Seduction and Sex: The Changing Allure of the Femme Fatale in Fact and Fiction

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Abstract
The ‘Femme Fatale’ has long been a trope of espionage fiction, film noir, and thrillers, and she can be seen throughout the 20th century as a dangerous figure sent to entrap men into revealing secrets through pillow talk. The femme fatale has her roots in history, Mati Hari becoming a blueprint and short hand in espionage studies for a dangerous and potentially evil woman. Mata Hari has played a key role in the construction of the femme fatale with her contribution to the ‘spy courtesan’ myth. The way Hari’s story has been fictionalised over the 20th century has helped to demonstrate the changing allure of the femme fatale and the way in which she has been forced develop to fit with changing gender dynamics. This chapter looks at the figure of the femme fatale through the lens of popular culture, in particular the moving and visual image, to examine the fact/fiction relationship of the femme fatale and the changes that the character undergoes. The paper examines some key real-life female figures that were portrayed as ‘femmes’ by the media and how these factual elements have been incorporated into fiction. The importance of costume, changing morals, and nationality when looking at the femme fatale are also discussed, as will the price that a femme fatale pays for her actions and what it is that makes her a threat to masculinity. The chapter looks at femmes fatales across the 20th century and into the 21st and how they have changed and developed into more complex characters who could now be seen as potential ‘anti-heroines’.

Key Words: Popular culture, fact/fiction, sexuality, femme fatale, espionage.

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The figure of the femme fatale or ‘deadly woman’ is particularly prominent in espionage fiction and the intelligence world because of the way in which she combines sex and danger – two common themes of the spying world. Within espionage fiction she is cast as the exciting, sexual element in a world that can sometimes be dull and gruelling. Her image and manner have become a well-established trope of espionage and the fiction that has grown up around it. Today, a spy novel or film is not complete without the trope of the femme fatale in character or at very least allusion. The femme is identified by the power she has over men and how she uses this for her own benefit. She is expected to present some obstacle to the hero and to deceive and to betray him. This can be in the form of a sexual encounter, but she may also be involved in the final showdown between the villain and the (almost invariably) male hero. She challenges the hero because she disrupts
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the normal gender roles with a range of deviant behaviours. These behaviours can include clear independence from men, a free and unapologetic sexuality, or it can come from her involvement with the villain or ‘other’ side, placing her in direct conflict with the hero’s mission. One of the key things that sets her apart from other enemies, and what allows her to be an alluring danger to the hero, is the fact that she often does not appear at first to be dangerous. Instead the femme uses her femininity to entice the hero into betrayal by exploiting him in the vulnerable and intimate area of sex.

The femme fatale of the spy fiction world has developed several stereotypical characteristics which have often been influenced by non-fictional events, but she has also often been influenced by sexual, societal, and political changes. This chapter examines the development of the femme fatale over the 20th-century, highlighting both continuities and change. The themes of sexuality, particularly promiscuity, independence, adoption of masculine clothing or mannerisms, and rejection of maternal duties have all contributed to the trope of the femme fatale. One of the ways that the femme fatale has managed to achieve longevity is by staying current, incorporating fears around women and the way in which they might be threatening masculinity through personality and appearance. Although fashions and politics changed over the Cold War period, when the femme begins to appear more in fiction, we do see a distinct look for the femme emerging during this period which allows an audience to identify her quickly for what she is. This look usually involves a revealing, close-fitting dress, high heels, dark and luxurious fabrics, and accessories, including a cigarette, possibly in a long holder, and heavy make-up (smouldering eyes, accentuated lips). The intention of the femme fatale look is to emphasise at every stage a feminine physique and overt sexuality.

The place of espionage fiction and film in the study of the femme fatale is important because it is here that she is often given a full development and a chance to be examined from a 360 degree viewpoint. Her motives, background, and relationships with others can be looked at in a way that one-dimensional images such as cartoons or posters cannot. Espionage fiction also allows us a window into a very secretive world that has few primary sources available to historians. The femme fatale is a long-standing female character in espionage fiction, and her development over time into a far more complex and interesting figure can showcase changes in gender dynamics and political ideologies.

The complexities of the femme fatale mean that this character cannot be simply dismissed as a ‘dumb blonde’ willing to sell sex for secrets or that she is merely an ‘evil woman’ out to ensnare and entrap men into betraying their country. These simple categories do not touch upon the complex motives for a femme fatale. She may be a patriot working for her country using her greatest asset – her sexuality as a tool for extracting information. She may have been blackmailed into the role, making her a far more tragic figure than appearances would suggest. There is also the possibility that she may actually enjoy her work and the independence and