

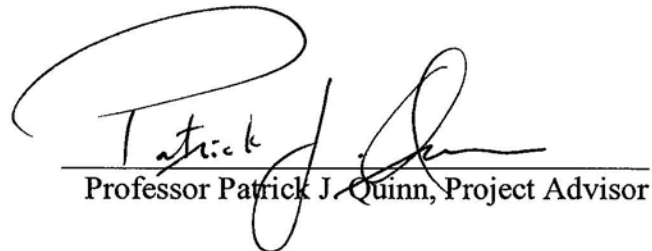
THE MIX OF MEDIA AND DECADENCE
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1. media
2. literature
3. sexuality

ABSTRACT

This paper is a media study in which the Decadent femme fatale is found to be a central archetype in American pop culture. Beginning with the literature of the end of the nineteenth century, it follows the history of burlesque, pinups, and striptease as it establishes her ascendance in advertising and third-wave feminism as a key element in public discourse.

PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally much broader in scope, with the intention of also thoroughly analyzing such modern media as music videos in light of the perspective cultivated throughout the course of the discussion. Of particular interest was how contemporary portrayals of lesbianism both comic and serious were a reflection and extension of the femme fatale.

Of course, such topics – as well as the many others relevant but not central to the discussion – had to fall to the wayside in order to focus the paper to a germane size and focus appropriate to an Interactive Qualifying Project. The report in particular attempts to focus mainly on tracing a chronological trail of entertainment media over the course of a century in order to establish the path through which the femme fatale came to such importance.

Thanks are generously given to Worcester Polytechnic Institute's George C. Gordon Library, Randolph-Macon Women's College Lipscomb Library, and the College of Holy Cross' Dinand Library for providing many excellent resources, and the starting points to finding many more resources. Acknowledgment is likewise given to Advisor Quinn, without whose research expertise and support the report would have suffered greatly.

so thoroughly amoral as a result or in part – that they are doomed to their own tragic end. Either way, the women in question are entrancing, fascinating in every sense of the word, and are worth studying from the male and female perspective as both a cultural phenomenon and cultural reflection, as well as a literary and storytelling archetype.

The fascination extends across moral boundaries, as well. Countless men and women alike have become obsessed with her as a worshipped sex object, while just as many moral purists have condemned the femme fatale as a vulgar and corrupting harlot. Regardless of why, the femme fatale sees scrutiny from all sides and revels in – or disdains – all of it.

That, in essence, is the power of the femme fatale: the power to entrance, to bewitch, and to beguile. She holds men in her archly feminine grasp, and crushes them like tiny insects through the power of her sex. Many incarnations have been written of and about this entrancing figure, but the key element is her ability to inarguably control a man, to reduce even the strongest and greatest hero to a sycophantic ninny.

According to contemporary feminist scholar like Prioleau, the femme fatale's earliest incarnation was a Goddess worshipped by the most ancient societies. Many women scholars take a pseudo-Campbellian approach and posit a monomyth that subverts the patriarchal version Campbell submitted, one where said Goddess reigns supreme and the world is full of peace and happiness due to its subjugation to her sex. This Goddess in all her resplendent sexual glory is, quite obviously, a larger-than-life version of the femme fatale.

Nowhere does the femme fatale take center stage better or brighter, however, than in the literature of the *fin-de-siecle* Decadents. And, in fact, no cultural milieu was better

suiting for such a figure to take dominance. The last dying gasp of a staunchly white Euro-Christian world, Decadence as a death rattle suffused life into modernity and postmodernity, forming a cultural foundation so thoroughly and subversively core to the modern paradigm that it is difficult to identify those strands of Decadence which weave together the whole.

The femme fatale, however, is inevitably one of those major strands, and her role as alternatively worshipped and condemned – but never ignored – firmly fixes her place of importance in cultural discourse.

There is more to this intense woman than her ability to entrance, however. The femme fatale can be identified by a few key elements. First, of course, is that element of sexual or pseudo-sexual manipulation. The femme fatale is able to manipulate men – and often women – with ease due to her ability to adeptly use her sexual wiles to her advantage. The precise method is hardly important; all that matters is that men desire to possess the femme fatale sexually and find themselves impotent in attempting to do so. There is the argument that the ingénue is a variation of the femme fatale, unconsciously manipulating through her innocence – a many-layered orchid of the Georgia O'Keefe variety. Most femme fatales, though, are quite conscious of their ability to sexually manipulate men, and willfully do so.

The prime factor, thus, is that she is absolutely unattainable. Even in those cases where she deigns to bestow any sort of carnal (or sometimes romantic) knowledge upon her victim, it is a situation where the manipulated clearly realizes his absolute lack of control and possession, whether beforehand or afterward. Any such relations are usually just another form of the femme fatale's manipulation. Often characterized as a vampire,

the femme fatale “shadows forth the chaos, destruction, and death which ensue when man succumbs to instinct” (Higashi 57).

Of less import – though still good identifiers – are other factors, such as those of intent. The truly Decadent femme fatale claims to have no intention in her manipulations except for the sake of manipulation itself. At best, men, romance, and sex are her playthings; at worst, a desperate method of staving off ennui. Another factor is her insistence of style over substance: the way a thing appears is more important than its reality. And then there is the issue of morality, and there an important distinction must be made: the femme fatale is not immoral, but amoral. Like the Decadents who shaped and refined her, she has little to no interest in bourgeois morals, but instead seeks new and varied experiences and pleasures in an extreme and skewed form of hedonism.

Of course, the fact that she is female should go without mentioning, yet is quite an important element. There are, of course, examples of the *homme fatale*, or the *femme fatale* in male clothing, but what makes the *femme fatale* ultimately interesting is that she both plays into and subverts the traditional image of femininity. She accepts socially submissive roles, yet dominates the men around her; she is nurturing, but at the same time, even in the same action, she is unutterably cruel; she bridges the gap between sexuality and maternity in a society where women embody one or the other, but never both.

These elements of femininity integrated themselves into the social reality of the feminine archetype, first in literature, then also in theatre and art, as can be seen in the Decadent movement and the explosion of popularity in burlesque striptease shows and pinup art in the early twentieth century. Such elements also influenced prominent

thinkers of the era in schools of both feminist and postmodern philosophy, and with the introduction of new media and technology the idea of femininity transformed and fused with the femme fatale until such woven strands became integrated into postmodern culture, giving us a new form of femininity closely related to the femme fatale and the Decadent movement which was the origin of it all.

The beginnings of the Decadence movement can be found in a group of French writers now called the Symbolists, when poet Stephane Mallarmé whimsically called a certain small circle of friends Decadents. While in certain circles the nomenclature of “Symbolist” and “Decadent” have become interchangeable, the question of which term to use is more than one of antiquarian self-selection, or antiquated on behalf of the writers themselves. The Symbolists are a set of writers who encompass – but do not define – that of the Decadents. While both groups are preoccupied with pseudo-mystical intuitive symbols of the real world, it is the latter that makes an even more precise classification of subject matter and style.

Speaking purely of the French, it was the zeitgeist of the *fin-de-siècle* which captured their attention and the tone of their work. In France, just like in much of Europe, there was the all-pervading air at the close of the nineteenth century that man was reaching his pinnacle, or at least that some sort of turning point was near. To many a bourgeoisie the time was immediate, or at least near, when reason would have extended itself as far as its scintillating pseudopodia would allow into all spheres of human existence, creating a golden age for man. The realm of physics, for example, was assumed to be a nearly-completed subject with precise and elegant formula to describe

the motion of bodies both heavenly and terrestrial, and the behaviors of forces less-developed societies would consider positively arcane.

To the Decadents, if such a future was even possible, it would be revolting to their senses. They disagreed, however, that such was where humanity was heading. They too felt that the end of an era was approaching, but the cycling would be regressive rather than progressive, and since they were poised at the end a desperation of sorts lingered as a malaise upon the air.

Part of what fueled this air of malaise was the very people who thought the *fin-de-siècle* was a hopeful and bright time, full of future's promise: the bourgeoisie. This group of people more than any other filled the Decadents with disgust, and the reactionary movement's desire to shock was directed at them, for the writers of Decadence were either genuinely upper class, or at least of the intellectual elite. This desire *épater le bourgeois* expressed itself in their poetry and prose, filled with images and associations that would shock the tastes or sensibilities of the average upper middle-class reader with his. Baudelaire's *Une Charogne*, for example, found in his *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which he compares his lover to an animal carcass found on the side of the path, provides a perfect example of this attitude at work.

Another element that found expression in the Decadents was that of the *femme fatale*, the unreachable woman who holds near-mystical significance in her power of allure. There is no doubt that many of the Decadents were obsessed with womanhood, femininity, even the ones noted for their homosexuality, such as Oscar Wilde, which further reinforces the notion that Decadence was a primarily male movement in literature. To the male Decadent, women formed an exclusive group impenetrable to the male, even

the sensual male. This exclusivity combined with an artful worship of all things feminine – often symbolized by the moon in a throwback to classical paradigms – to form an intense desire for the unattainable icon that woman had become, specifically for that kind of woman which served to entrance, entice, and control her victims through sexual manipulation by means of her well-endowed feminine charms. Primordially, this fascination stems from an innate desire of the Decadent male to possess and control this uncontrollable and impossible-to-possess woman himself. A prisoner of the modern age, however, the Decadent was powerless to possess her in any meaningful way.

And so the femme fatale – as a subject of Decadent obsession – found expression in their writings. Women like Clara in Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden* enslaved men to their will using their sexual charms, even afflicting perverse notions of death coupled with beauty upon them, and the men could do nothing but helplessly obey.

The most seminal example of the femme fatale, however, is found in Salome. Countless Decadents wrote about her: Huysmans, the Goncourt brothers, and most notably Oscar Wilde. Although he originally wrote it in French, Wilde's play bearing her name was so provocative that it was banned for quite some time from being produced in England. In it, the voluptuous Salome fails at seducing John the Baptist, and so she uses her influence over her father, King Herod, to have his head brought in on a platter. The influence she wields is quite sexual: she dances the dance of the seven veils to entice him into offering her anything, even half of his kingdom. When she asks for the head of John the Baptist, he is dismayed, but keeps his word and delivers it. As if using her powers of seduction over her father wasn't shocking enough, Salome delivers a passionate kiss

onstage with the bloody head, both revolting and fascinating her father and audience alike.

The influence Salome wielded both as play and character is impossible to deny. Her character has continued to influence artists throughout the past century, from Decadent writers to early filmmakers. Many of the first films were devoted to reinterpretations of Wilde's work, including a notable work spearheaded by actress Alla Nazimova who insisted that all of the actors be gay or bisexual. But Salome did more than influence literature and movies: she became one of the matriarchs of striptease, providing an avenue for the femme fatale to move from the page to the stage and ultimately into pop culture as a whole.

The swell of popularity for striptease at the turn of the century provided the link between the decadent femme fatale and the arts outside of literature – a link that would eventually extend to pinup art in the 1940's and cycle back to modern striptease to fully integrate the fatal woman into popular culture. The Dance of the Seven Veils, more popularly known as the Salome Dance, was largely responsible for this translation. Although Wilde's play was banned in England, the Salome Dance on its own and in multiple variations and interpretations was performed in theatres without the accompanying play all across Europe and America.

The dance was provocative to say the least. A single woman slowly removed seven veils over the course of the dance, revealing more and more bare flesh until exposure was almost total. This artistic display somehow managed to attain popularity amongst all classes all throughout the West, despite its rise at the height of the Victorian era, where bourgeois sympathies playing at being upper class restrictive notions were the

order of the day. The dance was so popular, in fact, that “by August 1908 four Salomes are performing in New York alone, and by October the number increases sixfold” (Schlesinger 1).

Although popular interest in the dance had been booming since the end of the nineteenth century, its function as a translation for the femme fatale was in no small part due to the dancing of Maud Allan, a Canadian-born girl raised in San Francisco and self-identifying as American (Walkowitz 1). By the time she began Salome-dancing, women such as Mata Hari were already performing – there was even a school in New York dedicated to teaching the dance (Schlesinger 1).

Allan was quick to boast, however, that she had never taken a dance class. Even so, she took the part of Wilde’s play parenthetically narrated in a single-line stage direction and expanded it into her own production, *The Vision of Salome*, revising “Wilde’s plays that were at once more shocking than Wilde’s rendering yet more accessible to a broad social constituency” (Walkowitz 27). It would be her headlining role in every performance, and it would be the role that launched her to international stardom.

The Vision of Salome is a dream-like solo reenactment of the events of Wilde’s play, including her meeting with John the Baptist, her provocative dance, and her eventual death at the orders of her father. As Walkowitz mentions, “Allan represented a series of traditions bound up with the metropolitan decadence of the fin de siècle, the homoeroticism of classical Greece, the license of the Continent, and the missing presence of Oscar Wilde at the center” (46). *The Vision of Salome*, Allan’s solo performance as

the femme fatale in the nude with all the trappings of Wilde's Decadent play, was what made this observation of representation clear.

Decadence did not only inform the semiology of the performance, however; it was present in the very relics of the staging. Allan's performance in the nude while at the same time adorned with exquisite jewelry speaks to the artificiality of the art. As she was caricatured in the magazine *Sketch*, she was "the centerpiece of a decorative display of Art Nouveau jewelry, marking her as a commodity and linking her visually to fin-de-siècle decadence" (Walkowitz 37).

Artifice is more than simple maquillage, however: it is also a deliberate human effort to act in a way counter to or different than what would "naturally" occur – a definition that is implicit in the act of theatre, or any act of art. Every posture in Allan's dance was a deliberate choice used to heighten the aesthetic of her performance. Moreover, the dreamlike quality *The Vision of Salome* provided another layer of artifice beyond the simple human sphere. Allan's performance was a glimpse into the inner world of Salome, one rife with visions and artifice of the inwardly human kind that can be found nowhere else in nature.

That syrupy style of her performance evoked the poetry of the Symbolists – the name synonymous with that of Decadent – as well as that of the Imagists, a contemporary movement that had clearly been influenced by the Symbolists of a decade previous. Dealing largely with images of Salome's internal world, everything in Allan's performance had a multiplicity of meanings involving layer upon layer of symbols, leading up to the final image that defines the entirety of the Salome myth: "[t]he visual juxtaposition of a mobile female body and a very immobile, trunkless male head (a head

without a heart) was the most shocking and climactic element of the performance”
(Walkowitz 28).¹

Although she was not the first to perform Salome’s dance of the seven veils, she was the dancer who set the standard for all other dancers, echoing through both high performance art and American vaudeville to affect the way burlesque and striptease came to exist, and the way popular culture perceived women, the art of striptease, and the *femme fatale* as a result.

Take, for example, “Allan’s trance-like state, evocative of the hysteric, the mystic, and the autoerotic” (Walkowitz 40). This method of evoking the symbolist discourse is one that has become common practice on the stage for the modern striptease performer. “She is dancing to please herself, yet encouraging and enabling a voyeuristic gaze” (Walkowitz 40). And at the same time, what could be more implicitly *femme fatale* than a woman who is available to every male gaze in the room – and clearly desired – yet wholly unavailable for possession? French writer Colette called it the “barrier of light” (Bentley 187), and nothing could be more enticing than such an intangible veil – a completely transparent gauze created by the stage itself. She is on the stage, out of reach of those grasping, desiring hands, but not out of sight, and not unable to manipulate the desires of those around her. That is, in fact, an *ecdyasiast*’s job, and the *femme fatale*’s delight.

When the *Salomania* that hit America at the beginning of the twentieth century mixed with the already-popular form of entertainment known as vaudeville, burlesque as it is commonly recognized today was born. With burlesque as a vehicle, the *femme*

¹ This shocking climax is likewise further indicative of Decadence in the simple desire to shock the bourgeois.

fatale traveled through the world of entertainment until fully integrating into mass culture with the advent of the pinup girl in the 40's and 50's. But in the meanwhile, she was titillating and teasing men all across America as part of Broadway revues and traveling carnival shows.

It is important to distinguish between burlesque dancing and the phenomena of burlesque itself. Burlesque as most people today recognize it actually refers to a certain era where it was common to have shows centered around a single headliner girl like Gypsy Rose Lee who performed striptease numbers to jazz music in a variety of glamorous costumes – this period is more precisely referred to as the Golden Age of Burlesque. Burlesque dancing, however, simply involved chorus lines of skimpily dressed girls parading across the stage, often as a frame for other acts typical to a variety show, from acrobatic acts to standup comedy.

In America vaudeville was one of the showcases of burlesque dancing until the phenomenon took on a life of its own. Vaudeville actually appropriated the “hootchy-kootchy” dance in 1893 after a tiny dancer headlined as Little Egypt sparked controversy at the Chicago World's Fair. Announced to passersby as a woman whose “every fiber and every tissue in her entire anatomy shakes like a jar of jelly from your grandmother's Thanksgiving dinner,” she captivated the crowds, and was “as hot as the Fourth of July in the hottest county in the state” (Shteir 44). She performed mostly nude as part of the Egyptian exhibit, dancing a shimmy to a tune vaguely Oriental in nature – a facile excuse to shake her body with erotic power. The act, of course, was a hit with the men and drew public protest from the Board of Lady Managers. The scandal caused by the protest

blazed through the newspapers, and probably saved a World's Fair that was likely going to shut down due to low attendance by reviving public interest.

Soon after, every vaudeville show that hadn't already incorporated a Little Egypt imitator soon did, and the cootch-dance was a staple from then on. Countless dancers went so far as to appropriate the name Little Egypt until it is now impossible to tell exactly who the original was; there was even a Little Egypt Dancing Company that toured using the name to fuel sales. Whatever form it took, scandals continued to follow the name wherever it went. One of the more publicized cases concerned an Algerian waif named Ashea Wabe who took on the Little Egypt sobriquet and was hired to do a "dance and a pose" at a bachelor party for one of P.T. Barnum's grandsons in 1897 (Bentley 36). After the party was broken up in a police raid, Wabe was hired for a thousand dollars a week to perform in a skit based on the scandal at the Olympia vaudeville theatre.

In a sense, Little Egypt was the 1893 grandmother of striptease, and her various incarnations are what primed America to be more receptive to the femme fatale as striptease developed as a form of popular entertainment. Early burlesque showcased the female figure, but Little Egypt paved the way for proper striptease and the true enticement of male audiences using sexual power on the stage.

Vaudeville eventually came to be seen as entertainment for the lower classes, an ironic idea because vaudeville supporters "linked women in vaudeville to what they saw as vaudeville's debased statues" (Kibler 206). Yet at the same time, members of the upper classes appropriated the Salome dance for their own entertainment craze. Anyone wealthy or noble – up to and including the King of England – spent at least one evening watching some variation of the Salome dance, and many members of the upper class

made watching the unveiling of breasts and labia a regular event. Performing variations of it even became something of a risqué thrill for the seedier side of the upper class. Very often those same performers from the upper class were living lives of sexual escapade that the Decadent authors only wrote about.

Take the French writer Colette as an example. Although her first husband, Henri Gauthier-Villars, took the credit for much of it, she was the author of the Claudine series of novels at the turn of the century about the sexual awakenings of a young teenager; her writing career throughout the eighty-one years of her life often focused on sex and women – just as her affairs in the bedroom did. Following her divorce from Gauthier-Villars, she engaged in a six-year relationship with the marquise de Belbeuf, known as Missy to her intimates. The marquise was well-known as a female cross-dresser, often going to high-society functions wearing three piece suits or overalls. Even when she was compelled to wear women's clothing, her own family thought she looked more like a man in a dress than a woman. Considering heterosexual intercourse an ordeal, she often hosted salons for the burgeoning Paris lesbian scene.

She was one of many trysts of Colette's; the author was also involved in many ménage a trois during her relationship with her first husband. What made her relationship with Missy more interesting than her other lovers (most of them women) was that the two appeared together in the only performance of *Le Reve d'Egypte* at the Moulin Rouge. Written by Gauthier-Villars, it was one of many erotic pantomime-dances in Colette's stage career. As the show began, an archeologist would open a sarcophagus to reveal a beautiful woman inside wrapped up in mummy bandages, and would proceed to slowly and erotically unwrap her. Afterwards, the revealed and mostly nude beautiful

Egyptian queen would dance for her master, the archeologist. But what brought the Moulin Rouge and Paris as a whole into riot was the long, deep, and passionate kiss which the archeologist used to awaken the mummy – an act which would normally not seem remarkable at all, except that the archeologist was played by none other than Missy billed as a mysterious “Yssim.” Yet there was no mistaking the famous transvestite of noble blood once she was onstage, nor of the lesbian overtones of the performance.

Lesbianism became a political statement in the 70’s and 80’s, but as performance it takes on an entirely different meaning – that of the femme fatale. This is especially true in the world that existed at the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At that time the very notion of gender was being reevaluated – what it meant to be masculine and feminine were still in flux thanks to the upheaval of the Decadent movement. Sexologists such as Havelock Ellis were scientifically dissecting sexuality in a way that had never before been attempted, and the public was both horrified and entranced by the knowledge that was produced.

But if there is any question as to whether gender roles and the Decadent movement are intertwined, look only to the writers themselves for the most satisfying answer. “Flaubert, for example, had no trouble thinking of himself as an ‘hysterical old woman,’ and the Goncourt brothers sometimes describe themselves as sisters” (Weir 18).

A telling number of the writers of Decadence saw themselves not merely as men, but also as the women they idealized. They were the first transgender individuals, in the way that the term “transgender” can only truly apply to Western culture. At the same time, they were incredibly misogynistic, seeing a threat in woman herself, even as they venerated their perception of femininity. As Showalter says, “the male rebellion against

patriarchy did not necessarily mean a commitment to feminism... [S]trongly anti-patriarchal sentiments could also co-exist comfortably with misogyny” (11).

A simple example of this can be found in Huneker’s *The Supreme Sin*, a short story where a character quite literally and firmly states, “the Devil is a woman” (quoted in Weir 174). The femme fatale as written by the original Decadents confirms this idealization of woman coupled with misogyny. Their vision of woman “incarnates destruction rather than creation” (Ridge 143), a sharp contrast to the Romantic vision of woman as a natural and emotional nurturer. In most every significant incarnation, the Decadent woman – the femme fatale – “is malevolent and has a malignant effect upon men” (Ridge 144).

And still the Decadents worshipped and adored her. Take, for example, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* poem number 24, ‘*Je t’adore a l’egal*’:

I love you as I love the night’s high vault
O silent one, o sorrow’s lachrymal,
And love you more because you flee from me,
And temptress of my nights, (53)

Baudelaire is a clear example of an early Decadent romanticization of the femme fatale, which morphs into a clear sexualization as the movement continues – in other words the femme fatale becomes an enticing sexual ideal to the Decadent writers. But what exactly is being sexualized? According to Paglia, the femme fatale “is a gruesomely direct transcription of female power and male fear” (13). This is more expressly described in Ridge’s analysis of the character of Prince Noronsoff in Lorrain’s *Le Vice errant*:

His deep grief arises principally because of his disenchantment with women... His mysogynism is much deeper than a mere bias, an intellectual pose... [T]he man

who rejects woman renounces life, for the woman is the matrix of the life-process. (154)

And so there is – on behalf of the Decadent *fin de siecle* men – either a fetishization or rejection of woman as both life-giver and death bringer. Noronsoff's mentality is what fuels the Decadent male homosexual's in "the most valorous of attempts to evade the femme fatale and to defeat nature" (Paglia 15). Is it any wonder that so many of the prominent writers of the time were homosexual?

Similarly, is it any wonder – since life and death were so evocatively combined in woman as the femme fatale – that vampirism was so strongly favored as a metaphor for sex and femininity, or that many femme fatales were vampires outright? For proof, simply look again to Baudelaire as a starting point of a trend that continues *ad nauseum*: his poem *Les Metamorphoses du vampire* concerns a woman in his dreams who entices him sexually. Naturally, she is a psychic and illusory vampire, one that nonetheless leaves him a drained shell.

The femme fatale as vampire continued in its most blatant forms in cinema of all formats. The lesbian vampire film was a popular genre from the 1930's to the 1980's, especially with Hammer Studio, who saw an opportunity for box office success after their hit with *The Vampire Lovers*. These genre films are all the more interesting because the lesbian relationships portrayed mirror very similarly those held by women artists and aristocrats in *fin de siecle* Paris. Nearly without exception, the vampires are "always aristocratic ladies with long family bloodlines," and they always seek to seduce ladies in the aristocratic circle (Weiss 93). This holds true as much in *Lust for a Vampire* as it does for Colette and Missy.

With such lesbian relationships very much a part of their modern metropolitan existence, the Decadents saw in the *fin de siècle* world that traditional gender roles had been turned on their heads. Men were no longer merely strong and able conquerors; women were no longer helpless possessions. The modern and metropolitan world reversed these roles, and the chief source of feminine power, sexuality, was allowed to fully manifest unchecked – Paris was a haven for lesbianism at the turn of the century, with Colette and her lover Missy being but one example of the trend. Indeed, the desire to possess women sexually and the inability to do so is what characterizes the Decadent male even as such desire sculpts in relief what could only be the femme fatale.

Female sexuality, of course, was debated *ad infinitum* by sexologists, almost to the exclusion of other subjects. The consensus was that women who allowed themselves to become socially diseased degraded into nymphomaniacs who existed only for their own pleasure – *les damnees femmes* that the Decadents loved so well. This belief was partially informed by the dualistic separation of male and female into spheres such as human/beast, artificial/natural, rational/emotional etc. with the emphasis on the male side of the coin being superior in almost every way. So the logical conclusion to draw about female sexuality was that women who enjoyed sex were giving into their animal instincts and were thus subhuman. And in the midst of this was the femme fatale: a woman who twisted and manipulated the “natural” sex drives of men for the “artificial” goal of subordinating men for her own pleasure and power. In the eyes of the sexologists, she was most certainly a woman to be condemned.

Somehow, though, the femme fatale was celebrated in the entertainment world of vaudeville. Posters depicted all sorts of situations that could only point to the femme

fatale.² One had a vaudeville girl going bowling with pins that had the heads of men. Another depicted a giant burlesque girl using ribbons to manipulate tiny marionette-men in the throes of ecstasy and celebration. Most indicative of a playful femme fatale was a poster entitled, “How the High Roller Girls Do It” (Allen 211). At the bottom is the phrase, “Dearest – enclosed I send you a lock of my hair as requested,” and the scene is of a smirking burlesque girl at her writing desk clipping a lock from the tail of her well-groomed poodle. Clearly to the vaudeville dancer depicted on these posters, men might be well-groomed, but they were really no better than dogs. Yet these posters were considered humorous, and depicted something not far from the truth: these men in the audience were held captive by the women, and were nonetheless glad for it.

Even as this simultaneous judgment and celebration of the femme fatale was taking place, women of the upper classes were starting to explore their sexualities in a way that had previously been impossible even to consider. Couplings like Missy and Colette’s were not uncommon, and were very rarely limited to only the couple. Lesbian salons and female polyamory were rampant in upper class European society

So lesbianism represented the ultimate expression of the femme fatale in the form *les damnees femmes*. In the lesbian was a woman who looked at other women in the same way men do: as a predator. A beautiful lesbian had the gazes of other men to contend with; all gazes which received no attention from her. Completely cool to the sexual interest of men, she nonetheless held their rapt fascination and was able to manipulate them even as she served as competition for the attentions of other pretty and available young ladies.

² All posters described can be seen in Allen.

Not just lesbians took the stage, and nude or nearly nude girls were making plenty of profits off of hapless audiences in Europe and America. It was Ziegfeld's Follies, however, that brought the European respectability of naked women dancing across a stage to American audiences on Broadway, beginning in 1907 and running to 1931. Organized and aggressively marketed by Florenz Ziegfeld, the Follies were modeled directly off the Parisian *Folies Bergere* and the shows at the Moulin Rouge – where Colette's *Le Reve d'Egypte* was staged. The femme fatale was also a direct import; a Salome dancer was one of the first Ziegfeld acts, and one of the most successful.

The Follies are still recognized even today for their elaborate and expensive costumes, especially the massive and florid headdresses on the chorus girls – but more importantly, the Follies are remembered for the girls themselves. As one biography review hyperbolically states, Ziegfeld is “The Man Who Invented Women” (quoted in Mizejewski 12).

The absolute truth of such a statement is irrelevant. What is important is Ziegfeld's own admitted dream “to reject the coarse, vulgar, ugly atmosphere of vaudeville and replace it with glamour, taste, and charm” (Mizejewski 38). Vaudeville was the first entertainment racket to have an act resembling the striptease, but those shows focused more on nudity and lust than the spectacle of glamorous women exposing themselves. The structure of both vaudeville and the Follies was rather simplistic: alternating sequences of comic routines by men with scantily clad girls dancing suggestively and posing onstage. Vaudeville, however, had a deserved reputation for seamy lower-class entertainment.

When Ziegfeld introduced his Follies to great commercial success, other entertainment venues rushed to imitate him. By the second decade of the twentieth century, vaudeville as many of the performers knew it was virtually dead. Instead, it had taken on the glitz and glitter of the Follies, and became burlesque as we know it today: sequined, racy, and glamorous. The golden age of burlesque had begun, and lasted until 1937 when reforms in New York seriously hurt the industry of g-string entertainment.

Burlesque was a natural path for the femme fatale to take on the road from literary stock character to American pop culture archetype. Using theatre as her vehicle, the femme fatale went from the stages of Europe to America through Ziegfeld's Follies and into the American public consciousness as she transformed the stages of vaudeville into burlesque. A decent argument can be made that her presence in America is due to the writings of Decadents like Huneker, Hecht, and F. Scott Fitzgerald³, but it is her popular consumption as a part of live performance that puts her on the path to true archetype in the public consciousness.

When Gypsy Rose Lee took the stage in 1936 billed as "the Literary Stripper" (Shteir 177), the femme fatale had found full integration with burlesque. Lee's mother's role in her launch to superstardom cannot be denied, of course; Rose Thompson Hovick was integral to Gypsy's success with her aggressive networking and excessive demands of house managers and producers for her daughter's stage performances. More importantly, however, Gypsy was on stage and driving crowds wild. Her name became synonymous with burlesque, and she could easily be considered the first pop culture diva of the twentieth century as pop culture was just starting to become a beast all its own.

³ Although one would also have to argue that writers like Hecht and Fitzgerald owe allegiance to the Decadent tradition, something far outside the scope of this paper.

Gypsy Rose Lee's rise to diva status during the late 1930's is no coincidence. The world was still recovering from the crash of 1929, which led to a boost in the entertainment sector. Also, advances in communication and travel technology made commoditization of the intangible possible at a rate that blew the previous system away. Thanks to trains, automobiles, and newspapers, girls like Gypsy could be seen and read about across America. As soon as pop culture could support the weight of a diva, a diva naturally emerged to entice and entertain the male population of America.

Divas of the flesh, however, were not enough. The pinup art of the 1940's and 1950's heralded the first emergence of the ideals of the femme fatale into American pop culture, becoming even more popular than the burlesque queens. Artists such as Alberto Vargas, Gil Elvgren, and Rolf Armstrong took the idealized all-American girl and painted her in various sexual and revealing poses and instances. In contrast with the overtly sexual imagery of late twentieth century media-art, pinups dealt with painted ladies mostly fully clothed. Flesh is revealed in tantalizing ways, but the revelation is a thigh or a garter belt – sometimes even a breast is exposed in the most transgressive instances. In short, pinup art is a tease as opposed to the stark anatomical nudity seen in modern pornography.

This teasing is an element also present in American burlesque. While it may be obvious that the two art forms had similar goals and means – the goals: to entertain and take money from men; the means: striptease and other sexual manipulations – what is remarkable is how similar they worked both in terms of the material's tone and how the idea of sex-entertainment expressed itself.

The nostalgic and sentimental glamour commonly associated with both pinups and burlesque are likely retroactive impressions of today's fascinated pop culture upon the era – why else would websites like Retro Radar invite surfers to “MEET OUR APRIL PINUP CONTESTANTS!” (Retro Radar) all composed of modern women with their clothes (mostly) on? – but there certainly is a distinctive style which can be seen in strains of both art forms. Glitter, glamour, cool ladies confident in both their sexiness and their ability to use it: these are the hallmarks of the sexual underside of the four-color fifties. Such sexual confidence and the willingness to engage men with it is exactly the kind that is just as much a hallmark of the femme fatale.

Nothing exhibits this zeitgeist of early-to-mid twentieth century sexuality better than the subsection of pinup art known as glamour art. Often using the effects of soft light to set the tone, glamour art depicts women in evening wear and poses which can only be described as glamorous and sexy, but not explicitly sexual. Rolf Armstrong painted many examples of this form of art; his painting *Invitation*⁴ of a smiling woman in black and red dress seated upon a golden couch provides an excellent example of the genre. The sexiness of these ladies, both in Armstrong's work and in others', is especially striking because it is not rooted in the teasing liminal space between clothing covering and revealing sexualized body parts, but instead in her raw and unadulterated femininity. Every softly painted curve, each fold of her glamorous dress, the smile framed by lipstick and cheeks framed with rouge⁵: these are just some of the disparate parts that form the gestalt of the glamour girl's unambiguous femininity. And what other

⁴ All pinup art referenced can be viewed in Martignette & Meisel, as well as many other collections of pinup art.

⁵ Such maquillage serves to construct femininity as well as provide a direct link to *fin de siècle* Decadence, which placed great stock on artifice, especially as it pertained to makeup and also the femme fatale.

than femininity-as-sexiness is the quintessential expression of the femme fatale? What is more artful than being able to sexually manipulate without reverting to the overtly sexual?

It is in the interaction between viewer and picture that the essence of the femme fatale lies, however. While the personality of the girl depicted in pinup art may or may not share the vampiric qualities of the femme fatale – that much is nearly impossible to determine in all but the most blatant of pictorial representations – the artist's treatment of female sexuality through the pinup girl is certainly a manipulation all on its own. By making her desirable through transgressing upon the sexual standards of the time, the pinup qualifies as a femme fatale not by virtue of her character, but by virtue of the medium itself. Taking McLuhan's infamous "medium is the message" mantra to heart, the sexual manipulation employed by the artist combines with the physical block of the picture frame between the fantasy world of the pinup and the reality of the male consumer to create the essence of the femme fatale. She is beautiful, manipulative, and wholly unable to be possessed except in the most superficial of manner: through her visual representation.

That pinup art is intended to be sexual in nature is unambiguous. Take, for example, a few paintings by Gil Elvgren. One picture shows a female lab assistant in a tight white lab uniform (complete with miniskirt) perched with legs slightly spread on a countertop as she works with various test tubes, smiling at the viewer. Another shows a secretary with her garter belt visible as she fumblingly tries to change the bottle of an office water cooler. Still another depicts an upset young lady seated at a picnic flashing her slip as she holds up her freshly-stained white dress.

One thing all of these examples have in common is girls in situations simultaneously considered common and sexual. Secretaries, lab assistants, picnickers: these are all jobs and activities which women engage in trivially both in the fifties and now. Almost all pinup art tried to capture this essence, instilling the sexual into the everyday girl. The quintessential example of this is Art Frahm's series of ten paintings involving girls with their panties falling down in various situations, including in an elevator, at a bus stop, and crossing the street – all while carrying groceries or parcels of some sort.

The difference between these pinups and glamour art is more than simply the contrast between everyday and bedazzling surroundings. Both sets of pretty ladies directly engage the viewer with their gaze – a technique not usually seen in visual art – and all of the art is sexual in nature. But unlike the glamour girls, the expression of Elvgren and Frahm's pinup is usually one of surprise or embarrassment – not confidence like that of the glamour girls. One gets the sense from the glamour girls that even should they find themselves with their panties down, they would still have that nonplussed demeanor and stylish grace. Not so with the Average Jane pinup, and so she seems somewhat out-of-sync with the femme fatale ideal when compared to girl glamour art. But if it holds true that the nature of the medium itself turns drawings of sexually enticing girls into the femme fatale, then I would argue that the pinup art of everyday girls is even more strongly femme fatale than that of glamour art.

The glamour girl – like the everygirl pinup – directly engages the viewer with her gaze, but while that is incidental to the former, it is quintessential to characterizing the latter as a femme fatale. The girl whose garter is showing as she lifts her ketchup-stained

dress acknowledges the viewer with her direct gaze, and her blush of embarrassment is a one-way interaction which tells him that she is full aware of the sexual tones of the situation. That the male gaze seeks to either possess or exalt by its nature is already well documented, and while it seems that the blushing girl's shame invites the possessive voyeuristic gaze, her direct acknowledgment of the gaze rarely seen in visual media transmutes it into the fetishistic gaze – the exalting gaze which promotes the cult of femininity that places the femme fatale at self-centered center.

Both voyeuristic and fetishistic gazes are classifications of the male gaze, as described by Mulvey. The male gaze can be explained in a simplified axiom: men look; women are looked at. Mulvey originally wrote about the male gaze as a tool for film studies, but it has since been appropriated by countless academics to look at mass media in general both with and without a feminist agenda.

The male gaze was an important feminist conception because it classified pretty much all media spectatorship as essentially patriarchal. Although many have argued that this framework is too simplistic – and many feminist artists have tried to create visual media that forces the viewer to look without the male gaze – its power as an analytical tool has kept it at the forefront of many media discussions.

The voyeuristic and fetishistic gazes are two distinct versions of the male gaze, demarcated by a single important difference. The voyeuristic gaze is an aggressive way of looking, and is associated with sadism and methods of control. The fetishistic gaze is one of exaltation, where what is seen is substituted as erotic instead of actual eroticism. This can take the form of eroticizing stocking advertisements, or more subtly it can take

the form of eroticizing the visual itself. It is the latter which is of primary interest in this case.

Although comparisons could be made between the reclamation of sexuality found in the pinup girl not unlike the reclamation of words like “bitch” and “cunt,” which is clearly the case in the form of modern striptease, the key is not in the character’s reclamation of her sexuality but again in the medium itself. The viewer upon seeing this sexual situation wishes to possess it for himself, and the embarrassment of the girl invites him to try, but the pane of the picture itself keeps him from doing so. It is a manipulation more complex than simple sexual and status exchange, or simply viewing a picture. Pinup art, by nature of how it is viewed, is a form of sexual consumption which leaves the consumer unsatisfied and empty-handed, but leads him to believe that it is everything he thought he wanted. His frustration demands more consumption, placing him at the beck-and-call of the smiling, elusive, and sexy girl in the picture – exactly the effect the femme fatale has upon her victims.

A perfect demonstration of the psychology at work is found in Ernest Dowson’s *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonai Sub Regno Cynarae*. The narrator of the poem is “desolate and sick of an old passion,” and flees into the arms of girl after girl trying to sate his desire for his own femme fatale Cynara. “Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet,” he says of the whores he uses as escapism, but the more he consumes, the more he is reminded of his Cynara and he is left still “hungry for the lips of my desire,” much the same as the consumers of pinup art and contemporary pornography (Dowson 188-189). Whereas such desire was once an aristocratic longing known chiefly to poets of the

fin de siecle, the advent of the pinup as a pop phenomenon marked the turn of this experience into one common to mass culture.

As the twentieth century progressed and the popularity of burlesque and pinups waned, the tease fell out of striptease and the art form that provided a vehicle for the femme fatale all but disappeared. It was replaced by tawdry dancers who bared everything, or nearly everything. As McLuhan said, "Striptease will become irrelevant when naked entertainment becomes ubiquitous" (quoted in Shteir 315).

Smut magazines like *Playboy* were taking off at this point, to both positive and negative effect on the femme fatale. Although they encouraged the topless and eventually bottomless dancers that killed striptease and burlesque, they also reinforced the femme fatale in the same manner that the pinup girl did. By taking everything off, there was no longer any mystery to entice the viewer but smut magazines and live strip shows encouraged the fetishistic gaze by aggressively promoting lust while making the girls only available as a pedestal-raised commodity by nature of the medium itself – Colette's barrier of light having followed through the generations of striptease, just as the femme fatale had.

Playboy is especially notable not only as a major promoter of this bare-all trend in pornographic advertising, but also for couching it in particularly deceptive form. Simon summarizes its effect best when he says:

By enveloping a striptease in an extraordinary glorification of consumer culture, then surrounding it with interviews, essays, and stories by and/or about contemporary figures and events, and finally dressing it up in a kind of ersatz

wholesomeness, *Playboy* has created a peculiarly middle-class pornography. (101)

This distinction as middle-class pornography is an important reminder that if the femme fatale hasn't already been translated into a thoroughly bourgeois pop culture icon through burlesque, the advent of the smut magazine most certainly makes it so. No longer was the femme fatale limited to literature and film. By then she belonged to the public in every single *Playboy* and *Hustler* on the magazine stands.

Looking for the Girl by Neil Gaiman provides a story-based analogue to this phenomenon. First published in 1995 in *Penthouse*, it narrates the life of an anonymous narrator who has an on-again off-again obsession with a nineteen-year-old girl named Charlotte who posed in a Penthouse when he was the same age. As he describes her, "Charlotte was sex; she wore sexuality like a translucent veil" (160), and as he narrates his life, he tells of how he sees Charlotte over and over again with different names and different hair, but always nineteen-years-old. Her eventually tries to track her down, but is unsuccessful until he is in his late thirties when – after winding up in photography – she shows up at his door and asking to be photographed. As the narrator tells it, she is still nineteen.

I suppose you think that after the pictures were taken, I made love with her.... But I didn't touch her. She was my dream; and if you touch a dream it vanishes, like a soap bubble. (169)

Charlotte: a femme fatale in photography so powerful that even in person she is untouchable.

Another notable McLuhan truism is, “Advertising is striptease for a world of abundance” (quoted in Shteir 322). The true significance of this phrase goes beyond its obvious meaning to inform us precisely where the femme fatale exists in the modern world: advertising. As any student of basic marketing will tell you, sex sells, and what is more sexually enticing than the femme fatale?

Images of beautiful women abound on television and in print. From celebrities marketing makeup on television commercials to supermodels adorning the cover of glamour magazines, it is nearly impossible to consume any media without having a physically attractive woman accosting you – always with something to sell. The art of striptease has even taken hold of the glamorous fashion world: “New powder and make-up products... and flesh-colored diaphanous fabrics introduce this new, erotic dimension [of nudity and transparency] to fashion” (Buxbaum 154). It should be fairly obvious that the same argument which holds true for pinup girls and smut magazines is equally applicable to the beautiful ladies of advertising, and thus demonstrates that the femme fatale has integrated herself so firmly into our culture that she is nearly omnipresent in the market-driven need to sell, market, and promote.

Many feminists of the eighties and nineties disparaged the advertising culture that dominated media, theorizing that the constant barrage of beautiful women cultivated an unhealthy body image in girls who were constantly forced to compare themselves to the advertised ideal. “As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control” (Wolf 10). In other words, as the more youth-marketed Ophira

Edut claims, “Our bodies have become like private correctional facilities, and we their prisoners” (xx).

McNair goes so far as to say that we are now in a global striptease culture. Our advertising and entertainment media is dominated by porno-chic: images that are evocative of symbolism and imagery commonly found in pornography – including and especially S&M porn – to elicit a sexual reaction out of its audience. Such images, he claims, are seen as stylish by their very connection to the imagery of pornography. He goes even further to claim that our striptease culture extends beyond matters of sexuality to affect even our own interpersonal relations: “Striptease culture frequently involves ordinary people talking about sex and their own sexualities, revealing intimate details of their feelings and their bodies in the public sphere” (88). With modern media exposing more and more physically, we are compelled mimic such behavior emotionally and admissions of private affairs in the public domain are not only allowed but encouraged in our culture.

Even with these issues raised by culture and media critics, the fact that the majority of third wave feminists⁶ have not only embraced the old ideals of striptease as empowerment but actively seek to recreate the look and feel of burlesque all but proves how deeply the femme fatale infiltrated popular culture in order to seemingly disappear for a couple of decades only to reappear in one of the femme fatale’s strongest guises: striptease.

Countless books and articles have been written about women reclaiming sexuality, and the empowerment to be found in striptease. Diana Courvant couldn’t put it

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more plainly: “If you ever want power: Strip” (104). Such empowerment is found in women being able to control their own sexuality by displaying it in front of others and controlling them. It is a direct effect of the fetishistic male gaze; it is a direct effect of ordinary women taking on the role of the femme fatale.

One contemporary critic, Wendy Shalit, uses the logic of the femme fatale to argue for a return to modesty. She cites that sexual relations are improved by the interplay of an emotional striptease, as opposed to striptease culture’s mandate to bare it all, and that modesty in behavior and dress encourages such healthy relationships. According to her, “Modesty damps down crudeness, it doesn’t dampen down *Eros*. [sic] In fact, it is more likely to enkindle it” (173).

Other critics, such as Betsy Prioleau, make a clarion call to women to emulate the great seductresses of history, including Colette.

Seductresses are in fact the liberated woman incarnate....

They’re futuristic models of female entitlement:

independent operators, pleasure claimers, *terroristas* of traditional femininity, and big, classy divas. They recover women’s natural supremacy and achieve what most eludes us today – erotic control and a positive union of work and love. (2)

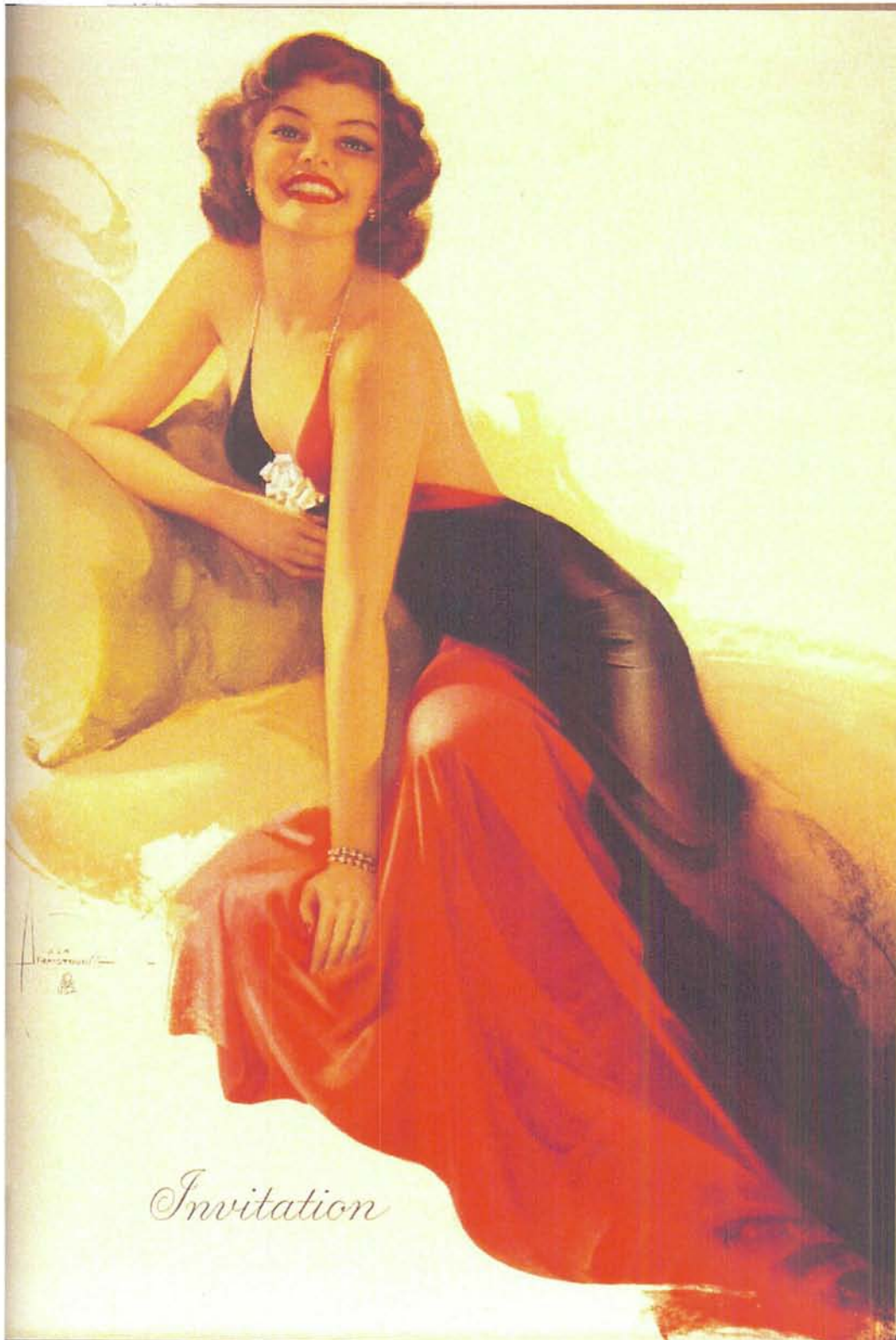
In other words, she encourages women to take advantage of the femme fatale’s deep-rooted place in pop culture and leverage the sexual power women can wield into social power. In fact, she claims even further that men’s “sensibilities are tuned up for outsize, magisterial love goddesses” (291) – that with the claim that men are undergoing as a

whole a gender identity crisis, they are as eager for women to embody the femme fatale as women should be.

Both Shalit and Prioleau provide an interesting and worthwhile analysis. Both rely strongly on the femme fatale. And as we move through the twenty-first century replete with feminist homage to burlesque, calls for a return to Victorian morality, and a still endless stream of porno-chic advertising, it is easy to see that the femme fatale has rooted herself quite strongly into the foundations of American pop culture. America may not see itself as Decadent, but little else has had the same impact on American culture that the legacy of the Decadents has.

APPENDIX A1 – EXAMPLES OF PINUP ART

“Invitation,” by Rolf Armstrong (from Martignette & Meisel)



Painting by Elvgren (1 of 3) (from Martignette & Meisel)



Painting by Elvgren (2 of 3) (from Martignette & Meisel)



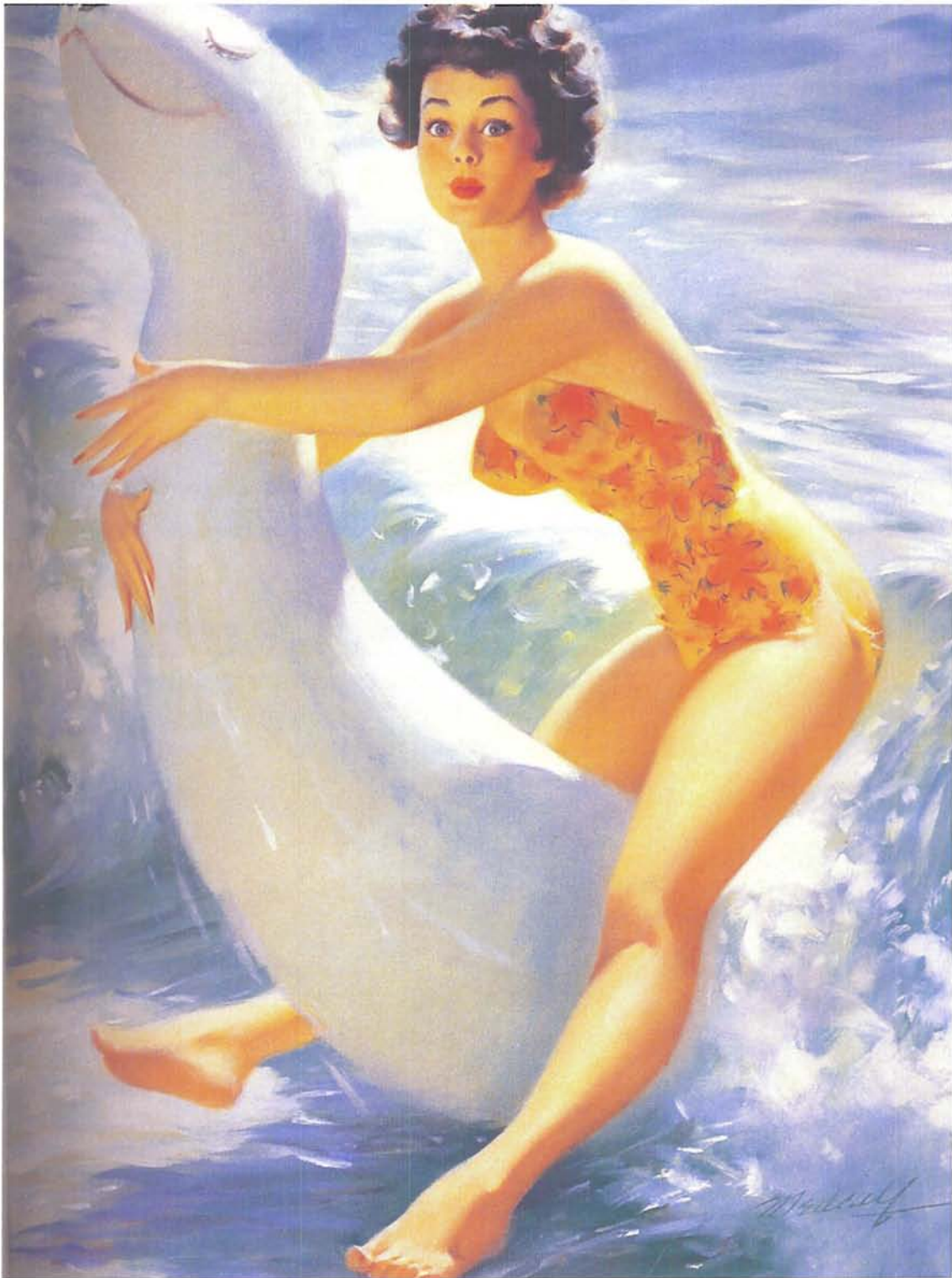
Painting by Elvgren (3 of 3) (from Martignette & Meisel)



“Panties Falling Down” series by Art Frahm (from Martignette & Meisel)



Painting by Bill Medcalf (from Martignette & Meisel)



Painting by George Petty (from Martignette & Meisel)



APPENDIX A2 – BURLESQUE IMAGES

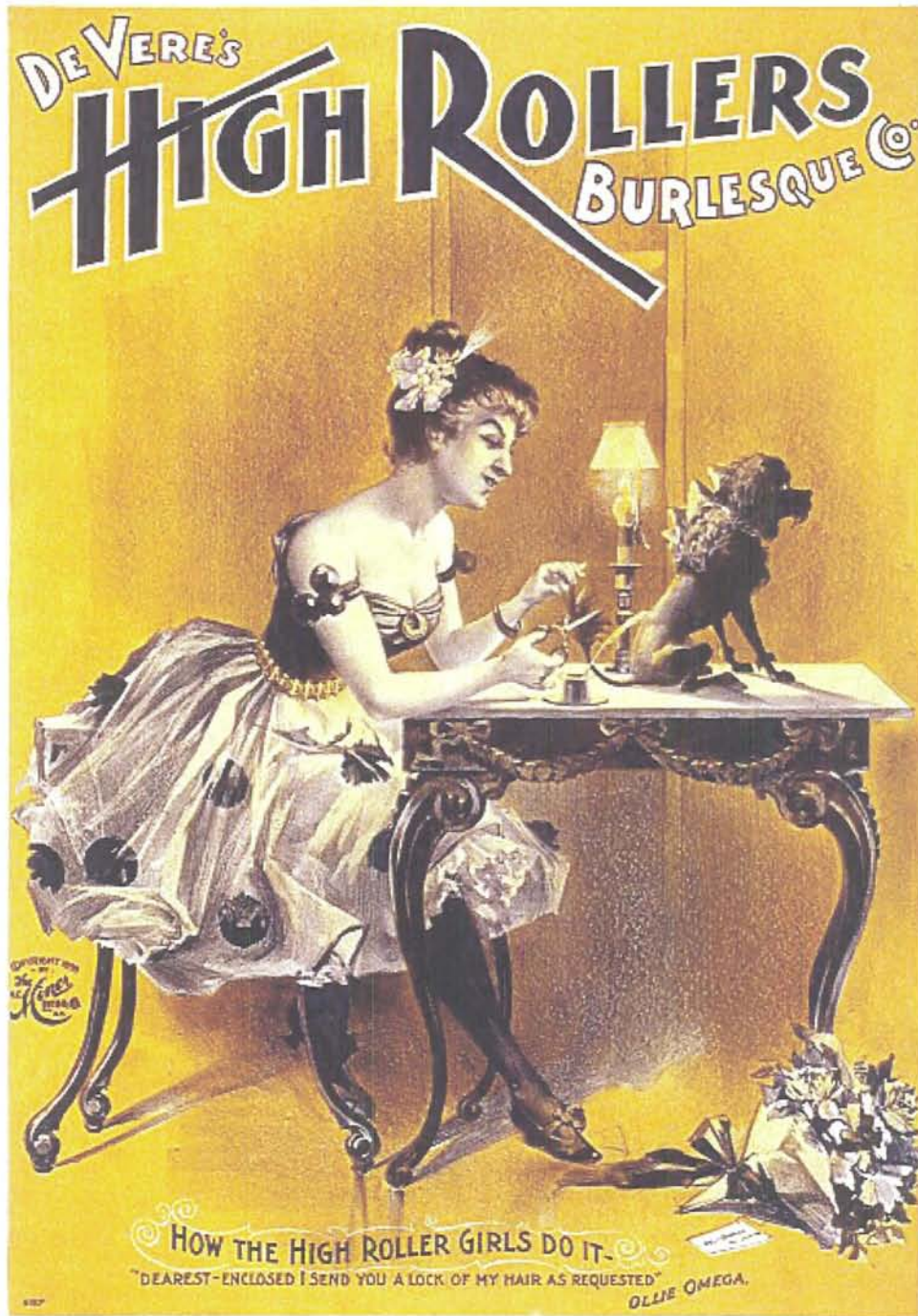
Photograph of Margie Hart (from Briggeman)



Photograph of Mona Vaughn (from Briggeman)

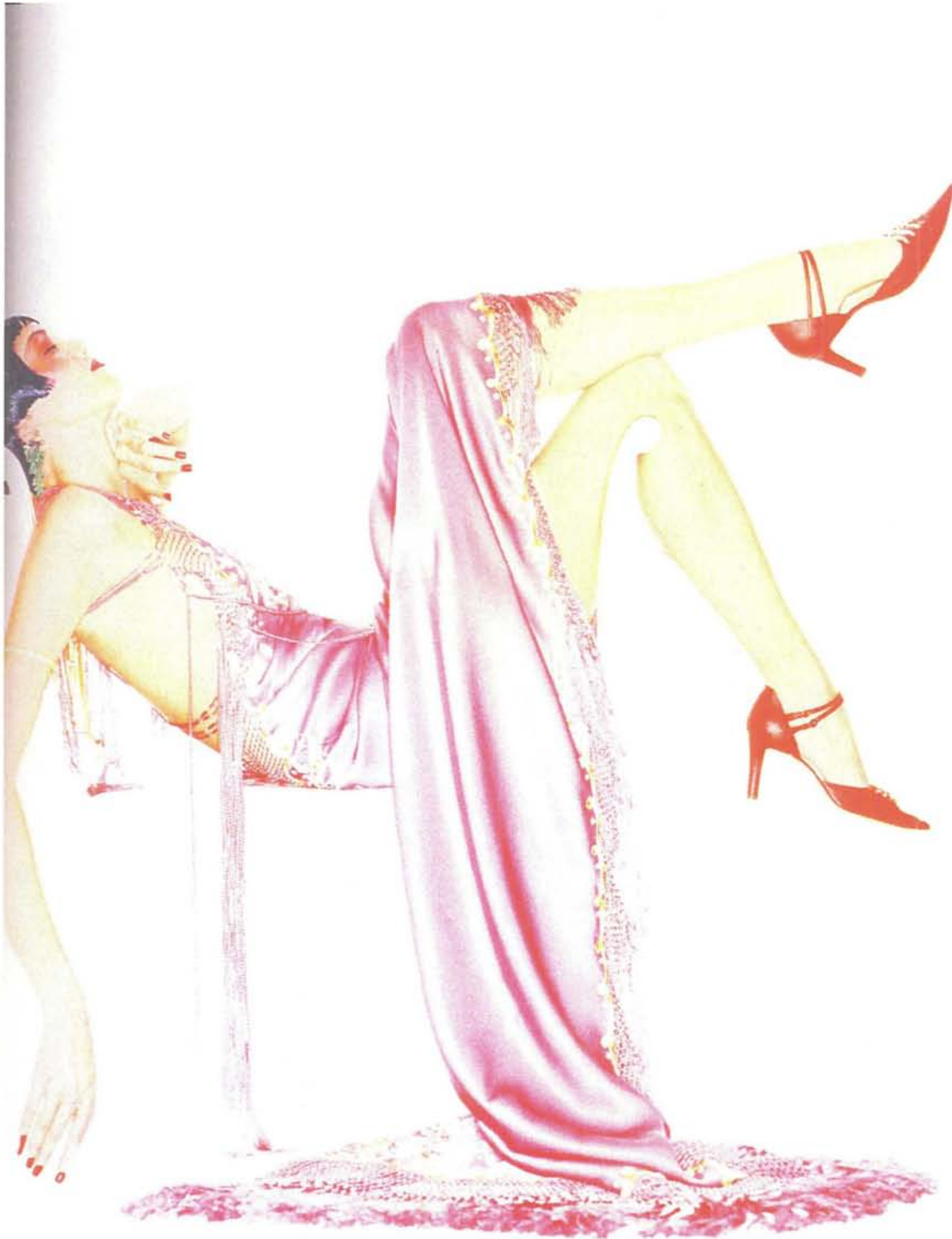


"How the High Roller Girls Do It" (from Allen)



APPENDIX C – EXAMPLES OF PINUP INFLUENCE IN FASHION

Photo of design by John Galliano for Dior, Autumn/Winter 1997/98 (from Buxbaum)



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