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**The *Femme Fatale* in “Postfeminist” Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction:  
Redundant or Re-inventing Herself?**

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## Abstract

The *femme fatale* of the hard-boiled era, who arrived in the late 1920s, seduced, shot and poisoned her way through pulp magazines, hard- and paper-backed novels, and films for almost fifty years, as the iconic figure of evil whose abjection secured a new masculine ideal that found its voice in the tough-guy detectives created by the likes of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane. But by the 1960s her particular brand of villainy was in decline. In the 1980s a new representation of the dangerous woman, in the form of the tough female detective subverted the genre, by decentring the masculine fantasy that was the source of the *femme fatale*.

The female detectives authored by women, such as Sara Paretsky and Katherine Forrest, were a product of second-wave feminism, which, in the 1960s, agitated for legal and customary rights within the masculine hegemony. By the 1990s, the feminism that had driven a host of social and legal reforms was felt by many to have entered a new phase, allowing for the postulation of the return of the *femme fatale* within postfeminist detective fiction as the representative of the abject “other.”

Contemporary gender politics and new postmodern representational regimes, however, make her return difficult. The cultural meaning attached to her has changed. The question is what different form of marginality, or “otherness,” can take her place? The focus of this study is to answer this question through a study of selected postfeminist detective fiction, framed by the theories of Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek.

This research suggests that the initial encroachment of the feminine, in the form of the hardboiled female detective, into the genre, and the further intrusion by aggressive women with no regard for hegemonic law, destabilises the masculine imaginary, and in doing so prepares the ground for a female imaginary, which though framed by the symbolic order, occupies its own space. The fiction of Declan Hughes, Megan Abbott, Stieg Larsson, Ian Rankin, and David Peace provides a mirror into a world where the *femme fatale*, moves, not necessarily in a linear progression, from being the guarantor of a particular brand of masculine subjectivity to a more diminished stature in the

recognition that she is too small a figure for representing evil in a world of global corporations, atomic bombs, and national humiliation.

Nevertheless, vestiges of the *femme fatale* remain in postfeminist crime fiction. However, the demands of feminism and the consequential reshaping of the established order make her survival, in whatever form of “otherness,” tenuous. While statistical evidence may provide some measure of women’s progress, perhaps the detective genre makes a better gauge. It reflects not the job numbers, or percentage of degrees earned, by members of each gender, but the changes wrought upon the sociosymbolic contract, and their effect upon traditional representations of gender, through the destabilising of a once-established masculine ideal.

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## Introduction

### The *Femme Fatale*: In the Beginning

Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too.

Tertullian (circa 200 AD)<sup>1</sup>

This research arose from a less than satisfying encounter with Otto Penzler's collection of short stories called *Dangerous Women*. Long a fan of crime fiction, I could not resist its lurid cover. It promised that seventeen of today's foremost crime writers would thrill me with their updated version of the *femme fatale* in sizzling masterpieces of murder, seduction, and treachery. Addicted as I am, I read them from cover to cover, but what a disappointment! I love those old time *femme fatales*. Seduction is their byword. They come prowling out of the shadows, all long legs and stolen mink, looking for a dupe to take the fall for any nefarious scheme they have in mind. The postfeminist, postmodern *femmes fatales* of *Dangerous Women* just lacked something. While their hard-boiled predecessors oozed sexuality and danger, these lethal women missed the mark. I was not alone in my disenchantment. Eleni, in a customer review posted on Amazon, thought *Dangerous Women* was a great concept spoiled by lousy submissions. She wondered if the highly regarded authors were doing a "quickie favour" for the editor, and complained that the dangerous women seemed fixated on committing sadistic acts upon gullible men. She wound up: "Dangerous *femme fatales* [...] give me a break. You want dangerous women? See Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* or read the novel by James Cain." Much as I agreed with the pithy relevance of Eleni's critique, what I found more disconcerting in the stories was the continued linkage between female sexuality and danger. To consider female sexuality dangerous in a world overloaded with sexual imagery in films, television, advertising, and fashion seems incongruous. That the contributors to *Dangerous Women* used it as their signifier of evil highlights the disjuncture between the feminist legislative gains of the nineteen-eighties and the increasingly gratuitous sexualisation of women by the media in the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> qtd. in Karen Armstrong. *A History of God*, (145).



It prompts the question: what guise does the dangerous woman or *femme fatale* take in the postfeminist age, or can she even survive? My hypothesis is that Western culture has altered to such a degree that the classic *femme fatale* of hard-bitten *noir* crime fiction who emerged in the 1920s, has become a redundant figure within the context of contemporary gender politics. In an age, where the effects of female-friendly legislation are simultaneously applauded, reviled or subverted, and a postmodern susceptibility embraces uncertainty, paradox, fragmentation, and muddy conclusions, the sureties that helped create the classic dangerous woman no longer apply. My argument is that these influences are making it increasingly difficult to use the feminised “other” as the repository of evil, and as a result, the *femme fatale* is fated to become either a weakly realised figure or an ironic one that cannot help slipping into parody. By examining selected texts where deviancy and criminality are the preoccupying concerns, I will seek to discover how, in a postfeminist age, the *femme fatale* is displaced, reconstructed or dematerialized.

Historically, the *femme fatale* has always been part of Western myth and legend. Her prime characteristic is a beguiling seductiveness that masks her duplicity, and her deadly effect on men. Constantly reinvented to better suit the culture or historical period from which she emerges, the fatal woman has always been present in some form or other. In Biblical times, she was the sinuous dancer who claimed John the Baptist’s head. More importantly, she was Eve whose transgressions worked to associate all women with evil and criminality. In the Middle-Ages, she took the shape of the succubus, a witch who emerged at night as a beautiful woman and drained the power from sleeping men. In the late Victorian era, she was a vampire, or sometimes a voluptuous and rapacious African queen. In the 1920’s she arrived as the *femme fatale* of hard-bitten crime fiction: later still, she subverted the whole ideology behind her original creation and swung to the side of the law. The historic and cultural contexts from which the classic *femme fatale* and later the tough female detective arose link directly to two separate, but effectively continuous, periods of feminist social and political agitation that had their roots in the 1890s and 1960s respectively. By the 1990s, many critics, especially those within the media, voiced the opinion that feminism having achieved its aims should relax the doctrine of “political correctness” that blighted the lives of so many men. This period “after” feminism often expresses itself as a backlash that lauds the achievements of women, while at the same time

attempting to undermine them. Commentators, academics, and the media came to frame this phenomenon as “postfeminism.” Unlike the feminist ages that went before it, the impact of the postfeminist age on crime fiction is more diffuse. There is no standout, or iconic literary creation, that represents the era. Instead, there are scores of characters who epitomise the contradictions inherent in an age where old gender certainties clash with the promise, and, in some cases, the actual delivery of equality.

My critical approach, given the subject matter, and the eras being examined, cannot avoid being broadly feminist. Influenced by the impact of feminism and postmodernism, hard-boiled fiction has moved from essentialism to positionality. This undermines the essentialist role played by the *femme fatale* as a representative figure whose defeat serves to affirm male subjectivity. Furthermore, the relaxation of sexual mores means female sexuality can no longer be a reliable indicator of danger. The question is how will we recognise the *femme fatale* in a postfeminist age? What we know is that whatever the period, or whatever the guise, the common factor is that “she” will be a figure of disruption who must be expelled, or abjected, from the body politic. For this reason, Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of the abject is particularly appropriate for the interrogation of the crime novel. Julian Wolfreys sums up Kristeva’s notion of the abject when he says, “Her notion of the subject rids itself of something that is other than itself, yet part of itself, thereby seeking in the process of ab-jecting to re-establish the boundaries of self” (5). In hard-boiled fiction, the detective seeks to re-establish the boundaries of his subject self by expelling the dangerous “other” as represented by the *femme fatale*. With her emphasis on abjection, marginality, and the repression of the feminine in terms of boundaries rather than essence, Kristeva is the key theorist for the interrogation of most of the novels in this thesis.

Slavoj Žižek plays a secondary role to Kristeva, but nevertheless his writings on the *femme fatale* and the detective make a singular contribution to this project because he goes beyond the feminist analysis that dominates the debate. His discussion relates to the classic *noir femme fatale* of the nineteen-forties and the postmodern *noir femme fatale* of the nineteen-nineties. He claims that despite the detective’s failure to contain the spectacular transgressions of the *neo-noir* figure, she remains a creation of the male imaginary. He argues her successful resistance to patriarchal authority not only

fails to advance the feminist cause, but on the contrary, it also serves to reinforce the symbolic order. He offers a way out of this double bind that is hardly convincing. Nevertheless his discussion of the male imaginary, which appears to ignore the postfeminist transformation of gender roles and the postmodern deconstruction of the metanarratives, allows for an interrogation of the supposed universality of that imaginary.

Given the density and extent of both Kristeva's and Žižek's writing, I have chosen to explain their various theoretical positions and ideas within the main body of the current study as they become relevant. The study itself is divided into two parts, both of which recognise that at the heart of the *femmes fatales*' role in crime fiction is their symbiosis with the male detectives. In Part I, the first chapter explores the classic interdependence that establishes her abjection as well as her role in securing the masculinity of the detective. The second chapter explores the threat to this symbiosis arising from the feminist reinventions of the genre, particularly through the displacement of the male detective by the female detective, which has the effect of making the *femme fatale* either supernumerary or superannuated. Chapter Three examines what we have come to know as postfeminism, its meanings and its sensibilities. This lays the ground for Part II, and an examination of five postfeminist-postmodern authors, which seeks to discover whether in postfeminist crime fiction, the old symbiosis between the detective and the *femme fatale* is possible, given the shifts in genre and the mutations to both of these types over the ninety years of their existence.

## **The Context**

This thesis sits within the context provided by two waves of feminism and the limbo of postfeminism that followed. Each of the "waves" promoted cultural changes that in their turn impacted on crime fiction. While first-wave and second-wave feminism are stable terms attributable to defined historic periods that produced equally definable sub-genres, postfeminism can make no such claim about the stability of its meaning. All, however, have influenced a wider context that includes literature, history, politics, various commercial imperatives and technical developments to produce a

popular culture that reflects the social concerns of the day. Fears relating to women getting the vote saw masculinity redefine itself away from the urbane Poirot towards rough, tough men, imperturbable against the wiles of the sexual women, a redefinition that was assisted by the ever-growing popularity of American cinema. The impact of second-wave feminism on the genre was itself part of a wider resurgence that interrogated, appropriated, and revised some of society's metanarratives. "Postfeminism," a term rejected by many feminists, nevertheless enjoys considerable currency through the media's usage, and aided by the fact that attempts at rejecting it only contribute towards its recirculation. It has had, however, no overwhelmingly recognisable impact upon the transmutation of literary genres, unlike the changes to literary form and popular genres that had accompanied second-wave feminism. Its most evident impact upon crime fiction is registered in the economic capital gained through worldwide mass marketing and large-scale circulation. As Ken Gelder says, it is this "industrial" production based on money that distinguishes popular genres from literature. He cites the extension of this "industrial" approach to the marketing of Ian Rankin's output that garners a reported ten per cent of all fiction sales in Britain (16). Stieg Larsson's estate similarly benefits to the tune of many millions of dollars from the successful marketing of *The Millennium Trilogy*. All these influences are, by implication and direct observation, recognised in this investigation. However, the tighter focus is on postfeminism and what it might, or might not, mean in its relationship to the hard-boiled genre. This emphasis on the ramifications to crime fiction arising from sociocultural change necessarily departs from the alternative pathway of situating the interpretation of these novels in the context of various literary antecedents, thus taking this thesis into less furrowed ground.

The aim of Part I is to provide the historical and critical framework relating to the *femme fatale* since she first appeared in the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s. It will look at some of the important innovations in crime fiction over two separate ages of feminism, and lay the ground for an understanding of what constitutes postfeminism. The hard-boiled detective as exemplified by the work of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane, and the reappropriation and revision of the genre by the introduction of the hard-boiled female detective, as created by Sara Paretsky and Katherine Forrest, are manifestations of two very different feminist ages. The hard-boiled detective romanticised traditional male values of individuality and toughness as

he confirmed his own subjectivity through the containment of the sexual woman. The hard-boiled female detective, however, contests the whole notion of male dominance. Logically, she is not a successor to the *femme fatale*, but to the male detective. There are, however, wider implications. In threatening the primacy of the male detective, the female detective undermines his role as upholder of patriarchal values and masculine subjectivity. Created by female authors with a feminist agenda, her role is to show women as the equal of men. She disturbs the binary co-dependent relationship between the *femme fatale* and the male detective and raises doubts whether the *femme fatale* can survive. Whereas, the issues of first-and second-wave feminism are very clear, postfeminism has no such clarity. Constructed from multiple influences, many of them contradictory, it remains a site of contestation. An examination of the context surrounding these contradictions will provide a way into recognising the ambiguities, anxieties, and displacements that encase the re-contextualised *femme fatale* of the postfeminist age.

### **The Influence of Victorian Age Feminism**

Though not discussed at length, in this study, except in terms of the American experience, the patriarchal reaction in England and France to women's demand for the vote laid the foundations for one of crime fiction's most famous stereotype, the *femme fatale*. Her creation has its roots in the turmoil created by late nineteenth-century Victorian women attempting to win the right to vote against the objection of a fiercely resistant patriarchy. The theoretical and historical analyses of this period are well documented, but two authors, Rebecca Stott and Elizabeth Menon, are particularly helpful in terms of this research. Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale* (1992), sites the *femme fatale* within the historical perspectives of Victorian England interpreted through the theoretical base of twentieth-century feminism. Of special interest is her use of Kristeva's emphasis on abjection, marginality, and the repression of the feminine in terms of boundaries and positionality rather than essence, and she further extends Moi's notion that "what is marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies at the time" (39). The ideology of the times puts the sexual woman outside those margins, alongside the other deviants and misfits of the late nineteenth-century. Besides Kristeva's theories of marginality, Stott uses the arguments of Said, Derrida, Jameson, and Irigaray, to posit that while Woman-as-

Other is a fixed concept inscribed in Western binary oppositions, “the constitution of the *femme-fatale-as-a-sign* depends on *what else* (besides Woman) is considered to be culturally invasive, or culturally and politically Other at any historical point”(44).

Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (2006), follows a similar path, but covers late nineteenth-century France. Her interest is the psychology behind the creation of the *femme fatale* as manifested through salon paintings, theatre posters, and newspaper cartoons. What Menon illustrates well is how by placing women within the context of original sin, the link between them and Satan is exploited to create the image of sexual women as evil, and by extension criminal. What she also demonstrates is the anxiety created within the patriarchy by the political agitation of the suffragists, as cartoonists and editorials equated feminists with prostitutes in terms of their threat to society (95-96). Stott reports a similar situation in England where anti-suffrage posters depicted women as degenerate hags, cross-eyed, with huge hands and vampire-like teeth that express the “horror and potential degeneration of the species evoked by the idea of extending the franchise to women” (202). Others, such as Lynda Nead, and Patricia Stubbs help complete the picture as they add the various slurs, smears, and calumnies heaped upon the suffragists, who are often linked to prostitution, which in its turn, was seen as seditious and subversive in its threat to bourgeois society. Stubbs posits, the emergence of feminism coincided with advances in psychology and contributed to the rising political and economic pressures that were forcing change on a reluctant governing class (57).

The construction of the modern *femme fatale* in the late nineteenth century thus represents one of many responses from the forces of the patriarchy to quell the rising demands of feminism. As portrayed in art and literature, she attests to the historic specificity of an otherness that bears the marks of original sin, criminality, duplicity, and disease that serve as a warning to all men about the dangers represented by the sexually liberated women. As Stott puts it, increasing anxiety about masculine identity in the face of feminist agitation constructs the *femme fatale* as the inhabitant of an imaginary zone, and “as with all images of Otherness, she is a stereotype and the origin of stereotypes is in the manufacture of texts” (31). In Victorian England, the creation of evil and otherness reflects British cultural anxieties and fantasies about

class, gender, and race. Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker are but two of a variety of writers who created vampires and various heavy-breasted African beauties, along with sexually available women about town, as the representatives of the dangers that threatened Victorian culture and manhood.

### **The Detective and His *Femme Fatale***

In the United States, the feminist search for the vote similarly heightened male anxieties that needed assuaging. Forgoing the vampires and nubile voluptuaries that reflected the cultural disquiets of Britain, the Americans looked to their own “mean streets” and created a sub-genre of crime fiction that became immensely popular. It featured tough, fast-lipped, fast-fisted detectives locked in battle with steamy *femmes fatales* who looked a million dollars, and would kill for a lot less. They moved the genre away from the Sherlock Holmes-style enigmas and country house mysteries that were as much about English upper-class lifestyles as they were about murders, and took it into new territory. As Raymond Chandler said in his celebrated essay “The Simple Art of Murder” (1950), crime fiction entered the real world. It was a world where gangsters ruled the city and head-lining restauraners made their money out of brothels, mayors closed their eyes to murder, all lawyers were shysters, and judges were in the pocket of the mob. The language was that of the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles, not Surbiton or Bognor Regis (17). The representative figure of all this evil was also a new creation, a sexy broad with a penchant for murder. The only person who could control this creature was the detective. In Chandler’s portrayal, he is a man of honour: he might seduce a duchess but never sully a virgin. He is a lonely but proud man, contemptuous of sham and pettiness (18). The combination of tough detective, *femme fatale*, and language that snapped and snarled became known as “hard-boiled,” a term deriving from a colloquial phrase of understatement that compared the fragility of the soft-boiled egg to that of one cooked for considerably longer. The *femmes fatales* and the wisecracking loner detective of the nineteen-twenties and sixties set the benchmark for hard-boiled crime fiction. It is against them that all the dangerous women and hard-hitting guys of the genre are measured.

The literature surrounding the origins of the hard-bitten detective and his *bête noir* the *femme fatale* is limited. Jopi Nyman, however, in *Men Alone: Masculinity,*

*Individuality and Hard-boiled Fiction* (1997), and Megan Abbott in *The Street was Mine: White Masculinity in Hard-boiled Fiction and Film Noir* (2002), provide valuable insights and establish the link between masculine anxiety regarding female independence and the emergence of the *femmes fatales* of hard-boiled fiction. Nyman explains the shift away from the cowboy to the hard-boiled detective as the masculine ideal. He argues, as do Stott and Menon, that hard-boiled fiction should be regarded as a symbolic representation of anxiety over masculinity, which stems from its historical and cultural context that links it to late nineteenth-century feminism: “Ever since the turn of the century psychological reassurance for masculinity was being sought in different ways” (Nyman 67). In early twentieth-century United States it was through the hard-boiled detective. Abbott argues that hard-boiled masculinity may construct notions of normality in large part through the *femme fatale* and against her lethal perversion, but it was his refusal to fit within an industrialised capitalist society that posed the greater threat to the masculine hegemony. R W Connell makes a similar point in *Masculinities* (2005) when he refers to the “emergence of an array of subordinated and marginalised masculinities” (191).

The assumption of innate evil attached to female sexuality is thus part of the need to construct a brand of masculinity that can restore order from the chaos she creates. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane produced such men. The seductive women they jailed, shot, or institutionalised are merely the costs associated with maintaining the patriarchal order. Each of their detectives, Sam Spade, Phillip Marlowe, and Mike Hammer, brings a different style to the genre. Whether it is Spade as the unflappable and omnipotent prototype, Marlowe as the knight-errant, or Hammer with his sensationalist sadism, the function of hard-boiled fiction’s detective is to protect patriarchal values from incursions from what Kristeva has named as the “abject.”



## Second Wave Feminism and the Hard-Boiled Female Detectives

As noted earlier, the hard-boiled female detective is an unlikely *femme fatale*, yet she not only threatens the future of the male detective, but she also blurs and shifts the boundaries of gender. Whereas the focus of first-wave feminism was to get women the vote, the second wave of the nineteen-sixties emerged from the failure of that vote to transfer itself into a fairer labour market, or better educational opportunities. Exacerbating this failure was women's experience of World War II. With millions of men drafted into the armed forces, women took over many of the jobs that were normally the male preserve. They took higher responsibilities, and earned more money than they had ever earned in their lives. At the end of the war the men came back and the women returned to their domestic chores, the typist pool, or waiting tables, all of course at a lower pay rate than they had become used to. Having got a sense of what they could do and what they were worth, women pressed for equal opportunity across the board, and thus we come to a second wave of feminism, agitating to build on the successes of the first.

This second wave accomplished a great deal, as it won legislative gains that in all legal respects made women the equal of men. Such validation of women has consequences for the detective story that were completely at odds with the reverberations that followed first-wave feminism. Whereas, it produced the hard-boiled male detective dedicated to proving his subjectivity through the control of the sexual woman, the second wave produced an ambiguous figure in the shape of the hard-boiled female detective. While reader response to her was positive, academic opinion was divided. The intensity of the feminist political debate often obscured the potential danger to gender boundaries that resided in a female detective figure who moved beyond English villages and dowagers smelling of lavender. General opinion was that the insertion of the female detectives into a predominantly masculine form offered neither change to the fundamental social structure or a place in discourse for women who disrupted hegemonic power. Sally Munt, in *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (1994), appears to express the opinion of many academics. While acknowledging the popularity of the new detectives, she describes them as feminist fantasies that do not attempt to analyse, understand or subvert the myth-making processes that collude to privilege the masculine. While more or less

agreeing with Munt et al. regarding the fantasy element in feminist crime fiction, Gill Plain, in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001) sees the advent of the lesbian detective as a genuine threat to the law of the hegemony.

The female detectives chosen for examination, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski and Katherine V Forrest's Kate Delafield, are probably also the best known to fans of the genre. Plain generally dismisses Warshawski as a feminist fantasy, but sees in Delafield a real challenge to existing boundaries and gender understandings. She is an aggressive lesbian in a homophobic police force, and her perceived "non-woman" status contributes towards destabilising the male-female binary. As both woman and lesbian, she not only disputes relegation to the margins, but also rejects the notion of "abject" as a component in the construction of "woman." This rejection, according to Plain, removes "woman" from her default position as monster in crime fiction. Her sexuality has lost its power to represent the monstrous, and without her, the genre needs to find a new monster. She believes that this outcome puts the male detective at risk. Hence, by extension, she argues that the female detective is a *femme fatale*, who not only threatens the subjectivity of the detective, but also threatens the form of the genre itself (245-48).

### **The "Postfeminist" Age**

While second-wave feminism produced the hard-boiled female detective, no such clear-cut representative figure has emerged from crime fiction in the postfeminist age. This is not surprising as there is doubt in some circles that such an age even exists. For many, it is an infinitely flexible term created by the media, and may not even be a valid phenomenon. Nevertheless, valid or otherwise, postfeminism has created a lot of debate, ranging from the most considered academic analysis to the ravings of the talk-show hosts and their equally rabid callers, upset about some nebulous example of political correctness that is about to destroy civilisation as we know it. While being fully cognisant of the media's role, which at one-and-the-same time manages to support and undermine women's aspirations, it is academic comment that offers the more nuanced exploration of the era. Nevertheless, as a concept, postfeminism remains riddled with contradictions.

Apart from the debate whether the age actually exists, there are two lines of thought within academia. The first is that postfeminism is disastrous for women; the second, considerably more positive view, is that women, having taken the opportunities offered by equality under the law, are now seeing benefits that promise a bright future. Angela McRobbie represents the negative view with her thought that postfeminism is a “double entanglement [that] facilitates both a doing and undoing of feminism” (3-4). Susan Douglas rejects the term postfeminism calling it a manufacturing process that week after week in the media both exploits and punishes female sexuality (10). Views that are more positive come from Mairead Owen, Lisa Tsalik, and the *Economist's* Schumpeter, who see new technologies as favouring the perceived qualities of women and bringing them empowerment. Rosalind Gill, in contrast, offers a broader view of postfeminism. First, she registers the shift that recognises feminism as having reached its peak and has now moved to another phase. Then she recognises another dimension of the term that relates to the backlash against feminism and political correctness. Beyond this, there is her idea of “postfeminism as a sensibility,” which acts as a corrective to the extremes of view surrounding the era.

Clearly, there are competing and conflicting claims about postfeminism. In regard to crime fiction its impact remains largely unexplored and elicits little academic comment or examination. While there is no shortage of fact, opinion or analyse of postfeminism, it rarely includes any study of the detective or the *femme fatale*. Nevertheless, postfeminist analysis portrays a milieu that has the potential to make her redundant as a signifier against which masculine subjectivity is established, or to bring her back in all her former glory as the universal representative of evil and “otherness.” postfeminism offers the potential, for either a back-to-the-future scenario driven by backlash in all its forms, or a forward-to-the-future driven by technology and its empowerment of women.

Though the crime writers who created the *femmes fatales* of first-and second-wave feminism almost chose themselves for this study, the postfeminist authors have yet to produce a figure, or contribute a canon that represents the age. Perhaps, the defining features of postfeminist crime fiction are continuity, adaption, and contradiction. My initial problem was finding crime novels that exhibited some reinvention of the genre, which distinguishes their postfeminist *femmes fatales*, in whatever guise, from those

who went before. To narrow the field, I used simple criteria: the authors should primarily work in the area of crime fiction, preferably with a *femme fatale*. They should be less than fifty years of age, thus ensuring they have lived all their life within the influence of second-wave feminism and its postfeminist aftermath. This unfortunately eliminates some of the finest crime writers of an earlier generation, such as Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy. The criteria also demanded that the work of the authors selected should be freely available in local bookshops or libraries, and there should be a geographical spread. To assist me in my task—crime fiction is the most popular of genres, with up to ten thousand new publications a year—I sought help at my local library. There I was steered towards Vivienne Durrant, who as luck would have it is a serious reader of crime fiction, and, even more fortuitously, she comes with a lifetime involvement in feminist issues. She quickly understood what I was looking for, but cautioned me, that from her perspective the postfeminist age is ripe for the return of the full-blown *femme fatale*. Nevertheless, out of her selection of ten authors, later reduced to five, we, between us, settled on a range that went from almost traditional to postmodern efforts that turn the genre on its head. The final selection of Declan Hughes, Megan Abbott, Stieg Larsson, Ian Rankin, and David Peace makes no pretence to being a representative range of the hard-boiled genre, but each in some way mirrors the conflicts that surround the postfeminist *femme fatale*. When interrogated through the theories of Kristeva and Žižek, they expose the uncertainties surrounding the future of the *femme fatale*, yet create new spaces for her in a world where her sexuality is negated and her duplicity blunted, as she slowly disengages from a detective who is neither omnipotent nor necessarily the agent of the symbolic order. In some novels, the traditional *femme fatale* is present in a vestigial form; in others, she emerges almost unrecognised in completely new guises. Elsewhere, she is displaced by other manifestations of cultural or symbolic threats, or the magnification of criminality through capitalist, corporate, and global, net-works make her an inadequate representative of the evil that confronts the world of the detective.

## The Investigation

The investigation begins with the work of Declan Hughes, whose work is closest to the tradition of the hardboiled genre and moves through to the postmodern novels of David Peace where the *femme fatale* becomes an illusionary figure. In *The Wrong Sort of Blood* and *The Colour of Blood*, Hughes explores through crime fiction set in modern-day Dublin the destruction of the family through the literalization of the Freudian family romance. It is in this context that the *femme fatale* takes her place, either as a formidable threat to the patriarchy or as a seduced victim of patriarchal power. In Hughes' work, new *femme fatale* figures emerge in the form of the mother, yet even this is problematical. On the one hand, there is the *femme fatale* who combines the fetishisation of the body that is now available to older women with the archaic fear of the mother. On the other hand, Hughes presents sexual mother figures who commit no crime but are nevertheless punished for their sexuality as if they were *femmes fatales*.

Megan Abbott's *femmes fatales* operate on both sides of the Hollywood strip. In *Die a Little* and *Queenpin*, they are by turns, respected housewives, businesswomen, drug taking sluts or callous killers. They depart from the classic modality as they lay claim to a space that competes with the masculine imaginary. They are not the black and white figures of Hammett and Chandler; instead, they offer a reversal of roles as they play out the fantasies of the female imaginary. This is enabled through a doubling of roles where competing *femmes fatales* struggle for agency and dominance and in the process destroy the co-dependency of the *femme fatale* and detective. The appearance of the *homme fatale* further inverts traditional relationships and puts the *femme fatale* in the overriding position. Notwithstanding Žižek's claim that the *femme fatale* is a transgressive figure inherent to the male imaginary, projected by the male detective, Abbott excavates and extends a place of criminality and offers, along with it, subject positions for the *femme fatale* not dependent on the male detective.

Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy: The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* situates the *femme fatale* in Stockholm and its environs, but there is a hybridisation about her that makes her difficult to place. On the surface she a feminist fantasy as the almost super-

human hero who shoots, tases or rapes the various men who cross her, or stand in her way. Yet “undecidability” hovers over every space she occupies. She conforms to neither polarity of any dichotomy. Technically, she has all the features of the classic *femme fatale*, yet often they are a chimera. She does not use her sexuality as a weapon of seduction; nevertheless her enemies use, what they perceive as her sexual deviancy, to demonise her. She is victim and avenger, a feminist sympathiser yet scornful of “weak sisters.” She goes beyond the comfort zone of the male imaginary and further destabilises the co-dependency between the detective and the *femme fatale*.

Ian Rankin sites his detective John Rebus in Edinburgh. He writes Rebus in real time so that *Knots and Crosses*, *Black & Blue*, and *Exit Music*, which cover his twenty-year career from first appearance to retirement, provide a useful record of gender politics over the period. The Rebus series allows him to modify many of the tropes of the genre to reflect changing gender and cultural norms. The *femme fatale* is vestigally present in some of the seventeen novels in the series, but Rankin prefers other figures of evil. In *Knots and Crosses* the homosexual is positioned as “other,” but by Rebus’ mid-career, evil comes in the form of big business, and by the end of his career the effects of feminisation have so changed the culture of the police force that Rebus becomes the isolated outsider. His isolation pushes him to the brink of nervous breakdown, so that his inner demons come to represent the “otherness” that was once the preserve of the *femme fatale*.

David Peace and Julia Kristeva could have been born for each other. The first two novels of his yet-to-be-completed *Tokyo Trilogy* take the reader on a journey to abjection that could come straight out of *Powers of Horror* and does so in part, and most dramatically, through the intervention of poetic language representing the subversive voice of the maternal. In *Tokyo Year Zero*, the detective is revealed as a war criminal and a fraud, and the *femme fatale* as a total figment of his imagination. In *Occupied City*, language is stretched, compressed, and deleted. Two unnamed detectives are ineffective and have no authority. They are but two voices of twelve who each gives different versions of the same crime. In Peace’s world, the detective, as a representative of the law, is marginalised and his subject-self destroyed, and the *femme fatale* is too ephemeral a creation of the male imaginary to bear the burden of

the evil represented by Japan's defeat. As the American victors impose their own cultural values upon a subjected nation, she is displaced by the horror of loss and occupation.

## Where To?

In the journey from Hammett to Peace, much has changed. New sites for the *femme fatale* have emerged. Some of these sites are attributable to the exhaustion of the traditional figure; others are a direct result of the changing position of women within society. This, along with new technologies that negate male physical strength, allows for the possible emergence of a female imaginary to challenge hitherto male dominance in deciding the limits of permissible female behaviour. Both the culturally potent *femme fatale* who emerged from an anti-feminist backlash in the 1920s and the ambiguous hard-boiled female detective of second-wave feminism are reflections of their respective eras. A recognisable representative of the postfeminist *femme fatale* has yet to surface. The sexually saturated media-scape, which is a feature of postfeminism, offers an opportunity for the *femme fatale* to re-emerge, yet the evidence of *Dangerous Women* suggests otherwise, as those who pass as *femmes fatales* in this collection are merely thin parodies of their literary predecessors. Two great ages of feminism have shifted the landscape. The question I am trying to answer is how the postfeminist era has shaped the *femme fatale*: can she survive responding, as she has done for thousands of years, to the gender politics of the day, or has she no place in a world coming to grips with the "facts" of female equality.

## **Part I**



## Chapter I

### The Classic *Femme Fatale* of Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction

A voice said, 'thank you,' so softly that only the purest articulation made the words intelligible, and a young woman came through the doorway. She advanced slowly with tentative steps, looking at Spade with cobalt-blue eyes that were both shy and probing.

(Hammett 1)

With its emphasis on masculine virtues, hard-boiled fiction seeks to reaffirm a particular brand of masculinity as the sole source of authority, and relocate women and other non-masculine characters to a position of abjection or “otherness.” The subjectivity of this particular representation of masculinity is dependent on the containment and defeat of transgressive women. Though this defeat may come through a bullet, a lengthy jail sentence, or some form of expulsion, the central issue is the restoration of the “natural” order of masculine dominance. An examination of three classic *femmes fatales* through reference to Kristeva’s notion of abjection demonstrates how hard-boiled fiction functions to promote a form of masculinity that acts as a bulwark against the feminist gains of the early twentieth century, embodied in the ambiguous form of the *femme fatale*.

When Miss Wonderly, aka Brigid O’Shaughnessy, pliantly slender, high breasted, and with a timid smile, enters Sam Spade’s office, she brings with her a long history. Included in her ancestry is every temptress of Western legend, literature, and myth. She draws not only on the traditional masculine fear of female sexuality that dates back to Eve, but also on the newly minted masculine anxieties springing from women’s fight for the vote, better job opportunities, and control over their own fertility. Historically, the dangerous woman is a universal character; however, the *femme fatale* of the hard-boiled genre is an American creation. Her natural habitat is the mean streets of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. Seduction is her weapon of choice, but if forced into a corner, a Webley-Fosbery 38 is a ready substitute. Jopi Nyman claims that no single cause led to her creation; rather she

comes out of a series of inter-related historical events that heightened male anxiety and had a profound effect on American culture. Since the beginning of the new century American society was changing rapidly. The taming of the “Wild West” and growing urbanisation had eroded the myth of the legendary cowboy who was at the centre of the masculine imagination. World War 1, with its death and destruction, had shaken confidence; prohibition, which promised a decent society, sent many cities reeling into gang warfare, and made lawbreakers of any citizen who could not resist the lure of bootleg gin. The Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression added to the malaise, but behind all this sits the Nineteenth Amendment, with its attendant history, that in 1920 gave women the vote. The fears surrounding this apparent relinquishing of an, until then, exclusively male privilege forced many men to consider how they could restore the traditional values of masculinity. One representation of this search for reaffirmation resides in hard-boiled fiction as it romanticises the masculine world of the detective, and his ruthlessness in curbing the excesses of the sexual woman (Nyman 57-73).

In America the suffrage campaign, as Mildred Andrews explains, had been a long one. Its formal beginning was in 1848 when 200 women and 40 men signed the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions in New York, and formed the National Woman [sic] Suffrage Association. Over the next seventy years the Association faced fierce opposition. In the five states that granted the vote to women, continuance was never assured. In Washington women won the vote in 1883, lost it in 1888, and reclaimed it in 1910. The grounds for rejecting suffragist demands were many, but a front page article in the *Territorial Dispatch and Seattle Times* of November 6th 1871 encapsulated community and masculine fears. It describes Susan B. Anthony, a national leader of the suffrage movement, as a revolutionary whose aim was to destroy the very fabric of society and overthrow every institution organised for

the protection of the altar, the family circle, and the legitimacy of our offspring, recognizing no religion but self-worship, no god but human reason, no motive for human action but lust... It is true Miss Anthony did not openly advocate free love [...] but she did worse [...] under the guise of defending women against manifest wrongs, she attempts to instil into their minds an utter disregard for all that is right and conservative in the present order [sic] of society [...]. Are our sisters, wives and daughters, prepared to accept the teachings of brazen harlots and open advocates of licentiousness? We trust not. (qtd in Andrews 2)

The unknown author of this article got right to the heart of masculine anxiety — the fear of unbridled female sexuality. Patriarchal dominance in the home, the work place, the ballot box, and the bedroom was under threat. Sexually active women were a threat because their behaviour blurred traditional gender roles. In many people’s imagination the cult of piety and purity, if not the day-to-day reality, of the idealised middle-class woman was about to be swamped by perversity or, horror upon horror, nymphomania. In 1898 R Ussher wrote, “It [contraception] would very considerably diminish ante-nuptial chastity on part of both men and women, especially the latter” (qtd. in Stubbs 12). Furthermore, contraception would unleash the dangerous power of female sexuality unchecked by the network of taboos that enforced female chastity. In hard-boiled fiction the dangerous woman is essentialised in the figure of the *femme fatale*, and given innate traits that render her erotically lethal, open to vilification and most often defeat.

This assumption of the innate evil attached to female sexuality relates in part of the patriarchy’s need to reconstitute a particular representation of masculinity. There is evidence within the texts to show that this evil is itself a patriarchal construct driven by essentialist thinking that fixes the innate qualities of the pure or fallen woman. A lingering Victorian morality that demonises the unchaste women as dangerous, controls the construction of the *femme fatale*. She is evil and threatening because she is alien and other by virtue of her sexuality, the fantasies she conjures up disturb patriarchal notions of order and control. She fits the Kristevan concept of “abject” because she “neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law: but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them to take advantage of them, the better to deny them.” The only way to control her is to hem her in and thrust her aside through an “unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law” (*Powers of Horror* 15-16). Within the hard-boiled canon, the *femme fatale* highlights the instability of the prohibitions relating to religion, morality, and the law as well as the contradictions that exist within them. In Kristeva’s view,

[a]ny crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality [...].

Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady [...]. (*Powers of Horror* 4)

Within the genre the law, while being fragile, is also very elastic when gender is factored in. The detective may break the law supposedly for the greater good. The *femme fatale*, however, does it in pursuit of her own desires and is constructed as evil. Spade, for example, pushes the law to its limits: his concealing of evidence, his inciting of Gutman – the leader of a gang competing with O’Shaughnessy for the *Falcon* – to give up his henchman Wilmer, and the deaths that follow from that incitement are glamorised, and given a grandeur that is quite the opposite of the swift justice dealt to O’Shaughnessy for no worse crimes.

Kristeva explains, through the example of bodily wastes, that the abject must be expelled if the body is to survive. While blood, urine, and faeces are the most obvious signs of the “filth” that must be cast from the boundaries relating to the body, that which is expelled is not a quality in itself. “It applies only to what relates to a boundary [...]. It represents its other side, a margin” (*Powers of Horror* 69). Citing Mary Douglas, Kristeva comments, “The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins” (69). Even though the abject threatens life, it must also be recognised as a necessary support for subjectivity. The representative symbol of the abject, the *femme fatale*, must be expelled beyond the boundaries of the symbolic order if hegemonic masculinity, in the form of the detective, is to survive.

Within the text of the hard-boiled novels (if not their cinematic adaptations), the detective is a problematic figure who sits outside the margins of “official” hegemonic law and its role as protector of the vulnerable, i.e. women. He represents an “unofficial” and unspoken law that is there to keep women in their place of subordination<sup>2</sup>. Defined by his toughness, independence, dubious morality, assorted tics and warts, the detective protagonists of Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane are nevertheless mythic figures. The women, by contrast, even the good ones who feature in the narratives, are constructed within a framework of misogyny built upon historic masculine fears and anxieties. Ever-present feminine qualities of duplicity, selfishness, and manipulative sexuality compete against positive masculine traits such

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<sup>2</sup> This is an example of Žižek’s “inherent transgression” that is discussed at length in Chapter V

as loyalty, toughness, and independence. The negative qualities assigned to the *femme fatale* represent a threat to the very props that support the patriarchal structure. It is therefore not surprising that within the hard-boiled genre, the emphasis is on the defeat of the independent woman and the reassertion of male control. Until recently this was the norm of the film world, where a now redundant “Hays Code” demanded that evil never triumphs. By contrast *femmes fatales* of the literary world, especially in the tougher hard-boiled versions, frequently demonstrated their “evilness” by vanquishing some hapless male or occasionally even the smartest of detectives. In Paul Cain’s 1933, *One, Two Three*, the *femme fatale* successfully incites three detectives, who are tracking her down over an insurance fraud, into a pitched battle that leaves them variously bloodied, trussed up, or unconscious while she disappears with the loot.

### **Three Broads in *The Maltese Falcon***

Generally regarded as the prototype of the hard-boiled genre, Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* offers a cynical and callous male view of the world that places women at the centre of corruption. I first read the book many years ago, but my memory of it was corrupted by too many viewings of the 1941 film version starring Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade. In my re-reading, the darkness of Spade, with his satanic looks and dubious morality, and the steadfastness of Brigid O’Shaughnessy in adversity, swung the balance of my sympathy. So consuming, however, is the dominant masculine ideological acceptance of the independent woman as evil that we readily accept her as the *femme fatale* without critically examining the evidence of the text. Cast in her role as the *femme fatale*, what is overlooked is that she is a 22-year-old girl (well, that’s what she claims) dealing with two lecherous, almost middle-aged detectives and competing with a gang of three cutthroats for possession of the fabled Maltese Falcon. The effect of her poise and skilful self-fashioned masquerade leaves even Sam, who has wrung a confession of murder from her, wavering about letting her go.

Although there is much analysis of *The Maltese Falcon*, most of it relates to the 1941 film version where the rather matronly Mary Astor in the lead female role bears no resemblance to the sinuous O’Shaughnessy of the novel. Abramson claims that

Astor's selection was aided by her notorious off-screen reputation of having had an affair with John Barrymore when she was 17 and a subsequent steady stream of husbands and lovers (117-18). According to *Metress*, literary analysis of Hammett's output was limited because of his association with the Communist Party. By the eighties a diminished fear of "reds under the bed" saw considerably more comment, with most of it focused on the construction of Spade as the quintessential private eye, his final confrontation with Brigid, and the meaning of the Fitchcraft parable. In his study of 75 years of critical analysis of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Metress* makes no mention of any work that examines the construction of the coterie of women who represent the feminine in Spade's world (65-77). Michael Mills, preceding *Metress* has produced the same imbalance. His discussion of the cast of the film gives one sentence to Brigid and three to four paragraphs each to Spade, Cairo, and Gutman who are also after the treasure. Yet, Brigid, Effie Perrine, the dutiful secretary, and Iva Archer, his needy mistress, are equally important in the construction of Spade's subjectivity. They are women seen through a masculine discourse intent on maintaining the dichotomous nature of women as either good or evil. As Molly Haskell points out, the mutual exclusivity of good and evil in masculine portrayals of women is a "way of converting women from their ambiguous reality into metaphors" (199). The three women of the *Falcon* are such metaphors. The temptation is to go along with the clichéd masculine representations of the *femme fatale*, or the sainted woman, but a critical reading reveals slippages that suggest some of these women are more than just pretty faces, or singular representations of good or evil.

As anticipated, Brigid O'Shaughnessy is defined by her sexuality. Along with her pliant body, she has cobalt-blue eyes that are both shy and probing, long legs, narrow hands and feet, full red lips, glistening white teeth, and wears two shades of blue, selected because they show off her eyes (1-2). Her physical appearance is remarked on almost every time she appears on the scene. Her fashionable clothes, the blue satin gown, the matching shoes and stockings, the chalcedony shoulder-straps, the width of her belt, the side her hair is parted, are all mentioned and repeated. When Spade arrives unexpectedly early at her hotel, she is wearing a belted green crêpe dress, her face is flushed and her hair "somewhat tousled," suggesting she has not quite finished dressing. This air of dishabille is part of her construction as a sexual woman; *ipso facto* she must be dangerous. So beware.

Also defined by her sexuality is Iva Archer, Spade's mistress, and wife of his soon-to-be-dead business partner. She is blonde with a sturdy body that is finely modelled, and exquisite. She has soft damp red lips, and holds hope that Sam will one day marry her. That she half-believes he may have been involved in her husband's murder gives her room to fantasise that this hope may soon be realised. She may not be fatal, but she makes Spade's life very difficult.

Effie Perine is, at first reading, the model of what a good woman should be. She is a "lanky sunburned girl whose tan dress of thin woollen [clings] to her with an effect of dampness. Her eyes [are] brown and playful in a shiny boyish face" (1). Her "manliness" is reinforced as she opens the morning mail—"her boyish face pale under its sunburn" (22). She is loyal to Sam, but his treatment of Iva and Brigid stretches her patience. Notwithstanding her loyalty, Sam does not consider her as a potential sexual partner; this is confirmed when, complimenting her for a job well done, he rubs her cheek and says, "You're a damned good man, sister," and walks out of the door (156). Clearly, she is not happy with the role Sam has cast her in. When asked by Sam to inform Iva that her husband is dead, Effie objects. She reminds Sam that Iva had been his mistress, to which he mutters words to the effect that he wishes he had never met the woman. Effie flares up, calls him a liar, and then in a moment of frustration at her own lack of sexual appeal, goes on, "You know I think she's a louse, but I'd be a louse too if it would give me a body like hers" (25). Effie's admiration, and defence, of Iva and Brigid, even though, and probably because, they sit outside the margins of respectability, is an expression of her growing dissatisfaction with the expectations of loyal service and chastity placed upon her as a "good woman."

Just as these expectations overwhelm Effie, so do the masculine expectations surrounding the *femme fatale* prevent anything but the label "dangerous" being placed upon women who seek agency. The moment Brigid walks into Spade's office the male gaze condemns her. Her masquerade may be that of the demure and helpless woman, but Spade and his seedy partner intuit almost immediately that she might be sexually available. Their banter when she leaves, while ostensibly about the size of their fee, is heavy with sexual innuendo that would never surround a "good woman." Spade warns his partner not to dynamite her, then asks him what he thinks of her. He replies, "Sweet! And you telling me not to dynamite her. Maybe you saw her first

Sam, but I spoke first” (8). Effie doesn’t like their attitude, and even the next day when Sam tells her Brigid operates under several names, she remains protective: “I don’t care if she has got all the names in the phone-book. That girl’s all right, and you know it.” Sam’s boast that he has charged Brigid \$700 for two days’ work, gets an angry response, “If that girl’s in trouble and you let her down, or take advantage of it [...]. I’ll never forgive you; never have any respect for you, as long as I live” (40).

Effie’s threat, besides undermining the binaries controlling masculine positionality, serves as the only recognition of the gendered power imbalance permeating Brigid’s position. Against that position is the amoral Spade, a man who cuckolds his business partner and incites another man to murder. In addition to Spade, there is the brilliantined Miles Archer who has designs on “dynamiting” her, and there are the other three claimants to the falcon who intend to rob her of her share of the falcon’s treasure: the Gutman, Cairo, and Wilmer alliance of crime and homosexuality, a mode of abjection that is a feature of hard-boiled fiction. Yet among these crooks, killers, and ne’er-do-wells, it is only Brigid with a single murder to her credit who is cast in the role of evil.

Brigid’s marginalisation centres not on her desire to have a share of the fortune offered by ownership of the falcon, but in the danger represented by her sexuality. In the prelude to her seduction of Sam, or his of her, is a site of contestation where Brigid is portrayed as the prime mover. Provocatively dressed, and her room awash with flowers, she invites him to sit with her, an invitation he refuses. He tells her she is not as innocent as she makes out, and she concedes that this may be so, “But if it’s a pose it’s one I’ve grown into” (53). They haggle over the price of his further assistance to recover the falcon, and when he keeps raising the ante she cries angrily and demands, “Can I buy you with my body?” (55). His non-reply keeps him in control of both the sexual and financial aspects of their gendered power struggle. The negotiations continue in his apartment. Spade then falsely warns her that Cairo, a man she is afraid of, is down in the street and has a gun. This lie persuades her to stay, and over the course of the night they make love several times (79-86). While Brigid is portrayed as the sexy and dangerous *femme fatale*, it is Sam’s lie that ultimately precipitates the seduction. As much sinned against as a sinner, Brigid remains calm and resolute. Even when subjected to a strip search, she shows grace



under pressure, and stands there naked, proud, “without defiance or embarrassment” (192). When Sam exposes her as the murderer of Miles Archer, and threatens to turn her in, she maintains her act with considerable skill. She uses their “love” for each other as a bargaining tool:

“But—but, Sam, you can’t! Not after what we’ve been to each other.”

“The hell I can’t.”

She took a long trembling breath, “You’ve been playing with me? Only pretending you cared – to trap me like this. You didn’t—care at all.”

(207)

As she pleads her case, Sam responds with, “I won’t play the sap for you” (207). He claims that the law is above personal feelings, but the real reason he resists the desire to let her go is because to do so would require him to recognise his vulnerability to her sexual powers. After Brigid’s arrest, Sam returns to his office and mockingly says to Effie, “So much for your woman’s intuition.” Effie is distraught: “Her voice was as queer as the expression on her face:

‘You did that, Sam, to her?’ She hurries out of the office, but quickly returns to announce in a flat voice, ‘Iva is here.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, and shivered. ‘Well, send her in’” (212-13).

Emphasising the isolation of the male, the narrative closes with an ashen and alienated Spade contemplating an uncertain future. His easy dominance of Effie and Iva meets a resistance he struggles to handle. Between them, and Brigid, they have exposed the limits of the generic claim of the detective as the final authority, and his ability to impose his construction of “woman” upon all women. His reluctant handing over of Brigid to the police, even while acknowledged as right by Effie, “You’re right. But don’t touch me now – not now,” signals the presence of another ordering, one that stands apart from normative male dominance (212). It negates any easy reconciliation through a smile or a casual “good man,” and erodes Sam’s standing in Effie’s eyes. As for Iva, Sam raised her hopes of marriage and now she is calling in her due. Without Effie’s help, Sam cannot handle her.

Megan Abbott argues in *The Street Was Mine* that masculine identity in hard-boiled fiction is a tentative achievement and not merely because of the *femme fatale*’s

betrayals. Isolated loners, the hard-boiled detectives' independence from authority, workforce, wife, family, mortgage, the production of consumer goods, and their muddled morality make them no less ambiguous figures than the *femmes fatales* they confront. According to Abbott, the urban white male figures who dominate hard-boiled fiction,

pose a significant threat to the cultural hegemony not for his reactionary misogyny, homophobia or racism, nor even for his potential violence or class critiques, but instead for his refusal to take up his newly aligned position within a patriarchal heteronormative and industrialised capitalistic system. (19)

The relentless toughness, the desire to uphold the law at all cost, and the fierce maintenance of the masculine point of view that justifies their actions and shapes their identities, look to shift the responsibility and blame on to the *femme fatale*. Even so, the identity they create through the destruction of the *femme fatale* is a fragile and ambiguous thing. The *femme fatale* meets the patriarchy's need to reconstitute a particular representative of masculinity. Her abjection, the means by which she is contained, in turn becomes implicated in his identity. Her role of *alter ego* is consistent with Kristeva's notion of the abject, as a means to "stop the subject from foundering" (9). The abjection of the *femme fatale* is integral to the detective's identity, but paradoxically her expulsion both disturbs as well as confirms that identity. She may be expelled to the boundaries of society but she still remains within his imaginary. She's gone but she is still there, not as Brigid O'Shaughnessy or Charlotte Manning but as the always threatening "other." As Kristeva sees it,

[a]bjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. [...] Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as *alter ego*, points it out to me through loathing. (*Powers of Horror* 9-10)

Slavoj Žižek in *Enjoy Your Symptoms* specifically discusses both the ambiguity and fragility of the identity Sam Spade fashions through the abjection of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and her capitulation. He offers two interpretations of Lacan's position on "Woman as the symptom of man." In the first, woman is the embodiment

of man's fall; when he rejects her, "she disintegrates in precisely the same way a symptom dissolves" after successful treatment (155). On her disappearance, he regains his imaginary identity. There is a problem with this because it does not allow for the Kristevan interpretation that although the "other" is no longer physically part of the subject's life; it remains as his erstwhile *alter ego* through which his new subject position is constituted and demarcated. Žižek's second interpretation may be more applicable; she [the *femme fatale*] functions as the signifying formation that confers "ontological consistency" on the masculine subject. In this situation, when the symptom dissolves the subject "loses the ground under his feet" (155). This is the fate of a shaken Sam Spade when the good woman/bad woman dichotomy that holds his identity together withdraws its support (like Effie), or like Brigid, is forced from the scene through his determination to resist her sexual power by having her hauled off to jail (154-156). Though both Kristeva's and Žižek's arguments are about positionality, only Kristeva's allows for the on-going existence of the abject rather than its disintegration.

## **The Sternwood Sisters and Phillip Marlowe**

Raymond Chandler brings a different sensibility to his creation, Phillip Marlowe. Chandler, was born in Chicago in 1888, but after the break-up of his parents' marriage some eleven years later he was taken to England. He lived in middle-class Norwood in South London with his mother and her family, and attended Dulwich College, a school designed to prepare middle-class males for the professions or a civil-service life serving the Empire. He became a naturalised British citizen which allowed him to take the civil service Classics examinations (where he finished third overall) and joined the Admiralty. A classics scholar, an aspiring poet and satirist, "he learnt those late Victorian verities and inherited those late Victorian doubts that later emerged in his fiction." When he returned to America and began writing, it was this inheritance that returned, but in an American context (Bloom 48-49).

Many critics describe Marlowe as a romantic, an honourable man on a quest, a modern knight jousting against the forces of evil that are well represented by the women who populate his texts. Marlowe's client in *The Big Sleep* engages him to

warn off a blackmailer. What follows is a complex tale of murder, double-crossing, and corruption. The client's younger daughter, Carmen Sternwood, is a drug-taking nymphomaniac who models for pornographic photographs. Nymphomania links Carmen to one of the central myths of Victorian morality that believed any display of female sexual desire was the sign of a pernicious disease. This "illness" manifested itself as a devouring and depraved aggressive sexual attitude. Carol Groneman claims that "even minor transgressions of the social strictures that defined 'feminine' modesty could be classified as diseased." Among the many symptoms were flirting, being divorced, or of feeling more passionate than one's husband (341). It titillated, yet terrified, men. Unlike O'Shaughnessy, Chandler's *femmes fatales* use sex not sexuality to lure their victims. It is a lure that barely raises Marlowe's eyebrow, let alone his libido. In *The Big Sleep* the crude and blatant seduction techniques of Carmen and her sister Vivian leave him cold. So much so that Carmen's advance almost makes him ill:

Her eyes were slate-grey, and had almost no expression when they looked at me. She came over near me and smiled with her mouth and she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pit and shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin too taut lips. Her face lacked colour and she didn't look too healthy. (5)

When he finds her in his bed he turns away, and returns to a chess problem he is trying to solve. Her small sharp teeth glint as she tells him she is "all undressed" under the blankets. To prove it, she flings them off and reveals herself naked and "glistening as a pearl". He tells her to get dressed and get out. "Her teeth parted and a faint hissing noise came out of her mouth." She calls him a foul name, and he becomes angry:

I don't mind what she called me [...]. But this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. It was everything that was mine that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of the family. Not much: a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that [...]. Such as they were they had all my memories. (158)

He throws her out, and after slowly drinking a glass of whisky, he tears "the bed to pieces savagely." Afterwards he says, "You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. Women make me sick." (159).

In this vignette, myth and modern psychoanalysis come together. Carmen's hissing links her to the serpent of the fall, and her small sharp predatory teeth connect her directly to the succubae of the Middle Ages, who by day were ugly witches, and at night transformed into beautiful nubile young women, who, identified by their small sharp teeth, seduced men while they slept and rendered them powerless. Marlowe's forcible expulsion of Carmen's advances has its psychoanalytical underpinnings in Kristeva's theory of abjection, not only as a necessity of survival, but of identity and self. At the simplest level, according to Kristeva's abjection, Marlowe's rejection of Carmen corresponds in psychic terms to the material rejection of waste.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva uses the example of her response to the skin on milk, to show how abjection disturbs her sense of identity:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of the milk [...]. I experience a gagging sensation and still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly [...]. Along with the sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream [...]. 'I' want none of that element. 'I' expel it. But since food is not an 'other' for 'me' [...] I expel myself, I spit myself out. I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*. (2-3)

Marlowe casts Carmen out, not just for her historic association with evil, but primarily because her unwanted approach offends his sense of being. In Kristeva's milk example, at one level her body rejects it because it may cause her harm, but this is not necessarily so, plenty of people consider the skinned milk that sits atop of many a winter's pudding as the best part of it. As she explains, the food is not "other" for her; it is her involuntary reaction to the skinned milk that serves to establish the limits of her subject self. For Marlowe, who considers himself a man of honour, to sleep with a nymphomaniac would be a betrayal of his own identity. On the other hand, Spillane's Mike Hammer, even though engaged to another woman, has no such qualms. Marlowe, however, must expel Carmen to establish the boundaries of his identity, which is constituted by its exclusions. Even though she is not materially part of his subject self, she represents a part of his psyche that needs to be abjected if he is to re-establish the boundaries of that self.

For similar, if not quite the same reasons, Marlowe rejects Carmen's sister Vivian. Initially it appears that she offers the promise of uncomplicated sensuality, but, as it turns out, she is not much different from the psychotic Carmen. Already married three times, the subtext is Vivian must also be addicted to sex. She asks Marlowe to drive her to the Del Rey beach club so she can look at the water. Once there she tries to seduce him and lead him away from the truth of her and Carmen's involvement with murder. He meantime, while appearing to react to her caresses, has a different agenda:

“What has Eddie Mars got on you?”

“So that's the way it is,” she said in a dull flat voice.

“That's the way it is. Kissing is nice, but your father didn't hire me to sleep with you.”

“I have warm blood like the next guy [but] you're easy to take—too damned easy.” (151)

As does Carmen, Vivian offends his sense of honour, and thus threatens his identity. In a strange way, the only sexual and romantic attraction Marlowe has is towards the icy Mona Mars, aka Silver-Wig, the wife of gangster Eddie Mars. He only meets this woman of mystery once, when she chooses to free him from his imprisonment by Mars and his henchmen. Her reserve and loyalty to her husband, captivate Marlowe even though that loyalty doesn't prevent her from releasing Marlowe at some considerable risk to herself. As he leaves, he asks her for a kiss: “She put her hands up and took hold of my head and kissed me hard on the lips. Her lips were like ice [...]” (198). This cool and unpromising response has the allure of unattainable, and thus nonthreatening, desire that stays with Marlowe long after it becomes clear that Mona's act of kindness had cost her life.

## **Reconstructing Charlotte Manning**

In the figure of Charlotte Manning, the *femme fatale* of Mickey Spillane's *I the Jury*, almost all the masculine anxieties and fears expressed by the unknown *Seattle Times* author, who feared the destruction of the “family circle” by brazen harlots are realised. She is sexy, well-educated, and independent. Well-paid, she runs her own psychiatric clinic, moves among the upper echelons of society, deals drugs, and

murders Mike Hammer's best friend, yet blinded by love, an unusual situation for a hard-boiled detective, especially one as brutal and misogynistic as Hammer, he refuses to see the signs. All the contradictions inherent in the masculine construction of women are present in the figure of Manning. In the Victorian manner Hammer constructs her as the ideal woman, without any understanding that she is a figment of his imagination upon which he has projected "essential" womanly qualities of purity and dependence. When Manning does not live up to his ideal, she is swiftly made abject and destroyed without compunction.

No matter how seductive she is, Hammer won't sleep with Manning, because he wants it to be special on their wedding night. In the meantime, his misogynistic attitudes and rabid homophobia are constantly on display as he sleeps with a couple of rich "nymphomaniacs," beats up two "faggots," and assaults several "chinks". In the classic manner, Hammer is able to shift the responsibility for his encounter to the nymphomaniac Mary Bellamy:

When she crossed her legs I couldn't think of anything more to ask her. Why don't women learn to keep their skirts low enough to keep men from thinking the wrong thing? Guess that's why they wear them short. (87)

With Manning he struggles to match representation with reality. As presented by the misogynistic narrative, Charlotte's independence and sexuality should make her a threat. She represents an ambiguously gendered, independent "mannish" woman: long solid legs, muscles clearly defined on her stomach, and "incredibly wide shoulders for a woman" (13). Despite this description, she is not mannish in the 'butch' sense, but is so on account of possessing the attributes normally conferred through education, independence and wealth upon the male. Her independence is particularly dangerous, since unambiguous dependence on a man constitutes part of the "social instinct" that makes up the idealised woman of the male imaginary. Even before he knows Manning is the killer, he distrusts female independence: "No wife of mine is going to work. I want her at home where I know where she is" (119). As the realisation dawns on him that she had murdered his friend, he recalls his promise that he would shoot the killer in the stomach and inflict maximum pain, a promise he hopes Charlotte remembers. What really appears to be worrying him, however, is the whole distasteful business of

female independence. He tells her that all the crime and evil surrounding her actions flow from the facts of her education and her high-paying profession: a profession that allows her to see “into the frailty of men and [see] their weakness [...]. You are a woman who wanted wealth and power [...]. You no longer had the social instinct of a woman — that of being dependent on a man.” (143). His cruel shooting of her in the stomach and his callous response of “It was easy” to her agonised question, “How could you?” reflects the arbitrary nature of the projection of femininity he imposed upon her (147). That she is a cold-eyed killer is one thing, but that she refuses her male designated role of dependency threatens one of the key props of male identity.

### **There’s a Change Coming**

The *femme fatale* comes out of a need to reconstitute a particular representative of masculinity that can demonstrate its control over women. Whatever his style, whatever his methods, the detective’s aim is to enclose women within predictable gender boundaries. He corrals them behind the clichés and stereotypes of the male imagination that his bullying, boneheaded self-absorption cannot see past. He demonstrates his superiority with constant put-downs, unwanted groping, and deliberate humiliation. Hammer’s said-in-jest, but knowing it would be half-believed, promise to Velda, his secretary-cum-part-time investigative assistant, that he would marry her if there wasn’t a “flatfoot downstairs covering every exit” is a controlling device that exploits what he believes is her desire for him. That she checks that he is serious, and that he says “yes,” only magnifies her disappointment when the said flatfoot is duly discovered patrolling the downstairs lobby (16). In a similar vein, Spade’s frequent admonishment to Effie whenever she expresses her disappointment with him, “That’s the way it is sister, get over it,” amounts to a put-down suggesting female weakness. When he wants to praise her, he calls her a man.

Good women may be easy to control, but it is not so with “bad” women. Blinded by ideology, the detective understands that the containment of the *femme fatale* occurs through his determination to resist her sexual power. Hammer demonstrates his control over his own body’s weakness by not giving in to the temptation posed by Charlotte Manning. Spade sleeps with Brigid, but shows his control by turning her in,



and Marlowe's harsh rejection of both Sternwood sisters is a desperate defence of his own identity. The subject "I" of the detective gets in the way of everything. He understands women only in terms of their threatening or non-threatening sexuality. The only way they can work with their secretaries is to turn them into men, but such is the commitment of the non-compliant woman to the fulfilment of her own desires, the only way to stop her is with the help of the law or a 45.

The hard-boiled detective is a patriarchal construct constituted to meet the threat arising from the suffragettes' battle for the vote and better access to employment and education. The *femme fatale* is likewise a patriarchal construct. She represents the threat of female independence. As Toril Moi sees it, she comes out of a system that defines women as marginal to the symbolic order, and "construes them to be at the *limit*, or borderline, of that order" (166). She represents the necessary frontier between man and chaos. Locatable neither inside or outside, or even straddling the border, her position is fluid, and changes to meet the needs of the society. The hard-boiled genre positions women within traditional patriarchal gender boundaries. It wants woman as essence, and yet periodically it also needs them to disturb the boundaries by some deed or word that disrupts notions of purity or evil in order to define and control masculine anxieties and identity. Examples that disturb the natural order could be a "bad mother" or a sexual woman. By placing women on the borderline of the symbolic order it allows the patriarchy to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, or if the occasion demands venerate them as Virgins or domestic goddesses. Neither position reflects any "essential" truth about women; rather, they represent a masculine construction that suits the needs of the patriarchy. In the hard-boiled genre the essentialisation of women is relative to, and a product of, the construction of masculine identity. "Woman" may be "essentialised" by the detective's construction of her but this "essence" is notional, and dependent on the position she occupies within the masculine imaginary at any particular time (Moi 165-66). Manning, despite Hammer's essentialised construction of her, is an example of this fluctuating positionality, one moment an admired perfect woman, the next a drug-dealing, financially independent murderer who is swiftly disposed of as "filth." When she is revealed as the killer, Hammer is oddly pleased that what she has confirmed is his misogynist view that all women are the incarnate representatives of Satan; locked into

an essentialist masculinity that limits his point of view, Hammer's hold on gender reality is at the best tenuous.

Though unremarked by commentators, the texts examined in this chapter demonstrate the influence of social change on the position of the *femme fatale*. When O'Shaughnessy flutters her way into Spade's office round about 1930, she may have just been old enough to vote for Herbert Hoover in the 1929 presidential election. By then women had been allowed to vote for ten years, but Brigid remains an old-style temptress dependent on a heady mixture of sex, charm, and deceit to satisfy her desire for the riches that come with possession of the falcon. The apparent ease with which he sees through her masquerade is because *femmes fatales* of her era are a known quantity. Similarly, the "madness" attached to Carmen's sexuality makes it easily understood, and just as easily remedied by "abjecting" her to a long spell in a sanatorium. In contrast Charlotte Manning brings almost thirty years of feminist gains in education and job opportunities to the role of *femme fatale*. Her position as owner of her own company, possessor of a university degree, and a good income suggests she would not be voting for Harry Truman in 1948. She is way out of Hammer's blue-collar league, and he knows it. The only way he can control her is through over-the-top violence.

As the fifties came to a close, the tough guy detective, and his adversarial relationship with the *femme fatale* began to lose favour with readers. Edward Margolies claims the slide began towards the end of the 1940s, suggesting that the energy required to survive the Depression and fight World War II induced feelings of fatigue towards the detectives' smash-and-bash bravado; he further remarks that "possibly too, the growing independence of women as both breadwinners and war workers dampened readers' ardour for machismo" (13). Margolies' claim that the decline of the tough guy detective was in part due to the audience turning away from violence is possibly true, but he understates the influence on the genre of the growing independence of women. By 1960, women were better educated, and, according to the US Bureau of the Census, made up 33% of the work force. This compares to 1920 when women made up only 20% of the labour market and were predominantly engaged in domestic service (Filene 185). O'Shaughnessy had to "perform" the role of *femme fatale*, because the only asset she had was her charm. The educated and wealthy Manning did

not “need” seduction in her repertoire, only falling back on it as a last resort. She rightly assumed that she could not reason with Hammer. O’Shaughnessy, by contrast, always felt she had a chance of snuggling her way out of trouble. Hammer was never going to be moved as he had too much invested in the conventions, ideologies and taboos surrounding the good girl/bad girl dichotomy for there to be anything but that final bullet.

## Chapter II

### Undermining the Construct of the *Femme Fatale*

“You’re no more a detective than I am a ballet dancer”

Paretsky

The creation of the hard-boiled detective was one response to the view that giving women the vote would destroy the prevailing social order. It is difficult at this distance to understand the depth of emotion the issue created. The representative figure of this coming “catastrophe” was the *femme fatale* and her sexuality. Destroying her could always be justified on the basis that she needed to be stopped, if only to prevent her corrupting the “wholesome” families who are at the core of a nation’s strength. But, by the 1960s, a second wave of feminism arrived to test the structures, customs, and prohibitions that subordinated female sexuality. The hard-boiled female detective is a creation of that age. She moves away from the classic hard-boiled formula. Placing her in the subject position brings a different perspective to the genre. Most of the critics acknowledge that family, personal relationships, domestic concerns, and some form of feminist critique often drive the plot of female-authored crime, and it is to these things that much academic comment is directed. They, however, give little attention to the disruption of genre and gender conventions that privilege male sexual desire over that of women’s. When Sara Paretsky’s private investigator V.I. Warshawski, and Katherine Forrest’s Detective Kate Delafield take the subject position they not only claim specific subjective spaces for themselves in areas of social concern or lesbian desires, they directly contest and disrupt the balance in the bedroom, and in doing so lay claim to a once exclusive masculine role of potency and power. Educated, sexy, and strong, they, along with their fellow female detectives, pushed, pulled, and stretched gender-imposed boundaries so that they lost much of their definition, and consequently made the notion of female sexuality as dangerous, less tenable.

Masculine fears attached to women winning the vote were never fully realised. As Peter Filene notes, women, while becoming better educated and a larger part of the work force, remained in the subordinate position with regards to pay and promotion. Having the vote altered very little, and the double standards surrounding female sexuality continued unchanged. For a brief three or four years, World War II, with its need for increased industrial output, gave women the chance to work in occupations previously dominated by men at a pay rate well above anything they were able to earn in so-called women's work. At war's end, the bonanza came to an abrupt halt. Displaced by soldiers returning from the battlefields, women quickly found themselves back in the traditional role of wife, mother, and homemaker. For some this was a welcome relief from considerable hardship and worry. For those, however, who kept their jobs the near pay parity they had enjoyed during the war years disappeared with unseemly haste. Women, newly accustomed to a wide range of job opportunities and comparable pay were recorseted into a 1950s version of the Victorian domestic goddess (Filene, 174-79). Better educated than their Victorian grandmothers, and having proved capable of handling many of the jobs reserved for males, these women were ready to break out.

Second-wave feminism erupted in the 1960s. Within broad parameters its demands were simple, but if met would be calamitous for the masculine hegemony. It wanted an end to sexism in labour, legislation, and language, along with the patriarchal prejudices and institutional practices that kept them in place. This meant equal pay, equal opportunity, and equal legal status. It meant legislating against inequality within marriage, and making sexual harassment a criminal offence. It meant mothers in the work place having flexible hours to enable them to look after their young children. The aim was to release women from the ideological straightjacket that saw them only as daughters, wives, and mothers, and let them become subjects in their own right.

The fight for equality took place in protest marches, political process, and personal action. Bra burning captured the imagination of men and women alike, but alas appears to be more urban myth than historic fact. Filene reports that at the 1968 Miss America Pageant a group of feminists, who objected to women being reduced to breasts, hips and smiles, filled a rubbish can with old underwear and burnt it as a symbolic protest. The media reported this single event as a bra-burning pandemic

(219). More factual was the hijacking of the hard-boiled genre of tough-talking, hard-living detectives, gun molls, and slinky *femmes fatales* by the arrival of equally tough-talking, hard-living female detectives who strode into the subject position bringing with them a dangerous mix of avenging social conscience and self-legitimated sexual desire. This brand of female detective is framed by a feminist ideology that subverts the hard-boiled genre, turning it from a champion of masculine values into a critique of Western gender ideology that tests the structures, customs, and prohibitions that subordinate female sexuality. Female detectives were not new when the tough girls arrived on the scene, but the Nancy Drews, Cordelia Greys, and Miss Marples did not sleep around, have affairs with other women, cheerfully break a man's nose or throw up over his suit. The combination of social change that second-wave feminism brought and the buying public's acceptance of the new tough girls, saw the classic *femme fatale* slip from the headlines. However, she did not disappear completely. The likes of James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential* and a stream of bestsellers from Elmore Leonard kept her alive, while a handful of films such as *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* let her continue to lead poor saps astray. The rise of the hard-boiled female detective, prompted a whole host of female forensic scientists, detective inspectors, and prosecutors, and forced the *femme fatale* into the background. These "new women" directly contested the male detective by moving the centre of moral authority away from phobic masculine subjectivity towards the social other. Their presence, whether in the squad car, the judge's chambers, or the D.A.'s office, alters the gender dynamic. They may be different from men, but that difference cannot translate easily into "otherness" when the female cop or P.I. is just as strong, just as knowledgeable, and at times just as amoral as any of her male colleagues. Her specialised knowledge, authority, and, at times, seniority blur the focus of the masculine gaze. The threat emanating from the female detective compromises the entire masculine subjective orientation responsible for the construction of the *femme fatale* as "other". She, the female detective, contests the place of the male detective and a particular ideal of masculinity that is dependent on the *femme fatale* as a representative of the symbolic confinement of the place of women. If he goes, the construction of *femme fatale* has no point and risks redundancy.

## Academic Response

Although public reaction to the female detectives was positive, academic response was wary and often a pulpit for airing a range of competing feminisms. The liberal leaning group wanted change through individual rights and gender equality enshrined in the law. The more radical groupings wanted to establish a place for women in discourse that would disrupt male hegemonic power and alter the whole basis of gender inequality, and there were others yet who wanted a mix of both. Whatever their “political” differences, many feminists considered the move into the hard-boiled genre to be ill-considered. They questioned the viability of stretching the generic formula through the infiltration of the “other” into the law. The general opinion was that the integrity of the detective and the genre’s traditional narrative closure, together, negate the attempt at destabilisation through the insertion of the female detectives into a predominantly masculine form. Sally Munt claims that the hard-boiled tough girls are liberal feminist fantasies who change nothing. She reluctantly concedes that the new detectives’ positive images of women “accrued readerly acclaim,” but too often they create a macho feminism that takes on the aggressive qualities of the male. Overlaying this with a sprinkling of feminist concerns, she says, does not disguise the fact that female detectives implicitly work to support the prevailing hegemony. Furthermore, there is no attempt by their authors to analyse, understand or subvert the myth-making processes that collude to privilege the masculine (58).

Along with Munt, Plain and Klein, describe the female detectives as feminist fantasies, fairy tales or utopian experiments that underscore what they see as the inherent contradiction in the notion of the female detective as a crusader for feminist rights. Maggie Humm, while acknowledging the contradictions, claims they, the contradictions, force a reconsideration of the boundaries that define the genre, and that the writers of feminist crime fiction, by choosing to work in with “material that is indifferent to, and often, actively hostile to women,” have crossed a border (189). Stephen Knight in his *Crime Fiction* is slightly sceptical, and wonders if the feminist adoption of the “hyper-masculine sub-genre of the private eye” was a strategic mistake. He thinks the police procedural by nature of its more cooperative approach may have been a better bet than a genre deeply implicated with masculine norms. The

violence of the action, and the male chauvinist attitude and behaviour, along with the acceptance of the patriarchal social order, are at odds with twentieth-century feminism (163). Written in 2004, this comment seems strangely out of touch and assumes some sort of overarching and cohesive feminist goal to which all could aspire.

Kristeva, even though she has written three crime novels, does not appear to have entered the debate surrounding the relative effectiveness of the female detective either as signifier of heroic feminist resistance or fifth columnist seeking to support patriarchal rule. I suggest, however, that her pragmatic approach to feminism may lead to an assessment of the female detective that provides a positive reading of her role as an agent of change. Kristeva's position, as expressed in "About Chinese Women," is hard-headed, and for many feminists upsetting. In effect, what she said was, we already have a functioning symbolic economy based on the paternal word that provides a degree of social harmony sufficient for society to develop and reproduce itself. Without this, society is endangered. She goes on to say that it is naïve to consider modern societies as simply patriarchal, class structured, capitalist, or whatever mixture of "isms," if in doing so one forgets that the monotheism that governs the whole is "sustained by a fight to the death" between men and women who are separated by a fundamental incompatibility, which can only be resolved by recognising the depth of sexual difference and by keeping fighting until some other economy of the sexes installs itself (144-45). She further claims that as women can only gain access to the "important" affairs of our society through identifying with the masculine they are left with little choice: they can become politically aggressive in the way of the suffragettes or sullenly retreat to a corner. She offers in place of these extremes a position that recognises the "unspoken in all discourse" and the recognition and expression of all that "remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric or incomprehensible" in a manner that "disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers" (156). Five years later in "Women's Time," in a section headed "Another generation is another space," she modifies her stance. She claims that there is a new generation of women who understand the opposition between men and women has its base in metaphysics. This, perhaps, allows for a softening of the "fight to the death" rhetoric in order to shift the struggle to the area of most resistance that of personal and sexual identity, so that it "disintegrate[s] in its very nucleus" through a "community of language" that acts to equalise and unify (209-10). A Kristevan



reading of the female detectives, using her formula to disrupt gender norms while simultaneously seeking to redress the power balance in language, would take a different path to most academic critiques of the female detective.

### **Warshawski: A Feminist Fantasy?**

Sara Paretsky's creation, Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski, is one of the early hard-boiled female detectives; she upsets the old maid and mothballs stereotype of Miss Marple, and gives new meaning to the concept of the female private investigator. She holds a law degree from the University of Chicago, did a short spell as a public defender, and then turned to private detection with a special interest in white-collar crime. She is strong and fit and can hold her own in a fight. Though a semi-loner, she nevertheless works at her friendships, forms strong emotional bonds, has a social conscience, worries about people even if she has no professional obligation, and although her choice of lovers can be dubious, she moves on easily with little harm done to her self-esteem. Though her friends call her Vic, she prefers her clients to use her initials V.I. because of its gender neutrality. Her villains are the institutions and their minions who control the discourse that shapes our lives. Banks, insurance companies, fundamentalist churches, and the legal profession provide a steady flow of pinstriped crooks who, while seeking to protect their ill-gotten gains, manage to block, exploit or destroy the livelihoods and ambitions of the working poor, especially women struggling to bring up children on their own.

Munt's response to Warshawski was typical. She bemoans that in the standard structure of the Warshawski's novels the "threat to the family is always removed, the enigma resolved and order restored [to] perpetuate a mildly revisionist status quo [that is] complicit with its continuing hegemony" (45). Plain objects, saying that "neither the concept nor the signifier of the female private investigator can be assimilated by a patriarchy rooted in binary gender stereotypes" (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 145). She goes on to say that "though Warshawski has a powerful investment in traditional liberal values of justice and the concept of human rights, these attitudes tend in the end to prevent [her] from offering any radical revision of the structures of otherness that shape North American society" (147). Klein concurs, adding that the

“private motivations of the investigator do not lessen the impact of her bolstering a system which exists, at least in part, to uphold male privilege” (202).

Munt and Plain further object to Warshawski’s obsession with clothes and shoes. Munt calls her “a fantasy of femininity” (48) and speculates that the “fetishization” of clothes may also be a fantasy of empowerment that reassures the female reader that “dressing up” helps one do the job or it signals the artifice required of femininity (47). Warshawski’s constant change of clothes could also be as prosaic as the fact that the rough and tumble of her trade is hard on them. Having the clothes cut from her back by the hospital emergency ward after she has been caught in a factory fire is all part of her day’s work (*Fire Sale* 5).

In *Indemnity Only*, (1982) Warshawski sorts out insurance fraud, union malfeasance, and a vaguely unsatisfying romance; she suffers some serious beatings, but in the final showdown smashes the three villains, breaking one’s arm, shooting another in the knee, and leaves the last of the trio cowering with a gun held to his head. The plot of *Bitter Medicine* revolves around hospital mistreatment of a pregnant woman, her death, and that of her unborn child. The resulting cover-up reveals how the profit motive outweighs any thought of medical ethics or patient care. *Fire Sale* has big business in its sights, especially hugely wealthy companies, along with fundamentalist religions who preach a message of love but operate through intolerance and the repression of women; the police are party to and complicit in that repression. Rose Dorrado, a worn down south-side slum dweller, sees the police as indifferent observers of her travails: “The police she spat. Even if they answer my call, you think they would care?” (269). Her angry response serves as a reminder of how little women’s issues, especially among the poor and dispossessed, are deemed worthy of attention. Warshawski, by contrast, cares, and, in doing so, crosses a boundary that brings compassion for the underclass within the compass of hard-boiled detection, and provides a class/gender-based critique that is not within the tradition of the genre.

That she meets resistance in her job is a reflection of an on-going gender power struggle. When Warshawski announces to Ralph Devereux, who later becomes her lover, “I’m a private detective and I’m looking into Peter Thayer’s death,” his response is one of dismissal, “You? You’re no more a detective than I am a ballet

dancer” (31). Twenty-four years later attitudes have changed. In *Fire Sale*, published in 2006, Warshawski has two prospective clients — Frank Zamar, a small-time manufacturer, and Mr Bysen, owner of By-Smart the world’s second largest retailer. Zamar initially doesn’t think he needs her, and Bysen wants to chisel her out of her standard fee, but from the very beginning neither of them has even the slightest quibble, qualification, or surprise about her gender. This goes some way to refuting Plain’s earlier contention that Warshawski would remain a feminist fantasy because the patriarchy could never distance itself from binary stereotypes. The tacit acceptance of Warshawski as a detective shows that somewhere between 1982 and 2006 the meaning attached to the notion of detective expanded to include tough, intelligent, and sexually-active women.

While Warshawski can be accused of fantasising, and despite clunky language in *Indemnity Only*, where she bests three villains intent on rape, with a few diversionary insults about “a big old penis” and flashy bit of gun play that puts two of them down and leaves the other in tears, she also offers a more subtle challenge to phallic power through her choice of lovers (306). Though there is a lot of academic discussion about the “feminine subjective space” she creates through her supportive “family” of female friends and male father figures, it is her rarely analysed relationship with her various male lovers that offers the most resistance to gender stereotypes.

Generally, Warshawski’s men are not quite up to it, they are competent, but the earth never moves. Ralph Devereux, her good-looking lover in *Indemnity Only*, is ultimately revealed as lacking the street smarts — “so goddamn naïve it’s unbelievable” — to survive in Warshawski’s world. Frustrated with his refusal to take her advice, she threatens to shoot him if he continues to ignore her. The villains get to him first. Later she visits him in hospital where he apologises for not listening to her, and attempts to make a proclamation of love, only to falter as it dawns on him that perhaps their relationship was initiated by her to help to expose his boss as a murderer. Warshawski’s limp response, “I wasn’t just using you to get Masters. I liked you Ralph,” says it all (312).

In *Bitter Medicine* (1987), she teams up with another weak man. Her brief relationship with Peter Burgoyne, a doctor at the hospital she is investigating, is never

fully explicable. She is too strong, and he is too insipid. For his part, his motives are clear. He is trying to cover up malpractice within the hospital by keeping tabs on her investigation. The cover-up gets out of hand and murder is committed. Throughout, Warshawski sees Burgoyne as a lightweight. One witness describes him as “that pansy doctor” (180). Even he sees himself as a loser. He regales Warshawski with tales of his ancestor General Burgoyne, a British general defeated during the American War of Independence. After telling her this, he then refers to her as “my General George Washington”. The sex between them is not passionate, “more a demonstration of his ‘good knowledge of anatomy’ than any expression of emotional connection (91). Her taking the dominant role in their relationship and sexual exchange becomes a symptom of the shift in power between the genders. Racked with guilt, he shoots himself in the head, eliciting from Warshawski the passing comment, “I hadn’t known Peter long enough to be eating my heart out for him. His bones and brains on the desktop flashed into my mind. Horrifying, yes. But not my personal burden” (337).

In *Fire Sale* her nominal lover is Morrell, a writer shot to pieces covering the Afghanistan war. There is no sex. He is convalescing in Warshawski’s apartment. When they finally do get to bed after she has been wounded, and he not yet fully recovered, it is two sore and fragile bodies huddled together “bringing each other such comfort as this mortal life affords” (526). What goes unsaid is that he and his predecessors cannot fully take up the masculine role society bequeaths them.

I find the argument that the female detective is a reluctant and inadvertent champion of the male hegemony a bit of a stretch. As is the male detective, she is a fantasy figure. The difference is the fantasy that envelopes the female detectives comes wrapped in issues of equality, rights, and sexual autonomy, while he resides in the male imagination as an independent loner who can restore the “natural order” and has a constant choice of sexually available, but ultimately dispensable, or dispensed with, compliant women. The real nightmare for Sam Spade is not blood, guts, and pistol shots, but that Iva Archer, his onetime lover, refuses to go quietly. In comparison, the Warshawski character, who is derided by many as a liberal feminist fantasy, for the most part seems to be less a full blown fantasy than an achievable, if still distant, goal. Contrary to Munt’s complaint that this is a fantasy that changes nothing, I believe

Warshawski's less than radical brand of feminism offers an effective challenge to the existing distinctions, boundaries or margins that exist between men and women. In Kristeva's words, she "disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers" at almost every level ("About Chinese Women" 156).

## **Renegotiating the Boundaries of the Law**

Kate Delafield is a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department. She is a lesbian who hides her sexual preference from her male colleagues lest it damage her career prospects: she is, however, a fierce defender of gay rights and wages battle against any form of sexual discrimination. Closer to the original male private eye than Warshawski, she is a hatchet-faced, physically strong Vietnam veteran, whose lack of womanliness contributes to her authority. She is not above tampering with evidence or seducing attractive female witnesses. While Paretsky's targets are the multinationals and major institutions, Kate Delafield takes on homophobia, sexual harassment, child molestation, and prostitution. Like Paretsky, who attracted critical attention for being one of the early female PIs, Delafield attracted similar, if somewhat less, attention for being an early instance of the lesbian detective operating within a masculine police force. I will argue that her author Katherine V Forrest, with her mix of hard-boiled, police procedural, and lesbian romance, disrupts and confounds masculine notions of homosexual desire, the law, and the tradition of the all-seeing detective.

Generally, the critics were kinder to Delafield than they were to Warshawski, perhaps best summed up in Plain's respective chapter headings – "Sara Paretsky's Feminist Fairy Tales" and "Paradoxical Possibilities of Detective Delafield." Plain sees the Delafield novels as "'radical thrillers' that represent a constant renegotiation of the boundaries of law and disorder," which paradoxically assert that the "restoration of order can simultaneously represent a challenge to that order" (189). Munt also sees radical possibilities in Delafield. She sees Forrest's detective as a subcultural stereotype who promises a "romantic forbidden fantasy" that conflates agency, empowerment, and alienation in order to destabilise generic conventions through the contradictory sign of "butch" within the dominant masculine culture and feminism

itself (132). She claims, however, the process is undermined by the demonisation of the criminal so as to create an abject “other” who occupies the space formerly inhabited by sexual deviants (homosexuals) so “that the organising structure is not significantly changed, merely the criteria of membership” (136).

For all Plain’s qualified endorsement of Delafield, she also fears that as Western societies become uncertain about the new moral standards, the old prohibitions have lost their power. She writes that in the original paradigm of detection the monstrous was woman, or, more particularly, the feminine. The lesbian, the gay, the racial other, and the criminal were in some sense feminised and defined as deviant in opposition to patriarchal authority. As laws and mores changed, the pollution that the feminised deviants represented began to dissipate, and so did the associated danger. This accords with Kristeva’s thoughts in *Powers of Horror* where she notes:

The potency of pollution is [not] an inherent one, it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it. “It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social are clearly defined. (69)

Over time, the trend of the crime novel has moved from Hercule Poirot to Hannibal Lecter and changed the paradigm. Crime fiction can no longer contain or restrain the abject. Within the genre, Plain cites the rise of violence and the lesbian detective as examples of this shift. She claims that Kate Delafield and her lesbian sisters have pushed the genre to its limits, and destabilised the formula. Drawing on Kristeva, Plain claims the transformation of twentieth-century crime fiction stems ultimately from the “woman” whose “refusal of monstrosity has left the genre without its fundamental sacrifice or its constitutive outside.” The problem is to find a new monster to replace the bogeywoman upon which the genre has relied. She fears that the life of the detective and the order he represents ultimately depends on the genre’s capacity to reinvent and reposition the essential body of the other (245-4). In saying this, Plain seems to overlook the various categories of otherness that Warshawski and Delafield are able to create. While agreeing with much of what Plain says in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, I believe she overstates her case and at times contradicts her own argument. Though notionally conservative, the crime genre has

always been able to reinvent its “other” to suit the mood of the day. Slavoj Žižek’s alternative “others” are not feminised and will feature in the examination of Ian Rankin’s work in Chapter VII.

### **Homosexual Desire, Homophobia, and Hierarchy**

Whether described as hard-boiled or police procedural, the central theme of the Delafield series is lesbian desire and homophobic resistance. In each of the narratives examined, Delafield disrupts formulaic conventions with same-sex encounters that are graphic displays of eroticism and sexuality. These contrast dramatically with the homophobic resistance and rage she encounters both in the L.A.P.D. and the criminal fraternity she deals with every day. This creates some contradiction within the texts where homosexuality is “normalised” through romantic attachment at the same time as feminising the suspected killer, the homophobic Kyle Jensen, as part of a process of demonisation.

In her erotic trysts with her lover Aimee, in *Murder by Tradition* (1991), the fingers “moving strongly in the creamy wet, greedy for more of the ecstatic gasps” are at odds with the “and so to bed” sex of Warshawski and the hard-boiled tradition (96). In *Amateur City* (1984), she disrupts formulaic expectations by deliberately seducing Ellen, the key witness. It is a move she puts down to loneliness during her temporary estrangement from Aimee, but the intensity of the sex, more “fingertips enveloped in warm wetness,” and her full knowledge that Ellen is already in a committed relationship, leaves the reader unsure of her motives (129). Is Delafield trying to corrupt a witness? Is she merely looking for a one-night stand or perhaps a permanent replacement for Aimee? Either way, she raises question about her professional and personal ethics. The graphic sexual imagery moves Delafield beyond generic boundaries into the politics of homophobia.

The opposition to this torrid same-sex love-making comes from Detective Ed Taylor, Delafield’s partner on the L.A.P.D. He and Delafield subvert the “good cop bad cop routine” into the lesbian detective as good and the homophobic detective as bad. Taylor is as homophobic as any gay basher. In *Murder by Tradition*, he identifies and sympathises with the killers of a young, handsome, and personable gay man brutally

murdered in a violent, homophobic attack. In turn, Delafield's own hidden-from-view sexuality has her identifying with the dead man, making her desperate to catch the killer, even at the risk of outing herself. In the resulting investigation and court case she is forced to fight both official and community attitudes. Frustrated with Taylor's negativity towards the victim and his reluctance to fully engage with the case, Delafield asks him to explain himself. Not happy with his answer, she pushes him further. Angry with her, he spouts off a series of responses, "They aren't men. They're faggots," and adds Mincey little faggoty fake men." He elaborates further,

"Some people are freakish, but they're still men or women. Faggots, they want to be fucked, so they turn themselves into women. If you are a real man you aren't a woman. [...]. All the masculine type guys are perverts. They use faggot men like some guys use sheep or a piece of liver." (90-91)

Such is the antagonism between them that after this exchange they virtually stop working together and Kate carries on the investigation and the subsequent court case virtually on her own. She asks for a change of partner, but unsure of her superior's attitude towards Taylor's homophobia, makes no mention of the reason for their estrangement. In the final scene, Taylor announces his "retirement", still unaware that it is Delafield who was the catalyst that led to the diplomatic "suggestion" that now would be the right time for him to go. In a reversal of the norm, the "straight man" is abjected and expelled from society through the political manoeuvring of the "deviant," and the traditional "buddy" partnership of much crime fiction is rendered inoperative.

The suspect Kyle Jensen is feminised as part of the demonisation process. He is muscular with thinning hair and a thick moustache that "accentuated rather than concealed sensuous slightly bow-shaped lips" (38). He lives in a one-bedroom flat with a male friend who has thick fleshy sensual lips, and whose naked well-muscled chest has Delafield's thoughts turn to Aimee (43). According to Jensen's nominal girl friend the two men like to "strut and pose" for each other" (72). They are also at pains to point out that though there is only one bed in the flat they are not queer: "You had to mention the bed, Kate thought" (45).



By the time it goes to trial, Taylor, demonised and despatched, is sulking somewhere in the background, and Delafield is the chief witness, and the other representatives of the law — the prosecutor and the judge are all women. The defence, run by a man, Kenneth Pritchard, is based on an unsubtle homophobia that argues that the accused is a clean-living country boy who “like most us has been taught that homosexuality is one of society’s deepest taboos:”

“Here he is a stranger in Los Angeles, confronted by a man who embodies everything he has been taught to abhor. A man who makes an abhorrent sexual proposition—and backs it up with a knife. Need I mention the spectre of AIDS?” (252)

The defence claims that Jensen’s reaction was the natural response of any normal American citizen. This argument wraps the accused in the Stars and Stripes, and portrays him as the defender of the nation’s morality and way of life. It attempts to create a hierarchy of “otherness,” so a violent act becomes not that of a criminal, but that of a normal citizen in the face of the horrendous and terrifying threat of homosexuality. Jensen’s fear of being associated with the feminine is the catalyst and justification for his murderous homophobia. A man at war with his own barely repressed homosexuality, Jensen’s homophobic response comes from a defence of his own ambiguous and threatened masculinity, an ambiguity furthered by the femininity Delafield’s imposes upon him. That Delafield is masculinised and romanticised to better fulfil her role underscores the precarious or perhaps always fragile construction of the stigma of femininity within “normative sexuality.” That the jury rejects the defence plea suggests guilt or innocence is not the issue, rather it reflects the recognition that both gender and genre boundaries have moved on. As Plain states, Delafield represents a “constant renegotiation of the boundaries” between law and disorder:

In the investigation of crimes motivated by racism, sexism and homophobia, making the law work outside its dominant white, heterosexual, male framework of interests may both disrupt expectations and successfully avert the threat of chaos [...]. Delafield forces the law to contradict its founding prejudices and work in favour of women, lesbians and gay men even when it doesn’t want to. (*Twentieth-Century Crime* 189)

The appropriation of a genre that had its beginnings in a misogynist desire to control female sexuality, through the insertion of fulfilled transgressive desire into the text, makes Delafield a threat to gender norms. In her tracking down of a gay-bashing murderer, she disrupts and subverts masculine subjective dominance, a tenet of much hard-boiled fiction, the male fear of homosexuality. Sam Spade beats up Joel Cairo, Hammer treats “homos” with disdain, sneering, punching, maiming at the slightest provocation. Declan Hughes’s homosexual villain is a psychopathic rapist and murderer, while the homosexual advance made on Rankin’s Rebus gives him nightmares for years. It is interesting that eventually these nightmares give way to feelings of remorse as Rebus comes to regret his rejection of a fellow human being driven mad by intolerable and deliberate pressure. In all this, Forrest’s text makes a vivid contrast to the valorising of gay bashing that was part and parcel of Spade’s and Hammer’s work-a-day life.

In *Hancock Park* (2004), Delafield further disrupts notions of gender with the introduction of her transgender nephew/niece, “a slender, bony, flat-chested figure with dark hair in a mannish cut no more than an inch in length” (181). The notion of a sexuality that is outside her concept of “queer” shocks Kate. She struggles with the concept, and it is this refusal to accept her “niece,” and her continued decision not to out herself at work that prompts the rift with Aimee. When at Aimee’s urging she makes the decision to accept her “niece,” Kate continues to equivocate about her own sexuality. Clearly uncomfortable, she knows that outing would put her job in jeopardy and take away what power she had in her efforts on behalf of gay/lesbian rights. As Judith Butler says in *Bodies that Matter*, the concept of a “queer” is itself a “site of contestation” that disrupts the heterosexual matrix (228). It also serves to illustrate how the “other” is an always extendable category. There is always the “other” of the “other,” when the “other” assumes the subject position. Kate’s rejection of her ‘niece’ creates a hierarchy of otherness that serves to protect Kate’s lesbian identity. When after some study she begins to understand that transgender people have been around forever, but “they’re just better at hiding themselves,” she relents (241). Now recognised as a nephew, Dylan is welcomed into the “family,” which again demonstrates the possibility of re-drawing the boundaries of “otherness.”

Genre norms are again disrupted in *Hancock Park* when Delafield has a case thrown out of court. Desperate to get a conviction against a man she believes is a wife beater and producer of child pornography, she ignores the facts. In doing so she disrupts the claim to omniscience that is part of a traditional detective's identity, such as that of P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh. With his "half ecclesiastical patina of authority" and easy acknowledgement that he sees and knows more than others, Dalgliesh is the embodiment of justice (*The Lighthouse* 6). In contrast, Delafield's rushing her case to court reveals how her prejudices have shaped the facts, and calls into question a legal system where evidence gathering can be premised on prejudice and ideology. That the detective, the purported defender of that ideology, is no longer all-seeing further undermines the institutions of the patriarchy as well as the certainty around the processes of detection.

## Considerations

Though critics claim that the hard-boiled female detective acts to support the masculine hegemony, I would argue that within all of Paretsky's and Forrest's novels there is enough of an interrogation of the patriarchy for the emergence of a female imaginary that renegotiates the place of the feminine. Critical concerns that the female detective offers no prospect of structural change within the symbolic order and therefore alters nothing highlight the rift between Kristeva and many feminists over her belief that change to the symbolic order is neither possible nor desirable. I argue that Paretsky and Forrest, by focusing on issues other than structural change, reveal that having taken the subject position in a once exclusively masculine form, the female detective moves boundaries and brings a new perspective to a genre formerly populated by misogynist loners. This results in a resiting of the narrative point of view that inevitably has an effect on the traditional construction of the *femme fatale*.

At the core of the original hard-boiled genre is the need to control female sexuality in the interests of male subjectivity. Spade, Marlowe, and Spillane control not just the sexual power of the *femme fatale*, but all women in their orbit. Spade controls Effie Perrine by calling her "man", thus writing her out of the sexual equation. He has Brigid abjected by having her thrown in jail. The only one he can't control is Iva, who

refuses to accept his version of their sexual relationship. Hammer negates Charlotte Manning's desire so that she better fits in with his construction of the ideal woman. Mary Bellamy's nymphomania and already "fallen" state make a sexual liaison permissible. Marlowe blunts the power of the Sternwood sisters' sexuality through the simple expedient of refusing their advances. Sexual desire and its consummation are thus set within a hierarchy that makes women's needs or even consent secondary to that of the man. In the world of the female detective, this hierarchal context is disturbed. By taking up the subject position she removes female sexuality from its place of abjection and its necessary "purification." Delafield, because her sexual desires move her beyond the orbit of male involvement, and Warshawski, because changing social mores allow her to take the dominant role in any sexual engagement, allow female desire to take precedent, and become more important in the narrative sequences than men's. This reversal of roles is also exacerbated by the different sexual experiences of Delafield and Warshawski. Erotic, graphic, and exultant lesbian love-making in the first case, contrasts with mildly satisfying bread-and-butter heterosexual encounters.

Detective fiction, as already noted, traditionally emphasises the safety of such traditional boundaries as gender, race, and class; on which side of the boundary one is located determines whether one is accepted or abjected. Historically, threats to gender boundaries are resolved through a process of abjection. Witches, spinsters, suffragettes who threatened society's norm were subjected to the ducking stool, the bonfire or a spell in Pentonville. In the interests of unity, most societies need a bogeyman or beast. Whereas the *femme fatale* filled this role in original hard-boiled fiction, the female detective, in plain sight, fashioned a different set of monsters: big business, insurance and drug companies, fundamentalist religions, homophobes, wife beaters, child molesters, and an array of petty officials and crooks preying upon the underprivileged and the lost. To all intents and purposes, it is institutions of the patriarchy and their masculine representatives who are demonised and brought to book.

Beneath the covers of hard-boiled fiction women, have moved beyond their original two-dimensional vamps or victims roles to well-educated professionals in control of their own sexuality. By the tail end of the second feminist era, the prohibitions

surrounding female sexuality and its feared moral pollution no longer dominate the debate. However, while the narrative texts may portray a general masculine acceptance of feminist gains, there is a difference between the public face and private anxieties. This becomes apparent as society moves further into a postfeminist era where a many-faceted media campaign gives hope to discontented males, and offers the prospect of resurrecting old sexist stereotypes, including that of the villain we love to hate, the *femme fatale*.

## Chapter III

### “Postfeminism” as Cultural Phenomenon

Feminism encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.

Pat Robertson, US Politician, 1992.

The advent of the postfeminist era had none of the drama of first- and second-wave feminism: no street protests, demonstrations or even imagined bra-burning. In fact, many members of the general public may not even recognise the term. What they will recognise is a view pushed through the press and other media that feminism has achieved its aims, and it is now time to address some of its unintended consequences, especially the juggernaut of “political correctness” that has heaped indignity upon indignity upon uncomprehending white males who see feminism as the cause of all their woes. There is, however, more to postfeminism. It represents a mix of ideology and emotion, as much a media creation as a considered or seriously debated political philosophy. At the moment the popular media seems to be carrying the debate as it echoes its constant claim that not only has feminism gone too far, but its successes have made it redundant. There is a view that the media want to roll back feminist successes, and return to the safety of traditional gender stereotypes. The history of feminism, however, has been characterised by resistance and negotiation, and while many aspects of postfeminism appears to favour a return to earlier gender roles there are elements within its different understandings that lend themselves to the advancement of feminist goals and gender equality, which will influence the construction of the *femme fatale* in contemporary crime fiction.

Postfeminism trips off the tongue, but what it actually means is up for debate. Rosalind Gill and Christine Scharff claim that it falls into four broad areas, some of which overlap and others having such fine distinctions that they are difficult to categorise. The first area, described as an epistemological break within feminism, represents a convergence with other anti-foundationalist movements such as

postmodernism. The second represents a “historical shift after the height of second-wave feminism,” which recognises that feminism has now moved onto another phase (3). The third is understood as a backlash against feminism and all that is politically correct, and fourthly, it can be considered as what Gill calls a “sensibility” or what Angela McRobbie calls a “double entanglement [that] facilitates both a doing and undoing of feminism” (3-4). On the other hand, Susan Douglas is more basic. She rejects the term postfeminism, claiming it “is gummed up” by too many definitions, and by implication makes feminism the problem, when in fact the term represents “old-fashion sexism” and serves to reinforce the patriarchy. She prefers to call it enlightened sexism, which she describes as a manufacturing process that is produced week after week by the media which objectifies young women, the “dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality” and consumerism aimed at women of all ages (10). Whatever its various definitions, postfeminism cannot avoid being a debate about feminism and its future.

### **“Backlash”**

“Backlash” is the most easily recognised manifestation of postfeminism. It is the territory of talk-back hosts and unsubstantiated claims that foresee the collapse of the masculine hegemony. It appears to consist of disappointed men and disillusioned women for whom the solution lies in a return to the good old days of fixed gender representations and traditional morality, while on the side-lines a much reduced feminist voice mourns a stalled revolution and opportunities lost. It is the “popular” media that blames feminism for all the world’s ills. It whines that feminism is responsible for women’s unhappiness. It complains that political correctness is destroying normal male-female relations, that the education system works to favour girls, and boys are becoming a lost generation. Penzler’s *Dangerous Women* is part of that backlash as it re-installs old gender binaries to exploit and demonise women because of their sexuality.

New Zealand newspaper columnist Rosemary McLeod’s “The new F word: Why don’t girls want to be feminist anymore?” manages to cover most of the bases of a typical postfeminist “backlash” media report. She lays a list of ills at the feet of feminism: second-wave feminists are “dowdy [with] bra-less breasts hanging at waist

level, and facial hair unplucked,” responsible for a host of “unintended consequences,” such as more pornography, more abortions, more women deliberately taking on solo parenthood, and one in five households becoming reliant on welfare benefits. Their ideas have led to the young women of today having no ideals or aspirations beyond imitating the women of the TV series *Sex and the City*. They have failed to stop sexist attitudes as advertisements continue to flourish, showing women cleaning toilets, and doing the family washing pretty much as they ever did. A deep cleavage and uplift bra remain essential for any woman fronting a car advertisement. The article then offers the good news that by 2025 women will make up 75% of all university graduates in New Zealand. Unfortunately, this means men will be further unhinged and “continue to opt out of careers and live their lives riding their skateboards, and wearing their caps on backwards.” Switching tack, McLeod claims that a recent resurgence of interest in traditional home crafts – sewing, baking, and knitting is a sign that young women want what they have always wanted – a home, a partner and children. This, she ventures, should not be read as a sign that feminism is dead. Rather, that an emphasis on the softer more domestic issues of life could be better for both men and women (35-36). In this short article she manages to suggest that over-educated and unhappy women are responsible for men’s failures, and if they went back into the kitchen, life would be better for everyone. The only angle missing from McLeod’s account of feminism is the usual accompanying photograph showing plenty of leg, bust, or bottom.

The *Sunday Star Times*, likewise, claims that the responsibility for boys’ lack of success rests with the feminisation of the education system. In a muddled article headed “Stereotypes can make School Life Harder for Boys,” Michelle Sutton argues that it is an urban myth that girls do better than boys, then goes on to say that it is the myth itself that causes boys to fail. One way or another, girls are to blame. Girls, especially Asian girls, are held responsible for the potential demise of white male doctors and possibly the whole health system, according to Donna Chisholm’s *North and South* essay “The Disappearing White Male Doctor.” In it she discusses the changing face of students at New Zealand’s medical schools, where, in 2009, 60% of the intake was female and, of the total intake, 40% was Asian. While the medical schools believe the quality of our future doctors has never been better, many white male doctors currently in practise think otherwise. Stuart Ferguson, an experienced



paediatric surgeon, is one of them. Chisholm quotes him as saying. “The white male is a goner” (43). He blames Asian students, especially the females. He complains that because they don’t play sport, and work extremely hard, they are not well-rounded people. In his opinion, female doctors are responsible for most of the unnecessary paediatric referrals to Starship’s outpatient clinics because they don’t know what a boy’s penis should look like, and the political correctness that permeates the whole medical school means these future doctors will never be any good (43-44).

Penzler’s *Dangerous Women*, the anthology that was the catalyst for this thesis, reflects a confused and regressive patriarchal fight back that objectifies the sexual woman, then puts her beyond any control. This contrasts with another era when the genre operated as an affirmation of a social order based on masculine authority. The hard-boiled, wise-cracking detectives created an image of self-discipline and toughness that allowed them to best even the most seductive of the sirens. In an important departure from this tradition, the women of Penzler’s anthology never get caught. In most cases the narrative voice is that of the male dupe, caught and entangled in a web of murder, intrigue, and female sexual wiles that he can never outwit. It appears that despite the barrage of sexual images that are part of the modern world, or perhaps exacerbated by them, private masculine fear of unfettered female sexuality has altered little since Richard Ussher’s 1898 prediction of the dire consequences of contraception and the demise of the prohibitions that enforced female chastity (qtd. in Stubbs 12). The macho posturing is still there and most of the women conform to clichéd masculine visions of female sexuality. Typical descriptions include “blonde hair, a short tight black dress, good legs in very high heels” and “a nice set of jugs showing in the neckline of a red blouse” (10). Another is the sort of “girl you’d like to shove against the water cooler and take standing up” (172). Or still another whose best qualities are those hidden beneath her severe clothing where he could see swells both front and back “where her ass rose up almost in defiance of the tailored jacket and straight skirt” (113). Finally, there is that all-time favourite for shifting the blame on to the woman: “She was asking for it, right?” (181).

This is the masculine talk of the hard-boiled era, but that’s where it ends. Whereas the *femmes fatales* of that era shimmied and slithered their way into a man’s heart or

pocketbook in the pursuit of agency or a dupe to take the blame for whatever nefarious scheme they had in mind, these women murder, assassinate or execute to avenge long-held slights and grievances, some of them real and serious, others imagined or wildly exaggerated. Still others give no reason; it is the thrill of the kill or more chilling the absence of thrill that marks these women as a different breed from their long-legged, mink-wearing predecessors. The pick-up line in Ed McBain's "Improvisation" as two dangerous tootsies cruise the bars looking for a victim is "Why don't we kill somebody?"(1). After getting the sucker's attention with such an intriguing proposition, they set the trap with the promise of a threesome at their nearby apartment. After they kill him, which they describe as like "getting a haircut or something," and are tidying up, they turn to each other: "Tell me something," Susan said. "Do you... you know ... feel anything yet?" "Nothing," Jessica said (20-22). Unlike the classic *femme fatale* who killed for money, or more often than not got someone to do it for them, McBain's jaded girls keep on killing long after it has lost any sense of excitement.

Laura Lippman's cutey pulls a similar stunt. In the name of research, she lures a young man, stranded at the airport, back to her apartment with the promise of unencumbered sex. Once there she kills him, pickles a variety of his body parts, and stores them in a cupboard along with the remains of the rest of her victims. The story begins with the narrative voice of the callow youth lucking on an easy lay, as he tells of being picked up by a woman and being taken back to apartment. After being wined and dined his "voice" disappears to be replaced by a third person narrative that reveals the woman as a mature female author hoping to be published in *Penthouse*. As she frets about rejection letters and her failure to appear in print it becomes clear that story she tells of seducing a young man and then pickling his "parts" is true. Her fretting is as much about getting the story published as it is about inadvertently giving the police any clue regarding the possible fate of several missing young men.

The men of these narratives are an update of the 1940s sap, the fall guy who takes the rap while the *femme fatale* waltzes off with the cash. The difference here is there is no cash; it's all about an imagined female desire for unspecified revenge against the male of the species. In all of the texts, even those created by females, the masculine stance of the narrative, the gendered power talk of "arses" and "jugs," and the narcissism of

men who see all women as desperate to fall into bed with them, obscure the fact that every step of the way she is in control. The themes that run through this collection build on the notion of the sexual woman as dangerous, and while the text uses masculine language, none of the male protagonists are models of moral courage or toughness. Manliness in this collection means fecklessness, foolishness and greed, and the tendency to be easily led astray by a well-filled bra or a flash of fancy knickers.

The backlash postfeminism of Penzler's anthology gives out the message that all women are dangerous and sexual women doubly so, and the male hegemony is doomed. Any attempt to objectify sexual women is a waste of time; they cannot be expelled or abjected, because in the imagination of all the narrators, women, through their sexual wiles, already command the subject position. They "win" every encounter. This is postfeminism as backlash that speaks to a rump of anxious males and unhappy women with entrenched attitudes and unconscious assumptions surrounding the sexual female. A subtext of blinkered nostalgia and a yearning for yesterday colour each story as *Dangerous Women* falls back, in an almost Victorian manner, to the sexual woman as the source of all men's problems with almost no regard to the social changes that have occurred since the Wright brothers took to the sky and women got the vote.

### **Exploiting the Female Body**

"Backlash" postfeminism expresses masculine fears of female sexuality and agency, so does Gill's concept of postfeminism as "sensibility." However, there is a difference. From the popular or normative point of view, "backlash" provides a clear link that equates postfeminism with an antifeminism that is easy to identify. Gill's notion of "sensibility" is more subtle and one she thinks best defines postfeminism. It is made up of many interrelated ideas and emphasises "the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourse and the entanglement of both feminist and antifeminist themes within them" (2). Briefly, these themes include the concept of femininity as a bodily property, leading to the sexualisation of culture, an emphasis upon self-surveillance, the dominance of the "makeover paradigm," as embodying the shift from objectification to subjectification in the way women are represented, a resurgence of

ideas about natural sexual difference, and a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment.

While Gill's postfeminism has many components, they all flow from two issues: the intense attention given to the "makeover" of women to better fit a media model of femininity, and the even greater focus on the sexualisation of women and in fact of the whole culture. Trinny Woodhall and Susannah Constantine are exemplars of the "makeover" phenomena. Their popular television series, *What Not to Wear* and *Susannah and Trinny Undress the Nation*, take mainly badly-dressed, middle-aged, and lower middle-class women and show them how to appear glamorous and sexy. Their poor dress sense and physical flaws are paraded in front of a nation-wide audience. In the name of "improvement" they are poked, prodded, and undressed. Susannah and Trinny sneer and laugh, all supposedly in good humour, but there is an edge to it that is belittling and cruel. More often than not, they refer to the contestants breasts as "tits" and demolish their dress sense with statements, such as "your trousers are too clitty" or refer to their skirts as "pussy pelmets." Trinny and Susannah are ironic and knowing, as they talk dirty with an upmarket English accent. In a show launched in 2008, *The Great British Body*, they stripped naked and persuaded 300 other women ranging in age from 18 to 80 to do the same, then marched them up a hill to create a living sculpture. Their twelve classification of shapes of women refer to breasts as "big tits," "small tits," "small boobs," "big boobs," or "hooters," all to the audience's delight. Gill understands this as a modernised, neoliberal version of femininity, which disavows any notion of its actions being done to please a man and is presented as something that is freely done to please the women themselves. This is often undercut in the closing scene in most of the shows by the woman being paraded in front of her husband, who obligingly stammers, "She looks as beautiful as she did when she was seventeen," which, of course, serves to confirm that older women's bodies can never be attractive in their own right (161-62).

Susan Douglas tracks the sexualisation of women by the media through a tour of *Cosmo* covers starting in 1992, when a typical cover read "10 Ways To Recover Your Energy When You're So Tired." Five years later "Make Him Beg for It: How to Fire up His Desire in Bed," still left room for articles like "How to Write to Your Congressman." With the advent of the twenty-first century, things began to warm up,

the old articles on politics and work-related problems were dropped in favour of sections such as “Man Manual” and “Love and Lust,” while typical covers screamed “Dirty Sexy Sex” and “67 New Sex Tricks Including the Tongue Swirl” (162). This selling of sexual imagery is moving to ever younger girls and projects sexuality even down to the level of three-year-olds (183).

According to Gill, McRobbie, and Douglas, this mix of sexualisation and antifeminism is accepted in the name of irony. Yes, we know the arguments of the feminists, we have taken them on board, they are now part of culture so we can move on and even joke about them in “good fun.” It allows the young man to pick up his girlfriend from her family home while wearing a T-shirt declaiming, “**Things to Do: Your Sister: Your Mom,**” and claim it is all good clean fun (Douglas 185). In postfeminist culture, irony makes it permissible to have it both ways. One can knowingly express sexist or homophobic ideas, as long as you can claim it as a jest or irony, and so shift the blame upon the failure to “understand the humour” and thus to the “victim.”

“Postfeminist sensibility” is different from the backlash against feminism in the way it allows for contradiction, but those contradictions always return in whatever guise to a fear of female agency. Women may be presented as desiring social subjects, but only if they remain within the media ideal of femininity. The fact of the media’s ability to control the debate means that “backlash” drowns out most other voices. It is a constant drone that bemoans the ascendancy of women at the expense of men and boys, while at the same time refusing to recognise the continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to gender and female sexuality. Female agency may occasionally be celebrated, but “backlashers” believe it still needs to be controlled. Gill makes the point that, especially with young women, “every aspect of their life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination,” and notes how the dramatic rise in the number of women having Brazilian waxes or breast augmentation is depicted as indicators of women “pleasing themselves.” Less attention is given to the commercial interests driving this phenomena and its role in the control of socially constructed ideas of female beauty, and sexuality (158). Women who stand outside this construct could well be the raw material from which any postmodern version of the *femme fatale* may arise.

## The Future is Female?

Though the media is setting the pace and making loud claims that feminism, having achieved its aims, is now redundant, there remains a body of feminist opinion and real life experience that will make the return of the *femme fatale* difficult. Sarah Gamble's postfeminism claims "postfeminism is an infinitely flexible media definition," which may not even be a valid phenomenon (43). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in their introduction to *Interrogating postfeminism* also see postfeminism as a set of assumptions within the popular media about the supposed pastness of feminism, and agrees with many feminists that it is a manifestation of the media's attempt to march back feminist gains (1). Germaine Greer is more aggressive; she calls postfeminism little more than a market-led phenomenon that claims women can have it all only so it can resituate them as consumers of convenience foods and cosmetics. She then goes on to claim that second-wave feminism is not dead and that the feminist fight needs to continue (qtd in Gamble 53). The legacy of legal, legislative, and educational gains left by second-wave feminism, and the intersection of old and new feminisms with postmodernism will help in that fight.

Mairead Owen, in her re-evaluation of the goals and outcomes of forty years, argues that, even though inequalities in pay may still exist, statistically the future belongs to the female. In "Conclusion: That 2020 Vision," she posits that the twin movements of globalisation and flexibility will have profound effects on the structure of employment: "More and more jobs are geared to the perceived qualities, skills and abilities of women" (176). No doubt the male reaction to this will feed into the "backlash" dimension of postfeminism. In Ian Rankin's *Black & Blue*, the hard men of the oilrigs lose their value. Made redundant by skinny, bespectacled computer operators of both sexes, they are no longer an acceptable measure of masculinity. Lisa Tsalik's essay "Women and the New Technologies" has a similar vision of technology as a form of empowerment that offers women "a means of control over their lives" (91).

*The Economist*, of January 2010, with its front cover of an overalled "Rosie the Riveter," and headline, "We Did It! What happens when women are over half the workforce," is similarly upbeat. Its lead article, "We did it," claims that women are

gradually taking over the workplace, and it is a trend that is likely to continue (7). In the same issue another article “Female Power” states that of the 8 million jobs created since 2000 in the European Union, 6 million of them went to women (51). Meanwhile in the United States male unemployment sits at 11.2%, compared to the female rate of 8.6%. The U.S. Bureau of Labour calculates that women make up more than two-thirds of the labour force in 10 of the 15 job categories likely to grow the fastest in the next few years, and this year (2011) there will be 2.6 million more women than men studying in American universities. Social arrangements have yet to catch up with these economic changes, but in “Female Power,” *The Economist* claims that many forward-thinking companies are becoming more female friendly by restructuring their business so that spells out of the labour force will not damage a woman’s career prospects. (48-51).

The trends revealed by these facts and figures may raise further alarm among those concerned with the fate of men in a feminine future. Any alarm, breast-beating or trying to turn back the clock only reflect *The Economist’s* observation that social arrangements have yet to recognise that the workplace is indeed changing. A recent furore in the local media over an assertion by the head of the Employers and Manufacturer’s Association that women are less productive than men because of their “monthly sick problems” is an example of this. His comment drew scorn and derision and ultimately cost him his job. Ironically, it may have also been the catalyst for some genuine transformation in the New Zealand workplace.

### **The Intersection with Postmodernism**

Gill and Scharff, among their other definitions, offer postfeminism as an epistemological break within feminism that marks the intersection of feminism with other anti-foundationalist movements that include postmodernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism. Ann Brooks understands the term as a “useful conceptual frame of reference” within which the patriarchy can be critically engaged, and is part of a process of on-going transformation and change, but does not assume patriarchal discourses and frames of reference have been replaced or superseded (1).

Kristeva takes a wider view. In an interview with Suzanne Clark and Kathleen Hulley, she posits postmodernity “as a moment of crisis” where “something has crumbled, something is rejected, but is also a moment when new sources appear” (165). She argues in *Novel as Polylogue* that “postmodernism’s rejection of totalising and universalising models of metanarratives allows for the transformation of the subject in his [sic] relationship to language, to the symbolic, to unity, and to history” (qtd. in Edelstein 199). In *Powers of Horror*, speaking of abjection as the reverse side of the moral and ideological codes which hold society together, she says “we have lost faith in One Master Signifier” and this loss of faith will come to be recognised as the “first great demystification of [religious, moral, and political] Power” (209-10). Demystification serves to blur the boundaries of any power, as it exposes the artificiality and lack of foundation in many of society’s laws, customs, and beliefs, and makes more difficult the abjecting or “othering” of those who don’t fit into what is accepted as the norm.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* uses the term “metanarratives” instead of “master signifier,” but like Kristeva, believes they are losing any claim to legitimacy:

In contemporary society and culture—post-industrial society, postmodern culture—the question of legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (37)

Lyotard supports Kristeva’s argument concerning language. He, too, sees that any attempt to restructure the multiplicity of events and influences that constructs the subject can only come about through a reformulation of the power relationship that exists within language, because the metaphysical tradition that informs our language has historically excluded women’s representation (McGraw 265). His ambition is to replace metanarratives with mini or localised stories. He suggests that metanarratives be deemphasised, and the focus switched to “incidents” of history. By thinking of them as sentences in an overall narrative and giving them equal weight, the political becomes more diversified; it also serves to give the subject a position within a collection of phrases or sentences that undermines the notion of some existing higher



authority. This constant challenge to the notion of an authoritative single voice would give all subjects the right to be heard equally. In “Re-Writing Modernity,” he briefly refers to the detective novel and its process of “positioning and identifying crimes, sins and calamities” so that when all is revealed at the end the reader is forced into a questioning of the beginning of the plot, and in doing so mentally rewrites and reviews previously held views of subjectivity. Thus in Lyotard’s world a sentence can be formed to represent several differing points of view at the same time, depending on the stage of the narrative. The formerly dominant subject (usually the detective) may dematerialise (but not often), along with his controlling narrative, and the subject may, or may not, be reassigned to a new position (5). Delafield’s reordering or interpretation of the evidence in *Hancock Park* to better fit her world view is an example of this. The emphasis on relative positionality with reference to a collection of phrases coincides with Kristeva’s notion of marginality as expressed by Moi: “What is as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies” (166). In *Dangerous Women*, the fluidity of position and point of view easily subverts the formation of an authoritative position. The grab-all title suggests that all women are dangerous, and by including the work of several female authors in the collection, it implies that this view is not just limited to men, and these female authors are *ipso facto* disillusioned with the unexpected consequences of feminism. Shift the narrative perspective, however, and these women become fierce fighters for the feminist cause, though like Mike Hammer before them, their methods are a little over the top.

### **The Contradictions of the Third Wave**

To understand the “post” of postfeminism as meaning “after”, in the sense of “post” in “post-war,” is a mistake. The high point of second-wave feminism may have been and gone, but a new generation of feminists is, as Catherine Orr claims, “reworking what it variously perceives to be the successes and failures of the women’s movement of the late sixties and seventies” (29). Gamble and McRobbie identify the emergence of a third wave of feminism whose ease with contradiction distinguishes them from second-wavers. The differences, however, are greater than these comments suggest. Partly it is a matter of perception. Whereas first wave fought for the vote and second wave fought for equality, on a wide range of fronts, including equal opportunities for employment, and an end to legalised sexual discrimination, third wavers don’t have a

single encompassing issue that distinguishes them. Reflecting a postmodern era, the third wave sort of embraces contradiction and diversity, and rejects the notion of a universalising female identity built on the experience of upper-middle class Western women. It also rejects the gender binary and looks on sexuality as a positive part of life. McRobbie considers that the third-wave appears to have produced a new breed of confident women who regard their body as their best asset and are prepared to use it for maximum enjoyment and economic advantage. Reflecting the conflict within feminism, she goes on to support the notion of third-wave feminists who demand that within feminism it be “legitimate to have a particular brand of femininity folded into it, and as such for femininity to become a mark of celebration, not a mark of subordination.” She also believes that in this scenario, the barrier to individuality is not the patriarchy but a feminist ideology that in its resistance to the patriarchy has become strident and inflexible (157).

Renegar and Sowards recognise that for the moment third wave is mainly a matter of individual protest as there is no unifying theme or theory that could propel the nascent third wave of feminism to a greater resistance against the masculine hegemony. Like Kristeva and Lyotard, they see the way forward through language. Feminists must start with the question of language, and seek to create a new vocabulary that can transform the existing social order (339). This is not the *écriture féminine* of Cixous that inscribes the rhythms and articulations of the female body to forego the closures of binary opposites and create an open-ended textuality she calls *jouissance* (*The Newly Born Woman* 170). Renegar and Southward’s approach is more street-wise. They believe that irony provides the frame work to produce a vocabulary that forces people to think about words differently. It means reclaiming words that are used to denigrate women, such as “spinster,” “girl,” “whore,” or “bitch,” and turning them against their user. It is interesting that, as both Gill and Douglas demonstrate, men use irony as an excuse to claim that any insult is just a joke that you failed to get. If it weren’t for the disparity between Trinny and Susannah’s wealth and class, on the one hand, and that of their contestants, on the other hand, which exposes a cruel edge to the proceedings, their shows with all their “tits,” “bum,” “arse,” and “clits” could be an example of reverse irony that takes the language of male sexism away from its perpetrators. Renegar and Soward’s proposition relies on the perspective of the individual to be conscious that there are no objective standards, and in this way avoids

the political correctness of a previous generation. At the same time, it may awake the unthinking to the powerful effect that masculine putdowns have in the shaping of gender attitudes. My own feeling is that third-wave feminism has yet to bring anything new to the table. Reading the works included in Barbara Findlen's *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* is dispiriting. The various contributors appear wary of second wave feminism, yet many of their concerns – should I shave my legs – should I go to the gym – seemed old hat and “yesterday.” Catherine Orr claims that in this postmodern world we should not be surprised that even “feminist history is heaped into the reviled pile dubbed ‘master narratives’” (33). She is clearly ambivalent about the third-wave discourse. On the one hand, she believes that feminism is thriving someplace other than scholarly journals and classrooms, but on the other hand is fearful (not fearful enough in my opinion) that the new populist feminism is being shaped by media representations that are not noted for giving feminism a fair press (40-43). My concern would be that the emphasis on individuality and acceptance of contradiction will lead to the loss of a feminist “voice.”

## Change

Postfeminism is not a clear-cut historical or political entity and is a mass of contradictions. The media, driving the postfeminist phenomena with its unholy mix of nostalgia, raw sex, social comment, and commercialised cynicism continue to want it all ways. It brays for the return of old gender roles, while screening impossibly slim female detectives, guns in designer holsters strapped to their sashaying hips, as they shoot and punch their way not quite to the top. In an ironic statement of female dominance, the only place she is on top is in the sex scenes, where no doubt the producer's real interest is the extra advertising revenue produced by flashy displays of silicone-enhanced breasts. This is the postfeminism of everyone's experience, token respect for female gains, and an ever-increasing sexualisation of Western culture that in the final outcome serves to cement male dominance and undermine the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s. This will continue to impact on a detective genre that until recently has always been complicit with a mythic function that acts to establish the masculine in the subject position.

It's not all bad news. Though presenting some difficulties for women, postfeminism has established, through its intersection with postmodernism, its legacy of second-wave feminism, and the potential of the yet to be fully focused third wave, an ideological and theoretical base to better challenge male dominance. How this will play out in hard-boiled fiction, and where the *femme fatale* will fit in, we are not sure. Though formulaic, the genre has always been adaptable. Its origins are part of the masculine hegemonic resistance to the demands of the suffragettes, it easily accommodates feminocentric novels that intertwine questions of gender, race, class, and sexual preference with issues of social injustice. It is flexible enough to handle dark crimes, and slapstick humour, romance and rape, but whether the *femme fatale* can negotiate the twin obstacles of contemporary gender politics and new postmodern representational regimes, and still retain all her old vim and vigour is questionable. Stripped of her essentialist certainty, she could become either a truncated version of her former self, or be displaced by a different form of marginality or otherness.

## **Part II**

## Chapter IV

### **The Sexualised Mother as the *Femme Fatale* in the Detective Fiction of Declan Hughes**

All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.

Barbara Creed (44)<sup>3</sup>

Bad mothers are not uncommon in the crime genre. They range from the degenerate Ma Grisson of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, who feeds her psychotic son's carnal appetites by kidnapping the unfortunate Miss Blandish and keeping her in a drugged state to facilitate her frequent and brutal rape, to the foolish Salome Otterbourne of *Death on the River Nile* whose lewdness and drunkenness is a constant source of embarrassment to her daughter. Rarely, however, is "mother" constructed as a temptress. In a departure from tradition Declan Hughes takes the convergence of sex and crime that is the *femme fatale* and recreates her as a maternal figure. By doing so, he offers a postfeminist re-evaluation of the power of the mother that paradoxically also ensures her demonisation, which in turn supports her abjection. *The Wrong Kind of Blood* and *The Colour of Blood* construct mothers in a manner that highlights the power associated with their sexuality. In Barbara Dawson of *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, this manifests itself as a destructive expression of damaged pride, egotism, and revenge. For the Howard women of *The Colour of Blood*, their sexuality serves to illustrate the gulf between the historic notions of the sacred mother, the lived experience, and the postfeminist conflict surrounding the expression of maternal anxieties regarding identity and self. Though invested with the predatory sexuality of the *femme fatale*, Hughes' women, even Barbara Dawson, are in some way or other victims of a dysfunctional patriarchy. Quasi *femmes fatales*, they disturb as a consequence the genre's exclusive connection between female sexuality and criminality. Hughes' disruption of that linkage is ambiguous, but serves to provide a

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<sup>3</sup> *The Monstrous-Feminine, Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*

critique of patriarchal power and abuse. It recognises the awkward position of the maternal figure in a postfeminist world, and also that previous forms of sexualisation can no longer operate in a postmodern age. The result is a double-voiced quality that seeks to perform simultaneously the classic functions of the genre with regard to shoring up masculinity, while at the same time critiquing the patriarchy's own departures from the prohibitions against incest enforced by the law of the father.

Hughes came to crime writing after a career as a playwright. He co-founded the Dublin theatre group "Rough Magic," and wrote and produced several plays. The first, which he directed, in 1990, was *I Can't Get Started*, a drama about Dashiell Hammett, covering his politics, his relationship with Lillian Hellman, and the mystery of his thirty years' silence after *The Thin Man*. He lists Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald as his major influences, but pays homage to Hammett by naming his detective Loy, a derivative of the Gaelic word "lai" meaning "spade." He resurrects the gender binaries of the original hard-boiled era, and sites them not in mid-twentieth-century down-town Los Angeles, but in twenty-first century Dublin. Since 2006, his five Loy novels have mirrored the changing fortunes of the Irish economy as it plunges from Celtic Tiger to international basket case.

In both novels examined, Ireland is still on the rise, but it remains a country marked by its history and haunted by revelations of sexual abuse within its state institutions and the Catholic Church. These elements are often swamped by Hughes's overwritten plots, or his protagonists' convoluted relationships, but stripped of their excesses, both narratives operate at two levels. The immediate one contains many of the standard elements of the genre. Criminal gangs rising out of the "neighbourhood," on the back of boomtown speculation, hijack the establishment through graft, corruption, girls, drugs, and murder, with only the tough PI standing between the city and complete anarchy. These provide the avenue into a second level of plotting that involves historic criminality and real and symbolic incest, which forces a re-evaluation of the Freudian family romance and the figure of the mother, who, in Barbara Dawson's case, is transformed into a version of the ur *femme fatale*, while the Howard women are revealed as less *femmes fatales* than postfeminist figures concerned with issues surrounding motherhood, career, and subjectivity. The two levels of plot result in a double time frame with Loy tunnelling into the past, and uncovering the common

threads that connect yesterday's passions to today's criminal acts. Each novel is constructed around certain reiterated motifs. *The Wrong Kind of Blood* is built around the search for identity and fatherhood, and upon a masculinity based on the unresolved Oedipus complex, seen in the sexualities that emulate the mother-son cathexis. The *Colour of Blood* focuses on the exploration of incest and the female Oedipus complex. Lurking behind both narratives is the failure of paternity and with it the problematic status of the postfeminist father. The consequential effects give rise to the *femme fatale* as either demonic mother, or the sexual mother, one an aggressive castrator, the other a castrated victim.

### **Constructing the Detective**

As a detective Loy brings little new to the genre. Though a long way from the tough and assured Sam Spade, he adds little to current postfeminist interpretations of the hard-boiled detective. His first-person point of view reveals him as fallible and at times disingenuous. He has the usual markers of masculinity that go with the territory. He is a loner with a troubled past: he's a smart wisecracker, has an abundance of sexually willing women, and a remarkable ability to withstand pain. In a postmodern-postfeminist world, these are not enough. In Spade's era the role of the detective was to emphasise the masculine values of strength, independence, and rationality through a solidarity that served to exclude women and preserve the privileging of men within the symbolic order, and through his infallibility reinforce the notion of an orderly universe. In Loy's world the social changes wrought by feminism have had an inevitable effect on the construction of the detective, leaving him less self-assured and more conscious of his disjointed self. Spade's subjectivity was heavily dependent on his successful containment of the *femme fatale*, who is, according to Mary Anne Doane, an "articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the 'I,' the ego" (2). The postfeminist/postmodern detective does not have Spade's DNA, omnipotence or authority. His subjectivity is fragmented; consequently he cannot rely on a single representative figure, such as the *femme fatale*, for stabilising his identity.

For the postfeminist detective, containment of the *femme fatale* is not the panacea it once was, especially in Hughes' narratives where too often the putative *femmes*



*fatales'* guilt lies not with high crimes, but with their sexuality, their desire for agency, and their rejection of patriarchal models of motherhood. These women all project some form of transgressive agency that enables the implied author to demonise them through a world view that suits the needs of the symbolic order. For Loy his search for his father and the sense of identity that his job brings are part of a fragmented self that needs constant reinforcing. The job is very important to him. In *The Colour of Blood* he acknowledges this. Confronted by his lover's nineteen-year-old son, who asks why he did such an unsavoury job, Loy struggles to answer. His interior voice, however, knows why:

I didn't just make my living this way, and it wasn't about justice. I seemed to need the chaos other people brought me so I could make a pattern from it, establish the connection they couldn't see themselves. Not from envy but from need. (*The Colour of Blood* 190)

That need is partly met when in unravelling one murder he discovers his father's body, buried in the garage of the family home, and this leads to the resolution of doubts about who his father is: "I had a DNA test. I am Eamonn Loy's boy. Better to know" (340). His problems began when at eighteen he returns home with the news that his results were good enough to get him into medicine at Trinity College. Though his father no longer lives at home, it still comes as a shock to the young Loy to find his mother in bed with her husband's best friend. Fleeing from his mother's sexuality, he leaves the house, and all prospects of a medical career. Twenty years on, he returns for his mother's funeral and he brings with him plenty of baggage. He carries the burden of being cuckolded by his wife and learning that he is not the father of his beloved dead daughter. Fearful and doubting the stability of his subjectivity, he is always unconsciously seeking to reinvent himself in a way that can successfully perform the discourse of manhood, through the displacement of his anxiety onto dysfunctional women. In this way he compensates for his lack and sustains a fantasy of being unified and complete. Given his history and his inclinations, it is little wonder that his problems whether personal, professional or psychological involve mature maternal figures.

### **The *Femmes Fatales***

In contrast to his “off the shelf” detective, Hughes brings innovation to his *femmes fatales*. They are maternal figures defined by their sexuality and failure to accept patriarchal models of motherhood. Of the four, only one has blood on her hands; for the rest, their crime is their sexuality and desire for agency. These latter do not incite, encourage or carry out any homicidal act. Their fatalism is inwardly directed, but nevertheless their sexuality is destabilising. Almost by osmosis, and without regard for the fact that these women are all victims, their sexuality somehow implicates them in all of Dublin’s evils. This in part may be a reflection of a postfeminist backlash against supposedly independent women who project some sort of fledging agency, or it may be that Hughes is mirroring a particular aspect of the Irish psyche. These women are not evil *per se*; constructed as such through a patriarchal discourse, their construction reveals nothing about female desires and everything about masculine fears regarding maternal sexuality. That Hughes sets them up as *femmes fatales* but remains dismissive of their implied agency creates the impression that he is presenting an essentialised view that woman by nature is a victim.

Innovation brings with it some difficulty for Hughes. Making female sexuality an unreliable predictor of criminality goes against a long tradition within the genre, but in revealing his quasi *femmes fatales* as victims, the narratives lose their way. Instead of developing the “victims of the patriarchy” themes more deeply, Hughes compensates for the loss of the “traditional” *femme fatale* by over-plotting and engaging in a confusing array of connections, relationships, and old feuds. Nor does he come to terms with the wider problem of maternal sexuality. On the one hand, there is the mother, in the Irish context at least, whose sexuality is subsumed into her maternal role, and despite the myth of domestic dominance, an impotent figurehead within and without the home. On the other hand, there is the erotic maternal figure that refuses to be subsumed within a benign maternal role. This divide between the erotic and the idealised maternal woman is never bridged.

## Sexuality and the Maternal Figure

That this cleavage remains unresolved is not surprising. There is a paradox surrounding sexuality and the maternal figure in the Western world. Kristeva argues that all representations of femininity, whether religious or secular, are built around the image of an idealised archaic mother in the form of the Virgin Mother. She further claims that the decline in religious observance and a corresponding decline in the cult of the Virgin Mary leave us without a satisfactory discourse on motherhood. She suggests that the various psycho-social functions that the cult provides serve to hold women in traditional models of motherhood that are no longer applicable in a modern world (“Stabat Mater” 161-62). The decline of religious observance and the revelation of widespread sexual abuse within many institutions of Church and the State compound the problem, and leave women with no clear or central model of maternity. The position in Ireland regarding the decline of the Church and its history of sexual abuse is well documented. Academics such as Tom Inglis and Robert Savage, along with the press and television, have exposed not only the systemic failures of the Church, but successive Governments’ complicity in the scandals associated with Irish orphanages, the Magdalene Asylums, and Irish adoption practices. In 1999 the Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, made an official apology in the Taoiseach<sup>4</sup> to all victims of childhood abuse “for our collective failure” and with it an attendant legislative package that conveniently deflected attention away from the politicians, and squarely focused attention onto the Catholic Church, its erstwhile partner in moral and social issues for much of the twentieth century (Savage and Smith 4). Caught between traditional Catholic morality, the sexual/moral revolution of the late twentieth-century, and the failure of the Church, Irish women challenged their traditional place in Irish society, a place that rendered them “unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual and complex ordinary mortals and instead had forced them to cling to a fantasy of women as simple handmaidens of the Lord” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery,” 32-33). In Hughes’ narratives these various elements manifests themselves in dysfunctional and unhappy women, whose lives are an uneasy amalgamation of anxious careerist, reluctant mother, and loveless sexual partnerships.

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<sup>4</sup> The Irish Parliament

In *Powers of Horror*, “Stabat Mater,” *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and “Motherhood According to Bellini,” Kristeva places the maternal experience in its theoretical and historical context. In these and other texts, she focuses on the significance of the maternal and preoedipal in the constitution of subjectivity. Her distinction between what she calls the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” lays the grounds for the patriarchal abjection of women. She claims that all significations are composed of these two elements. Closely associated with the maternal body, the semiotic is the primary source of rhythms, tones, and movement for the developing foetus. The symbolic order is associated with grammar and the structure of signification, which gives referential meaning to the words and language we use, but that meaning is co-dependent on the contribution of the semiotic experience:

Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively semiotic or exclusively symbolic,” and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 24)

Within this indebtedness, however, there is an imbalance. Within the maternal body, Kristeva argues, there is a repressed authority that pre-exists paternal law yet is crucial in the development of subjectivity: This creates a tension between the repressed maternal authority and the symbolic law that invokes the frailties of the symbolic and threatens the boundaries that define subjective and group identities (*Powers* 71-72). The pre-oedipal maternal bond represents a challenge to the unity of the symbolic law, and so it becomes necessary to abject the maternal function. In doing this, not only is the maternal function abjected but so is female sexuality. It is this fundamental abjection that is instrumental in much of the oppression of, and discrimination against, women in patriarchal cultures.

In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva claims that it is not possible to say what a woman is except in her relationship to motherhood. Yet even here, there is a paradox. Kristeva observes, “We live in a civilisation where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood” (161). This motherhood is, however, itself a fantasy of an idealised archaic mother, largely constructed through Christianity, more specifically by the Catholic Church. It is a fantasy so powerful that it has subsumed femininity into the maternal. She, Kristeva, speculates it is a

masculine appropriation of the Maternal, a sublimation that works to tame the feminine economy. What she wants is a new discourse of maternity which moves away from both the Catholicism that makes the mother sacred and from the scientific analysis that reduces her to nature. In her essay Kristeva attempts to move away from the prevailing model. “Stabat Mater” is split into two columns using two different typefaces. In the right column, she analyses the development and purpose behind the Catholic discourse of the Virgin. In the left column, in more poetic language, she describes the birth of her son in a way that tries to capture the rhythms of the semiotic body. The separate columns bring forward not only the Catholic representation of motherhood but the semiotic rhythms of the flesh that it represses.

In “Motherhood According to Bellini,” Kristeva continues her argument and again suggests that there needs to be a different discourse surrounding motherhood. In this essay she claims that the submergence of the maternal is necessary for the maintenance of the symbolic order even though the mother remains excluded from that order. She argues, “The desire for motherhood is without fail a desire to bear a child of the father” (238). Once this has been achieved the parents are subsumed into the roles of mother and father. This process of socialisation makes everyone,

homologous to the male speaking body, motherhood would be nothing more than a phallic attempt to reach the Mother who is presumed to exist at the very place where (social and biological) identity recedes. (242)<sup>5</sup>

Social coherence is thus maintained and “any negation of this utilitarian, social, and symbolic aspect of motherhood plunges into regression” (242). This regression turns her into her own mother and takes away any right to speak as a female subject. Kristeva maintains that Bellini’s art unsettles and disturbs the Symbolic organisation that subjugates women by exposing the vulnerability of all subjectivities. In her analysis of many of Bellini’s Madonna series, she claims that the artist has a grasp of the maternal realm before it was eclipsed by the Symbolic. Caputi encapsulates thus Kristeva’s claim:

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<sup>5</sup> This “phallic attempt” suggests that the abject mother resides at the nature/culture threshold at the very point where subjectivity falters so that motherhood as a social identity can only make its representation through the aegis of the phallus. This predicament of maternity is demonstrated later in this chapter through the relationship between Barbara Dawson and Kenneth Courtney.

As a painter Bellini invokes the maternal in two ways. One is through the use of light and colour which undermine figuration, thus putting into play the dissolution of subjectivity [...]. [He] also invokes the maternal through the positioning of his subjects' bodies [...]. [He] understands the artistic enterprise as a search for the very space of the lost-unrepresentable-forbidden *jouissance*. (Caputi 133)

In this way, Kristeva sees art drawing attention to the way meaning is produced and thus challenges the dominance of the symbolic control of language and "order." The challenge offered by Hughes's women is a lot more about action than esoteric works of art, but it is nevertheless visceral as they fight against the Irish strain of patriarchal dominance.

### **The Crimes of the Mother: *The Wrong Kind of Blood***

*The Wrong Kind of Blood* opens at the wake of Loy's mother Daphne. An old school-friend, Linda Dawson, asks Loy to investigate the disappearance of her husband. Dublin is booming, but, as he discovers, behind the façade are the same old crooked politics, bent local body officials, and organised criminal gangs such as the Halligans who have all the local builders and developers in their pocket. The closer Loy gets to the truth of Linda's missing husband, the more he realises he is entwined in the family histories of the Loys, the Dawsons, and the Halligans, and that the murders, abductions, and drug deals he discovers were caused by deals made, and murders committed, more than twenty years ago. At a more personal level, the story is also about Loy's search to discover his father, and Barbara Dawson's desire to repudiate hers. Barbara exemplifies the *femme fatale* as the monstrous maternal. At the other end of the scale is the idealised mother in the form of Carmel Donnelly. Between them sits Linda, Barbara's daughter-in-law, a faux *femme fatale*, whose crime involves symbolic mother-son incest.

#### **The Idealised Mother**

Carmel is not integral to the plot, but her idealised maternal femininity makes her important. Named after Our Lady of Mount Carmel, another name for the Virgin Mary, she is not only the Marian figure of patriarchal myth against whom all mothers

are measured, but she is also Loy's interpretation of that myth. As such, she devotes her life to her policeman husband and their four children. This shows in the lines around her eyes, the chestnut hair threaded with grey, and her clothes flecked with milk and children's food. Her home that she shares with her husband and children has walls full of children's paintings, holiday snaps, and family photographs; the few conversations she has with Loy are always interrupted by the cries and crashes of her brood as they careen around the house. She nurtures her children, provides a haven for her husband, and is indulgent towards his minor failings. Loy constructs her not only as the ideal wife and mother but adds to that construction the eroticisation of motherhood. He reads into her smile a half promise, deferred, but still possible, of unspecified sexual favours. Big boned with "wide knowing eyes and full lips," she has a smile and a way of looking "that made you feel you'd missed your chance with her, but only just" (80). When she asks if he has children, he shrugs, and she responds by noting that it is "Never too late for men anyway [...]. Although it gets much harder on the knees" (80). Her mild flirting, *double entendre*, common-sense, and more importantly her unattainability become, when grafted on to her Marian model of motherhood, Loy's version of womanly perfection.

### **The Monstrous Maternal**

Linda Dawson is the forty-something wife of the twenty-four year old Peter Dawson. She is licentious and at times a barely functioning alcoholic. She cried on Loy's shoulder on the night of his mother's funeral, "put her tongue in [his] mouth and asked him to find her husband" (5). Despite being warned to stay away from her, Loy is very quickly in her bed (23). Her alcoholism, her promiscuity, and reputation ignore the boundaries of respectable womanhood, and create a narrative tension that suggests she is the *femme fatale*. This perception is erased when after a few heady weeks with Loy she is found dead, "her corpse [looking] like some grotesque parody of the undertaker's art" (5). Her early death removes her from suspicion, nevertheless she remains a transgressive figure. Her sexuality and alcoholism die with her, but her role as Peter Dawson's much older wife point to a far greater symbolic infringement. Her marriage to a much younger man challenges the incest taboo and is complicit in preventing Peter breaking from his "mother" and identifying with the paternal order. This is her transgression and the crime she is punished for.

Unlike Linda, Barbara Dawson is really dangerous. She is an *ur-femme fatale* who kills two husbands, her son, and her daughter-in-law. Her age, her overt sexuality, and failure to perform as a fit mother all add to her construction as a *femme fatale*. She is mother, monster, murderer, and whore; as with all stereotypes of the feminine, she is defined by her sexuality. “When woman is presented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions,” and one needs to “recognise the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* 7). Kristeva believes that within men there is a primal fear of women’s generative maternal power and it is this fear that drives the abjecting of women (*Powers of Horror* 77). Her theory of abjection with special regard to the mother-child relationship provides a way into understanding the representation of Barbara as monstrous.

The process of abjection begins prior to the entry of the subject into the symbolic order. To be effective, this entry requires the repression of maternal authority and the education she provides the child through the bodily connections and intimacies in the womb and the pre-oedipal stage. This creates the split between the semiotic world of maternal authority and the paternal symbolic order:

If language like culture, sets up a separation and, starting with discrete elements, concatenates an order, it does so precisely by repressing maternal authority and the corporeal mapping that abuts them.<sup>6</sup>  
(*Powers of Horror* 72)

For the infant to make a successful transition into the paternal symbolic, maternal authority must be suppressed, since it disturbs the formation of the subject self. In the interests of preserving the symbolic order, the mother is constructed as abject – cast aside for the greater good of the symbolic order. In Kristeva’s formula the function of ritual is to reinforce the separation of mother and child. Creed, in her discussion on the ideology of horror films that feature the monster as female, posits that such films are part of that ritual. “Constructing monstrosity’s source as the failure of paternal order to ensure the break, the separation of mother and child,” shifts the blame on to

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<sup>6</sup> Corporeal mapping is a function of maternal authority. This mapping relates to and defines the self’s clean and proper body. “Through frustrations and prohibitions this authority shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 72).



the abjected mother. The failure is thus viewed as a refusal by the mother and her child to recognise the paternal order, and in Creed's opinion this is what "produces the monstrous" (*The Monstrous Feminine* 38).

The failure of the parental order to ensure the break between mother and child is at the heart of Barbara Dawson's abjection. Four separate narratives slide into each other to construct her as the monstrous feminine. The stories of Barbara, Kenneth Courtney, her second husband, Peter Dawson, and Linda, all interconnect and come together to create Barbara as a monster. Other bit players, including John Dawson, her first husband, George Halligan senior, who fathered her out of wedlock, and Loy's mother, are also complicit. Barbara's story is more than a history of murder. It is also about her desire to erase an identity that reveals her as the illegitimate daughter of a man who is the leader of a notorious criminal gang. Her story is driven by her need to create a subject self, not as mother, but as a respectable member of Dublin society. Barbara in fact has many identities. At the time of her first murder three of them intersect: first, she is a mother of the little baby Peter; second, she is the jealous wife; and finally she is her husband's murderer. Loy's later exposure of her as the killer of her son and her daughter-in-law extends her identity to include that of demonic mother, but of all of them the one she wants most to conceal is her illegitimate identity, a fact she denies to the very end. It is the abject that permeates her whole life and cannot be sublimated, or held at bay. She tries to displace feelings of unworthiness relating to the circumstance of her birth through her mothering role, her cosmetic regimes that highlight her sexuality, and her business acumen. These displacements, though temporally restorative, all break down in the face of her maternal failure, the inability of surgery to permanently hold off the aging process, and a business success built on deceit and murder.

Sex had been her way to power. According to Courtney, as a young girl, she would "let you ride her [...], when none of the others'd give you a decent kiss. But deep down, beneath the looks, she was rotten. And she's rotten still" (325). The catalyst for all the violence, the killings, and the corruption is provided by her first husband John Dawson's affair with Loy's mother Daphne. Infatuated with her, he murders Daphne's husband (Loy's father) in the belief that once rid of him he and Daphne could make a new life together. When she rejects him, he returns to Barbara,

confesses all, and asks for forgiveness. Her first reaction is to take him back. She had a new-born son, and his welfare came first. But her mounting frustration and anger focuses on the fact that her husband had murdered a man for love—not for love of her, but for the love of another woman. To avenge this humiliation she hatches a plan. She recognises a similarity between John and family friend Kenneth Courtney, whom she promptly seduces, and then persuades him to kill her husband. Nervous and afraid, he botches the killing. At that moment she recognises that she is the stronger one in the partnership. Resignedly she takes the gun and shoots her husband twice in the back, then twice in the head (129-30). The air of resignation points to a conflict of gendered expectations even in the committing of crime. She expected Courtney, as the man, to finish the job. That she had to take over alters their relationship forever. Nevertheless, such is her desire for revenge, she still goes ahead with her original plan to murder her husband.

In the cover-up, she and Courtney concoct an elaborate scheme for him to take the dead man's place. Transformed by plastic surgery and stripped of his identity, Courtney moves in with Barbara, and lives for the next twenty years as John Dawson. In this role, he is husband to Barbara, father to the young Peter, a role he never fully embraces, and titular head of the Dawson empire. In the variety of roles that he takes up, he acts out in a visible way the fraudulence and pretence that lie behind the conversion of criminality to respectability, which also infects the patriarchal position he occupies.

It is one of the weaknesses of Hughes' plotting that Courtney submits so willingly to the subsuming of his identity into that of John Dawson. It's never fully explained why he should do so. This lack of realism suggests this substitution may be seen as a symbolic working out of the demonic mother as the *femme fatale* trying to transcend her potential assignment to abjection through the paradoxical instrument of murder. The role of mimicry imposed upon Courtney may be perceived in effect as a continuing enactment of the symbolic death and neutering of the patriarch in the Dawson household, following the material death of John Dawson. His simple explanation is, "She had me under her spell" (319). In this way he excuses himself from responsibility and links her to a traditional representative of evil, the witch. Though surgery has helped him look like Dawson, Courtney has none of his

doppelganger's potency or power. Afraid of detection, he destroys all photographs of Dawson, and shifts his office into the family mansion, which he rarely ever leaves. In this situation, the power moves inextricably to Barbara. Reducing Courtney's role to an instrumental function allows her to claim his phallic agency as her own in the furtherance of her criminal career. Symbolically castrated, by the finale he is a melancholic and diminished man. In his last act, before Barbara guns him down, he reveals that she was old George Halligan's bastard. The revealing of Barbara's secret shatters the elaborate façade she has created of a sophisticated and successful business woman. Her whole history, the murder of her first husband and the manipulation of Courtney, gave her power, but they were not enough to sublimate an identity based on illegitimacy. After she put three bullets into him, she turns with eyes blazing to Loy and insistently repeats, "I'm not, I'm not, I'm not." We are told, "She keeps repeating it, a threnody of denial and shame, and a negation of – what? her birth? her life? (325).

If her string of brutal murders did not faze her, why should the facts of her birth, which are already an open secret, send her into such a state of obsessive denial?<sup>7</sup> Paternal failure to ensure a successful transition into the symbolic order may provide some of the answer. Creed, in *The Monstrous Feminine*, posits that identifying with the father brings the daughter reward: "She is recognised not as herself but in opposition to her rival, the mother [...]"(150). If, however, there is a failure to identify with the father she can identify with the mother, [that] "vaginal body, she imagines she is the sublime, [through the] repressed forces which return through the fissures of the order" (150). For Barbara there is no such return, her mother, as far as the text is concerned, does not exist. She is left a misfit with no place to go. Creed, however, suggests that if the mother is present, returning to her is represented as a return to the pre-Oedipal period of the semiotic:

The normal state of affairs however, is reversed; the dyadic relationship is distinguished not by the marking out of the child's 'clean and proper body' but by a return of the unclean, untrained, unsymbolised body. Abjection is constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal female flesh. (*The Monstrous Feminine* 38)

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<sup>7</sup> It was strongly hinted by Mrs Burke, a girlhood contemporary of Barbara, that everyone in Barbara's old neighbourhood knew of her illegitimacy and who her father was (195). Her son, Peter, also knew and it cost him his life (323).

Barbara is all these things, as she deliberately chooses not to identify with her father, the criminal gang boss, George Halligan senior. Hiding behind her mask of respectability, she threatens the symbolic order as much by her murderous and nefarious deeds, as by her exposure of paternal failure and its costs. It is noteworthy that all her victims are associated with that failure. Her husbands, through their absence or indifference, and her own natural father, through the shadow of illegitimacy he has cast upon her, are all judged guilty. Linda's role in aiding and abetting Peter's refusal to separate from the mother figure also makes her complicit in the rejection of the patriarchy's need for the child to identify with the father. Right to the end, Barbara tries to protect her "respectable" identity. Yet in denying Courtney his identity by organising his substitution for her first husband, she is able to extract some form of revenge against him and her first husband through their symbolic doubling as custodians of patriarchy.

Courtney's twinning with John Dawson meets with mixed success, but for the newly-born Peter it is a disaster. Courtney refuses to take up the surrogate fathering role, and Barbara is too preoccupied with the Dawson conglomerate. Their failure of parenting leaves Peter psychologically arrested. Over the years Barbara's attention towards her son fluctuates between suffocating closeness, conflict, rejection, and long spells of disapproval. Within this mother/son relationship, we can see the processes at work that act to construct the maternal figure as abject. Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror* that the mother/child relationship is one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free, but the mother is reluctant to release it. "It is a violent and clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power that is as securing as it is stifling" (13). The problem is made more complicated by the "instability of the symbolic function" in relation to the "prohibition placed on the maternal body" as a defence against incest (14). Hughes' text reveals this instability. Courtney's inability to represent the paternal role compounds the difficulty Peter has in separating from his mother. Without a paternal figure to gravitate towards, he evades the prohibitions placed on the maternal body by his marriage to a woman old enough to be his mother.

As Kristeva further explains in *Powers of Horror*, separation creates problems for both the mother and the child. The child needs to break free to secure his own

subjectivity. This breaking free, however, brings problems to the mother. The child “can serve as a token of her own authentication,” but it also confirms her position of abject (13). Thus she brings mixed feelings to the task of securing the place of the child within the symbolic order, because the child’s rejection or exclusion of her in favour of the father means that her already problematic relations to the symbolic order can only be resolved by her being made abject (13). With the subject’s entry into the symbolic, in the separation of the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed. In Barbara’s and Peter’s case, this is more problematic because she resists the repression. She sublimates many of her maternal “feelings” into the quest for power and, accordingly, her authentication is less dependent on the mother-child bond. The disruption caused by Barbara’s desire for agency means the bond is never fully developed and leaves Peter searching for a mother-figure.

The maternal body thus becomes a site of conflicting desires: for the child the choice is between the comforting pleasures of the maternal relationship and the “risk of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (Kristeva *Powers of Horror* 64). The threat to the stability of the symbolic order by being subsumed into the physical comforts of the mother is controlled by taboos, prohibitions, and ritual exclusions. The incest taboo acts to control the mother-son relationship. Kristeva argues that a whole area of religion acts to reduce this danger:

This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which based on the feelings of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother. (*Powers of Horror* 64)

Peter is always at risk of being swamped by his castrating mother. Her attitude to her son is made clear when, after his death, acting the bereaved mother, she calls on Loy. According to her, Peter had been living in the shadow of his father; “Every passing day, the boy would feel increasingly diminished by comparison” (123). Taken aback, Loy allows that maybe it was shock or grief, or perhaps the reality was “she did consider her son an inferior manifestation of his father,” in which case he was indeed

better off dead, even if by his own hand (123). The reader must presume that the “father” Peter is urged to emulate is John Dawson, not his reclusive and ineffective “twin” Kenneth Courtney. For all this, Barbara tries to keep Peter as close to the family business as possible. He struggles to break free of his mother. He first tries developing his own business, but lacking the stomach or guile necessary to survive in boomtown Dublin, he quickly becomes the victim of smarter and more corrupt operators. At the age of twenty-one, he marries the forty-plus Linda. By marrying Linda, Peter is subsumed into the bodily comforts of his “mother.” Using the unsuitable Linda as a proxy, he ignores symbolically the incest taboo, choosing to stay locked into a relationship with his “mother” rather than take his proper place in the symbolic order. Desperate, because of the collapse of his marriage and his business failures, he tries again to break free of Barbara by challenging her about the death of a local councillor. More dangerously, he claims to know that she is George Halligan’s bastard child. At this she becomes enraged and shoots him. Found floating in the sea with two bullet holes in his chest, Peter never gets to enter fully the symbolic order. His masculinity thus remains non-validated.

Even when he is dead, Barbara tries to control him. Her calling on Loy the night before Peter’s funeral is an attempt to make him look like a man forced into suicide by his own failures. In a clumsy attempt at seduction, she “vamps” Loy with heaving bosom and fluttering eyelashes:

Her eyes were large and brown, her aubergine lips wide and full: her skin was pale bronze and firm around her eyes and chin, and it shone with a pearly glow. She wore a black linen trouser suit over a black top that revealed a hint of black lace cleavage, stood about five-six in heels and exuded a sexuality that would have been potent in a woman thirty years her junior. (119)

Looking twenty years younger than her biological age of sixty-four, Barbara appears the same age as her new daughter-in-law. Her secret to eternal youth is that she “goes to a clinic in the States every summer, comes back looking five years younger” (13). This relentless drive for physical perfection, according to Estella Tincknell, reflects an older, half-remembered discourse of the Christian ideal, the perfect self, attained through ritual abjection, followed by redemption. The difference, however, is that

unlike the twenty-first century search, which seeks a perfect body, the Christian ideal being sought then was that of the perfect soul, as it is through the soul that man knows the spirit of God, and it is through the sanctified soul that he may enter blameless into eternal life: “In the postmodern culture there is no soul, so that any perfectibility must inevitably be played out upon the flesh” (Tincknell 93).

Gill, in her postfeminist *Culture: Elements of a Sensibility*,” sees this obsessive preoccupation with the body as one of the most striking aspects of postfeminism:

In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than (say) a social structure or a psychological one. Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity [...] it is the possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. (150)

Barbara’s assumed “identity” is roughly stripped from her when, leaving Loy’s house, she “stumbles on the concrete, and [is] instantly transformed into an old lady, stooped and frail” (125). The artifice of the “beautiful image” she had created for herself suddenly crumples. The surgery that was supposed to erase her old self in order for a new self to arise proves inadequate. Much of her subject identity rests upon her “assisted” beauty that is itself a gesture towards the sublimation of a repressed abject self-built upon illegitimacy. Her stumble on the concrete causes a failure in that pretence towards sublimation. Her aging body not only puts her outside the boundaries of sexual appropriateness, but it reveals the fragility of her subject self. Batting her heavily mascaraed eyes at Loy and trying to look forty cannot avoid the fact that the surgeon’s knife is not enough. Suddenly her chronological age rather than her physical appearance governs Loy’s attitude towards her.

At the funeral, Loy’s new perspective sees Barbara’s large brown eyes, and aubergine lipstick that looked so appealing only days earlier in a different light. Her large eyes become engorged, her aubergine lipstick now stains her teeth, and “she look[s] more than half mad” (172). The potent sexuality of a forty-year-old has vanished. The appearance of age produces a fluctuating boundary that alters what is a socially constructed position. Loy’s rapidly changing view of Barbara is consistent with Negra’s claim that one of the “most striking recurrent elements” of a postfeminist age

is that it celebrates the dissolving of traditional distinctions between youthfulness and adulthood “even while the disapprobation accorded to the aged body is intensified” (75). The suggestion that she is “half mad” also contributes to her abjection. By characterising her as psychologically handicapped, it explains the contradictions between Barbara’s history of violence and crime and the ideal feminine characteristics associated with real women. That she rose to the top of a construction empire, through a strategy of cunning, and corruption, gives her masculine qualities at variance with patriarchal notions of femininity. The whole construction of Barbara is designed to mark her as irrational yet she could not have carried out her scheme without a great deal of determination, and careful planning. To acknowledge the ‘rational’ side of her character gives her agency and threatens gender binaries. Having her madness revealed serves to diminish her threat and any notions of agency as part of a “real” woman’s identity.

### **Crimes of the Father: *The Colour of Blood***

Notwithstanding the chicanery, the pornography, the murders, the rapes, and the fire bombings, at the heart of *The Colour of Blood* is the unveiling of the conspiracy of silence that for so long surrounded violations of the incest taboo and the complicity of a Church anxious to protect its moral monopoly. *The Colour of Blood* involves an exploration of incest, the myth of respectability, paternal oppression, denial, and trauma. It engages with themes of child abuse, domestic violence, and female sexuality, but when the women involved move from figures of potential danger to victims, it strains to rewrite the *femme fatale* plot and becomes a critique of Irish institutions, female identity, and motherhood. In Hughes’ narrative, Irish identity comes from a cultural legacy of deep rooted worthlessness enforced by the English belief that being Irish is an inferior state. Exacerbated by the Catholic Church’s attitude that instilled a sense of shame about sex, which governed every aspect of Irish life, worthlessness became part of what being Irish meant.<sup>8</sup> The silence surrounding

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<sup>8</sup> This aspect of the Irish “character” is discussed between Loy and Counsellor David Manuel who declares, “We live in determined alcoholic furies of denial [...] but you can’t shake off all that [...] what is it the Catholic Church used to call its teaching, ‘formation’” (130).



sexual matters with regard to incest, child abuse, and the realities of paternal oppression is the background against which the myths of respectability are exposed.

Loy's white-knight character in relation to the theme of lost children, child abuse, and paternal criminality is established in the opening sentence: "The last case I worked, I found a sixteen-year-old girl for her father; when she told me what he had done to her, I let her stay lost" (3). The next case he works includes incest, sodomy, white slaving, murder, and gang warfare. Called to investigate a case of kidnapping, he becomes embroiled in the affairs of the dysfunctional Howard family. The three women involved, Sandra, who Loy falls instantly in love with, Jessica her sister-in-law, and Emily, Jessica's daughter and the purported kidnap victim, bring with them a voracious sexuality that leaves them open to suspicions of criminality. In fact, it is patriarchal sexual abuse that lies behind their deviant behaviour. John Howard, the "revered" patriarch of the family, was one of Dublin's leading and respected surgeons, but his incestuous relationship with both his daughters and his attempts to sodomise his son blight their lives forever so that the damage flows on into the lives of their husbands, wives, and children. The heliotrope, often called the bloodstone, with its magical proprieties that turn the sky red and make people invisible, becomes the motif that connects patriarchal sexual abuse and the resultant "invisibility" of its victims.

### **The Reluctant Mother**

Though not the central character, Jessica Howard is important; better than anyone else she represents the gulf between historic notions of the mother's role and postfeminist contradictions and conflicts surrounding maternal anxieties of identity and self. Written out of the plot very early, she angers her husband Shane by her promiscuous behaviour, and he kills her only a quarter of the way into the book. Her apparent "crime" is her sexuality; her real crime is her rejection of patriarchal models of motherhood and desire. Her overt sexuality disconcerts Loy; it not only offends his notion of traditional motherhood, but it makes him underestimate her and thus overlook several important aspects of the case. The photos of her, revealing lots of cleavage or completely naked, prominently displayed around the house, take him aback. Her apparent indifference to the fate of her missing daughter disconcerts him

even more. When Loy suggests to her that she doesn't appear too concerned about her daughter, she responds: "By her age I was living in Paris, I had lovers, affairs, an abortion, I took cocaine, and acid and I had threesomes" (19). In her boastful tone Loy catches the hint that perhaps mother and daughter are sexual rivals. In this his instincts are right. Emily is very angry with her mother: "What does she care about who I am going out with except to shove her tits in his face and try to fuck him like she does with every man she meets" (80). In her own way, Emily, with the faked kidnapping and pornographic photo sessions, is seeking to force her mother back into the traditional maternal role. Loy, too, is angry and frustrated with Jessica's apparent indifference to her daughter's fate. When he voices his opinion, she declaims, "I am not an uncaring mother, or indifferent to my daughter's safety. On the contrary—it's because I do care. I don't want her in thrall to the Howards, you see" (21). What Jessica wants is her daughter to be free of patriarchally imposed norms, not to become some *frau* whose only job is to raise children and keep house — a view Loy finds disturbing (21).

When she announces that the interview is over because she has to meet an important client, Loy turns on her and demands what is more important to her, work or her daughter. An equally angry Jessica tells Loy she has worked very hard to establish her business, then suddenly stops short when she realises what she is about to say — that she wouldn't let Emily's disappearance jeopardise all her effort. She then breaks down in tears. Torn between her own desires and her role as mother, Jessica is shamed into recognising her failure in the caring role.

Shortly after this encounter, Jessica is dead. No longer a suspect or the *femme fatale*, her presence serves to illustrate the tensions between historic notions of the sacred mother and the postfeminist anxieties surrounding the maternal role and self. On the one hand, Loy constructs her as a desiring sexual woman; on the other hand, he wants to reconstruct her within the terms of the Marian myth. His shaming her into putting her mothering role ahead of her career exposes the reality that, even in a postfeminist age, maternal subjectivity is an elusive principle. Loy's experience through his wife's and his mother's adulteries, described in *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, colour his thinking about maternal figures. It contributes to his misreading of the Howard women because of his unconscious acceptance of an imagined synonymy between

female sexuality and transgression. Their overt sexuality is the only evidence he needs to construct them as *femmes fatales*. If he hadn't let Jessica's sensuality and attitudes towards motherhood get in the way, he would have understood more quickly the cause of the Howard family's dysfunctionality and perhaps been able to intervene in the tragedy that ultimately engulfs Sandra Howard.

### **The Controlling Taboo**

Initially positioned as a possible refiguration of the classic *femme fatale*, Sandra exudes a powerful sexuality, enhanced by long slender legs encased in black stockings and a seductive "aroma of smoky salt earth and the sweet tang of spice" (61). Rumour is that she was involved in the death of her teenage lover, and probably killed her first husband's wife. Regardless, there is a mutual and instant attraction between her and Loy which before long leads to vigorous sex on the grand stairs of the Howard family mansion beneath a portrait of John Howard, the family patriarch. Loy misreads this as a sign of overwhelming passion, but for Sandra it is an act of defiance. Symbolically, she is trying to shake off her late father's malevolent influence and her shame for her part in their incestuous relationship. Their transgression of the incest taboo, however, is one between father and daughter, which needs to be read quite differently from the symbolic mother-son incest of Barbara/Linda and Peter Dawson.

Nancy Chodorow points out that the incest taboo function depends on the level of threat. Father-daughter incest does not threaten the male-dominated family; on the other hand, mother to son or mother to daughter would, however, represent a threat to male supremacy, since the father would become irrelevant to the emotional fabric which determines the relationship within the family. The incest taboo is thus a means by which the male-dominated family is maintained (132). Elizabeth Ward concurs. From Freud to modern sociological theory and throughout the field of anthropology, the mother-son incest is the 'real' taboo. Clinical data shows that it is extremely rare, suggesting that not only is the mother-son incest prohibition more effective than the father-daughter prohibition, it is, as Ward claims, the real taboo both in theory and in practice (185-87).

Kristeva's theoretical explanation, in *Powers of Horror*, is less succinct, but eventually by way of Freud's founding myth that establishes the centrality of the Oedipus complex, the specific coding of abjection that religion achieves, and their cumulative effect on the positioning of the speaking subject within the symbolic order, she arrives at the same conclusion.<sup>9</sup> As Kristeva understands it, the founding myth indicates the unconscious origin of the two foundational laws of totemic society, the taboo against murdering the father, and the taboo against incest. Kristeva, however, claims that this account does not really explain the basis of the incest taboo. What concerns her,

is not the socially productive value of the son-mother incest *prohibition* but the alterations within subjectivity and within the very symbolic competence implied by the *confrontation with the feminine* and the way in which societies code themselves in order to accompany as far as possible the speaking subject on that journey. Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night. (*Powers of Horror* 58)

If the murder of the father "is that historical event constituting the social code as such," the abjection of the mother ultimately comes down to fear of repressed maternal authority through the semiotic voice (61). Poetic language would then be seen "as an attempt to symbolise the 'beginning,' of an attempt to name the other facet of taboo: pleasure and pain" (61-62).<sup>10</sup> Kristeva then asks "are we finally dealing with incest?" Her reply "not quite or not directly," leads on to discussions on defilement, the poverty of prohibition, and eventually to the notion of maternal authority as the trustee of the self's clean and proper body. The focus is always on the maternal body, and any allusion to incest is defined in terms of mother-daughter or mother-son.

Kristeva's theory explains why incest with one's own mother is considered the greatest sin but almost by omission allows for a less stringent attitude to father-

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<sup>9</sup> In *Powers of Horror*, she argues, "The archaic father and master of the primeval horde is killed by the conspiring sons who, later seized with a sense of guilt for an act that was upon the whole inspired by ambivalent feelings, end up restoring paternal authority, no longer as an arbitrary power but as a right; thus renouncing the possession of all women in their turn, they established at one stroke the sacred, exogamy and society." (56)

<sup>10</sup> Poetic language is a visible example of the semiotic voice and is discussed at length in Chapter VIII on David Peace

daughter incest. Serge Moscovici, the French anthropologist, writing almost forty years ago stated:

The form of incest most generally condemned is undoubtedly that between mother and son; between fathers and daughters it is most easily tolerated [...]. Though exemption is not official, in most cases an incestuous father is seen as merely reprehensible whereas a mother is condemned outright. (111)

In twenty-first century, postfeminist Dublin little has changed. The silence surrounding father-daughter incest not only serves as an exemption but allows for the preservation of paternal integrity and power.

### **The Abused Daughter**

Love and lust colour every thought Loy has about Sandra. He knows she lies to him but he is in love with her: “I could live with this woman until the end of time” (228). She falsely tells Loy that her sister-in-law Jessica was abused by her father from the age of thirteen, went off the rails, was expelled from school, put in foster care, slept with anyone who was available, and finished up having a nervous breakdown. Loy reads this to mean that Emily is the real victim. Lacking empathy, he does not recognise that Sandra is trying to tell him something about herself. Even with knowledge of her history as the youngest deputy principal at Castlehill College where she left under a cloud after having an affair with one of the students, and that student was later found in the bottom of the sea in the boot of a car, nothing can shake him from the idea that this is the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with.

The truth about Sandra and the Howard family is not revealed until, besieged in a firebombed mansion (one of Hughes’ many subplots), she tells Loy of her history of sexual abuse by her father. He came to her bed when she was thirteen:

‘I was the first,’ Sandra said. ‘It was exciting [...] we’d go for drives and secret walks [...], I don’t remember what I thought about the sex...it was messy [...]. I felt so many different things [...] love, fear disloyalty, the thrill of the forbidden [...]. It got awful fairly early [...] then it became just disgusting. At first he’d bring me presents [...] then it became more about Mother not finding out. It ended after two years.’ (327)

Then one night she heard screams from Shane's room and there was her father trying "to do Shane from behind" (328). She attacked her father and forced him out of the room and for months she slept in Shane's bed to protect him from any further assaults. As she later confesses, this protection was not what it seemed. Part of her was saving Shane but part of it was jealousy. If she couldn't have her father, neither should Shane: "I felt I had been slighted, that when I sent him away he should have come back with a better offer, he should have taken me off on a white charger" (328). In this way, Sandra, through her passive aggression, sought to reignite the affair between herself and her father, and becomes the seductress. Frustrated, her father then started "visiting" the thirteen-year-old Marian. Everyone in the house knew what was going on, even "Mother," John Howard's wife. There were constant arguments between them, which got worse when Marian gave birth to a daughter. A distraught Marian drowns the child in the garden pool decorated with bloodstones, and, after hiding the body under a rock, drowns herself.

Dr John Howard, Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, was in his time advisor to several ministers of public health policy and part of the trinity of Church, State, and medical profession that contributed to Ireland's anti-sterilisation, anti-contraception, and anti-abortion laws. As Loy comments, these were Church policies that only succeeded because of "the enthusiastic participation of the medical profession" and, one may add, the state (205). Handsome and debonair, Howard was widely respected in the public domain. Privately he was a predatory monster. Besides sexually abusing his three children, and covering up the death of a new-born baby, he was a seducer of housemaids. A child of one union was Jerry Dalton. He and Emily become very friendly, but refrain from lovemaking because they suspect they may be related. Despite all this, John Howard's public reputation for probity was always protected. After his death, the family preserved the notion of his respectability by building several hospitals and clinics dedicated to his memory with portraits of him on virtually every wall. Sandra describes him as inspiring (68). She calls him a great man – funny, charming arrogant, but adds that great men have their foibles, then rhetorically asks, "Shouldn't they be allowed them?" (231).

This is part of her defence mechanism. By idealising him, her "seduction" becomes a love affair, not a betrayal. At one stage she even visualises that they could run off

together so “that he might be mine, not Mother’s” (327). Herman and Hirschman argue that this sort of idealisation leaves the victim of paternal incest trapped:

She is dependent on her father for protection and care. Her mother is not an ally. She has no recourse. She dare not express, or even feel the depths of her anger at being used [...]. She must endure it, and find in it what compensation she can. (270)

While buildings, portraits, and fantasies may refigure the reality of Howard’s behaviour, Sandra’s actions tell another story. As a victim of father-daughter incest, she reflects her traumatised sexualisation by entering a series of idealised sexual relationships, which, while designed to free her from her father’s authority, serve to reinforce the idealised bond which continues to dominate her life. Her “passionate” lovemaking with Loy under the portrait of her father says more about her relationship with “Daddy” than the lovelorn Loy. Her romanticised affair with Stephen Casey and her marriage to Rock O’Connor that seek to free her from her father’s malign influence serve only to reinforce it.

The affair and the marriage act out a symbolic incestuous relationship. Stephen is seventeen and his seduction followed soon after John Howard’s death. Sandra acknowledges that it was inappropriate, but her father’s demise saw her “long lost libido” return with a vengeance. It was totally unexpected, and for a few months she and Stephen had “an absolutely fucking brilliant time” (232). On his “disappearance,” she turns to the considerably older Rock O’Connor, like her father a doctor. He was very fit physically; they had a good sex life, he was volatile and energetic and unpredictable, but as Sandra ruefully notes, “He wasn’t this ... I don’t know safe harbour” (235). Her tone of voice suggests the marriage was less than she hoped for. In these two relationships, she reflects the legacy of sexual abuse by maintaining a cycle of dysfunctional sexualised behaviour that perpetuates the sins of the father. This is consistent with Hall and Lloyd’s finding that three-quarters of incest survivors had subsequent problems developing relationships with men, and these relationships were characterised by disappointment, fear, hostility, and mistrust. This is in part because, perversely, they also tend to idealise the men they do take up with and are almost inevitably disappointed because the legacy of sexual abuse causes problems with trust and intimacy that intrude on the relationship (60-61).

Despite everything, Sandra steadfastly refuses to blame her father. When he develops cancer, she looks after him and her aging mother, but it is upon her mother that she heaps her anger. While compassionate towards her father, she sees her mother, “or my fucking mother as I exclusively thought of her back then,” as a nuisance or worse. She worked hard to keep her mother from “either driving her father mad, firing the nurses, taking an overdose herself, selling the house from under us or otherwise stealing the limelight” (230). This anger reflects what Janet Jacobs claims is the “universality of findings that situate the mother as the focus for feelings of anger, hatred and betrayal on the part of daughters who are abused by their fathers” (15). Mothers bear the brunt of the blame because their abused daughters cannot reconcile the mother’s idealised role as the power in the home with her complicity in the incestuous abuse by the father (Jacobs 22). While denying her victimhood at the hands of her father, Sandra sees herself as victimised through her mother’s ineffectuality and her own disillusionment with a particularly Irish construction of maternal omnipotence.

According to Inglis, the Irish depiction of the idealised mother was culturally enshrined through the public/private differential that created the institution of motherhood. Though mothers had no power outside the home, they were, however, afforded moral power within by virtue of the Catholic Church, which required that indoctrination in the faith be reinforced within the family environment. Through the daily reality of the Church’s moral monopoly and its dominance through education, confession, and the home, the last through the figure of the mother, her sexuality was enshrouded and controlled. Inglis argues, “By allying herself with the Church in the moralisation and desexualisation of her children, the mother occupied a sphere of Church/state endorsed familial dominance.” Such a morally dominant position was, however, heavily dependent upon support from priest and Church and the effects of such compromise ensured that Irish mothers were judged good or bad, successes or failures, under a specifically puritanical patriarchy (*Moral Monopoly* 179).



## **Victims All**

Loy's exposure of the excesses of the monstrous John Howard creates an inter-generational account of sexual violence against women. Initially presented as potentially dangerous sexual predators, all the women of *The Colour of Blood* prove to be victims of a corrupt patriarchy. Yet at the fiery conclusion of the narrative in which nearly everyone related or associated with John Howard is stabbed, shot or immolated, the implied author leaves room for doubt. In the aftermath of the fire that destroys the Howard mansion, the dawn sky glows blood red and the reader is left with two interpretive options: either it signals a fresh dawn, or less propitiously the "gift" of invisibility continues to hide the sins of the fathers. In the first interpretation, the bloodstone legend sees death as a cleansing agent that heralds a new beginning. Evil is removed. Freed from the taint of John Howard's abusive behaviour by their example of self-restraint, which breaks the intergenerational legacy of incest, a new life becomes possible for Emily and Jerry Dalton. This, of course, offers small comfort for the women and children who died as a direct result of Howard's abusive behaviour. The other interpretation is to read the blood-red sky as representing the continuing triumph of silence. With all the victims dead and the material markers of empire destroyed, Howard's presence is conveniently obliterated. The death of all the key protagonists in the Howard family sweeps patriarchal crimes and corruption under the carpet and leaves no room for redress. It doesn't recognise the plight of those caught in the cross-fire, and there is no reason to believe that it will. Howard's crime is supposedly exposed, but legally, publically, and socially it remains shrouded in silence.

## **Mixed Messages**

Hughes' narratives contain many of the features of the classic hard-boiled genre while still managing to introduce elements of postfeminist innovation. His reworking of the form retains the sexism and misogyny of old that renders women absent or marginal, but also highlights the difficult position of the maternal figure caught between domestic duty and professional ambition. As a detective, Loy brings little new to the genre. Situating him in Dublin offers room for difference, but Hughes does not write

place with the surety of a Rankin or a Peace, and as a result Dublin brings no aura or particular purpose to the plot. Innovation comes in the maternal figures he uses to represent the *femme fatale*. By focusing on her sexuality, he shows her as the victim of a dysfunctional patriarchy rather than the narrowly constructed sexual predator of the popular imagination, but the move is fraught with ambiguity. The problem is that, having constructed his quasi *femmes fatales* as sexual adventurers, Hughes doesn't quite know what to do with them. Contained, commodified or punished because of their sexuality, they are unable to escape from patriarchally imposed models of motherhood and desire. As the only true *femme fatale*, Barbara Dawson gets away with it for some time, but is eventually exposed and destroyed. Hughes' decision to kill all the others off, even after making it clear that they are in some-way-or-another victims of a corrupt patriarchy, leaves the reader uncertain whether he is writing as part of a postfeminist backlash or writing a critique of women's place in today's Ireland.

His sexualisation of the mother modifies the *femme fatale*, which is assisted by the recognition of patriarchal complicity in the failure of the child to identify with the father. The lifting of the incest taboo, symbolically with the mother, and materially with the father, offers, especially in regard to the mother, a departure from genre norms. Hughes, however, still leaves the fundamental structure of the genre unchanged. His treatment of the incest taboo is indicative of masculine privilege. The participants in the symbolic mother-son incestuous triangle of Barbara, Linda and Peter Dawson all meet violent deaths. By contrast, in *The Colour of Blood* the daughters drown themselves or perish in fiery graves, while the perpetrator dies in his bed still respected by the public at large. The machinery of patriarchal ideology is revealed, as is its centrality to the symbolic order, but there is no alternative on offer. Feminist critics of the hard-boiled female detectives (Refer to Chapter II: "You're no more a detective than I am a ballet dancer") have long complained of this. While the detective may resolve issues of fairness and justice at a localised level, he or she never believes they will change society. When Brigid O'Shaughnessy first sashayed across the page, she was operating in the deep shadow of a morality that feared female sexuality would destroy the lynch-pin of society, the wholesome God-fearing family unit. That fear lingers on in Loy's Dublin. How else does one explain the womanly bodies which lie spattered along the way? The certainties that came with a state-

endorsed religion are no longer there, and it would appear that the only “known” is that sexual maternal women are dangerous, because they exacerbate the damage already done to religious orthodoxy, and destabilise the dualistic myths that rationalise the control of women’s sexuality. A particularly Irish version of victimhood as the “natural” position for women also appears to be at work. There is, however, enough of an interrogation of Hughes’ maternal figures to suggest that the conflation of criminality and female sexuality is no longer a reliable signifier in a postfeminist age. This, in spite of his production of the monstrous maternal in *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, which is, nevertheless, leavened by a degree of victimisation that includes her illegitimate origins and the trauma of an adulterous husband, is not an area where most hard-boiled narratives go. In going there, Hughes offers a critique of the place of the maternal in a postfeminist age and challenges, albeit tacitly or obliquely, the continuing association of female sexuality and *criminality*.

## Chapter V

### Deconstructing the *Femme Fatale* in the Works of Megan Abbott

The strange appears as a defence put up by a distraught self: it protects itself by substituting for the image of a benevolent double that used to be enough to shelter it the image of a malevolent double into which it expels the share of destruction it cannot contain.

(Kristeva, *Strangers* 183-84)

Megan Abbott's *femmes fatales*, bar-girls, and Hollywood lowlifes revel in the sleaze of 1950s downtown Los Angeles. It was a time when men wore sharp suits and snap brim hats, and women kept their stocking seams straight and their blouses well buttoned to better disguise their dastardly schemes and growing drug habit. Rather than the over-the-top parodies they could be, *Die a Little* (2005) and *Queenpin* (2007) are in the spirit of 1950s' hard-boiled, but told in a style that owes as much to the graphic novel as it does to Hollywood. The ideology that informs them, however, is postfeminist and postmodern. The detective is a figure of little consequence, the potential *femme fatale* is more working woman than temptress, and the only complete performance of her traditional role comes from a man. The virtual disappearance of the detective weakens patriarchal authority, and by blurring the distinction between good and evil, Abbott disturbs the relationships that equate threatening difference with abjection. Her *femmes fatales* assume narrative authority: sometimes they take on the role of investigator, or are twinned through the splitting and merging of their respective roles. Operating on both sides of an unstable boundary, this "twinned" figure" comes with a double face that makes polarisation more difficult to maintain.

"Othering" becomes difficult when everyone has a price, immorality goes unheeded, and men are as much objects of desire as any high-class hooker or B-girl on the make. Both the narratives examined operate in closed societies virtually untouched by the

law. This turns the key feature of the hard-boiled genre on its head. In Chandler *et al.*, the role of the detective is to find and stamp out the corruption (represented by the *femme fatale*) that threatens the “innocent or idyllic” status quo. Abbott’s women derail this notion, as they lay claim to a subject space that competes with the masculine imaginary. In their world, where the detective has lost his centrality, the victim is no better than his or her killer, and the law enforcement agencies that represent the symbolic order are so enfeebled or mired in their own domestic failures, that identifying the “other” is no longer simple. Just as the female detectives of Paretsky and Forrest have displaced the hard-boiled masculine detective, so Abbott’s dangerous women subvert the classic and *neo* constructions of the *femme fatale*. In Abbott’s fiction, women take the subject position; they also, by their attitude and actions, diminish the power of the law, and feed into and exacerbate historic male anxieties, which justify Plain’s opinion that the future of the detective and, by extension, the *femme fatale* is at risk (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 248).

Abbott freely admits her debt to Hollywood. In a lecture given at Francis Marion University, she claims that her first writing influences came from the Turner Classic Movies of the 1940s and 50s, which she watched as a child. She loved their heightened style, dark glamour, and high stakes, where women walked on the wild side, were larger than life, and slaves to desire. Given those influences, one would expect that her *femmes fatales* would be modelled on the roles played by Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, and others such as Lana Turner. This is not the case. They are closer to, yet different from, the *neo-noir* of Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1981) or John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction* (1994). Here Kathleen Turner as Matty Walker and Linda Fiorentino as Bridget Gregory are strong, sexually knowing women, who take the subject position, find a sap to take the blame, and they get away with it. Abbott’s women are more complex, and draw not only on Hollywood, but her own academic interest in hard-boiled fiction. An interview in *Cultural Impopular* takes up the theme. She notes the limited representations of women in both hard-boiled literature and film: *femme fatale*, victim, or occasionally the cop’s wife bemoaning the amount of time he spends at work. She determined to present women as real, complicated, and just as damaged as the men they associated with. Asked how writers such as Raymond Chandler and James Cain, whom she read

in her research for *The Street Was Mine* (2002), impacted on her prose, she responded:

I was aware writing it, that these books were heavily a world of men, and there did seem a ripe opportunity to write these kinds of books with female characters who were not *femme fatales* (or not viewed as *femme fatales* and defined solely by their ability to entrap men).<sup>11</sup>

Yet for all her desire to have her characters seen as complex with real jobs, such as teaching or nursing, rather than being judged solely by their sexuality and ability to ensnare men, they can't avoid the label *femmes fatales*. This is reflected in the promise of the covers of her books, yet Abbott's protagonists are not *femmes fatales* in the classic sense. Nevertheless, cultural memory and the commercial reality of publishers and reviewers conspire to keep the image alive. The lurid covers establish formulaic expectations and make it crystal clear that these yarns are not about Miss Goody Two-shoes. *Queenpin* features an almost naked woman on a ghastly pink cover that sells the reader a tale that is subtle, seductive, and stunningly violent. *Die a Little* has an equally lurid cover. A luscious blonde watches on as a man and a woman engage in a passionate embrace while the accompanying text tells the prospective reader that the novel inside the dust jacket is a thrilling portrayal of rival *femme fatales* — one a denizen of L.A.'s *demi monde*, the other seemingly immune to its dark pull. The dust-jackets are misleading.

The term *femme fatale* carries with it connotations of female sexuality as dangerous. This very naming of a woman as a *femme fatale* brings with it expectations of how she will look, how she will act, and her probable fate. Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) understands this as part of a discourse that enacts what it names. Calling a boy John, for example, sets him on a path which preordains that he will dress differently from a girl, have a different haircut from a girl, and be expected to act in a "manly" fashion. In other words calling him John becomes part of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Oscar Palmer, "An Interview with Megan Abbott," *Cultura Impopular* where Abbott points to the influence of David Peace, who appears later in the present study. In particular she singles out his approach to research when writing a period piece. "While I still read standard history books, I prefer the more tossed aside ephemera of the time which says a lot more about the culture than the so called "official history. [It's like] David Peace's approach" (3).

construct that makes him a man.<sup>12</sup> As Butler notes: “The naming is at once a setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (8). Naming John is thus a performative act that “demonstrates the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). John is a boy’s name, and as such subtly pushes him towards acting in a manner that befits a boy. John, as a name, thus materialises as an effect of discourse. This discourse itself must also be understood as “complex and convergent chains in which ‘effects’ are vectors of power” (187). In turn it needs to be recognised that the performative, of itself, is a political act because the “conferring power of the name is derived from the conferring power of the symbolic” (138). The word John carries with it the promise of the subject position. Likewise, naming the *femme fatale* confirms her otherness, and needs to be recognised as a political performative that is part of a patriarchal discourse that supports and sustains masculine dominance. Abbott’s females are complex, but readers, reviewers, and publicists, conditioned by the reiterative power of the performative, judge her on the ideological base that supports the *femme fatale* rather than the ambiguity that resides within the text. The grifters, schoolteachers, models, and goodtime girls who populate these narratives go beyond the boundaries the symbolic order deems acceptable. Contrary to common misperceptions, the transgressive women of the Hammetts and Chandlers are not truly transgressive. Their role is pre-ordained by the demands of a symbolic order and the need to reinforce male subjectivity. Abbott’s women offer a different perspective that challenges this predetermination, but nevertheless they cannot escape being filtered through the lens of hard-boiled fiction’s gendered history in which woman are understood only in terms of their representation of masculine anxiety. Abbott’s tough women are not the black and white figures of 1950s Hollywood; they embody a conflation of feminism and the gender fantasies of popular culture, as well as those emanating from male anxiety and self-identity. They wrestle power away from ineffective men and lay claim to a subject position that accords them agency within the world of crime. In the manner of third-wave feminist protest as postulated by Renegar and Sowards, Abbott has hijacked the term *femme fatale* by making it into an expression of female agency

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<sup>12</sup> Giving him an inappropriate name creates all sorts of problems as witnessed in Johnny Cash’s humorous “A Boy Named Sue.” It tells the sorry saga of a boy whose father names him Sue, “the meanest thing he ever did.” Girls laugh at him, boys snigger, and he spends his life looking for revenge. Finally reconciled with his father, he concludes that whenever he has a son, he will call him anything but Sue.

that forces people to think about words differently. As postmodern postfeminist representations of twenty-first century femininity, Abbott's women are scarier than ever.

Abbott's reinvention of the genre is tougher and darker than many of her tart *noir* contemporaries such as Sparkle Hayter, Laura Lippman, and Janet Evanovich. Her *neo-femmes fatales* slide into the subject position in a way that seems "natural" and "right" as they neutralise the detective and encroach further into the former male domain of criminality and violence.<sup>13</sup> The dominant cultural narrative is challenged by the conscious crossing of boundaries. Men are eroticised, objectified, and rendered weak or hapless. Women occupy the world of Marlowe and Hammer but offer a different point of view, and with the law playing only a peripheral role, they show little regard for the legalities. The disappearance of the detective who instituted the formula disperses and fragments the form and leaves it in the hands of the "other" it was supposed to suppress. Men become "other," as feminised objects of desire that are fought over and killed for.

This leaves little room for the classic *femme fatale*. She was a known quantity, identified by a sexuality that signified criminality and defined her as abject. The codes of the genre restricted her to the role of "other." After initially being led astray by her seductive smile or long legs, the detective eventually recognises the threat she represents and takes action to contain her dangerous presence. The four *neo-femmes fatales*, of different temperaments and style, who stride through Abbott's narratives command centre stage, and disturb any conventional ordering of sexuality as well as patriarchal claims to represent the symbolic order, thus making the identification of the abject more difficult. This multiplicity of *femmes fatales* takes away certainty by offering a range of traits that moves beyond standard characterisations and creates a degree of confusion when the traits don't fit the prescribed model. These women are not simple representations of good and evil: they combine a mix of adoring sister, dutiful daughter, and domestic goddess, tempered with cold-hearted fury, sexual abandon, treachery, and revenge. They break down the binaries of transgressor and victim, domestic woman and sexual temptress, aggressor and the passive pawn. They

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<sup>13</sup> Lauren Henderson claims that Tart *Noir* was originally called *Slut Noir*, but it was altered by Sparkle Hayter to *Tart Noir* because she felt Americans wouldn't respond favourably to the word *slut*.



do not “respect borders, positions or rules.” They are the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers of Horror* 245). They fit perfectly Kristeva’s notion of the abject. Yet, in a genre designed to demonstrate control over the abject, neither Abbott’s male nor female protagonists seem likely candidates for the sublimation that this necessitates. The female protagonists operate in a hybridised space, in part remnants from a male imaginary, yet perceived from a woman’s perspective and appealing to a female imaginary of empowerment. The narrator of *Die a Little* is a respectable woman who ventures beyond the realm of respectability and breaks down the security of patriarchal binaries through the duplicity she harbours within herself. The narrator of *Queenpin* is similarly ‘respectable’ but with little respect for the law or patriarchal values she slides easily over to the wild side. If they are contained, it is by other *femmes fatales*, not the representatives of the law. The result is there can be no return to the society that existed before their arrival on the scene, only the wreckage left behind by their excesses. Abbott’s women further undermine the genre and the constitutive aspects of the *femme fatale*, since neither they nor the detective can be fully encompassed by the male imaginary. Whether the *femme fatale* can ever be truly erased from that imaginary is, however, a different matter.

### **The “Inherent Transgression”**

Žižek’s notion of the “inherent transgression” would suggest Abbott’s women cannot escape the male imaginary. His argument, however, has its flaws. The female imaginary of Abbott’s world may not be able to deny its genesis in the male imaginary. Nevertheless, even though Abbott pays homage to that imaginary and its various fantasmatic constructions and disavowals, the narrative agency she gives her protagonists moves them beyond the boundaries of an exclusively male domain. Žižek, however, posits that despite getting away with it, the *neo femme fatale* remains a creation of the male imaginary and therefore cannot be a sign of feminine resistance. Both she and her classic sister are caught in the same ideological trap. He points out that far from simply being a threat to male patriarchal identity, the *femme fatale* functions as the “inherent transgression” contained within the patriarchal symbolic universe:

The “inherent transgression” refers to the notion that the very emergence of a certain ‘value’ which serves as a point of ideological identification relies on its transgression, on some mode of taking a distance from it. Ideology depends upon the ‘gap’ the symbolic order produces between itself and the subject as an effect of bringing the latter into being as a subject of language. Since there is no direct unmediated relationship between the subject and the authentic, true value, the problem of ‘belief’ takes on vital importance. But the very separation of belief and knowledge requires the ‘true believer’ must always be someone else. (“The Inherent Transgression” 10)

Žižek’s concept of the “inherent transgression” refers to the gap between the value and identification of ideology. It exists in the space between the values of the symbolic order and the facts of individual experience, and allows for a unity of ‘belief’ that is reinforced by the very existence of ‘nonbelief.’ This gap is “original and constitutive” and necessary for the functioning of the symbolic order. One example Žižek gives is the Clinton era compromise of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” that allowed gays to join the US army. It was strongly criticised because it tacitly endorsed homophobic attitudes towards homosexuality. This policy of public non-acknowledgement had a two-fold effect; it allowed the presence of homosexuality at the same time as it reinforced its threat. Žižek questions why such a powerful body as the US army resists the notion of accepting gays into its ranks. He concludes that, contrary to the obvious answer that homosexuality posed a threat to the “alleged ‘phallic and patriarchal’ libidinal economy, it is because “the libidinal economy of the Army community itself relies on thwarted/disavowed homosexuality as the key component of the soldiers’ male bonding.” It is the knowledge of the “flaw” within them that gives the group its identity and keeps it together (“The Inherent Transgression” 7-8).

The *femme fatale* is similarly constrained by the structure of the inherent transgression. Unlike the classic *femmes fatales*, Abbott’s neo models — or at least some of them — get away with it, but, as Žižek argues, getting away with it can’t avoid the fact that they remain a creation of the male imaginary, which negates any notion of feminine resistance. Both classic and neo models are thus caught in the same ideological trap. The classic *femme fatale* represents the male masochist paranoiac fantasy of the exploitative and sexually insatiable woman who simultaneously dominates men and enjoys suffering. This combination becomes the

fundamental fantasy of the all-powerful woman whose irresistible attraction presents as a threat not only to male domination but to the very identity of the male subject. It is against this fantasy that the male symbolic identity sustains and identifies itself, but Žižek argues in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (2002) that the threat itself is never more than a male fantasy. It is a false one, “effectively a fantasmatic support of patriarchal domination, the figure of the enemy engendered by the patriarchal system itself” (10):

The *femme fatale* is the fundamental disavowed “passionate attachment” of the modern male subject, a fantasmatic formulation which is needed but cannot be openly assumed, so that it can only be evoked on the condition that, at the level of explicit narrative line (standing for the public socio-symbolic sphere), she is punished and the order of male domination is reasserted. (*The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* 10)

The patriarchal erotic discourse creates the *femme fatale* as the inherent threat against which the male identity asserts itself. The “inherent transgression” also ensures that getting away with it rather than strengthening the feminine position serves to reinforce the threat by reconfirming the extent of the danger. Žižek extends this argument through the Linda Fiorentino character from *The Last Seduction* by identifying what he claims is the fundamental fantasy behind the *neo-noir femme fatale*'s construction. What the Fiorentino character does is manipulate that male fantasy by destroying any aura of feminine mystique. She transforms the sexual act into a cold psychological exercise that deprives her partner of any emotional warmth. Supposedly, her achievement is to expose the fantasy by fully accepting the male game of manipulation and beating him at his own game. Žižek, however, goes on to argue that she fails as a symbol of feminist resistance, because, firstly, she remains a male fantasy, “the fantasy of encountering a perfect Subject in the guise of the absolutely corrupted woman who fully knows and wills what she is doing” (10-11). Secondly, she remains caught in the grip of the “inherent transgression” that now explicitly renders what was once only hinted at.

He then goes on to argue that there is a way out of this ideological trap and instances the cinematic works of David Lynch with special regard to *Blue Velvet* and *Lost Highway*. In the latter, he compares the hyper-realistically idyllic world of small town “Lumberton” with its dark underbelly of murder, kidnapping and sadomasochist sex.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear the idyllic little town is a grey alienated suburb of banal lives and failed marriages. Instead of the choice between good and bad, represented by the detective and the *femme fatale*, the viewer has the choice of two horrors. With the fantasy withdrawn, the choice becomes “the aseptic impotent drabness of social reality or the fantasmic Real of self-destructive violence” (13). While the “inherent transgression” is a powerful argument Žižek’s solution seems to me to be one-dimensional. He doesn’t consider whether the *femme fatale* figure is sustainable in the postmodern age; nor does he discuss the impact the *neo-noir* model may have on a female audience. In only considering the male perspective, he helps the fantasy survive. It is a piece of misdirection that steers away from the issues of feminine subjectivity rather than addressing the social changes that have allowed a “stronger” woman to arise. My argument is that Abbott, through her narrative agents, borrows and intercepts the production of the male imaginary through their shifting and divergent identifications. Unlike the majority of their predecessors, who knowingly broke the law, Abbott’s *femmes fatales* give it, the law, no consideration. They are indifferent to the way the male imaginary constructs the *femme fatale*; no longer held by the grip of that construction, they are able to mutate in accordance with the released female desires. The “inherent transgression” may allow the male to enjoy his fantasy despite his fear of female agency, but it also serves to allow a different audience to enjoy a fantasy of empowerment and equality. A woman who has sex on her own terms, controls the money, and is above the law may be scary for some, but for others she is admirable. This suggests that in Abbott’s work there is more than one imaginary in play. In the male imaginary, the *femme fatale* may confirm the danger posed by “woman,” but this presupposes the universality of that imaginary without due consideration of the possibility of a hybrid space perceived from a woman’s perspective that while unable to avoid some form of identification with the symbolic order, nevertheless exists as a challenge to masculine dominance.

Abbott’s women are in the subject position. They are not the objectified women of Hammett, Chandler, or Spillane, and though clearly dangerous to themselves and the masculine order, they do not fit historic representations of the *femme fatale*. All four of the protagonists are in some way a blending of the bad girl, good woman dichotomy. This amalgamation of *femme fatale* and nurturing woman in the same and the doubling up of the dangerous woman in *Die a Little* and *Queenpin*, where each

novel features two women in a struggle for dominance in Los Angeles circa 1950, allow for an exploration of the fluidity of the female self through the creation of characters who live on the edge, or border, of what is culturally permissible. The central themes revolve around the abject within, as circumstance and desire for possession push all the women to the boundaries of their own morality. The question they all face is, “What you will do if you have to, if your back is against the wall?” They learn that “the hardest thing in the world is finding out what you are capable of” (*Die a Little* 237-38). “Finding out” is tough on the male protagonists as they founder in the wake of female revenge or sink to the carpet with blood pouring from their severed jugular, their macho image or air of masculine rectitude exposed as illusion.

### ***Die a Little: The Strangers Within***

*Die a Little* is the story of two women, one a respectable schoolteacher, the other a mysterious Hollywood seamstress with a murky past. Each in their own way is an amalgamation of the *femme fatale* and the domesticated woman. Lora King is a school teacher who lives with her brother Bill, an investigator in the district attorney’s office. Orphaned as youngsters, they are a very close and adoring couple. Into this idyllic world arrives Alice Steele, a chameleon of a woman who moves effortlessly between drug-pushing porn queen, 1950s domestic goddess, calculating schemer, and victim. She is the stranger in their midst, and very quickly she disturbs not only the established order of the King household but the relationship that exists between Lora’s subject self and her repressed “other.” Within weeks of meeting Bill through the stratagem of crashing into his patrol car, Alice and he are married and his devoted sister finds herself pushed out of their shared home and living in an apartment on her own. It is not long, however, before a worrying picture starts to emerge as Alice’s superb homemaking skills are disturbed by intrusions from her lurid past. Desperate to protect her brother from the knowledge of his wife’s sordid history, Lora sets out to investigate, and sparks an unspoken but deadly rivalry between the two women. Jealousy, obsession, and danger drive the plot as it breaks down the boundary between self and “other” and makes it difficult to distinguish the respectable school teacher from the hedonistic and immoral wardrobe mistress.

## Encountering the Foreigner

Lora's carefully controlled and self-serving first-person narration presents an idyllic picture of her relationship with her brother — she as the good woman, he the honest and handsome policeman. Their golden hair is a signifier of their goodness and closeness, but for her it is also a sensual and sexual experience, which hints at a relationship that borders on, but never slides into, incest. As a young girl and into womanhood, she used to cut his hair and just seeing his bristly yellow locks was a reminder that “he belonged to our family, no matter where we'd move or what new people came into our lives” (1). Hours after each cut, she “*would find slim, beaten gold bristles on [her] finger tips, [her] arms [...]*” Then she would lovingly and gently blow them off her fingertips one by one (2, original italics). For Lora, cutting Bill's hair is an intimate and bonding act that not only serves to confirm their special relationship, but creates a boundary that keeps others at a distance.

Alice's presence disturbs that boundary and exposes its instability. Her effect on the King household is profound. She is the foreigner in their midst and arouses mixed feelings; she both attracts and horrifies. She is life-enhancing and life threatening. In accordance with Kristeva's argument about the stranger, she reflects the way we feel about those parts of our self that we endeavour to keep hidden. Kristeva comments:

The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner; we are fighting our unconscious—that ‘improper’ facet of our impossible ‘own and proper.’ (*Strangers to Ourselves* 191)

For Bill, Alice is exhilarating. For Lora, she is a threat to the order she has been at pains to establish. Alice disturbs their sense of ‘self.’ As Kristeva notes, “The foreigner presents one with a potential loss of boundaries: the boundaries between imagination and reality” (188). The repressed ‘other’ that has held Bill and Lora in their “proper” place breaks free under the influence of Alice's malign, or perhaps magic, presence.

Depending on her mask, she moves easily between domestic goddess, fashion plate, sewing teacher, or porn queen opening her legs for the camera. The gorgeous clothes

she wears come with a tawdry history and signify the artifice behind her many reinventions. Her job as a seamstress at one of the Hollywood studios allows her to accumulate a wardrobe of glorious dresses no longer required by the stars. The most sumptuous was a delicate black velvet one once worn by Claudette Colbert. On Alice it “made her small chest look positively architectural, like cream alabaster jutting up from her wasp waist” (90). Just as her chest wasn’t quite what it seemed, neither was her wardrobe. The dresses were discards from the studio. Altered so often to fit various roles and various actresses, they had reached the end of their use-by date. In exchange for unnamed favours, the girls could take them home. Certain panels needed to be replaced because of “the variety of stains left by actresses, suggesting encounters had while still in costume” (20). Alice’s role of glamour queen is built around make-believe and illusion. The dresses were always props made specifically to lend “authenticity” to a particular role. Alice uses them to confirm her place as an exotic and sophisticated creature in the heart of Los Angeles’s deepest suburbia.

Despite her star power, once she is married Alice quickly becomes the ideal 1950s symbol of the suburban housewife, helped in part by liberal doses of speed. She cooks, she sews, and she entertains. Her house is always immaculate; she does neighbourly things, like taking a tuna noodle casserole to the new family that had moved in, or to the household with the sick mother. She goes to church with Bill and Lora; she brings gifts for the neighbourhood women. She bakes; she makes evermore exotic desserts. She organises luncheons, cocktail parties, and bridge gatherings, all the time maintaining her reputation as a matchless homemaker. As the queen bee of the ‘investigators’ wives, she loves it: “It was as though she had waited for it all her life” (23). As Lora observes, her sister-in-law in action, she wonders how long it can go on: “This fever pitch, this spinning, quaking thing before us. Forever or a little less?” (32).

The answer appears to be: “not long.” With a few drinks under her belt, her ideal housewife mask would slip, and she would whisper confidences to Lora that revealed a little of her past: the private “modelling” jobs or the story of her friend who bathed each night in rubbing alcohol until one night she stepped out of the bath and her then lover of the moment thoughtlessly lit up a cigarette. Lora loved the stories, but by Alice’s frequent retelling of them she demonises herself. In repose her face became

to Lora “utterly foreign, exotic and strange [...] like something someone I’ve never met, someone who no longer is.” Under the glare of a harsh lamp, Alice’s “eyes look strangely eaten through. The eyes of a death mask, rotting behind the gleaming facade” (16-17). Alice, in Lora’s eyes, gradually shifts from the exotic “other” to the face of death.

### **More than the Dupe**

Despite Lora’s reservations, Bill sees Alice as a bringer of life. He is a good man, a cop who had joined the force for a greater purpose than power or the desire to see action. Earnest and provincial in his tastes, he has a sharp jaw and straight-edged cheekbones, but amid all his masculine rigidity “lay a pair of plushy girlish lips, pouty and pink, and a pair of lovely and nearly endless eyelashes” — eye lashes so extravagant that as a young boy he had taken the scissors to them (13). His “girly” features and the passive role he takes in the sexualised cutting of his hair, which leaves his sister basking in the aftermath, serve to make him the feminised “other.” Mild and innocent, he appears to be the perfect candidate for the role of sap or dupe, but Bill is not in the tradition of dupes such as *Body Heat’s* Ned Racine (“You’re not very bright Ned. I like that in a man”), or *The Last Seduction’s* similarly blessed Mike Swale who first makes the mistake of marrying a transvestite then compounds that by complaining that the heavy breathing Brigit Gregory, who has reached into his trousers to check out his “equipment,” is using him as a sex object. Both men are greedy and dumb, easy marks for a smouldering look or the promise of great wealth in exchange for a small matter of murder. In contrast, Bill sees himself as Alice’s rescuer. Even when he becomes aware of her chequered history, he is prepared to give up his career and break the law so that he can protect her.

He has known, or suspected, Alice’s lifestyle almost from the beginning. Pals often warn the dupe to stay clear of the *femme fatale*, but Bill is obsessed and remains undaunted. His colleagues in the force make it clear she is different from all the other wives. They’d watch the way she walked, “hips rolling with no suggestion of provocation but with every sense that she knows more than any of the rest. A woman like that, they seem to be thinking, a woman like that has lived” (56). Tom Moran, a police colleague of Bill’s, seeks to reassure him,



“Don’t worry, pal, don’t worry. It’s not that they want her. It’s just that they have feelings – and they’re way off – but they have this sense that somehow beyond that knockout face of hers, she’s more like the women they see on the job, on patrol, on a case, in the precinct house. Women with stories as long as their rap sheets, as they’re dangling legs.” (57)

Traditionally, the *femme fatale*’s sexuality is a performance — an act good enough to fool any man wanting to be fooled. She claims that she gives Bill what no other woman can. She provides him with a model home, excitement, an interesting sex life, and the pleasure of having a beautiful woman at his side. In short, she provides the ultimate male fantasy. In return, she gets a respite from her former life. She gets a man who is smitten and can “make me shudder long after no man could make me shudder” (236). Dependent, however, on one’s reading, this can be an orgasmic shudder or one of revulsion. It may be a tribute to Bill’s sexual prowess, or equally it is the price she pays for the security he offers.

The application of Žižek’s idea of “inherent transgression” would suggest it could be more complicated than that. The first reading acts as an endorsement of the culturally sanctioned “good man” — a man who is special to his wife, honest, and true. It buys into the notion of marriage as a settling down that absolves or expiates Alice’s sins through her newly found adherence to the symbolic law. She reaffirms her position within patriarchal notions of sexuality and *jouissance* through the love of a good man. This reading situates both of them at a point of ideological identification that obeys the prevailing moral code. If, however, the “shudder” is one of disgust, it means that Bill has done more terrible things to her than the myriad of men who have used her and eventually inured her to even the worst of sexual practices and perversions. The “inherent transgression” allows the reader to stretch his or her imagination beyond the “official” story line of Bill as the ill-starred dupe/rescuer to its transgressive opposite in Bill the monster. It gives readers permission to indulge in some fantasies of their own as they imagine what indignities Bill may have forced upon a seasoned bar-girl like Alice that would make her shudder. The reader is free to read Bill as either saviour or monster, but permission to read him as monster is dependent on the presence and “acceptance” of the saviour model or official line,

precisely BECAUSE you know that you are as it were “covered” or “absolved from guilty impulses” by the official story line, you are allowed to indulge in dirty fantasies; you know these fantasies are not “for real,” they do not count in the eyes of the big Other. (Žižek, *Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* 5)

This double reading thus allows the reader to see the “public” man and get a brief glimpse of his hidden self and its repressed “other.” It also leaves room for Alice to be considered as a lost soul, a victim rather than a predator, and raises the question of patriarchal culpability. Brought up on Struggle Street, Alice moved house every few months to avoid the rent man, as all the while her mother eked out a precarious income from small film parts and dyeing the pubic hair of her various landladies. There was Alice’s first job at the chocolate factory for a \$1 a day, and her progression to the violent encounters with “clients” during “*the kind of dance you’re lucky to make it out of,*” which left her “lying there, body twitching, more blood with every spasm, more pain with every move” (200-01, original italics). The culpability of the men in her life is, however, minimised or ignored. As one of her lovers said, “She was awfully fun,” and followed with the disavowal, “She wasn’t really my type. There was always too much going on with her. Once you started talking to her she made you feel like the threads in your suit were slowly unravelling” (72). As she passed from man to man on the Hollywood circuit and they marvelled at her willingness to partake in every ritual humiliation, they could comfort themselves by believing it was all her fault. Thus the application of Žižek’s notion of inherent transgression, in all its variants, ties into the facts of Alice’s victimhood, and exists alongside the myth of the *femme fatale* to sustain the prevailing masculine ideology. Yet at the same time Alice’s victimhood intercepts the standard construction of the *femme fatale* as the “inherent transgression” by allowing room for a sympathetic female imaginary to place her beyond the formal boundaries of hegemonic masculinity.

### **The Repressed “other” Unloosed**

While Alice’s shudder may allow a glimpse of Bill’s repressed “other,” her very presence sets loose the dark side of Lora’s public face. Disguising her jealousy under concern for her brother makes her an unreliable narrator, but even while she paints Alice in the darkest of colours, she cannot resist her exotic pull. As Kristeva points out, “The abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverises” (*Powers of Horror* 5).

Lora is both attracted and repelled by Alice, who offers a subject identity Lora unconsciously desires for herself. No longer comfortable with her schoolteacher identity, part of her wants more. Kristeva explains that the subject weary under the tension of trying to identify with something on the outside, “and finds the impossible within, and that impossible constitutes its very *being*, that is none other than the abject” (5). She goes on to say:

There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact the recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (*Powers of Horror* 5)

Intellectually denying such a want, Lora nevertheless takes on Alice’s Hollywood camp-follower identity while steadfastly refuting any notion that it is so. Even though Alice repeatedly tells her that they are sisters under the skin and thus recognises her “terrible weakness,” Lora refuses to recognise that aspect of her subject self. She prefers to believe that Bill has been taken in by the scheming Alice, but the evidence of the narrative suggests that she is so conflicted by her own desire to possess him that she not only misreads but chooses to ignore what Alice instinctively knows about her. The battle for Bill’s affection hides Lora’s internal struggles with her subject self. What she doesn’t want to acknowledge is that in Alice she sees the realisation of her own desires. She is the alien face of the abject that both attracts and repels, that is both within her and without. The relationship between them exemplifies the impossibility of clear-cut borders between good and evil, law and order, and between the subject and its “other.” As Lora reads it, Bill must be protected from Alice. She is the abject who must be expelled, the pollutant that threatens to destroy them both:

“You think you can infect him. You think you have the right. You have no right. I can protect him from you, from it, from whatever it is that you have tried to pollute him with.” (225)

What Lora cannot see is that she is the one being polluted. Her carefully constructed role of prim miss, who sublimates her desires into domesticity and innocuous boyfriends, falters and she finds herself panting for a ride on the wild side. In her efforts to shield Bill, she finds herself moving ever deeper into Alice’s world. It is a world of glamour, sleaze, and corruption, and it fascinates her. It is as horrifying as it

is compelling: "It's like the world, once sealed so tight and exact, has fallen open" (130). Very quickly she experiences an internal conflict. She wants to protect her brother by finding proof of Alice's deception, but she is also drawn into the milieu of Hollywood names, fixers, drug dealers, and glamour that is Alice's secret life. She meets new men quite unlike the chemistry teacher who never got further than rubbing his rough lips against hers, or the insurance agent who would take her to dinner, followed by "an awkward searching embrace" in the front seat of his Buick (49). The Hollywood men are all glamour and sharp suits. Mike Standish is a fixer for the studio. He is the man who cleaned up after the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, the man who paid off the police so the star could avoid a drug conviction: he arranges trips to Harlem night spots so visiting money men can sample the exotica of dark skin, or escorts the studio boss's mistress to the film premier so that the boss can take his wife. He does all this with aplomb and a sophistication that Lora cannot resist. Equally attractive to Lora is Joe Avalon, a fixer of a different ilk. Want an abortion, talk to Joe, need money to pay off an irate boyfriend, or need dirt to blackmail a politician, Joe is your man. Want someone dead and the body made to go away, Joe can organise it. These two men become important to Lora, one as her lover and informant, the other as the man who can make Alice disappear.

Lora is never a neutral observer, nor does she ever concede that the world Alice has lived in is the fantasy she desires. The further she goes into this dark world, however, the more she finds herself to be like Alice. Within hours of meeting Mike, she is in his bed. Looking in his mirror at 2:00 am, her "face, neck, shoulders still sharp pink, [her] legs still shaking," she sees "something used, dissolute and unflinching," and asks herself, "How did all this happen so quickly?" (80). For the first time she starts to get an insight into her inner self, as she considers, but rejects, the idea that this may be the real her:

And it had nothing to do with him at all. It was if the girl in the mirror had slipped down into a dark, wet place all alone and is coming up each time battle-worn but otherwise untouched. (84)

It is this woman who plots the murder of Alice, who uses her sexuality to solicit information, who is in Mike's bed within three hours of their first meeting, who

comes to his house for “a late-night fuck after being on dates with other men,” who likes the rough sex, the vicarious thrill of trailing through brothels and rubbing shoulders with smooth talking killers (179). She becomes tough and devious, willing to use her sexual charms for advantage and plot murder, supposedly in defence of her brother, but ever more likely for the thrill. Even when Alice tells her, “You don’t have to pretend with me,” she feigns ignorance: “Pretend what?” Alice’s “That you don’t like the dark side [...]. It’s something we have both got in us” makes her angry. She forcefully denies it: “I don’t have it in me.” (241).

### **Whose Identity?**

By the end of the narrative Alice is dead, beaten to a pulp by Joe Avalon acting under Lora’s instructions. As just another unidentified body, she represents the ultimate abjection, the corpse without make-up or mask, the only clue a small card with the letters L o. Standing over the body Lora comments, “The irony is so rich to be painful. Whose identity — Lois, Lora, Lora, Lois — had Alice planned to wear, and did it matter?” (239). Lora misses the irony of her own situation. Alice, with her multiple identities, understands they are part of her subject self. She has no fixed referent; she can choose who she chooses to be, when she wants to be. It is Lora who wants to hold Alice to a fixed and stable identify to better distinguish between the good and evil that resides within her own subjectivity. Lora is both subject and “other.” Part respectable school teacher; part detective, and part Hollywood moll, she refuses to recognise her own darkness. She rejects Alice, but try as she may she cannot erase the memories of her own tawdry adventure. Her boundaries of respectability are lost, and the domesticated woman and the *femme fatale* become one as they occupy a place where patriarchal law and its representatives have lost their value. The space they move into allows room for the operation of a female imaginary through the suspension of the dictates through which the patriarchy operates.

## ***Queenpin: The Enduring Image***

More stripped down and violent than *Die a Little*, *Queenpin* also offers two strong women competing for power and position. They are both deadly in the traditional manner, and they have the *femme fatale*'s iron will to succeed, but from there on they follow different paths. The unnamed narrator is a young woman who keeps the books in a rinky-dink nightclub where she is "discovered" by Gloria Denton, a woman in her forties with links to the mob. Gloria sees the younger woman as her protégée and brings her into the criminal world of gambling, race fixing, and protection. Within weeks she has more money than she can stuff down her cleavage, but she was in with the fast money and wants more. She soon forgets Gloria's basic rules when she falls for a smooth but unlucky punter. The narrator's failure to follow Gloria's advice soon has her ensnared by a man who plays the role normally reserved for the *femme fatale*. In every respect, action, and attitude, he is, apart from gender, the *femme fatale*. Devious, grasping, and traitorous, he is defined by his sexuality, and in 1950s style his "containment" is brutal and swift, leaving the two women in a deadly contest for the role of Queenpin. In this contest, Abbott extends her reconceptualization of the *femme fatale*. She does this by showing the *femme fatale* as a "performance" that plays to the female imaginary, thus effectively displacing the detective, or any representative of patriarchal law as the anchor for her identity. Furthermore, Abbott's revision of the *femme fatale* brings a mix of mothering and violence to the performance that disturbs, and alters, the traditional role of the *femme fatale*.

The first thing the narrator notices about Gloria are her legs. They were the legs of a twenty-year-old showgirl – "a hundred feet long and with just enough curve and give and promise" (1). Her soon-to-be protégée, twenty years her junior, ruefully notes that her skinny matchstick legs were no match for Gloria's. The narrative's opening line, "I want the legs" (1), foreshadows the narrator's desire for a lot more of what Gloria has on offer than just her legs. It also focuses on "the most fetishised aspect of the *femme fatale*" and draws the reader's attention to the "immense durability of the image" (Horsley, "The Queens of Noir" 3). Like the image, Gloria has "been around forever" (5). Those legs suggest she is in the mould of the classic *femme fatale*, but like most of Abbott's characters, she is more complex than that. She brings with her the generic traits of the *femme fatale*, which Horsley describes as "flawless

performance,” along with the “steel: the class, inscrutability and lack of visible emotion” (3). Gloria, however, goes beyond traditional stereotypes by being nurturing and fiercely protective. Her fury when her “baby” is conned by the *homme fatale* leads to a slaying of such savage violence that even Mike Hammer would have quailed.

Gloria is a legend. She has the reputation of a killer and is not a person to be crossed. She is a trusted member of the mob. She acts hard to preserve her reputation for reliability and toughness, and has no trouble separating her private life from her public performance. At the casino she could pass for thirty. At the track she “couldn’t outflank the merciless sun.” Nevertheless, she makes no attempt to hide the slightly worn hands or the tugs of skin that frames the bones of her face (1). In contrast to many postmodern-postfeminist portrayals of the older woman, her age is seen as a benefit. Until the final breakup, her protégée admires and appreciates the experience that comes with maturity. Stories about her abound. One rumour claims that a stripper called Candy Annie crossed her on some deal, and Gloria took revenge with a cut-throat razor, gutting her like a fish. Another rumour claims that she boasted of having slept with every hood in town. One of them, affronted that he was not on the list, told her to put her money where her mouth was, which she promptly did with the assistance of every man in the room. One of the wives took umbrage, and after the excitement died down approached her, calling her a whore. Gloria slapped her around, grabbed her by the hair and snarled that she was the best in town, and had the diamonds to prove it. She sneered at the woman, “Your knees have rubbed plenty of carpets. Where are your diamonds?” Gloria remains mute on the veracity of these rumours, but when challenged by the narrator, she looks at her as if she were a fool: “That was Virginia Hill, [that] hillbilly tramp”<sup>14</sup> (30).

Confronted by this mix of rumour and fact, the narrator asks one of the mob soldiers “Whose wife is she?” The mobster tells her, “She’s no one’s wife and she’s no moll, never was, not even when she was fresh and tight as Kim Novak. They trust her.” He goes on to say that she was one of the few women who mattered past how they

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<sup>14</sup>See Mark Gribben. “Girlfriend to the Mob,” *True Crime Library*. [www.trutv.com](http://www.trutv.com). Hill was a real life monster’s moll. She was Bugsy Siegel’s girlfriend. Questioned by the Kefauver Commission in 1951, she claimed her income was not from the mob, but gifts from grateful boyfriends who appreciated her sexual prowess.

performed in bed (5). This appears to be confirmed by her answer to the narrator's question of whether she ever fell for anyone. The answer is yes, but never with anyone from the mob. Gloria thus has two identities: her mob persona and her hidden private life that she keeps completely separate, a feat that the younger woman is initially unable to achieve. This separation of roles highlights Gloria's *femme fatale* persona as pure performance, crafted to ensure her survival as the Queenpin.

She is, however, thinking of retiring and needs a replacement. She first observes the narrator at the Tee Hee Club where she works as a bookkeeper. Gloria visits the club regularly and quickly notices that the narrator is fiddling the books for the owners even though she knows their system is hopeless. Clearly bright, with larceny in her soul, she looks like a promising prospect. Gloria takes her aside, offers her a job that in a break from tradition puts value on a female's brain rather than her body. It's "one that'll make real use of that stuff I know you have upstairs." Then for the next two hours she lays it out. She is offering the keys to the kingdom. The narrator, however acknowledges, "I just didn't know where the kingdom was" (11). Already on a learning curve, the narrator watches how Gloria's every move looks, "like she'd thought through every finger lift, and the way she spoke, with care, in the same even tone all the time." She figures that what Gloria saw in her was something "plain, unshaped and ready for dirt." When Gloria offers her more in a week than she can earn in a decade at the Tee Hee club, there is only one answer: "I'm ready, and I'm all yours" (12).

What Gloria wants to do is reshape the narrator in her own image, and this nameless loner is willing to be shaped. In this shaping, the reader sees the artifice behind the creation of a fictional type that depends on looks, faultless performance, icy calculation, and lack of conscience. Gloria figures that the narrator already has these elements, but lacks class. To this end, she takes up the nurturing and mothering role. Installed in an expensive apartment, the narrator gets a fast education. They go shopping at the best department stores, and the narrator's ratty blond hair is dyed smooth honey brown: "Boy did she school me" (20). Gloria teaches her willing pupil how to dress: the way to look at the track: not standing out, but nevertheless classy. She teaches her how to carry a wad of cash and look like the sort of dame that earned it legitimately. When Gloria is satisfied, the younger woman is sent on her first



mission, laundering a suitcase of mob money through bookies at the local track. As she departs, Gloria offers two pieces of advice: “You can’t let your guard down. If you can control yourself, you can control everyone else.” And whatever you do, “Don’t fuck up” (21).

Operating as a team, Gloria and the narrator wash dirty money, cross state lines with stolen goods, and act as collection agents for the illicit money coming out of the mob’s casinos and gambling joints. The secret of their success is they don’t look like hookers or grifters; they look like a couple of classy dames. It is all going swimmingly until Vic Riordan appears on the scene. He is “all black mick hair and sorrowful eyes, and a sharkskin suit cut razor sharp.” He is also a smart confidence trickster, playing a long game to create an insurance against mob demands for their money back. The narrator first sees him at the casino as he is coming to the end of a winning streak. By the end of the night he is broke, but it doesn’t matter. She is already in thrall to his sexual magnetism, his sharp cologne, and his darting eyes. She recognises him as a loser, a chalk jumper, a “sucker bettor,” but this doesn’t deter her from going back to his apartment:

I should be ashamed. I should be filled with shame. That night right off he had me. There I was in his apartment, half past four. Nothing in it was paid for, not the chrome, not the leather sofa, the mirrored coffee table, the thick buff-coloured drapes, not even me. I gave it to him without so much as a steak dinner, a wilting rose, a smooth line. Let’s face it, he broke me because I was begging to be broke, his hands so hard on my shoulder, I couldn’t steer the Impala for a week without gasping for air. (45)

She is no victim. She is fully aware of what is happening: “See how quickly it falls apart if you don’t keep your legs together” (45). Before long Vic is proposing a fool-proof scam to fleece the mob. Naturally it would need her assistance. Besotted and seemingly out of control, she agrees. She knows it’s dangerous but carries on with their wild revels. “One night he ripped my \$350 faille suit from collar to skirt hem in one long tear. Fuck me, I was in love” (48). That “fuck me” is a “what the hell” moment that tells the reader she knows what’s happening and is going ahead anyhow. It works as a distancing device that signals a distinctive double perception. On one hand, she pays close attention to how and what she feels; on the other hand, she is the calculating observer fully aware of the risks and what the mob would do when they

finally hunt them down. She is out of control but aware enough to marvel at the sensation. She is powerless because she chooses to be. What she doesn't understand, and Gloria does, is that the classy sexuality that gave her power drew its strength from its performance, not its actual engagement. As Horsley notes, "Female empowerment can only be assured by avoiding any entrapment in a close sexual relationship" ("The Queens of Noir" 4).

Inevitably it all goes horribly wrong. The robbery is a fiasco. Vic flees the scene, and the narrator knows the only way to save her skin is by telling Gloria. When she hears the news, it only takes Gloria minutes to work it out. Vic has to "disappear" quickly and permanently. Here her roles of angry mother, ice cool *femme fatale*, and gang confidant conflate. At first it is the angry mother who dominates: "Listen baby doll, somebody hurts you," she said, "They don't get a second chance [...]. You're mine [...]." When they arrive at Vic's house, she confronts him: "You cheap clip artist. You think you got any business laying your flyweight hands on my girl?" Vic's response that she hadn't complained leads to more vitriol (95-97):

"You think you can talk that way, think you can manhandle my girl, knock her around, put the scare in her, beat her until she ponies up for you? Bruise her fine flesh? Well that's my flesh you're marking little boy." (97)

In distant echoes from Genesis's "flesh of my flesh," Gloria's "that's my flesh" lays claim to a maternal connection and it's the avenging mother who puts two shots into Vic. This departs from the normal *femme fatale* role through its graphic and prolonged violence. Gloria's interpretation of the role moves it from seduction and cajolery to an upfront physical ferocity that crosses into masculine territory. In the struggle that follows she stabs Vic repeatedly. In her final act before the bloodletting stops, she bends down and stabs into his face. With a tug that tears the last strands of muscle, she levers out his jawbone and sends it skittering across the floor. The killing over, it's suddenly back to business. Cool as ever she stands up and says, "Don't worry [...]. We'll find someone else for you to fuck" (100- 01).

This scene of blood and revenge, confirms Gloria's role as both a maternal figure and a monster. Compare, however, Gloria's "ease" in her role as frenzied killer with

Hughes' maternal monster, Barbara. In *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, the suggestion that Barbara is "half mad" is used to diminish any claim she has on agency, and any notion that agency is part of a "real woman's" identity. Gloria's frenzied attack is part of her performance. It adds to her "don't mess with me" reputation, but her rapid return to "cool" lets the reader know that at all times she is acting rationally in a world where the meaning of femaleness is not a patriarchal projection. The male imaginary is thrust to one side, and the female imaginary takes precedence.

In this imaginary, the *femme fatale*-detective binary is displaced by an evolved *femme fatale*, and filling her previous unalloyed traditional role is the *homme fatale*. In a sense they become Žižek's "competing horrors." Vic's role is untouched by domesticity, parenthood, or family. He is the temptor, a mix of seductive charm and dangerous criminality, whose fatality embraces both him and his "victim," who in this instance can be said to already occupy a not dissimilar role. The traditional relationship of the *femme fatale* to the detective as the conservator of the law is thus further negated.

Vic, as *homme fatale*, represents a growing trend in female-authored crime fiction. Frizzoni claims there has been a remarkable and well-documented change in the erotic representation of men in Western popular culture, first in the area of film and advertising, but increasingly and strikingly so in crime fiction authored by women (33). So much so she claims that John Berger's phrase, "Men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at," is no longer appropriate as popular culture now makes eroticised male bodies freely available for female gaze and desire. This trend has led to the development of a new character, "the Adonis, the beautiful, erotic male – often as a *homme fatale*," who creates an erotic tension surrounding the use of "will-she-won't-she" rather than the real physical threat of sudden death offered by the traditional *fatale* construct, whether *femme* or *homme*. The new model does not endanger the "heroine's" life but represents a "dangerous" erotic seduction that disrupts her sense of self and "ruins" her life. This, I would argue, takes the fatal out of the *homme fatale* and becomes, by extension, a further deconstruction of the traditional *femme fatale*. Frizzoni claims, however, that in Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series both types can be used together:

The two *homme fatale* conceptions can be combined. Due to the professional suspiciousness of the investigating heroine, doubts about a handsome man's capability for relationships may quickly give way to doubts about his basic integrity. This wavering between real and imaginary dangerousness makes the character of the *homme fatale* in female crime fiction particularly attractive from a dramatic point of view. (34)

This represents a move away from the female detective texts of second-wave feminism where female desire and sexuality were considered highly problematic in a male-dominated culture. The traditional construction of female sexuality exposed the inequality of heterosexual relationships so that the "main topics of the early texts often focussed on domestic violence, incest, rape, and sexual harassment" (Frizzoni 39). *Queenpin* ignores those male-imposed boundaries. Female desire has the freedom to take whichever course it likes. Lust or love, it matters not. Gloria understands this. Her "We'll find you someone else to fuck" is an expression that recognises and contributes to an understanding of changing gender positions, and doing so underscores the performative nature of the *femme fatale* role. Whereas the female detectives are trying to wrestle the moral high ground from patriarchy, Abbott's women are trying to refigure power within the criminal network, and in doing so the site of abjection becomes a space for new struggles.

### **The Missing Detective and Passive Men**

The generalised change in gender positions is exacerbated by the competitiveness and ruthless drive for agency of Abbott's women as they stand in contrast to the mainly feminised and weak men who inhabit the narratives. The standard detective has no place in Abbott's texts, the law is largely absent, and father figures are ineffective. In his original incarnation, the role of the hard-boiled detective was to restore masculine values and protect the patriarchal agenda. Today the detective, instead of providing security and stability, has become an ambiguous figure, and it is only the presence of the crime that gives coherence to the genre. In Abbott's work, he has almost disappeared. He is either a shadowy figure who can't be trusted, or an overgrown schoolboy playing social baseball and having a drink around the barbecue. The only non-criminal father figures are portrayed as weak and unambitious. Plain believes that the undermining of authority figures within the genre is building towards a crisis for the hard-boiled genre (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 247).

A policeman colleague of Bill King, Charlie Beauvais, of *Die a Little* is one of those weak men. A failure as a cop and a husband, he is married to a much younger woman, who is anxious to get pregnant. When she miscarries, he is so absorbed in his own disappointment that he fails to recognise her despair, and that Alice has introduced her to hard drugs. Before long she overdoses and dies in sordid circumstances. Unable to cope, he simply disappears without a word. The father of *Queenpin's* narrator is similarly weak. He fills the vending machines at the Tee Hee Club. His working-stiff lifestyle allows him to pay the bills and not much more. He gets her a job at the club because he is afraid that her last job modelling dresses for leering businessmen at Hickey's Department Store would lead to her "downfall." As she says, "My old man was never too bright, never saw the angles" (3). When she leaves home to work with Gloria, he sits sulking in his bedroom as she bids the family manor a "dry-eyed adieu" (17). This is not to be her last rejection of patriarchal values.

Abbott's law enforcement figures are equally diminished. The lolloping "schoolboys" of *Die a Little* are trapped in domesticity, and the sinister, but barely visible, detectives of *Queenpin* are most likely corrupt. In the former, we learn less about the cops than we do about their wives. We know they wear their hair tucked in curlers under their scarves, "bodies straining, or flaccid, pregnant or waiting to be." They come from places like Orange County and from families with sagging mothers and fathers with dead eyes. They iron house dresses in front of the television while the steam mats their faces, and children with sticky hands clamour for attention (56). Meantime, their husbands play baseball, scrap about football scores, old debts, sport and cars, and fail to notice their wives' growing drug habit, or unexplained absences. The cops of *Queenpin* barely worry the narrator. She knows that they are all wired the same, regardless of their different sizes and different scars. They may look at you as if all you were good for was "lowdown and lay downs," but most of them could be bribed (145). Their upholding of the law is conditional. As representatives of a dysfunctional order, they lack the "unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law" that is required if the abject is to be "hemmed in and thrust aside" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 16).

Thus in Abbott's sagas the law and its representatives have lost their authority. They stand for a symbolic order that can no longer control the "other." Plain's concern is

that if this trend continues the detective will become redundant (248). Only thirty years previously Stephen Knight argued in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* that the presence of the “detective” gave the modern form its cohesion. Before the detective appeared there were stories about the control of crime, but it was the development of the especially skilled individual that consolidated a pattern that, with some modification over the years, has served to satisfy and assure the reading public that through support of patriarchal values any disorder could be contained and disciplined (8). Plain argues thirty years after Knight’s comments that this is no longer true; it is the crime alone that holds the formula together. She considers the creation of the hard-boiled female detective, especially of the lesbian variety, did the damage. She, the lesbian detective, takes “the body and the concept of the detective to the edge of destruction,” by destabilising the foundational misogyny of hard-boiled fiction and the classical respect for law and order (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 221). Her sexual preference makes her the embodiment of excessive feminine desire, which in the tradition of the formula makes her a transgressive figure and by extension a criminal. She is thus both agent of the law and the “other” who disrupts it, and she embodies what Plain sees as the crisis plaguing the genre. The arrival of the lesbian detective and the relaxing of laws relating to homosexuality in most Western countries make these older representations of the abject redundant. Plain’s concern is what happens if continuing social change has the same impact on the feminised “other.”

What is certain is that the life of the detective, and the order ‘he’ represents, will ultimately depend upon the genre’s capacity to regenerate and reposition the essential body of the “other.” (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 248)

Plain’s argument, as discussed earlier, is predicated on the notion of the feminised “other” in the form of the *femme fatale* or her representation in the gay man, the racial “other” or the criminal as a necessary and fixed element of the crime story. Yet if, as she argues, the detective is not the cohesive element of the genre but the crime itself, why should this logic not apply to the *femme fatale* or her representative? It would seem that just as the twenty-first century has seen the detective’s centrality eroded, so too has the *femme fatale* reached the limits of her traditional construction. This can be observed in Declan Hughes’ postfeminist “transgressive women.” Having defined his

putative *femmes fatales* primarily by their sexuality, he struggles to attach any crime to them except that sexuality. Notwithstanding this, I believe Plain is being overly pessimistic, and this is proven by the elasticity of the genre in the hands of someone like Abbott.

## Where To?

The noir films that influence Abbott's work always came with a caveat. Those of the 1950s and 60s were constrained by the Hays Code and conventional expectations about the ultimate repression of the sexual, aggressive woman. The *femme fatale* narrative overwhelmingly played to popular prejudice by ensuring the defeat of the independent female. This was not necessarily the case in literature where occasionally, as exemplified by Paul Cain's *femmes fatales*, they got away with it in spectacular fashion, but in the cinema, repression of the transgressive female was the norm.<sup>15</sup> Abbott's shift of the *femme fatale* to the subject position allows no such stability or moral clarity. Whereas the genre used to offer certainty and reassurance, Abbott offers the contrary. In her representation, the *femmes fatales* are twisted away from their original source in the male imaginary and the narrative point of view shifts its identification from the detective to the *femme fatale*. So whereas originally Lora identified with Bill, her focus moves onto the *femme fatale* represented by Alice who both attracts and repulses her. Abbott's fairer sex lever jaw bones out of their victims, detectives play no part in detection, and the patriarchy is pushed into the background by transgressive women, who transcend binary formulations and subvert the gendered frameworks that underlie concepts of masculine activity and feminine passivity, negotiating a new, post-feminist stance that is characterised by agency as well as struggle. She understands the complexities and contradictions inherent in her subject position. Hers is a world where ambiguity is a by-word and concepts such as good, evil, right, and wrong are always slippery.

Abbott highlights the performative nature of the *femme fatale's* role and creates a space for her that, while recognising the influence of masculine dominance, allows for

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<sup>15</sup> Not to be mistaken for James Cain who wrote *Double Indemnity*, Paul Cain's 1933 *One, Two, Three* brings a light touch to the genre when the *femme fatale* "Mrs Healey" leaves three detectives battered and bruised and walks off into the sunset with the loot under her arm.

the existence of a female imaginary. Within that imaginary her abject status, like the rule of law, is suspended. This returns us to Kristeva's proposition that all borders are inherently unstable, as is the border between "I" and the repressed "other." Abbott's deconstruction of the masculine relationship with the law has also displaced the universality of the masculine imaginary. This, along with her women's tenuous connection to that law, makes it tempting to argue that with the law impotent in the face of abjection, a space is created that was never available to the lesbian detective.

Almost eighty years separate the publishing of *The Maltese Falcon* from *Die a Little* and *Queenpin*. In direct comparison to Abbott's women, Brigit O'Shaughnessy was never going to get away with it. As a 1930s-40s *femme fatale*, she was the fantasy whose ultimate defeat was a reassuring shield against male anxiety and fears about masculine identity in the face of feminist gains garnered from the results of universal suffrage. By the time Linda Fiorentino smoked across the screen in the 1990s, the fantasy of the *femme fatale* was beginning to fragment. Severely dented, the male shield now offers considerably less protection against the challenge posed by contemporary women. The twenty-year gap between Fiorentino's and Abbott's protagonists has seen more fragmentation, which lends itself to multiple significations and increases the potential for agency. The early twentieth-first century version of the "*femme fatale*" offered by Abbott opens up new subject spaces and categories of identification that leaves a gap between the classic version offered by O'Shaughnessy and the dangerous ladies of *Die a Little* and *Queenpin*. No longer easy to label, the postfeminist woman of crime continues her rewriting of the genre, and the fragmentation of the so-called *femme fatale* gathers pace.



## Chapter VI

### “Undecidability” in Stieg Larsson’s Construct of the *Femme Fatale*<sup>16</sup>

*The Millennium Trilogy* enacts precisely the double standards  
its discursive strategy seems to want to challenge.

Björk<sup>17</sup>

Although most of the postfeminist detective stories in this study have been commercially successful, Stieg Larsson’s *The Millennium Trilogy: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl who Played With Fire, and The Girl who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest*, is a phenomenon. Not published until three years after the author’s death, it has sold, by some estimates, over 80 million copies, and spawned three Swedish films that enjoyed international acclaim, plus a Hollywood blockbuster starring James Bond’s Daniel Craig. Part old-fashioned locked-room mystery, part police procedural, political thriller, courtroom drama, and horror story, it is an amalgam of many of the genre’s variations spiced up with a heady mixture of sex, violence, and gender politics. Its success, however, rests on the almost unique character of the androgynous Lisbeth Salander. Prominently tattooed, she is a forty-kilo punk rocker who favours leathers, and is a near-genius computer hacker. As hard as the male protagonist, Mikael Blomkvist, is soft, she is also a victim who inflicts terrible vengeance on those who harm her. Her kick-arse attitude and the feminist themes that course through the trilogy, while appearing to celebrate Sweden’s success in combining economic growth with a functioning welfare state and genuine equality in gender relationships, contribute in fact, to a critique that questions all of these much-lauded achievements. In managing to both support and undermine feminist goals, the trilogy disturbs the established order at its margins and leaves room for the

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<sup>16</sup> “Undecidability” is a term used by Derrida to describe a word that cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy. As David Bates explains, “undecidability” precedes and makes “possible the production of any of the determinate meanings that then had to be ‘decided’ for meaning to unfold in any particular reading” (4). In the case of Salander, her oscillating status as victim and avenger breaks up the possibility of defining her in any unitary or determinate fashion.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Stenport and Alm 171

re-emergence of a *femme fatale* who brings with her all the contradictions of the postfeminist age.

In extending the meaning attached to the *femme fatale*, Larsson creates a degree of “undecidability”: binaries appear and disappear, subjectivities fluctuate, the traditional symbiosis between detective and the *femme fatale* becomes problematic, and the only certainty appears to be Salander’s female duplicity. She is not the classic *femme fatale* of the nineteen-forties or fifties; nor is she the retro form as evidenced in Hughes and Abbott. Artfully presented as a twenty-first century model of female agency and accepted as such by the public and reviewers, Larsson’s figure, I will argue, is in fact a postfeminist update on the *femmes fatales* of the hard-boiled genre. She does not use sex or seduction as her form of subversive power. Yet in the way of the classic *femme fatale*, it is her sexuality that demonises her in the public eye and makes her the repository of criminality beyond rehabilitation. This demonising of her sexual practices is the deliberate act of a retrogressive patriarchy represented by her father, brother, and the psychiatric establishment, orchestrated by rogue elements of the State. Constituted as a dangerous sexual deviant, a construction that a salacious press supports with enthusiasm, she becomes the focus of male loathing and illicit desire. When it comes to larceny, like most *neo femmes fatales* she gets away with it, but unlike them she does not need a dupe to validate her agency. Kathleen Turner’s Matty Walker in *Body Heat* and Linda Fiorentino’s Bridget Gregory in *The Last Seduction* may be strong, sexually knowing women, who take the subject position, but they both need a front *man* for their nefarious schemes to succeed. Not Lisbeth Salander. She is always a contradiction. When to all intents and purposes she finally succumbs to the pressure and agrees to become a solid citizen within the symbolic order, her duplicitous self re-emerges and within hours she “arranges” the killing of her brother, while taking care that she cannot be implicated.

In a further blurring of boundaries, she is both victim and avenger, a multidimensional figure who is a “stranger” wherever her location. Though sexualised, demonised, and stripped of her rights, it is the State secrets she knows that are the real source of her power, not the dangerous sexuality which a compliant press would have the public believe. It is the possession of this knowledge that has her stigmatised, isolated, and

pushed into abjection in order to protect the supposedly vital institutions of the State. In addition, a different kind of knowledge reflected in her hacking skills, combined with an incredible willpower, allows her to resist any form of authority intent on controlling her. It allows her to destroy a billionaire by emptying his many tax havens of his entire fortune, use a taser and a tattooist's gun to humiliate the man who raped her, and gain access to information denied anybody except those with the highest security clearance. Detective, victim, enforcer, and disappointed lover, it is the multiplicity of her role as the nominal *femme fatale* that provides us with a different postfeminist analysis of female abjection.

Mikael Blomkvist is an investigative journalist. He and Salander share the role of the traditional detective, and in doing so confuse and destabilise the boundaries between the *femme fatale* and the detective figure. Blomkvist is a womaniser, but nevertheless a paler, softer figure than the average macho fictional detective. Salander's one-time lover, he remains loyal to her throughout her travails, but like her there is a doubleness about him. A seemingly moral and honest man, his character flaws are sympathetically treated, but they come to mirror those of the criminals he seeks to expose. His serial womanising has already led to his divorce, and only sporadic contact with his daughter; he campaigns against crooked financiers, and crimes against women, but remains silent if it actually threatens an economic and political structure founded on patriarchal dominance. He is a do-gooder with a serious purpose, but his collaboration of silence erodes his position as a champion of female rights. While following what appears to be a politically correct gender path, Blomkvist tacitly endorses the very crime and attitudes he fights against.

Nonetheless, a determinedly feminist influence peppers the trilogy. The four parts of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* open with epigraphs that signal the implied author's intent: "18% of the women in Sweden have at one time been threatened by a man," "46% of the women in Sweden have been subjected to violence by a man," "13% of the women in Sweden have been subjected to aggravated sexual assault outside of a sexual relationship," "92% of women in Sweden who have been subjected to sexual assault have not reported the most recent violent incident to the police." Never attributed or qualified, these figures could be plucked out of the air. Similarly, the four parts of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest* are headed by short discussions

about female warriors: women soldiers in the American Civil War, Anatolian women who are only allowed to lose their virginity after they had killed in battle, breast amputation among the Amazons, and the Fon women's army of Dahomey who several times defeated French colonial forces. These often gratuitous snippets serve to reinforce the feminist credentials of the implied author or Larsson himself. Eva Gabrielsson, his long-time partner, claims that when he was fifteen years old he witnessed the gang rape of a young girl which marked him for life, and led to his abhorrence of violence against women (Cooke 1). The problem is one can never be sure about the "facts" of Larsson's life. He died in 2004 at the age of fifty, leaving behind three unpublished manuscripts, and it wasn't until 2008 that the first of them, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, found its way to the English-language market. Rumours swirling around his untimely death suggest, among other things, that he was murdered to prevent his yet-to-be-published fourth novel from exposing the corruption at the heart of Sweden's ruling clique. His English publisher, Peter Maclelhose, scoffs at the notion of any conspiracy, suggesting that sixty cigarettes a day plus tremendous amounts of junk food and coffee were the more likely culprits (qtd. in Hitchens 1). Nevertheless, he never denied claims—and why would he?—that Larsson spent time in Eritrea training a group of female Eritrean People's Liberation Front guerrillas in the art of the grenade launcher, and that his work on a Trotskyist journal led to constant death threats. Or that he and Gabrielsson never married because to do so would put their address on public record and make them even more vulnerable to death threats from the extreme right. What we do know is that his Swedish publisher, Norstedts, invested more than a million kronors in promoting the advance copies of the *Millennium Trilogy*, making it the most expensive campaign that had ever been undertaken by the company for a debut novelist (Stenport & Alm 175). Name the rumour about Larsson and it will be on the net somewhere. Whatever or wherever, it all adds up to the package that is *The Millennium Trilogy*.

## *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

The original title of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in Swedish, *Mäsom hatar kvinnor*, which translates as *men who hate women*, is the central theme of the novel as it tracks the tale of a woman contained by State-endorsed violence in order to keep her silent. It is a commentary on contemporary Swedish society, which incorporates violence against women, a still-virulent Nazism (which features in almost all Swedish detective fiction), the failure of investigative journalism, and the moral bankruptcy of modern corporations. For all its good intentions and its highlighting the dastardliness of men, there is a subtext that belies the intent and suggests that the implied author is a man. His hero, supposedly a feminist fellow-traveller, lives out a male fantasy as various women of all ages and sexual preferences are grateful for the “service” he provides. These exploits belong in the realm of a male pipe-dream, yet they are unleavened by any irony or self-knowledge. The implied author may headline his sympathy for the feminist cause, but misogyny is always there in the small print.

### **The Story**

There are three intertwining stories. The first centres on clearing Blomkvist’s name when he loses a libel case after making allegations against billionaire financier Hans Erik Wennerström. Ordered to pay hefty damages and serve a three-month prison sentence, he is almost bankrupt. The second story begins when, after losing the case, he is approached by the lawyer of Henrik Vanger, a very wealthy retired industrialist, who offers to supply information that will confirm the truth of Blomkvist’s allegations about Wennerström. In exchange Blomkvist is to reinvestigate the mystery of Vanger’s granddaughter, Harriet, who went missing thirty-six years earlier. This investigation, in its basic story line, is a locked room or “cosy” mystery in the tradition of Agatha Christie. Larsson draws our attention to this when Blomkvist says, “It’s actually a fascinating case. What I believe in the trade is known as a locked room mystery, on an island” (208). The use of lists – mapping relationships, the logic of victims’ telephone numbers, and times of call – has echoes of Christie’s train timetables and village road maps (191-92). The third story centres on postfeminist fantasy figure Lisbeth Salander. A brilliant researcher, though more ‘Nikita’ than

Miss Marple, she is recruited to assist Blomkvist with his investigation.<sup>18</sup> She has been a ward of the state since her early teens, following an “incident” that has her judged as mentally incompetent and highly dangerous. Committed to an institution, she had resisted all attempts at rehabilitation, so much so that she spends much of her time strapped to her bed. Her record shows her, as “*introverted, socially inhibited, lacking in empathy, ego-fixated, psychopathic [...] incapable of assimilating learning*” (143). Though uneducated, once free of her enforced incarceration, her grammar is perfect, her French and English unaccented, she reads and understands complex financial documents, hacks into the most secure computers, and is a self-taught mathematician, who within a couple of weeks of picking up a text book is able to solve one of mathematics’ most perplexing problems, that of Fermat’s last equation.<sup>19</sup> Over the trilogy the reason for her committal emerges, as do the motives of the various departments of State determined to keep her incarcerated. Despite her small frame she is capable of dealing with any man who threatens or abuses her. Her vengeance is always excessive; a 120-kilo monster who tried to abduct her is Tasered in the groin, kicked in the face, and shot through the heel bone. Another villain gets nail gunned to the floor, another is whacked with an axe, still another has a giant-sized dildo rammed up his rectum, all done with grim satisfaction, and no remorse. The forensic skills she brings to Blomkvist’s investigations unearth a sadistic father and son, members of the Vanger family, who rape, torture, and murder young women over a period of forty years. She also exacts a spectacular revenge over a corrupt financier by robbing him of his fortune, then turning him over to the Mafia money-men, who had bankrolled his business for the purpose of money laundering.

### **Rape, Retribution, and Loss of Meaning**

Lisbeth Salander continues the path of evolution of the *femme fatale* by disturbing genre conventions surrounding sex and sexuality. Many of today’s fictional wonder women have her taste for violence. However, it is the handling of her sexuality, and

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<sup>18</sup> Nikita, is from Luc Besson’s 1990 cult hit film of the same name featuring a beautiful nineteen-year-old girl trained as an assassin by the French State. It was turned later into a successful American TV series.

<sup>19</sup> See “Fermat’s Last Theorem” in Eric Weisstein, *Mathworld* (web). Fermat was a mathematician who in 1637 proposed a theorem relating to the Diophantine equation and offered a solution. Unfortunately this was lost and for over three hundred years mathematicians worked on a solution. It wasn’t until 1995 that Andrew Wiles with vast amounts of computer power not available to Fermat, found a solution. Salander did it with an old text book, a note pad, and a pencil.

the ambiguity around the space she occupies, which disturb the genre. The rape of Salander and its consequence collapse the carefully constructed boundaries that give meaning to being masculine or feminine. This threat to boundaries and meaning is what Kristeva locates in the abject. Neither subject nor object, the abject threatens and “confronts us [...] within those fragile states wherein man strays onto the territory of the *animal*” (*Powers of Horror* 12). Thus the abject, by threatening the collapse of order, threatens the collapse of meaning. The crime fiction of the feminist and postfeminist years reorders gendered power relationships by fostering a growing ambivalence about the linkage between female sexuality and danger. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, this expresses itself through an equivocation that creates a dissonance between the “real” author and the implied author, and challenges the “givens” of the inherent transgression. Sex and sexuality are not matters that Salander gives much thought to:

She had never brooded over whether she was straight, gay, or even bisexual. She did not give a damn about labels, did not see that it was anyone else’s business who she spent her nights with. If she had to choose, she preferred guys – and they were in the lead, statistically speaking. (293)

Salander sees her sexual life as “normal” – most often it occurred on her terms at her initiative. She had fifty sexual partners from the age of fifteen, which translates into about five a year. This she considers “O.K. for a single girl who had come to regard sex as an enjoyable pastime” (211). Though she enjoys her sexuality, it brings out the worst in men. There is the rape by her guardian Bjurman, the predetermination of the police to use her bisexuality as proof of her guilt on a murder charge, the psychiatrist Teleborian’s tampering with her clothing while she lies strapped to a couch, and even the “saintly” Blomkvist adding her to his list of conquests with little thought to the damage it causes.

In all of this she is the victim, especially of the abusive and criminal behaviour of her State-appointed “guardian,” Nils Bjurman. He will only release her funds if she performs fellatio on him. Determined not to be abused again, on her next compulsory visit, she takes a hidden video camera. This time he wants more than oral sex. He grabs her, and before she can react, has her handcuffed and face down on the bed. Normally at this stage of any crime story, the hero or something or somebody

intervenes. Not this time. Tied and bound, she is subjected to brutal and graphic multiple rape. Her knickers are shoved down her throat. “Then she felt an excruciating pain as he forced something up her anus” (224). It was four in the morning before he let her go. She spent the next week in bed with pain in her abdomen and bleeding from the rectum. As she began to recover, she searched the internet, reading articles and theses on the psychopathology of sadism. She found one article that claimed “the sadist’s best victim was the one who voluntarily went to him because she did not think she had any choice. The sadist specialised in people who were in a position of dependence. Advocate Bjurman had chosen her as a victim” (227).

Salander plots her revenge, returning to his apartment, where she takes him by surprise, forcing a Taser into his armpit and firing off 75,000 volts. When he comes to, he discovers he is lying naked on the bed, gagged, his wrists in handcuffs and his legs spread painfully apart. She hunts in his drawer of sex toys and finds a large anal plug, then “roughly spreads his cheeks and rams it into him.” The duct tape that covers his mouth muffles his howls of outrage and pain. She then proceeds to show him the video she had secretly recorded of him raping and violating her the week before. She tells him that if he ever comes near her again this recording would go to the police, the press, and his boss. He is to free all her funds and write regular exemplary reports to the Justice Department, recommending her release from guardianship. Just as he thinks his ordeal is over, she leans over him and begins tattooing his body. For two hours, he alternately whimpers and howls. By the finish she has written a message which covers his belly from his nipples to just above his genitals: “I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST.” He lies silent in a state of stunned apathy (234-35).

This is not the stuff of the standard crime novel. By contrast rape – real or implied – has long been a staple of the American cinema, no more so than in the modern horror film where the rape-revenge story is often centre stage. Even here there are some conventions. Originally the revenge element is in the hands of the essentially decent fellow provoked into violence by the rape of his wife, sister, or virginal girlfriend. Carol Clover in *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) writes that by the 1970s women were starting to take their own revenge,



usually by the sadistic killing or castration of the offending male. More often than not, the critics were offended. *I Spit on Your Grave*, a 1977 film which still has something of a cult following, was condemned by critics. Clover cites Martin and Porter, who called it “an utterly reprehensible film with shockingly misplaced values. The scene where [the female victim] robs a man of his “offending weapon,” is one of the most appalling moments in cinema history” (151). In these films the audience is asked to identify with the victim/avenger, to feel her pain and humiliation and her morbid satisfaction as she returns the favour (Clover 150-52). Salander’s vengeance moves the action onto another level.<sup>20</sup>

In the Swedish film version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, the treatment of both rapes, Salander’s and Bjurman’s, is very graphic. In the viewing I went to, the audience’s reaction was especially interesting. Bjurman’s rape of Salander, viciously prolonged as it was, earned only an uncomfortable shuffle and gripping of the arms of the seats. Her assault on him with a yellow dildo, seemingly as big as a baseball bat, got a collective wince, which surprisingly came with an air of disapproval. There was no pleasure taken by the mixed audience in her action. An invisible line seemed to have been crossed. And it had. Often never reported, rape of a female is a power issue; rendered helpless, ashamed, humiliated, and angry, often her only answer is silence. The tattooing of Bjurman leaves him in the same situation. It takes away all his power. Raping a man disturbs masculine power at its very base. It collapses order and meaning. Žižek’s notion of the “inherent transgression” goes some way towards explaining the audience’s discomfort. The notion is that the very emergence of a certain value which serves as a point of ideological identification only takes effect when it is transgressed. The rape of Bjurman breaks, or ruptures, an ideological identifier of masculinity. Cultural beliefs are disturbed and masculine subjectivity threatened, as a male finds himself forced into silence, and his social and professional life destroyed. Rape of a woman, while frightening and humiliating, does not change the fact of her being a woman. It, regrettably, still sits within the settled borders of

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<sup>20</sup> The rape of Salander and her revenge are the subject of the just published (July 2013) *Rape in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy and Beyond*. The various contributors build on feminist theory surrounding rape and its representations in literary and visual culture, and the relationship between victimisation and empowerment, but apart from a reference by Aström Berit to Žižek’s “globalisation” there is no interrogation of the rape of Bjurman as a “fantasmatic support of male domination.”

feminine identity. Rape of a man by a woman, however, takes away his manhood. It challenges the cultural meanings associated with masculinity.

At the heart of this disruption of cultural identification is Salander's ambiguous role as retributive agent, and eroticised victim. From this position she calls upon the reader/audience to negotiate the rocky ground between the differing fears and fantasies of men and women. Our understanding of what is permissible is contained within customary boundaries, maintained through texts, images, and narratives. This framing, by default, inference, and silence, signals what is unrepresentable. Salander's violation of Bjurman changes that. By allowing him to be violated, Larsson disturbs the boundaries. He further disturbs these boundaries with the different reactions of Salander and Bjurman to the indignities forced upon them. She, apart "from the tears of pure physical pain [...], shed not a tear" (226). He, by comparison, weeps, whimpers and howls. According to Clover's maxim, "A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers" (13). Where does this leave the reader in terms of gender identification? Encoded within the genre are certain threats or terrors associated with the female investigator that, whilst frightening, are usually averted. In Salander's case, she is raped. More unsettling is the fact of the actual rape of a male character. The threat of penetration confronts each of Hughes' and Rankin's detectives and even Mikael Blomkvist, but it never eventuates. The action in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* breaks away from an agreed value about the constitution of masculinity. When the rapist is a woman, what does that do to gender identities? The brutality of Salander's retribution, I suspect, leaves the implied author with a problem, that of risking losing Salander's victim status. Over the remainder of the trilogy, it is her position as victim that comes to the fore, and her acts of vengeance become more "mainstream." Nevertheless, in the rape scenes, especially in the cinema version Swedish-style, several boundaries are crossed which have the power to transform meaning. One only has to think of the cinematic lesbian kiss. Once a rarity, demanding comment and disapproval, it is now *de rigueur*, and embodied in new social and cinematic codes. The rape of a man by a woman is currently considered unrepresentable because it threatens male subjectivity. If that threatened subjectivity becomes representable, as it does in Bjurman's case, it must be rendered through a new set of social, political, historic, and gendered norms. It should be of no surprise that Larsson sidesteps the problem in the genre's time-honoured

way. An assassin's bullet soon eliminates the "embarrassment" Bjurman represents to normative masculinity.

What does this say of Salander's ambiguous role as avenger and victim? The skill of Larsson is that he is able to create a figure who engages the reader at two levels. As victim and retributive agent Salander's besting of Bjurman makes her a flag-bearing fantasy for the feminist cause. At the other level, one that is rarely, if ever, mentioned, is that her complete routing and humiliation of Bjurman is exactly the role that the *femme fatale* is created to play, as the "fundamental fantasy against which the male symbolic identity defines and sustains itself" (Žižek *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* 10). Whose fantasy is she? Is she the feminist fantasy of the avenging woman dealing retribution to all rapists? Yes she is, but Žižek's notion of "inherent transgression" enables us to take a different perspective as well. The dream of the all-powerful woman may be a female fantasy, but it competes with the more dominant masculine fantasy of the "absolutely corrupted woman who fully knows and wills what she is doing" (*Ridiculous Sublime* 12). The "brutalisation" of Bjurman is the male fantasy of the powerful woman whose irresistible attraction presents not only a threat to male domination, but to the very identity of the male subject. In running two fundamentally opposed fantasies in tandem, Larsson creates an air of "undecidability" that provides comfort for both camps. It has the feminist camp uneasily cheering on Salander's rape of Bjurman without realising that his humiliation also provides the rationale for the fear and ostracism of women that tacitly acts to support hegemonic male identity. Similarly the feminist aura surrounding Larsson and his trilogy cloaks the casual misogyny that lives within Blomkvist who remains clothed in the privilege of masculinity.

### **Privileged Boundaries**

Blomkvist is a feminist sympathiser, yet his perspective is unwittingly that of the privileged male. Publicly and privately, he is a fighter for women's right to be free from exploitation and abuse. Yet he exploits women sexually, and is always able to make moral accommodations that allow him to quietly push his principles aside if there is some advantage to himself. Blomkvist trumpets his aim of preventing violence against women, but by the end of each of the three narratives that intention is

casually negated. In his hunt for the serial killer of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, he sells his soul to the Vanger family in exchange for a financial injection into his failing publishing company Millennium. He also helps cover up the identity of the serial killer with a sophist's argument that even he is uncomfortable with.

After his defeat in court by Wennerström, Blomkvist is close to financial ruin and his reputation is in shreds. A job offer from industrialist Henrik Vanger, who wants to learn the fate of his grand-niece Harriet who has been missing for thirty years, rescues him. Offered a considerable sum of money, along with the promise of evidence that will prove Wennerström's guilt, he can't resist. The search for Harriet uncovers a series of murders that point to Martin Vanger, the CEO of the company, as the killer. For over thirty years he and his father before him kidnapped young girls, tortured them in a specially constructed basement, then sodomised, raped, and murdered them. Even Harriet fell victim to her father and brother. Frequently raped by them, she eventually was able to escape and remain hidden for almost thirty years. Finally, with Salander's help, Blomkvist solves the mystery of Harriet's disappearance – she has been living in Australia – and clears his own name by revealing, this time with proof, Wennerström's fraudulent practices.

Much of his information comes from Salander. When Henrik's information proves useless, her hacking skill provides the evidence against Wennerström. Henrik knew, even as he promised the information, that it would have no standing in court. It is she who also comes to the rescue when Martin Vanger captures Blomkvist and enchains him in a much-used murder and torture chamber. Hung from the ceiling, naked and shackled, Blomkvist is about to be sexually abused. Martin tells him: "I've never touched another man as a matter of fact [...] except for my father. That was my duty. [...]. I've always wondered how a man tastes." He then leans forward to kiss Blomkvist on the lips and Salander bursts in, and saves him from humiliation and death. Her first swing of the golf club breaks Martin's collar bone, the second breaks his ribs, a third to his hip and a fourth to his shoulder blade disable him (408-09). She then turns to cut Blomkvist down.

In this account of Blomkvist's rescue from certain sexual molestation, the reader witnesses the defence of one of the boundaries of masculinity crossed in the rape of

Bjurman. When Salander was similarly in danger, no one came to her rescue. She didn't have anybody – police, state or legal representative – to solve her problem. Without her, however, Blomkvist would be lost. Why is it so important that he remains inviolate, while she can have all sorts of indignities heaped upon her? So embedded is the privileging of masculinity within the symbolic order, that the implied author struggles to avoid the social and metaphysical assumptions that such a system serves. In this system the rape of Salander, however reprehensible it may be, does not violate “normative” gender constructions. Likewise, Blomkvist's escape from Martin's attentions fits within such construction. “Real men,” however, don't get raped. The rape of Bjurman by Salander is the “inherent transgression,” which crosses the line defining acceptable masculinity, and in crossing that line also serves to reinforce the hegemonic notion of the masculine ideal. Salander's rape of Bjurman is not a win against the oppressor, but, using Žižek's words a “male masochist – paranoiac fantasy” that supports patriarchal domination (*Ridiculous Sublime* 10). As a particularly lurid extension of the male fear of castration it serves to justify male domination, and provide a further support for the subordination of women. The smoke screen of liberal feminism that flows through *The Millennium Trilogy* disguises its hegemonic purpose.

Bjurman may be a moustache-twirling villain, but Blomkvist, in his own promiscuous way, is also an abuser of women. His wife threw him out because of his on-going affair with long-standing lover Erika Berger, and he barely knows the daughter he abandoned. During the three to four months spent investigating Harriet Vanger's disappearance, he not only sleeps with Berger, but also carries on affairs with Harriet's cousin, the fifty-six-year-old Cecilia, and with the twenty-six-year-old Lisbeth Salander. Later, when Harriet turns up very much alive, he is quickly in her bed. The older women profess to understand Blomkvist's no-commitment approach, but Salander is a different matter. During their investigation of the Vanger case, she appreciates that he is content to let her be “herself”: “Dammit, he treated her like a human being” (355). Without fuss she says to him, “I want to have sex with you.” She reminds him that the research she did on him showed him as a man who could not keep his hands off women (356). His objections are feeble and they are soon in bed together. His affair with Cecilia tapers off, and Berger, in Stockholm for most of the duration, proves to be not a problem. The problem turns out to be Salander: “She felt

that she had never before in her life had such a trust in another human being [...]. She was in love for the first time in her life” (527-28). The feeling overwhelmed her and her “greatest fear, which was so huge and so black that it was of phobic proportions, was that people would laugh at her” (532-33). Needing to find an excuse to see Blomkvist, she rushes out to buy him a Christmas present. As she approaches his apartment, she sees him arm in arm with Berger: “Their body language left no room for misinterpretations—it was obvious what they had in mind” (532-33). Salander is stunned; she feels betrayed and within hours is jetting out of the country via Rome, to Israel and, eventually after a year, to the Caribbean. As for Blomkvist, blithely unaware of the crushing blow he has inflicted, he tries to get in touch with her but “cannot understand what had happened” (*The Girl Who Played with Fire* 13). Though he sees himself as a self-effacing man who understands women and sympathises with feminist goals, Blomkvist’s personal relationships have hollowness at their core so that he struggles to distinguish between self-serving aims and genuine empathy.

### Cover-Up

The cover-up of Martin’s death brings into question the implied author’s or his creator’s pro-women credentials. A lot is made of Larsson’s feminist sympathies. My strong suspicion is that much of his persona is a creation of publishers and their public relations departments. Sprinkling the novel with uncorroborated facts about the level of violence against women in Sweden builds on the feminist sympathiser persona, but as Stenport and Alm say, the novel is far from what American critic Maureen Corrigan calls “an unflinching common sense feminist social commentary” (160). Rather, they claim that,

[t]he novel’s international marketing and sales success make manifest that, as a near global artefact, Larsson’s work is fully enmeshed in the very social, gendered, and economic paradigms it appears to want to critique and that these paradigms posit contemporary Sweden as part of mainstream Western culture rather than as exceptional. (Stenport and Alm 160)

Stenport and Alm make a very important point. Commercial imperatives shape our understanding of the trilogy's feminism. Larsson’s early death gave the public relations and advertising teams a blank canvas to work on. He is their creation. He

became a fearless fighter for feminism, so much so that he risked death from aggrieved fascists and neo-Nazis. His death, when it did come, became “mysterious,” rather than a routine heart attack. This public relations persona is the back-story that drives and colours perceptions of *Millennium Trilogy*. This marketing drive obscures the “undecidability” of the texts. Its messages miss the ambiguity of the feminist fantasy figure who could morph into the *femme fatale*, or of the novels’ overt feminism that very often hides the attitudes and priorities of a benign patriarchy that is wrested out of the demise of its more lethal agents. The power of the marketing covers up, or misses, the ambivalence that resides within the texts. It brings a dimension to the reading experience that “prepares” and misdirects the reader. I make this claim not from a flight of fancy, but from twenty years of close working with advertising and public relations companies at the top level. I can bear witness to how little it costs to influence the news, and get your “story” on the front page or as the lead story on prime time television.<sup>21</sup> A trawl through press releases and articles relating to the trilogy reveals an easily recognisable process of myth building according to the public relations manual. With this understanding of the construction of Larsson’s feminism, the cover-up at the end of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* and the trajectory of the rest of the trilogy leave room to believe that both the real and implied author are not quite the champions of feminism that we are led to believe. It may be as Stephen Heath said some twenty-five years ago that “men’s relationship to feminism is an impossible one”:

[It is women’s] voices and actions not ours: no matter how “sincere,” “sympathetic” or whatever, we are always also in a male position which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation, everything precisely that is being challenged, that has to be altered. Women are the subjects of feminism, its initiators, its makers, its force; the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of that subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism—to be a feminist—is then only also the last feint in the long history of *their* colonisation. (Heath 1)

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<sup>21</sup> For twenty years I was MD of a company with a turnover of one hundred and twenty million dollars. The more we came to recognise the effectiveness of a public relations approach; it became a more important part of our six-million-dollar promotional budget. On one occasion, we opened a new store in Lower Hutt and our public relations company “arranged” that the event led TV1’s news that night. Much as I considered this a coup, it also cemented my increasingly cynical view of the so-called news.

Salander's aggressiveness, her capacity to overwhelm men through her fighting skills, and the headlining of feminist "facts," are a feint by Larsson, or the implied author, to suppress reader recognition that the patriarchy is quietly reasserting itself. It requires a sleight of hand, that has Salander gradually brought towards a normative femininity to better hide her true role as *femme fatale*. Her tacit acceptance of Blomkvist's abandonment of principle, when asked by Henrik Vanger not to publish the facts of Martin's crimes, or write anything about Harriet is the first sign of her "normalisation." Asked to name his price, Blomkvist, after a short nominal protest, caves in. He vacillates between different obligations; "I don't intend to hang Harriet out to dry, but *somebody* has to say *something* about the women who died [...]. Who is going to speak up on their behalf?" (460). Salander's response, as she tries to distinguish between victimizers and victim, is less qualified: "If Martin Vanger were alive at this moment, I would hang him out to dry" (461). She then says that given a choice on Martin's fate she would send every detail of the case to the major newspapers and media outlets, throw him into his own torture chamber, stick needles through his balls, then let him rot. "Unfortunately he is dead." She then turns to Blomkvist and says, "Which is worse – the fact that Martin raped [Harriet] out in the cabin or that you are going to do it in print?" (461). Blomkvist sits mute, unable to return her gaze. She then suggests that the Vanger Corporation seek out all the families of girls known to be victims of Martin and recompense them, on an understanding of silence, with what she calls suitable compensation. On top of this, the Corporation is to donate two million kronor annually in perpetuity to the National Organisation for Women's Crisis Centres. Throughout this, Blomkvist sits his head bowed in shame; he who had lambasted his colleagues for not publishing the truth about Wennerström is now involved in a vast cover-up of major crimes against women: kidnapping, murder, rape, torture, and incest. His decision not to bring the crimes against women into the public arena shows him to be as morally and financially compromised as those he had railed against. Implicit in this is a critique of the limits of male feminism. The novel reveals what Blomkvist suppresses, including the fact of his suppression, and thus engages in an exposure that escapes the fictional world it constructs, and adds to the undecidability of its feminist credentials.

Considering her history, Salander's acquiescence is just as surprising. Only days earlier she had called Harriet a "bitch" for doing nothing: "If she had done something



in 1966, Martin Vanger couldn't have kept killing and raping for thirty-seven years" (448). What the reader is witnessing is a shift of responsibility, made more subtle by the implied author putting words into the mouth of a woman, thus shifting the onus from the perpetrator to the victim. If a woman fails to act, doesn't scream, doesn't kick the perpetrator in the testicles, or doesn't report it to the authorities, she becomes compliant. By doing nothing to stop it, *ipso facto* in the words of the old cliché, she is asking for it. Harriet, rather than bringing the facts of her rape to the attention of the state authorities, fled the country. Salander similarly did not report Bjurman's abuse even though she had incontrovertible evidence. This suggests a dissonance between Sweden's self-portrayals as a female-friendly environment and a reality that is much less sympathetic.

Understandably, Salander has little faith in the institutions of State and their record of protecting female rights, but along with this is the matter of her being 'in love' with Blomkvist. She went into the relationship with eyes wide open, but her lack of emotional contact as a child, teenager, and adult makes her very vulnerable. That he is polite to her, doesn't enquire into her past, and treats her as an adult, are more than enough. It is she who sets the running; it is she who invites herself into Blomkvist's bed. He suggests it would be better if they were just friends, and weakly objects that to have sex would spoil their friendship. He then claims that he is too old for her: "[You] can't ignore our age difference. It's no sort of basis for a lasting friendship" (455). For all his show of reluctance, and in full knowledge that Salander is an emotionally stunted and damaged woman, Blomkvist embarks on a two-month affair with her. He seems to have an instinct for vulnerable woman when it comes to his libido. Besides Salander, there is Cecilia Vanger, whose marriage fell apart because of her family's hostility. Starved of sexual and emotional contact, she too virtually invites herself into his bed. Afterwards she is the grateful older woman: "Thank you it's been a long time, you're not bad." For him that sort of response "was always childishly satisfying" (207). That single sentence tells the reader that easy conquests are part of Blomkvist's *modus operandi*, a form of abuse predicated on the vulnerability of his "willing" victims. By the end of the novel, Blomkvist and Salander are no longer lovers or even friends. Salander, despite her denials that she didn't expect a lasting relationship, is shattered when it becomes obvious that he is still carrying on his relationship with Berger. Her disappointment is so deep that it is

well into the final leg of the trilogy before she allows any contact between them, and this only by text or email. Her long sulk suggests there is a reservoir of femininity beneath her armour plating which moves her closer to gender norms. Her blood lust, however, is just below the surface. By the second part of the trilogy, she is back to her eye gouging, testicle-kicking best.

In contrast, Blomkvist's "failings" are minimised. Distancing him from the negotiations softens his "cave-in" to Henrik Vanger. Deferring to Salander moves the blame for the decision further away from him. The swift refocusing on the Wennerström affair when Vanger's information turns out to be useless also draws attention away from the murdered women. It disappears entirely when Salander breaks into Wennerström's computer and steals all his records. This gives Blomkvist all the information he needs. The trawl through Wennerström's records also reveals how he "persuaded" his twenty-two-year-old waitress girlfriend to have an abortion by water-boarding her until she agreed. Salander's retaliation for this is to hack into his computer and empty his numerous tax-haven bank accounts, and after a suitable period, by which time his Mafia creditors are becoming increasingly irritated, to send them the address of his hide-out, and with grim delight to enjoy the notice of his death in the Swedish dailies. She not only ruins him financially, but also condemns him to death. His callous disregard of an ex-girlfriend explains some of Salander's motivation, but her desire to protect Blomkvist's reputation is the real driver behind her action. Subsumed into the cause of male dominance by the privileging of Blomkvist's reputation, she loses sight of the interest of hundreds of murdered young girls and the grief of their families. The lone waitress is avenged, but hundreds of murdered women are short-changed.

The original focus of the novel, the violent abuse of women, gradually loses its importance. In the end it is far less significant than matters associated with big business and money. The destruction of Wennerström and the commandeering of his fortune come to dominate the book, while all the crimes committed against women – the rapes, the torture and the murders – are effectively suppressed. Along with this, a subtle transformation of Lisbeth Salander begins that will continue throughout the trilogy. It is a change that sees her move along an uneven path from the place of evil to that of avenger, and from investigated to investigator – a role she at times shares

with Blomkvist – in fact at one stage she is paid to investigate him. She plays many roles; victim, avenger, feminist wonder-woman and *femme fatale*, all of which contribute to her “undecidability.” Nevertheless, behind the implied author’s smoke and mirrors, Salander is a postfeminist *femme fatale*. She is not in the classic mode, but her humiliation of Bjurman feeds into the male imaginary as an implied support of hegemonic masculinity.

***The Girl Who Played with Fire***  
**and**  
***The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest***

Despite her deliberate suppression of crimes against women, Salander appears to have triumphed. She has moved from victim to aggressor; her nemesis, Bjurman, has been routed; she has demonstrated computer skills beyond those of most men and her street fighting ability has, in a reversal of traditional roles, seen her rescue Blomkvist from humiliation and certain death. With her photographic memory, her mathematical skills, her varied sex life, and by now vast fortune, she is a feminist fantasy figure who transcends critical analysis. What someone such as Jill Dolan, seems to overlook when she praises Larsson’s liberal feminist commitment is that both *The Girl who Played with Fire* and *The Girl who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest* open with Salander helpless, either strapped to her bed, or confined there by horrific injuries, and both finish with her absolutely dependent on the intervention of Blomkvist, and institutions of patriarchal dominance such as law, medicine, or the body politic (see Dolan 1-8). These actions may justify her aggression, but in the end her freedom comes down to her acknowledging the sovereignty of, and her responsibility to, the State. Over the course of the action, Salander’s resistance slowly moves from individual violence against her persecutors to a more collaborative defence involving her lawyer and Blomkvist through the auspices of the court. In doing so, she appears to acknowledge the primacy of normative social and cultural boundaries.

*The Girl Who Played with Fire*, part thriller and part horror story, opens with a prologue that has Salander captured and tied to a bed in a dark room. As a form of

resistance she plays over in her head the “incident” that had her committed to a state institution. It occurred when she was thirteen. Her father violently assaulted her mother, leaving her brain-damaged. An angry Salander filled a bottle with petrol, poured it over him, and set him alight. It was for this that she was incarcerated and later, when released, put under the supervision of a “guardian.” Her father it turns out is more than a wife beater; he is Zalachenko, a turncoat Russian spy, whose identity a certain department of the Swedish government is anxious to keep secret. He defected at the height of the Cold War and brought with him all manner of useful information they wanted to protect as long as possible. It was for this reason that Lisbeth was quietly committed to an institution. It is a committal that she fights with a mixture of silence and extreme violence. By the end of the novel, she is on the run from the rogue elements of the secret service and the legitimate police, badly wounded and near death. *The Girl who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest* terminates in a court room drama. Salander spends most of the novel recovering from a bullet in the brain. Unable to leave her bed, it is only in the last part of the story that she is well enough to appear in court. Though impaired, she continues to ferret for information through her computer hacking. Her defence, however, becomes the concern of other people. Ultimately she has to concede that if she wants to become a functioning member of an adult society, she has to accept the sociosymbolic contract that demands that some desires or impulses must be foregone. It is this apparent move from resistance to acceptance that provides the textual evidence to support the notion of Salander as a postfeminist *femme fatale* – dangerous, but ultimately controlled. More tellingly, this acceptance is merely another ruse, designed to hide the duplicity that resides in her very being. It is this deceit that gives her common cause with all of history’s dangerous women.

### **A “Postfeminist” Sensibility**

For the most part it is Salander’s violent acts of resistance that command centre stage. She continues to shoot, taser or karate chop her opponents into submission, and for the bulk of the trilogy this is enough. Not as flashy but more important are the gradual changes she makes towards a more “normal” version of femininity. In doing so, she embraces many of the “sensibilities” that make up contemporary articulations of gender. In “postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminist media culture is characterised by a sense of liberated

femininity that nevertheless remains beholden to patriarchal notions of “order.” In Gill’s assessment there can be no single authentic feminism as a comparison point. Postfeminism can only be informed through an examination of a postfeminist media culture rather than of any individual or group of women. In this view post-feminism equals its representations. *The Millennium Trilogy* is very much part of that postfeminist media culture and is a representation that emphasises the contradictory nature of postfeminism, and the entanglement of both feminist and antifeminist themes within it. Among those themes, according to Gill, are the notion of femininity as a bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, self-surveillance, individualism, the sexualising of culture, and what she calls the dominance of the “makeover paradigm” (149-51). She argues that much of what constitutes the “liberated” woman is in fact a repackaging of old ideologies,

that highlight the pernicious connection of a representational shift to neo-liberal subjectivities in which sexual objectification, as an example, can be re-presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects. (156)

She also points out that however a postfeminist sensibility is expressed, it is clearly a response to feminism. Feminist ideas are articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed in a manner that entangles the discourse of both feminism and anti-feminism (169). All of these themes emerge as the trilogy develops. When Salander flees, dismayed by Blomkvist’s betrayal, she has \$US2.4 billion of Wennerström’s money stashed in several shell companies based in Gibraltar. After checking that her fortune was in safe hands she flies to the Caribbean where she has her more obvious tattoos removed and breasts enhanced: “They were by no means gigantic, that was not what she wanted – but they were two round breasts of medium size.” The difference was dramatic “both for her looks and her self-confidence” (16). So we now have this fabulously wealthy, intelligent woman, capable of looking after herself, who puts the desire for breasts ahead of anything in the belief that they will enhance her confidence. Against everything the reader knows about Salander, she has retreated into what Gill calls a socially constructed, mass-mediated ideal of beauty that accepts that femininity is a bodily property and the key source of a woman’s identity (150).

Six months after the operation, “she could not walk past a mirror with her top off without stopping and feeling glad that she had improved her quality of life” (16). That the abnormal smallness of her breasts allowed the enlargement to be considered a medical rather than cosmetic procedure gladdens her even further. Anxious to test out her new-found breasts, she sets out to seduce a teenage boy who, like her, has an interest in mathematics. He is a perfect initiation for her new self, and she watches closely as he begins to touch her. Only when she was certain that he thought her breasts natural could she relax (27-28). Though she is subject to the external male judging gaze, Salander is subjecting herself to her own internally reflected self-policing. Gill, in her discussion of self-policing, argues that it (represents a deeper form of exploitation than objectification. By internalising the objectifying male gaze, Salander is creating a new disciplinary regime. Power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but from within. In this regime women can by choice commit themselves to being a particular kind of self that gives them agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy (Gill, 153-54). The whole breast enlargement scenario works through notions of the body as property and harnesses self-surveillance and the “makeover paradigm.” This notion of choice and empowerment ignores the question of how or why a tough, supposedly independent woman such as Salander, should internalise and make her own such socially constructed ideas of female beauty. By doing this, she is tacitly relinquishing her subject position.

Thus the trilogy continues to reassert the patriarchy by presenting a selective view of feminism. It is a view that entangles feminist and antifeminist ideological positions giving scope for female agency at the same time as it directs it towards the achievement of patriarchal ends. In Larsson’s canon, women are either victims or high achievers who have the confidence and means to live as they choose. The feminism he appears to approve of is a version of the third wave based on individualism and privilege that tends to hide the continuing presence of gender inequalities. Erika Berger represents such version of feminism. Independently wealthy, she is the publisher of *Millennium*, Blomkvist’s nominal boss, and his long-term lover. As the virginal Effie Perrine was Sam Spade’s loyal secretary, secretly pining after him, and less secretly bemoaning her lack of a sexy body, Berger is her postfeminist reconception. Importantly, she is Blomkvist’s boss but that doesn’t materially alter the

traditional power relationship. She is loyal, competent and compliant, but unlike the sexually inhibited Effie, Berger is a sophisticated woman of the world. She has a bisexual husband who accepts without rancour that Blomkvist is a permanent part of his wife's life. Sexually she is far more liberal than Blomkvist. Sex had been always important for her. At school she had an affair with her teacher, she tried bondage, she had threesomes with her husband and his male friend that "paralysed her with pleasure." She slept with women but nothing or nobody was as good in bed as Blomkvist: "He had talent. He was quite simply so good [...]" (*Played with Fire* 117). If he is the perfect lover, she is the perfect "friend." When he starts a serious affair with Säpo agent Monika Figuerola, Berger quietly steps aside, and promises his new love that she will stay out of his life. Read as a liberal-feminist fantasy, she is equally the fantasy figure of any "Men's" magazine. The agency she has, however, is conditional on her constructing herself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy of (in the vernacular) the thinking man's "totty." Of the feminist constructs Larsson offers, only Berger moves beyond non-conventional gender roles successfully, and hers is an individual construction that pays no heed to the fate of her less privileged "sisters." Aided by her independent wealth that protects and cushions her, she is able to pursue sexual adventures and domestic arrangements without let or hindrance. In a land that is lauded for its implementation of gender equality, gifted and privileged women can live well, but the outlook is less benign for those who do not fit into that category.

### **Order Restored?**

Throughout the trilogy, Salander's silence creates a point of resistance, but it also leaves her without a voice. That she needs Annika Giannani, a woman's rights lawyer and Blomkvist's sister, in the courtroom corresponds to Kristeva's view that only a voice that identifies with the masculine can speak with any authority ("About Chinese Women," 156). The final court scenes, where, among much drama, corrupt administrators, lawyers and secret police are finally brought to heel, appear as a great triumph for Salander and her feminist defence attorney. More subtly, it is a blunting of feminist ideals, and a holding of the patriarchal line. After Giannani's besting of Teleborian in court, Blomkvist congratulates his sister:

“When it comes down to it this story is not primarily about spies and secret government agencies; it is about violence against women, and the men who enable it.” (677)

This is only half true, or at least it needs qualifying. The victory could only be won through the workings of the Swedish justice system. It was a victory for the good guys, who, however, belatedly, and admittedly with considerable help from outside the ranks, eventually came together to defeat a break-away group determined to enforce their view of “democracy.” Salander may have defeated individuals such as Bjurman but on her own she could never defeat the State. She had grievously wounded her father, but only at great cost to herself. What the court victory does is reassert particular patriarchal boundaries, boundaries that Salander eventually realises are impossible to resist.

While her silence thwarts Teleborian, the corrupt psychiatrist, he is nevertheless able to declare her insane. That she never answered a single one of his questions over a four-year period proves vital later in court in the destruction of his credibility as a witness. Before reaching court, her silence isolates her and allows her to withstand the pressures put upon her by the State and the media: one branded her a triple murderer, and the other made her into a mythical monster, with headlines such as “Police Tracking Lesbian Sexist Cult” that linked Salander to lesbianism, terrorism, anti-globalisation, and Satanism (*Played with Fire* 334-35). Against these slanders, her silence keeps her protected. Kristeva, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, writes of the experience of the outsider and the defences they erect. They stay out of reach, “saying nothing, nothing needs to be said, nothing can be said.” Initially this may work, but eventually this cold war with the enemy de-energises and fills the brain with despondency, which leads to further isolation (Kristeva 15-16). Without a voice, Salander cannot function in the patriarchal institution of power, the court room, a fact that she concedes when she appoints Giannini as her lawyer. In the patriarchal world only the voice that speaks from the centre or identifies with the paternal, “because it supports symbol and time, can have a [right to be heard] in the chapter of politics and history” (“About Chinese Women” 156). Giannini in her role of “lawyer” can command such a voice, and while Salander’s decision to appoint her is a pragmatic one, it nevertheless binds her to the symbolic order.



She is further bound, when, with the Crown case in tatters, Giannini asks that it be dismissed, Salander's declaration of incompetence be rescinded, and her civil rights be restored. The judge agrees, but legal technicalities make it impossible for the competence issue to be settled immediately. In the end a compromise of sorts is arrived at, which hinges on Salander making herself available to appear in court at a later date to give evidence against officials who were complicit in her incarceration. She refuses, saying the moment she is released she is leaving the country. The judge eventually agrees to rescind the incompetence order, but wants Salander to understand what it means:

Fröken Salander, if I rescind your declaration of incompetence, that will mean you have exactly the same rights as all other citizens. It also means you have the same obligations. It is therefore your duty to manage your finances, pay taxes, obey the law, and assist the police in investigations of serious crimes. So I am summoning you to be questioned like any other citizen who has information vital to an investigation [...]. Like any citizen you can refuse such a summons. How you act is none of my concern [...]. If you refuse to appear, then like any other adult you may be charged with obstruction of justice or perjury. There are no exceptions. (678)

After a pause Salander looks up and nods her assent. Freed by the judge on the understanding that she later has to appear as a witness, she asks Giannini to represent her as her lawyer in any on-going court cases and in negotiations with the government for compensation due to her. Giannini reluctantly agrees, but only after giving her a list of conditions and cautioning her: "Lisbeth if you are going to be a legally responsible citizen, then you are going to have to start behaving like one (715). Again Salander nods her assent. Her acceptance of the judge's warning and Giannini's conditions see her contained within the patriarchal order. But it is acceptance that is soon to be tested.

Granted part of her father's estate, she goes to examine the property where to her surprise, Niedermann, her brother, is hiding out. There is the inevitable fight to the death with Salander unarmed and unprepared. Ingeniously she manages to manoeuvre him onto a plank, where with the help of a conveniently placed nail-gun she is able to hammer five seven-inch nails through his feet and into the floor. Then comes the test. Her first instinct is to put the gun to his head. Then she begins to think. This is a man

who had murdered at least eight people, and sold women wholesale and retail. He had also tried to murder her, and she could see no reason for letting him live any longer. Could she get away with it? Then her recent court appearance came to her mind: “She had the legal right of a citizen, and was socially responsible for her actions. How many years of her life did she want to sacrifice?” (737). Her compromise is simple. First she rings Sonny Niemenen at the Svavelsjö Motorcycle clubhouse, then she phones the police and warns them that a man is about to be murdered. The police arrived in time to arrest the gang, but not save Niedermann’s life. Salander’s compact with the judge and Giannini becomes honoured in the breach. She recognises the legal and moral forces of the State, but she circumvents them. Is this the righteous act of a fearless woman avenging a multiplicity of sins against her and all women, or is it the duplicitous act of a *femme fatale*?

### **Disempowerment, Empowerment, and Containment**

If one is to believe his publicity, Larsson wrote the trilogy in order to draw attention to gender inequalities within the Swedish system.<sup>22</sup> It is a nation that prides itself on a society that practices equality for all, but like all such constructions the borders and divisions are inherently unstable. Even fixed boundaries, such as masculinity and femininity, lose their distinctions when faced by Salander’s rape of Bjurman. Competing ideologies within the State, as between the normal police and Säpo, also blur the boundaries. And of course identity itself is not fixed; Salander moves from cold-eyed killer, to detective, to mooning adolescent, to self-taught mathematical genius, all within three pages. Out of all this comes the risk or challenge of disruption, change, and renewal.

The various transgressions of Salander and her adversaries as they trample on established norms give rise to discursive innovations that may lead to the normalising of activities once considered marginal. The first lesbian TV screen kiss was in “LA Law” in 1991. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2013 the New Zealand parliament passed the first reading of a bill that will legalise same-sex marriage. Transgression may lead to resistance but it also leads to normalisation, and *The Millennium Trilogy*, with all its

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<sup>22</sup> In the preface to *The Expo Files*, he is cited as claiming that *The Millennium Trilogy* was going to be his pension (9).

contradictions remains a champion of the status quo and masculine privilege. Blomkvist's flashy declarations of being a feminist fellow-traveller are narrative gestures rather than any commitment to an ideology. What he appears to want is a "safe feminism" that makes no demands, one that comforts and affirms rather than challenges the patriarchal order. As Gill notes, this manifestation of some kind of "safe" feminism allows for contradiction, but no matter its nature it always returns in whatever guise to a fear of female agency, which may appear as a given, but ultimately must be controlled ("Postfeminist Media Culture" 151-53). Indicators of women "pleasing themselves," such as with breast augmentation, ignore the fact that the real drivers are the commercial interests that benefit from such socially-constructed ideas of female beauty and sexuality. From Gill's notion of postfeminism as a sensibility, I posited that women who stand outside this construct may well be the raw material from which any postmodern version of the *femme fatale* may arise. The Lisbeth Salander of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* has the potential to be that woman, and she could well be, but over the rest of the trilogy she slowly gets reeled in. The killing of Niedermann, however, finally reveals her as a neo *femme fatale*, who gets away with it. Unlike Abbott's dangerous women, who inhabit an emerging female imaginary, Salander is, despite Larsson's credentials as a feminist sympathiser, an inhabitant of the male imaginary.

As a representation of a postfeminist *femme fatale*, Lisbeth Salander is a woman intellectually and physically able to take on the "establishment," either on her own or through intermediaries, and win a convincing victory. Her appeal rests in her outrageous acts of violence against men twice her size, her disregard of the law, and her indomitable will. Her triumph over Bjurman and her vindication in court through the exposure of patriarchal criminality appear to support feminist ideals of agency. As the series develops, the subtext shows Salander as contained – not necessarily as dramatically as O'Shaughnessy or Mannering, the respective *femmes fatales* of Hammett and Spillane – but contained nevertheless. It is not a stretch in jail or a bullet in the gut, but the weight of the law and social expectations that bring Salander into line. Originally constructed as a model of feminist resistance with little regard for sexual or social normalcy over the course of the trilogy, she appears to move from dildo wielding rapist to a woman who meekly forgives an ex-lover who has inflicted great emotional hurt.

It is women rather than men who are required to accommodate change. Blomkvist can abandon his principles without losing public respect, and compliant women make his path easy. In the male fantasy world he lives in, even his long-time mistress steps aside gracefully when she becomes aware he has a new “love.” By contrast, Salander is forced to modify her behaviour while at the same time presenting it as actions that are freely chosen. She agrees to the cover-up of the murder of scores of young women to save Blomkvist’s face. She removes her more obvious tattoos, once signs of protest and resistance, on the pretext of making herself less visible. She rationalises that her breast augmentation is for medical reasons, but the text tells us that it is to make her feel like a proper woman. She throws herself at Blomkvist, but the relationship is always on his terms. When he “cheats” on her, her response is angry but hardly comparable to her previous outbursts. It is she whose freedom is dependent on accepting the authority of the state. That she chooses not to kill Niedermann personally, but arranges his death nevertheless, shows a new respect for the power of the law but also shows that her subversive streak remains and she can never be fully trusted: a characteristic of any self-respecting *femme fatale*.

### **The Feminist Feint**

The undecidability that is part of the Salander character lends much to her popular appeal. It allows her to be either a feminist wonder woman, or the illusionary support of hegemonic masculinity. Larsson’s public position and the evidence of the text suggest not only the difficulty men have in identifying with feminism, but how deeply the *femme fatale* and the danger she represents remain embedded in the male imagination. The hard-boiled genre, in its original form, acted to reaffirm masculine subjectivity through the abjection of the sexual woman. The *neo-femme fatale* that is Salander differs from her classic older sister in that she gets away with her various crimes and misdemeanours, but in the Žižekian way she remains a figure whose unspoken role is to support hegemonic masculinity. Overtly a voice for feminism, Lisbeth Salander nevertheless brings with her a subtext that reinforces patriarchal order and meaning. The feminist sympathies peppered throughout the text act as a feint that draws one away from the fact that Salander is a product of the male psyche. She is a postfeminist *femme fatale* in the guise of a wonder woman.

## Chapter VII

### The Displacement of the *Femme Fatale* in Ian Rankin's Rebus Novels

“Tell me he’s going to be all right [...]”  
( *Exit Music* 380)

This thesis rests on the premise that the co-dependency between the hard-boiled detective and the classic *femme fatale* is unsustainable in the context of the post-feminist revision to gender identities. Her construction in her original form rested on male anxiety. Whether in her mythic configuration or as represented in popular fiction, she is a product of the male psyche. She represents the dangers and anxiety that threaten both patriarchal values and male identity. In turn, the masculine ideal of self is dependent on containing her within the prescribed boundaries of the symbolic order. In a postfeminist world where women have equal rights, the masculine ideal is beginning to fragment. The *femmes fatales* essentialist certainty is dissipated, and she can no longer represent the place of criminality or “otherness” with any credibility. Diverse manifestations of “otherness” make her a more nuanced figure. In previous chapters we have seen Hughes’ women come with a traumatic history, and Abbott’s women with a competitive homosociality, while Larsson’s fatal woman assumes an ambiguous, but aggressive feminist perspective. Each of these putative *femmes fatales* brings with her some form of subjectivity. In the process they take on the role of victim or even, as in Abbott’s and Larsson’s fiction, some of the functions of the detective in the apprehension of criminal networks. By contrast, in Ian Rankin’s Rebus series, where women play an important role in law enforcement, such figures almost disappear as their function melds into a complex mix of shifting gender roles, homosexual anxiety, “competing horrors,” “interiorisation,” “strangers within,” and international mega corporations who are a law unto themselves.

Rebus challenges Gill Plain’s claim that the male detective is in his death throes. Done down by the advent of the female detective who changed the genre to such a degree, the once reliable feminising of the “other” has become problematic leaving

the form without its fundamental sacrifice, according to Plain. The problem is to find a new monster to replace the bogeywoman upon which the genre has relied. Plain fears that the life of the detective and the order he represents ultimately depends on the genre's capacity to reinvent and reposition the essential body of the other (245-48). While agreeing with much of what Plain says, and acknowledging the difficulty of avoiding feminising the "other," I believe Rankin, and Peace who appears in a later chapter, achieve this. Notionally conservative, the crime genre has always been able to reinvent its "other" to suit the gender politics of the day. Hughes and Larsson *et al.*, in exposing the patriarchal regime as vicious and evil, allow room for some reconstruction of the *femme fatale* that moves her from figure of danger to being a victim. Such a reading should, however, be viewed with some caution, as the term "victim" is not a neutral signifier in the postfeminist world. On the one hand, it moves Hughes' and Larsson's *femmes fatales* away from unalloyed evil by tactically acknowledging that their resistance to patriarchal norms is a reaction to their victim status. Contesting their victimhood gives them a form of agency that could describe them as resisting "subjects". On the other hand, the term serves to objectify the "subject" and reinforce their status as "other". Even though Hughes and Larsson give their women some form of agency they also naturalise them as victims.

Rankin is heir to the hard-boiled tradition; his work is often described as tartan *noir*. He not only dispenses with the feminised "other," but he does so without her loss disturbing the feel and sense of the genre. Peace, however, substantially reinvents the genre: the hard-boiled detective remains, but the *femme fatale* is an undefinable figure of his imagination, more representative of women as casualties of war than as formal threat to the subjectivity of the detective. In Rankin's Rebus series, the near absence of the *femme fatale* inverts the whole rationale behind her construction. It allows women to be construed in a more nuanced way; they may be seductive, they may be tired, worried, and not above a little larceny, but these are only parts of them. They are not defined by a single trait foisted on them by the male imaginary. In her original form she was the external manifestation of male anxiety. Rankin turns those anxieties in on themselves. Where once such anxieties were objectified into the form of the *femme fatale*, it is now Rebus's erratic behaviour, his penchant for alcohol, and a reckless disregard of authority that reveals them. This turning of male anxiety upon itself displaces its projection upon the *femme fatale* and serves as a marker for the

place she once occupied. Kristeva speculated on this notion of “interiorisation” thirty years ago in “Women’s Times,” when she posited a process that saw “an ‘interiorisation’ of the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract” that would replace the “scapegoat victim as foundress of society” by an analysis of the potentialities of being victim or executioner which characterise each, whether male or female (210). In the Rebus series, the *femme fatale* no longer represents “otherness.” Replaced, or interiorised into the form of Rebus’s inner demons that she becomes the “stranger within.” This “stranger” makes Rebus vulnerable to marginalisation and disintegration of self, thus eroding the strength of his possible oppositional position against the *femme fatale*.

Kristeva, when writing about “strangers,” begins with the notion of the stranger as foreigner, an outsider by virtue of “otherness,” the markers of which may be identified with gender, colour, class, experience or whatever quality that sets one aside from the group. The stranger’s experience of “otherness” results in mixed emotions that lead to guilt, exhilaration, anger, pride, depression, and silence. As the Edinburgh police force proceeds with the postmodern postfeminist transformation that is bound more by regulatory protocols than the “tough guy” methods that Rebus favours, he too feels marginalised. Despite his “hard-guy” exterior, he wears a masculinity that is caving in because of self-doubt and uncertainty, even as he unconsciously discerns that the redefining of gender boundaries also exposes the vulnerability of women within the police force. They and he share the experience of exclusion and this leads on his part to an empathy with women that he cannot achieve with many of his fellow officers. Among these officers and the higher echelons, he is increasingly a stranger. From his perspective, however, they are the strangers. Their abandonment of old, more direct tough-guy methods, “acceptance” of new protocols, and general tidying up of their language and dress sense amount to a rejection of a brand of masculinity that Rebus clings to. It leaves him disdainful but lost. In this, Rankin puts the “tough guy” of the hard-boiled genre under review. The tough guy is never lost. His fists normally solve everything. In Rankin, however, even the loner attitude, which is a trope of the genre, is being revised and displaced. Traditionally there by choice, the loner portrayed by Rebus is a stranger who can no longer cope with his isolation. Kristeva argues that the way we feel about “strangers” reflects the way we feel about those aspects of ourselves with which we feel uncomfortable:

“[To] worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange: our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 191). Rebus knows his ghosts well; he dwells with them every day, and they haunt him. They are the foreigners within him, and when he struggles or flees from their influence, he is fighting his own unconscious. These ghosts are the “other” that must be abjected, and though they take the place of the *femme fatale* they are not feminised.

Rankin is beguiling; he makes significant structural changes to the genre yet hardly intrudes upon the “sense” and feel of its form. Barely noticed are the deft changes made to the positionality of “otherness,” which mean the virtual disappearance of the *femme fatale*. In *Knots and Crosses* the demonic forces normally projected on and externalised with reference to the “other,” usually the *femme fatale*, challenge the detective’s masculinity and probity this represents, and are internalised through the homosexual/homophobic oscillations that Rebus recalls from an incident between himself and a fellow soldier during their army training. The challenge to masculinity thus comes from the “other within” and makes the *femme fatale* redundant. In *Black & Blue* the demise of the *femme fatale* is signalled through a vestigial figure who is only a bit player in a larger plot involving intricate underground criminal networks. In *Exit Music* there is uncertainty surrounding the identification of the *femme fatale* as such, relative to the point of view taken. She shifts between a complex representation of femininity and the simplistic demonisation and polarisation that is usually attached to the *femme fatale*. Further, the complicated tangle of enquiries that Rebus weaves detracts attention from the nature and scale of the crime involving the *femme fatale*.

## Rebus

Inspector John Rebus first appeared in 1987 and finally retired in 2007. Changes made to the retirement age in Scotland allowed Rebus to reappear without any loss of credibility. In *Standing in Another Man’s Grave* (2012) he works as a civilian for the cold case division of the Edinburgh C.I.D. The three novels examined here, *Knots and Crosses*, *Black & Blue*, and *Exit Music*, cover the beginning, middle, and end of his career. He made his first appearance as a detective sergeant nearing forty, and Rankin’s decision to let him age in real time contributes to the development of his



character and believability. It also puts him apart from other fictional detectives such as Poirot, Wexford, and Dalgliesh. On a quick calculation Poirot was still working at one hundred and ten, Wexford at ninety, and Dalgliesh, still going strong at eighty-seven, has yet to marry the ever-fragrant Emma Lavenham. Rebus, in contrast, is witness to twenty years of social and political change. He has many of the behavioural patterns we have come to associate with the hard-boiled urban detective. He is a hard drinking—two whiskies followed by a couple of beer chasers is not an uncommon breakfast for him—obsessive loner, who has trouble sustaining relationships. Distrustful of institutions and structures, he privileges his private morality above all, so much so that breaking the rules is part of his daily routine. Along, however, with these standard tropes of the genre, he is a man prone to nervous breakdowns, reads his bible in search of answers, and is casually comfortable with women. He is fixated, desperate to find the truth wherever it may lead. Too often the path is addictive and ultimately self-destructive. To get to the truth he is prepared to lie, fudge the evidence, and bend the rules. In his personal life he seeks the truth in religion. In *Knots and Crosses* he tries a different church every week, but by the end of the series he has largely given up. Left with an amalgamation of a Calvinist work ethic married to an historic, but always present, Catholic guilt that brings with it a whiff of the hair shirt, he blames himself for the sins of the world, as he constantly fights depression and nervous breakdown. Where earlier the hard-boiled detective has always been characterised or masculinised by his ability to absorb physical pain, in Rebus's case he too often finds he cannot handle the psychological pain caused by his own demons.

### *Knots and Crosses*

*Knots and Crosses* marks the first appearance of Rebus, as a forty-year-old detective in the Edinburgh police force. Besides the tropes of a hard-drinking loner, Rebus brings to the genre a conscience, a religion, and a sense of place that examines a divided Edinburgh in postfeminist post-devolution Scotland. With women already redeemed into positions of institutional power—Gill Templer is both Rebus's superior officer and his lover—there needs to be another representative of evil. Rankin does

this by using the crime novel, formerly a bastion of masculine subjectivity, to shift the construction of “others” away from the *femme fatale*. This refiguration of “otherness” works through the internalisation of Rebus’s fears and the external drama played out through the action associated with a series of murders. The homosexual underbelly of the plot offers something else as “other,” rather than the deviant woman. If the *femme fatale* comes out of the masculine/patriarchal imaginary seeking to embody the criminality of society, it may only be a ploy to cover up the even more deadly and haunting visitations of what can prey upon it. In this case, the homosexual “other” becomes a repository, in Rebus’s mind, for what is dangerous to the patriarchy. A kiss between him and another man, Gordon Reeve, when both were in the army, which begins as a signifier of male friendship or homosocial bonding, slides perilously close to homosexuality and dominates the narrative. The whole episode leaves him conflicted and disturbed. On the one hand, he is appalled that he nearly committed the “unthinkable” sin; on the other hand, he is deeply ashamed that he abandoned a friend driven close to madness by an army course aimed at separating the strong from the weak. It is a decision that leaves Rebus prone to depression and unable to sustain his marriage or other close relationships. The ostensible subject of the novel may be the solving of a murder mystery, but the narrative serves as an examination of male friendship, homosexuality, religious belief, the unconscious, and the metaphorical underworld of Edinburgh.

### **The Reeve Affair and its Aftermath**

The Reeve affair and its consequence brings two levels of detection to *Knots and Crosses*. The first involves the standard fare of the detective novel, finding and apprehending the criminal; the second works to reveal the unconscious processes and machinations that lead to the refiguration of the “other.” This “othering” process moves away from both the *femme fatale* and her proxy, the feminised “other”. Rebus’s internalised fears, and the politics of place and gender, take the space that she relinquishes. The plot revolves around a baffling series of murders and a journalist’s suspicion that Rebus and his brother Michael are running drugs. Edinburgh is shocked by the abduction and strangling of two young girls. Assigned the case, Rebus meets with little success. Then in a series of events two more girls are strangled. Rebus’s former wife is attacked and his only daughter abducted. He starts to receive a

succession of cryptic, but anonymous, letters. Inside one is a knotted piece of string, in another two matches tied together as a cross. Unable to make much sense of them he allows his brother Michael to hypnotise him. During this hypnosis Rebus brings to the surface the long suppressed “incident,” which allows him to connect the murders of the four girls to an event in his own military past.

He recalls that he and Reeve were vying for a place in an elite SAS squad. Part of the training consisted of a survival course designed to see how they performed under extreme conditions of capture, torture, and imprisonment. Thrown in a cell, they are beaten and starved. “[They] slept side by side, pissed and defecated in the presence of the other, tried to exercise together, played little mind games together, and endured together” (164). Reeve had a piece of string with him and continually practised tying the knots they were taught in training. Rebus tells how they played noughts and crosses, scratching the games on to the powdery wall with their finger nails. They also talked about God. Dependent on each other for survival, they became very close. Reeve confides about his childhood traumas and his wish that he had a brother. He declares that Rebus is the brother he has never had, and as he says so he nicks his and Rebus’s palm and declares that now indeed they are blood brothers. Rebus recalls that as Reeve did this he moved close to Rebus and planted a breathy kiss on his cheek, and Rebus felt himself yielding to temptation. Reeve edged his way behind him, making the two-backed beast. Rebus, though trembling, remained strangely immobile and began to weep. Even at the time Reeve knew he had crossed a line: “There were tears in his eyes, because he could see that everything had gone haywire. He, too, could see that something was ending” (167). Rebus’s emotions fluctuated wildly. Was this a test? If so it was intolerable and he cursed himself for a fool. Nevertheless he found himself inextricably drawn to Reeve. In the end he recalled “love was still behind everything” (167). With his eyes and nose streaming, Rebus returns the embrace. At that moment a guard burst in, and Rebus is told he had passed the test. As he is taken from the cell, Gordon pleads with him, “Don’t let me down, John” (169). Both men understood that their kiss and the embrace that followed was the culmination of an ideal and sacrificial kind of “love” for the other that even in their own mind was considered “dirty.” For Rebus the event altered his life, changed his behaviour, and left him with lingering anxieties that impacted on his mental health, attitudes, his personal relationships, and his notion of honour. His anxieties serve to

diminish the role of the *femme fatale* as the external threat moves from her to the danger that resides in the stranger within. For Reeve, the incident pushes him to madness as he collapses under the weight of what he sees as Rebus's betrayal of a very special psychological friendship and the failure of his own masculinity.

### **The Rejection of the Homosexual as Feminised Other**

Rankin's treatment of homosexuality is both a departure from one of the tropes of the genre and a rewriting of the detective figure. As Plain states, in the original archetype of detection the "monstrous was woman or specifically, the feminine" (246). The feminised other, whether the lesbian or the gay man, were defined as deviant opposition to the "legitimate authority of patriarchal masculinity" (246). The defeat of the feminised "other" in the form of the homosexual is often used to reaffirm the masculinity of the detective. This is witnessed in Chapter IV of this thesis. When Hughes' Ed Loy is drugged and rendered helpless, he is not exploited by Podge Halligan, the notorious homosexual rapist. In fact, the reader is told that it is the first time Podge has ever let a potential victim off. Why he did this is never explained. But as a consequence, Loy's "maleness" remains intact, and male homosexuality continues to belong to the territory of deviants and criminals. Plain further claims that

[s]ocieties are built upon the repression of their 'underlying causality', and within crime fiction each act of self-assertion, each new account of the integrity and strength of the detective, is dependent on a process of endlessly reconfiguring and confronting of the monstrous—a codification and expulsion of the abject. (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 246)

Rankin forgoes the easy demonisation of the homosexual as the monstrous. Reeve may become a monster through his murders of young girls, but his monstrousness is not dependent on the feminised "other" that homosexuality represents in the genre. Instead of projecting the externalised "other" on to the *femme fatale* or her surrogate, the homosexual, the challenge to Rebus's masculine identity is internalised. The challenge to masculinity comes from the "other" within, making the *femme fatale* or her proxy redundant. The question of masculinity is raised early in the novel, along with the question of probity, which is more complex as it revolves around the issue of conscience.

By not revealing what the “incident” was until three quarters into the narrative, Rankin has time to establish Rebus’s heterosexual status and allow for a more nuanced examination of male friendship and homosexuality than is normal in the genre. Before the homosexual question can be raised, Rankin renders it necessary to establish Rebus’s masculine credentials. He is constructed as a flawed red-blooded heterosexual. He, in line with all hard-boiled detectives, is a rough, tough hard-drinking loner. He lives in a small untidy apartment with little furniture or home comforts. The shirt he puts on in the morning probably comes out of a pile of unwashed clothes, and his breakfast, if not a couple of neat whiskies, is likely to be a pint of milk stolen from the local dairy on the way home from a late-night bender. He gets along with his colleagues if he has to, and throughout the series remains in constant conflict with his superiors.

In case there are doubts about his sexual orientation, the reader is told that he has a daughter, Sammy, from his failed marriage. He and his ex-wife Rhona met soon after he left the army. She was coming out of a brutal marriage and saw in him someone who could protect her. He seemed perfect, but as it turned out he was a man who should never have married. Neither trusted the other, though neither cheated. Over and over they would cuddle up and try to make things right, but the break-up was inevitable. He may have been a terrible husband and a poor father, but regardless of these faults he is, at the very least, man enough to fill both roles.

His masculinity is, however, fragile. The Reeve incident is continually on his mind and often leads to paroxysms of guilt and general disquiet as he examines his conscience in terms of personal integrity and accepted modes of masculinity. He has lovers, but the memory of his abandonment of Reeve often intrudes. In one case he has an instant collapse of ardour when Gill Templer, his colleague and sometime lover, wants him to take her from behind; on another occasion there is his “madness” when on awakening in the bed of a woman he can’t recall going to bed with, he tries to strangle her. As further ‘proof’ of his masculinity, there is his friend Jack Morton. Like Rebus, he is divorced, his wife has taken a lover, and he is a chain-smoker. At thirty-six, he gets on with the job, thinks now and again about his pension and “[drinks] his wife and children out of his conscience” (32). His friendship with Jack Morton is sufficiently “blokey” and drink-ridden to rule out anything but casual

mateship. Through his marriage, and later his affair with Templer, and with the stranger he meets in a theatre, and his friendship with Jack, Rebus establishes his heterosexuality.

With Rebus's heterosexuality established, and homosexuality unlinked from the feminised "other," space is left to examine why Rebus and Reeve are so shocked by their encounter. Writing of male homosocial desire at the start of the twentieth century, Sedgwick claims that by the first decade of the century "the gaping and unbridgeable homophobic rift in the male homosocial spectrum already looked like a permanent feature of the geography" (201). It was a schism created by a homophobia that struggled to distinguish between close male friendships and homosexuality. Writing in 1985 she remarks,

[t]he deep structure of this double bind for men, the fact of a profound schism based on minimal and undecidable differentiation has persisted and intensified in the twentieth century. Homosexual panic is not only endemic to at any rate middle-class Anglo-American men (presumably excluding some homosexuals), but a mainspring of their treatment of politics and power. (201)

Filene picks up the theme. He claims that up until the 1970's most American gays chose to stay in the closet. Between 1970 and 1980 the Gay Liberation movement persuaded many states to repeal anti-homosexual legislation and The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (236). Everything changed in 1981. AIDS swept the land and split the community. Thirty years on, the law no longer differentiates between straight and gay, but old attitudes persist in many sectors of the community. Rebus's Scotland is not immune from this. *Frommer's* travel guide warns homosexual tourists that there is not much of a gay scene in Scotland, and to be careful in Glasgow where gay bashing is frequent and rarely punished. It also warns that in rural areas displays of affection between males invite scorn and retribution.

The reaction of Reeve and Rebus could be described as "normal" in circumstances which were not dissimilar to many men under the stress of war. Filene notes that during World War II many army and navy units instituted a "buddy system" that in

confined quarters, under the stress and danger of war, saw many buddy relationships develop into romance, sometimes affectionate, sometimes sexual. It was not uncommon to see men holding hands or kissing as they watched films on the deck of naval vessels crossing the Pacific. Filene goes on to suggest that the war “reopened the continuum that the Victorians had enjoyed before the barrier of ‘homosexuality’ was raised” (174). Sedgwick interrogates the difference it makes when a social or political relationship is sexualised (5). In the case of Reeve and Rebus it is the catalyst that drives them to murder and nervous breakdown respectively.

While Rebus tries to put a distance between himself and the “incident,” for Reeve it is a still festering wound of a friendship betrayed and of a failure of masculinity. He may repress his homosexual identity through abject deviance, but nevertheless, he is driven by the “incident.” He plans his revenge and his target is Rebus’s daughter. She was always his target, and he always wanted Rebus to know it. His choice of victim depended on the initial letter of each girl’s name. Each killing gradually builds up to read the name of Rebus’s daughter Samantha. Reeve continues to blame Rebus for his “betrayal” and plans to exact such an extreme revenge, although even he must know that, in the environment they were in, Rebus had no choice but to leave the cell. The guards weren’t tricking as Reeve believed; Rebus had passed and was free, while he, Reeve, had to face further soul-destroying ordeals.

Rebus’s “failure” of friendship disturbs Reeve, so does the fear that he may be labelled a deviant or homosexual. Right from the moment of that kiss, he knew he had crossed a line and the special relationship forced on them through shared deprivation was over. His method of murder was designed to put additional pressure on Rebus, but it was also designed to reject any notion of predatory sexual deviance. He killed but never sexually interfered with his female victims. As he looked at his latest, Helen Abbott, he enjoyed the moment that told him the riddle was complete and the next and final victim would be Rebus’s daughter. As he took Helen’s photo he knew, “If they ever caught him they’d kick the shit out of him for this, but they would never be able to brand him a sex-killer. Sex had nothing to do with it; these girls were just pawns, fated by their christening” (132).

While Reeve is explicit in his rejection of the homosexual tag, Rebus sublimates it into a higher concern with his culpability and need for redemption, not on account of the kiss, but for his so-called betrayal of Reeve by walking away from him. At one level it manifests itself in his sometimes problematic sexual relationship with women, and at a more spiritual level it surfaces through his constant search for redemption. His “*Gordon, my friend, what did I do to you?*” echoes the reproaches of Good Friday. Christ on the cross asks, “My people what have I done to you. How have I offended you?” Rebus knows exactly how he has offended. Reeve’s “Don’t let me down, John” (169), as Rebus leaves the cell, comes from a man at the end of his psychical and mental strength, which also brings with it connotations of Good Friday’s “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” The magnitude and spiritual content of Rebus’s guilt over his betrayal swamps his more earthly fear of homophobia. Sitting in a pub, going over his options, he sees instead of fellow drinkers, cowered men “awaiting the wrath of some Old Testament monster, some behemoth, some flood of destruction. He could not see behind their eyes, nor could they see behind his:”

The ability not to share the sufferings of others was all that kept the mass of humanity rolling on, concentrating on “me,” shunning the beggars and their folded arms, their eyes. Rebus, behind his eyes was begging now, begging to that strange God of his to allow him to find Reeve, to explain himself to the madman. God did not answer. (194)

For Reeve, his homophobic fears are sublimated into madness and a thirst for revenge, a revenge he takes great care to separate from accusations of deviance. Rebus, on the other hand, is never sure whether the “incident” was a threat to his masculinity or brought into play a “love” that recognised a fellow man’s suffering: a Christian act perhaps? Was it an act of erotic desire, or was it a sign of an overwhelming need for reassurance and comfort? Projected into an act of betrayal that denies both men their humanity, the stranger within takes the place of the essentialised *femme fatale* and broadens the whole concept of self and other within the hard-boiled genre.



## The Abjection of Self

This “incident” is the ghost that haunts Rebus; it is the “other” that seeps into every crevice of his life. It keeps forcing him to confront the “foreigner” and threatens his boundaries and sense of identity; it divides him. Similarly, Edinburgh is a city divided by the politics of place — by its history, its social and religious divide, its tribalism, its economics, and its notions of nationhood. It had been the home of John Knox, the Protestant reformer, who for many is the creator of “modern” Scotland but for others is the creator of the bleakness that inhabits the Scot’s soul. All of these things contribute to and make Edinburgh as much a character in the series as Rebus himself. Gary Hausladen uses the term “place-based police procedural” to describe crime novels where fiction and geography combine to make location absolutely necessary for the plot and for an understanding of the character’s motivation (qtd. in P M Newton 22). In *Knots and Crosses*, it is religion and the actual and metaphorical underground of Edinburgh’s buried city that define the politics of place and character.

Rebus’s search for answers, as he continually confronts a world that is at odds with his religious tradition, is never rewarded. It is religion that gives him the conscience that he struggles to live with, and moves his encounter with Reeve beyond the usual good versus evil of the standard detective story. Spirituality is never faced again as directly as it is in *Knots and Crosses*, but nevertheless, throughout the series Rebus is always looking for answers that lie beyond the secular. Very early in the piece, he reluctantly recognises that he is open to unorthodox beliefs. Visiting his semi-estranged hypnotist brother Michael, Rebus dismisses Michael’s claim that in a recent performance he, Michael, had put a woman, who was a Rangers supporter and staunch Protestant, into a deep trance that led to her claiming to be a nun in her previous existence, and demonstrated it by slipping into fluent Latin. Rebus’s “It’s a nice story Mickey” is met by, “Plenty of people believe in past lives.” At this we are taken into Rebus’s mind, “*Past lives ... Yes, he believed in some things ... In God certainly ... But past lives...* Without warning, a face screamed at him from the carpet, trapped in its cell” (10-11). So what we have is a man who believes in God, has serious doubts about religion, dismisses the supernatural world of reincarnation, but sees apparitions that connect to his past life. In Rebus we see the tension between

religious faith and doubt exacerbated by his unconscious flirting with a “supernatural” that represents the return of the repressed “other.”

He is a man who prays, yet hates organised religion, but wants to be involved in its rituals and comforting truths. For him, however, the rituals of defilement provided by the church to protect one from contact with the abject prove fruitless. His “interiorisation” of impurity makes his abandonment of Reeve a sin, but such is his ambivalence about “faith,” that confession offers little prospect of ejecting the abject. He tries different churches and finds none to his liking. “He hated the smiles and manners of the Sunday-dressed Scottish Protestant” and the emphasis on communing with your neighbour rather than God. He tries sitting at home and reading his Bible on a Sunday, but nothing works:

He was caught, a believer without *his* belief. Was personal faith good enough for God? Perhaps, but not *his* personal faith, which seemed to depend on guilt and his feelings of hypocrisy whenever he sinned, a guilt assuaged only by public show. (71)

The guilt that Rebus feels for his “abandonment” of Reeve drives him to a nervous breakdown. He seeks atonement in prayer: “[He] was begging now, begging to that strange God of his to allow him to find Reeve, to explain himself [...]” (194). His conscience over the Reeve incident cannot be quietened. It may be momentarily silenced, but like the abjected self there is always an echo that remains.

The underworld of Edinburgh is both real and metaphorical. There literally is a buried city under the streets of the “Old Town.” Burke and Hare, the grave robbers who supplied the Edinburgh Medical Schools with bodies in the early nineteenth century, had their headquarters there. Introduced in *Knots and Crosses*, in the later novels it comes to play a more important part. Edinburgh’s ancient underground network of streets is important as a metaphor for the unconscious dimensions of this novel and of all the Rebus novels. In *Knots and Crosses*, the final show down takes place in the cells left intact underground when the old Sherriff Court building was partially demolished to make way for the library. Metaphorically, it suggests the unconscious through the Oedipal symbolism attached to the final battle that is fought in the cells that are the underbelly of the library. It is a fight for survival, but what primal drives

are being played out under this edifice of civilisation? For Rebus it is a fight to save his family and quell the voices that nag at his “manhood”. For Reeve it is far deeper. He is struggling against a primal loss that for a brief time he believed could be compensated for by his “friendship” with Rebus. The traumas of his childhood, his virtual abandonment by his parents, mean that Reeve is too fragile to bear the loss of his only “friend.” Beardmore, in her interrogation of Kristeva’s *Black Sun*, suggests that for those suffering primal loss there may be consolation in “the imaginary father” (98). Unfortunately, this “consolation” is brutally withdrawn. This throws Reeve into a symbolic collapse that leads to despair and intolerance of rejection and abandonment. Reeve is fighting for more than the redemption of his masculinity; he is fighting to preserve his already flawed subject self. In the emotional turmoil churning within him and Rebus, there is neither place nor need for the *femme fatale*.

### ***Black & Blue***

Ten years after *Knots and Crosses*, society has moved on. Rebus’s homophobic anxieties have faded, influenced perhaps by Scotland’s belated decriminalisation of same-sex sexual acts in 1981, some fourteen years after England and Wales, and the fact that by 1990 lesbians and gays were allowed to serve openly in the police force. In *Black & Blue*, the *femme fatale* survives in a vestigial or marginal form. In part this may be due to the impact of feminism that makes the overt demonisation of women more difficult, but it also may be that the intricate criminal network, which takes in big business, drug dealers, and the corrupt police, is too vast, with too many tentacles and extensions, to be hung upon a single representative figure. In the process of shrinking the *femme fatale*’s role Rankin departs from the essentialism that is normally central to the idea of *femme fatale*. Taking her away from her “starring role” allows other paranoias and horrors to be released for their conscious relegation to abjection.

## The Story

There are four interwoven plots in *Black & Blue*: the death of an oil worker found impaled on a fence, the apparent reincarnation of a serial killer after a twenty-year hiatus, the flow of drugs from Glasgow to Aberdeen and on to the oil rigs, and the pressure going on Rebus for his part in the “fitting up” of a man who dies in prison still protesting his innocence. Various themes flesh out the story: police corruption, the feminisation of the force, and the collapse of the nuclear family. The central investigation is the “Johnny Bible” case, a series of killings that have similarities to the actual “Bible John” case of 25 years earlier. The killing of the oil worker connects to criminal gangs, “green” protestors, and the oil company’s complicity in corruption, murder, and deliberate environmental pollution. In the meantime, Rebus is fighting off corruption charges of his own, the falsifying of evidence, and the covering up of an alleged police assault on the criminal Mental Minto. On top of this, he cuts corners and provides otherwise inadmissible evidence to support Gill Templer, his sometime lover, in her bid for promotion.

## The Shrinking *Femme Fatale*

The *femme fatale* of *Black & Blue*, Eve Cudden, is not accorded the centrality that Bridget O’Shaughnessy of *The Maltese Falcon* had “enjoyed” nearly seventy years ago; nor is she in the same class. Though she uses her sexuality and is dangerous, she is nevertheless only a bit player. O’Shaughnessy operates with a charisma and panache that Cudden lacks. Rendered elusive through her smokescreens and multiple facades, O’Shaughnessy challenges the detective’s quest for cognitive mastery. Whereas she acts on her own behalf, Cudden is merely a decoy acting for criminal elements wishing to derail Rebus. He in turn uses her to betray her former protectors. She brings with her all the accoutrements of the traditional *femme fatale* — an obvious sexuality, treachery and greed — yet she also displays a level of honour not normally found in the role.

When Rebus first meets her, he is not aware that she is the mistress of Uncle Joe Toal, a notorious Glaswegian gangster, or that she is cheating on him with his son Malky. All he takes in is her peroxide hair, lashings of gold jewellery, and her two-piece crimson suit. While the suit is a too obvious reference to the scarlet woman, her

surname, Cudden, is more subtle. It is a derivative of the Scottish word “Cudleigh,” which is defined as a gift or bribe, “a night’s entertainment due from a tenant to his superior” (Plain, *Ian Rankin’s Black & Blue* 49). Rebus dismisses the notion of her as a prostitute, but senses correctly that this is not a chance meeting. He refuses her unspoken invitation, but later learns that she and Malky are working a scam to deprive Uncle Joe of his fortune. Armed with this knowledge, Rebus promises her protection in exchange for information that will put the Toals away. She agrees. Not only does she give them up, she cleans out their bank account.

That night she and Rebus book into the best hotel in town and charge it to the Toals’ account. As he walks towards her bed, he says, “I need one favour before you go. I want you to phone Judd Fuller [suspected of being a member of the drug cartel], and tell him you need to see him” (405). The next morning Rebus wakes to find the bed empty; Eve is long gone. All he could hope for is that she had made the phone call. He hadn’t told her that it was part of an elaborate and risky trap. At reception there is a message that the meeting is on: “Rebus’s heart rose: she hadn’t just upped and run” (434). This is a major departure for the *femme fatale*. Rebus no longer has any hold on her, but she honours her word and in this way distances herself to a degree from the binary constructions controlling the traditional role. Not fulfilling the role completely makes her a more interesting character, but also leaves a space where she once would have been. Rankin fills that space in two ways: firstly, as he did in *Knots and Crosses*, he allows for the internalisation of the “other” into Rebus, which in itself contributes to diminishment of the *femme fatale*’s importance; secondly, through the conflation of the criminal network and postmodern capitalism, he portrays a corporate rendition of evil that makes the *femme fatale* more or less redundant.

### **The Stranger Without**

Rebus’s internalisation of the “other” must be seen in the context of a changing world that leaves him at odds with not only the “other” in himself, but with many of those around him. Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* makes it clear that being a stranger or foreigner goes beyond difference in nationality. The stranger is the person who does not belong to a group. Rebus’s hard-man attitudes drive him to the margins. The reorganisation of the police force has taken away his *modus operandi*. Gone are the

days when you could rig the evidence or give a “crim” a good walloping in the cells. It’s all regulations and by the book in the new force, and policewomen such as Gill Templer and Siobhan Clarke appear more comfortable with this regime than many of their older male colleagues. Rebus has only disdain for those who give in to the new demands forced on them by cultural change. From his perspective any policeman who arrives at work well-dressed and sober has crossed over to the other side, and by definition must be corrupt. To survive, traditional hard-men must adapt to a new model of masculinity. It is something Rebus cannot do, and as a result he becomes distrusted within the force. His affinity with criminal elements, once seen as an asset in terms of “thief-taking,” now leads to rumours that he may have crossed over. In his struggle to adapt he faces not only an internal conflict with the stranger within, but also an external clash in regard to the position of the hard-boiled detective. Rebus is becoming alien not only to himself but to his fellow officers who are more attuned to the realities of a postfeminist police force.

“Foreignness” does not rely on it being from a different country, religion or race. To be different in attitude, dress, class or education may be enough to mark one as alien or foreign. Being a woman in the Edinburgh police force is still sufficiently different to have her considered a stranger. In “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” Kristeva goes further, and claims that,

[a] woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species, and consequently feels *exiled* within both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalisation intrinsic to the language. (296)

Rebus also feels alienated and exiled. The demands of a new masculinity go against his whole ethos. He struggles to cope with the notion that his brand of masculinity has no value in a corporatised model, which while claiming to respond to feminism nevertheless maintains its dominant role. In this “rearranged” hierarchy, women still remain at the margins, and coppers like Rebus who ignore the new order are pushed to the margins to join them. It creates a fragile alliance between a masculinity that, despite its hard-boiled exterior, is crumbling from within and vulnerable working women trying on the hard exterior required to survive in a men’s world. At times this

permits Rebus a certain empathy that lets him see women as people, not the essentialised representations that are the norm for the genre.

Two policewomen, Gill Templer and Siobhan Clarke, represent different aspects of women's arduous and unstable ascent to power. Two journalists, Kayleigh Burgess and Jennifer Drysdale, demonstrate the toughness required and the draining effect upon them of competing in a man's world. Finally, there is the afore-mentioned Eve Cudden, presumptive *femme fatale* but more realistically just another "working girl" who does what she has to do to survive. The "twinning" of Templer and Clarke gives two different perspectives to women's place in the Edinburgh police force. Templer's success relies on male intervention. Rebus, her one-time lover and junior officer, steers her through the mine field of a major drug case and shields her from the political risks that could mar her success. The younger Clarke is university-educated and, while willing to learn from Rebus, already has an instinct for policing that distinguishes her from the more circumspect Templer, who to protect her position prefers to do things by the book.

Recently promoted to Chief Inspector, Templer contacts Rebus seeking advice. She begins the conversation, "Do you know how many women make chief inspector in the Scottish force?" He replies, 'I know we're talking the fingers of a blind carpenter's hand' (114). She then tells him she can't afford to make any mistakes, as already she has been in her new job five months and has yet to make a major arrest. Informed by her "snout" that a big drug shipment is about to take place, she has a dilemma. She should pass the information to the crime squad, but she wants to act on it alone, and prove that her promotion is merited. The trouble is she can't trust the information, and doesn't want to move until it is shown to be good. She wants Rebus to have a "word" with the snout and check the information out. By the end of the novel, Rebus has connected the information to the murder inquiry he is conducting and has passed it on to Templer. She, in turn talks to a couple of witnesses, and comfortable that the case is strong, hands it over to the crime squad: "They're the experts after all." She apologises to Rebus, "I'm sorry if you think I bottled out." He responds by telling her she played it just right: "You'll get your share of the glory, but let them do the dirty work" (452). As a promoted woman, Templer has to be careful. She can't take short cuts or be seen to be anything less than "perfect." Her dilemma is

clear. She cannot act as a man would, yet by calling on Rebus she leaves herself open to the charge that her promotion is less for a job well done than as a tacit piece of politically-correct gender rebalancing.

Clarke belongs to the new breed. At this stage of her development she is content to be Rebus's assistant, but by the end of the series she is more than ready to take his place. Unlike the cautious Templer, she has an instinct for the criminal mind. It is her insight that points Rebus in the right direction with regard to the Bible John/Johnny Bible murders: "It might sound crazy, but maybe Bible John is out there looking for his offspring" (395). Confident that he and she are on the same wave-length, he suggests she look at the possible connection between big oil companies and Bible John. Rebus and Clarke are a collaborative team. She may be his junior, but given time he knows she will be his equal. Whereas Templer's promotion can be read as a piece of affirmative action, Clarke shows that her instincts, combined with her ability to cope with the new demands of an institution that is rapidly becoming constrained by process, make her the way of the future.

Along with Templer, the two journalists, Burgess and Drysdale, serve to illustrate the precariousness and vulnerability of women operating in a predominately male sphere. Surprisingly, Rebus recognises their struggle. His attitude towards Templer may be coloured by their joint history, but with the journalists, Burgess, and Drysdale, his own growing fears and isolation give him an affinity and softness which is outside his normal emotional range. An encounter in a bar frequented by policemen sees him accosted by a female journalist looking for a "story." She offers to buy him a drink:

She smiled: lips glossed, eye-shadow, tired face trying for enthusiasm. 'Jennifer Drysdale.' Rebus knew why she was tired: it was hard work acting like 'one of the boys'. Marie Henderson had told him about it – the pattern was changing only slowly; a lot of surface gloss about equality sloshed over the same old wallpaper. (97)

His relationship with Kayleigh Burgess is initially a lot less sympathetic. Angered by her dogged pursuit of the truth about his part in the Spavin "fit up," where Rebus supplied a dodgy alibi for his friend and superior officer, he reacts to her persistent questioning by grabbing her tape recorder and throwing it out of the window. Later he



apologises, offers to have the tape recorder fixed, and invites her for a drink. Over the course of the evening, he recognises in her the same driven personality as his own: “She needs a break, he thought, as in a rest” (151). His recognition of Burgess’s anxieties puts him, albeit briefly, in her shoes, and as his particular brand of masculinity loses its currency, he can empathise with someone also classified as an outsider. Rebus’s association with the working women of *Black & Blue*—Eve Cudden, the two female police officers and the female journalists—illustrate how the old polarities of gender no longer hold. The feminine need not be the default position for “otherness.” Cultural changes blur the boundaries. The identification of the detective, as represented by Rebus, with “otherness” and the showing of women in all their guises help erode, even in a small way, the myth that sits at the heart of all hard-boiled fiction: the notion of women as either domestic goddesses or representative of evil.

In Rankin’s fiction, “otherness” is transferable; it does not have to reside within the *femme fatale*. It resides in the stranger. Much of that tension of the text comes from the fact that Rebus outwardly revels in his position as outsider. He is openly scornful of the “new” police force and sneers at its values. Kristeva claims the foreigner as critic is a characteristic of many narratives; he is able to “judge the limitations, peculiarities mental and political” of his new land (*Strangers* 134). The problem for Rebus is that the old land has gone. The hard man ethic that he models himself on has lost its currency, creating a conflict between the public man and the internalised doubting self. The external “hard” becomes internalised in a conflict of self. That he still works on the principle that the end justifies the means goes against the grain of the new police model, and contributes to his alienation. It also comes to represent the conflicting codes between the old and new representations of masculinity. Both representations threatens the other’s sense of “self.” This creates a tension. As Kristeva explains, “the foreigner presents one with a loss of boundaries [... ] between *imagination* and *reality* (*Strangers* 188).

The different perspectives Rebus and his boss Ancram each bring to policing confuses imagination with reality and makes them “strangers” to each other. Both believe the other is corrupt. As brawn is replaced by regulation and control, promotion is for those who understand the process and the new politics of gender. Many of the men

respond by smartening themselves up; Ancram is one of them. Interviewed by Ancram for his part in an historic “fit up,” Rebus immediately attacks his interrogator’s own honesty as he wonders aloud about the quality of his suit, the fancy watch, the ID bracelets, and the rings, then muses that the gang boss Toal was always one step ahead of the police, and who must he be paying for the “info.” Ancram shoots back that half the skeletons relating to dubious information, murky evidence, and doubtful convictions were all down to Rebus. In this exchange, neither detective is defined through reference to the *femme fatale*, but through a set of protocols that put Rebus on the wrong side.

### **The Stranger Within**

Under pressure of the interview and his own doubts that he may have in fact fitted up Lenny Spaven, and the knowledge that he had put the frighteners on Mental Minto to prevent him from laying a complaint against police brutality, Rebus begins to wilt. The pressure Ancram puts on him starts to tell and pushes him to the limits of his brand of tough-guy masculinity. He attempts to flee, but is wrestled to the ground by Jack Morton, his friend and “minder.” Subdued by a withering blow to the solar plexus, he starts to cry “not just for himself [...] but all the victims he couldn’t help and would never ever be able to help” (325). In breaking down, Rebus temporarily gives up any claim to hard-man status. He loses his sense of identity and personal order. He has seen his inner self, the foreigner within, and it disturbs him. Historically, within the genre, such anxieties are projected upon the figure of the *femme fatale*. Rebus reveals them through his erratic behaviour. It represents the breakdown, or at least threatened breakdown of a particular fictive identity – fictive in the sense of having been informed through the genre, and fictive in the sense of the persona that has been adopted by the character. It would never have happened to Mike Hammer.

### **Reconstructing Masculinity**

Jack, whom Rebus feared had crossed to the “other side,” proves to be a real friend, when after a fight between them he accepts Rebus’s tacit apology, and helps him home. There, concerned about his mental state, he makes up a bed so he can better keep an eye on him. For the first time in years Rebus sleeps soundly. He awakes

feeling refreshed and relaxed and marvels that he had done it without alcohol. The doubts that Rebus had held regarding Jack's loyalty swiftly disappear. He understands the new politics. A one-time hard man, he has given up smoking, had joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and bought himself a couple of decent suits. He is no longer prepared to put his life on the line to prove his masculinity. What he offers is a masculinity that offers kindness and support, not competitiveness and macho posturing. When he moves into Rebus's small flat, Jack tends to Rebus's emotional and physical scars and wounds. He cooks the dinner, helps Rebus repaint his flat, and generally makes life more pleasant. Jack's new model of manhood allows a homosocial relationship to develop that is built around nurture. As seen in *Knots and Crosses*, homosociality is built around a tightly monitored and calibrated intimacy between men. The slightest gesture that can be misinterpreted imperils the relationship, and risks the smear of homosexuality. Damaged by his earlier experience with Reeve, Rebus appreciates Jack's efforts, but likes to keep some distance between them. Once while they are cooking dinner, Rebus has to duck out for some ingredients. As he goes out, he calls back to Jack, "Sure you can trust me?" In a small way it lets Jack know that even if he is acting as Rebus's "keeper," he is powerless to contain him if he decides to do a runner (354). This bit of banter serves two functions. On the one hand, it is Rebus asserting his power; on the other hand, it is a sign of intimacy that says we know each other so well we understand this as a joke. Interestingly, it is also in Rebus a sign of internal conflict. [He] "thought about not going back. There was a pub on the next corner, its doors open. But of course he was going back: he hadn't eaten yet" (354). In a sense, Rebus, while appreciating the comforts that "intimacy" brings, is reluctant to relinquish his "hard-man" loner status. It is, however, a status that is slowly drifting away. His refusal to accept the rules brings no kudos. Rebus may have escaped censure in the past because he got results, but expediency no longer brings glory. His broken mind, failing body, and increasingly pointless resistance can lead nowhere but to exhaustion and expulsion.

### **Changing Roles**

While Rebus is going backwards, the status of women is slowly changing. Kristeva does not have a theory of femininity *per se*. What she has is a theory of marginality, subversion, and dissidence. According to Moi, "If 'femininity' has a definition in

Kristevan terms it is [...] ‘that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order’” (165). In this model, positionality rather than essentialism is the deciding factor, and it allows that men as well as women can be constructed as marginal by the symbolic order. This “floating” or relational model is moving all the time, displacing any notion of an essentialised masculinity or femininity. Women such as Templer and Clarke provide a mode of policing in keeping with the new regime and move towards the centre. Rebus, whose methods are passé, now occupies the margins. In doing so he leaves less, or even no, room for the *femme fatale*. Originally her foundations rested upon male anxiety. Whether in mythic or in popular fiction, she is a product of the male psyche. She represents the dangers and anxiety which threatens both patriarchal values and male identity. In turn the masculine ideal is dependent on her containment. In Rebus’s Edinburgh it is not so simple. Women have equal rights, making it difficult to see them only in terms of the old binaries. Eve Cudden is too small to be a representative figure of Rebus’s myriad anxieties. Instead, he turns his angst inward. Where once it manifested in the *femme fatale*, it now reveals itself through the near disintegration of the detective.

### *Exit Music*

By the end of his long career new models of masculinity and femininity have deprived Rebus of agency and threatened his identity. From his perspective, he needs the old-fashioned crooks, toe-rags, and villains to keep him alive. The Eve Cuddens, Toals and Big Gers of the world are guarantors of his identity. By the time of *Exit Music*, officialdom, which has always been wary of him, considers him a threat to the new model they wish to create, and he is ejected from his office. Over the space of twenty years, he has moved from nearly insider to outcast. The old patriarchy as embodied by church, state, and capital has been reorganised. Mega corporations, big finance, industries geared to technology, and the service industries, which are fast becoming the largest employers of labour, make up the new order of power. It is a culture Rebus instinctively distrusts. *Exit Music* marks his retirement. How does he handle it? Not very well. Ill-disciplined as usual, he spends his last three days on suspension, prohibited from entering the building. Barred from his office, Rebus can only work

through Siobhan Clarke. Without official status, he is powerless; she, rather than any of the hard or “new” men, is the only one judged fit to inherit his role.

Murder is at the centre of the novel, but it is as much about politics, in particular the question of Scottish independence, and money. The vast amounts of money flowing out of Russia and the question of which bank will win the account seem to provide the motives for the murder of a dissident Russian poet, but appearances are wrong. Rebus is so keen to settle old scores in his last days on the job that he disturbs conventional notions of the detective as one who knows and sees more than others see. In his determination to wrap up all the loose ends, he connects all his ancient enemies in one fell swoop. He links Big Ger Cafferty, the boss of Edinburgh’s underworld, with a major Scottish bank and the Russian mafia, only to discover that the original murder was the result of a domestic incident. In the course of his investigations, his over-vigorous interrogations and harassment of powerful Scottish bankers and politicians see him suspended.

### **The Accidental *Femme Fatale***

As in *Black & Blue*, the *femme fatale* is a much reduced presence. This in part comes from the shifting of gender boundaries throughout the Rebus series that consequently affects the position of the *femme fatale*. Compared to the upwardly mobile professional women who inhabit the novel, Louisa Walsh, who represents a much truncated version of the *femme fatale*, is a slightly old-fashioned figure weighed down by her domestic problems. It is her response to those concerns that pulls Rebus into a complex network of investigations that brings together the world of international banking, Russian oligarchs with incomes bigger than many small countries, and local gangsters like Big Ger Cafferty, keen to get a clip on the ticket. Glamorous as the international world may be, the “crime” that sets Rebus on his path is banal. It comes out of what Žižek would call “aseptic, grey alienated suburban-megatropolis married life” (13). The putative *femme fatale* sits uncomfortably between the traditional role and the suburban alienation of the Žižekian alternative discussed in Chapter V. In her we get pared down forms of the *femme fatale* and Žižek’s “opposing horrors.” Ironically, her “drab alienated [life] of impotence and distrust,” serves to reveal the

limits of Žižek's theory because, rather than serving to eliminate the *femme fatale* role, it perpetuates her function as a prop that sustains male identity.

Louisa is ten years older than her husband, but well preserved and glowing with life. 'Ripe' is how Rebus describes her. "The problem is, nothing stayed ripe forever" (349). The trouble is her young and chiselled rock-star handsome husband is cheating on her. They live in a small maisonette out in the suburbs: she works on the perfume counter in a department store, and he is the late night attendant at a city car park, and carrying on a torrid affair with his boss. Unable to prevent her husband straying, Louisa tries to shock him. She begins to solicit men for no-charge-sex around the car park where he works. Whether it's in the car, on the car, or against a wall, her hope is that at some stage she will be picked up on one of the security cameras in Gary's office, and it will make him give up on his affairs. This "romantic" notion is shattered when her husband catches her on camera. Instead of the Mills and Boon reconciliation she dreamed of, he bludgeons the man to death.

As seen with Eve Cudden, the positionality of the *femme fatale* is in a state of flux. Louisa Walsh's position is particularly fluid. She is Žižek's alienated housewife, but she is also the *femme fatale* of classic dimension who lures the unfortunate Russian poet Todorov to his death. That the victim shares his name with the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, whose "The Typology of Detective Fiction" attempts to explain the various branches that operate within the genre, points the reader towards Rankin's academic background and underscores his conscious elitism. For the Russian poet, Louisa is the definitive *femme fatale*, yet equally she is a figure deserving of sympathy. Hers is not the grand scheme of a Bridget O'Shaughnessy; it is the desperate act of a benighted woman who wants her husband back. Rebus and Clarke see her as the victim. He recalls the "domestics" he has seen over the years, partners abusing partners, lies, deceit, fury, and festering resentment (352). It comes to both of them that Louisa Walsh did not even know that Todorov was dead, so Rebus and Clarke turn their attention to Gary Walsh. Rebus, convinced that Gary is a murderer as well as a wife-beater and cheat, arrests him with little regard for the niceties. Clarke looks at him handcuffed and bleeding, and blinks not an eyelid. For her, Louisa is the victim of a domestic incident. Thus in Louisa Walsh, the boundaries of the *femme fatale* lose their definition as she moves from dangerous woman to victim.

## The Future is Female

The refusal of Rebus to see Louisa in the *femme fatale* role reveals in him a sensitivity towards women trapped in bad marriages, a further unravelling of his “hard-man” image and a blurring of the boundaries that contain the sexual woman. Siobhan’s refusal comes from two different perspectives. One involves her judgement and instinct, the other her position as a senior officer who understands that women need not always be the victim or the subordinate. Her suggestion that Todorov was the victim of a mugging gone wrong is closer to the mark, even if literally incorrect, than the elaborate plot Rebus constructs around the incident (6). She scales down the magnitude of the crime by her suggestion; similarly in *Black & Blue* she had conjectured that Bible John might be hunting his imitator. Anxious to leave no loose ends before he retires, Rebus’s instincts fail him. He links local criminal boss Big Ger Cafferty, the Russian mafia, a major Scottish bank and members of the Scottish parliament to a scheme that will see millions of roubles washed clean through the First Albannach bank and used to foster Scottish independence. This interpretation gives Rebus a reason to go after all his old enemies: big money, bent politicians, and local criminals. In all these assumptions he is wrong, and serves to show that Clarke’s instincts are better and less likely to be distracted by fantasies built upon frustration and alcohol. His being banned from his office in his last three days on the force results in him not being able to operate without her. Cool and rational, she reverses the gender binary and is ready to take over. When the pathologist asks her whether she is looking towards stepping out from Rebus’s shadow, “she prickled but kept her mouth shut—as far as she was concerned she’d long left Rebus’s shadow” (11). On the evidence of *Exit Music*, female success seems inevitable. Almost forty years ago Kristeva wrote in “About Chinese Women” that eventually some new logic of production and reproduction would emerge and from that would come a new economy of the sexes. The Rebus years see the new logic of production writ large, as muscle gives way to technology and old styles of masculinity lose their value.

It is almost a given that women will rise to the top in the “new” force. Rebus’s retirement will see two more women moving into management roles. Clarke expects promotion to Detective Inspector, and her elevation leaves room for Phyllida Hawes to move up to Detective Sergeant at the expense of her colleague and boyfriend, Colin

Tibbet. Of the Detective Constables on the team, it is Phyllida rather than Colin who is heading for promotion: “He was an inch shorter than her and several inches less smart [...]” (34). Rebus likes the fact that Phyllida drinks pints, and tacitly disapproves of Tibbett sticking to orange juice (44). Stuck to find the right word as to how semen had stained the victim’s underpants, Tibbett is saved by Hawes who says, “I think [he] means masturbation” (45). Shorter, less bright, and socially not as adroit, he is doomed to second place in the race for promotion. This is consistent with Mairead Owen’s claim that globalisation and flexibility have led to more jobs geared to the perceived skills and abilities of women. The future is female, she says, but warns there are caveats:

More and more jobs are calling for workers to display the traditional work pattern of women, low paid, uncertain, in that work is temporary, part-time, perhaps done from home or ‘hot-desk’ office or production shift in the factory. (177)

Owen asks if we are witnessing a major change where men will not get jobs unless they “accept women’s jobs and women’s low pay and acquire women’s skills” (177). Certainly over the span of Rebus’s career, men who understand the politics of gender and the requirements of the new order have superseded former models of masculinity.

In a world of high technology, where strength is not important and “feminine” dexterity and relationship skills have value, what happens to the “hard man”? Owen sees that, in the “transition” period we are in, women have a head start, but there is no reason why men should not develop the necessary skills demanded by this new age (178). This is the challenge Rebus and his cohorts face, and for many of them it is a bridge too far.



## Changing Boundaries

Rankin pushes the formula of the flawed hero to its limits and in doing so provokes a series of questions regarding the shifting gender roles of contemporary society and the fate of the detective himself. Yet for all that, Plain's worst fears do not materialise. It is true that social change and the advent of the female detective changed the genre so that the once reliable feminising of the "other" has become problematic, but rather than being in his death throes, the detective still has plenty of life. He is no longer the infallible "hard-man" of old. His frailties have pushed him to the margins, where he competes for the narrative space once held by the tough guys and *femmes fatales*. Rankin is writing crime for our times, and in these times the place of "otherness" tends to fluctuate. In *Knots and Crosses*, the homosexual is offered as the repository of what is dangerous to the patriarchy. In *Black & Blue*, there are the usual crooks, thieves, and murderers, all supported in their efforts by the machinations of "Big Oil." There is also a modified *femme fatale* who is treated "sympathetically" and stands by her word. In *Exit Music*, the *femme fatale* shifts to the role of victim, depending on one's perspective. The most telling "other," however, emerges through the disintegration of Rebus as he can no longer cope with the pressures he imposes on himself. He is a man at war with himself. The ever-present interrogation of the self's relation to itself makes Rebus both subject and abjected "other." All this suggests that the old binaries and the symbiosis between detective and *femme fatale* are distorted and obscured through the complexities of criminality and the insecurities of the detective. By *Exit Music*, Rebus is a misfit in a domesticated police force and is hurried into inglorious retirement. Pushed to the margins, his brand of masculinity is surplus to requirements. The emergence of a new economy of the sexes precludes the resurrection of the traditional *femme fatale* in her entirety, but leaves plenty of room for "others" to practice their own particular brand of villainy. As Rankin shows, in his sagas the social and cultural changes that have occurred over the working life of his hero make the essentialised certainty of the *femme fatale* less certain. Removed of that certainty, she is, in the Rebus series at least, a truncated version of her former self.

## Chapter VIII

### The Retreat of the *Femme Fatale* in David Peace's Tokyo Trilogy

#### *“Enduring the Unendurable”*

Over the course of this project the detective has lost his omnipotence and the *femme fatale* much of her mystery, nevertheless each of the novels examined to date are recognisably within the realm of the genre. David Peace, however, refuses the dictates of the form. In its place he offers a chaotic world where nothing is what it seems. Japan is on its knees after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With Tokyo reduced to rubble, its citizens have no sense of meaning. Day is night, night is day. The victors are the losers, the losers are the victors, and people become indistinguishable from luggage. Personal and national identities are fragile concepts and subjectivity is problematic. Kristeva tells us that the “abject disturbs identity,” system and order, and draws us towards the place where meaning collapses. It threatens to dissolve boundaries of self and the other, of the clean and the filthy, of the living and the dead, thus causing a reaction of nausea and vertigo (*Powers of Horror* 4). The sight of the corpse, of menstrual blood, of excrement, and sewage all produce a violent reaction associated with abjection. Kristeva could well have written the opening chapter of *Tokyo Year Zero* (2007), as Detective Minami discovers a woman's body in an overflowing cess pit on the day of Japan's surrender.

*Tokyo Year Zero* and *Occupied City* (2009) are the first two of an intended trilogy that is to culminate with the yet to be published *Tokyo Regained*, which covers the period of the American occupation. Unusual for the genre they are experimental, so much so that *The Guardian* critic Ian Sanson dubbed them avant noir.<sup>239</sup> Unlike the average

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<sup>19</sup> Ian Sanson. “The Hammer Strikes,” *The Guardian* 11<sup>th</sup> August 2007. <<http://guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview18>. Accessed 4/3/10. “Peace demonstrates what we instinctively know and fear to be truth about the world: that there are of course, moral absolutes, but that we all live, in our daily lives as moral relativists. What Peace then adds to this already compelling schema is a vivid and detailed depiction of place and a strong poetic use of language. It is as if Ian Sinclair [he writes occultist psychogeographies of London] had taken possession of the mind of Ian Rankin: the outcome is what one might call avant noir.”

hard-boiled novel, Peace is not any easy read. He mixes prose and poetry, uses different type faces, and has what Sanson calls “distinctive quirky verbal tics and tricks,” that make much use of repetition. The reader may struggle to identify competing narrative voices when typography alone distinguishes them from each other. Rendering *Occupied City* in both upper and lower case jars the eye. Occupied City can become OCCUPIED CITY, oCcULT City, Dead City, Perplexed City, Posthumous City, or THE FICTIONAL CITY. Pages may look like newspaper columns; others have some or all of their words ruled out. For the casual reader it all may be a bridge too far.<sup>240</sup>

This use of text may belong to Kristeva’s “language” of the semiotic, a “voice” rarely heard in the formulaic world of cops, murderers, and robbers. It is a specifically feminine locus of subversion within the paternal structure of language, which is the organising principle of our culture that we know as the “symbolic.” Bringing the semiotic aspect of language into play, she claims, destabilises signifying practice to such a degree that it becomes comparable to political revolution: “One brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society” (*Revolution in Poetic Language*17). Peace’s use of the poetic voice may jolt readers into a new awareness of the limits of the genre and a rethink of the American occupation but the term “revolution” would seem excessive to apply to Peace’s remake of the genre.

As discussed in earlier chapters, this feminine “voice” has direct links to the shared body space of mother and child prior to signification, and leaves its presignifying traces in the musicality and rhythms of language. These presignification processes offer a multiplicity of meaning that must be suppressed in the interest of clarity and universal understanding. Once the child enters into the symbolic order, it is the “rational” language that takes precedence. For Kristeva, the semiotic expresses the original maternal voice and its libidinal multiplicity. This “voice” finds expression, among other places, in the world of “poetry.” By allowing for multiple meanings and non-closure, the maternal voice or the semiotic at times has the potential to disrupt and momentarily displace the paternal law. That Peace uses the poetic voice in what is

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<sup>240</sup> This reader found Peace much more accessible after viewing the film of his ‘crossover’ novel, *The Damned Utd*. This opened the door not only to the text of that novel but gave a way into *Tokyo Year Zero* and *Occupied City*.

essentially a masculine form, and in the case of the *Tokyo Trilogy*, a particularly brutal version of that form raises some questions about Kristeva's strategy of subversion. The use of poetic language allows Peace to capture the sounds and rhythms of suffering and despair. The difficult reading, however, that is inherent in any of his work suggests that poetic language of itself cannot be sustained and its displacement of paternal law is only ever temporary. Yet it is Peace's use of that language that distinguishes his work from all other contemporary crime writers.

### **David Peace**

Peace is a Yorkshire-man, with a Japanese wife and two children, who lives and writes in Tokyo. It is from there he wrote the *Red Riding Quartet*, a sequence of four novels loosely based on the police hunt for Peter Sutcliffe, the serial rapist and killer known as the Yorkshire Ripper. Among Peace's acknowledged influences are the angry young British authors of the fifties and sixties, such as John Braine, Stan Barstow, and Allan Sillitoe. He includes as well Dashiell Hammett, James Ellroy, Walter Mosley, and the post-war *avant-garde* work of J G Ballard. Like Ian Rankin, he sees crime fiction as literature that brings with it a powerful social commentary. He also believes he can only provide that commentary if he fully understands the period he is attempting to describe. To do this he immerses himself in a particular period. He calls it "cultural research." He tries to place his own "memories" and understandings against what actually happened, or was reflected, in the newspapers of the day; the politics of the period, the music, the films, the personal columns, the obituaries, the weather, official and unofficial histories, all help with the detail and language of the day. As he writes, he has the music of the period playing and where possible watches the films of the time. As noted earlier, Megan Abbott, who places her crooks, gangsters, and good-time girls in nineteen-fifties America, credits Peace's approach for the perceived authenticity of her own work.

In an interview with Matthew Hart, Peace makes the point that crimes happen to actual people in actual places at actual times in history, and the crime novel needs to ask what it was about that time or place or person that led to that crime. He goes on:

I would argue that not only does the crime novel have the opportunity, it also has the *obligation*. Because if you refuse the obligation to examine the causes and consequences of crime – whatever they may be – you are simply exploiting for personal financial gain and entertainment the deaths of other people (even if you fictionalise those deaths because murder is a fact). (559)

His own self-confessed failure in *Nineteen Seventy Seven* (2000) to follow those dictates saw him make every effort to try and take the “entertainment” out of his crime writing and eliminate any hint of irony or humour. He points to *Tokyo Year Zero* as an example of that. After twelve years in Tokyo he became increasingly obsessed with the history of the city, particularly in the twentieth century. The area he lives in is a suburb of ghosts. Destroyed twice within the space of twenty-odd years, first by the Great Kanto Earthquake, then by intensive American bombing, it is a place that remains haunted. For Peace the best way to unlock the hidden history of the area is through true crime and its political and social consequences (Hart 556-8).

In discussion about his writing style he was asked if he was surprised by the impact of *The Damned Utd* (2007), his so called “cross over novel”:<sup>25</sup>

Well, I really wanted to show that the so call *Avant-noir* style can be used to write about anything. And so I am proud that a book of short sharp sentences, with pages and pages of profanities and repetitions, can cross-over to a wider audience [...]. Because I really hope it encourages more writers, and particularly, more publishers to take more fucking risks and to stop foisting the same old shit on us all the time. (Unsworth 4)

Peace is a risk taker. Working in a genre designed to contain the abject through the imposition of identity, system, and order, he offers none of these. Instead he offers an ontological uncertainty that leaves the reader unsure about what really “happens” in his fictional world and what is merely imagined, fantasised or hallucinated by his characters. Through the perspective of the defeated he disturbs the metanarrative of the American occupation as benign. He takes Kristeva’s poetic language and turns it into the language of horror and abjection. His detectives are delusional, and in

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<sup>25</sup> The Damned Utd is the story of Brian Clough, the brilliant but controversial English football coach, who accepted the Leeds United Manager’s job as successor to his bitter rival Don Revie. Contemptuous of Revie’s brutal tactics and crude manner, he attempted to introduce his own flowing game and fair sportsmanship. The team resisted all his efforts, and he was forced out of the job after only forty-four days.

*Occupied City* don't even have a name. More than any other writer in this study he exposes the full extent to which the masculine imaginary is implicated in the construction of the *femme fatale*. He also provides, through the extension of Žižek's "competing horrors" where sex, murder, and violence are confronted by the grey banality of suburban life, one answer to Plain's dilemma regarding the place of the detective and the *femme fatale* in a world where civilised boundaries are lost and the abject can no longer be identified.

## **The Tokyo Trilogy**

Peace originally envisaged a quartet stretching from 1946 to 1964. It was intended to be about the total collapse of a sovereign state and how it dealt with humiliating defeat, destroyed cities, foreign occupation, and a cowered population, and how that within a space of only eighteen years that same population had recovered to a level that they could show-case their achievements by successfully running the Tokyo Olympics of 1964. He decided to make it a trilogy that dealt only with the period of the American occupation because before long he found so much interesting material that helped him understand how the country could rebuild itself so quickly. *Tokyo Year Zero* and the *Occupied City* do not share any of the same characters, but the mood, setting, and use of devices that fracture narrative and semantic stability are common between the two texts. After finishing *Tokyo Year Zero*, Peace claimed he had "gone as far as I can go with what I was trying to do with the repetition and one lines" and predicted that *Occupied City* would be a "different kind of book," and it is (Segundo 14). The brutal repetitions, the hypnotic hammering of *Tokyo Year Zero*, and the free use of expletives, which rarely find themselves in private discourse, give way in *Occupied City* to twelve competing voices that through deletions, mind changes, and confusing typefaces challenge the authority of language itself. How, or whether, *Tokyo Regained* will see the return of earlier characters or some bringing together of disparate threads is yet to be seen. Its original publishing date was set for mid-2011, but as of June 2013 it has yet to appear. Whenever it happens, what we do know is that it will come from the perspective of the vanquished and use a mixture of poetry, prose, and typography to capture the despair of a nation coming to grips with

defeat and the desire of the victors to make the country a reflection of American democracy.

Coming from the perspective of the vanquished, Peace's fiction disturbs the metanarrative of America's successful and "friendly" occupation. Immediately after the surrender, rumours speculated that the occupying American troops would be filled with hatred and many people fled Tokyo in anticipation of rape and pillage. Richard Storry, a prominent historian and recorder of the occupation of Japan, notes to the contrary:

As the [occupying] troops arrived by air and sea, it was soon evident that popular fears were groundless. The Americans did not behave like demons at all. So began perhaps the most peaceful and, to outward appearance, the most harmonious occupation of one great country by another that has ever been known. (238)

Storry notes, however, that McArthur surrounded himself with sycophants who took "almost ludicrous care that only the rosier reports of the progress of the occupation should reach the outside world" (238). He also claims, probably correctly, that the Americans gave technical advice of permanent value and introduced the Japanese people to a new awareness of freedom and dignity. If the Americans had been generally obnoxious or corrupt, "we should have heard about it on every side during the years of anti-American reaction following the Treaty of Peace." It is widely recognised, he said, by all "apart from the Communists, that American intentions were benevolent" (243). In concentrating on the defeated, Peace has replaced Storry's metanarrative of the most successful occupation in history with individual stories that challenge the notion of a "single" authoritative voice. By focussing on the "incidents" of history Peace de-emphasises a master narrative and gives these incidents a weight that reformulates the power relationship.

Similarly, Peace's repositioning of the detective, especially in *Occupied City* forces the reader to review continually the nature of the crime and his or her views on subjectivity. Lyotard, in "Re-Writing Modernity," refers to the detective novel and its processes where "a sentence can be formed to represent several differing points of view at the same time, depending on the stage of the narrative." In *Tokyo Year Zero* the formerly dominant subject, the detective (Minami), and his controlling narrative

dematerialise in a way that leaves the reader unsure as to exactly what has happened. In *Occupied City*, Peace disperses that controlling narrative. There is not one detective but two, both of whom compete with ten other voices in matters of “truth.” In this deconstruction of the dominant detective, the possibility of a metanarrative is aborted, and along with it his authority and role in the perpetuation of masculine power (5).

Likewise, Peace, along with highlighting the construct of the *femme fatale* as a product of the male imaginary, also destabilises the notion of male subjectivity being reliant on his ability to control her. This should not be surprising. In an interview with Manuela Barretta, he claims to not really like *noir* or crime fiction, because of its close links to the American pastoral tradition. In his eyes a form which offers a crime and a resolution through a figure such as a detective who restores order is a redemption story, and when you add to it some kind of romantic *femme fatale* type, it becomes “just rubbish.” When Barretta suggests to him that *Tokyo Year Zero* contains such a figure, he responds by saying, “Unfortunately there is, kind of [...]. I don’t agree with this idea of a woman, but that’s how a lot of men think when they idealise a woman [...] but stereotypes exist and you can’t ignore them.” He goes on to say that he considers it really important to counter the traditional detective narrative, and he hopes this will show through in *Occupied City* (101-02). There is also another factor driving Peace’s ambition to break out of the standard misogynist attitudes that lurk in the genre’s curriculum vitae. In all his interviews, there is a sense of barely contained anger reflected in his opinions of his fellow men. He claims to have a very low opinion of them, “There’s never any who-dunnit is there? It’s always a fucking man and the victims are always women and children!” (Shaw 124).

Peace rewrites the traditional narrative and he does it in several ways, but most strikingly through the use of what Kristeva calls poetic language. When she talks of poetic language, she is talking about *avant-garde* writing. This kind of writing disrupts normal expectations of grammar, rhythm, and typography:

Thus in any poetic language, not only do the rhythmic constraints, for example, perform an organising function that could go so far as to violate certain grammatical rules of national language and often neglect the importance of an ideatory message, but in recent texts these semiotic constraints (rhythm, phonic, vocal timbres in Symbolist work, but also



graphic disposition on the page) are accompanied by non-recoverable syntactic elisions; it is impossible to reconstitute the particular elided syntactic category (object or verb) which makes the meaning of the utterance undecidable. (*Desire in Language* 134)

Such is the language of the *Tokyo Trilogy*. It is a destabilising voice, and it works to disturb the authoritative truth of Japan's defeat and occupation and with it role of the *femme fatale*. The past and the present are constantly colliding. The living and the dead coexist, but in which world is often hard to grasp. There are omissions and deletions, vowels or consonants are lost, words crossed out, and sentences fragmented. Fact, fiction, and fantasy come together to highlight the selective aspect of any text and its subsequent unreliability. It also serves to destabilise the masculine containment of the *femme fatale* by exposing it totally as a product of the male imaginary. Furthermore, it demonstrates, certainly in *Occupied City*, that when the masculine voice is not dominant the *femme fatale* loses her importance or ceases to exist.

### **The Language of Revolution**

In Kristeva's terms, Peace's work is revolutionary. For a reader long used to the detective formula, it is something of a shock. Unless confronted with the text, its layout, and its disruptions, it is difficult to comprehend what he is trying to do. As a result, it is necessary to interrogate not only the texts but the different type faces, varying column widths, fragmentations, and even blank pages that are intrinsic to the trilogy.<sup>26</sup> The layout of the page contributes to the meaning of the words, and for this reason there will be more than the normal level of direct citations to better illustrate the extent of Peace's subversion and on what basis they are considered revolutionary.

Kristeva argues that poetic language is the voice of the semiotic. Traceable to the womb and to the formational beginnings of subjectivity, it is a voice of disruptive and unpredictable power. To consider such utterances as revolutionary is more complicated. As early as 1974 she was claiming:

Our philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs.

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<sup>26</sup> Wherever possible I have tried to duplicate Peace's layout and font sizes

Fascinated by the remains of the process, which is partly discursive, they substitute this fetish for what actually produced it. [...]These static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil, persists in seeking the truth of language by formalising utterances that hang in mid-air and the truth of the subject by listening to the narrative of a sleeping body – a body in repose, withdrawn from its socio-historical imbrication, removed from direct experience. (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 13)

The point she is making is that the then contemporary theories of language had become a science that ignored the speaking subject. Her belief was and is that “Every language theory is predicated upon a conception of the subject,” and that includes even those theories that explicitly or by implication try to deny it. She argues that in the Saussurian model one can find the subject in the gap between the signifier and the signified that admits both structure and interplay and it is the speaking subject who makes the connection between them. She further maintains that the subject who posits meaning comes out of a process that is prior to meaning: the chora. Made up of rhythms, tones, sounds, and non-sounds that are prior to meaning it can have no attached meaning. This is Kristeva’s “semiotic” that echoes the submerged maternal voice. It unsettles the process of meaning by creating a tension between the patriarchal symbolic order and the repressed maternal. The language of the symbolic is the language of the rational or the scientific that represses the semiotic and allows little leeway between rational description and emotional expression. Poetry, however, welcomes semiotic rupture of syntax, musical rhythms, the transgression of sense through metaphor and other word play. Such evidence of disruption challenges any closures of linguistic theory; nevertheless Kristeva recognises that though the semiotic is subversive it remains dependent on the law (*Desire in Language* 124-28):

However elided, attacked or corrupted the symbolic process might be in poetic language, due to the impact of semiotic processes, the symbolic function nonetheless maintains its presence. It is for this reason that it is language. First it persists as an internal limit of this bipolar economy, since a multiple and sometimes even incomprehensible signified is nevertheless communicated; secondly it persists because the semiotic processes themselves, far from being set adrift [...] set up a new formal construct: a so called new formal or ideological “writer’s universe,” the never-finished undefined production of a new space for significance. (*Desire in Language*, 134-35)

While this “new space for significance” may become a vehicle for change, albeit slow, it hardly carries with it the energy of revolution against the forces of capitalism as Kristeva once suggested it could. One of the problems with Kristeva’s suggestion is that her emphasis on literature and revolution brings with it connotations of barricades and tumbrils incited by a few lines of insipid poetry, when this is far from what she is positing. What she is arguing is not about literature but social struggle. She is saying that the language of power is intrinsically negative and inflexible, and inevitably impacts on historic understandings and meanings. In “poetry,” she sees elements of something that stands outside the “realm of symbolic functioning and so outside the realm of given structures of meaning” (Beardsworth 43). It provides a site of confrontation between repression, through which society sustains itself, and an opposing “voice.” Kristeva’s claim is that in a world where social dissatisfactions can be absorbed and blunted through the interconnectivity between capitalism and modern institutions of power, the semiotic language of poetry can expose the negativity that drives that repression:

Capitalism leaves the subject the right to revolt, preserving for itself the right to suppress the revolt. The ideological systems capitalism proposes, however, subdue and consolidate that revolt, bringing it back within the field of unity [...] that of the subject and the State. (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 210)

What Kristeva appears to be describing is more evolution than revolution, and quite problematic. The very process is a double action that challenges the symbolic order but at the same time finds itself co-opted and subsumed into the very system it is resisting. While she is using the revolutions of the nineteenth century as her examples, the feminist uprising of the late twentieth century may be more relevant. Feminism’s fight for equality led to legislation that enshrined that equality in the law. This law effectively pulled women further into the capitalist system by giving them access to occupations that were formerly the preserve of men; the legal profession, accounting, management, and the military all became open to them. This further engaged women within the capitalist embrace. The feminist revolution changed the public face of society, but the reality is not so rosy. Women are expected to retain their domestic, social, and sexual roles but also provide the professions a new source of highly educated cheaper labour. Auckland University psychologist, Peter Adams, was cited

as saying at the launch of his new book, “More than thirty years of feminism had achieved huge change in the public sphere, but research he had done with young men suggested little had changed in private – at home these young guys were saying all the same old stuff men were saying thirty years ago.” Capitalism allowed the revolt to happen, confident in the knowledge that it would eventually be subsumed into the mainstream, leaving the underlying mechanisms of capitalism untouched.

Kristeva’s “poetic revolution” did not quite live up to its billing, but in *Powers of Horror*, published some eight years later, she returns to the repressed maternal in language, claiming that much of the authority of language, politics, and religion depends on the repression of horror. What she is saying is that such institutions, and even language itself, act as shield and guarantor against these “imagined horrors.” The symbolic order is saying, in effect, obey my rules, and I will protect you against your worst nightmares. Total protection against “nightmares” can, however, never be fully guaranteed. They find expression in the “language of abjection” that has at its source the repressed maternal, which creates a crisis in the authority of the Word. The power of the language of abjection is to demystify, diminish, and displace authority. Abject literature – Peace’s novels fall into that category – calls into question language itself, along with the authority of the subject. Like revolutionary poetry, the content of abject literature is maternal; it contains the semiotic music and rhythms of language. At one level abjection is what is repressed within the symbolic element of language. When this repressed bubbles to the surface via the semiotic, it undermines the authority of language itself. In the context between formulaic crime fiction and Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic as the voice of dissent, David Peace’s oeuvre makes its appearance.

### *Tokyo Year Zero*

Set in 1946, the Year of the Dog, Tokyo is a ruined city. The war, instead of bringing national honour and riches, became a catastrophe that had forced Japan to endure foreign occupation for the first time in its history. Torn between the humiliation of defeat and relief that the sleepless nights, wholesale slaughter, and the prospect of starvation are over, the citizens of Tokyo are dazed and confused. The city is in chaos

as the Allied occupation focuses on eradicating Japan's historic militarism through a social and cultural revolution that promotes Western-style democracy. No arm of government can be trusted and even the Emperor is open to criticism. The police are no exception as many of them, fearful of being linked to wartime atrocities, seek to change their identity or disappear. When the bodies of two young women are discovered dead in Shiba Park, Detective Minami reluctantly takes the case. Weighed against the horrors that the city has endured it seems pointless; bodies are being discovered everyday among the wreckage. What difference does a couple more make? Minami himself is unsure of his own history. Threadbare, hungry, unwashed, and flea-bitten, his search for the killers is as much about finding his own identity, and he is sorely tempted by gang boss Matsuda's offer of a new name, a new job, a new life, and, importantly, a new past. This may help him hide from those who believe he is a war criminal, but it does not quell his internal doubts. Only by solving the mystery of several young girls found strangled, raped, and left to die among the decomposing bodies of the war dead can he prove to himself that he is a detective and thus confirm his subjectivity. In a broken society, the treatment of vulnerable women, forced to sell their bodies for a slice of bread becomes a comment on gender and power relationships, made even stronger by the knowledge that the State in the form of Minami, is not above raping a prostitute when he doesn't have any money to pay her.

### **The Dissolution of the Detective**

Minami is unlike any of the detectives we have examined. He is heir to the traumatised detectives witnessed in the work of Hughes, Larsson, and even Rankin, but his traumas are more than personal; they are the traumas of a nation. As a citizen of a thoroughly vanquished, barely functioning state, he is by definition abject, a rare position for any detective, but it is through that role he seeks to find his subject self. Thousands of decomposing bodies lie among the rubble, yet his desire to find the killer of four of them turns to obsession. He relies on sleeping tablets to get him through the day; he uses drugs obtained from a crime lord in exchange for favours and information. He woefully neglects his wife and children, preferring to spend his time with Yuki, his mistress, an increasingly hallucinatory figure of his fevered dreams. In fact, even his wife and family may be part of those same dreams. He apologises to a prostitute he rapes, but weeps at the degradation of young girls forced, by deprivation,

into prostitution. He only has the clothes he stands up in, has lice, is always hungry, and, like his fellow citizens, struggles to cope with the despair of defeat.

Peace, in part, describes this despair through the masculine language of the symbolic, but when that language proves incapable of capturing the agony of a defeated nation he turns to the language of the repressed maternal. The heading of Chapter One is prosaic. The reader is informed that it is the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the twentieth year of Hirohito's reign, the temperature is 90 degrees. The night before the surrender, the citizens of Tokyo fear the worst. Peace captures their fears, in the breakdown of the symbolic through fragmentariness, repetition and uncertainty of meaning, and introduces several phrases that re-echo throughout the text.

*No sleep. Only dreams, No sleep. Only dreams ...*

*Night and day, this is why I take these pills...*

*This is what I tell myself night and day... (4).*

Sleeplessness, dreams, pill-taking night and day come to represent Minami's life. He cannot exist without his Calmotin, a brand of sleeping pill that is almost like currency; night and day become inseparable; the dreams and nightmares that haunt him fill his hours and begin on the very first page to challenge symbolic meaning.

On the day of the surrender, he is assigned the case of a young woman whose body is found in the flooded basement of an air raid shelter. Stripped to the waist, he pulls her body from the raw sewage. In doing so he knocks his leg against the corner of a submerged table and prays that it is only a bruise, not a cut that could lead to infection and death. In one sense he worries unnecessarily. His body and mind racked by the proximity to death, disease, and defeat are already infected. Tormented by guilt over the neglect of his wife and family, worried by doubts about his part in war crimes, and uncertain about his identity, he is a lost soul. He believes that through solving the case of the murdered girl – that rapidly turns into a hunt for a serial killer – he will rediscover his subject self. It is soon obvious that this is not enough. His inner turmoil cannot be purged, nor can the anxiety created by his need to make an arrest while ensuring he himself is not arrested be quietened. In the end it proves more than his mind can stand and he seeks the ultimate abjection – death.

The sound of the siren warning every citizen to halt whatever they are doing and listen to an Imperial broadcast forces Minami to stop dragging the body of Miyazaki out of the basement into the sunshine. Despite everything, the whole population is shocked when Emperor Hirohito announces the surrender. In a dignified speech to his people, he outlines the reasons that had brought him to that decision and states:

*Despite the best that has been done by everyone [...] the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage [...] We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable. (22)*

Peace captures the people's heartbreak as they hear their Emperor's words: "Men on their knees, howling, now prostrate upon the floor in lamentation, weeping in the dust." This is the sound of the vanquished: "One hundred million weeping, howling, wounded people borne on a wind across a nation's ending –" (23). Later, as he dwells on his own and the people's agony, Minami reflects:

If you've never been defeated, never lost –  
 If you've never been beaten before –  
 Then you don't know the pain –  
 The pain of surrender –  
*Of occupation.... (70)*

Through all this, the investigation of the murder continues. Lack of transport, technical expertise, and trust hamper the operation right from the beginning. Minami works from a police office still hung with blackout curtains; there is no water and the toilets are blocked. There is only one working car for the whole division and on most occasions he makes his calls on foot. And he has been wearing the same shirt and trousers for four or five years. Suspected of hiding something, whether it is their identity or their war crimes, none of his colleagues can be trusted. Minami himself is suspect. There are veiled accusations of war crimes and doubts about his credentials as a detective. Criminal boss Matsuda's offer of a new job tempts him. "A new name? A new life? A new past...?" (9). Notwithstanding the fact that he refuses the offer, he continues to supply information to Masuda in exchange for drugs, which raises further doubts about his integrity. For his part, Minami can't abide the duplicity and confused morality of his superior officers. His distrust of Chief Inspector Adashi highlights the

crisis of identity upon which literally millions of defeated Japanese try to reinvent themselves:

*Adashi or Anjo or Ando or whatever he calls himself this week; he has changed his name and he has changed his job, his uniform and his rank and his past, he is not the only one ...  
No one is who they say they are ...  
No one is who they seem to be ... (34-35).*

Minami has a past, but unlike many of his colleagues who change to fit their new circumstances, he cannot, or will not, confront what his mind has blocked out. His unconscious voice remains repressed. All he is aware of is that he is a survivor. The sound of hammering “*Ton-ton Ton-ton*” and the ticking of the clock “*Chiku-taku*” remind him of it every waking hour:

*Ton-ton. Ton-ton. Ton-ton.  
I am one of the survivors –  
One of the lucky ones ...  
Chiku-taku. Chiku-taku. Chiku-taku .... (29).*

The perspective of the survivor is somewhat different from the American view of a successful occupation. In a flurry of action designed to democratise Japan, the Americans write a new constitution, promote land and law reform, rewrite rules relating to trade unions, and demilitarise the nation. Retribution in the form of trials and purges supposedly remove the stain of Japan’s worst crimes. As Storry points out, however, the American’s were sometimes “prisoners of their own naïve prejudices, and apt to condemn out of hand any belief or custom they regarded as ‘feudalistic’” (242). Firmly fixed in their belief of the total “rightness” of their occupation, the Americans too often failed to see what their occupation was doing to ordinary citizens. In two scenes the different perspectives are exposed. One shows the occupation, as benign, almost idyllic; the other depicts it as malevolent and cruel. In the first some children are playing in the street, while Minami sits among the rubble and watches:

Two little boys spread out my newspaper. I watch them crease and fold the paper into two GI hats. The three little girls stand among the rubble



and call to two little boys. In the ruins the two little boys march up and down with their dog-ends in their mouths and their paper hats on their heads –

“Asobu? ( Shall we play?) call the three little girls –  
Asobu...? Asobu...? (177)

The boys in their GI hats, butts hanging from their lips, ape the Americans; the girls with their childlike ‘do you want to play’ appear to be engaging in an innocent game. They represent the American view of the “world’s most successful occupation.” The reality is a lot crueller. The innocent call of these little girls – do you want to play? – is the self-same call of the prostitutes in the streets or those who people the International Palace brothel. This is a brothel set up on the orders of Douglas MacArthur, Japan’s Supreme Commander from 1945-1951, who institutionalised prostitution to protect his soldiers’ health. The International Palace was a place “where the Victors get their prophylactics” and the ‘girls’ are able to buy from the ‘company’ store cheap cosmetics and “shoddy clothes on borrowed money and expensive prices” (163). Minami goes there in search of a witness. He knows most of the working women there are “found or bought among the ruins of the cities and the countryside;” many quickly become ill or commit suicide (159). As he goes through the building, he witnesses the reality of the children’s street game:

There is a girl in the corridor. There is a naked girl in the corridor. There is a naked girl in the corridor on all fours. There is a naked girl in the corridor on all fours, no older than fourteen, being penetrated up the backside by a Victor as she stares down the long corridor at Nishi and I, with tears running down her cheeks and into her mouth, saying, ‘Oh, very good Joe, Thank you, Joe. Oh, oh, Joe...’

*She is better off dead. I am better off dead...*

This is America. This is Japan. This is democracy. This is defeat. I don’t have a country anymore. On her knees or on her back, blood and come down her thighs. *I don’t have a heart.* I don’t want a heart ...  
Her legs apart, her cunt swollen with pricks and pus –

*I don’t want a heart. I don’t want a heart ...*

Thank you, Emperor MacArthur –. (166)

This shocking incident and Peace's incremental reiteration, which starts with the seemingly innocent "There's a girl in the corridor," and builds step by step to the horror and degradation that accompanies defeat, to the final ironic thanking of McArthur, make a mockery of the 'accepted' view of the American occupation. Peace claims that this scene represents "the whole point of the book. That girl is every girl, every woman and that G.I. is every man, everywhere" (qtd. in Katy Shaw 126).

As the American metanarrative is disturbed, so are the boundaries of space and time. The small type face of the prologue signals and accentuates the disturbance. In a single page it tells of Minami lying among the corpses: "I lie among the corpses. **One Calmotin, two.** Hundreds of them, thousands of them. Dead leaves floating in the autumn breeze." There appears to have been a terrible defeat or even costly victory: "Tis the land of Manchuria, far, far from home. I lie among the corpses and I listen." The reader, immediately disorientated, has to ask questions. Is the speaker literally or figuratively dead? If he is dead, why are pills so important? (2). As the novel moves on, time loses all meaning and death takes on many guises. The past and the present, the living and the dead are all interchangeable. No longer national heroes, soldiers return home only to be ignored and treated as if they are ghosts. "Men and women talk about ghosts and demons in their sleep." Real or imagined, they are the same. The constant refrain of "chiku-taku, chiku-taku" underlines the fact that time has become disjointed. Minami obsesses about it. In a world which appears to have come to an end,

[e]veryone talking about the minutes that feel like hours. The hours that feel like days. The days that feel like weeks. The weeks that feel like months. The months that feel like years –  
This year that has felt like a decade – (70)

Continuity is broken by the idiosyncratic layout. Real time is constantly expanding and contracting within a novel that is nevertheless carefully organised around historic dates. This chronological ordering of time places the novel squarely within the symbolic order, yet Minami's internal subjective time disturbs that ordering. An old man in a bar tells Minami that his watch is stuck at noon (158). Later, Minami returns and is dismayed to find only rubble. A local tells him the bar was destroyed during the war. He objects that it couldn't be, "I was here only two days ago... Well you were

drinking with ghosts then.” In tears he hears again, “*Well you were drinking with ghosts ...*” (210). In the world Minami inhabits, all boundaries are mutable and the symbolic order loses its certainty.

### **The *Femme Fatale* as Fevered Dream**

The disaster of *Tokyo* is of such a magnitude there can be no single representative of otherness in the way of the *femme fatale*. Yet in a landscape where degraded sexuality is part of the economic necessity under occupation and sex is available for a crust of bread, or taken without payment or consent, Yuki, Minami’s mistress, is a singularly sexual being. Though sited in the nineteen-forties, she is not the *femme fatale* of Hollywood. She doesn’t conjure up images of *The Maltese Falcon’s* Brigid O’Shaughnessy, or any of the now clichéd figures who sidle out of the night all wreathed in smoke and bad intentions. Critics such as Barretta and Shaw are not quite sure where Yuki fits, but both seem to agree that she is some sort of modification of the classic *femme fatale*. Barretta describes her as a “kind of *femme fatale*,” a description Peace uses himself during their interview (Barretta (101). Shaw justifies “this strain of *femme fatale*” on the basis of Minami’s obsession with Yuki as a means of escape from trauma and hopelessness (125). Despite these caveats, Yuki has the hallmarks of what Žižek, in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, calls the classic *femme fatale*, the “fundamental fantasy against which the male symbolic identity defines and sustains itself” (10). She functions as “the inherent transgression of the patriarchal symbolic universe, as the *male* masochist-paranoid fantasy of the exploitive and sexually insatiable woman, who simultaneously dominates us and enjoys her suffering” (10).

Žižek’s description fits Yuki, but she is more than that, or perhaps even considerably less. She is woman, the natural victim of war, hungry, desperate for sleep, and constantly at risk of being raped or dragooned into one of the victor’s brothels. Minami’s role as a policeman offers a degree of protection, but in all probability it is his access to drugs, which keep the horror of defeat at bay, that makes him attractive to her. Her reasons may be pragmatic, but for him reason has no part in it. Infatuated by her, she is “the one splash of colour among the dust” (49). Such is his obsession that it is difficult to distinguish between the real person and the woman of his

imagination. She is a composite, her material presence embodied through the subjects of Minami's murder enquiries. Throughout the narrative, he continually grafts incidents, gruesome discoveries, or bodies distorted in death on to his construction of her. The sight of the first victim, "legs parted, raised and bent at the knee," becomes part of his portrayal of Yuki (34). Likewise the second victim's white canvas shoes and their red soles slide into his imagined construction of her. A prostitute he rapes also becomes part of that construct:

*Asobu...? Asobu...? Asobu...? Asobu...?*

In her white half-sleeved chemise and pink socks –

Her white canvas shoes with red rubber soles –

*Asobu...? Asobu...? Asobu..?*

Her hair is black. Her skin is white –

Under an archway. In a shadow –

*Asobu...? Asobu...?*

*Asobu?* She asks me in a harsh Tohoku accent

I stand before her now and I bow. I say, 'I am sorry I have no money. I am very sorry. What's your name?'

*The women are the men...*

And she tilts back her head, deep under the arch, deep in the shadows, and she laughs, 'You choose: Mitsuko? Yori? Kazuko? Yoshie? Tatsue? Hiroko? Yoshiko? Ryuko? Go on you choose...'

The dead are the living. The living are the dead...

'Your name is Yuki,' I tell her. 'Yuki' (172-73).

Yuki and Minami meet during a rainstorm, when he lends her his umbrella. She invites him into her room. When she makes him tea, he worries what diseases the water may carry. Later she remarks, "You were more worried about typhoid than syphilis" (146).

From the moment of their first meeting until the bloody climax of their relationship he is obsessed:

I have waited hours for her to lie again here upon the old tatami mats of her dim and lamp-lit room. *I think about her all the time. I think about her all the time.* I have waited hours to watch her draw her figures with their fox-faces upon this these screens. *I think about her all the time...* (46)

The repeated image of their love-making underscores his obsession and her role as an escape from the hopelessness of his life. The day they first meet they make love in the middle of a bombing raid, and he cannot get the incident out of his mind:

*She has haunted me from the day I first met her, in the thunder and the rain, from that day to this day, through the bombs and the fires from that day to this.*

What he remembers is her lying naked on a futon, “her legs parted, raised and bent at the knee.” This phrase appears again when he describes the murdered girls, the prostitute in the street or the teenage girls lured into the victor’s brothels. The description of their love-making is a scene Minami constantly revisits:

She dips her fingers in my come. *I think about her all the time.* She puts her fingers to her lips. *I think about her all the time.* She licks my come from her fingers and says again, ‘Please make it rain, rain like it rained on the night we first met....’

*She haunts me here. She haunts me now....* ‘I am a woman,’ she whispers. ‘I am made of tears.’ (46)

Katy Shaw writing of Yuki claims that she is a constant reminder of the solace Minami finds in this particular strain of *femme fatale*, and that Minami’s irresistible desire for her increasingly exposes him to compromising situations and clouds his ability to make rational decisions “about the case and his own sense of self” (125). That he is obsessed with Yuki there is no doubt, but to label her the *femme fatale*, as Shaw does, without further examination may miss the point. In describing her as “this particular strain” Shaw tacitly acknowledges that Yuki is not in the classic mode, but in calling her the *femme fatale*, she implies that Yuki’s sexuality signifies danger. The suggestion that Minami’s desire for Yuki clouds his judgement makes her the representation of all his problems. This understanding of Yuki goes against Peace’s intent. In his interview with Barretta, he makes it clear that he doesn’t agree with the

stereotyping of women and he felt that was evident in the novel. However, stereotyping cannot be ignored. (101). Unquestionably Yuki is a construct of Minami's imagination. Like all *femmes fatales* she springs from the male imaginary. As Shaw acknowledges, she is also a victim stuck in a situation from which she can't escape. Minami's final tumble into madness is not triggered by his obsession with Yuki. He is a man living under the pressure of defeat, the loss of his identity, doubts about his perhaps criminal past, drug use, and regret about his neglect of his wife and children.

His buried identity begins to emerge when one of the gang bosses refers to him as Corporal. Later while interviewing Kodaira, the man he suspects of killing the four young girls, he is stunned when Kodaira claims to know him. "Come on," he laughs. "You were there; you saw what I saw, you did what I did..." He goes on to say that he had seen a man there who looked like Minami, but that wasn't his name then: it was Katayama. Minami protests, "I know who I am," which follows with "*No one is who they seem...*" (361-62). His protest contains both denial and doubt, and it is the doubt that pushes him towards insanity. Gradually he begins to accept that perhaps he is Katayama. Anxious and concerned about his possible fate, he goes to visit Yuki in search of comfort. Before he goes, he says goodbye to his children, "Please remember us, my daughter and my son call after me. Please don't forget us Daddy..." (352). From then on Minami's mind becomes lost in a muddle of time space, life, death, and the nature of his subject self.

In a montage of quick-cut scenes with no chronological order, but representing incipient madness, a senior police officer puts a razor and bottle in front of him and says, "Sweet dreams, Corporal Katayama" (367). Next we move to Yuki:

She is lying naked on the futon. *Her eyebrows shaved, her teeth black.* [...] *Her eyebrows shaved, her teeth black... Her eyebrows shaved, her teeth black... Her eyebrows shaved, her teeth black.* Her legs parted, raised and bent at the knee. *Her eyebrows shaved, her teeth black.* [...] She says - 'Marry me, please marry me...' (367).

The scene shifts again. “*I pick up the razor*’ Nobody knows my name [...] The strong are the weak. [...] Communists should be set free. Communists should be locked up. *I lift up my cock with my left hand*. Strikes are illegal. *The blade is cold*.

*I cut and I cut and I cut and I cut and I cut ...  
Until the dead are the living. I cut ...*” (368).

In apparently cutting off his own penis, Minami is physically and psychologically unmanned. He becomes “woman,” the perennial victim, which is the fate of all Japanese under the occupation.

The site then moves to a bombed out street. The only recognisable feature of his home is its gate. “My wife and my children step out of the half-light, their air-raid hoods are scorched, the bedding on their backs is black, their faces blistered and their eyes sunken, but they are alive – ” They push him away, “We are already dead ... He sees his house with no roof, no doors, no furniture, his children’s shoes in cinders, when it finally comes to him: “Now I remember I have no wife, I have no children, only ashes--” (370).

We then flick to the Matsuzawa Hospital for the insane:

I sit back cross legged on my cot--  
In my shapeless gown of yellow and dark blue stripe  
Chinese silk with my close shaven-head and my unblinking eyes--  
The blood--specked scroll on the wall above my cot-. (371)

This scene is signalled some thirty pages earlier:

*I am sat crossed legged on a cot, a blood-flecked scroll on the wall above my bed. My head shaven and my belly bandaged* (346).

The novel ends, three quarters of the way down the page with, “I close my eyes and I begin to count again: one hundred and twenty Calmotin, one hundred and twenty—*One of the lucky ones*” (371). This is followed by an unnumbered blank page, and then an unexpected and unannounced epilogue, which takes up the numbering

sequence at 373 indicating that the blank page is intended to have meaning. It forces the reader back to the prologue, which begins and ends with reference to thousands of corpses and the counting of Calmotin:

I lie among the corpses. **One Calmotin, two.** Hundreds of them, thousands of them [...] I try to raise my head but I cannot. Flies and mosquitos swarm over me I want to brush them off but I cannot. [...]. Last night somewhere between the midnight and dawn, between retreat and defeat, rain drenched in this place and, though the storm has now passed, fresh torrents of rain still fall upon the corpses and onto my face [...]. Images of my wife and children float before my eyes among the corpses. (2)

The epilogue takes up the refrain of corpses and Calmotin in the same type face and size as the prologue it starts with the second half of a sentence – “of every province through which we pass”. Then it links back to the prologue:

The flies swarm, the air stinks. I lie among the corpses. **One hundred and Calmotin, one hundred and twenty-one.** [...] In a half-destroyed house I lie among the corpses. Thousands of them, millions of them. **One hundred and thirty Calmotin, one hundred and thirty-one.** (373)

Then slowly though never directly stated, the reason for Minami/Katayama’s concern regarding war crimes begins to surface. The bodies, the thousands of them, are not the result of a great victory or a calamitous defeat, but the result of the massacre of perhaps tens of thousands of innocent civilians. “The unburied bones of the Chinese dead stand like sticks stuck in the soil. Brown thigh bones shine in the sunlight, vertebrae glisten.” Minami, it turns out, is no innocent bystander:

The Chinese couple are streaked with dirt, their faces expressionless. The interpreter spits out the match and shouts at the man. The garlic stench, the metallic words. The woman answers the question. The interpreter strikes her. The woman staggers. The interpreter nods. Kashara and I march to the outskirts of the village, the red sky reflected in the willow-lined creek. The woods are still tonight, the farmhouses abandoned. The couple stare into the waters of the creek, the clusters of wild chrysanthemums, the corpse of a horse, its saddle tangled in the weeds. Kashara draws his sword and I draw mine. The man and the woman drop to their knees. His hands clasped together, her frantic metallic pleas. The blade and then the silence again. Blood flows over their shoulders but neither head falls. The man’s body tilts to the right, and topples into the water into the wild chrysanthemums. *Masaki, Banzai!* I help the woman’s body into the creek, the muddy soles of her feet turned up to the sky.

Death is a man. *Ton-ton.* Cut off your cock. *Masaki, Banzai!* Death is a man. *Ton-ton.* Tear out you heart! *Daddy, Banzai!* Death is a man. *Banzai.* **One hundred and fifty Calmotin ...** (373)

This is the “incident” that drives Minami/Katayama to madness, not his obsession with Yuki. It forces the reader into questioning the beginning of the plot as partly revealed in the epilogue. The blank page leaves room to believe that the whole story is the nightmare of a man left for dead among corpses. It calls for a complete



re-examination of Minami's subjectivity and as a consequence the positioning of Yuki. Although revealed as unreliable, Minami's controlling narrative may still remain dominant, but it rewrites the subject position of everyone involved. Minami, his wife, his police colleagues, his children, and Yuki can now be seen through a different prism. It highlights the tenuous reality attached to all of them but especially to the figure of the *femme fatale*. Historically she has, in the universe of the genre, epitomised evil, posing "a threat not only to the hero's moral integrity, but to his very ontological identity" (Žižek 154). The revelations of Minami/Katayama's crimes dematerialise him and the threatening "other" shifts from the *femme fatale* to the "other" within ... In the Žižekian interpretation, the *femme fatale* functions as the signifying formation which confers "ontological consistency" on the masculine subject. In this situation when the symptom dissolves, the subject "loses the ground under his feet" (Žižek 155). After the reader's necessary readjustment of Yuki's position, her place as a *femme fatale* becomes problematic. Her sexuality obsesses Minami but offers no threat. Nor does she want anything from him apart from the odd Calmotin. A composite creation of Minami's imagination, Yuki represents his search for Žižek's "ontological consistency." She is a fantasy figure whose physical presence resides in many of the women Minami meets in his working life. She and they carry the burden of supporting his subject position. His roles as detective, husband, father, and lover collapse under the weight of evidence that his identity is an assumed one. When he dissolves on the realisation of his true identity, his imagination is not strong enough to maintain Yuki as his bulwark against the facts of his past, and she instantly becomes absent from the text. This is a reversal of the binary construction of detective and *femme fatale*: normally it is the triumph of the detective that sees her disintegration; in this case it is the slow disintegration of the detective that uncouples her from her role in his subjectivity. In a landscape scarred by death and destruction, where despair, dislocation, and displacement are the order of the day, subjectivity, otherness, and identity become indeterminate. With everyone seeking to exorcise their ghosts, or create a new identity, the *femme fatale* as the symbolic "other" becomes untenable.

## *Occupied City*

As does *Tokyo Year Zero*, *Occupied City* challenges the grand narrative of history's most "successful occupation" where the people of Japan look to their conquerors not as demons but heralds of a new and better day. Two years on, the scene shifts from the bitterness of defeat to the humiliation of occupation by an America determined to bring Tokyo "from Defeated and Ruined City, Surrendered and Occupied City to Olympic and Future City, in less than twenty years . . .," not only for the benefit of the Japanese, but for the furtherance of the occupiers' geopolitical ambitions (155). Similar to *Tokyo Year Zero*, however, nothing is what it seems — murderers pose as health inspectors, journalists pretend to be doctors, war criminals who are supposedly dead and buried are alive and well: "The war is not over. A cup is not a cup. Medicine is not medicine. A friend is not a friend, a colleague not a colleague. For a colleague here yesterday, sat in that seat by the corner, is not here today. Because a doctor is not a doctor" (60). The *femme fatale*, already untenable in *Tokyo Year Zero*, disappears completely in *Occupied City*. The dominant voice of the detective also disappears, and in its place come twelve competing voices and the occasional voice of the "writer" who tries and fails to discover an authoritative truth among the lies and contradictions offered by the witnesses.

### **The Story**

In 1948, the Year of the Rat, a man dressed as a medical officer walks into the downtown branch of the Teikoku bank. He says that he is there to inoculate the staff against another outbreak of dysentery. They all accept his word and drink the poison he pours into each of their teacups. Sixteen of them drink, and only four survive. Those who die suffer painful and lingering deaths. Twelve conflicting voices tell their story. Among them are two detectives, a journalist, a military scientist, the killer, the victims and their ghosts. Nothing can be believed, no one can be trusted. Peace points the finger at Unit 731, Japan's covert wartime chemical and biological weapons division, and a dubious confession that left the painter, Sadamichi Hirasawa, on death row. He lingered there for almost forty years before dying of natural causes at the age of ninety-five. Posthumous appeals and campaigns continue to fight his cause. His nineteenth request for retrial, filed in 1989, still awaits examination in December

2012. Suspicion remains that Hirasawa was the innocent victim of an American conspiracy seeking to obtain secret Japanese biological research to better position them in what was already emerging as the Cold War with Russia.

### **Reading Beyond the Text**

As much as the text and its structure challenges any notion of a singular truth, the presentation of typefaces, cross-outs, and fragmentation forces the reader to go beneath the words to seek meaning. Each chapter heading speaks to different understandings of the events and reasons that lie behind the mystery of the Teikoku bank killings. Each voice adds to, and deepens, the mystery as three years after the war's end people still struggle to escape the horrors of defeat. The chapters carry the following headings: The Testimony of the ~~Victims~~ Weeping, The ~~Testimony~~ of Note book of a Detective H, The Testimony of a Survivor, The (Dead) Letters of an American, The Curses & Spells of the Man in the Shrine, The Stories of a Journalist, The Exhortations of a ~~Soldier, Gangster,~~ Businessman and Politician, -The Martyr-log of a Homo Sovieticus, The Thirty-Six Wounds of a Second Detective, N, The ~~Protestations, Denials,~~ Confessions of the ~~Accused-Convicted,~~ Condemned Man in the Cell, *as it really was?* The Last Words of the Teikoku Murderer, or a Personal History of Japanese Iniquity, Local Suffering & Universal Indifference (1948), The Lamentations. Each brings with it a different voice. With their different perspectives, each voice serves to deconstruct any authoritative truth. Whose truth is it, that of the victim speaking from the grave, or of the increasingly disillusioned and delusional American scientist, or of the heavily censored Soviet observer, or that of the traumatised survivor? The multiplicity of voices, of accents, class origins, and languages operate in opposition to 'official' ideologies dependent on a single united subject. Without a dominant voice or common ideology, the conditions that give rise to the *femme fatale* are negated.

Frequent crossings out are a feature of *Occupied City*. **The Martyr-log of a Homo Sovieticus** has several such sections. Sent to Japan by the Soviet government to liaise with American officials regarding Japanese Bacterial Warfare, he is dismayed by the level of obstruction from both the Japanese and the Americans. The crossings out in his reports can be read as a sign of the high level of censorship in this newly

democratised land. Read, however, through or beneath the lines and the reader will discover an ambivalence about the truths that hold the symbolic order together. As he notes earlier, there are words for reports, for the tops of desks, the desks of others, ~~and then there are words for diaries, the drawers of memories~~ (169). He resists the rational language of facts and figures, but his referring to the Ten Commandments shows he cannot ignore the notion of the “Father,” or his law:

~~My head and my thoughts have been filled with numbers, the numbers of the dead and the numbers of the hurt, the numbers of my temptations and the numbers of my sins (all of which I know now to be countless). Repeatedly, I have found myself forsaking the documents, the reports and the transcripts, and retuning instead to the Ten Commandments ...~~  
(178)

Disillusioned by the knowledge that the Americans are colluding with the Japanese to obtain details of Japan’s germ warfare research and hide that information from their former allies, the Russian knows he can trust no one. In despair he takes his own life. An American researcher (The Dead Letters of an American), tasked with uncovering Japan’s wartime secrets and bringing the culprits to account, is similarly disillusioned. An idealistic man with naïve notions of his country’s honour, he becomes increasingly distraught as he learns that America is protecting and rewarding Japanese war criminals. He sees America’s idealism betrayed. Unable to cope, he hangs himself, and like the Russian scientist becomes just another victim of American global ambition.

Of more importance for this study is the fate of two detectives who share their narrative voices with ten other people. No longer dominant or granted any greater claim to authenticity, they are further diminished by simply being referred to as “a Detective H” and as “a Second Detective, N”. N writes from the grave as he explains his part in the investigation. He records conscientiously – police procedural style – in his note book:

**1948/1/26; 16.00** Snow / Day-off / In the public bath / The call from metro HQ / “Ten dead in jurisdiction of the Mejiro Police Station.’ / ‘Another Yakuza war?’ / ‘Much bigger. Mass poisoning. Report immediately!’ / Trolley bus from Naka-Meuro to Ebisu / Taxi to crime scene / (20)

For a week he records every detail of his day and the investigation, then gradually a change appears: “[VARIOUS PAGES DAMAGED, DEFACED, OR MISSING FOR REASONS UNKNOWN]” (42). Nineteen entries of Detective H’s note book, written over seven months, are defaced, damaged or are missing. His own disappearance is signalled by the ominous “[THE NOTE BOOK ENDS HERE]” (45).

Detective N also suffers a violent death, chased down by some American soldiers he has offended:

Out of the last corner of my eye I see them coming, *half-seen figures, half heard whispers* **IN THE BLACK FOG, IN THE BLACK MIST** Paralysis, petrification on your hands on your knees **REFLECTED, FRACTURED, DISFIGURED and OTHER** Dead. Dead is the little Jap bastard [...] (221- 2).

He is a man who hates the Americans. He sees Tokyo as a giant wound and its citizens as whores in the service of their occupiers. It particularly offends him that his wife works in a dance hall: “The bastard how he touches her up, how he feels her up, the slut, *she curtsies he bows* [...]” (193). When provoked beyond reason, he responds violently to American sneers and is beaten to death.

In H and N the reader sees the final disintegration of the detective. Rendered impotent through the obliteration of any information that gets too close to the Americans, and physically unable to resist the encroachment of the occupiers into their personal life, they nevertheless threaten the integrity of America’s dream for Japan. For this reason they are abjected from the body politic. Safe in the knowledge that ‘They can do what they want when they want, to who they want, how they want,’ the Americans treat all Japanese as “other” (OC 225). In the process the detective loses his omnipotence and his manhood. The ability to restore ‘order,’ the whole rationale of his being, disappears, as does he. Along with him goes the creation of his imagination, the *femme fatale*.

## The Ashes of Meaning

Through the use of poetic language, unimaginable horror, and multiple voices, Peace brings into question the meanings attached to America's "successful occupation" as well as to the mythic figures of the detective and the *femme fatale*. In contesting the singular narratives offered by the "victors," he challenges long-established truths and espouses Lyotard's claim that long-range metanarratives of the past are increasingly rejected in favour of local, individualised accounts (xxiv-xxv). In pointing out the subjective and selective nature of all narrative accounts, he demolishes the notion of any narrative claiming to offer an authoritative truth, and in doing so demystifies religious, moral, and political absolutes that collude in the manufacturing of that truth.

The redressing of the "facts of history" is one thing, but it is the use of poetic language that makes Peace unique. It is this voice that according to Kristeva works to deconstruct and reconstruct language at the outer boundaries of the symbolic and acts as an on-going source of subversion. In taking the poetic voice into the detective genre, Peace moves beyond the limits of the form. Language begins to crumble under the pressure. On the one hand, this creates some problems, mainly that *Avant-noir* is not an easy read. On the other hand, however, it encourages the reader to move beyond the text and central tenet of the genre -- the containment of the *femme fatale* in the interests of the symbolic order and masculine identity. In Peace, the symbolic and the semiotic collide, and produce a new space for signification that is not reliant on the dominance of the symbolic. It frees women of the burden of otherness. Historical contextual elements critical of the American occupation also demythologises the detective as master and the *femme fatale* as sexually dangerous woman by showing degraded sexuality as part of the necessity of life under occupation. This is a departure from genre depictions of female sexuality. Normally female sexuality is a subterfuge to distract the detective or the dupe from her intended larceny. In the *Tokyo Trilogy*, women are the victims and their sexuality is a mechanism of survival.

It is the embodiment of the murdered girls into the representative figure of Yuki that expresses Peace's world view, a view I have tried to capture through parodying Peace's idiosyncratic style on the page that follows. In its crossings out, fragmentation, and different typefaces it seeks to force the reader to go beyond the text. It is a simultaneous attempt at assertion and erasure that recognises the

limitations placed upon female sexuality by the masculine imaginary even as it destabilizes the dichotomy that sustains this imaginary.

This latter GOES against the **original** paradigm of detection where the monstrous was woman, or more particularly, the feminine. *As discussed earlier, the gay man, the lesbian, the racial other, or the criminal of whatever stripe was in some way feminised, declared deviant, and installed in the position of opposition to legitimate masculine authority. In the Tokyo Trilogy it is more complicated. The victors see the Japanese as a feminised racial "other."*

*"The city is a woman" who is regularly defeated, raped, and occupied (Occupied City 287). Its male citizens are rendered impotent or abjected. They are powerless to resist the "democratic capitalism" that is forced upon them with no regard for existing customs, Culture or history. For the Japanese the racial other is the American occupier intent on installing an alien order. It produces a horror beyond any *femme fatale* and leaves no room for a return to the old certainties.*

## Conclusion

### You're Gone, Baby

#### There's no room for you sweetheart

This study sought to answer the question of whether the *femme fatale* has any place in a postfeminist world. What I expected to find was verification that, regardless of any guise she has assumed, she is in decline and her passing is imminent. The answer I got was less clear-cut and more multifaceted than anticipated. What I found was a genre going through a complex revision that at times it struggles to cope with. In Hammett's world of seventy years ago, women were either innocents who needed protection, or *femmes fatales* whose seductive charms led men to disaster, doom, or death. In the postfeminist age many of the traditional tropes of the genre are as visible as ever: the jaundiced private-eye, the predilection for female victims, and the genre's alignment with male authorities and the institutions of law and order. Against this, however, are clear signs that none of the works examined are untouched or uninfluenced in some way by the feminist debate surrounding issues of gender and power. This has led to revisions within the genre that have had an inevitable impact on the construction of the *femme fatale*. Old binaries of gender are increasingly under pressure, so much so that the essentialised *femme fatale* and all she stands for struggle to remain relevant. Contradiction and ambiguity have replaced deep-rooted certainties. She may be victim and perpetrator, powerless or omnipotent; she may be truly feminist or a symptom of the genre's misogynist tradition. Whatever she is, the *femme fatale* is no longer a reliable fantasy against which male identity can define and sustain itself.

On balance, the textual evidence suggests that while the imprint of the *femme fatale* will be difficult to dislodge, her material presence in the hard-boiled genre is on the wane, Žižek's "inherent transgression" notwithstanding. She exists undoubtedly in Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, but lingers uneasily in the works of Hughes, where apart from one "real" *femme fatale*, the "dangerous" women are more victims of an oppressive cultural ideology than perpetrators of any crime. The other three authors



examined come closer to meeting my original expectations. Abbott uses her rendition of the *femme fatale* to claim a subject position for women within a feminine imaginary that challenges hegemonically imposed roles of “otherness” upon women. Rankin effectively replaces her through the “stranger within,” and Peace exposes her as a creation of the male imaginary. What each of the authors offer is a reframing of the *femme fatale* within the genre that includes reinvention, replacement or redundancy.

In some sense, Hughes’ detective Ed Loy is “truest” to the original hard-boiled detective. He is fast-talking, hard-hitting, has a tolerance for pain, and an always abundant supply of available women ready to fall into his bed. Yet it is through these sexy maternal women that Hughes departs from tradition. They are hybrid characters, part temptress and part victim. Yet, apart from one exception, they are guilty of no crime. Nevertheless, these would-be *femmes fatales* all meet violent deaths. It is their sexuality, which defies the once unassailable ideology of the Catholic Church and its idealised notion of the Marian mother, that sees them punished. In that they challenge hegemonic masculinity’s sense of order, they are dangerous. Yet in terms of the relationship between the detective, whose historic role is the containment of the dangerous woman, and the vulnerable women who tend to be subsumed into the part of the *femmes fatales*, there is a disengagement from the central tenet of the genre. He fails to recognise them as susceptible, mistreated women for most of the plot. Yet through his revisiting of historic crimes, he captures the victimhood of these women in a way that compromises any formulaic casting of them as representations of evil.

Megan Abbott moves the *femme fatale* beyond the male imaginary. In its place she offers a female imaginary, where in a genre designed to demonstrate control over the abject, her female protagonists ignore patriarchal codes of rationality and order. Her sexy, tough, and ruthless female characters operate in a hybridised space that admittedly owes something to the male imaginary, yet it is perceived from a woman’s perspective and offers a fantasy of empowerment. The male detective is of little importance in this world. In his absence, the notion of the abject that must be expelled becomes ambiguous. As Kristeva claims in *Powers of Horror*, the abject both attracts and repels and its containment requires borders (5, 69). Recognising the abject requires knowing the “other,” and it is the repression of that “other” that society relies on for its identity and for the security of its social and symbolic constitution. In the

female imaginary of Abbott's realm, the boundaries of this constituted order are rendered ambiguous, and accordingly, the borders that once identified the genre are dissolved. Her *femmes fatales* move into the subject position, and in the process walk away from their traditional role of securing masculine identity and dominance.

Larsson in his *Millennium Trilogy* appears to come from the perspective of the feminist sympathiser as he seeks to rewrite the roles of "victim" and "perpetrator." Salander is an ambiguously coded figure. She is a vision of female empowerment and a victim of rape, living in a society that professes gender equality but does little to protect women from male violence. The fluidity of Salander's identity among *femme fatale*, victim, and feminist fantasy figure of extraordinary abilities correspondingly destabilises the ideological force of the genre, which fluctuates between feminist critique and neo-patriarchal neutralisation of feminist agency as represented by Salander. These fluctuations create a sense of "undecidability." While they appear to destabilise the ideological heart of the genre, they are, if interpreted through Žižek's notion of the "inherent transgression," a smoke-screen that hides the fact that the Salander character cannot escape her place in the male imaginary. This suggests that the Larsson novels despite their feminist "cover" are simply more violent versions of the original hard-boiled genre with its agenda of supporting and maintaining masculine subjectivity.

More than any other author in this study, Rankin manages to reflect the social change produced by postfeminist professional mobility for women. Women are going about their business within the Edinburgh constabulary where they are neither idealised nor denigrated. The occasional *femme fatale* in the Rebus series is often a minor character. In *Black & Blue*, contrary to form, she even honours her word to Rebus, thus departing from genre conventions surrounding the *femme fatale* as the representation of evil. Rebus is no misogynist. His own sense of being an outsider contributes to his sympathetic treatment of women, and this means that he does not project upon them the threat to the sociosymbolic order, with the *femme fatale* cast in the role of the scapegoat. Her place is taken by the inner demons and anxieties that push Rebus towards mental breakdown. This is a realisation of Kristeva's notions of "interiorisation" and of the "stranger within." It resites women away from the paradigm of the "scapegoat victim as foundress of society" that dominates patriarchal

thinking (“Women’s Time” 210). Rebus’ inner torments thus reposition the “other” within the detective’s subjectivity and make redundant the scapegoating of the *femme fatale* for the crimes of society.

In *Peace* a similar “interiorisation” occurs. The disaster of Japan’s defeat is of such a magnitude that there can be no single representative of “otherness.” The ambiguous presentation of the detective’s mental state makes it difficult to distinguish his external reality from his interior state of mind. This means that his obsession with Yuki, his mistress, is similarly affected. His obsession and her sexuality suggest she may be a *femme fatale* figure who provides him temporary relief from trauma and hopelessness. However, given his state of mind, she may equally be a composite of an external reality wedded to a fevered imagination: her material presence to him is embodied through the subjects of Minami’s murder enquiries, as he continually grafts on to her incidents, gruesome discoveries, or bodies distorted in death. Her presence serves to “normalise” him within the boundaries of the genre, allowing for an interpretation of her as a Žižekian construct that acts as the fundamental fantasy against which the male symbolic identity sustains itself. Yet so fragile is the detective’s mental state, he loses eventually the power to interiorise her, and can no longer hold her in his imagination. In his final breakdown, she dissolves into the widespread existential abjection that underlies *Peace*’s work. Displaced from the male imagination, she dematerialises.

The revision of the genre in response to feminism as witnessed in this analysis comes at the expense of loosening male control over the female “other.” What we see is men being repositioned away from conventional notions of hegemonic masculinity as their subordination of women comes under increasing pressure. It means that a subgenre of crime fiction that had its origins as a backlash against women getting the vote and a desire to fashion a new masculine ideal has, in reflecting the impact of feminism, developed an uncertainty that it never had before. In its short life it served, and continues to serve, as a link in the reiterative chain of myth, legend, fairy tales, and “veritable truths” that work to hold women in their place of abjection. In this postfeminist age the link is not yet broken. However, the ideology that forged it is being tested. The old certainties and simplicities have gone, and in their place is a genre capable of reflecting a complex expression of social and political change.

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