

The Femme Fatale

by Kathleen Watt

*She's been around as long as Western culture. But who is she, really?
And is she really as 'fatal' as all that?*

SOME OF THE GREATEST sopranos ever to sing Richard Strauss' *Salome*—Maria Jeritza, Ljuba Welitsch, Astrid Varnay, Leonie Rysanek—could curl into come-hither poses along with the best of the Hollywood vamps—Theda Bara, Rita Hayworth, Yvonne De Carlo, Alla Nazimova in peacock feathers. They all danced the Dance of the Seven Veils. Luxuriously carnal, voluptuous and dangerous—*femmes fatales* all. Perhaps.

Literally translated, *femme fatale* is French for “deadly woman.” Her archetypes are both Lilith and Eve. She is Jezebel, Delilah, and Homer's Sirens. She's that girl in junior high who wears too much makeup and laddered black hose and bums cigarettes from helpless boys who are fascinated and repelled. She's a mystery of erotic heat and chill, daunting appetite and ineffable vulnerability. She ruins men, stealing virility from lovers, her sexuality allowing her access to rapture and immortality. Her reduction to a libidinous cliché arises from the fear that she will use her sexual secrets, Sphinx-like, for malevolence.



J'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan, Aubrey Beardsley, 1892

The *femme fatale* came under particularly sharp censure by turn-of-the-century Victorians. At that time, the Industrial Revolution had thrown Europe into upheaval. People everywhere were desperate for affirmation of their personal lives, and looked for it especially in heightened sensations. Churches frowned upon the ensuing hedonism. But the English essayist Walter Pater wrote about a “Religion of Beauty,” and artists of the “Aesthetic Decadent” movement subscribed to it devoutly. Hallucination, psychosis, death—even suicide—were admired as profound experiences. Pater described “the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death.” Women began to see themselves differently, too, and “the woman question” triggered a male identity crisis across all strata of society. And then, though he never fully explored it, Sigmund Freud breached the “Dark Continent” of female sexuality. The formula for the “deadly woman” was fixed.

The *femme fatale* became a literary type serving a vast range of psychosexual insecurities. In the middle of the nineteenth century, poet Charles Baudelaire wrote of his *femmes fatales*: “They are cold, cleverly, perversely corrupt, and transport vice from the body to the soul... they find pleasure only in satisfied wickedness...are filled with hysterical, mad fancies...lacking, like the Fiend himself, the power to love....” Marriage, he believed, was the worst form of captivity, and women the chains that enslaved. Similarly, novelist Gustave Flaubert wrote, “A woman is the opposite of a dandy; she is natural—that is, abominable.”

Later, there was less agreement about the *femme fatale*. Before retiring in 1923, screen vamp Theda Bara explained, “The reason good women like me...is that there is a little bit of vampire instinct in every woman.” Late twentieth-century feminists argued over whether the notion of the *femme fatale* was implicitly misogynist. Essayist Camille Paglia ventured: “The *femme fatale* ...wields the sexual power that feminism cannot explain and has tried to destroy....Through stars like [Elizabeth] Taylor, we sense the world-disordering impact of legendary women like...Helen of Troy and Salome.”

Still, understanding Salome only as a *femme fatale* gives her short shrift. For she also embodies the Victorian literary foil to the *femme fatale*—the *femme fragile*. Composer Giacomo Puccini loved this heartrending type and created her again and again. She arose from the tuberculosis epidemic that had swept across Europe—“the white plague”—rendering its victims pallid and exquisitely frail, felling them in a slow,

wasting death. In young women, it was called a “beautiful sickliness.” In literature, this *femme fragile* is epitomized by her aristocratic bearing, budding sexuality, and fascinating fragility. Likened to a flower or butterfly, her season is brief, and lovely. She is innocent, exhausted, exotic in her transience. Her environment complements her pallor, inside and out—she is cool to the touch, dressed in white, her flesh is ivory, translucent, bathed in silver moonlight.

In *Salome* we see all these elements. Richard Strauss wrote that his Salome was “...a chaste maiden, an Oriental princess...a sixteen-year-old princess with the voice of Isolde....” In a 1974 television film, soprano Teresa Stratas revealed her perfectly—pale, ardent, guileless. Strauss tells us that “[Salome’s] shipwreck on her first contact with the marvelous external world should stir us to pity, not merely to horror and terror.”

Salome's story first appears as a fragment in the New Testament Gospel of Mark, where she dances in exchange for the head of John the Baptist on a silver charger, at her mother's behest. In the Gospel version, the burden of wickedness thus falls upon Salome's mother, Herodias, and Salome's virtue remains ambiguous. In Strauss' opera, Salome dances as *femme fatale* for her stepfather, Herod Antipas, defying Herodias. The beheading of the Baptist is Salome's own idea, for which she will pay with her own ghastly death. Nevertheless, John, the Evangelist, come to prepare the way of Messiah with a new gospel of love, succeeds in coaxing the Judean princess to a personal epiphany, for the soul of Salome is not the same fetid sink as her mother's. "Speak again," Salome exhorts him, "Thy voice is as music to mine ear.... Speak again...and tell me what I must do." But just when a prophet's wisdom might have done some good, John is out of ideas, saying: "I will not look at thee. Thou art accursed, Salome...."

Salome is a spiritually changed person when she later laments, "I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me!...I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire....Ah! Wherefore didst thou not *look* at me? If thou hadst *looked* at me thou hadst loved me!" John the missionary had altogether forgotten the mission, to Salome's ruination and his own. And all for his fear of the *femme fatale*.

Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde's scandalous *Salome* of 1892 was the culmination of Europe's Decadent movement, capping a long literary and painterly obsession to peek behind the Gospel's judicious veil. Writing in the supple euphony of the French language, Wilde inverted the Biblical story's moral thrust, making Salome's nubile sexuality the vortex of Judea's appalling imperial palace. By 1901, when Richard Strauss saw Wilde's *Salome* in Berlin, he had already decided to make an opera of it. Strauss used extended passages of Wilde's mellifluous prose in word-for-word translation. But the German sonority is markedly harsher than the French, full of consonant clusters and glottals. For example, where Wilde's Salome exhales, "*Oui...j'ai baisé ta bouche...*," the Straussian moan is "*Ach...ich habe deinen Mund geküsst...*" German is a language suited to the apocalyptic mysteries heaving beneath the Decadents' filigreed surfaces. And as an orchestral psychologist of just such fundamental passions, Strauss was unsurpassed.

Backward-looking critics fulminated that Strauss' *Salome* "cannot be read by any woman, nor fully understood by anyone but a physician....(Boston *Advertiser*, 1907)." By 1907, however, the short-lived Decadent movement had all but expired. *Salome* remained popular with audiences, and modern observers knew the "blasphemies" erupting upon the stage were underpinned by real life. Though Strauss' subject was of the Decadent era, his execution of it anticipates the new century.

The degrees of separation from here to Benjamin Britten's chamber opera, *The Rape of Lucretia*, are fewer than one might think. Ronald Duncan's 1946 libretto relies upon durable symbolologies that served the Decadents fifty years before. "Beauty is all in life!" cries Tarquinius. "It has the peace of death!" Flowers declare beauty and transience. "Flowers alone are chaste," sings Lucretia, "for their beauty is so brief...." Natural exotica signals calamity. "Leave the orchids for Lucretia to arrange...the most perfect orchids I have ever seen...."

Again history hinges on a woman's mettle—an otherwise powerless woman whose ultimate bargain startles men to action. This revisits Camille Paglia's "world-disordering impact" of a wronged woman's redress. Here, too, is a tether to Freud's "Dark Continent," through his disciple Alfred Adler, who wrote in 1945, "The whole

history of civilization... shows us that the pressure exerted on woman...are not to be borne by any human being; they always give rise to revolt....”

Britten, however, is drawn more by the bitterness of lost innocence at the center of Lucretia’s tragedy. We’re introduced to her pure heart in the tranquil happiness of her household. No *femme fragile*, Lucretia’s curiosity about sounds in the night is as guileless as Salome’s. But her path from sewing-circle to death is shattering. Britten’s lifework is characterized above all by this theme of innocence destroyed—and, like Strauss, by an unfailing deference to his text. Here, a 12-piece orchestra functions more as illumination than accompaniment—a more devastating evocation of the predatory night ride of Tarquinius is impossible to imagine. Likewise the thundering stillness under Lucretia’s Act II entrance.

The Christian commentary offered by the twin frame of Male and Female Chorus can seem heavy-handed, especially in the Epilogue. But the unmistakable heart of the message is the profligate waste of innocence.

And in that sense, the tether to Salome is short.