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Unveiling and Unravelling the Femme Fatale in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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Abstract
Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" stands as an early masterpiece within the Victorian-era literary repertoire. In this renowned poem, Browning portrays masculine creativity through the lens of a well-established dramatic monologue, a poetic form he skillfully employs to convey his critical perspectives on toxic masculinity and the empowerment of women during the rigid Victorian era. Set against the backdrop of the Italian Renaissance, this ironic composition unfolds as a proud Italian Duke addresses an unresponsive guest and expounds upon the portrait of his late Duchess, whom he unabashedly admits to having ordered executed out of jealousy– all in a calculated bid to assert his sociopolitical dominance. However, in doing so, the "commodified" female object escapes her captor and transcends the confines of art, thereby revealing her true self and inner secrets. Through a feminist and archetypal theoretical framework, this paper will argue that Browning boldly subverts traditional female constructs by presenting a morally ambiguous and somewhat villainous femme fatale-like character. This reading delves into the Duchess' dark and complex feminine aspects to reveal how her assertiveness and independence, in a society entrenched with oppressive social norms, renders her an empowering figure for women. In so doing, Browning's exploration of the femme fatale motif emerges as an empowering symbol for women. Thus, Browning's creative portrait defies established conventional roles and assumptions about Renaissance and Victorian women and challenges the societal tendency to maintain female subservience. Since his work allows the female Other to reassert her uncanny and otherworldly power and presents her as a threat to patriarchal dominance, Browning can be considered a feminist poet.

Key words: *dark femininity, eternal feminine, femme fatale, "My Last Duchess," woman empowerment*

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"[T]he worst evil I have ever seen is the female sex: the hindrance, the hatred, the low calculation, the crudity, above all the inhuman threat to a spirit that wants to grow" (August Strindberg)

"Sexuality is power" (Marquis de Sade)

I. Introduction

Categorized as an archetype and a potent embodiment of femininity, the femme fatale stands out as a captivating character with a consistently recurring presence in mythology, religion, art, literature, music, theatre and film. The femme fatale, associated with feminine power, sexual self-determination, female subjectivity and the manifestation of "otherness" has a rich history dating back to the inception of Eve who is regarded as the earliest figure symbolizing fatal attraction. In addition to Eve, prominent figures such as Lilith, Judith, Jezebel, Delilah, Pandora, Cleopatra, Medusa, Circe, Medea, Helen of Troy, Guinevere, Astarte, Salome and Becky Sharp have gained popularity as influential femme fatales throughout history.

The femme fatale became a compelling and resonant figure in the concluding decades of the nineteenth century and was widely embraced in literature and art. While critics such as Mario Praz (1951) contend that the concept of an "established type woman" (p.191) is elusive, given the evolving transformation of female representation, and others assert that a woman's nature is inherently contradictory, unknowable and unexplainable, it can be argued that Robert Browning's "Duchess" encapsulates defining features of a femme fatale. The overarching aspects of such a persona give her power over men who find her fascinating for being "at once everywhere yet difficult to pin down" (Braun, 2012, p. 1). In this respect, Helen Tookey (2003) affirms that a fatal female's indefinability acts as a "feminine tactic, the deliberate creation of mystery in order to maintain a hold over the man" (p. 91). In fact,

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Praz (1951) contends that while the nineteenth century was a patriarchal era defined by sexual suppression, sex served to stimulate the faculty of the imagination (p. vii).

In effect, the emergence of such a trope comes as a response to changing societies during a period marked by intense industrialization, urbanization and socio-economic unrest. Accordingly, Jennifer Hedgecock (2008) explains: "images of the femme fatale are more pervasive during socially and economically troubled time" (p. 4), while Patrick Bade (1979) considers the "extraordinary proliferation of femme fatales" as the most conspicuous tenet of the fin de siècle culture (p. 6). Therefore, the femme fatale archetype was considered one of the most captivating tropes of the late nineteenth century– a period that marked the pinnacle of the sex taboo.

The femme fatale is essentially a French term signifying a "lethal," "deadly" or "fatal" woman. It serves as a counter motif to "the femme fragile" as it portrays a woman who is aware of her erotic and irresistible desires and who can use her enticing charms and assertive sexuality to stir male attraction and anxiety. To Carl Jung (1959), the femme fatale is an anima symbol or an archetype of the unconscious that "can also be a siren, melusina (mermaid), woodnymph, Grace, or Erlking's daughter, or a lamia or succubus, who infatuates young men and sucks the life out of them" (p. 25). The most precise description of such character is provided by Virginia Allen (1983) in *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* as:

> beautiful, erotic, seductive, destructive, exotic… self-determined and independent. [She embodies] the theme of an indifferent and chilling remoteness from human feeling…. The femme fatale is less human… immortal, queen, goddess…. She is not only amorous and lovely, but indulges her sexuality without concern for her lover…. [She] does not conceive…. She was construed as the woman who control[s] her own sexuality, who seduce[s] men and drain[s] them out of their "vital powers," in an exercise of eroticism. She… is the diametric opposite of the "good" woman. (p. 4)

The difficulty of defining women has been noted by Simone de Beauvoir (2009) who compares them to myths in their ambiguity and duality. She states, It is always difficult to describe a myth… it haunts consciousnesses without ever being posited opposite them as a fixed object. The object fluctuates so much and is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness; … she is the medicine woman and witch; she is man's prey; she is his downfall, she is everything he is not and wants to have. (pp. 196-197)

In a sense, much like the Salome prototype[1], the femme fatale archetype refers to women who exude a mysterious allure and are characterized by an unrestrained, erotic predisposition and overwhelming desire. Jung (1959) describes this vague and complex figure as vacillating between "goddess and whore" (p. 199). In the same vein, Luce Irigary (1985) argues that a woman's identity is contradictory and paradoxical: "*She is neither one nor two*… she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition" (p. 26). As typical of fatal females, women embody an ambiguous multifaceted "sex" that eludes easy representation. As Mary Doane (1991) elucidates, "the femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma," for one of her most remarkable qualities is that she is not "what she seems to be" (p. 1).

Thus, in contrast to the meek, compassionate and virtuous Renaissance or Victorian woman, the femme fatale emerges as a potent and menacing figure. She employs her bold, lascivious and erotic sexuality to subvert the traditional power dynamic between genders. This power shift sees the femme fatale challenging her male oppressor, seizing control and stripping him of agency. In this way, she challenges the conventional narrative of conservative Renaissance and Victorian society (as exemplified in "My Last Duchess") and its moralizing ideologies.

In terms of oppressing women, both the Victorian Age and Renaissance Italy share similarities. A sexually assertive woman in both periods is a threatening presence that arouses curiosity. However, she is also cunning in her desire for independence with Hedgecock (2008) noting that, the fatal female "desires autonomy and understands the oppressive nature of the social class system that keeps her subordinated, yet she enters into it by performing the role of the domestic woman" (p. 209). Thus, according to Lesley Cecile Marie Anderson (1995) the femme fatale is "an assertive,

[1] The Salome prototype is a cultural and literary archetype inspired by the biblical figure Salome, known for her seductive dance and involvement in the beheading of John the Baptist. In a broader sense, it represents a captivating and dangerous woman, often associated with sensuality and temptation.

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independent and powerful female who exists outside the restrictiveness of… patriarchal institutions as marriage and motherhood" which contribute to her destruction as she is considered "a sacrifice to the patriarchal network because she… contradicts its power dynamics" (pp. 6, 11). Moreover, Charles Baudelaire states that "[t]he strange thing about woman-her pre-ordained fate-is that she is simultaneously the sin and the Hell that punishes it" (as cited in Culler, 1998, p. 146). His nuanced allusion to a voracious and fatal sexuality mirrors Browning's portrayal of a Duchess who is aware of her dark feminine side, of the power of her seduction and who can manipulate these elements to defy masculine energy. However, she ultimately pays the price; her erotic power leads to both her own downfall and that of her male counterpart. Regardless, she is a femme fatale figure who reflects evolving attitudes towards women's independence and empowerment.

Viewed through the lens of power, Browning's "My Last Duchess" unveils a strategic portrayal of performative feminine subjectivity and fluidity, providing insight into feminine agency and power. This study aims to delineate the empowering attributes of the femme fatale archetype by employing a feminist interpretation of Browning's "My Last Duchess." In doing so, it unveils a liberating vision within the constraints of the Renaissance and Victorian societal norms. It reveals how desirability and dread persist as two inherent and unalterable dimensions of such a persona. The basic question is therefore, in what way does the Duchess serve as an archetype image with the attributes of a femme fatale? How is she a model of feminine desire, rebelliousness, amoral liberties and transgressive sexuality? What are her ulterior motives and intensions, and why cannot she be recognized as a sexually-liberated female instead of a threat to patriarchy? And more importantly, in what way is she a dangerous threat to masculinity?

To highlight Browning's unconventional, pre-modernist portrayal of the independent female and her motives, an analysis of the Duchess' character will be undertaken from both an archetypal and feminist perspective. She emerges as an exemplary figure of the Renaissance or Victorian femme fatale who embodies two crucial and fatal features: desirability and fearsomeness.

II. Literature Review

Undoubtedly, Browning's "My Last Duchess" has garnered considerable critical attention. However, the poem has seldom been categorized within the femme fatale genre since an essential aspect of the Duchess' identity has been overlooked: her role as an intriguing female stock character that can be categorized as a fatal woman. This oversight leads the majority of scholars to neglect her dark feminine side and instead associate her with the innocent "Angel-in-the-House" status, an inscription she, indeed, challenges. For example, Dorothy Mermin (1995) states, "The Duchess embodies the feminine virtues of naturalness, spontaneity, and non-judgmental sympathy" (p. 152). In addition, Earl Ingersoll (1988) considers the Duchess "as an innocent" wife who is appreciative of "the simple beauties of nature such as the bough of cherries, the sunset, or the white mule" (p. 76). In the same vein, Sidney Coulling (1986) believes that the murdered Duchess is guiltless (p. 77). Furthermore, Ismael Saeed and Lanja Dabbagh (2014) argue that the poem reveals the marginalization of a victimized Duchess (pp. 3-4, 7). Moreover, many critics believe that Browning's male speakers successfully repress and possess their spouses. In Eleanor Spencer's (2010) viewpoint, "Browning's speakers often seek to control the feminine; physically, mentally and verbally" (p. 135). Similarly, Carol
Christ (1987) contends that the dominating Duke overpowers his wife: "Browning… imagines male and female in conflict for the power of the look. But Browning's males characteristically win this struggle" (p. 396).

In view of such criticism, this paper will establish that a passive and innocent nature can never be attributed to the dead Duchess who is essentially an embodiment of the femme fatale stereotype. Within the confines of a patriarchal discourse, the masculine and feminine elements in the poem undergo a notable reversal of roles as the roles of master and mistress are inverted. It appears that the Duke's fragile masculinity hinders him from consolidating his authority and exerting his mastery on an independent, flirtatious woman who embraces powerful femininity.

Apparently, the prevailing viewpoint among Browning's critics is that the Duchess is a typical fragile, Victorian female and as such cannot be a femme fatale archetype. According to Ayman Elhallaq (2015), the familiar "Victorian femme fatale seems too harmless to be taken for a fatal woman" because her "image... does not always bear a sexuality that is wild and predatory. She… enters the mainstream Victorian culture without being detected as dangerous" (p. 89). However, this characterization does not apply to Browning's Duchess. In fact, her character contrasts with that of the Renaissance and Victorian woman since she challenges her husband's masculinity and plays an active and assertive role in their relationship. Her perilous femininity is embodied in an exotic and elusive archetype of fatal female sexuality with a transgressive female power that grants her ultimate superiority over the Duke. Indeed, what has been overlooked is the

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Duchess' elusive sexual voracity, which is dangerous, wantonly devious and concealed beneath the façade of an obedient, domestic wife.

Furthermore, Browning has been criticized for silencing his female character and for his inability to portray a real woman (Maxwell, 1992, p. 53). Ulrich Knoepflmacher (1984), for example, believes that the Duchess is depersonalized and denied a voice because she has "lost more than a freedom motion. Imprisoned… within a male's rhetoric of justification, [she has] … become bereft of a voice of [her] own" (p. 143). However, Browning's skillful portrayal of a coherent femme fatale persona in "My Last Duchess" demonstrates his ability to delineate female characters and provide them with a voice. Despite being deceased and silent within the narrative, the Duchess is rescued by Browning who grants the female Other an authentic voice of her own.

Indeed, the representation of the femme fatale in Browning's "My Last Duchess" has been largely overlooked. The significance of this research lies in Browning's perceptive insight, which envisions a new female Other who challenges moral and sexual ideologies while gaining power over her male counterpart. Browning's work probes into the ever-changing nature of feminine mystique and the fluctuating image of females. In contrast to critics who classify the Duchess as a femme fragile– a figure perceived as angelic, senseless and harmless, embodying innocence and chastity– Browning presents her in a different light. She emerges as a revolutionary woman for the Renaissance and the Victorian era: a dangerously sensual and unrepentant female who is characterized by a dual nature, being simultaneously sought after and dreaded.

III. Methodology

Archetypal literary criticism is rooted in Jung's psychology and represents a facet of critical theory which interprets literary texts by emphasizing recurrent myths, motifs, themes, stories, narrative patterns, images, symbols and character types. Basically, Jung posited that common myths and themes arise from universal patterns in the psyche. Jungian archetypes are "involuntary manifestations of unconscious processes whose existence and meaning can only be inferred" (Jung, 1991, p. 260). Describing archetypes as "organs of the psyche," Jung (1991) elucidates that these "dynamic, instinctual complexes... determine psychic life" and labels them as "dominants" of the "collective unconscious" (p. 845) because they play a crucial role in shaping the unconscious psyche.

Jung expounds his views on some major archetypes such as shadow, persona and anima. With respect to the anima, it is both "the female element in a male psyche" and the masculine unconscious of a female; in the latter respect, the anima figure is the femme fatale (Jung, 1988, pp. 177-178) that is inherently part of a fabric of symbolism deeply rooted in the collective unconscious of humanity. The femme fatale is thus related to " 'dangerous' women whose relationships with men clearly image the nature of the negative anima;" she is "[m]ysterious -tantalizing -alluring -wanton- but deep within her burning the violent fires that destroy a
man" (Jung, 1988, p. 180). Representing the Jungian anima or the soul mate, the character of Browning's Duchess can thus be read as a literary portrayal of the femme fatale embedded in the collective male imagination as one who nourishes his fantasies and fuels his lust.

The personality of the determined Duchess can also be analyzed through a mythological lens, in the form of "the eternal feminine," a collective myth that portrays women as the "Other." Numerous feminist authors, including Simone de Beauvoir, have attempted to deconstruct this myth. In her work, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (2009) questions the concept of "the eternal feminine" by examining how patriarchal ideology influences the perception of women. She posits that the "obscure and irreducible essence: femininity" (p. 259) is a socio-historical and cultural concept wielded by masculine ideology to subjugate females. This construction frames women as the Other, alienates them and eliminates their potential to break free from a passive and confined existence. As a result, women are prevented from achieving self-realization and asserting transcendence and subjectivity. *The Second Sex*, thus, deals with dismantling or deconstructing the myth of eternal femininity in which man "is pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being" while woman is considered "the inessential other" (Beauvoir, 2009, pp. 849, 321). Similarly, Kate Millet (2000) emphasizes that, "the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is 'other' or alien" (p. 46).

It could therefore be argued that the Duchess' femme fatale persona undermines the assumptions inherent in the concept of the eternal feminine as posited by feminist critics. The Duchess' refusal to submit to her husband's will is a defiance of what is expected of the eternal feminine myth and is what leads to her demise at the hands of her oppressive spouse, who replaces her with a painting. In this context, Browning's poetics or his portrayal of the feminine merits a

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reevaluation since it appears that his portrayal of the Duchess points to an attempt to deconstruct patriarchal ideology and to subvert the traditional myth of the eternal feminine. Through the Duke, Browning projects the image of a shrewd, sensual woman who liberates herself from the confinement of the eternal female myth as constructed by the patriarchal society. The Duchess is therefore the archetype of a modern poet's creative powers and an embodiment of the femme fatale– desirous and deadly. In this way, she poses a threat to the existence of submissive Renaissance and Victorian women. Browning has effectively created a new woman, or reinstalled the original Eve, and endowed her with a form of freedom based on a sensual power that makes her desired and feared.

IV. Desirability

The portrait in Browning's poem is of an ostensibly inconspicuous, indeterminate and enigmatic femme fatale. At first glance, she assumes the guise of an innocent, harmless and fragile victimized wife. Yet, beneath this exterior lies a woman far more perilous, menacing and potent than initial appearances suggest. With a closer, more profound look she emerges as an unpredictable being who is both powerful and destructive. The speaker/the Duke is astutely aware of the Duchess' ambivalence and expresses conflicting emotional responses towards one who, as a femme fatale, elicits both desire and fear. Drawing from Beauvoir (2009), femme fatale figures like Delilah and Judith embody a dual nature, serving as a "source of life, power of darkness" associated with the eternal feminine and/or "the dark soul" (pp. 196, 32). Likewise, the Duchess' complex personality is two-sided– she is fragile and fatal, attractive and fearsome, seductive and destructive, loving and deadly, heavenly and hellish, beautiful and heartless, good and evil and can evoke both pleasure and pain. This intense duality attracts male desire and fear, as she is both his dream and his nightmare. In essence, her ambiguous, elusive character is a form of revolt: a refusal of confinement which, at the same time, places her in an indirect position of control. Accordingly, Beauvoir (2009) explains, "As… social types are generally defined by pairs of opposite terms, ambivalence will appear to be an intrinsic property of the Eternal Feminine" (p. 316).

The Duke's monologue exposes a dark world of jealousy, madness, murder, immorality, transgression and revenge. It also reflects his disturbed psyche and alienated mindset, as the image of his former wife, the Duchess of Ferrara, is revealed. Interestingly, the dramatic monologue, designed to unveil the character of its monologist, delves into the concealed intricacies of the silent, deceased wife, exposing her unconventional behavior which is what captivates the Duke's primary concern. As such, the marital discord between the Duke of Ferrara and his late Duchess takes center stage, with the late Duchess' demeanor casting her as the desired and sexually threatening femme fatale archetype. One realizes that beneath the facade of a fragile, humble wife with the aristocratic poise lies a sophisticated sexuality.

The Duchess, disguised as a naive, humble and innocent woman, is in effect manipulative and promiscuous. Her duplicity is what confounds the Duke, and, at the outset, readers wonder what her ulterior motives are. Then it gradually dawns that the true intentions of such conduct are freedom and sexual equality. Her desires extend to a "desire for power and… the freedom to acknowledge and exercise desire" (Hochberg, 1991, p. 77), and it is in her exploration, her enactment and her embrace of the pleasures of freedom that she evolves into a liberated individual. Paradoxically, her uninhibited pursuit of desires is in stark contrast to that of the Duke who seems to suppress his own. She seems intent on asserting control by crafting an independent identity separate from her husband's.

Basically, a femme fatale's power resides in her desirability. With an unrestrained sexuality, a fatal woman "makes herself sexually available to everyone who can further her ambitions, but will never commit to anyone" (Farrimond, 2018, p. 96). What distinguishes Browning's femme fatale is her consistent preference for individual independence when desire beckons. She embraces a life of complete autonomy, rejecting traditional gender roles as she partakes in diverse sexual liaisons while exuding an irresistible allure that kindles desire and stirs lust within the hearts and minds of men. Far from embodying angelic or noble virtues, she is depicted as a bold, unrestrained, carefree and disobedient wife. Her libertine conduct therefore challenges the conventions of Victorian and Renaissance society as she transgresses social norms and uses her erotic power to make men succumb to her charms. In the end, she becomes a symbol of power, ambition, rebellion and liberation.

"My Last Duchess" can therefore be interpreted as a poem that delves into the tragic feminine desire for insubordination and the quest for sexual, social and political independence. What Browning does is challenge the representational norms of his society regarding liberated women by portraying the Duchess as one unable to conform to the expectations of Renaissance and Victorian society and culture which regard women as docile, acquiescent, chaste and subservient. Unwilling to confine herself solely to the Duke, the Duchess employs her seductive charisma to manipulate men and satisfy her sexual appetite. Since she refuses to adopt the submissive role associated with the eternal feminine,

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the Duchess is perceived as monstrous– a perspective consistent with Angela Carter's assertion (1978) that "[a] free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" (p. 27). As a result, the Duchess endeavors to forge a new feminine identity, with her deepest longing being to break free from the constraints of an unfulfilling marital bond. In the face of being perceived as the Other and treated as an object, she becomes "fated to infidelity" since "it is the only concrete form her freedom could assume. She is unfaithful… above her own desires… because she is seen as an object, she is given up to any subjectivity that chooses to take her" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 242).

Consequently, both the Duchess' virginal allure and the sanctity of marriage are tainted by her disposition as femme fatale. Characteristically, her carnal desires dictate the course of her life, and she focuses primarily on exploring her sexuality outside the domestic sphere at any cost. Consequently, in her free pursuit of pleasure and sexual gratification, her charms and irresistible sexuality lead her astray.

In this state of affairs, although the deceased Duchess is presented as a silenced subaltern, her voice resounds in the Duke's poetic discourse through body language. The Duke acknowledges, "I call/ That piece a wonder, now" (ll. 2-3). A profound look at the manner in which her body and facial expressions are portrayed allows the perceptive reader to notice the existence of a perilous persona behind her enticing, enigmatic smile on canvas. Beneath that remembered grin lies the motivation for carnal pleasure: "Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,/ Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without/ Much the same smile? (ll. 43-45). The Duke in a dejected and disapproving tone declares how she, as a seductive temptress, is excessively courteous and smiles warmly at other men. He explains that the "cause" behind her "calling up that spot of joy" was her "courtesy" (ll. 20-21) and her gratitude toward the opposite sex: "She thanked men" (l. 31) and seems to be implying that her subtle smiles and pleasures are directed to those men who gratify her sexually. As such, Hedgecock (2008) argues that a femme fatale is not one to fall in love but is rather preoccupied with enticing men (p. 60).

Moreover, this puzzling smile is a manifestation of increased empowerment and is now in the portrait, in the Duke's possession, and directed solely to his emotionally insecure state. His expression [t[his grew" (l. 45) points to his disturbed state since her subversive smile, along with her transgressive attitude and increasing resistance, disrupts nineteenth-century domestic norms. The Duke realizes that her smile resonates with her sexuality and reflects her charms, and a male in the strict Renaissance or Victorian environment finds it quite disturbing. Enraged with jealousy he "gave commands" against his Duchess, "[t]hen all smiles stopped together" (ll. 45-46) in reality, but for him, she does not cease smiling since her seductive, "same smile" (l. 45) is now manifested in an exquisite painting that radiates for his eyes only.

Undoubtedly, it appears that the Duchess takes pride in her sexuality since she boldly displays her vibrant energy in an erotic spectacle as she parades around her villa on a white mule. The lines that follow celebrate the power of sexual autonomy as she engages in a sensual display in public: "the white mule/ She rode with round the terrace" (ll. 28-29). In these lines, the white mule does not symbolize purity, humility or innocence but rather energy and a potent sex drive. The image of the Duchess enjoying her ride on the mule is a phallic one which indicates that she is not only sexually desirous, but also powerful and dominant.

Another symbol that conveys her desires and sexual exploits is that of the plucked cherries. Essentially, the image of a broken cherry is associated with virginity, forbidden sexuality, prohibited desires and infidelity. Notice the sexual connotations in these lines: "The bough of cherries some officious fool/ Broke in the orchard for her," (ll. 27-28); the Duchess receiving a cherry branch from a misguided fool who breaks into her orchard encapsulates the hidden secrets of her mysterious feminine sexuality. It hints at the sexual transgressions of a femme fatale in touch with her dark femininity and sensual energy. This sexual autonomy markedly challenges the norms and taboos associated with the eternal feminine myth. Kevin Gardner (2010) contends that the Duchess' implied promiscuity is insinuated through the symbol of the cherry, plucked by "some officious fool" (l. 27), which "serves as a strong symbol of a wife relieved of her virginity by someone other than her impotent husband" because cherries "had been applied figuratively to a desirable woman since the sixteenth century and… plucked cherries would have suggested fallen women" (p. 167).

Furthermore, a careful examination of the exquisite painting reveals how the Duchess' overt sexuality is vividly portrayed through color imagery. The sensually charged reddish hues emanating from the portrait signify the intensity of pleasure and present the Duchess as an extraordinarily sensual femme fatale. Erotic ardor permeates these joyous emotions which are evident in the recurring "spot of joy" (ll. 14-15, 21), "the faint/ Half-flush that dies along her throat" (ll. 18-19), blush (l. 31), "[t]he dropping of the daylight in the West" (l. 26) and "[t]he bough of cherries" (l. 27). These symbols and images highlight the unrestricted female desire and temptation over which the Duke has no control, whether in reality or on canvas. Moreover, the unchanging and eternal nature of these hues is emphasized in an erotic manner, conveying the

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Duchess' enduring libidinal energy. The red color, in particular, characterizes the visual elements of feminine sexuality, signifying her flirtatious nature and sexual power which pose a threat to her insecure husband.

Additionally, the "depth and passion" of her female gaze: "earnest glance" (l. 8), along with her flush, blush and smile, which springs from a source other than her husband's reveal much about feminine desire. "Frà Pandolf's hands" that "[w]orked busily a day" (ll. 3-4) do not only paint the Duchess' physical appearance but delve deep to paint the ecstatic nature of her character by giving an impression of her inner soul and inward look. The secret behind the "depth" of such a passionate and joyful "glance" is what the Duke is anxious about in his monologue, even his daring guests keep wondering about such a genuine glimpse: "And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,/ How such a glance came there" (ll. 11-12). It is interesting how a skillfully painted face communicates expressively and more effectively than the Duke's dramatic monologue. Behind the exterior of a muted, passive and decent femininity lies a rebellious femininity. As such, "[t]he depth and passion" of the animated "earnest glance" (l. 8) and "that spot of joy" (l. 21) captured by the artist are passionate and genuine-looking expressions beneath which is a layer of sexual gestures that reveal and capture the true spirit of the lady's character in the portrait. The word "spot" denotes both a stain and the physical spot of arousal that culminates with the intense pleasure of orgasm. Ironically speaking, the hired skillful artist immortalizes this stain of joy which the Duke loathes since it eludes his control: "'twas not/ Her husband's presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess' cheek" (ll. 13-15). Mentioned twice in the poem, the painted "spot of joy," unaroused by the Duke, is a haunting reminder of her sexual energy and infidelity that the Duke does not have the power to suppress. Interestingly, the "spot of joy" manifests Lacan's concept of *jouissance* as the ecstasy, orgasm and pleasure closely linked to the death-drive. It is also described by Sandra Gilbert as, "a virtually metaphysical fulfillment of desire" (as cited in Cixous and Clément, 1988, p. xvii).

A. Non-conformity

As an embodiment of female power, the Duchess presents a formidable challenge to her husband who is driven to control and possess her in order to maintain his traditional role as the dominant male. Her refusal to conform, together with her disregard for her husband's social status and lineage, provokes his anger as expressed in the lines "as if she ranked/ My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/ With anybody's gift" (ll. 32-34). Consequently, in a bid to prevent scandal and preserve his ancient title, he resorts to honor killing. It is thus her choice of sexual independence that seals her inevitable demise. Her tragic end is unavoidable since she has become a threat that should be eliminated for her male counterpart to flourish.

As for the Duchess' dangerous sexuality, it is uniquely a feminine attribute similar to that of Pandora's curious nature. To this effect, Millet (2000), drawing on Greek mythology, notes that when society "wishes to denigrate sexuality," it often references Pandora as the archetype that contributes to the depreciation of female sexuality positioning it "as her well-deserved punishment for the primal sin" and perpetuating the belief that sex, deemed sinful, is associated with the female, while the identity of the male is conserved as human rather than inherently sexual (pp. 51-52). Consequently, the independent, assertive and ambitious femme fatale is enshrouded in death and suffering as she embraces the repercussions of her choices instead of succumbing to societal expectations. This aligns with Allen's (1983) claim that the correlation between woman's "independence and ambition, on the one hand, and fatality on the other, is highly suggestive" (p. 3).

Consequently, when the sexually driven Duchess refrains from controlling her inherently immoral sexuality and persists in her pursuit of freedom, she is eventually reconciled with her ultimate fate, death. According to Elisabeth Bronfen (2004), this is typical of a femme fatale who "accepts her death as the logical consequence of her insistence on a radical pursuit of personal freedom" (p. 107). In a sense, the Duchess' nonconformist behavior has sealed her destiny, so that embracing death becomes the ultimate responsible outcome that serves the purpose of moral regeneration. As a fatal woman, she willingly selects "death as a way of choosing real freedom by turning the inevitability of her fate into her responsibility" (Bronfen, 2004, p. 111). In death, she acquires both freedom and personal redemption, liberating herself from a world steeped in decadence and corruption.

She is therefore a challenge to the Duke, a subversive figure, "a true Femme Fatale [who] will buck at the idea that she should belong to or be possessed by anyone" (MacArthur, 2013, p. 9). In effect, her amoral stance serves as a departure from an undesirable present– a stifling, male-dominant society. By resisting conventional gender roles and challenging masculine dominance, the Duchess disrupts the balance of power appropriation and tramples on the Duke's dignity. Consequently, she becomes a perceived threat that should be eliminated in order to save men from her allure and danger she poses. In this way, chaos could be avoided and order restored, as MacArthur (2013) notes, "to reinstate the

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status quo, the Femme Fatale must ultimately be punished" (p. 10). Eventually, she is penalized for disrupting the male order and transgressing masculine authority.

Interestingly, the fatal woman proves to be not only a menace to society, but also to herself. Embracing death becomes the inevitable outcome of her transgressions. Motivated by her desire to master her own destiny and by an unrelenting quest for pleasure, she meets her demise in eerie circumstances as part of her journey toward regeneration and liberation. Ultimately, while readers may eventually overlook the severity of the Duchess' punishment, her legacy persists as that of a dangerously formidable and charismatic nonconformist female with an unrestrained sensuality.

B. Mistrustfulness

It is evident that the Duke's animosity towards the Duchess stems from jealousy. Her overt sexuality and infidelity, together with the inability to be satisfied, poses a threat to the Duke's sense of self. An "insatiable" female remains a seductive image "in the fantasies of male heterosexuality, in spite of– or perhaps because of– the deep-seated fears it conjures… (of infidelity, and of the male failure to satisfy women's… fathomless sexual appetites)" (Simkin, 2014, p. 24). The Duke, despite being aware of the situation, chooses not to confront the issue of his Duchess' infidelity. In Jungian terms, one can interpret the alluring Duchess as a manifestation or projection of the Duke's anima. Driven by the fear of delving into the depths of his unconscious, the Duke is apprehensive of his anima– the feminine aspect of himself. This fear arises from the dread of being ensnared by his repressed feminine; the male who is fearful of "the communications of his inner depths" dreads "the feminine element in himself as he is of real women," so he never has the courage "to approach a beloved" (Jung, 1988, p. 283). Hence, the Duke opts to distance himself from his soulmate, refraining from "stooping" to question her actions: "–E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose/ Never to stoop" (ll. 42-43). He expresses his unwillingness to engage in a confrontation, as he deliberately chooses not to descend to her level for interrogation and argumentation about her peculiar and repulsive behavior: "that in you disgust me" (l. 38). While he does convey his displeasure with her sexual freedom, he consciously avoids lowering himself to her level to prevent further insult: "Who'd stoop to blame/ This sort of trifling?" (ll. 34-35). In reality, attempting to comprehend a woman's sexuality and seductive prowess invariably stirs masculine anxiety and fear, as she remains an enigma within every male's imagination, entwining men with her captivating charm.

V. Fearsomeness

In view of Terry Eagleton's (2002) assertion that "it is in the significant silences of a text… that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make 'speak' " (p. 32), a discerning critic can identify that beneath the façade of meekness, passivity and silence, a transgressive and threatening female lurks in both the poem and the portrait. Despite the fact that the poem consists entirely of the Duke's lengthy and tyrannical monologue, the Duchess' uncommunicative demeanor can be viewed as the poet's intentional strategy to reveal her silent bent for vengeance, resistance and power.

It appears that the speaker is indirectly acknowledging his weakness within the domestic sphere since it is the passionate and apprehensive Duchess who directs and controls her spouse. The poem demonstrates how the femme fatale's captivating sexuality harbors a feminine power in the face of which men feel threatened and disturbed. What distinguishes this double-natured dark feminine figure is "her effect upon men" because a woman can never be fatal without the presence of a male "even where her fatalism is directed towards herself" (Stott, 2003, p. viii). In other words, she is keenly aware of her sexual power over men.

According to Allen (1983), "one social factor underlying the birth of the femme fatale was the threat to men inherent in the rise of feminism" (p. ix). As Anderson (1995) asserts, "feminist advancements are interpreted to be harmful to the male's power position" (p. 11). Thus, with her multifaceted manifestations of female power, a fatal woman like the Duchess unquestionably becomes a disruptor of masculinity, emasculating and haunting the Duke.

As previously elaborated, the femme fatale remains a literary enigma, a metaphorically veiled figure awaiting revelation. The inscrutability of the mysterious femme fatale ensures her enduring status as a perpetual sexual and feminine threat. Her inherent mystery, unpredictability and manipulative nature render her uncontrollable and an undeterminable challenge and menace to men. Doane (1991) elucidates this notion by stating that the fatal female "harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable" (p. 1).

The oppressed and subjugated status of women in the nineteenth century gave rise to the depiction of femme fatale figures in art and literature– representations of women who evoke and disseminate fear among men. In the realms

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of feminist and archetypal criticism, the femme fatale stereotype is linked to unsettling anxieties surrounding feminine power and agency. Beauvoir (2009) elucidates the "disquieting hostility" that women provoke in males, illustrating how the mere term "female" conjures a medley of images, including a giant egg usurping and castrating the hyperactive sperm, a monstrous queen termite dominating subservient males and the praying mantis and spider, engorged with love, squashing and devouring their mates (p. 41). Furthermore, according to Jung (1988), archetypes possess energy and power (p. 80). In a similar vein, Margaret Atwood (1996) contends that any manifestation of "strength or power" exhibited by a female transforms her into "a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster" (p. 225).

"My Last Duchess" is a poem that delves into the intricacies of power dynamics. The Duchess' power, her sexual autonomy, is threatening and unsettling and emasculates the Duke. As Beauvoir (2009) cautions, "bohemian women are still regarded with suspicion. The woman who freely exercises her charms– adventuress, vamp, femme fatale– remains a disquieting
type" (p. 244). A femme fatale exerts a perilous influence on men, instilling profound fear in her male counterpart who dreads losing his power to assertive and ambitious females. Functioning as a castrating figure, she possesses a symbolic castrating power that gradually erodes man's masculinity. This fear of castration resides in the subconscious of every male apprehensive of the femme fatale's enduring feminine power. As Doane (1991) elaborates, "the femme fatale is not a symbol of feminism but rather a symptom of male fears about feminism" (p. 3).

Femininity's haunting and destructive power represents the "otherness" men fear and is the reason why Beauvoir (2009) describes the threatening female as "the feared other" (p. 223). Consequently, the femme fatale "threatens the status quo and the hero because she controls her own sexuality outside of marriage" (MacArthur, 2013, p. 9). Moreover, according to
Millet (2000), a sexual revolution that targets the patriarchal cultural matrix has the potential to bring an end to the institution of patriarchy and abolish male supremacy (p. 62). Thus, as a femme fatale, the Duchess projects a mysterious aura and a vengeful silence intensified by her husband's voice over hers. Though unable to counter the egotistical narrative that frames her, her silence and enigmatic aura serve as potent expressions of feminine power, enabling her to retaliate against his masculine oppression and tyranny. According to Jung, when women are oppressed and mistreated by males, they become a manifestation of the male's fear of their retaliation. Exploited women may reverse gender roles to assert dominance over men.
Bade (1979) expands on Jung's concept, explaining that the darker aspect of the anima emerges when men undervalue feminine qualities and mistreat women, leading to fears of malevolent women (p. 23). Consequently, when deprived of autonomy, a femme fatale yearns to metaphorically castrate the male. Beauvoir (2009) suggests that a femme fatale fantasizes about castration only when in captivity in order to strip the male of his "transcendence" because she aspires to possess that "transcendence" (pp. 848-849). This latent feminine power has the potential to disrupt traditional male-female dynamics.

Referring to Freud's castration complex and how he delves into an explanation of male anxiety and the profound fear of losing authority and power, whether in a literal or metaphorical sense, it is possible to understand the Duke's fear and his attraction to a woman possessing an unrestrained, uninhibited and emasculating sensuality. She is perceived as a morally destructive threat with the power to jeopardize his social, sexual and psychological identity. What he basically fears is his loss of identity. The femme fatale, as Allen (1983) notes, "passively accepts impregnation, motherhood [and] domesticity" (p. 4). Being non-maternal, barren and sterile, the femme fatale constitutes a threat that can disrupt the family unit and break generational cycles. It is a prospect that stands as one of man's worst nightmares. The Duchess, for instance, is obligated in marriage to preserve the aristocratic lineage of the Duke's family name. Yet, she displays disinterest in his "favor at her breast" (l. 25) and his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name" (l. 33), indicating her careless attitude for extending the male legacy.

Most intriguingly, the Duchess prevails over the Duke, who proves impotent in his attempts to possess a mysterious, unrestrained and silent figure. The final lines of the poem explicitly demonstrate his lack of control over his wife: "Notice Neptune, though,/ Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,/ Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" (ll. 54-56). Stefan Hawlin (2002) believes that the allusion to the dominance displayed in the image of the bronze statue of Neptune, the Roman god of the sea taming a seahorse, implies that the deceased wife is eventually tamed: "The feminine and the erotic have been reined in, ruthlessly brought under control" (p. 69). Similarly, Philip Allingham (2014) asserts that Neptune's statue reflects the triumph of the Duke, reveling in "dominating what is beautiful, delicate, feminine, and

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natural" (p. 3). However, it could be argued that the Duke's striking artwork of the god Neptune is reminiscent of the Duchess riding the mule– an assertion of female agency and a challenge to male dominance. This suggests that the declaration that the Duke tames the female figure lacks substance. Moreover, the more the insecure Duke endeavors to display his power and control, the feebler he appears. Despite his ostentatious show of authority, the Duke himself becomes the metaphorically castrated seahorse, powerless in the face of the erotic feminine. He can never subdue a virile and seductive figure like the Duchess, whose erotic power and potential undermine his potency and render him as feeble as the superficial and hollow interior of Claus of Innsbruck's bronze statue of Neptune. This statue, therefore, symbolizes the Duke's fear of losing his power and stands as a lasting reminder of his wounded ego and pride.

Indeed, the Duchess, an unyielding castrator, cannot be emasculated due to her assertiveness, stubbornness and self-confidence. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (1988) ponder: "isn't the worst thing that, really, woman is not castrated" (p. 69). Being thus, the Duchess refuses to "let/ Herself be lessoned" (ll. 39-40) and consistently stands up for herself, always prepared to "plainly set/ Her wits to [his]" (ll. 40-41). As Browning juxtaposes the feminized and vulnerable Duke against the masculine and power-craving personality of the Duchess, he subverts gender-based power dynamics thereby challenging the conventional gender assumptions of both the Renaissance and the Victorian period.

Undeniably, the sexual autonomy that the Duchess exercises is so threatening that the Duke has trouble describing her true nature: "She had/ A heart–how shall I say? –too soon made glad,/ Too easily impressed," (ll. 21-23) as "she liked whate'er/ She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (ll. 23-24). In vain does the Duke try to tame his wife who remains indifferent to his suffering. Without doubt, her roving eyes stimulate his sexual jealousy. Deeply disgraced by her emotional reactions and intimate glances aimed at other men, the Duke realizes that her active and disloyal lifestyle brings shame to his duchy. Thus, her sexual liberation/autonomy is a stalking menace because through sexual supremacy, she projects a patriarchal uneasiness about feminine empowerment. When the femme fatale pushes against the limits of tradition and oppressive patriarchy, she becomes the incarnation of the masculine fear of losing dominion. Obsessed with insecurity and fear, man becomes threatened and incompetent before such a sexually challenging, aggressive and transgressive (low or middle class) woman who does not seem dangerous or destructive at first but strives to alter her style of living. Choosing to act this way relegates the Duchess to "otherness" as she is marginalized and becomes an outsider to the norms of overwhelmingly patriarchal societies.

Stevie Simkin (2014) declares that the femme fatale's "erotic charge is magnified considerably precisely because of the threatening potentiality she carries within her: in Freudian terms, she combines two distinct drives– Eros and the death instinct Thanatos" (p. 7). Essentially, she embodies the essence of both life and death. Femme fatales like Delilah and Judith exhibit a dual nature, serving as a "source of life, power of darkness" associated with "the eternal feminine" and/or "the dark soul" (Beauvoir, 2009, pp. 196, 32). This unique fusion of opposing drives renders them perpetually captivating to men. According to Jung (1959), controlling the fatal female proves exceedingly challenging, given her inherent compulsion to indulge in exotic and erotic experiences. Therefore, he does not judge a woman with a pronounced Eros, recognizing her pursuit of "romantic and sensational episodes for their own sake" and noting that when "the goal is attained, her interest evaporates for lack of any maternal instinct, and then it will be someone else's turn" (p. 89).

A. An Immortal, Haunting Subject

The obsession with the literary phenomenon of the femme fatale reveals that the Victorian man's imagination is "haunted by another vision of the female-the castrating woman embodied in the Salome myth" (Sussman, 1992, p. 191). Desire for and fear of such a castrating and haunting female is embodied in the painted late Duchess who continues to cast a spectral presence over the Duke's life even after her death. Examining the opening lines of the poem, the Duke triumphantly declares: "That's my last duchess painted on the wall,/ Looking as if she were alive" (ll. 1-2). The action verb "looking" here refers to the looks she gives as if she has returned to haunt her murderer. Even though he tries to eliminate her literal existence robbing her of her name, voice and power by having her killed, it is ironic that readers find him rejoicing the physical presence of the living dead in the painting not only in line 2 but also in line 47: "[a]s if alive." This phrase suggests a deliberate attempt to portray the Duchess in a manner that emphasizes her appearance of vitality. This semblance of vitality asserts the resistance and self-empowerment inherent in the femme fatale who insists on asserting her presence even in death.

As the Duke persistently delves into discussions about the Duchess, particularly her character and nature, he paradoxically resurrects her essence, infusing the narrative with an oppressive atmosphere of her vexing dominance from which he cannot escape. The Duchess, portrayed as an omnipotent figure, haunts and emasculates the Duke, thereby

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creating a disconcerting effect on the already self-doubting nobleman who struggles to articulate his feelings. The Duke's inadequacy in expressing himself becomes glaringly evident in these lines: "A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,/…/ Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked/…/ In speech – which I have not– to make your will" (ll. 22, 32, 36). These lines reflect his difficulty in grappling with the overpowering presence of the Duchess and his own inability to communicate effectively. The haunting memory of the Duchess intensifies the Duke's internal turmoil, further accentuating his sense of inadequacy in the face of her enduring influence.

The overarching attributes of a haunting femme fatale include over-empowerment and immortality, as noted by Allen (1983) who argues that despite the death of a femme fatale, "she will not be obliterated" (p. 2). As Virginia Woolf (1993) aptly observes, "It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality" (p. 2152). This difficulty arises because even an imaginative possession of the ethereal presence of the feminine remains elusive. Therefore, the Duke's appropriation of a spectral feminine form proves hollow. It can be inferred that the femme fatale, shaped by masculine imagination, is invincible, possessing an uncanny and mysterious power that eludes control by her male creator. Paradoxically, the Duke, in silencing his subaltern wife through domestic violence to curb moral deviance and prevent further indiscretions, inadvertently empowers and immortalizes her. In this scenario, the female figure transitions from a passive object to an active subject, embodying the immortal and latent power of a silent femme fatale that hauntingly unsettles a castrated male, threatening both his moral integrity and identity.

Both pronouns "my" and "she" (ll. 1-2) at the start of the monologue act like a catalyst to summon the Duchess' haunting apparition reinforcing her enduring influence over the Duke's conscience. Despite the repeated use of the possessive pronoun "my" in the Duke's dramatic monologue in an attempt to assert ownership over his once-living Duchess, it is apparent that even in death she is impossible to be completely possessed. As a femme fatale, the Duchess proves impossible to be obliterated, both mentally and metaphorically. Even her textual erasure, that is, denying her a voice, serves to underscore man's fear of the threatening and haunting feminine subject. The Duchess, though absent in person, continues to be a persistent presence that will forever haunt the Duke. According to Catherine Maxwell (1993), "The female subject" constantly escapes her captor's control and uncannily reappears to haunt him, turning the poem into a confrontation where the deceased confronts the living, rendering "null the gesture of appropriation" (p. 994).

Uncontrolled by the constraints of the male psyche, the indomitable and resistant Duchess wields an irresistible force that emancipates her from oppressive systems, allowing her to not only overpower but also challenge male potency. Indeed, it aligns with the idea that a female "became free only in becoming captive" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 242). Evading the confines of the death trap set by the Duke, the Duchess transcends into the realm of the living, asserting her immortal existence while haunting her murderer.

B. An Aesthetic, Empowered Object

The fear of a destructive, dark femininity, of an indomitable female sexuality can only be averted by safely distancing and disabling the femme fatale to render her unthreatening. In order to repress female sexuality so that the femme fatale poses no sexual danger, the female Other is literally or metaphorically objectified. However, the femme fatale will never allow "the control and domination of her sexuality by men" (Allen, 1983, p. 4) which explains why males "need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it" (Kaplan, 1988, p. 49). Despite the fact that the feminine "other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other" (Cixous and Clément, 1988, p. 71), "My Last Duchess" rejects the presence of female submission. Though a martyred female, the Duchess is depicted as a cunning, oppressing female subject even after her death. In this way, the poet engages in feminism by avoiding the temptations of female objectification and by promoting female rebellion. In a sense, the Duchess threatens to expose the vulnerability of the male, stripping him of his manliness and dignity. Her outgoing personality jeopardizes her husband's power, while her sexual independence emasculates him. Consequently, regardless of the Duke's efforts, he will perpetually feel castrated and haunted by his untamed and undominated fatal female.

Consumed by a desire for dominance, the Duke turns the Duchess into an object of art. She becomes a treasured commodity, a fetishistic object, framed in an exquisite and highly prized artwork only accessible with his permission. In the monologue, this poetic realm, the Duke is portrayed as an aggressive, objectifying patriarchal antagonist who stifles the emerging female voice. His objectification extends not only to his former Duchess, but also to his prospective wife, the Count's daughter, whom he views as his "object" (l. 53). The undeniable reality is that "a devouring male ego reduces that Female Other into nothingness" (Knoepflmacher, 1984, pp. 142-143), driven by the belief that it is simpler to mentally and physically possess and manipulate the desired female Other in this manner. Within this framework, the proud,

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vindictive and sadistic Duke is motivated by his wounded ego and injured manhood to dominate his sinful, unchaste wife. However, his struggles come to no avail since he ultimately fails to establish his authority or patriarchal control.

Having failed to possess her indefinitely, he molds her into a still frame turning her into an objet d'art and making himself the art collector or creator with the power to display her to whomever he wishes. Karen Horney (1973) posits, "always, everywhere, the man strives to rid himself of his dread of women by objectifying it… in artistic… creative work" (pp. 135-136). Likewise, the Duke is convinced that the only perceived means to conquer and dominate a woman lies in objectifying her image and subduing the fear she instills. In retrospect, this proves that his anxiety or the threat he feels by her real, physical presence is itself materialized. However, the Duke is in some sense acknowledging his own defeat when looking at her image, since she still holds power over him.

Through the conduit of art, it appears that the three artists involved in the poem– the poet, the Duke and the portrait painter, Frà Pandolf– jointly achieve the fantasy of immortalizing the feminine subject in an enigmatic, unattainable work of art that portrays the ideal feminine. In the eighth stanza of "Women and Roses," Browning reiterates a parallel creative pursuit of masculine imagination: "I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her,/ Shaped her to his mind!" (ll. 46-47). Despite being reduced to the position of the Other as a product of poetic creativity for masculine fantasy, this Eve (the Duchess), initially a fetishized object, transforms into an empowered object that governs the Duke's, poet's or male's imagination. Despite the Duchess being confined within a frame to deny her independence and being objectified in portraiture, it is ironic how a representation of woman-as-other wields power. Consequently, the projection of the Duke's anima, the archetype of the femme fatale, holds him captive.

Consequently, maneuvering through artistic feminine resistance proves impossible as it allows no space for male dominance. Browning not only acknowledges feminine power, but also the sublime strength emanating from poetic art. According to Maxwell (1992), it is ironic how the Duke "tries to reduce the Duchess to a picture because he perceives art objects as being more manipulable… but a painting… can out-manoeuvre the… wishes of its artist or owner…. The Duchess becomes complicit with the imaginative power of art, and… she stages a return which undermines her husband's position" (p. 323).

Portrait painting is a compelling form of art crafted by the essence of a human spirit capable of breathing life into a portrait despite the demise of the painted figure. Though the poet's own imaginative and creative power brings the Duchess to life in a portrait, she seems to conspire with the artwork in which she dwells to overpower the Duke who is compelled to veil the lifelike painting and safeguard it behind a curtain in his gallery: "But to myself they turned (since none puts by/ The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)" (ll. 9-10). In this context, Browning skillfully immortalizes both feminine desire and threat in poetics and aesthetics.

While a vivid portrait does not typically convey a threatening presence, the standing posture of the painted Duchess signifies a menacing sexual potency. Shifra Hochberg (1991) draws attention to the erect position of the female in the portrait and its implication of sexual prowess. Hochberg notes that the Duchess' wall-mounted picture can be linked to the "positionality of power": "The Duchess' erect stance, associated with the phallocentric power of the Duke, helps to thematize the erotic strength of the Duchess as well as the poem's central paradox of the intersection of power with seeming powerlessness" (pp. 77, 80). Therefore, when the Duke announces twice in lines 4 and 46 "there she stands," the deceased Duchess reappears like a non-static phantom and performs a threatening and uncanny return in the form of a moving apparition. Indeed, the return of the repressed is challenging and threatening and as Cixous and Clément (1988) warn: "When the 'repressed'… returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (p. 95). The standing posture of the femme fatale in late nineteenth-century visual arts carries a connotation of menacing power (Allen, 1983, p. 2). Emilie Peneau (2012) further emphasizes that, females "should embrace art and use it as a way to express their own voice and resist patriarchal discourses" (p. 260). In this context, art becomes a platform for females to assert autonomy and demonstrate resilience. Consequently, the realm of art emerges as a novel and non-violent strategy for the expression of female power.

Despite the Duke's relentless efforts to control the Duchess through painting and framing, denying her desired independence, her essence transcends the confines of the visual portrait. Perhaps due to her restless soul, the Duchess does not seem to rest in peace. What troubles the Duke the most is not just her charming and overpowering external appearance, but a sexualized vision of her soul that he alludes to in his speech. While he may have possessed her as a wife and in the painted image, her erotic ardor, mind, spirit, feelings and pleasures elude his control. Her individuality

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cannot be subjected to possession and remains uncontainable. In a sense, the Duchess, in her haunting presence, challenges the Duke's attempts to confine and appropriate her essence.

Morally compromised, the Duke grapples with the challenge of controlling the unbridled power of the Duchess, evident in her vivid and haunting portrait. Incapable of dominating his unrestrained wife in life, the Duke also fails to assert mastery over her in death, ultimately falling short in objectifying his coveted subject. Instead of dismantling her identity by transforming her into a mere aesthetic representation, the poet, Duke and the painter artistically reconstruct her fragmented sense of self through the medium of art. This underscores the profound resistance and self-empowerment inherent in what society often perceives as the female Other.

VI. Conclusion

By projecting the femme fatale motif through the prism of art and verse in "My Last Duchess," Browning bestows a voice upon the otherwise voiceless female Other. In summary, the Duchess, whose influence stems from her allure and intimidation, can be interpreted and reimagined as a femme fatale, whether on the stages of the Renaissance or Victorian eras. Another character embodying the femme fatale archetype is found in Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," where he expresses his critical perspective on the nature of power. Browning's grasp of power's perception is notably modern, as evident in his poetic and aesthetic construction of the femme fatale's representation. He appears ahead of his time, exhibiting a modernist and postmodernist visionary portrayal of a subjective, potent and fatal femininity– one that challenges conventional attitudes toward female authority.

With an interest in feminine literary subjects, Browning emerges as a feminist par excellence, challenging the marginalization of women in poetic representation by relocating power within strong-willed female characters. The distinctive nature of his creative imagination is unveiled in his ingenious depiction of a feminist subject: an exotic femme fatale image, which, in reality, is a male fantasy projection of a female's dual nature, encapsulating desire and fear. Browning's daring treatment of taboo subjects and his bold portrayal of a fatalistic and castrating woman demanding sexual freedom reveal his ability to see through her ambivalence. In a sense, he celebrates sexual autonomy rather than suppressing it, foreshadowing
Beauvoir (2009), who anticipates that "erotic freedom would be accepted by custom" (p. 856) sooner or later.

The significance of the femme fatale portrait lies in its revelation of a fresh perspective on the modern social perception of the evolving status and role of a resilient female. This figure, with its genuine agency, challenges the dominant and traditional ideologies of the Renaissance and Victorian eras as it resists the constraints imposed by oppressive patriarchal structures and, in turn, destabilizes the established gender dynamics. This stance represents a direct critique of antiquated notions of Renaissance and Victorian womanhood, as the poet deliberately crafts a rebellious female who rejects patriarchal constructions as well as social and matrimonial conventions.

As a nonconformist poet, Browning engages in a reevaluation of the role of women, revitalizing their identity and restoring their silenced voices. Despite being initially muted by her husband, the Duchess reclaims authority and agency and in so doing ultimately embodies a new representation of a self-empowered female. She has undoubtedly succeeded in "becoming" a "femme fatale," who embodies fear, autonomy, desire and the liberation of unrestricted female sexuality. Such a process of "becoming" a femme fatale facilitates the emergence of a self-assertive and self-determining female who seeks power and autonomy, freely expressing her sexuality while defying patriarchal discourse and expectations. This portrayal emphasizes that female sexual liberty need not be inherently destructive; instead, it can be a celebration of female empowerment.

Interestingly, the poem delves into the theme of femicide, a term coined by Diana Russel to signify a poignant social phenomenon where a female is killed by a family member "as a result of intimate partner violence" (Laurent et al., 2013, p. 4). Intimate partner femicide, a tragic consequence of domestic violence, serves to silence women, and the death of the Duchess emerges as a stark illustration of this harrowing reality. It could therefore be argued that Browning, known for his strong aversion to domestic tyrants (Donaldson et al., 1987, p. 2036), is explicitly conveying this sentiment in the poem by condemning the mistreatment of women by men.

In the end, although the Duchess meets her demise and becomes the subject of her husband's compelling and impactful narrative, his dramatic monologue has ironically gone beyond his expectations. What he has done is provide her with an active platform from which her previously muted voice, as his wife, is allowed a space through which her independent personality and strength express themselves. Through his retelling of her tale of resistance and empowerment, the Duke makes the Duchess' story resonate with a wide audience, transcending the confines of the intimate setting to

captivate his various guests and readers. Instead of stifling and erasing his former wife, the Duke engages in a remarkable dramatic monologue, endowing her painting with life and inadvertently immortalizing her identity and narrative.

Far from perpetuating silence and obscurity, the Duke acts as a ventriloquist for the once-muffled voice of the sexually-liberated female. Her identity is revived through the reclamation of her sexuality, a facet that has always been inherently hers. Although intentionally unnamed, the Duchess, representing subaltern and silenced females, has her voice recovered by Browning, emerging to speak through two expressive mediums of art– the painting and the poem. In the end, an anonymous Duchess becomes an enduring, immortal prototype of an empowered femme fatale, celebrated not only in poetry but also in painting.

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