

## Introduction

Traditionally, the *femme fatale* has been closely associated with a series of *noir* films (such as *Double Indemnity* [1944], *The Maltese Falcon* [1941], and *The Big Heat* [1953]) in the 1940s and 50s that necessarily betray male anxieties about independent women in the years during and following World War II. However, the anxieties and historical factors that precipitated the emergence of the *noir femme fatale* similarly existed in the sixteenth century and, as a result, the *femme fatale* can be re-imagined in a series of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. In this context, to re-imagine is to imagine or conceive of something in a new way. It involves taking a concept or an idea and re-imagining it into something simultaneously similar and new. This article will argue, first, that the *noir femme fatale*'s emergence coincided with a period of history characterised by suspicion, intolerance and perceived vulnerability and that a similar set of historical factors—namely the presence of a female monarch and changes to marriage laws—precipitated the emergence a *femme fatale* type figure in the Renaissance period. Second, *noir* films typically contain a series of narrative tropes that can be similarly identified in a selection of Renaissance plays, which enables the production of a new, re-imagined reading of these plays as tragedies of the feminine desire for autonomy.

The *femme fatale*, according to Rebecca Stott (1992) is not unique to the twentieth century. The *femme fatale* label can be applied retrospectively to seductive, if noticeably evil women, whose seduction and destruction of men render them amenable to our twenty-first century understanding of the *femme fatale* (Allen). Mario Praz (1951) similarly contends that the *femme fatale* has always existed; she simply becomes more prolific in times of social and cultural upheaval. The definition of the *femme fatale*, however, has only recently been added to the dictionary and the burden of all definitions is the same: the *femme fatale* is a woman who lures men into danger, destruction and even death by means of her overpowering seductive charms. There is a woman on the Renaissance stage who combines adultery, murder and insubordination and this figure embodies the same characteristics as the twentieth-century *femme fatale* because she is similarly drawn from an archetypal pattern of male anxieties regarding sexually appetitive/desirous women. The fear that this selection of women elicit arises invariably from their initial defiance of their fathers and/or brothers in marrying without their consent and/or the possibility that these women may marry or seek a union with a man out of sexual lust.

The *femme fatale* of 1940s and 50s *noir* films is embodied by such women as Brigid O'Shaughnessy (*Maltese Falcon*), Phyllis Dietrichson (*Double Indemnity*) and Ann Grayle (*Murder, My Sweet*), while the figure of the *femme fatale* can be re-imagined in a series of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, including *The Changeling* (1622), *Arden of Faversham* (1592) and *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619). Like the *noir femme fatale*, there is a female protagonist in each of these plays who uses both cunning and sexual attractiveness to gain her desired independence. By focusing on one *noir* film and one Renaissance play, this article will explore both the historical factors that precipitate the emergence of these fatal women and the structural tropes that are common to both *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622). The obvious

parallels between the two figures at the centre of these narratives—Phyllis and Beatrice-Joanna respectively—namely an aversion to the institution of marriage and the instigation of murder to attain one's desires, enable a re-imagined reading of Beatrice-Joanna as a *femme fatale*.

### **Socio-cultural Anxieties**

The *femme fatale* is a component of changing consciousness: she is one of the recurring motifs of the film *noir* genre and takes her place amongst degeneration anxieties, anxieties about sexuality and race and concerns about cultural virility and fitness (Stott). According to Sylvia Harvey (1978), the emergence of the *femme fatale* parallels social changes taking place in the 1940s, particularly the increasing entry of women into the labour market. She also notes the apparent frustration of the institution of the family in this era and the boredom and stifling entrapment of marriage and how the *femme fatale* threatens to destroy traditional family structures. Jans Wager (1999) likewise notes that the *femme fatale* emerged as an expression of the New Woman, whose presence in the public sphere was in opposition to her adherence to traditional societal values, while Virginia Allen argues that the *femme fatale* came to maturity in the years marked by the first birth control campaigns and female emancipation movement. The Renaissance *femme fatale* similarly emerged in the wake of historical trigger factors occurring at the time, namely the presence of a female monarch and changes to marriage laws.

In 1558, Queen Elizabeth I assumed the throne, which had a profound impact upon relations of gender in English Renaissance society. She occupied a privileged position of power in a society that believed women should have none by virtue of their inferior sex (Montrose). This was compounded by her decision to remain unmarried, which ensured the consolidation of her power that she would have otherwise forfeited to her husband. The presence of a female ruler destabilised established notions of women as passive objects of desire and, as I argue here, contributed to representations of powerful women in Renaissance drama. Men created *femme fatales* in their work as an expression of what they saw in women who were beginning to declare their sexual and political freedom.

In addition, changing conceptions of marriage from arranged practices (unions for social and economic reasons) to romantic idealism (marriage for companionship and affective ties) saw the legitimation of desire outside the holy sacrament. Plays depicting *femme fatales*, including *The Changeling* (1622), *Arden of Faversham* (1592) and *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619) to name a few, appear to have fed off the anxieties that resulted from the shift from arranged marriages to individual choice of a spouse. Similarly, in the *noir* period, "restrictions on women's rights ensured that married women had comparatively fewer rights than single women, who could at least lay claim to their own property and wages" (Braun 2012, p. 53). As such, the *femme fatale* represented an alternative to domesticity, one in which a woman could retain her dignity without a man.

### **Re-imagining the *Femme Fatale***

James Damico (1996) proposes a model of *film noir's* plot structure and character type. The male protagonist is hired for a job associated with a non-innocent woman to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted to. Through his attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is a natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to or actually murder a second man to whom a woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally her husband or lover). This act invariably leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist and either metaphorically or literally results in the destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached and the protagonist himself.

In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson lures her hapless lover, Walter Neff, into committing murder on her behalf. He puts up minimal resistance to Phyllis's plan to insure her husband without his knowledge so that he can be killed and she can reap the benefits of the policy. Walter says, "I fought it [the idea of murder], only I guess I didn't fight it hard enough." Similarly, in *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna's father, Vermandero, arranges her marriage to Alonzo de Piracquo; however, she is in love with Alsemero, who would also be a suitable match if Alonzo were out of the way. She thus employs the use of her servant DeFlores to kill her intended. He does as instructed and brings back her dead fiancée's finger as proof of the deed, expecting for his services a sexual reward, rather than the gold Beatrice-Joanna offered him: "Never was man / Dearlier rewarded" (2.2.138-140). Renaissance fears regarding women's desirous subjectivity are justified in this scene, which represent Beatrice-Joanna as willingly succumbing to DeFlores's advances: she came to "love anon" what she had previously "fear'st and faint'st to venture on" (3.4.171-172). She experienced a "giddy turning in [her]" (1.1.159), which compelled her to seduce DeFlores on the eve of her wedding to Alsemero. Both Phyllis and Beatrice-Joanna localise contemporary fears and fantasies about women, sexuality and marriage (Haber, 2003) and, despite the existing literature surrounding the *noir femme fatale*, a re-imagining of this figure on the Renaissance stage is unique. Furthermore, and in addition to similarities in plot structure, *noir* films are typically characterised by 3 narrative tropes (masquerade, the polarisation of the *femme fatale* with the *femme attrappe* and the demise of the *femme fatale*) that are likewise present in *The Changeling*.

### **1. Masquerade: Her Sexual Past is the Central Mystery of the Narrative**

The *femme fatale* appropriates the signifiers of femininity (modesty, obedience, silence) that bewitch men and fool them into believing that she embodies everything he desires. According to Luce Irigaray (1985), the *femme fatale* assumes an unnatural, flaunted facade and, in so doing, she conceals her own subjectivity and disrupts notions of what she is really like. Her sexual past is often the central mystery and so she figuratively embodies the hidden secrets of feminine sexuality while the males battle for control over this knowledge (Lee-Hedgecock). John Caleb Hopkins (2014) characterises Phyllis as a faux housewife because of her rejection of the domestic, her utilisation of the role to further her agency, and her method of deception via gender performance. It is "faux" because she plays the role as a means to achieve her monetary or material desires. When Phyllis first meets Walter she plays up the housewife routine

because she immediately recognises his potential utility for her. The house is not a space in which she belongs but a space she can utilise to further her agency and so she devises a plan to dethrone and remove the patriarch from his position within the home. Walter, as the last patriarchal figure in her vicinity to interfere with the pursuit of her desire, must be killed as well.

Beatrice-Joanna's masquerade of femininity ("there was a visor / O'er that cunning face" [5.3.46-7]) and her performance as a chaste virgin to please Alsemero, suggests that she possesses an ineffaceable knowledge that femininity is a construction that women put on for men. Having surrendered her virginity to DeFlores prior to marrying Alsemero, she agonises that he will find out: "Never was bride so fearfully distressed [...] There's no venturing / Into his bed [...] Without my shame" (4.1.2-13). Fortunately, she discovers a manuscript (the *Book of Experiments*) that documents "How to know whether a woman be a maid or not" (4.1.41). Having discovered the book and potions, Beatrice-Joanna persuades her waiting-woman Diaphanta to take the potions so that she can witness its effects and mimic them as necessary. Thus instructed, Beatrice-Joanna is equipped with the ability to feign the symptoms of virginity, which leads us to the notion of female masquerade as a means to evade the male gaze by feigning virtue and thus retaining her status as desirable to men. Her masquerade conceals her sexual experience and hides the truth of female deceitfulness from the men in the play, which makes manifest the theme of women's unknowability.

## **2. *Femme Fatale* versus *Femme Attrappe***

The original source of the *femme fatale* is the dark half of the dualistic concept of the Eternal Feminine: the Mary/Eve dichotomy (Allen). In *film noir*, the female characters fall into one of two categories—the *femme fatale* or woman as redeemer. Unlike the *femme fatale*, the *femme attrappe* is the known, familiar and comfortable other, who is juxtaposed to the unknown, devious and deceptive other. According to Jans Wager (1999) both women are trapped by patriarchal authority—the *femme fatale* by her resistance and the good wife by her acquiescence. These two women invariably appear side-by-side in order to demonstrate acceptable womanhood in the case of the *femme attrappe* and dangerous and unacceptable displays of femininity in the case of the *femme fatale*. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis is an obvious example of the latter. She flirts brazenly with Walter while introducing the idea of insuring her husband and when he finally kills her husband, she stares unflinchingly ahead and continues driving, showing very little remorse after the murder. Lola (Phyllis's step-daughter and the film's *femme attrappe*) functions as a foil to Phyllis. "Lola's narrative purpose is to provide a female character to contrast with Phyllis to further depict her femininity as bad [...] The more Lola is emphatically stressed as victim through Walter's narration, the more vilified Phyllis is" (Caleb-Hopkins). Lola presents a type of femininity that patriarchy approves of and necessitates. Phyllis is the antithesis to this because her sexuality is provocative and open and she uses it to manipulate those around her (John Caleb Hopkins, 2014). It is Lola who eventually tells Walter that Phyllis murdered her mother and that her former boyfriend Nino has been spotted at Phyllis's house most

nights. This leads Walter to conclude, logically, that she is arranging for Nino to kill him as well (Maxfield).

The Renaissance subplot heroine has been juxtaposed, here, with the deadly woman at the center of the play, thus supporting a common structural trope of the *film noir* genre in which the *femme attrappe* and *femme fatale* exist alongside each other. In *The Changeling*, Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna occupy these positions respectively. In the play's subplot, Alibius employs his servant Lollo to watch over his wife Isabella while he is away and, ironically, it is Lollo himself who attempts to seduce Isabella. He offers himself to her as a "most shrewd temptation" (1.2.57); however, unlike Beatrice-Joanna, who engages in a lascivious affair with another man, Isabella remains faithful to her husband. In so doing, Beatrice-Joanna's status as a *femme fatale* is exemplified. She is represented as a woman who cannot control her desires and will resort to any and all means necessary to get what she wants.

### **3. The Femme Fatale's Demise**

The *femme fatale* is characterised by the two-fold possession of desire: desire for autonomy and self-government and the desire for death. Her quest for freedom, which is only available in death, explains the *femme fatale's* desire to self-destruct in these plays, which guarantees that she will never deviate from the course she alighted on even if that path leads inevitably to her demise. According to Elizabeth Bronfen (2004), "the choice between freedom and death inevitably requires that one choose death because there you show that you have freedom of choice. She undertakes an act that allows her to choose death as a way of choosing real freedom by turning the inevitability of her fate into her responsibility."

The *femme fatale* will never show her true intentions to anyone, especially not the hero she has inveigled, even if it entails his and her own death (Bronfen 2004). In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis, by choosing not to shoot Walter the second time, performs an act in which she actively accepts her own fallibility: "I never loved you Walter. Not you or anybody else. I'm rotten to the heart. I used you just as you said. That's all you ever meant to me. Until a minute ago, when I couldn't fire that second shot." This is similarly the case with Beatrice-Joanna who, only at the very end, admits to the murder of Alonzo—"Your love has made me/ A cruel murd'ress" (5.3.64-5)—in order to get the man she wanted. According to Bronfen (2004), the *femme fatale* turns what is inevitable into a source of power. She does not contest the murder charge because a guilty verdict and punishment of death will grant her the freedom she has sought unwaveringly since the beginning of the play. Both Beatrice-Joanna and Phyllis apprehend that there is no appropriate outlet for their unabashed independence. Their unions, with Alsemero and Walter respectively, will nevertheless require their subjection in the patriarchal institution of monogamous marriage. The destruction of the sanctity of marriage in *Double Indemnity* and *The Changeling* inevitably results in placing the relationship of the lovers under strain, beyond the boundaries of conventional moral law, to the extent that the adulterous relationship becomes an impossibility that invariably results in the mutual destruction of both parties.

## Conclusion

The plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, like the *noir* films of the 1940s and 50s, lament a lost past when women accepted their subordination without reproach and anxiously anticipated a future in which women refused submission to men and masculine forms of authority (Born-Lechleitner). While the *femme fatale* is commonly associated with the *noir* era, this article has argued that a series of historical factors and socio-cultural anxieties in the Renaissance period allow for a re-imagined reading of the *femme fatale* on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

In *The Changeling*, Middleton and Rowley foreground contemporary cultural anxieties by fleshing out the lusty details that confirm Beatrice-Joanna's status as a female villainess. Throughout the play we come to understand the ideologies that dictate the manner of her representation. That is, early modern anxieties regarding the independent, sexually appetitive woman manifested in representations of a female figure on the Renaissance stage who can be re-imagined as a *femme fatale*.

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