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FROM THE FEMME FATALE TO THE FEMME FATALIST: RE-ENVISIONING  
GENDERED ICONOGRAPHY IN CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

by

NOAH VOLZ

B.A. Florida State University, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis re-imagines cultural-historical texts from contemporary perspectives to argue for the visibility of the femme fatalist figure in classic Hollywood cinema. The project contends that the femme fatalist, as an identity, more substantively accounts for women's multidimensionality as filmic characters, beginning with an assessment of this figure in two films noir and arriving at an assessment of her presence in a psychological thriller. To demonstrate the necessity of re-envisioning female multiplicity in the cinema, this study investigates how the motion pictures *The Killers* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) contribute to an understanding of the femme fatalist phenomenon. Through an extended analysis of critical scenes and the ableist, masculine-hegemonic rhetoric that perpetuates the sociobiological hierarchies of power depicted in the films, this project determines the extent to which the women portrayed in these motion pictures may unfetter themselves from patriarchal values of femaleness without compromising their ability to belong to this gendered iconography. The femme fatalist derives from the femme fatale while remaining distinct from this entity. In other words, a woman does not need to signify as a fatale to project fatalist-ness. However, the woman who chooses to embrace fatale-ness or whom society Others because of her non-traditional identity cannot re-integrate into conventional culture once alienated. Only by performing a role—that of the femme fatale or the femme fatalist or possibly both—can she ensure that she still belongs in society. Women possess more complicated identities in classic cinema than history and existing scholarly conversations might suggest. Assessing the figure of the femme fatalist demonstrates that however much we understand about the human condition, we can re-define how we perceive ourselves in relation to a cultural past that continues to shape our contemporary identities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude for the people who have supported me throughout this process could fill a thesis on its own. For the sake of brevity, however, I will do my best to keep this section concise.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Representations of women in classic Hollywood cinema often conform to recognizable character archetypes whose value systems encourage some degree of audience identification. These figures necessarily signify on the scale of human morality, which ascribes a polarity to virtue in which a woman either appears wholly good, wholly evil, or, in all likelihood, somewhere in between these standards. Among all these models of the female in the cinema—the prostitute with the heart of gold, the good girl, the damsel in distress, and so on—perhaps none remains more familiar or more complicated than the femme fatale. This dubious moniker refers to a woman who weaponizes her attractiveness to seduce men into destruction. The archetype of the femme fatale has become almost as famous as the noir genre in which she most commonly appears. However, despite the continued push toward a spectral perspective on depictions of women in the cinema, critics still sometimes perceive fatale-ness as an inflexible identity—a female either fulfills the role of the fatale or she does not. Such a harmful binary produces what I identify in this thesis as the figure of the femme fatalist: most basically, a female operating within an inevitably masculine society who must either actualize her own agency, submit to her status as a woman in a man’s world, or live in the liminal space between these fates. Indeed, for all the scholarship surrounding the phenomenon of the femme fatale, relatively few critics have considered the potential for deviations of the femme fatale figure, especially regarding the femme fatalist. The ones that do—the occasional dissertation here, the odd text or so there—insufficiently address this idea, let alone in a cinematic context. Given a society where the female gendered subject signifies at the junction of womanhood and the resignation to

patriarchy, a subtler examination of the presence and role of women in classic Hollywood cinema necessitates an analysis of the femme fatalist and her impact on gendered iconography.

The figure of the femme fatalist originates from the French word for woman and the philosophy of fatalism. Abstracted by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in its namesake entry, the word *fatalism* commonly refers to an “attitude of resignation in the face of some future event or events” believed inevitable (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). For philosophers, fatalism manifests as the “view that we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do” (*SEP*). The common sense ascribes to the human subject a measure of agency. One chooses to resign oneself to the future because one believes in the inevitability of that future. The philosophic sense sees this same future as predetermined and inevitable regardless of one’s belief in such an inevitability. Philosophers conceive of fatalism through the “appeal to logical laws and metaphysical necessities,” through the “appeal to the existence and nature of God”—in effect, entreaties to reason and to spirituality (*SEP*). The figure of the femme fatalist fathoms the singular woman as paradoxical subject of and moving between either understanding of fatalism. Assuming the existence of a patriarchal society and the foreseeable endurance of this society, women operate in a predetermined existence as females within dogmatically male-dominated communities. To adopt a monochromatic perspective of gender, women in such a society remain fated to be women without hope for change. Presuming another hypothetical, if a woman recognizes the systems into which a patriarchal society has interpellated her—regardless of the supposed preordainment of that interpellation—she becomes the femme fatalist by deciding whether to submit to such systems or capitulate to alienation within them. Herein lies the quandary of the femme fatalist: her fated existence as a woman in a patriarchal society and the extent to which she possesses the agency to overcome her fate.

The femme fatalist derives from and offers an alternative to the figure of the femme fatale traditionally found in American film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. An understanding of the former necessitates a knowledge of the latter. Mass European exposure to American cinema following the conclusion of World War II yielded the term *film noir*, named so for the aesthetics of the films themselves: the “mise en scène” of nighttime shots and grim streets, low-key lighting and claustrophobic interiors (Pippin, “Philosophical Film” 517). Another decade of conflict and human suffering so soon after the first World War had produced a view of the world as “bleak, amoral, and ugly” as its inhabitants—hence the rise of these films noir (517). For many women, who in wartime had migrated from the private to the public sphere to occupy the workforce positions vacated by the men-turned-soldiers, the reconversion to the domestic life represented a renewed repression of their newly-found freedom. Though encouraged to return to the private sphere, the number of women in the workforce increased from 1952 to 1958, creating competition with the men who faced the disintegration of the social divisions to which they had adhered for so long (Walker-Morrison 26). The resulting crisis-of-masculinity, the overabundance of females compared to males, and the changing social relations between men and women contributed to the rise of the femme fatale in film noir. In a society whose traditional gender roles collapsed amid widespread anguish and sweeping social change, women became the objects of blame. Men feared a loss of power as women, frightened of romantic isolation or a return to domesticity, transformed their image to adopt more traditionally and uncomfortably masculine qualities.

The figure of the femme fatale draws from changing conceptions of gender to produce the common depiction of women in film noir as predatorial and criminalistic seductresses of men. These portrayals locate female motivation in a realm of “lethal ambition” within which the



“man is no longer a romantic object of desire” (Walker-Morrison 25). Recalling the gloomy and morally tortuous settings of film noir, the femme fatale derives from the woman who rebels against or seduces men merely to survive, not to acquiesce or to love unconditionally as traditional gender roles would suggest. Jack Boozer expresses this sentiment in his reading of Barbara Stanwyck’s and Lana Turner’s respective characters in *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Boozer concludes that the “determination of her [the femme fatale’s] fate goes beyond the rubric of social transgression and formal jurisprudence” into a kind of “patriarchal authority at a moralistic, metaphysical level” in which the man must live and the woman must die (23). Boozer, moreover, sees these depictions of females in film noir as subjects doomed to die before a “higher moral justice,” invoking the idea of the femme fatalist (23). The struggle of a woman to reconcile her predestined presence as an undesirable, a woman in a cynical man’s world, represents a more socially nuanced perspective of women’s roles in the cinema. Such a viewpoint shifts considerations of gender from those of the male imagination anxious about feminine independence to those of the female caught at the juncture between a familiar but navigable oppression and a potentially more liberating but unknown future. The femme fatale becomes or perhaps already signifies as the femme fatalist when her pursuit of independence situates her at the crossroads between fate and agency. On the one hand, she may be fated to die a rebel. On the other, because she recognizes her existence within patriarchal systems, she may either choose to surrender to them believing that this reality is inevitable and pointless to resist or may break free by choosing to believe in her autonomy within these systems. If she chooses autonomy—regardless of whether she actually possesses this autonomy—she lives as an eternal alien on the marge of patriarchy.

Although the femme fatale represents a familiar figure of film noir, one may trace her derivative, the femme fatalist, across classic Hollywood cinema. This thesis examines two films noir to assess the relationship between fatale-ness and fatalist-ness and one thriller to demonstrate the visibility of the femme fatalist outside the traditional noir. The films and their respective femme fatalists—Kitty Collins in *The Killers*, Gilda in *Gilda*, and Helen in *The Spiral Staircase*—provide significant insights into the figure of the femme fatalist in classic Hollywood. Hence, this thesis assesses three figures whose variant expressions of fatalist-ness offer a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. The first chapter of the thesis evaluates the femme fatale-fatalist Kitty, who embraces her fatale-ness to empower herself as a woman in the misguided belief that she can escape domestic womanhood and return to it at will without lasting repercussions. Yet Kitty’s decision to become the femme fatale, if only temporarily, fates her to this identity. The patriarchal society within which she operates cannot view her as anything other than a fatale, a spider-woman who weaponizes her body image to deceive men for personal gain. “Once a fatale, always a fatale,” so the pliant proverb goes, with Kitty’s situation demonstrating that although she chooses fatale-ness, she cannot un-choose this part of herself. She makes her critical decision as the femme fatalist before the events of the film, but this decision does not become evident—for her or for the audience—until her fateful plea to her dying husband to exonerate her from wrongdoing. Having once forsaken conventional womanhood, she loses her ability to re-occupy this role when she pleases. Kitty’s fate reveals that if at any point, the femme fatalist chooses to live as an alien from patriarchy, she condemns herself to isolation. The femme fatalist may signify for a time between belonging and not belonging, but when she decides to de-integrate or re-integrate—and sooner or later, she must

make this decision—her actions have consequences and her judgment is final. She must conform or live as an eternal alien.

The second chapter of the thesis employs the film *Gilda* to examine how the femme fatale-fatalist can subvert expectations of her identities and how this figure can experience her requisite crisis of identity while still belonging to patriarchy as an insider. Whereas chapter one discusses a fatale whose circumstances suggest the permanence of her sirenic self, the second chapter assesses alienation as a temporary status provided that the femme fatalist does not disavow traditional gender roles even as she destabilizes them. Gilda successfully re-integrates into society because she does not occupy but rather performs the role of the femme fatale. Her situation nuances Kitty's. If Kitty had merely acted the part of the spider woman like Gilda instead of becoming this figure, she would have not precluded herself from belonging to the society that she had once abandoned. Because Gilda contents herself with imagining empowerment, she does not radically dismantle existing hierarchies and, therefore, still signifies as a welcome member of these systems. As Kitty and Gilda demonstrate, the femme fatalist's critical decision as a woman comes at the expense of her sense of belonging. If she chooses life as an alien—as a fatale—she cannot shed this identity. She must impersonate fatale-ness and, in effect, must impersonate the female facing this crisis. If a woman becomes the femme fatalist who chooses alienation rather than simply imagining herself as one, she dooms herself to this life however much she endeavors to leave it afterward.

The third chapter of the thesis assesses an example of the femme fatalist as a non-fatale figure who, because of the additional dimension of womanhood that her disability adds, cannot conform to patriarchal expectations of femaleness despite her efforts to do so. Helen in *The*

*Spiral Staircase* suffers from speechlessness, a physical incapacity that precludes her from signifying as an insider of masculine-hegemonic society as well as an outsider. Unlike Kitty and Gilda, Helen neither willingly becomes an alien nor performs the role of alien to imagine herself as one. Her disability thrusts her into the position of the femme fatalist because the patriarchal, ableist culture in which she operates cannot abide two social weaknesses: femininity and speechlessness. To this society, disability represents a choice as much as fatale-ness does, with Helen's decision as the femme fatalist hinging upon her rejection of her infirmity. However, Helen can no more choose to shed her disability and outsider-ness than she can re-integrate within society as an insider. When she regains her voice at the end of the film, she does not regain her status as one who belongs within patriarchy, as the ableist rhetoric surrounding her would suggest. Rather, Helen's tragedy demonstrates that when society Others a woman and compels her into femme fatalist-ness, it fates her to a life of liminality. Once Othered, the femme fatalist cannot un-Other herself, no matter what she does and no matter what her judges state to the contrary. Indeed, Helen does not perform disability like Gilda performs fatale-ness but rather *is* disabled. Similarly, although Helen and Kitty both attest to the femme fatalist's inability to re-integrate following her alienation, Kitty notably chooses to become an alien and cannot renounce this identity so that she can choose belonging. Helen does not become an alien by choice. For Helen, the choice of belonging represents an illusion. If a woman is disabled, she is a femme fatalist, and if she is disabled but becomes able-bodied, she is still a femme fatalist. The simultaneous presence of the disabled and female identities in a woman designate her for eternal in-betweenness. Helen's disabled womanhood fates her to eternal femme fatalist-ness.

Examining the figure of the femme fatalist in classic Hollywood cinema will yield insights into fictional representations of women as well as the real-life phenomena that inspired

them. This thesis assesses the questions that epitomize our current cultural moment of reckoning with the past to confront our present and brace for our future. The films in this study demonstrate why we should care about an older, even antiquated generation's historical-cultural texts and how we can open ourselves to embracing new possibilities and identifying new issues for exploration as well. No one sphere of people may monopolize culture: not the esoteric considerations of academics, nor the broad reaches of the average reader and moviegoer. Specialists and laymen alike may enjoy a classic work of film or literature just as they may enjoy the potential intellectual considerations posed by the text-in-question. The blanket phrase "open to interpretation" suggests that one may just as well ignore interpretation as engage in it. This thesis illuminates what motivates us as human beings to help or hurt others, endure suffering, or revisit the past for guidance with the challenges that every generation has faced since time immemorial. Re-envisioning how we think of classic films, how we conceive of women's roles and representations in cinema, how we deconstruct womanhood across genres and periods, represents a valuable and necessary scholarly pursuit. Works of classic Hollywood cinema, no matter how popular or problematic, provide meaningful perspectives through which to consider timeless concerns such as the visibility and capabilities of women. The femme fatalists that this thesis discusses—Kitty in *The Killers*, Gilda in *Gilda*, and Helen in *The Spiral Staircase*—attest to the value of re-imagining these films from a contemporary viewpoint. Women play more complicated roles in classic cinema than initial readings of these motion pictures might suggest, than the traditional roles of women during this historical period might suggest. Assessing the figure of the femme fatalist demonstrates that however much we understand about the human condition, we can still re-define how we perceive ourselves in relation to the cultural past that shapes our identities today.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ETERNAL ALIEN

### Contextualizing *The Killers*

Unlike Gilda, who signifies strongly as both a femme fatale and a femme fatalist, and Helen, who signifies exclusively as a femme fatalist, Kitty Collins signifies much more obviously as a femme fatale than as a femme fatalist. Primarily, she appears through memories or through phone calls like some disembodied, imagined figure associated with the money that she stole and with her absence and her deception. This constant reminder of her dangerous duplicity situates her as the femme fatale of the classic film noir *The Killers*, a monumental work in the oeuvre of its director and noted architect of various other influential noirs, Robert Siodmak. *The Killers* exemplifies many recognizable conventions of the genre, including a sense of pervasive cynicism, fatal eroticism, and the changing perceptions of men's and women's roles during the period. Typical of a classic noir, the film explores the in-betweenness of human morality and the disorientating spaces between iniquity and righteousness. For the femme fatale Kitty, admirable qualities lay buried under a thick surface of guile and uncompromising self-interest. Even then, those characteristics that may redeem her character—namely, her apparent love for her husband—deserve the proverbial asterisk. On the one hand, yes: Kitty's dishonesty and unfaithfulness derive from a love for her family. On the other hand, this unscrupulousness runs two ways: she loves her family to the extent that she can but not unconditionally. In the closing scene of the film, out of desperation, Kitty begs her husband, Jim Colfax, to declare her innocence in their mutual schemes. Her predisposition toward self-preservation in this moment of crisis suggests that she would stop at nothing to save herself, even if it meant to “ask a dying man to lie his soul into hell” (*The Killers* 101:01-4). Indeed, Kitty embodies the attributes of the

femme fatale figure whose first allegiance remains to herself, with her empathy subordinated to her egotism.

Make no mistake, however—Kitty signifies as a femme fatalist. She suffers as a female fated to a violent womanhood who must deceive the men surrounding her or be deceived. Although the film does not shy away from making clear comparisons between Kitty and the femme fatale archetypes of yore, it still leaves room to interpret her as someone more than her archetype. So, yes: Kitty undeniably and unequivocally represents a femme fatale. Her on-screen introduction sees her seduce the enraptured Swede through her singing and the enchanting music that accompanies it, establishing from the first her status as a modern-day Greek siren. Her spell on Swede only intensifies throughout the film, to the point that even when great distances separate the two, he clutches her kerchief imprinted with a golden harp as if to cling to the freedom that she has stolen from him. And yet as Kitty herself confesses to Jim Reardon, albeit in a concession riven with deceit, she hates her life as a femme fatale and the world that hardened her into following that life. Her behavior, from the lying to the larceny, derives from her desire to succeed in a patriarchal society that would otherwise fully restrain her. Kitty becomes a predator of men so she does not become their prey, but as her marriage to Jim Colfax demonstrates, opportunities exist for her to re-integrate into society provided that she ceases her deceptive ways. Teetering between alienation from and belonging to the patriarchal social order portrayed in the film, she signifies strongly within these identities depending on the one that benefits her the most in a given situation. Regardless of how she weaponizes her identity, there still exists depth to her character. She signifies as a femme fatale because of her struggles as a femme fatalist.

Taken as such, Kitty exists on the borderlands of what Hermione in *Steppenwolf* identifies as the worldly conflict between superficial and authentic humanity. She lives a double life in which she despises her association with consumerism, wishing to free herself of it, but cannot excise her lust for material goods. In a conversation with Harry Haller the night of the masked ball, Hermione opines on mortality and the frontiers of pleasure: “It has always been the case and always will be that time and the world, wealth and power belong to those who are petty and shallow, whereas the rest, the real human beings, have nothing. Nothing other than death” (Hesse 122). Hermione bifurcates people into two identities, suggesting an absolute binary inflexible to any sense of in-betweenness. However, in competing images of the femme fatalist, Kitty’s character demonstrates that human individuality as Hermione defines it does, indeed, remain subject to complication. Undeniably, Kitty possesses the “wealth and power” to which Hermione refers, and her willingness to “ask a dying man to lie his soul into hell” reveals—mildly stated—her “petty and shallow” nature. Yet by her own admission, she recognizes that the path she travels yields “nothing other than death.” Kitty leads men to their doom in the fervent desire to avoid her own. By the end of the film, having long signified at the crossroads of fate and agency, Kitty chooses her agency and tries to condemn a dying man to save herself. In the very act of rebelling against the patriarchally hegemonic systems presented in the film, she condemns herself to criminality—that is, eternal stigmatization—within such systems. Kitty refuses to become a submissive subject to patriarchy, so she becomes a willing alien instead, desperate to cling onto what little power her continued resistance as the femme fatalist offers her.



### Kitty as the Violator

The figure of the femme fatale resembles that of a Greek siren, a mythological sea creature whose music and vocals lured unsuspecting sailors to their doom. These monsters often played the harp as their instrument of choice, singing men into an enchanted sleep as they strummed seductive chords from their promontories and murdered their victims. From the first, *The Killers* equates Kitty to a modern-day siren. Not long after Ole “Swede” Anderson, the man whom Kitty ultimately leads into destruction and whose demise facilitates the diegesis, loses his boxing career to a debilitating injury, he lies to his girlfriend, Lilly Harmon, about taking her on a date so that he may inquire about a potential business opportunity with the criminal “Big Jim” Colfax. While at Colfax’s house for a social gathering, Swede meets and becomes smitten with Kitty, voyeuring on her throughout the room as he ignores Lilly in his single-minded pursuit of Kitty’s attention (39:18-39:55). Although this scene marks the first on-screen instance in which Kitty tempts Swede, that Swede deceives Lilly to attend the meeting at all demonstrates Kitty’s corruptive influence. Kitty represents more a presence than a woman, a being whose very aura fatally tempts the men around her. Swede finds himself overwhelmingly drawn to Kitty’s dwelling, and like a sailor of Greek mythology bewitched into slumber, he becomes the unwitting victim of the siren Kitty.

A thorough understanding of Kitty as a noirish siren necessitates a closer examination of her first on-screen interaction with Swede. When Swede first meets Kitty, she is sitting at a piano with her legs crossed and her arms on her lap, wearing a bare-backed dress and leaning slightly toward the instrument and away from the party guests. Critically, in a moment suggestive of their dynamic throughout the film, Kitty conceals her face from Swede in the opening seconds of this

scene, keeping her back to him until they become formally introduced (38:07-23). Swede cannot take his eyes off her, and when he stalks over to her after their initial greeting, the following exchange occurs:

Kitty: (grins as Lilly enters scene) Jake tells me you're a fighter.

Swede: (excitedly) Do you like the fights?

Kitty: (her grin widening) I'm afraid I've never seen one.

Swede: No kiddin'?

Kitty: (still grinning) I hate brutality, Mr. Anderson. The idea of two men beating each other to a pulp makes me ill.

Lilly: (disdainfully) I saw all Swede's fights.

Kitty: (mockingly) How wonderful of you. I could never bear to see a man I really care for being hurt. (38:53-39:14)

Much like when Kitty hides her face behind her back, her tone and expression hide the meaning of her words. Although she notices Swede approaching her, she does not engage him until sure that Lilly can hear them, establishing herself as the dominant force in the encounter and Swede and Lilly as her subjects. This predatorial interaction defines Kitty's and Swede's communications with each other. She enchants him under a veil of seductive disingenuousness plain to observers such as Lilly but irresistible and inescapable for the doomed Swede. The more Swede listens to Kitty, the more he falls under her spell, to the point that her grin widens like that of a perverse Cheshire cat as she realizes that she possesses total control over him. This predator-prey dynamic reflects Mark Jancovich's estimation of early 1940s "female monsters," the "vicious women" of film noir who lead men into premature destruction. Kitty preys on Swede,

and though she professes to dislike fighting, she cannot help grinning monstrosly at the thought of it. She lusts for the idea of lust, for the opportunity to consume Swede's innocence as a beast does flesh. She claims to "hate brutality" because she prefers the subtler, far more treacherous art of cruelty. The brutality of the fights represents just one facet of an organized form of entertainment in which all participants adhere to a set of mutually agreed-upon rules. Kitty fetishizes this violence for her own entertainment. However, unlike in the fights from which Swede retired, the rules of Kitty's game remain known to Kitty alone. She represents the "vicious woman" in the ring, the "female monster" who feeds on the "idea of two men beating each other to a pulp" for her wicked gratification.

Swede's love for Kitty binds him to her like a prisoner to chains, and in no moment within *The Killers* does this comparison become more apparent than the scene depicting Swede's incarceration. During his investigation of Swede's death, Reardon interviews a former small-time crook named Charleston to learn more about Swede's demise. The first of two memories that Charleston shares pictures himself and Swede as inmates in the same cell. While Swede compulsively fidgets with the harp-imprinted kerchief that Kitty gifted him, Charleston discusses his fascination with the stars and the solar system:

Charleston: Jupiter's to the earth like a football is to a marble. That big. Then on the other hand, Mars ain't no bigger than a bean. That small.

Swede: (distractedly) How come you know so much about the stars?

Charleston: Oh, I don't know. Exceptin' after lights out, nights I couldn't sleep, I used to look at 'em through the bars. I knew they had names, and pretty soon I got to wonderin' which was which. So I got me a book from the prison library and began to study up on

'em. I don't guess there's a better place in the world for learning about stars than stir.

(48:49-49:29)

Swede and Charleston's discussion of the open sky emphasizes the restriction of their captivity. Stripped of their freedom by their own actions, they ponder the bastion of liberty in the natural world: the stars in the heavens. However, unlike Charleston, Swede lives in a prison within a prison. Presumably provided with endless opportunities for reflection, he thinks solely of Kitty, incapable of extricating her from his mind despite her having abandoned him for years. Indeed, Swede remains no freer as a citizen outside prison than he does as an inmate within, for his unrequited love for Kitty fetters him to her inescapably. She represents the domineering "football" to his emasculated "marble," and he can only view her "through the bars" of his imprisonment, enchanted by the "golden harps" of her siren's spell as he relentlessly fiddles with her kerchief (56:37). Mark Osteen explores this idea of the insecure man defining his relationship with femininity in multiple films noir: "These three films all portray forged identities, not only of the women whom the males mold into objects but also of the males themselves, who use these female images to fabricate or reinforce their identities as lover, worthy husband, or intellectual" (22). Although Kitty ignores Swede throughout his internment, implying to characters such as Charleston that she neither loves him nor cares for him, he associates himself with her affections anyway. He creates a hallowed, sacrosanct image of her in which she, like some seraphic being, cannot do any wrong. What sounds like the song of a siren to everyone else sounds like the "golden harps" of an angel to Swede. Even in prison, he fails to recognize the difference between freedom and captivity.

Behind bars or outside them, Swede pines for Kitty's presence in his life. However, this pining for Kitty's image condemns him to die. The concept of "presence" remains of particular importance to an understanding of Kitty. She does not appear in the present time until the denouement of the film, existing only as a connection to material goods and within the memories of the dramatis personae. Oliver Harris attests to this idea in his analysis of the femme fatale figure in relation to *The Killers*:

The famed "fascination and destructiveness" of the femme fatale is, however, always enigmatic, and the power she wields is typically far in excess of her material presence. One way of understanding this paradox is to say that the femme fatale functions neither literally nor allegorically but synecdochically within noir cinema, as a screen: as both herself and the bearer of a projected image. Now we can begin to recognize how noir negotiates between two versions of fascination: as the inherent property of a certain object, eliciting the gaze, or as relational and fantasmatic, projected by certain subjects. So instead of renaming her the *femme fascinant*, the essence of *film fascinant*, let us say that in noir both woman and film are invested with the power of fascination by the *homme fasciné*. For there is almost always one—and only one—for whom fascination with the femme as image proves fatal. (7)

Indeed, the "power [Kitty] wields is typically far in excess of her material presence." One sees as much when Swede deceives Lilly into attending a dubious business meeting rather than her expected restaurant date. Although Kitty does not appear on-screen during this moment, she draws Swede into her nest of deceit anyway. In fact, she rarely appears on-screen—showing up in about fifteen minutes of the film's one-hundred and five minute run time—and yet she

dominates the minds of all who come into contact with her, in passing or otherwise. No one can fathom to where Kitty disappeared after the payroll heist depicted in the flashbacks, prompting the central question of the diegesis: “What happened to Kitty?” (46:29-30). For Swede, Reardon, and more, she represents less a human woman and more a “projected image,” an intangible, unattainable object of their imaginations. Kitty bears the “fascination” for her “projected image” and, critically, welcomes it as a necessary and attractive component of her identity. Contrary to Harris’ interpretation of the femme fatale, by embracing her identity as the “inherent property” of the men surrounding her and “eliciting [their] gaze,” Kitty becomes a “fantasmatic” figure of the male imagination. She might signify as an *object* of obsessive desire, but the pursuit of her womanhood transforms men into the *subjects* of her predatory gaze. Her image festers in the imaginations of her male subjects, dooming them to lust for a presence that they cannot acquire.

This notion of Kitty as a presence becomes yet more apparent during the fleeting aftermath of her first interaction with Swede. Kitty’s profound association with material goods often renders her immaterial to the people surrounding her. She represents a different idea to different people—in Swede’s case, unachievable luxury and financial and romantic freedom—but the person whom she represents to others frequently contrasts with her actual character. When Kitty leaves Swede and Lilly to attend to another matter at the dinner party, the couple share a stunted conversation that culminates in the following lines from Lilly: “It’s a nice apartment. Must cost a fortune to keep it up. I bet they need two servants at least to take care of it” (39:41-49). As Lilly speaks the words “nice apartment,” the camera focus shifts from Lilly and Swede to a shot of Kitty sauntering past the couple and planting herself before them to croon a love tune. In a materialist context, this change in perspective—and the dialogue audible when this shift occurs—conflates Kitty with the apartment to which Lilly refers. Tellingly, Lilly does

not gender the domestic sphere but rather qualifies this antecedent with the third-person neutral pronoun “it,” suggesting Kitty’s resemblance to a material space that a man can occupy provided he has the “fortune to keep it up.” However, no man’s pockets run deep enough to consistently maintain the “apartment,” a place that requires “two servants at least to take care of it”—that is, the servants of fiscal security and the men who can meet this demand. In the context of Kitty as siren within this moment, Kitty forces herself into the scene to disrupt the potential re-establishment of romantic equilibrium between Swede and Lilly and solidify her binding enchantment of Swede. She remains off-screen long enough for Swede to look at someone other than her, and the moment that he does, she re-appears to ensure his inability to forget her. To recall an earlier scene, Swede’s attraction toward the apartment embodies his attraction toward Kitty. He represents but one servant in a house that demands “at least two” to “take care of it,” locked within Kitty’s innermost walls and unable to escape.

The equation of Kitty’s humanity with the material apartment reflects an understanding of body-image theory, particularly regarding the process of transformation. Rebecca Coleman explains this principle in her application of a feminist-materialist approach to bodies and images:

As I have suggested, bodies and images are a phenomenon in which both nature and culture have reciprocal effects. Furthermore, the conception of time as non-linear and multidirectional is important for understanding images of transformation in two ways. First, as I have argued, a linear model of causation would suggest that images *effect* bodies. The idea that images effect bodies is especially significant to an understanding of images of transformation because of their promise of a better future—that is, a linear

model of causation would imply that representations of self-transformation result in bodies that plan for the accomplishment of better bodies in the future. (39-40)

Coleman elaborates: “Crucially, this future as potential is brought into the present, so that concerns about what the future might be if the self/body is not transformed are required to be acted on now” (40). Kitty blurs the boundaries between her body and her image. Although she possesses a body, it is the image of her body and the longing to behold this image that dominate her observers, not her body itself. On a meta level, such a yearning for the image of Kitty’s body merges her body with the image of her body and transforms her physical form into a material for consumption. In other words, the image of her body replaces her actual body, with her recognition of this equivalence prompting the “self-transformation” necessary for what she perceives as a “better future.” A “better future,” in this sense, refers to the “accomplishment” of a better body that will enable Kitty to exorcise her femme fatale-ness. She envisions a future in which the male imagination has transformed her body into a better one and brings this vision of the future into the present to actualize it. In the context of the femme fatalist, Kitty positions herself as an alien of patriarchy to dominate the men around her and empower herself before her planned re-entry into society. She occupies the position of rebel so that, upon her re-integration into patriarchy, she may retain this empowerment as a contented woman in the domestic sphere.

#### Kitty as the Violated

The process of Kitty alienating herself from the patriarchal society depicted in *The Killers* and eventually re-integrating within this society remains critical to her identity as a femme fatalist. On the surface, she operates as a monstrous, noirish siren, deceiving men to their doom out of a relentless lust for material goods that renders her more a savage presence than an



empathetic human. However, her viciousness derives from her experience as a woman subject to patriarchal expectations of femininity. Julie Grossman speaks to this point in her complication of the femme fatale figure in film noir:

The predominance of the idea of the femme fatale, I've been suggesting, profoundly shapes our viewing of all women in film noir. This keeps us not only from recognizing complex levels of female subjectivity but also the extent to which women are trapped in social roles they can't change and trapped particularly into performing the role of femme fatale that then perpetuates ideation surrounding these women. (22)

What Grossman explains and what the figure of Kitty confirms manifests as the erroneous assumption that a female lead in film noir necessarily and invariably exhibits all the qualities of a femme fatale. Because viewers expect a femme fatale in film noir, they see all women depicted in these motion pictures as fatales, suggesting that the figure of the fatale may only ever signify as this figure regardless of the reality of this perception. Yet Kitty lives a double life as a subject to patriarchy and to "social roles [she] can't change." The male obsession with possessing her image damages her, so she copes with her subjectivity by occupying the role of predator in the attempt to change the immutable "social roles" shackling her to objectified womanhood and, in a tropic sense, to her fatale-ness. An understanding of these manacles frees one to observe an alternative ideation of Kitty as a femme fatalist as well as a femme fatale. For all her duplicity, Kitty represents a woman who harms others so that they may not harm her. She engages in constant self-defense, committing violence to actualize a future in which her freedom does not depend on the brutality committed by or inflicted upon her body.

To understand Kitty's double-life as the violator and the violated, one must first understand the transactional language surrounding Kitty's body. Coming from the lips of the men surrounding her, Kitty becomes synonymous with the term "business." During a flashback scene in which Swede, Kitty, and three other criminals plan a payroll caper, Swede and Colfax have a brief altercation at the card table around which they have all gathered. Perceiving that Colfax has cheated him out of his money, Swede punches Colfax and knocks him to the floor. Incensed, Colfax utters the following lines in response to the assault: "The job comes first. But afterwards we'll have business together" (66:42-50). Although outwardly Colfax alludes to retribution, the eventual revelation about his relationship with Kitty and "the double cross to end all double crosses" indicates the love triangle between the two and Swede. When he states that he and Swede will "have business together," he refers to Kitty's body as much as he does reprisal for his humiliation. Colfax knows that Kitty can only take the stolen money from Swede by sleeping in Swede's bed as his lover. For Colfax, Kitty's body image represents a commodity for consumption—for trade, purchase, and so on—that appreciates in worth depending on its use value to consumers. To apply Christopher E. Forth's understanding of the overweight masculine body to a strictly feminine context, "the inner turmoil of the [male imagination] is often mirrored in the grotesque villains whose bodies bear and represent not only their own corruption but also the potential collapse of the protagonist as well" (390). Kitty's body bears and represents the "corruption" of a society, embodied by Colfax in this scene, that would have her exchange her dignity and liberty for financial security. Of course, she consents to this auction of her image and even contributes to it, but that she must participate in the sale of her own body at all demonstrates the tragedy underlying her fatale-ness. Kitty chooses to sell herself so that, even when people such as Colfax retail her, she retains a degree of autonomy in the commercialization

of her body. She allows the possession of her body image to pass from one man to another with the belief that, regardless of her owners' convictions, she alone may decide within what social sphere she operates. Yet however much Kitty embraces her fatale-ness, her body image still belongs to the men who desire it. Her choice to commodify herself matters little when her only alternative amounts to coercive commodification and the exploitation of her body image anyway.

Kitty's climatic dialogue with Reardon best demonstrates her double life as the violator and the violated. Toward the end of the film, Reardon has collected enough evidence to potentially solve Swede's murder, needing only to record testimony from Kitty to conclude his investigation. He draws Kitty out from hiding to a meeting at the Green Cat restaurant and pretends to possess incriminating evidence against her to elicit a confession. They begin their conversation with the following exchange:

Kitty: Glass of milk, hot. (turns to Reardon) I haven't eaten all day.

Reardon: Steak sandwich, rare, and a glass of beer.

This dialogue establishes a commodified predator-prey dynamic between the two interlocutors. Kitty, who nourishes herself on the male imagination for her body, claims that she has not "eaten all day," glaring at Reardon as she says so. Her hunger does not refer to edible food but to the man before her. The subtext behind her words suggests that she considers Reardon another hapless victim for her consumption, not an apex predator like herself. Expecting this deceit, however, Reardon subverts the role of quarry by performing it and declaring that, unlike other cuts of "steak" such as Swede, whom Kitty cooked to "well done," Reardon represents a "rare" slice of meat—one whom Kitty cannot butcher and deceive no matter how she attacks him. Reardon situates his dialogue with Kitty within the realm of a transaction, an implication that

becomes all the more apparent considering the backdrop of the restaurant against which their discussion takes place. The meat metaphors represent pronouns for human beings. Regardless of how one slices it, Reardon and Kitty negotiate for the freedom of Kitty's body as if settling a business deal. She endeavors to fulfill the roles of the butcher and the chef who cut and cook Reardon to her specifications but discovers, as their discussion progresses, that he controls the dynamic of their interaction. If Kitty does not provide Reardon with his exact order—her evidence regarding her relationship with Swede—she will lose her liberty as a human being. She comes to the Green Cat as a sheep does to the slaughter, as a woman back into the folds of patriarchal domination.

Thus, although Kitty embraces fatale-ness to avoid male domination, she can neither escape her fate as a woman nor, recognizing this fate, shed her identity as a femme fatale. When Reardon conducts “business” with her at the Green Cat, she initially condescends to him, believing that he cannot possibly have collected any incriminating evidence against her. When he presents proof to the contrary, Kitty adopts a different, more ingratiating tone revealing of her innermost conflict: “I’m not stalling, Mr. Reardon, not now. I know when I’m beaten. I’m fighting for my life. Not Kitty Collins’ life but mine. I have a home now and a husband. I’ve got a life worth fighting for, and there’s nothing in the world I wouldn’t do to keep it just the way it is” (89:06-20). Kitty’s struggle as a femme fatalist manifests as her desire to become a siren on the borderlands of patriarchy and empower herself so that she may return to domesticity retaining this empowerment. However, Kitty only believes that she has abandoned her criminality and become a dutiful housewife. Although she professes to have a “life worth fighting for,” to have shed the moniker of Kitty Collins and re-integrated within society, she

resorts to deceiving Reardon anyway. Even if she did transform from the femme fatale Kitty to the docile “nice girl,” she reverts to her old self, negotiating with Reardon as if playing a game with winners and losers and “stalling” because she despises being “beaten.” To survive in a man’s world obsessed over her body image, she attempts to separate her old life as a criminal seducer from her new one as a wedded woman. Taken in this manner, Kitty reflects a legacy of female “characters identified as examples of the femme fatale [who] are actually the mistresses of criminals” (Jancovich, “Phantom Ladies”171). She serves as an accomplice in corruption, embracing moral depravity to overcome the restraints of patriarchy but finding herself unable to escape it despite her best endeavors. Tragically, the new woman to whose image Kitty aspires remains nameless, for she is and has always been Kitty Collins—that is “just the way it is.”

As Kitty pleads with Reardon to spare her, she demonstrates a surprising level of meta-reflection on her journey as the femme fatalist. Typical of her character, however, moral unscrupulousness underscores this meta-reflection. At every turn in her conversation with Reardon, Kitty attempts to deceive him, and at every turn, he counters her with another incriminating piece of evidence. When he produces the handkerchief that she gave Swede, she confesses significant details to him about herself and the crimes she has committed:

Mr. Reardon, I want you to believe something. I hated my life, only I wasn’t strong enough to get away from it. All I could do was dream of some big payoff that would let me quit the whole racket. The Swede was my chance to make my dream come true. If I could only be alone with him for a few hours. But Colfax was always there. I thought it was hopeless, and then suddenly my chance came. (90:35-59)

The “whole racket” to which Kitty refers to the patriarchal society within which she lives. She claims to have hated her life as a siren but that she “wasn’t strong to get away from it,” implying that she has since escaped her former fatale-ness when, in fact, she has not. She still signifies as a femme fatalist desperate to understand her own identity, seeking the “big payoff”—the right to belong to patriarchy as an equal rather than a fatale on the borderlands—that would let her “dream [of equality] come true.” Yet this “dream” remains only that: a dream, and a “hopeless” one at that. Even as Kitty bares her conscience to Reardon, she attempts to deceive him, beseeching him to “believe something” sympathetic about her while lying about her relationship with Colfax. Her fatale-ness represents an inextricable part of her identity. She assumed the role of siren to empower herself as an equal to the men she double-crosses, but she can no sooner shed this grievous mantle than she can raise the men that she has killed from the dead. To the males whom she betrays or who discover her betrayals, she functions as little more than an “articulation of patriarchal anxiety” (Lindop 324). When people see Kitty, they do not see a reformed woman as she does but a woman who is “poison” to herself and everyone around her (93:43), who would “ask a dying man to lie his soul into hell” to save herself (101:01-4). The femme fatalist Kitty alienates herself by choosing to become a fatale, believing that one day she will belong as a woman equal to the men surrounding her. However, her own actions preclude her from the ideal life that she cherishes. By embracing alienation, if only temporarily, she coalesces with her criminality and, ultimately, dooms herself to a lifetime of persecution.

#### Condemning the Self to Alienation

As a femme fatalist, Kitty Collins oscillates between belonging and not belonging to the patriarchal society depicted within the film. To evoke the words of Hermione in *Steppenwolf*,

within the patriarchal society depicted in *The Killers*, “petty and shallow” people possess the “time and the world, wealth and power” so long as they sacrifice the “real human beings” who have “nothing other than death.” Often, the “petty and shallow” people manifest as men such as Colfax and the “real human beings” women such as Lilly, the former group representing the violators and the latter the violated. Resentful of the male imagination that obsesses over her body image, Kitty employs this image to seduce men, actualize her agency, and obtain the “wealth and power” that enables her own fetishistic imagination. Although she recognizes that becoming the siren distinguishes her as a monstrous alien, she believes that her fatale-ness empowers her as a woman and that she may wield or abandon this part of her identity at her pleasure. Kitty perceives that by dominating men as the alien fatale, she may re-integrate within society with her power over men still intact. However, by choosing to become the fatale, Kitty fates herself to this identity. Society can only ever see her as a siren, and however much she pretends to have “quit the whole racket” to pursue a “life worth fighting for,” deception remains part of her very nature. Kitty descends into fatale-ness to escape the fate of domestic womanhood in a patriarchal world but doing so consigns her to a worse fate: to live as an eternal fatale unable to return to a sense of belonging, let alone with the power that she had hoped to carry with her. She lives a double-life as the violator and the violated but lost her opportunity at simple domesticity when she forsook it for power. Although Kitty found this power in her weaponization of her body image, the male fear of such influence prevents her re-integration into society. The femme fatalist who chooses to become an alien cannot abandon this identity once adopted. Kitty’s decision to assume the veil of fatale-ness condemns her to bear it for an eternity.

## CHAPTER TWO: PERFORMANCE AS A TRANSIENT DESTABILIZER

### Contextualizing *Gilda*

Gilda signifies within the in-betweenness of the femme fatale and femme fatalist identities. At first glance, she seems to represent a classic fatale. Like Kitty, Gilda employs her sexuality to seduce the men surrounding her and exhibits a sense of jaded cynicism consistent with the archetypal female figure in film noir. However, in a significant departure from the remorseless Kitty, Gilda remains at odds with her fatale-ness and her femme fatalism throughout the film. Although she plays the part of sirenic harpy, her wanton behavior turns out to be “just an act, every bit of it” to inspire jealousy in her ex-lover Johnny Farrell (*Gilda* 104:24-27). Gilda does not “do any of those things”—namely, exercising her sexual independence—that disrupt patriarchal hierarchies of power (104:19-22). She appears to unsettle traditional notions of virtuous womanhood, but the film subverts these disturbances by claiming that she remained faithful to both her husbands, first Ballin and second Johnny, from the beginning of their respective relationships. So, typical of *Gilda*'s complex depiction of romance, there exist layers of illusion to Gilda's interactions with men. In one moment, she engages in supposed adultery and drags men into sinful lust with her, and in the other, she weeps for her innocence and the suffering in a woman's life compared to a man's. Gilda's critical decision as the femme fatalist manifests as her decision to embrace her life as a woman in a man's world. She teeters between alienation from and belonging to this masculine-hegemonic world presented in the film. Unlike Kitty, who exhibits clear fatale-ness, and Helen, who operates exclusively as a femme fatalist, Gilda functions in the liminal space between these two identities, which enable her to embrace womanhood as a willing subject to the patriarchal society portrayed in the motion picture.



Gilda's successful integration as a female in a male world suggests the discovery of a happy medium between the unbound alien and the woman as subject that, however tempting to believe, the film does not depict. Again, Gilda only pretends to cuckold her husbands in marriage, coquetting with other men just short of committing adultery. Because she merely acts the part of the fatale and does not truly signify as one, she can embrace womanhood as a willing subject to patriarchy and, at least on the surface, enjoy a cheerful future. Yet Gilda's experience subverts the crisis of the femme fatalist, for although appearances suggest that she has long operated within the liminal space between alienation and belonging, she at no point ceases to actually separate herself from patriarchy. Yes, in one sense, Gilda's acting the part of femme fatale distances her from the society fettering her. She accepts this role and welcomes her dubious reputation as a spider woman. In another sense, if life represents a stage for Gilda, she does not occupy the role of the director who controls the action on-stage but that of the actor who simulates a *character's* life, who plays to the script that the director has given to her but who cannot amend or deviate from this script. Desiring freedom from patriarchy yet unable to achieve it, she settles for the illusion of liberty long enough to disrupt the status quo but not so much so that she precludes herself from returning to these circumstances. Gilda demonstrates that the femme fatalist's crisis of identity may culminate in belonging if she imagines her estrangement from patriarchal systems rather than actualizing this rupture. No matter how fervently she aspires to alienation, the femme fatalist cannot realize this vision without branding herself as an eternal outsider. She must remain a subject to patriarchy or content herself with imagining a world in which the subject becomes the dominator and the dominator the subject.

## The Sexual Economy and Adjudication of Gilda's Body

The patriarchal society depicted in *Gilda* becomes apparent in the demeaning language that men employ to discuss women. Like with Kitty in *The Killers*, male characters often sexualize Gilda as an object for coveting and reference her using dehumanizing terminology. In a reflective voiceover, Johnny, who works for Ballin as his casino manager, narrates his first encounter with Gilda as he enters Ballin's domicile to meet his boss' new wife. To his shock, he learns that Ballin has married Gilda, and he relates, "You think a bell would have rung, or you think I would have had some instinctive warning. But I didn't. I just walked right into it" (*Gilda* 16:05-13). Johnny uses this rhetoric again when he, Ballin, and Gilda converse with one another at a booth in the casino: "Because it looks like one thing and right in front of your eyes, it becomes another thing" (26:49-55). The pronoun "it" and the noun "thing" represent the operative words here. Johnny fails to see Gilda as a woman worthy of gendering. At first, he refers to her as an "it," suggesting a degradation of the human into an Other undeserving of humanity if not entirely excluded from the genera of living beings—a creature, in other words. Increasingly unsettled by Gilda's powerful sexuality, however, Johnny brutalizes the linguistic locus of her humanity to the point that she loses her creature-ness, reduced to a "thing" with a use value incapable of reciprocal exchange. Gilda fulfills the function of womanhood, however men like Johnny perceive this state of being, without actually signifying as a woman. As a sexual-material object, her body exists for the consumption of a male gaze covetous to possess "it," this "thing" of Ballin's that inspires jealousy in Johnny.

This idea of gendered volatility and the destruction of the linguistic signifier becomes yet more pronounced when Ballin responds to Johnny's objectifying comments about Gilda. At this

juncture in the film, Ballin has begun to suspect that Johnny and Gilda share a romantic history that they refuse to disclose. When Johnny reduces Gilda's womanhood to thingness, a straight-backed and inscrutable Ballin replies, "Well, you haven't much faith in the stability of women, have you, Johnny?" (26:57-27:00). Within the patriarchal society depicted in *Gilda*, there exists no absoluteness to a woman's capacity to signify as a woman. Masculine anxiety over the conservation of traditional gender roles destabilizes feminine signifiers to the point of objectified neutrality. Gilda, once a "woman" and a "her," becomes a "thing," her stability as woman lost because of male malcontent with her domineering sexuality. Men like Ballin and Johnny engage in this linguistic warfare to empower themselves through the disempowerment of women. Gilda's emasculating performance as the femme fatale necessitates the re-cultivation of male superiority over the female. Gilda alludes to this tragic reality in the following exchange with Johnny during the same scene as before:

Johnny: I was down and out. He put me back on my feet.

Gilda: (grins mockingly) Now, isn't that an amazing coincidence, Johnny? That's practically the story of my life. (28:13-23)

For Johnny—and for the men whom he embodies in this moment—"down and out" represents a phase of life that he can overcome, believing that the right circumstances can put him back on his feet. The language that he employs recalls that of a gambling game dependent on strokes of fortune to produce winners and losers. When Johnny suffers, he is "down" on his luck or "out" of luck but not to the extent that the next card or roll of the dice would not favor him and the recuperation of his prosperity. For Gilda, and for the women she exemplifies in this moment, "down and out" represents a nigh inescapable state of existence. She scoffs at Johnny's

comments because she recognizes the transience of his plight compared to the longevity of her own. Whereas her feminine signifiers become destabilized in the face of pervasive masculine anxiety, her plight as a woman “down and out” in a man’s world remains a stable identity. No matter her gendered expression, she cannot escape her fate as a subject to patriarchy.

The process by which Gilda degrades from a “her,” to an “it,” and eventually a “thing” reflects her signification on the spectrum of dehumanization. Expanding on the “dual dimensions of humanness” first described by Nick Haslam, the scholars Patrick Boyd, et al. write that “uniquely human attributes are often socially constructed, reflect qualities that must be taught and learned, and involve rationality, morality, and higher-order cognitive functioning,” while “human nature traits are considered deep-seated, universal, or inborn, and involve openness, warmth, and emotionality” (1303). The male denial of these dimensions of humanness—UH and HN, as Haslam abbreviates them—dehumanizes Gilda out of anxiety for her powerful genderedness. As I have previously mentioned and will discuss in-depth later, Gilda performs but does not occupy the role of the femme fatale who embraces ambiguous femininity to subvert traditional expectations of womanhood. Yet because she *appears to* signify at the intersection of traditional masculinity and femininity, she projects an image of unstable and radically unsettling genderedness to the men consuming her image. These men, Ballin and Johnny, fear for the preservation of their self-concept of manhood and cope with this trepidation by un-gendering Gilda to dehumanize her: “My wife doesn’t come under the category of women, Johnny” (21:20). To Ballin and Johnny, Gilda amounts to little more than a casino chip that they may gamble, earn, and exchange for profit as they wish. They deny her UH traits, seeing her as an “immoral or amoral” beast “driven by motives, appetites, and instincts” and “lacking in refinement, civility, moral sensibility, and higher cognition” (Haslam 257-258). In so doing, Ballin and Johnny also

deny Gilda's HN—her “emotionality, warmth, cognitive openness, [and] individual agency”—and render her a mechanism that performs the role of woman performing the role of femme fatale (258). Haslam's articulation of “individual agency” illuminates a key insight into the patriarchal society within which Gilda operates in the film. She experiences first animalistic dehumanization and later mechanistic dehumanization, both of which objectify her and strip her of her freedom. As a woman-turned-object, an it-turned-thing, Gilda lacks a sense of autonomous agency, signifying instead as a device who serves for the agency of others.

Further, the material object Gilda remains subject to a sexualized discourse that propagates the commodification of her body. The right to possess Gilda's womanhood passes from Ballin to Johnny, from man to man, as if no more than a common item meant for reciprocal exchange. Specifically, Johnny conflates Gilda with articles of clothing that he and Ballin share, washing her and hanging her out to dry as they please. After Gilda returns from a late night of reveling with another man, an incensed and jealous Johnny tells her at the steps to Ballin's mansion, “I don't care what you do. But I'm gonna see to it that it looks all right to him. From now on, you go anywhere you please with anyone you please, but I'm gonna take you there and pick you up and bring you home. Get that? Exactly the way I'd take and pick up his laundry” (49:28-47). Discomforted by Gilda's coquetry and ostensible sexual unfaithfulness, Johnny resorts to dehumanizing her, equating her with used dresswear that men wash, dry, and discard at will. If Gilda does not offer the right sexual fit for Ballin and Johnny, or if these men wear her to the point of overuse, they throw her in a hamper and launder her until she “looks all right” again. Indeed, when Johnny marries Gilda later in the film, he does so with the belief that he “will carry on where Mr. Mundson left off”—continually wearing her into waste and laundering her into use once more in a brutal cycle of consumption (80:49-50). Frida Beckman reads into the

consequences of sexual-material politics on women's relationships with men in her analysis of the classic femme fatale figure in the films of David Lynch: "The femme fatale of film noir continues to stand as a nexus of sexual economy and the power of sexual difference. Here, her sexual power makes her a desirable object of men's attention but frequently excludes her from their love, a love they save for the purer woman who is commonly posed as her counterexample" (26). The concept of sexual economy remains particularly valuable to an examination of Gilda as a material object. Gilda's "sexual power makes her a desirable object" of Ballin's and Johnny's attention, but this power manifests as "sexual difference" from the "purer woman" on whom men bestow "their love." Such a deviation from conventional patriarchal mores of womanhood—uncompromising chastity, inferiority compared to men, and so on—precludes Gilda from the sexual economy that Ballin and Johnny uphold. Within this market, she does not operate as a trader interacting freely with other merchants but as the flesh whom these venders launder to their specifications. The sexual economy within which Gilda functions predicates on the continued sale and re-sale of her body.

This cycle in which the ravaging male gaze endlessly consumes Gilda's body analogizes for inescapable incarceration. A rhetoric of freedom and fugitivity defines the relationships of the men and women depicted in the film with the patriarchal society in which they live. If the male-dominated world with which Gilda contends represents a courtroom that passes judgment, Gilda represents the woman on trial whose sentence determines the extent of her liberty as a human being. In the tribunal of gender equity portrayed in *Gilda*, men serve as the judges, juries, and executioners of human rights, while women serve as the offenders who must defend womanhood in a world that glorifies the superiority of manhood. After Ballin's presumed death, Gilda and Johnny marry, with Johnny becoming the new owner of Ballin's casino. In a cruel and misguided

attempt to keep Gilda faithful to her deceased first husband, Johnny neglects her to the point of abuse, prompting the following interchange when Gilda confronts him:

Johnny seizes Gilda's wrists.

Johnny: What about your husband? If you could forget him so easily, you could forget the others too, couldn't you?

Gilda struggles in Johnny's grip.

Gilda: But there weren't any others!

Johnny: Admit them. When you admit them and tell me who they were.

He shoves her to the side. She looks betrayed as she covers herself with her fur coat.

Gilda: You don't think one woman could marry two insane men in one lifetime, now would you? (88:46-89:08)

Johnny seizes Gilda's wrists as if handcuffing her as he forces her to take the stand for her alleged crimes of adultery. Although she professes innocence, he refuses to believe her, demanding that she "admit [to] them"—the bodies of the men that she laid to rest with at nights—so that he may pass the sentence of guilt he deems her to deserve. When Johnny shoves Gilda aside, furious at her insistence of virtue, she covers her body with her fur coat, the position of which covers her from the breasts-down, suggesting the presence of nudity despite her dresswear remaining on and intact. He strips her of her dignity, laying bare her secrets like her exposed flesh, yet strays farther from the truth with every dogged endeavor to wrest shame out of her. Indeed, as Adrienne McLean observes in her analysis of Rita Hayworth's star image and her Americanization as a Latinx actor converted to Hollywood, "Gilda is punished for her sexual life with marriage rather than literal death" (21). McLean elaborates, "Rita Hayworth's film roles are,

as several scholars have noted, most interesting not for their eroticism alone but for the way they integrate sweetness and innocence with erotic power” (21). Johnny’s denial of Gilda’s truth demonstrates that “sweetness and innocence” and “erotic power” represent mutually exclusive qualities for women in the film. Because Gilda projects erotic power and lives a sexual life, she cannot also preserve an appearance of sweetness and innocence, even if she does, in fact, maintain these patriarchal values. Whereas the sweetness and innocence of Johnny’s ideal nice girl prostrates this figure to masculine desire, the woman who leads a sexual life holds erotic *power* over men. Johnny perceives in Gilda’s sensuality the ability to undermine, even dominate, the patriarchal society that would otherwise criminalize her for her womanhood. The subversive potential of this sexuality marks her for the confines of marriage. Gilda employs her sexuality to defend herself in the court of masculine opinion and receives as punishment consecutive sentences of matrimonial imprisonment to “insane men.”

#### Performing the Role of the Femme Fatale

Recognizing that she lives within a masculine-dominated society that objectifies her and condemns her because of her femininity, Gilda seeks escape from patriarchal hegemony by performing the role of the spider woman who embraces her sexuality to undermine male endeavors to dominate it. Two moments, in particular, reveal the consequences of misogyny on Gilda’s emotional health. The first manifests as an illuminating interaction between herself and the restroom attendant Uncle Pio as they stand alone at a relatively secluded corner of the casino:

Gilda scans the room, holding a cigarette in her mouth. She catches Uncle Pio’s eye as he walks toward her.

Gilda: Got a light?



Pio stops at her side.

Pio: Yes, Mrs. Mundson. (pulling a lighter from his pocket) It is so crowded and yet so lonely. Isn't it?

Gilda: How did you know?

Pio lights her cigarette.

Pio: You smoke too much. I've noticed. Only frustrated people smoke too much, and only lonely people are frustrated. (37:02-37:18)

Ballin bluntly explains the source of this sentiment in a conversation with a German business associate, a man distressed over his recent financial losses: "Life is very difficult for the defenseless ones in the world" (39:29-31). Gilda represents one of the "defenseless ones in the world" whose "life is very difficult"—in her case, because of her identity as a woman.

Constantly contending with a society whose masculine power structure dehumanizes her, she becomes a "frustrated" and "lonely" person who slakes herself on control when she possesses it and desperately searches for this control when she does not. The cigarettes in which Gilda overindulges signify as the phalluses—the men—that she yearns to dominate: to keep in her pocket at her own discretion, to hold in the palm of her hand as she consumes and discards the used butts as she pleases. Ken Hillis sees Gilda's psycho-realized attempts at controlling the men surrounding her as a typical attitude of characters in films noir:

Films noir characters' belief in the American Dream allows them to see their desires for material gain as directly connected to acquiring greater agency and social status. More often than not, however, fate thwarts noir characters from achieving this status. Often they perish (the body count can be very high in these films), or if they do not perish

neither do they triumph; most often they merely survive through strategies of accommodation and making do. (4)

Although Gilda dreams of “acquiring greater agency and social status,” she recognizes the hopelessness of this vision for the future. Rather than assume the mantle of the femme fatale, Gilda acts the part, leaning into fatale-ness without declaring herself for this identity. She uses “strategies of accommodation and making do” to “survive” patriarchy, and though her disruption of the hegemonic status quo does not enable her to “triumph” over these dehumanizing circumstances, neither does it consign her among those women destined to “perish” because of their outsider-ness. Gilda performs the role of the femme fatale to create a “body count” of the men whom she ostensibly seduces.

Gilda’s high “body count” testifies to her convincing performance as a femme fatale. She blurs the boundaries between adultery and faithfulness just short of crossing the threshold into true infidelity, exploiting her sexuality to undermine patriarchal systems without precluding herself from belonging within them. Now, on the one hand, Gilda’s settling for the illusion of liberty suggests that whatever power she wields as a fatale amounts to a transient force and little else. If she can only act the part of the empowered woman and not actually attain this empowerment, one might argue, her agency represents but a fantasy and her womanhood an identity fated for subordination to manhood. On the other hand, that Gilda can manipulate her sexuality in such a subversive manner to patriarchy at all demonstrates her facility as a sexual puppeteer. Even if Gilda stages a performance for an audience of men who entertain themselves with her body, the fact remains that—however many strings make her a marionette to masculine desire—she maneuvers strings of her own in a symbiotic relationship between male and female gendered subjects. When Gilda dances a provocative number toward the end of the film to rouse

jealousy in Johnny, she stages a shocking encore in which men from the audience fiddle with the zippers on her dress as if with an extension of her genitalia (100:55-101:00). Witnessing this display, an incensed Johnny drags her into a backroom, where the following interaction occurs:

Johnny: What do you mean by—

Gilda wrests herself from his grip.

Gilda: Now they all know what I am, and that should make you happy, Johnny. It's no use just you knowing it, Johnny. Now they all know that the mighty Johnny Farrell got taken and that he married a—

Johnny slaps her. Crying, Gilda buries her face in her hands as Johnny runs away.

(101:20-42)

Gilda welcomes her reputation as a lascivious woman because she enjoys the feeling of power that this status gives her. Indeed, for Gilda, knowledge represents power. Men like Johnny *think* that she has loose sexual morals when, in fact, she *knows* that she remains faithful to her husband. She merely delights in the difference between appearances and reality that so discomforts Johnny. Libby Garland reads into the dynamics of film as performance in her analysis of the refugee figure in postwar cinema: "Cinema has always had a special affinity for stories of artifice and fakery, undercover adventures and hidden identities. Film is itself, after all, always a form of counterfeiting. As in theater, the illusion created by script, set, and acting simultaneously does its work to tell a story even as it points beyond itself, toward the actors underneath the costumes and the scripted lines" (85). Although Garland examines the translation of narrative from reality to the silver screen, her ideas assist in an understanding of Gilda herself. On a meta-level, Gilda propagates an "illusion" of herself within the "theater" of patriarchy. She considers her supposed sexual escapades a series of "undercover adventures" in which she

assumes “hidden identities” of fatale-ness to “tell a story”—her story—of resistance against male-dominated hegemony. “Underneath the costumes and the scripted lines” of Gilda’s “artifice and fakery” lies her longing to actualize her agency and her frustration at the vicarious fulfillment of this desire. She inhabits the role of the empowered woman as an actor does a character, alternately occupying and shedding this identity. However, like all actors, when Gilda takes the stage, she must eventually take her leave of it. For every instance in which she acts the part of the femme fatale, she must return to her life as a woman subject to subordination in a man’s world.

Gilda’s performance as the femme fatale emasculates Johnny to the point of infantilization. This rhetoric of (im)maturity becomes most noticeable in the early stages of Gilda and Johnny’s reunion. Shortly after Gilda and Johnny meet for the first time in scene, she and Ballin discuss the latter’s wish for her to appreciate Johnny as a person. The following interaction occurs:

Gilda: He’s a very attractive man, if you like the type.

Ballin: He’s a boy.

Gilda: Boys have the darnedest way of growing up, almost when you’re not looking.

(22:22-32)

In the scene immediately after this one, Johnny pushes a man’s face when the man comments on Gilda’s attractiveness (23:33-50), a childishness of manner at odds with his own admission of maturity in an ensuing interaction between him and Ballin:

Johnny: Look, Ballin, I’m a big boy now. You can tell me things.

Ballin: Gilda warned me that you’d grow up. (41:55-42:00)

Johnny's jealous ambition to control Gilda's body infantilizes him. Although his phenotypical appearance suggests his attainment of manhood, his behavior and the discourse responding to this behavior suggests otherwise. He claims to have become a "big boy," that he remains worthy of Ballin's confidence, but his engagement in playground warfare—palming a man's face and shoving him—contrasts with the mature image of himself that he professes to have cultivated. If his actions represent his newfound maturity, as he would have Ballin and Gilda believe, he has the "darnedest way of growing up," for his childish resort to physicality and assertions of experience indicate that he signifies as a boy desperate to join the adult world as a man. Paradoxically, the control of Gilda's womanhood represents both the means for his doing so and the reason for his emasculation, his devolution from man-to-boy. Celestino Deleyto explores this idea of the feminized male in his articulation of Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine in filmic texts:

The male fear of women which provides cultural legibility to representations of the monstrous-feminine is, therefore, twofold. On the one hand, women appear to be obsessively intent on castrating men and, consequently, 'infecting' them with their femininity; on the other, they threaten to reabsorb them into the womb, to consummate the desired/dreaded reunion with the mother and deprive men of their hard-earned individuality. Behind the figure of the castrating woman lurks the fear of *fém*inisation, while behind that or the archaic mother looms the threat of complete disappearance into the space of the mother....men desire most what would ultimately destroy their sexual difference and their sense of identity. (41)

Johnny at once fears Gilda's monstrously feminine womanhood—her femme fatale-ness—and yearns to possess it. Her powerful sexuality castrates him into boyhood, feminizing him until he loses his “hard-earned individuality” to a sort of prenatal manhood, as impressionable and eager to please his superiors as if only a few years removed from the womb. The pursuit of Gilda's womanhood “destroys [Johnny's] sexual difference and [his] sense of identity.” Her mature physicality so torments him that he, like Gilda, begins to signify on a spectrum of protean gendered-ness. Whatever the implications of Gilda's performance as femme fatale, the success of this performance remains undeniable. She embraces fatale-ness to disturb patriarchal conventions of womanhood and triumphs in her utter de-maturation of Johnny.

Loathing for the patriarchal society that sexually objectifies her stokes Gilda's performance as the femme fatale. She so despises her subordination as woman that she acts the part of the fatale to rebel against this subjection to masculine hegemony. Gilda's abhorrence for her social condition becomes evident in several significant moments, all of which directly address how this vitriol fuels her behavior. When Johnny determines to rescue Ballin from Gilda's supposed adulterousness, he attempts to evict Gilda from Ballin's mansion. As he fails to do so, the two confess their mutual animosity for each other:

Gilda: You do hate me, don't you, Johnny?

Johnny: I don't think you have any idea how much.

Gilda approaches him.

Gilda: Hate is a very exciting emotion. Haven't you noticed? Very exciting.

Gilda puts her face next to Johnny's and whispers in his ear.

Gilda: I hate you too, Johnny. I hate you so much that I think I'm going to die from it.

Darling.

They kiss. (76:17-58)

Gilda transforms her hatred for Johnny, for her womanhood, into strength. Rather than express heartache at Johnny's admission of revulsion for her, she feeds on it, becoming noticeably more aroused with each spoken word. Gilda's unconventional womanhood—her performance of *fatale-ness*—affords her unfamiliar and unsettling responses to traditional situations. In a patriarchal society, the mores of gendered relationships dictate that women represent emotionally-driven creatures who love to be loved and hate to be hated. For Gilda, hate *is* love. She loves how Johnny hates her, her sheer delight about this revelation akin to that of the typical “nice girl” who hears a profession of love. Gilda creates a veneer of guile and sinful lust to contend with the men who would otherwise manipulate her emotions as they pleased. Her reactions to love and to hatred remain hers and no one else's. If Gilda wishes to enjoy love, she does so, and if she wishes to revel in hatred, she does so as well. Indeed, she reflects Yuko Minowa et al.'s understanding of the role of fashion in the manufacture of the real-life *femme fatale*: “Femininity is artificially constructed, and thus naturalness or simplicity is avoided. It alludes to the idea that women who are insecure about their femininity use artifice and exaggerate their feminine appearance to hide their insecurity” (Minowa et al. 282). This idea represents the first of the two competing attitudes toward the fashion-femininity dynamic that the authors discuss. Gilda maintains two feminine sensibilities: that of the traditional woman as espoused by patriarchy and that of her own craft against this traditionalism. To escape from subordinated womanhood, she designs a “feminine appearance” that conceals her “insecurity”

about the ostensible natural order of power behind the fashion of fatale-ness. Gilda's artifice grants her disruptive strength on the emotional battleground that men endeavor to control over women. Her performance as the femme fatale enables her to upset the patriarchal conventions of womanhood that she so despises without radically breaking the status quo against which she rebels.

### Performing the Identity of the Femme Fatalist

The preservation of the gendered status quo—the film's happy ending in which Gilda and Johnny reconcile and become lovers again—attests to the successful resolution of Gilda's conflict as a femme fatalist. Although Gilda chooses to alienate herself from the male-dominated society in which she operates, she only does so to destabilize traditional notions of womanhood, to push these boundaries without actually crossing them. Whereas Kitty *becomes* a fatale and cannot un-become this part of herself, Gilda performs fatale-ness, playing a part from which she can retire at any time. She retreats to her life offstage just as often as she escapes from this life onstage. The closing moments of the film see Gilda passionately proclaim to Johnny, "Isn't it wonderful? No one has to apologize because we were both such stinkers, weren't we? Isn't it wonderful?" (106:37-50). Gilda only pretends to be a "stinker" among "stinkers," a masculine-signifying woman among men, and for this loyalty to the expectations of her sex, she can successfully re-integrate within society following her swan song. She disrupts conventions of femaleness as a revenge act against her former lover, destabilizing gender roles without causing any permanent damage to them. Thus, Gilda does not ultimately concern herself with the lasting attainment of agency and her fate as a woman in a man's world—she performs to exact personal retribution rather than lasting change. And just as she contents herself with the idea of social



transformation without ever effecting it, so too does she gratify herself with the thought of agency without achieving it. The knowledge that she can further destabilize patriarchal values of womanhood by becoming the femme fatale remains enough for Gilda. In this sense, Gilda performs the role of the femme fatalist as well as that of the fatale, signifying *as if* at the crossroads of fate and agency but not truly operating at any junction at all. From the beginning of the film, she belongs to the gendered hierarchy that patriarchy has designated for her and only seems to desire more from her identity as woman. Whatever her fate as a woman in a man's world, whatever agency she possesses within this world, Gilda accepts wholeheartedly so long as she gets to choose the man with whom she will spend the rest of her life.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF A MULTIDIMENSIONAL IDENTITY

### Contextualizing The Spiral Staircase

Compared to Kitty and Gilda, who represent both femme fatales and femme fatalists, Helen signifies exclusively as a femme fatalist. She exhibits clear virtue and righteousness, and at no point does she reflect a moral grayness that colors her signification as the heroine on screen. In part, this departure stems from the genre of the film. Strictly speaking, *The Spiral Staircase* is a psychological thriller, not a film noir, and so does not contain all the trappings of the latter genre, including the presence of a femme fatale figure. However, such a divergence does not suggest that the film operates independently from its contemporaries. *The Killers* and *The Spiral Staircase* share the same director, Robert Siodmak, who specialized in thrillers as well as films noir and whose creative impact runs deep in the film. *The Spiral Staircase* presents familiarly fatalist, existentialist attitudes toward the human condition, with erotic undercurrents charging the violence at the center of the narrative. Indeed, Helen's conformance to different and innovative identities, however monochromatic her morality, distinguishes her as a figure worthy of consideration. The femme fatalist derives from the femme fatale but does not remain contingent on the latter for meaning. Hence, Helen's identity as woman may develop from the figure of the femme fatale without actually signifying as one. She reflects the qualities of the femme fatalist, a figure born from a parent archetype that, nevertheless, may not actually acknowledge the influence of its antecedent.

To understand Helen as a femme fatalist in *The Spiral Staircase*, one must first—of course—understand the patriarchal philosophy that undergirds the narrative. In the forbidding, male-dominated world of the noir, there exists little tolerance for vulnerability or imperfection.

This attitude manifests most clearly in the straightforwardly destructive philosophy of the narrative's dead father figure. Attesting to and reinforcing the patriarchal systems under which men and women alike suffer in the film, the father's words ring in the minds of his sons, the chronic loafer Stephen and his half-brother and serial killer-in-disguise Professor Warren, as they discuss their mutual past in the drawing room: "the strong survive, the weak die" (*The Spiral Staircase* 35:24-26). The father's ideology, so damaging that it haunts his sons into adulthood, could not evidence a more traditional conception of gender roles. In the film, the "strong" represents the unfeminized male averse to vulnerability and the "weak" the traditionally dependent female who—even more so than the male—must conform to her role as the willingly "weak" woman or risk purgation as an intolerable mutation of patriarchy. To invoke Laura Mulvey, the women of *The Spiral Staircase*—particularly the speechless Helen—become "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 809). The murderous Professor sees Helen as an aberration unworthy of "to-be-looked-at-ness" in his patriarchally "strong" society. Although her existence as a woman necessarily renders her "weak," this reality alone does not strip her of the right to life and the right to be objectified. Rather, her status as a *disabled* woman physically incapable of conforming to the role expected of her marks her for elimination.

Thus, just like Hermione in *Steppenwolf*, Helen is fated to die. Her disability and her womanhood preclude her from a "normal" existence in which she may live without the anticipation of an impending and inevitable demise. Helen's critical decision as the femme fatalist hinges upon her assimilation into the patriarchal, ableist systems presented in the film. She may re-integrate as an accepted member of society, preserving her life and regaining the

right to live, so long as she accepts the necessary erasure of her greatest weakness: her speechlessness. For the femme fatalist Hermione, elimination manifests as her embrace of death when she orders Harry Haller to kill her. Faced with the decision to conform to a society intolerant of her or to die rejecting this society, she chooses her expiration, signifying along this pathway throughout the novel. Unlike Hermione, Helen does not make the decision to die by herself. The patriarchal, ableist world depicted in *The Spiral Staircase* marks her for elimination, independent of her desires. Indeed, as Hermione opines to Harry on the evening of the highly anticipated masked ball, Hermione and Helen “have one dimension too many for [the world’s] liking, so it will spit [them] out. It is impossible for anyone wishing to live and enjoy life in today’s world to be like [them]” (Hesse 120). Helen’s voicelessness represents “one dimension too many” for a world insisting upon the purgation of the weak. She cannot possibly “live and enjoy life” because her destiny coincides with her demise. To sustain the philosophy of the strong, Helen must either die a rebel unwilling to accept such a system or abandon her disability to conform to it.

#### The Paradoxical Elimination and Preservation of Womanhood

Stephen’s and Professor Warren’s presences within any given scene indicate the most obvious commentaries of the patriarchal philosophy depicted in the diegesis. Perhaps no statement better reflects these misogynist values than when a smirking Stephen says to a weeping Blanche, his girlfriend, “Men like to see women cry. It makes them feel superior” (55:05-08). Such a blatantly chauvinist remark embodies his internalization of his father’s philosophy. For Stephen, one derives strength by reveling in another’s weakness, specifically a man delighting in a woman’s suffering to improve his own precarious self-image. He perceives weakness in

himself and, disgusted by it, channels this vulnerability through his caddish and indolent behavior, exploiting Blanche and other women as he endlessly pursues life's basest pleasures. As an extension of Stephen's perspective, Professor Warren believes that one acquires strength by eliminating weakness entirely, as if the osmosed remnants of his victims will amalgamate to make him stronger. He scorns the omens of the bedridden Mrs. Warren as the "ramblings of a sick woman," murders Blanche because of his unrequited love for her, and endeavors to murder Helen because of her speechlessness (49:20-21). Considered in an exclusively feminist context, Professor Warren believes that a woman may become weak for something as innocuous as unreciprocated affection. He detests vulnerability in all genders but wishes to expunge females in particular, suggesting that though males may exhibit as much weakness as women, the former alone may signify across this spectrum. The women in the film may only ever exist as weak, while males may oscillate between strong and weak depending on their abuse of women. In this sense, Stephen and Professor Warren reflect, albeit in a corrupted fashion, Roland Barthes' understanding of absence and the loved object: the "man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized...because he is in love" (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* 14). As surely as Stephen and Professor Warren suffer from their waiting to become strong, so too do they become "miraculously feminized" by their love of this wait. They brutalize women in their obsessive pursuit of strength, the vicious philosophy with which Helen contends throughout the film.

If Stephen and Professor Warren represent patriarchally weak men, Dr. Parry exemplifies the values of a patriarchally strong man. The pervasive philosophy of strength versus weakness in the film predictably conflates masculinity with the former ideal and femininity with the latter. Such a statement, of course, does not intend to equate gender with the gendered position—only

to say that, in the pithy words of Mary Ann Doane, “feminine and masculine positions are not fully coincident with actual men and women” (*The Desire to Desire* 8). To echo an earlier point, on a strictly binary spectrum of masculine and feminine signification, men may signify as feminine and women may signify as masculine. The difference between this “reversed gender typing”—at least within the film—lies in the potential for escape into masculinity. Stephen and Professor Warren abuse women with the misguided expectation that they will eventually become strong and masculine, while the already conventionally strong Dr. Parry remains content with his dominantly male masculinity. Dr. Parry embodies the strengths that the narrative’s dead father figure failed to see in his sons, namely his emasculation of other men and his willingness to resort to physical violence to settle disputes. When he argues with Stephen regarding a “cure” for Helen’s speechlessness, he adopts an assertive stance to Stephen’s casual arrogance:

S: (seated magisterially in an armchair) It so happens I don’t think much of your business, Dr. Parry. If there is a solution to Helen’s problem, I think that solution ought to be in the hands of someone other than a country-hick doctor.

DP: (walks right before Stephen, staring down at him with his hands in his pockets) The only thing keeping me from cracking you in the jaw is the almost certain possibility that it would break your neck. (48:20-36)

Recognizing his feminine masculinity, Stephen endeavors to establish an authoritative presence, but his attempt belies his insecurities with his manhood. That he sits motionless while Dr. Parry threatens to fight him proves as much. Stephen abuses other individuals with his words, relying on their moral scruples to avoid direct confrontation in an attitude that Dr. Parry deems “very insolent” (49:52-54). Such impudence contrasts with the doctor’s own proclamation that he

“[takes] most things seriously” (49:22-24). Stephen’s impertinence indicates an immature predisposition for taunting and exploiting the moral generosity of the adults around him. He recognizes his failed masculinity as he observes Dr. Parry’s ideal one and channels his shame by mocking the man whom he knows will not harm him. In the context of female masculinity, Dr. Parry’s self-restraint recalls Jack Halberstam’s statement regarding the maintenance of the gender status quo: “One might imagine that even a hint of femininity sullies or lowers the social value of maleness while all masculine forms of femaleness should result in an elevation of status” (*Female Masculinity* 28). Although Halberstam identifies how this declaration misunderstands the fluidity of gender typing, the male characters within *The Spiral Staircase* have still internalized this problematic conviction. They reproduce the “social value of maleness” that discourages any “hint of femininity” potentially disruptive to the patriarchal desire to project strength and conquer weakness.

Despite the rhetoric of inevitable suffering, to claim that Helen operates exclusively as a victim of patriarchy means to deny the agency that informs her character in *The Spiral Staircase*. After all, she signifies as the femme fatalist, the woman at the crossroads of actualizing her own agency or submitting to her fate as a female. *The Spiral Staircase* begins as an embedded narrative, a film within a film. On her day off from her duties as caretaker, Helen watches a silent movie in the town theatre, holding her handkerchief and fighting back tears at the close of the film. This opening scene, however short, situates Helen in a position of agency that she occupies intermittently throughout *The Spiral Staircase*. Her filmic introduction places her within an obvious role of subversive spectatorship as bearer of the female gaze in a conventionally masculine locus. Needless to say, understandings of woman as onlooker have changed drastically since the first Mulveyean analyses of generations ago. Countless scholars

have expanded her argument to include spectatorial identities that Mulvey did not initially consider, so much so that acute responses to her work have become obligatory and feminist film discussions couched primarily in her original conception of gender roles smack of a more antiquated second-wave feminism. Even so, this necessary theoretical transformation should not suggest a futility in reading Helen as a female inhabiting a traditionally male space. That the first scene in which she appears portrays her as a voyeur indicates as much. She defies the prevailing notions of spectatorship as outlined by Mary Ann Doane:

Nevertheless, men and women enter the movie theater as social subjects who have been compelled to align themselves in some way with respect to one of the reigning binary oppositions (that of sexual difference) which order the social field. Men will be more likely to occupy the positions delineated as masculine, women those specified as feminine. (*The Desire to Desire* 8)

Presumably, Helen entered the movie theater compelled to align herself in relation to the strict gender roles governing the patriarchal society that *The Spiral Staircase* presents. Yet the audience's earliest glimpse of Helen in-scene manifests as the voyeuristic act of her watching a movie for pleasure. She does not watch the film as a diversion later within the narrative but instead engages in the act from the start, suggesting that she occupies a role of masculine leadership rather than feminine over-dramatism. Inherent to the dilemma of the femme fatalist is the *choice* to submit to patriarchy or alienation. No individual may decide to which system she yields except the femme fatalist herself. Helen's relationship with voyeurism follows her throughout the film, most obviously as the potential victim of a murderer stalking her and more subtly as the woman who occupies an established male position of agency. Helen chooses to



watch the silent film and enter a conventionally masculine space, just as she will eventually decide whether to become a willing subject to patriarchy or an alien living outside it.

In another, more negative context, Helen's relationship with voyeurism, specifically with the murderer pursuing her, conjures an image of women's bodies as the transposable subjects of male domination. As Helen watches the silent film, the camera pans up to a room above the cinema where a limping woman looks out a window as a man, seen only by his voyeuristic eye, spies on her from inside her closet (*The Spiral Staircase* 02:35-03:27). He kills her as she dresses for bed, and in the investigative aftermath, the idealistic Dr. Parry and the jaded Dr. Harvey share this conversation:

DH: There's nothing for you to see unless you just want to do some sightseeing.

DP: How was she killed?

DH: Strangled. She was dead when we got here.

DP: Who was she?

DH: The lame girl that worked over at Nelson's.

DP: How awful...she was in to see me just last week.

DH: (smiling) Did she pay the fee...or was this her way of getting out? (06:31-53)

Dr. Harvey's nonchalant attitude toward the murder exemplifies the objectionably patriarchal treatment of women throughout the film. Recalling the image of the killer's voyeuristic eye, he equates the girl's body with a mildly interesting spectacle for "sightseeing," trivializing the tragedy of her death by placarding her life as if for a tourist attraction that showcases "the lame

girl that worked over at Nelson's." That the killing occurs right above the murderer's next victim, Helen, with the camera shifting from one woman to another, essentializes women's bodies as interchangeable commodities meant for eventual destruction. For the killer—and, thus, the patriarchal systems governing the world of the film—women exist as property whose use values extend only so far as they can attract men. If their bodies fail to generate the spectacle necessary to maintain male interest, they lose this sense of spectacle entirely and become disposable, unfit for visual consumption.

In this sense, the scene parallels Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" regarding the male gaze that objectifies the female body. Motivated by the philosophy of "the strong survive, the weak die," the murderer "is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like," the weak woman destined for subordination to men (Mulvey 810). He "cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" and thus assumes the "look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle" (810). The murderer voyeurs from within his victim's closet, violating her right to privacy—her most personal space, the place at which she prepares herself to enter the world—and depriving her of any freedom or authority that she may possess in this space. Yet, as any critic of Mulvey's argument would contend, such a perspective presents a heteronormative outlook of women's roles in cinema that erases their potential for agency. The author bell hooks discusses this issue in her essay on "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators": "Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (*Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* 94). Helen's actions—not how she is acted upon—inform her role in the opening scene of *The Spiral Staircase*. As a scopophilic spectator, she manipulates the traditional

masculine gaze by engaging in that gaze herself, by watching the silent film in the theatre at her leisure and investing herself in it as she pleases. In the constant push-and-pull struggle of the femme fatalist signifying as the subversive agent or the doomed woman, Helen positions herself as the agent of her own story, not the murderer's or anyone else's. The end for one girl marks the beginning for her and her journey as the femme fatalist as she approaches the crossroads of her primary conflict. Eventually, Helen will either "pay the fee" for freedom with her life or discover the "way of getting out" by becoming a willing subject of patriarchy or by becoming an eternal outsider—an eternal spectator—to that patriarchy.

This critical juncture at which Helen realizes her fate manifests diegetically when she ascends the stairs to the room of her ward, Mrs. Warren, after returning from the theatre. She scales the steps and experiences a moment of self-reflection when she glimpses herself in the mirror, studying her image and mouthing words as she feels her throat and admires her strength (16:40-17:19). The camera pans up and away to the feet of the killer stalking her from the top of the staircase and in a chilling scene enters his spying eye to filter his perspective: an image of a terrified Helen clutching her throat, with her mouth physically erased from her face (17:20-58). Here, Helen engages in the meta-reflective act of gazing at herself, innocently appreciating her appearance while somberly stroking her vocal chords as if to feel the vibrations that once strummed in her throat. The mirror represents both the ultimate decision that she must make as the femme fatalist—the conformance to her role as the weaker sex destined to display herself for male pleasure or walking away from such expectations—and a paradoxical act of self-empowerment. In this scene, Helen leans toward a willing conformance to patriarchal authority. She wants to beautify herself and so, to a degree, wants to play the role of the woman meant for male visual consumption. At the same time, by gripping her own throat as if to wrest words from

them, she exercises a control over her greatest vulnerability that the murderer neither has nor will ever have. Luce Irigaray explores this idea of manipulating women into silence in her essay “This Sex Which Is Not One”: “One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing *an ‘other meaning’* always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them” (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 29). Helen’s silence belongs to her and to her alone. Although the killer believes that this silence necessitates her erasure, she possesses the power to voice what trauma took from her. Thinking her weak, he tries to eliminate her, but his fixation on her destruction emphasizes his own weakness. Emasculated, he must content himself with imagining her elimination while she affects her own agency by embracing her beauty and choosing to perform her silence.

This notion of the voyeuring male imagining the purgation of the “weak” woman climaxes later in the film when Helen makes her crucial decision as the femme fatalist to submit to her fate as a female. After Dr. Parry bids her farewell to visit a patient elsewhere in town, she stands at the door and fantasizes about marrying him. In her daydream, she dances with him in the hall of the Warren house before the scene dissolves into one where the Professor walks her to the altar and another where the couple recite their marriage vows (51:45-52:36). However, her speechlessness prevents her from saying “I do,” and the two words echo in her mind as her daydream fades and she returns to reality, the Professor having watched her the whole time (52:37-54:00). Helen’s reverie reveals her decision to become a willing subject to patriarchal systems. She fears her speechlessness, so much so that she now uncompromisingly believes that she must restore her voice to become “normal.” This “normality,” of course, perpetuates the destructive gender dynamics into which the society presented in the film has interpellated her. Helen envisions a future in which she has passed from one domestic sphere into another, the first

as a caretaker for an ailing elderly woman and the second as the wife of and eventual caretaker for a husband and, presumably, children. Indoctrinated into believing her existence within male-dominated society as inevitable and preferable to alienation, she embraces her fate and yearns for it. However, the murderous Professor still intrudes on her fantasy, suggesting that even though she recognizes and accepts her fate, this acceptance does not spare her as a target for elimination. For Helen, in the words of Toril Moi, “there will always be unstated blind-spots, fundamental presuppositions and ‘pre-understandings’ of which [she is] unaware” (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 43). Slightly subverting the crisis of the femme fatalist, the “fundamental presuppositions” of the patriarchal systems under which Helen and the Professor labor manifest as the inevitability of elimination. Either Helen must die to preserve patriarchy or the Professor must die to spare Helen from the worst of this system.

#### Marked for Elimination: The Necessary Purgation of Disability

Likewise, Helen’s trauma-induced speechlessness demands an interpretation of *The Spiral Staircase* through a disability studies perspective. Critical disability studies refers to an emerging movement in literary theory whose roots rest in the realm of the social, not the medical, and connect with one another through minoritizing and universalizing models. Scholars of this field recognize the former model as addressing the realities of a limited population of people and the latter as a spectrum along which people will inevitably signify throughout their lives. Considered as such, disability studies queers able-bodiedness, the implicit socio-normative notion suggesting that disability represents an exception, not a norm, and whose performance should be avoided as queerness should in a compulsorily heterosexual society. In *The Spiral Staircase*, the voiceless Helen signifies as a disabled person in a compulsorily able-bodied

society seeking to cure her of her perceived affliction. There exists no tolerance for the queer, for the disabled, in the world of the film. Either Helen must learn to speak and to communicate “normally” with other people, or she must die because she cannot exist as a permanent Other in a violently ableist culture. When she regains her voice at the end of the film, she does not shed tears of unbridled joy but of sorrow. From the perspective of the femme fatalist, she lives as a disabled woman fated to speak again one day or lose her life because she cannot recover her able-bodiedness and must suffer the ultimate punishment.

Helen’s identity as a voiceless woman necessitates an analysis of her character from a critical disability studies perspective. Because this field remains a more recent, developing movement, scholars have yet to explore its theories to a significant degree in any artistic medium, including classic Hollywood cinema. When they do, these examinations often manifest as studies of representation of disability, rudimentary scholarship that rarely dares to contribute to the field in any meaningful capacity and that recalls earlier feminist movements’ emphasis on providing positive images of women. Such studies identify how texts code disability and do little else, advancing close readings of underexplored texts that inevitably end in the same conclusions—the problematic naturalization of able-bodiedness, the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, and the need to de-exoticize disability and challenge hegemonic ableist systems. To a degree, given that texts communicate the values of the people who produce them, one should expect that classic Hollywood films embody the principles of a bygone era. The contemporary discourse surrounding disability did not exist during the 1940s, so the cinema reflects a rhetoric incongruent with that of the 2020s. In other words, employing disability theory to investigate historical texts represents a necessary process but one whose analysis of portrayals should remain implicit and not the primary motivation of the investigation. Offering a disability studies

reading of a film such as *The Spiral Staircase* merely because there does not already exist one would mean to exhibit the very problem that prompted this reading in the first place: the Othering of disability. In this hypothetical scenario, such a reading only occurs because it discusses disability when other readings do not. However insightful, attending to a conversation for the sake of commenting on disability means to hegemonize interpretation within an ableist discourse in which disability becomes significant when scholars have already mapped all other critical pathways. The interpretation itself preserves compulsory able-bodiedness by mapping able-bodiedness to traditional readings and disabled-ness to disability studies readings. *The Spiral Staircase* demands an interpretation of Helen as disabled because her speechlessness remains vital to her identity, not because of the lack of previous such interpretations.

To read Helen as disabled in *The Spiral Staircase* means to examine her existence as a marginalized Other in the compulsorily able-bodied society presented in the film. In this sense, because Helen lost the use of her voice to trauma, she represents a different kind of femme fatalist—one compelled into rather than welcoming of alienation. She operates in a society that wishes to cure her of her disability, as if her speechlessness represented a disease for which there exists a remedy. After the murder in the opening scene of the film, Dr. Parry takes Helen home to the Warren house by coach, and they share this uncomfortable exchange:

DP: You haven't any family, Helen...no one else to worry about you...and I got to wondering just how long you're going to go on like this...

Helen looks at him questioningly.

DP: I mean doing the kind of work you're doing at the Warrens. (pauses) You wanted to be a nurse or a teacher...

Helen nods with troubled eyes.

DP: You mean you're going to give all that up, without making another effort to get your voice back?

Helen frowns and shakes her head as if she wants to say something.

DP: (patiently) Yes, I know, Helen...you *did* see a doctor once...but that was a long time ago...they might have discovered a lot since then...there're specialists in Boston now...  
(pauses) I don't want to build your hopes up, Helen...but it seems such a shame to give up so easily...

H: (turns away, pained) (8:32-9:40)

Dr. Parry's somewhat exasperated tone with Helen throughout this conversation exemplifies the casual ableism pervading the film's depiction of her disability. Although he loves her, he cannot see her as anything other than a maimed half-woman who needs someone to worry about her and who needs a man to protect her because she lacks a family and an able body. He cannot understand why Helen is "going on like this"—why she still lives with her disability—because he believes that her voicelessness renders her inferior and ruins her hope for a "normal" life. Within this ableist system, the femme fatalist Helen needs to become able-bodied or else exist as a permanent alien. Considered in such a manner, this exchange reflects Robert McRuer's understanding of compulsory able-bodiedness in society: "In the emergent industrial capitalist system, free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else" (McRuer 92). He elaborates on this statement, explaining, "Like compulsory heterosexuality, then, compulsory able-bodiedness



functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice” (92). What Dr. Parry fails to grasp and what Helen recognizes but cannot express manifests as the notion that she cannot simply make “another effort to get [her] voice back.” The language surrounding their conversation locates Helen’s disability not in a social but in a medical discourse where the able-bodied Dr. Parry implies that Helen chooses to be disabled when, in fact, “there actually is no choice.” To an extent, his medicalization of Helen’s disability is justified. He works as a doctor, and doctors routinely follow a patient-specialist dynamic. However, Helen *is* disabled. She does not perform disability because she refuses able-bodiedness, yet the ableist society in which she operates expects her to conform anyway. As the femme fatalist, she must either find a cure for her disability or live ostracized because of it.

This last sentiment—that Helen will continue to live as an alien unless she regains her voice—becomes especially ironic and problematic when one reflects on the dynamic of a typical social interaction. For the purposes of this chapter, the word *communication* broadly denotes an exchange of information. Such an exchange depends on myriad factors, with the reality of the exchange often deviating from one’s expectations of it. However successful the execution, an act of communication necessitates the conveyance of information and the processing of this information. Crucially, the sub-acts of conveyance and processing do not represent exclusively verbal undertakings. In the carriage riding scene from before, Dr. Parry shares an ostensibly one-sided conversation with Helen. He raises the subject of her voicelessness but drops it when he realizes that she does not wish to hear of the matter:

DP: (after a pause) You’d rather I wouldn’t talk about it, wouldn’t you?

Without turning to look at him, Helen shakes her head.

DP: All right, I won't... (sighs)

He reaches over and pats her hand. Helen stares straight ahead, her eyes wet and shining.

(9:15-9:22)

Helen's voicelessness does not prevent her from communicating with Dr. Parry. She employs her body language—her gestures, movements, and facial expressions—in lieu of spoken language to engage in the conversation. More importantly, Dr. Parry responds to Helen's physical messages as if she had vocalized them. "No" means "no" even if Helen shakes her head to say it. The fact that Helen conveys information using her body language and the fact that Dr. Parry processes this information by responding to her physical movements demonstrates that she has a voice despite her speechlessness. In her piece "Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness," Alison Kafer expands on the intersection between able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality: "Compulsory able-bodiedness is also instituted and maintained through less physical—although no less coercive—means, through 'verbal and nonverbal messages'" (80). Here, Kafer refers specifically to how able-bodiedness "[masks] the pervasiveness of disability" and renders "those with non-apparent disabilities" invisible (80). However, one may re-contextualize her argument to address how communication takes place regardless of the human medium. Helen's disability only becomes apparent when one attempts to speak to her, and even then, her speechlessness does not prohibit her from reacting in turn. The society depicted in *The Spiral Staircase* does not question whether Helen can converse at all but rather if she can converse according to the compulsorily able-bodied standards expected of her. As a disabled woman, she still possesses the ability to interact with others. She struggles because people refuse to communicate with her.

Yet even when people do choose to communicate with Helen, they cannot see past her disability. The moment of her return to the Warren house best exemplifies this ableist attitude and rhetoric. As Helen enters the kitchen, the startled housekeeper Mrs. Oates greets her in the following exchange:

MO: They phoned us about the murder...for a while I thought it might have been you...

Helen smiles.

MO: It's terrible, that's what it is... Horrible!

Helen nods.

MO: And if it isn't bad enough murdering people...

Helen places a chair by the fireplace. She removes her wet clothing as Mrs. Oates speaks.

MO: But all these defenseless women. First there was the girl with the scar on her face, then that poor, simple-minded creature, and now this cripple. It seems like...

(13:53-14:19)

Although Mrs. Oates expresses an appropriate degree of horror at the wicked acts, her response to Helen suggests a similarly disturbing reality. Her vernacular equates disability with defenselessness and reduces women's identities solely to the presence of their disabilities. Whatever other virtues the murder victims may have embodied disappear in the shadow of their disabilities. The compulsory ableism presented in the film demands that a wounded woman may only ever signify as a "girl with the scar on her face" or that, worse still, a woman with a lame leg may only ever signify as a "cripple." That Mrs. Oates "thought it might have been [Helen]" whom the serial killer had murdered indicates that, no matter how much she loves Helen, she

strains to see her as anyone more than a “cripple,” a “poor, simple-minded creature” merely because of her speechlessness. In this sense, Mrs. Oates’ lexis reflects Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s decades-old observation that “feminist theories all too often do not recognize disability in their litanies of identities that inflect the category of woman” (“Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” 2). Garland-Thompson writes:

The informing premise of feminist disability theory is that disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment. (5)

There exists space enough for sympathy for the disabled women in the film but just enough prejudice to keep them alienated from their able-bodied fellows. Mrs. Oates recognizes Helen’s humanity but still marks Helen’s body as differently abled from—and lesser than—her own. Indeed, Helen’s perceived “corporeal inferiority” represents a “culturally fabricated narrative of [her] body” as a “stroke of misfortune” that recalls the problematically medical discourse of before. She does not have “something wrong” with her (*The Spiral Staircase* 23:00-02), as the police chief states later in the film, nor has she become so “adjusted to her affliction” that it would be “cruel and foolish” (45:13-14) to propose that “there’s some miracle in store for her” (45:05-08). Yet the compulsorily able-bodied society depicted in the film has interpellated

people such as Mrs. Oates into believing that disability necessarily marks one for elimination or medical treatment. There exists no liminality to this binary. Helen lost her right to individuality when she lost her voice. Only by restoring her voice may she restore her womanhood.

Helen's existence as an alien in ableist society manifests most clearly when Dr. Parry makes plans with her to travel to Boston. While calling on the Warren home to check on the health of the family matriarch, Dr. Parry speaks with Helen about curing her disability and forces her to relive the trauma that caused it. She screams and breaks down in tears, prompting him to say the following:

DP: (holding her) It's only because I wanted to help you. Go over everything that happened that day—have the courage to see it all again—and by not blocking it out of your mind, you may find your voice again.

He picks up a chair and places it beside the couch. Helen is still face-down, sobbing on the divan. As he sits, he speaks.

DP: I don't like being an outsider, and you shouldn't either. I know what I'm talking about because...

H: (listens)

DP: I'm an outsider here myself. A lot of people don't want me. They want me to quit.  
(46:33-56)

Dr. Parry tries to empathize with Helen, but by essentializing outsider-ness, he marginalizes her disability. He exists as an "outsider" in *one* place whose inhabitants alienate him because he learned his profession in another town. Presumably, as a medical practitioner, he may find

acceptance in many locales, if not in the small village with the capacity for but a single doctor. From where he comes, he exists on the “inside”; only when he chooses to migrate into another such “inside” does he signify as an “outsider.” Because of her disability, Helen always signifies as an “outsider.” There exists no place where she may live on the “inside” because her disability, to a world of able-bodied “insiders,” leaves her a permanent “outsider.” Characters such as Dr. Parry, however well-meaning, cannot see beyond her voicelessness. They conflate her with her disability and reduce her worth as a human being and a member of society to what she physically cannot achieve. When Dr. Parry fails to persuade Helen to speak, he attempts to force her to:

DP: (seizes Helen, speaking sharply) Look at me. Remember how wonderful it was when you had a voice? When you could say hello and thank you? When you could yell back at someone who started picking at you? I do it all the time. You look at me as though you don't believe me, but I know I'm right.

He forces her to stand and shakes her as she gasps and cries.

DP: Try to talk! Try it! Try it! (47:07-24)

Helen cannot conform to the expectations of able-bodiedness thrust upon her, and so the ableist society depicted in the film resorts to violence. Dr. Parry shakes Helen as if wringing her voice out of her, but his actions only push her deeper into her own trauma. Even under kind pretenses, persuading Helen to shed her disability amounts to a cruel act of erasure that, as H-Dirksen L. Bauman states, “reinscribes the oppressive essentialism of colonialism” by “basing one's identity on essentialized definitions such as ‘speech is an *essential* human trait’” (“Towards a Poetics of Vision, Space, and the Body: Sign Language and Literary Theory,” 836). For Helen, speech does not represent an essential human trait. Society's attempts to restore her voice amount to little

more than the ableist colonization of her freedom, her humanity. From the perspective of the femme fatalist, dominating notions of able-bodiedness have made her crucial decision for her. She lives as the fated alien, and unless she chooses to submit to compulsory able-bodiedness by finding her voice, she will die as one.

When Helen recovers her voice in the closing moments of the film, the occasion comes not as a joyous surprise but as a somber reinforcement of compulsory able-bodiedness. After the Professor reveals himself to her as the murderer, he pursues her throughout the house and up the spiral staircase. However, the chronically ill Mrs. Warren shoots him to death before he can kill Helen, whom she and Stephen task with calling Dr. Parry. At the phone, Helen speaks her first words since childhood and collapses in tears, touching her lips as she realizes that she has broken her years-long silence: “One—eight—nine—Dr. Parry—come. It’s I—Helen” (81:50-82:58). Ironically, despite the Professor’s demise his desire to purge the “weak” Helen from his “strong” society becomes actualized. On the one hand, this moment empowers Helen: no doctor can give her back what suffering took from her because only she wields the strength to discover her speech again. On the other hand, trauma claimed Helen’s voice as a young girl, and through trauma she reclaims it. She finally proffers herself to what McRuer deems the “able-bodied culture that holds out the promise of a substantive (but paradoxically always elusive) ideal” (“Compulsory Able-Bodiedness” 97). In such a sense, Helen does not reclaim her voice at all but an imitation of it, as evidenced by her awkward speech and solemn, sobbing smile. Pervasive ableism “holds out the promise” of an “ideal” that molds the disabled body into an ersatz “normal” figure. Helen’s final words suggest that she has lost herself in the compulsory pursuit of able-bodiedness. Her name denotes her identity—“It’s I, Helen”—but she does not know what her identity signifies. Compelled out of her voicelessness, the femme fatalist Helen enters an “in-

between” space within which she represents neither “insider” nor “outsider.” All that she has to her name is her name.

### A Life of Liminality

Although not a film noir in the strictest sense, *The Spiral Staircase* presents perhaps the most significant insights into the figure of the femme fatalist. More so than Kitty or Gilda, Helen exists at the crossroads of fate and agency because she possesses—to recall the words of Hermione in *Steppenwolf*—“one dimension too many.” To a patriarchal, ableist society, the multifaceted-ness that distinguishes the femme fatalist from her filmic counterparts becomes her ruin. Helen signifies as woman, as disabled, and as the innumerable other identities that constitute her individuality such as caretaker, lover, and survivor. Her complexity defines her, yet the intricacies that empower her as a person prompt the societal response to eliminate her. The femme fatalist maintains a malleable identity in which, depending on the circumstances conspiring against her, she may either embrace her reputation as “weak” by upholding traditional values of femininity and becoming able-bodied or submit herself to purgation. Indeed, from the outset of her greatest conflict, the femme fatalist remains an alien who alone may choose her fate: whether she lives a subject or dies a rebel. Ironically, however, in the act of conforming to hegemonic systems, the femme fatalist Helen loses her sense of self anyway. She accepts assimilation into the patriarchal, ableist society depicted in the film but cannot occupy more than the in-betweenness of belonging and not belonging to such a civilization. The scars of her past remain because her speechlessness cannot simply disappear, erased and forgotten. Helen’s fate to live neither as an “insider” nor an “outsider” illuminates the tragic reality of the femme fatalist. Even when she embraces the systems that bind her, that compel her into obedience, the memory



of her former resistance persists. No matter her choice, the femme fatalist's one-time challenge to hegemony condemns her to perish or to endure a life of liminality.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout this work that the figure of the femme fatalist represents a critical and insightful extension of the femme fatale in classic Hollywood. Too often, we perceive representations of women in 1940s cinema as reflective of a constraining binary—she resembles a fatale or she does not, she resembles a good girl or she does not. The femme fatalist, as a concept, rejects a dichotomous view of women’s identities. There exists a fundamental multiplicity to the female experience for which simple categories such as fatale-ness cannot account. The phenomenon of femme fatalist-ness occurs when the fate of a female who challenges patriarchal expectations of womanhood hinges on a trichotomous decision: embracing alienation, submitting to hegemony, or operating in the liminal space between these futures. Indicative of this multidimensional conception of female-ness in the cinema, the femme fatalists depicted in *The Killers* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) demonstrate how we can re-imagine gendered iconography in classic cinema. The psychobiological power structures presented in these films rarely reflect a view of gender roles so straightforward that men only ever project power and women only ever remain subject to it. Indeed, as I have demonstrated throughout this project, the crisis of the femme fatalist stems from her agency and empowerment as well as the shackles of patriarchy.

I employed three examples of the femme fatalist in classic Hollywood—Kitty in *The Killers*, Gilda in *Gilda*, and Helen in *The Spiral Staircase*—to argue for a polychromatic perspective on representations of women in the cinema. However much Kitty reflects the qualities of the traditional femme fatale, there exists a clear multifaceted-ness to her character indicative of her crisis as a femme fatalist. Because she loathes the male gaze that objectifies her

body image, she weaponizes this image to seduce men into ruin, actualize her agency, and acquire social-material power to facilitate her own fetishistic imagination. Notably, Kitty becomes a femme fatale because her socioeconomic circumstances as a woman living under patriarchy compel her to assume this dubious mantle. She believes that if she dominates men as the spider woman, she can empower herself and transfer this empowerment to a life of domestic womanhood. Yet her siren-ness condemns her to live as an eternal fatale, unable to belong to the society she once disavowed for power. She endures a double-life as the violator and the violated, the male fear of her fatale-ness prohibiting her from re-integration into conventional gender roles. The femme fatale Kitty does not signify as a simple siren who expresses all the trappings of this archetypal identity. She signifies as the multidimensional femme fatalist as much as she does the recognizable femme fatale, demonstrating the value of re-imagining representations of women in the cinema.

Likewise, Gilda expands an understanding of the femme fatalist to include performance. Alone among the femme fatalists that I explore in this project, Gilda manages to successfully re-integrate into society following her crisis of identity. Critically, however, Gilda only pretends to experience this crisis of identity. She does not truly signify as a femme fatale or a femme fatalist, contenting herself with the thought that she can destabilize patriarchal expectations of womanhood without actually crossing these boundaries. So long as Gilda may share her life with the man whom she loves, she does not care about the subordinate position that she occupies in the gendered hierarchy. She performs for retribution, not revolution, a disruption to rather than a dismantling of sexual mores. Gilda indicates that if a woman becomes a femme fatalist at any point, she cannot un-become this figure. She must perform this role or content herself with her

patriarchally designated position The femme fatalist's requisite crisis of identity precludes her from belonging to society.

However, as the fate of the disabled Helen proves, the femme fatalist's very multidimensionality can fate her to alienation or, worse, liminality. The patriarchal, ableist society in which Helen lives cannot tolerate two perceived weaknesses: womanhood and speechlessness. Helen becomes an alien because of her disability, confronting the relentless pressure to conform to able-bodiedness. Tragically, however, even though she ultimately chooses to shed her disability, the scars of her disability endure, and she cannot re-integrate into traditional womanhood. Helen's situation reveals that the femme fatalist who has one too many dimensions does not have a choice to belong or to live an alien. Just as Helen *is* disabled, she *is* a femme fatalist. Like the memory of Helen's speechlessness, the femme fatalist's one-time resistance to hegemony remains in the mind of the society in which she operates. She must perish as an alien or, choosing to belong but unable to fully re-integrate, live in the liminal space between isolation and social acceptance.

My thesis assesses three examples of the femme fatalist to argue for the visibility of multidimensional female identities in classic Hollywood. In doing so, this project re-imagines how we conceive of gendered iconography in cinema and the roles that men and women play as they interact in this network. However often we study the socio-sexual relationships portrayed in motion pictures, there still exists an exigency to interrogate, expand, and re-conceptualize our understandings of the medium. We have inherited our cultural past, and we bear the responsibility for negotiating the troubling implications of the "classics." The figure of the femme fatalist intervenes in contemporary debates about portrayals of womanhood in 1940s

Hollywood cinema, suggesting that we may reconcile with our historical legacy by introducing a new character-based lexicon to address this heritage. Future research can explore new variations of recognizable figures or propose other, innovative additions to our cinematic vernacular. The gendered iconography in classic Hollywood films presents a limitless potential for reimagination. Seeking these opportunities will not only help us accept our past—it will help us accept ourselves as well.

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