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*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

(1819)

- 1 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.
- 5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.
- I see a lily on thy brow  
10 With anguish moist and fever dew;  
And on thy cheek a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.
- I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful - a faery's child,  
15 Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.
- I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
20 And made sweet moan.
- I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sideways would she lean, and sing  
A faery's song.
- 25 She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew;  
And sure in language strange she said -  
'I love thee true!'
- She took me to her elfin grot,  
30 And there she gazed and sigh'd full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.
- And there she lulled me asleep,  
And there I dream'd - ah! woe betidel  
35 The latest dream I ever dream'd  
On the cold hill side.
- I saw pale kings and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
They cried - 'La Belle Dame sans merci  
40 Thee hath in thrall!'
- I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam,  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke, and found me here,  
On the cold hill side.
- 45 And this is why I sojourn here,  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

1 In this examination of 1840's and 1860's fiction, I argue that the mid-Victorian femme fatale is a literary signpost of the changing roles of women in the nineteenth century, a period when the middle-class begin organizing more radical feminist movements, and that she foreshadows later protests against society's treatment of women. The emergence of the femme fatale in Thackeray's 1848 publication of *Vanity Fair* appropriately coincides with the promising emergence of the late 1840s middle-class feminist movement. In his portrayal of Becky Sharp, Thackeray is one of the first Victorian novelists to identify oppressive sexist roles among middle-class women, and to show a female character blatantly subvert her assigned domestic role as constructed by patriarchy. In many ways, the image of Becky Sharp is a precursor of the women who later would forge more radical middle-class feminist movements.

By emphasizing the harmful effects of restraint and passivity on women in his characterization of Amelia Sedley, Sharp's foil, Thackeray forces us to take a serious look at the complicated roles that women play in the 1840's. By the 1860's, a mere twenty-odd years later, middle-class feminists denounce bourgeois ideals that relegate women to the domestic sphere and prevent them from entering into public life. By challenging censorship, insisting on greater sexual freedom, rejecting biased divorce and property laws in 1857, and opposing the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864, these women demonstrate their refusal to be subordinated to men. However, these social changes also cause much hostility toward women, which is reflected in an ambivalent attitude toward their sexual relations with men.

The femme fatale is part of this evolving assertiveness on the part of women. By characterizing the femme fatale as a specific danger to men, sensation novels in the 1860's implicitly suggest the degree to which an independent woman is viewed as a threat to the fabric of Victorian culture. Collins' *Lydia Gwilt* and Braddon's *Lady Audely* represent these unconstrained women breaking both legal and moral laws as they struggle for self-reliance. As a single, educated woman, the femme fatale — having escaped the polar definitions of domestic or fallen women — is a threat to bourgeois ideology in that she threatens to destroy the structure of the family and obscure the definitions assigned to domestic women. In a society ruled by patriarchal thinking, for example, many saw the Women's Movement as a threat to British culture, in the same way that the femme fatale in Victorian literature is seen to corrupt middle-class values. Victorian ideology that attempted to keep women within these constraints largely depended on the belief in a woman's moral purity. The link between Thackeray's realist novel and the bizarre situations and illicit passion described in sensation fiction by Wilkie Collins may appear too casual a connection, but both genres address turbulent socio-economic problems and the burlesque get-rich-quick schemes carried out by sly female heroines. In *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes agrees that "the realists and the sensationalists are trying to come to grips with the same overwhelming experience of urban, technological society; both reflect a diminished stature of the individual amid the crowding and the complexities of modern existence" (57). Given the rapid rate at which urbanization, industrialization, and technology flourish, the idea of self-hood is lost within new social codes instituted by religion, medicine, and family used to keep individuals controlled. However, despite these changes, midcentury society is plagued with sanitation problems, overcrowding in London, prostitution, underpaid wage labor, and inequality within the new social class system. The femme fatale embodies the cruel conditions of modern life in which poverty, sickness, disease, slum dwelling, and prostitution echo the moral turpitude of the nineteenth century, and she mirrors social anxieties that conflict with prudish and often unrealistic ideological standards of modern Victorian life. So, to watch women like Lydia Gwilt, a woman whose appearance is one of cultured sophistication, moving about freely

among city streets under her heavy paisley shawl and black veil, is a threat to this order. Her behavior is deemed taboo: good women do not lead public lives, and therefore must not be seen among this urban setting addled with sanitation problems and social disease. All mid-Victorian women are similarly ruled by these external circumstances. Images of the femme fatale are more pervasive during socially and economically troubled times that coincide with the publication of the sensation genre, and reflect sexual ambiguity in Victorian society. Her sudden emergence signals societal hardships and anxieties especially reflected in fictional dominant male figures ruled by precarious circumstances that jeopardize their authority and power.

Despite nineteenth-century critics' sententious reviews of sensation fiction, especially their attacks on libertine female characters, Victorian women flocked to Mudie's lending library to read novels that delineate fatal women, increasing the popularity of dangerous female characters throughout the mid-nineteenth century. In rapid perusal of this fiction describing the antics of the femme fatale, these readers more than likely related to the degree to which the conventional mid-nineteenth-century ideal was simply used to keep women powerless within the domestic sphere.

Furthermore, subversive images of women may have led young Victorian female readers to believe that rebelling against social codes is not a moral crime. Due to the constant theme of women's economic and social powerlessness and sexual repression in the midcentury novel, and in the limited opportunities available to middle-class women in Victorian England, female readers may have identified with the agitation and frustration the femme fatale experiences in her social climbing adventures. Hence, the Fatal Woman (another name for the femme fatale) makes a profound impression on nineteenth-century popular culture, embodying the socioeconomic vulnerability of the Victorian woman.

Thus, this feminine trope of the dangerous woman seems unabashedly to subvert the bourgeois ideology that disenfranchises a woman who transgresses social boundaries and exploits men for their power and wealth. Unlike the domestic or fallen woman, mid-nineteenth-century femmes fatales take action against such conventional restraints by threatening men who represent the dominant Victorian ideology that oppresses women. Cunning, strong-minded, independent, and unconventional — these indeed describe accurately the traits of the femme fatale, but these features alone do not earn her the name. So, why do I recognize certain female Victorian characters as femmes fatales while earlier examples of strong self-sufficient heroines like Jane Eyre are not? How and why does the midcentury femme fatale warrant that name? Elements of mythical and historical women influence traits of the mid-century femme fatale, which cannot be ignored. According to Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the first Romantic incarnation of the Fatal Woman, and her exoticism appropriately reflects the passionate energy of the early nineteenth century (214). Though the Fatal Woman became pervasive in Romantic literature, Praz explains that "there is no established type of the Fatal Woman" (201).

From *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature, The Danger and the Sexual Threat*, Jennifer Hedgecock, New York, Cambria Press, 2008.

