* Virginia Allen makes a convincing argument for her as one of the earliest incarnations of the femme fatale: "Goethe's Lilith represents death, danger, Eros, and beauty—and becomes the model of the femme fatale" (*Femme Fatale* 34). But a closer look at the "Walpurgis Night" scene of *Faust* might lead the reader to consider that Allen overstates the case. Lilith's role in the scene is minor, and Faust himself is unsure of her identity until Mephistopheles explains that she is "Adam's first wife. Beware of her. / Her beauty's one boast is her dangerous hair. / When Lilith winds it tight around young men / She doesn't soon let go of them again" (Goethe, ll. 4206-11).

Amy Scerba, in her "Walpurgis Night" Scene of Goethe's "Faust, Part I" [1808], observes Goethe's drawing on the ancient legends of Lilith that foreground her "ensnaring sexuality" through the image of her long hair. Despite the warning, Faust does decide to dance with the witch, and readers can only surmise that it was her striking beauty that convinced him to cavort with this potentially dangerous temptress. The small talk between the two is rather charming. One can almost empathize with Faust as he struggles for the right approach:

> FAUST. [Dancing with the young witch]
> A lovely dream I dreamt one day. I saw a green-leaved apple tree. Two apples swayed upon a stem. So tempting! I climbed up for them.
>
> THE PRETTY WITCH.
> Ever since the days of Eden, Apples have been man's desire. How overjoyed I am to think, sir. Apples grow, too, in my garden. (Goethe ll 4216-23)

Touché! Our first femme fatale counters the small talk and speaks of her own charms and how she could be literally as good to die for as Eve's tempting offer to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

The Bible does include a wealth of women who could be seen as femmes fatales: it is not difficult to cast Jezebel, Delilah, Judith, Salome (one of the Victorians' favorites) in that role. The classics, too, are filled with females who are of the same ilk. Patrick Bade, in his study of the archetype, offers a representative list: Helen of Troy, Circe, Medusa, and the Sirens—Astarte (bringer of death and decay, but also fertility)—Messalina, and Cleopatra. He also aptly points out Iseult, Guinevere, and Francesca as examples of medieval femmes fatales. In short, there have always been women who appear to use their sexual allure to bring men around to their own views and desires. Further, failure to acquiesce often results in the male going mad or being destroyed.

One major trait of these women is that they consciously use their sexual wiles to seduce the male into performing some action that he has no desire to perform; or better yet, to perform an action that will wreak havoc on him and his world. Perhaps among the first important literary incarnations of a femme fatale is Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Reading *Julius Caesar*, many young readers conclude that Marc Antony is an exceedingly principled character. However, upon close reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* and witnessing how this seductive Egyptian queen corrupted such a nobleman and led him into a life of decadence and vice is undeniably shocking. There are scenes in the play when one is convinced that surely this time Antony will come to his senses and put his sword through her—but each time she manages to escape his righteous anger. For example, after losing the Battle of Actium, Antony is ashamed of his overlooking of common military sense, and he returns to the palace enraged. Here, finally, with his reputation in ruins and his world crumbling, he will take his just revenge upon Cleopatra. Yet just being in her presence, he is becalmed and under her sway once again:

> Egypt, thou knew'st too well
> My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,
> And thou should'st tow me after: o'er my spirit
> Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that
> Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods Command me. (*Antony* Act 3, Scene 11)

Of course, the ending of this play does not require much comment: the lovers commit suicide under far different circumstances than the star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Patrick Bade offers an exemplary definition that deftly encapsulates the femme fatale. She is easily recognizable: pale, proud, mysterious, idol-like, and full of perverse desires, but cold at heart. Death and eroticism surround her, and her cruelty grows in intensity as the male tries to escape her clutches, for she is malignant, threatening, and fascinating (8).

Aspects of Bade's definition can also be found on canvas in John William Waterhouse's 1888 painting "Cleopatra". Here, it becomes at once obvious that the artist's vision of Cleopatra has been influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite explorations. Waterhouse's Cleopatra oozes sexuality; she is unapproachable, authoritative, yet highly desirable. There emanates from her a sensuality that evokes power; her red lips call out for love, but their brightness also intimate blood and sacrifice.

This ambiguity, this fascination and its concomitant anxiety, form a powerful cocktail of the avoidance/approach syndrome that also lies at the heart of the male fascination with the femme fatale. Virginia Allen notes that "she is the dark half of the dualistic concept of the eternal feminine, the Mary/Eve dichotomy. The evil of this form was intensified by artists and writers during the late middle decades of the 19th century to become a new image" (*Femme Fatale* vii).

If the femme fatale was not a particularly "new image," she did become much more prevalent as the nineteenth century ran its course, becoming a familiar trope in the French literature of the period. She was utilized by the English in the middle of the century, with Rossetti, Swinburne, and Pater carrying her banner high. By the 1890s, she was everywhere: in paintings, operas, and literature throughout Europe. Theories abound as to why the femme fatale became the cause célèbre of the fin-de-siècle, and these will be discussed subsequently. However, the primary trajectory of this book is to examine the development of the femme fatale from her early beginnings in France, through her English phase, and then to observe in what form she emerged in the United States near the end of the Victorian period.

# CHAPTER ONE

# FRENCH BACKGROUND

In her influential study of art and decadence, *Sexual Personae* (1990), Camille Paglia correctly notes in her "Cults of Sex and Beauty" chapter that Henri de Latouche's *Fragoletta* (1829) is no doubt the earliest appearance of the French femme fatale. Fragoletta, a lesbian transvestite, is exposed at the novel's conclusion as impersonating a non-existent twin brother, a seemingly nasty roué who deflowered many young women without a qualm. The novel is important with regard to the emergence of Decadent literature because its androgynous female protagonist challenged classical expectations and subverted the nature of traditional gender norms. Instead of demonstrating the value of order and stability, as classical French literature had done, Latouche's work focused on the destabilizing aspect of disease, discord, and the destructive power of emotions in people's lives.

Fragoletta is a femme fatale who intuitively understands that her male disguise offers her a sexual power that women cannot obtain in traditional French society, so she luxuriates in her "enigmatic beauty" and takes full advantage of her disguise. Latouche's purpose, of course, is to shock his conventional reader, but in the process, this confusing of gender expectations will be advanced by male writers throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.

With these considerations in mind, it is not surprising that many so-called Decadent English writers over a quarter of a century later borrowed freely from Latouche's novel. Both Richard Le Gallienne's "Song for Fragoletta" and A. C. Swinburne's "Fragoletta" explore the issue of love that is outside the ordinary. Startlingly, even a novel called *Fragoletta* (1881) appeared; it was written by "Rita," the pseudonym of Eliza Margaret J Humphreys, a prolific British writer of light fiction.

Of these works, Swinburne's poem is the most central, for it shows a direct lineage from the novel to the English writer perhaps most attracted to the myth of the femme fatale. The poem opens with two very erotic and ambivalent stanzas:

O Love! what shall be said of thee?
The son of grief begot by joy?
Being sightless, wilt thou see?
Being sexless, wilt thou be
Maiden or boy?

I dreamed of strange lips yesterday
And cheeks wherein the ambiguous blood
Was like a rose's--yea,
A rose's when it lay
Within the bud. (1-10)

Here the speaker frankly admits he does not know how to deal with his experience of the androgynous Fragoletta. Is he obsessed with a male or female, and what precisely is his role in this masquerade? No answer seems forthcoming, and perhaps this relationship will turn out to be merely platonic. In the second stanza, however, the speaker admits to a deep, unconscious longing for Fragoletta. The imagery is sexual, and references to blood, the rose bud, and strange lips all point to a physical longing for a sexual resolution. The speaker cries out in frustration:

O sole desire of my delight!
O sole delight of my desire!
Mine eyelids and eyesight
Feed on thee day and night
Like lips of fire. (21-25)

Jessica Simmons, online at “The Victorian Web”, concludes that “the mysterious nature of the hermaphrodite seems to transcend the human realm with its subtle, perplexing beauty.” She notes that the speaker is feeling perplexed at the presence of opposites in one being: "what fields have bred thee, or what groves concealed thee, /O mysterious flower?" But for the speaker, the more mysterious or arcane the explanation for the creation of this freak of nature, the more aroused he becomes by the unnaturalness of Fragoletta’s beauty.

Thy mouth is made of fire and wine,
Thy barren bosom takes my kiss
And turns my soul to thine
And turns thy lip to mine,
And mine it is. (46-50)

Swinburne’s purpose is simply to establish just how powerful the lure of exceptional beauty can be, and if this beauty is felt to be exotic in its

oddity, it can easily bring a man to his figurative knees. The only quandary is the difficulty in knowing whether or not Fragoletta is conscious of her exotic charms or whether this mental titillation only exists in the speaker's mind. Without a doubt, to be a true femme fatale, a full-blooded fatal one, the woman must be fully cognizant of the spell she is weaving and must enjoy inflicting its ramifications on the man for her own pleasure or purpose.

However, in Swinburne's poem we observe a particular aspect of the Decadent male. When the male beholds the beautiful woman, he loses all self-control, and his masculinity is weakened. This loss of virility often leads to despair, for he cannot capture the essence of this beauty in any tangible manner, nor can he discover in reality an incarnation of this fantasy or ideal. As many French literary critics have observed, this obsession with the ideal woman is most prominently found in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and other French symbolists of the period.

It is not surprising that the early symptoms of Decadence began to develop in France in the 1830s. The Second Empire prided itself on recovering from the Romantic ideals that were prevalent in England at the time. Reason and order were back in vogue. The Decadents challenged many of these conventional pretensions and avowed that artifice was superior to nature, that the bourgeois values of the French middle class were shallow and an obstacle to creativity. They found the myths of civilized progress that were linked to duty, diligence, and mercantilism in direct conflict with their own cherished values of individual liberty and an "art for art's sake" credo with which to generate new ideas that might challenge traditional expectations.

One particular belief that Decadent writers were wed to was the superiority of the artificial over the natural. In his article "The Idea of Decadence in French Literature," A. E. Carter points out that in Théophile Gautier's *Fortunio* (1836), "the eponymous hero leads an artificial existence shut up in a windowless house with a glass roofed courtyard of tropical plants with a sprinkler system. To spare him the boredom of travel, dioramas of Swiss Alps and the Bay of Naples are painted in strategic rooms throughout his home" (6). At one point in the novel, Fortunio invites his lover back to his home, which has been decorated in a fashion evoked five decades later by certain themed rooms in the home of Jean des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans' seminal Decadent novel *Against Nature* (1884):

> In fact, the room in which they now stood was of the greatest simplicity. It was encircled by a low divan, and the walls and floor were covered with mats of extreme delicacy and dazzling designs. Blinds of Chinese, bamboo covered the stained-glass windows, and from the ceiling hung a crystal globe filled with clear water, in which was swimming blue fishes with golden fins, their perpetual movements filling the room with the brightest and oddest prismatic rays. Under this globe was a small fountain, the sparkling water of which fell in a pearly spray into a vase of porphyry. In one corner was a hammock, and in the other a magnificent hooka, entwining its black, supple coils around a vase adorned with silver veins. This was all. (128)

Gautier chronicles the love affair between Fortunio and two women. The first is Musidora, a stunning blonde whose elegance makes her appear English. She has a naughty streak and can be quite passionate, but she lacks an exoticness that can ensnare a man of such sophistication as Fortunio. For a short period it appears as if the couple will make a societal-pleasing marriage, but Fortunio cannot overcome the allure of his Javanese lover, Soudja-Sari. Gautier luxuriates in every exotic detail of her physicality, and the reader easily discerns the distinction between the attractive real woman and the fantasy woman:

> We shall make an attempt to describe her costume: trousers with gold and black stripes reached from her hips to her ankles; a narrow vest, resembling the strophia, was held with jeweled clasps, and displayed the perfection of her form. This vest was of gold cloth, with designs of flowers in precious stones—the leaves of emeralds, the roses of rubies, and the blue flower of turquoises. It had no sleeves, leaving her two beautifully molded arms bare.
>
> Her hair, as we have already said, was divided into four braids that fell to her feet, two in front and two behind; a camboja flower was placed on each side of her bluish and transparent temples, and in her pearly ears sparkled two scarabees of golden green, in which reflected the richest hues imaginable; an over-tunic of India muslin with golden flowers softened what might have seemed too rich and dazzling in this costume.
>
> Her feet were bare, with a diamond ring on each toe and gold bands around her ankles; and on each arm she wore three bracelets, two near the shoulder, and the other at the wrist…
>
> Her toilet being finished, she called for her pipe, and began to smoke opium. Rima-Pahes stood at her side and dropped into the porcelain vase, from the point of a silver needle, the pastille that had been melted over a flame of perfumed wood, while Keni-Tabouhan gently waved two large

> fans of argus pheasant feathers, and the beautiful Cambana, seated on the floor, sang softly, accompanying herself on a triple-stringed guzla.
>
> …Nevertheless, Soudja-Sari had passions as violent as the perfumes and poisons of her country. She was of the race of those terrible Javanese— those graceful vampires who suck the blood and gold of a European in three weeks, leaving him as dry as a squeezed lemon.
>
> Her delicate nose, her lips as fresh and red as the cactus flower, the width of her hips, the small hands and feet, all bespoke purity of lineage and remarkable strength. (178-80)

Her exotic clothing, her flower-strewn hair, the ostentatious richness of her jewelry: all make it obvious that she would appear far different than a typical French woman, who at the time wore the gigot sleeves above large full conical skirts with corseted tight waists. In addition, Soudja-Sari's opium smoking is a sign of her ennui and an attempt to escape the banalities of life; the languid nature of repose that follows smoking opium also is very erotic and unusual for women of the period. Most importantly, the reader is told of her unbridled passion and predatory beauty that could physically and financially destroy any man she wishes.

The novel concludes with Fortunio aware that he will escape with his exotic lover—despite all the societal complications involved. Soudja proves to be spoiled, capricious, and conscious of her allure, and a good deal of her exoticness is filtered through the highly sensitive nature of Fortunio, who clearly has taken Soudja and made her into the woman of his dreams. Like an artist, he has taken the raw material of reality and transformed it into a perfect art form.

Although *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) is often cited as Gautier's greatest contribution to the development of the femme fatale, its protagonist is hardly a convincing character. Her disguise as a beautiful cavalier is enough to make D'Albert, the dandy, effete hero of the story, wish to turn homosexual, but Maupin's flirtation with Rosette, D'Albert's mistress, is so intricate and tedious that the novel reads more like an eighteenth-century French comedy of errors than a study in femme fatale creation. However, in Gautier's "One of Cleopatra's Nights" (1838), a short story that Paglia surmises may have been written under the influence of Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (417) because Gautier recognized that the oriental allusions of depravity and luxury manifested in Balzac's novel could be revisited in the figure of Cleopatra, he gives us a femme fatale with purely materialistic and self-serving tendencies.

When Cleopatra is first seen aboard her cangia, she is lying on a cedar wood neck recliner. Her divine head is said to have once "caused the loss of half-a-world" (7). But Cleopatra is bored, "weary unto death." (11). She is tormented because she cannot be sure if men love her for her beauty or for her regal power. She dreams of a diversion to amuse her during the journey to the summer palace. She is unaware that a handsome young man named Meiamoun is following her royal cangia in a small bark boat. When she finally arrives at the summer palace and is praying for some new sensation, suddenly an arrow flies into the room with an attached message that simply reads: "I love you." Cleopatra is aroused by the prospect of a sexual adventure, and when Meiamoun is eventually discovered, the queen questions him about his arrogant behavior.

After reflecting on his love-struck reply, Cleopatra whimsically resolves to fulfill Meiamoun's fantasy: "I am willing to inundate you with glories and splendors and lightning; I intend that your good fortune shall be dazzling in its brilliancy" (53). In short, she will give him one amazing night of sexual pleasure ("I take you out of nothingness; I make you the equal of a god; and I plunge you back again into nothingness")—and then have him executed (53).

From Meiamoun's infatuated perspective the offer is just, for what more does he have to live for once he has achieved his goal? What experience could ever surpass his one evening with the most beautiful woman in the world? The pair dress provocatively; they dine on a menu of rare delights: phenicopter's tongues and livers of the scarus fish. They drink the finest wines and listen to the finest music. Eventually, Cleopatra dances for him, and the couple slowly embraces as evening falls.

The next morning an Ethiopian slave hands Meiamoun a horn vase filled with deadly poison. "Flinging his whole life to his mistress in one last look, he lifted to his lips the fatal cup in which the envenomed liquor boiled up, hissing" (63). But Cleopatra stays the hand of her young lover, for she feels he might be useful at a further time. Yet at that moment, clarions blow to announce the return of Antony. Cleopatra releases his hand and allows him to swallow the poison draught. She sheds a single tear and informs Antony that this unsightly corpse was simply the result of a test to ensure a quick death if she ever became Augustus' prisoner. She calls Antony to her side, and they prepare to watch some Greek dancers. The corpse is forgotten, and the femme fatale goes after bigger game.

Without doubt, herein resides the prototype for the femme fatale that will be reconstituted for nearly a century.

In addition to revealing the obvious sexual attractiveness of the unobtainable fatal woman, Gautier's short tale utilizes the exotic oriental setting to emphasize her exquisite beauty. Cleopatra's artificial enhancements are noticeable as well: her outrageous clothing, her rare jewels, her dependence on cosmetics and her use of dance (which is exotic in itself) as a seductive tool all add to the voluptuousness of the atmosphere and setting. Gautier also describes her ennui, for femmes fatales must be somewhat bored in order that they should long for something different, something exciting to titillate their sensitivities.

To some extent, Gustave Flaubert models his own femme fatale, Salammbo, on Gautier's. Patrick Bade declares that in *Salammbo* (1862), Flaubert "presented one of the most compelling and influential portrayals of a femme fatale. The priestess Salammbo is distant, idol-like, frigid and scarcely human." (10). At her first appearance in the novel, a riot has occurred in the garden of her father, Punic General Hamilcar Barca. The Carthaginian mercenaries are upset at not having been paid, and out of fear the elders of the city have agreed to allow the disgruntled soldiers a place to rest until Barca's return from the battlefield. When the delay turns violent, Salammbo emerges from the palace to rebuke the allies. She is nothing less than stunning:

> Her hair, which was powdered with violet sand, and combined into the form of a tower, after the fashion of the Chanaanite maidens, added to her height. Tresses of pearls were fastened to her temples, and fell to the corners of her mouth, which was as rosy as a half-open pomegranate. On her breast was a collection of luminous stones, their variegation imitating the scales of the murena. Her arms were adorned with diamonds, and issued naked from her sleeveless tunic, which was starred with red flowers on a perfectly black ground. Between her ankles she wore a golden chainlet to regulate her steps, and her large dark purple mantle, cut of an unknown material, trailed behind her, making, as it were, at each step, a broad wave which followed her. (4)

Her demeanor and beauty stun one of the soldiers, the Libyan warrior, Matho. In fact, the novel's plot line turns on his theft of the Carthaginian sacred veil and the recovery of it by Salammbo, who turns out to be the priestess of the goddess Tanit, whose veil (or zaimph) Matho has stolen.

While the war rages around her, Salammbo travels, despite threat of personal peril, to find Matho. Showing great courage, she eventually makes her way stealthily to his tent. Not recognizing her in the darkness, he takes her inside, where she tells him she has come to rightfully take the zaimph back to the palace where it belongs. Matho is unmindful of her request; all he can do is gaze lustily at the sexual feast before him:

> Matho did not hear; he was gazing at her, and in his eyes her garments were blended with her body. The clouding of the stuffs, like the splendour of her skin, was something special and belonging to her alone. Her eyes and her diamonds sparkled; the polish of her nails continued the delicacy of the stones which loaded her fingers; the two clasps of her tunic raised her breasts somewhat and brought them closer together, and he in thought lost himself in the narrow interval between them whence there fell a thread holding a plate of emeralds which could be seen lower down beneath the violet gauze. She had as earrings two little sapphire scales, each supporting a hollow pearl filled with liquid scent. A little drop would fall every moment through the holes in the pearl and moisten her naked shoulder. Matho watched it fall.
>
> He was carried away by ungovernable curiosity; and, like a child laying his hand upon a strange fruit, he tremblingly and lightly touched the top of her chest with the tip of his finger: the flesh, which was somewhat cold, yielded with an elastic resistance.
>
> This contact, though scarcely a sensible one, shook Matho to the very depths of his nature. An uprising of his whole being urged him towards her. He would fain have enveloped her, absorbed her, drunk her. His bosom was panting, his teeth were chattering. (264-65)

The next scene is classic femme fatale; although Matho is completely smitten, the woman remains distant and claims she is just there to collect what is rightly hers. But Matho cannot allow her to leave; he bristles and literally puffs out his chest and demands that she stay. The stifled passions—hatred on the one hand, lust on the other—these two feel are barely contained by their elevated language. In places they even refer to each other as gods. After using vain threats to frighten her to spend the night, Matho relents and kisses her entire body in panting longing. Finally, exhausted by his passion, he relents and offers her the veil:

> "Carry it off," he said, "what do I care? Take me away with it! I abandon the army! I renounce everything! Beyond Gades, twenty days' journey into the sea, you come to an island covered with gold dust, verdure, and birds. On the mountains large flowers filled with smoking perfumes rock like

> eternal censers; in the citron trees, which are higher than cedars, milk-coloured serpents cause the fruit to fall upon the turf with the diamonds in their jaws; the air is so mild that it keeps you from dying. Oh! I shall find it, you will see. We shall live in crystal grottoes cut out at the foot of the hills. No one dwells in it yet, or I shall become the king of the country." (271)

Completely smitten, Matho forces her to sleep with him, but Salammbo plots revenge. When she awakens the following morning, she seizes his dagger and is about to kill Matho in his sleep, when the alarm is raised and Matho must hurry onto the field of battle. Salammbo successfully returns to her palace unharmed with the veil. At the conclusion of the novel, Matho has been tortured and then gutted by the Carthaginians, and Salammbo dies soon after being given to the Numidian mercenary chief as his wife.

There is little doubt of Salammbo's awareness of her charms; she agrees to go to Matho's tent because she knows he will be powerless to resist her. She dresses exotically and purposely, and she is willing to exploit her sexual charms. Dennis Porter goes as far as to say Salammbo is the ideal of beauty to which the novel aspires: "Half priestess, half courtesan, she is the narcissistic antithesis of natural woman. Her oiled and jeweled-studded body [is] itself an elaborately stylized work of art" (102). Porter's contention brings to light another aspect of the relationship between the femme fatale and art. In many ways, the femme fatale, somewhat like the dandy, is more of an art form than flesh and blood. After all, she projects herself beyond the normal woman by using cosmetics, by wearing rare gems and stones, dressing elaborately and behaving in a manner that puts her outside the commonplace. She is more than the sum of her parts, and it is this gestalt mystery that is part of man's fascination with her.

Of course, if any one person can be credited with giving a philosophical unpinning to the femme fatale's wiles, it is Charles Baudelaire. In his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier chastises French critics for demanding morality and usefulness in art. Baudelaire soundly defends Gautier's precepts and further argues that literature (art) has no moral or utilitarian purpose. Baudelaire contends that all art strives towards beauty, bringing to this rather wearisome and vulgar world a form of aesthetic escape. So when one queries about the purpose of art, the answer resides in its ability to create a form and style that bring pleasure to the beholder. When done correctly, the observer of this art form is able to glimpse the beautiful. Of course, Gautier's novel also celebrates the awakening of sexual desire as well as the exotic longings in youth. In a

scene reminiscent of Dr. Frank N. Furter's nocturnal dalliances with Brad and Janet in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" (1975), Mme De Maupin in the same night makes love to both her admirers (D'Albert and Rosette, who are also lovers in their own right); both of whom have fallen victim to her magnetism in the guises of Madeleine/Theodore, respectively. As Virginia Allen, writing of the femme fatale, fittingly observes:, "She is self-willed, erotic, seductive, and exotic—chilling remote from human feeling ( *Femme Fatale* 4). She is a static art form, despite her often destructive nature.

Baudelaire's male responses to the fatal woman have been dissected often by critics. Many of them agree that he was very ambiguous in his treatment and appreciation of the female. Patrick Bade catalogues his attitudes towards women as "reverence, desire, disgust, fear, and contempt (10). Baudelaire is situated in that classical psychological conundrum of avoidance/approach. Basically, he felt that relationships with women were ultimately unhealthy for him, yet at the same time was driven toward them because he felt their beauty was essential to his creative well-being—a beauty that served as an inspiration for his poetry.

In his 1860 essay on the artist Constantin Guys, a painter of contemporary urban life and an illustrator for several European newspapers, Baudelaire explored the alluring nature of the femme fatale's beauty. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire explained that classical beauty has in its very nature a tangible quality we must not neglect: the beauty that inhabits our daily existence. Contemporary life celebrates beauty in fashion, in architecture, in dance, and in observing the inward and outward countenances of human beings. For Baudelaire, Guys was an effective painter because he found beauty even amidst the crowds of the bustling city. Baudelaire celebrated Guys' depiction of the vitality and the diversity the city offers, for his work often captured the beauty in "the glance, the smile, or the living style of one of those creatures whom the dictionary of fashion has successively classified under the coarse or playful titles of "doxies," "kept women," "lorettes," or "biches" (Schwartz 41). These are the women who use their heightened sexual nature to lure men into their clutches; they call on the assistance of artifice to help them work their magic. Artifice, then, is an essential element of the Decadent sensibility, and any savvy femme fatale will use cosmetics and grooming aids to transform herself into a pleasing art form.

In his essay on Poe, Baudelaire characterizes Poe's demanding muse as "plastered with cosmetics, drenched in scent. Her hair dyed, seated before a toilet table covered with tweezers, lotions, perfumes…" (Carter 14). Here is Alexander Pope's Belinda at her dressing table, but the eighteenth-century mademoiselle has gone in Poe from victim to victimizer. Moreover, in his essay "Éloge du Maquillage" ("In Praise of Makeup"), Baudelaire discusses the close relationship between art and artifice. For a woman, cosmetic artifice, he concludes, is the highest of all art forms. She must work to take the "natural" elements and gild them in order to turn herself into a work of art. Her success is judged primarily by the number of men she can tantalize within the framework of her creation.

Of course, Baudelaire knows that the magic of this transformation must be merely temporary, that eventually the artificial will give way to the inevitable sway of nature; yet this may be all the more reason to value the transient nature of enhanced female beauty. George Ross Ridge effectively sums up Baudelaire's final thoughts on male victimization by these calculating doxies or "biches" in his cogent analysis of "Les Metamorphoses du Vampire." "Man is a weak decadent consumed by a modern woman, a vampire or femme fatale. Their love is a passionate death-struggle in which the active female destroys the passive male…. Man searches for beauty but finds ugliness; he looks for love but discovers death" (Ridge 352).

Baudelaire began describing the nature of the femme fatale early in his career. In his 1847 novella "La Fanfarlo," in which the main character, Samuel Cramer, is a thinly disguised portrait of Baudelaire himself, the writer's stance on beauty is clearly established. The plot is fairly straight forward. Cramer consents to assist his childhood sweetheart, Mme. De Cosmelly, recapture her husband's affection from the exotic dancer la Fanfarlo. What exactly Cramer expects to gain from his assistance is open to speculation, but the point becomes moot when he falls in love with the dancer, despite initially behaving in a rather rude manner towards her. Cramer and la Fanfarlo eventually marry, and their artistic pretensions are eroded by the tedium of everyday domesticity.

One scene that critics refer to when writing about this novella is where Cramer finally insinuates his way into la Fanfarlo's bedroom and realizes that he cannot be aroused by her natural appearance; she is no longer a cosmetically enhanced figure of high art. He understandably demands that she transform herself into the stage figure of Colombine; he wants her

dressed fantastically, with extremely exaggerated features, and he reminds her to be liberal with the rogue.

> "Je veux Colombine, rends-moi Colombine; rends-la-moi telle qu'elle m'est apparue le soir qu'elle m'a rendu fou avec son accoutrement fantasque et son corsage de saltimbanque." (27)
>
> ["I want Colombine, give me back Colombine; return to me she who appeared to me the night she drove me mad with her capricious accoutrement and her mountebank corsage."]

Once the relationship is formalized, the marriage deadens her creativity, and the once attractive la Fanfarlo becomes chubby and bourgeois. The magic is over.

The philosophical underpinning of this privileging the artificial over the natural became one of the major tenets of French Decadence. Drugs and alcohol were seen as elixirs to be used to flee the ordinary aspects of existence and to elucidate the hidden wonders in everyday life, to enhance an event or experience that might excite the senses and free one's spirit and mind from common drudgery. Sexual taboos were challenged, and gay and lesbian relationships were explored not only because they challenged religious and social norms, but also because they held out the possibility of new sensual pleasures.

It was Paul Verlaine who announced the seminal judgment on Baudelaire as the first poet to interpret the modern world. In Verlaine's view, mid-nineteenth-century European civilization, the bourgeois world of duty and responsibility, had fallen apart. He believed that a decadent world was emerging, with Parisian life as its exemplar and Baudelaire as its voice.

# CHAPTER TWO

# ENGLISH BACKGROUND

Baudelaire's voice was able to reach across the English Channel and sing into the waiting ears of another poet, Charles Algernon Swinburne. In her chapter dedicated to Swinburne and Pater entitled "Romantic Shadows," Camille Paglia credits Swinburne with emphasizing the paganism implicit in the Romantic Movement, as well as restoring the sexual frankness that the English had lost after the eighteenth century (460). She points out that his poetry rejected the patriarchal duty-bound responsibility of Victorian society and replaced it with a matriarchal vision that was not unlike the one endorsed by Robert Graves in his *The White Goddess* (1944).

Swinburne's affinity for French literature began in 1862, when he stopped off in Paris on his way to meet his family. While there, he bought a copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and his reaction to Baudelaire's poems was so profound that he felt impelled to write a review for the *Spectator*, which appeared in September that year. The first page evinces the twenty-five year old's sympathy for a poet he felt shared his penchant for suffering and pain:

> It has the languid lurid beauty of close and threatening weather – a heavy, heated temperature, with dangerous hot-house scents in it; thick shadow of cloud closed about it, and fire of molten light.... The writer delights in problems and has a natural leaning to obscure and sorrowful things. Failure and sorrow, next to physical beauty and perfection of sound or scent, seem to have an infinite attraction for him.... Not the luxuries of pleasure, in their first simple form, but the sharp and cruel enjoyments of pain, the acrid relish of suffering felt or inflicted, the sides on which Nature looks unnatural, go to make up the stuff and substance of his poetry. (1)

Swinburne goes on to argue that poetry should be free from political or moral considerations, and that it should be written for poetry's sake alone.

But if Swinburne was excited by Baudelaire, he was also strongly influenced by Gautier and inhaled deeply the art for art's sake philosophy

pervasive during the period. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) continued the anti-didactic stand of poetry that he had discovered in Gautier, especially *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Moreover, he was fascinated with the image of the dominatrix, and despite all his criticism intellectualizing an approach to art and history, more than any other aspect of his personality, Swinburne sought a beautiful woman who would dominate him. His biographers point out, for example, that in his tempestuous relationship with Adah Menken, the American-born actress and celebrity who he met in 1863 and who was known to the world by her stage name Mazeppa, he may have found the woman he desired. In her transgressiveness, Menken was the 1860s version of the 1980s Madonna: she wore her hair bobbed a half century before it was deemed acceptable, openly smoked cigarettes, was married at least four times, and moved in very exclusive literary circles.

Her acting reputation rested on a role in *Mazeppa*, a drama based on a tale by Voltaire and later used by Lord Byron in a poem by the same name. The play, and later the opera by Tchaikovsky, tells the story of Mazeppa, a Polish nobleman caught in adultery with the wife of another nobleman. In retribution, Mazeppa is tied naked on the back of his horse, which runs loose for days but instinctively heads back to their home in the Ukraine, where our hero is restored to life by peasants and eventually becomes a Ukrainian prince.

When the play opened in Albany, New York, Adah played Mazeppa (hence her nickname) and decided she would be tied to a real horse and wear a flesh-colored costume to present the illusion that she was naked. The result was immediate: her reputation soared. Eventually, she went to London and performed before Charles Dickens, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne.

It is perhaps ironic that a book proposing that there was an active Decadent movement in America between 1870 and 1920 should observe that its strongest advocate for the spread of Decadence in England should himself be the victim of an American femme fatale. When Adah Menken arrived in London to perform *Mazeppa* in October of 1864, two large posters "depicting a shapely young woman clad in a wisp of muslin and tied to a galloping horse" appeared on hoardings around Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, where the play was being performed (*The Age* 1). The public outcry about the morality of the advertisements only insured a full house. On opening night, the response to Adah's portrayal of Mazeppa's ride was spellbinding. It wasn't long before accounts of that scene spread

by word-of-mouth, fuelled by the more conservative papers lamenting Adah's poor acting and deplorable lack of decorum.

From London, Adah moved to further success in Paris, then Austria (where audiences were less appreciative of her talents,) then back to London in 1866. Everywhere she went, she found herself being fêted by adoring males (and by females, such as George Sand), including Alexandre Dumas. It is no surprise that in 1867 Swinburne fell victim to her dominating personality and powerful charisma. Adah had also become something of a literary figure, and even Rossetti complimented her on several of her poems.

There exists a delightful posed photograph of Swinburne and Adah: she sits majestically on a chair with her arm on Swinburne's shoulder (he was only 5'4") and holds his hand as he gazes down at her in awe. About this time, Swinburne wrote Adah a short poem in French entitled "Dolorida" (although several biographers and critics have made cases against the poem being specifically written for her), a lament about the transience of love. Swinburne's melancholia permeates the poem, quoted here in full:

Combien de temps, dis, la belle,
Dis, veux-tu, m'être fidèle? –
Pour une nuit, pour un jour,
Mon amour.

L'Amour nous flatte et nous touche
Du doigt, de l'oeil, de la bouche
Pour un jour, pour une nuit
Et s'enfuit. (*New York Tribune* 8)

(For how long, tell me, Beauty,
Tell me, will you be faithful to me?
For a night, for a day,
My love

Love flatters us, and touches us
With its fingers, eyes, and mouth
For a day, for a night
And escapes.)

Later, Swinburne would introduce Adah to his publisher, John Hotten, and under his company's imprint her book of poems, *Infelicia*, appeared. The collection was surprisingly eclectic in its subject matter, but one of the

recurring motifs is Menken's distaste of male patriarchy and a celebration of female independence. For example, "Judith" is an homage to the biblical Jewish heroine who delivers her city from the Assyrian general Holofernes by dressing alluringly and seducing the unsuspecting soldier in order to behead him in his sleep. Adah's sensual and sadistic imagery would have appealed to Swinburne's own sexual proclivities. After all, this liberated poet knew full well the seductive power of the female and was not averse to using it to bend men to her will.

In the prose poem, "The Autograph on the Soul," Menken writes of "…fallen women, who are covered with paint and sin, and flaunt in gaudy satins, never heeding the black stains within their own breasts?—lost to honor, lost to themselves; glittering in jewels and gold; mingling with sinful men, who, with sneering looks and scoffing laughs, drink wine beneath the gas-light's glare" (104). Denouncing those men who wantonly destroy women's honor and lives, the speaker asks: "How will it be with him who deceives and betrays women?" The answer is that men should suffer exquisite pain for their thoughtless and insensitive actions.

Eventually, Swinburne and Adah grew apart and began making excuses for not seeing one another or answering each other's letters; Adah returned to Paris to continue her career. Tragically, less than a year after they had begun their relationship, Menken died, unexpectedly, of cancer. She was thirty-three. In a letter to his friend George Powell written a few days after he learned of Adah's death, Swinburne sums up her contribution to his life:

> I am sure you were very sorry on my account to hear of the death of my poor dear Menken. It was a great shock to me and a real grief. I was ill for some days. She was most loveable as a friend, as well as a mistress. (Myers 116)

Although Swinburne did not arrive at his concept of the femme fatale through his relationship with Adah Menken – after all, he had completed his *Poems and Ballads* almost a year before he knew her well – she incarnated his dream of a beautiful, cruel, exotic woman, one who mirrored the Anactoria, Dolores, or Felice of his poetry. The very contrariness of her character and his inability to win her complete affection, not to mention her carnality, made her the ideal model for his femme fatale. His relationship with Adah Menken ended in disappointment and pain, as do so many relationships in his poems. In a rather forlorn follow-up to Adah's legacy, written in the *Boston Daily Globe* of 11 December 1879, one can