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**SHE'S MORE THAN JUST A PRETTY FACE:
REDEFINING, REIMAGINING, & RETELLING THE FEMME FATALE'S STORY IN
A CONCERT DANCE SETTING**

by
LOREN MELLO

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR WILLIAMSON
PROFESSOR JACOBSEN**

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ABSTRACT

The femme fatale remains a staple icon in the media zeitgeist – a power-hungry woman unafraid to wield her sexuality as a weapon against unsuspecting men. While this character has usually represented a socially unacceptable version of womanhood, this narrative feels particularly relevant within our current sociopolitical context – one in which repressive, “traditional” notions of womanhood and, more specifically, female sexuality are being promoted on the national stage. This thesis seeks to further develop the femme fatale character by offering insight into her personal experience of pursuing empowerment within a patriarchal structure that seeks to violently silence her, exposing a side of this character not usually seen by audiences – emotional complexity. This project culminated in a choreographed dance piece performed in a concert dance setting, drawing on both heels dance and modern dance techniques.

Introduction

Discussions of “appropriate” female sexuality have consistently been a controversial topic. A sexually liberated woman stands to threaten the oppressive patriarchal structures within which we live, and therefore, young women like myself are taught not to aspire to her lifestyle. One such tool within media used to tell this story is that of the femme fatale character, usually symbolized as a power-hungry woman unafraid to wield her sexuality and physical beauty as a weapon against unsuspecting men.

In our current sociopolitical environment, female sexuality and independence are once again being demonized on the national stage. Most prominently, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, we see that women’s bodies continue to be viewed as reproductive property of the patriarchal state rather than the physical vessels of autonomous, independent, complex people who may possess life goals beyond motherhood. At the same time, harsh and often unattainable beauty standards are inescapably fed to young women. Through social media especially, women seem more hyperaware than ever of our appearance and the purported importance – and power – of fitting within the current beauty standard. According to a 2019 article from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, “American women spend an average of 45 minutes grooming each day and make up 80-90% of the \$115 billion industry for beauty products, affecting both their time and financial resources.”¹ Thus, if physical beauty remains presented as a potent pathway to power for women, we must wonder what the inner world of these women looks like. While the trope of the femme fatale depicts pretty clearly how her actions impact the people (mostly men) around her, it rarely offers insight into her emotional experience. We do not get to

¹ Ramati-Ziber, L., Shnabel, N., & Glick, P. (2019). The beauty myth: prescriptive beauty norms for women reflect hierarchy-enhancing motivations leading to discriminatory employment practices. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1-27. DOI: /10.1037/pspi0000209.

see how the femme fatale attempts to balance the pressure to be beautiful “correctly” against the pressure to conform to socially acceptable ideals of womanhood.

By generating a choreographic project combining my background in heels and modern dance, I aim to demonstrate that the femme fatale seeks power within an oppressive system in the manner most logical to herself while remaining emotionally complex. Despite how her story is usually told, her sole goal is not to obtain power and domination. She also seeks connection and emotional fulfillment within a violent patriarchal structure that could not care less about her well-being. I became motivated to create this work during my time in college because, in many ways, I feel like I am living out this character’s life. As a young woman, I have and continue to think about how I fit or do not fit into the current beauty standard. I often feel pressured based on media portrayals of “beauty” to adjust my appearance to better fit this standard. Additionally, in some respect, I have internalized the idea that external beauty remains one of the most powerful tools a woman can use to advance herself within patriarchal structures. I relate to the femme fatale’s desire to find some sense of control within an oppressive world that regards women merely as reproductive property. Thus, I disagree with her portrayal as “power hungry” and “cunning.” She is just trying to survive.

Section I – Femme Fatale: “At once desired and despised, feared and revered”²

Media scholars trace the origins of the femme fatale character to the post-World War I era. As many men returned to the United States after fighting in the war, they found that the

² Leslie, Carolyn. "Cherchez La Femme: The Evolution of the Femme Fatale." *Screen Education*, no. 80, 2016, pp. 16-25. ProQuest, <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/cherchez-la-femme-evolution-fatale/docview/1772450804/se-2>.

women left on the “home front” had transitioned from occupying the role of homemaker towards more personal independence through pursuing careers. These women were no longer content with the sole role of housewife and mother. They wanted more and were actively pursuing it. This shift directly challenged long-established patriarchal gender roles and, notably, generated extreme anxiety amongst young men about how their lives would be different in a more gender-equitable world. Therefore, in response to this widely shared male anxiety, Hollywood generated a character trope – the femme fatale. Media scholar Carolyn Leslie writes:

“The femme fatale - seducer and betrayer of the hapless hero - was also seen as springing from a post-war change in the balance of power between the sexes: male veterans, physically and psychically wounded in the war, came home to find that women had grown in financial and sexual independence from having joined the workforce as part of the home-front war effort. Men found such powerful women both alluring and frightening - the same ambivalence felt for the femme fatale.”³

Thus, the femme fatale character ultimately stems from the male gaze and, more specifically, men grappling with and processing their fears regarding women’s empowerment and gender equality. The femme fatale captures not only men’s fear of independent and driven women but also their fascination and sexual attraction to them.

The defining characteristics of the femme fatale are her beauty and sexuality. “She is alluring and enrapturing, and [the] hapless protagonist is drawn to her like an insect to a spider's web.” In this trope, the femme fatale usually has some inexplicable quality to which men cannot help but be drawn. She is magnetic – and she knows it. Typically motivated by money and power, she uses this quality to exploit men to advance herself. Thus, she is presented to audiences in a largely hostile and judgemental light, as cunning, calculated, and heartless.

³ Leslie, Carolyn. "Cherchez La Femme: The Evolution of the Femme Fatale." *Screen Education*, no. 80, 2016, pp. 16-25. *ProQuest*, <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/cherchez-la-femme-evolution-fatale/docview/1772450804/se-2>.

Additionally, depending on the film, it is usually either implied or stated that she uses the promise of sex or sex to manipulate her male “victims.”

The femme fatale is usually regarded as a “doomed” character within media. Her story arc typically ends with some sort of tragedy to represent a sense of justice having been served. As Carolyn Leslie notes, “[The femme fatale] subverts male authority, and they are, ultimately and inevitably, punished for their transgressions.”⁴ Thus, this character is intended to send a clear message to empowered women by demonstrating the violent “consequences” of their potential liberation from the patriarchy. “[The femme fatale] operates as a demonization of the independent working woman at a time when there was a concerted effort to persuade women to surrender the jobs that they had taken on during the war and to return to their roles as wives and mothers within the domestic sphere.”⁵ Ultimately, the femme fatale character trope functions as a tool of the patriarchy, designed to diminish the benefits of empowering those of marginalized gender identity through overt threats of physical violence while upholding the supposed power of quietly accepting established gender roles.

A recent and recognizable example of the femme fatale in media is Amy Dunne from *Gone Girl*. Originally written as a novel by author Gillian Flynn and later adapted into an Academy Awards-nominated film, *Gone Girl* is a psychological crime thriller about unraveling the details surrounding the mysterious disappearance and apparent murder of Amy Dunne. At the story’s onset, it seems that Amy – an innocent, sweet, and loving wife – was murdered by her

⁴ Leslie, Carolyn. "Cherchez La Femme: The Evolution of the Femme Fatale." *Screen Education*, no. 80, 2016, pp. 16-25. *ProQuest*,

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/cherchez-la-femme-evolution-fatale/docview/1772450804/se-2>.

⁵ Jancovich, Mark. "'VICIOUS WOMANHOOD': GENRE, THE FEMME FATALE AND POSTWAR AMERICA." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2011, pp. 100-114. *ProQuest*,

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/vicious-womanhood-genre-femme-fatale-postwar/docview/878213979/se-2>.

husband, Nick Dunne – portrayed as emotionally absent and adulterous. Initially, Amy appears to be the story's victim, outwardly the perfect image of feminine beauty and values, seemingly brutally silenced by an abusive partner who, when questioned by authorities regarding her disappearance, could not even recall her personal hobbies or interests. Additionally, it is revealed that Nick had been cheating on his wife with a younger woman, adding to the notion of Amy's innocence and victimhood. However, as the plot unfolds, we learn that, underlying Amy's outward beauty and charm is a manipulative, cunning individual who has not only orchestrated faking her murder and framing her husband for said crime but who did so out of malice, seeking retribution for her husband's emotional unavailability and extramarital affair. While it seems she is Nick's victim, we learn that it is the opposite – Nick is the actual victim of an elaborately calculated revenge plot constructed by Amy. However, in line with the femme fatale trope, Amy's character is ultimately doomed. At the end of the story, she returns to and reunites with her husband, having fallen back in love with him.⁶ Amy's character is a good representation of the femme fatale for a few reasons. First, she is beautiful, unknowable, and mysterious to her male partner. Additionally, she betrays him, using murder as a tool to seek revenge against him. Finally, despite seeming so powerful, calculative, and independent, her plots are doomed because she cannot stop herself from falling in love with her male partner and returning to him.

Section II – Physical Beauty, Sexuality, and Women's Empowerment

Within oppressive structures, it is not unusual for marginalized individuals to seek out tangible means through which to feel some sense of control and power in their lives. Within the

⁶ Rothfeld, B. (2014, October 8). *Gone Girl's Feminist Update of the Old-Fashioned Femme Fatale*. The New Republic. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from <https://newrepublic.com/article/119743/gone-girl-has-offered-feminism-new-hero>.

structure of the patriarchy, women have historically sought power by pursuing (1) physical beauty and (2) personal pleasure through sexuality.

Physical beauty remains presented as a potent pathway to power for women. “[Beauty] is the prize claimed by the victors of struggles over human worth. The sting of ugliness is a weapon used by those at the top of social hierarchies to assert superiority over groups they deem inferior and, therefore, ugly. Celebrating the beauty of one’s people has been a way to fight back. Most of the time, women are the beauties crowned by these struggles over collective worth.”⁷ Possessing physical beauty that aligns with the established beauty standard means possessing an inherent power and superiority over peers. Importantly, as this quote notes, this dynamic is inherently gendered, specifically targeting women. Beautiful women – not men – are the “prizes” of entire communities of people to be utilized not only as objects for admiration but as tools to disparage the worth of others. Thus, with this burden historically falling entirely on the shoulders of women, this dynamic presents an immense amount of pressure and a potential avenue for women to empower themselves. However, this path is complicated, as it hinges entirely on remaining palatable to a specific ideal of beauty that can unexpectedly and drastically shift at any moment. Additionally, physical beauty may not be compatible with an individual’s professional pursuits or passions. As one feminist scholar notes, “sexual attractiveness is the ultimate measure of a success for a woman – whatever else she is, she must also be beautiful and normatively strive for perfection.”⁸

⁷ Craig, M. L. (2021). *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics: Introduction* (pp. 3-8). Routledge. <https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1242019026>.

⁸ Gill, R. (2021). *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics: Neoliberal Beauty* (pp. 9-18). Routledge. <https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1242019026>.

Thus, the pursuit of physical beauty is a complex tool for women's empowerment, as it hinges entirely on external validation. Being beautiful does not guarantee that a woman will escape gender-based violence or discrimination. Additionally, in some ways, women do not get to choose whether or not they want to be subjected to societal ideals of beauty. Especially in our modern context, we are constantly confronted with the “ideals” of beauty through typical media like magazines, television, and film, as well as social media, an inescapable landscape of FaceTune and filters. For women, beauty is both a tool for personal empowerment and a necessity to be accepted by their communities. Furthermore, beauty appears ever-changing and somewhat unattainable. Beauty as a “tool” for women’s empowerment is inherently contradictory and dissonant, leading one to question whether it can really be considered a pathway to empowerment if a sense of personal struggle is central to its existence.

Historically, women have also sought empowerment against oppressive patriarchal structures by exploring personal pleasure through sexuality. In her work *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, author Audre Lorde discusses how the patriarchy has demonized female eroticism to diminish its power to empower individuals. Specifically, she emphasizes how personal connection to one’s eroticism allows for a more complete understanding of what generates joy in all aspects of life.

“Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy... That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of our capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife. This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave

responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.”⁹

Lorde argues that connecting with our eroticism not only allows us to identify what generates joy in our lives but also, importantly, to actively seek out and demand the dynamics, places, and things that generate joy in all areas of our lives. Through connecting with our eroticism, Lorde asserts that we can view our lives through a lens that centers personal pleasure in an inescapable way such that one refuses to accept convention or tradition that stifles our ability to feel genuine fulfillment. This centering of joy for which she advocates threatens a patriarchal structure that demands blind acceptance of established gender roles. Furthermore, she writes, “[when] in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.”¹⁰ Thus, unlike empowerment via physical beauty, which is widely idealized within patriarchal values and relies heavily on external validation, empowerment via sexuality and pleasure differs in that the work is done and power comes from within an individual themselves.

The trope of the femme fatale represents not only the patriarchal demonization of female eroticism but also the pitfalls of relying upon physical beauty to empower oneself within a patriarchal structure. As discussed in Section I of this paper, this narrative trope serves primarily as a threat to women regarding the dangers of tapping into or exploring their sexuality. Her story paints female sexuality as an uncontrollable weapon that brings harm not only to herself but to those around her as well. Furthermore, despite the femme fatale being presented as beautiful, this quality does not protect her from violence and tragedy, given that her story either ends with her

⁹“Audre Lorde Reads Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power (FULL Updated).” *Youtube*, uploaded by Growbean, 1 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0.

¹⁰“Audre Lorde Reads Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power (FULL Updated).” *Youtube*, uploaded by Growbean, 1 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0.

submission to a male partner or her death. Therefore, analysis of the femme fatale's story through a lens that centers her voice provides a unique opportunity to explore how these dynamics impact her life and emotional world.

Section III – Creative Component: “The Original Sinner”

As a culmination of this research, I choreographed a dance work for *Scripps Dances 2024* entitled “The Original Sinner,” performed on April 12th and 13th at Garrison Theater. My goal for this piece was to illustrate the emotional complexity of the femme fatale character, an aspect of her experience not usually displayed to audiences. Specifically, I hoped to address (1) the facet of this trope that allows audiences to see just her external physical beauty, but not the character's internal struggle associated with her pursuit of that ideal and (2) the character's internal grappling with the knowledge that her beauty may not be enough to escape patriarchal violence. I wanted to show the emotional weight and exhaustion that accompanies not only pursuing power through external beauty within a violent patriarchal structure but also her experience as said patriarchal structure reacts to and punishes her for tapping into her sexuality. I chose to draw both on my training in modern dance techniques and heels dance to bring this character to life.

Title

I chose to title my work “The Original Sinner” in reference to the Biblical “original sin” of Eve. Although this piece is not a discussion of any religious notions regarding gender roles and femininity, I feel that the stories of Eve in the Bible and the femme fatale are intimately related. Both characters exemplify the trend of negative judgments and blame being unfairly placed upon a narrative's female character, who is subsequently punished for her apparent

transgression. I felt compelled to make this reference in my title because I want to clarify for my audience the intention of my piece – not to demonize these women further but rather to question why our society is so quick to ascribe negative labels to women who do not abide by established patriarchal values of femininity.

Costuming

Throughout my process, I felt drawn to include red in my costume design due to the supposed suggestive nature of women dressed in red. Upon further research, I discovered this dynamic is called the “red dress effect” among social psychologists. In short, according to a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, “[men] perceive women in red as sexually receptive. Men perceive sexually receptive women as attractive.”¹¹ Thus, including red in my costume design felt essential to build into the character’s outward “design” as sexually alluring.

I centered my dancers’ comfort and consent as much as possible in this part of my process. I felt my dancers were already pushing their comfort zones in performing provocative movements, and I wanted to ensure they felt safe and comfortable in their performance wear. Therefore, I largely let dancers pick their costumes from their closets, giving the following directives: (1) clothing must be red, burgundy, or black, and (2) clothing should be tight fitting or “sleek.” Additionally, I noted that hair should be styled out of their face and that they would wear red lipstick. To supplement the items my dancers provided, I used my \$200 costume budget from the Dance Department to buy black high-ankle socks for the non-heels dancers, one pair of black leggings, one black bra top, four red fishnet shrugs, and one burgundy mesh shrug.

¹¹ Pazda, A. D., Elliot, A. J., & Greitemeyer, T. (2012). Sexy red: Perceived sexual receptivity mediates the red-attraction relation in men viewing woman. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(3), 787-790. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.12.009>.

Music

My ultimate goal for this work was to progress from performing the stereotypes of the femme fatale and fulfilling the audience's expectations regarding this character to disrupting their assumptions and displaying her usually unseen emotional complexity by the work's culmination. I felt that creating a soundscape that clearly delineated this progression was essential to my project.

For the beginning of the piece, I chose a section from [Escalate by Tsar B](#). This song has precise beats that invite very specific and musical choreography, which helped develop the notion of the performed character's strong sense of confidence and her control over her environment. I then selected [6 Inch by Beyoncé featuring The Weeknd](#) to follow. I collaborated with Pitzer College artist LIKETHEHIGHWAY to edit the transition between *Escalate* and *6 Inch*. The lyrics of *6 Inch* discuss how hot and alluring this woman is, meeting our preconceived expectations about the femme fatale character based on how her story is usually told. For instance, the song opens with "Six inch heels, she walked in the club like nobody's business. Goddamn, she murdered everybody, and I was her witness"¹² (Appendix A, 1:43-1:57). These lines are repeated at several points throughout the song as well, confirming the complete power this character has over her surroundings – and that her peers appear helpless against said power. Finally, this song ends by once again affirming her control over her peers: "Ooh, boy, I'll make you feel [that] you'll always come back to me. Come back, come back..."¹³ (Appendix A, 5:05-5:32). When she is seemingly beckoning the audience to her, the lyrics illustrate that she is inescapable. Even if someone tries to escape her, they are always drawn back to her. Thus, I

¹² (2016, April 23). *Beyoncé – 6 Inch Lyrics*. Genius. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://genius.com/Beyonce-6-inch-lyrics>.

¹³ Ibid.

selected this song for my soundscape because its narrative contributes to the central assumption of the femme fatale trope – that beautiful women are both immensely powerful and equally threatening.

After ending *6 Inch*, I wanted to signal to my audience that my piece was shifting away from the established narrative trope. Therefore, I added in the sound of a cassette being inserted into and played through a cassette deck (Appendix A, 5:33-5:41). While *Escalate* and *6 Inch* talked about our female character from a third-party, external perspective, I wanted my audience to know that, from this moment onward in the piece, the story would be told by this woman herself, emulating a confessional or diary entry. Additionally, I wanted to generate a sense of discomfort for my audience and disrupt their potential assumptions about the arc of the piece. Therefore, the transition from the sonically full soundscapes in both *Escalate* and *6 Inch* to the simple sound of a cassette playing felt like a simple yet effective method of disrupting the established pattern. Furthermore, generating discomfort beginning at this moment felt essential so that the audience could start evaluating why it felt so natural and comfortable to judge and sexualize this character until now.

I followed this moment with a piece by feminist musician and artist Paris Paloma titled [*the fruits*](#). I selected this song because it includes chanting that mimics the sonic fullness of both *Escalate* and *6 Inch*, but with drastically different lyrics that instead describe this woman's experience enduring various forms of gendered violence. One notable section of the song highlights this theme: "Devil, you call me, but seems to be enjoying the fruits of my labor that came to me too young. When he stole my virtue, I'm glad it seems to serve you that I was born a daughter and not a son"¹⁴ (Appendix A, 7:09-7:21). I appreciated this lyrical moment specifically

¹⁴ (2022, April 29). *Paris Paloma – the fruits Lyrics*. Genius. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://genius.com/Paris-paloma-the-fruits-lyrics>.

because it directly confronts our society's dynamic of overly sexualizing women and then demonizing them for said perceived sexuality. Additionally, this song begins with one woman speaking, as if we are overhearing her confession, which I felt successfully contributed to the narrative environment I hoped to generate.

For the final song, I selected *LABOUR (the cacophony)*, also written by Paris Paloma. This song's overarching theme describes the explicit and invisible violence as well as the abuse of power within heterosexual relationships that result from patriarchal values. More specifically, it details the imbalance of labor performed by women in these relationships, implying that the amount of work women are expected to do without complaint is literally killing them. The chorus says, "The capillaries in my eyes are bursting. If our love died, would that be the worst thing? For somebody I thought was my saviour, you sure make me do a whole lot of labour. The calloused skin on my hands is crackin'. If our love ends, would that be a bad thing? And the silence haunts our bed chamber, you make me do too much labour"¹⁵ (Appendix A, 9:56-10:19 & 11:10-11:33). These lyrics emphasize that the amount of work she is expected to perform both for and by her male partner – an unaddressed dynamic that "haunts" their relationship – is bringing her bodily harm.

The song also describes how women often recognize their powerlessness over their own lives and their inability to protect future generations of women from suffering the same fate, writing, "[if] we had a daughter, I'd watch and could not save her. The emotional torture from the head of your high table. She'd do what you taught her, she'd meet the same cruel fate"¹⁶ (Appendix A, 10:43-10:59). Finally, I found that the sonically overwhelming nature of the end of

¹⁵ (2024, March 29). Paris Paloma – *LABOUR (the cacophony)* Lyrics. Genius. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://genius.com/Paris-paloma-labour-the-cacophony-lyrics>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the song corresponds with how I imagine the femme fatale must truly feel – deeply frustrated and frantic at her lack of control over her life and fate. The end of the song lays out the roles that the patriarchy says women are supposed to fill seamlessly, illustrating the absurdity of this premise. “All day, every day, therapist, mother, maid, nymph, then a virgin, nurse, then a servant. Just an appendage, live to attend him, so that he never lifts a finger. 24/7 baby machine, so he can live out his picket fence dreams. It's not an act of love if you make her. You make me do too much labour”¹⁷ (Appendix A, 11:34-12:18). While her male partner is expected to do relatively fewer tasks, just because she is a woman, our leading character is required to fulfill these countless and, at times, contradictory duties, highlighting the impossible list of responsibilities women shoulder within our society’s patriarchal structure.

Movement

In generating movement, I focused on embodying the stereotypical personality traits of the femme fatale. In the first two songs, the choreography presented our character as we know her – cunning, manipulative, and confident. Specifically, to embody her “manipulative” quality, I crafted movements and formations demonstrating her control of the people with whom she shares space. For instance, at the beginning of *6 Inch* (Appendix B, 1:20-2:03), the ensemble of dancers is drawn physically towards her at the back of the stage before she “parts” them to make a pathway for herself to walk toward the audience. This moment ends with her making a hand gesture that compels the ensemble dancers to fall to the ground suddenly, demonstrating her complete control over her peers and her apparent heartless apathy towards others. She seemingly has no remorse regarding using and harming others to advance herself. *6 Inch* culminates with

¹⁷ (2024, March 29). *Paris Paloma – LABOUR (the cacophony) Lyrics*. Genius. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://genius.com/Paris-paloma-labour-the-cacophony-lyrics>.

the whole cast of dancers onstage, with the heels dancers slinkily dragging black folding chairs from offstage (Appendix B, 4:32-5:24). This section was one of the first sequences I created, as “chair dancing” feels like a very stereotypical representation of the kind of woman I was portraying. I drew inspiration from the imagery of Taylor Swift’s performance of *Vigilante Shit* from *The Eras Tour*, which features scantily clad, conventionally attractive individuals performing intentionally provocative choreography in chairs (Appendix C). At the culmination of this sequence, the dancers perform three sharp, quick changes into different positions. In combination with specific lighting choices that I will discuss in the following subsection of this paper, I intended to create “freeze frames,” thus building on the outward performance energy of the piece (Appendix B, 5:25-5:38).

In generating choreography for my solo in *the fruits* and the group movement for *LABOUR*, I hoped to embody the femme fatale’s emotional overwhelm, exhaustion, and frustration. The ending sequence of my solo in *the fruits* overtly emphasizes this goal (Appendix B, 7:47-9:07). Up until this moment in the piece, the audience has viewed my character principally from the front. However, after rolling on the floor, I dramatically reach toward the chair and pull it towards myself so that its seat is facing the stage left wings rather than the audience. By changing the chair’s angle, the audience has no choice but to view my character differently. Additionally, because my focus changes from forward toward the audience, this moment demarcates a shift away from performing for the audience. In not acknowledging the audience as she had previously, I hoped to generate a sense of discomfort for the audience. Specifically, I sought to emulate the practice of praying at a church pew, which is generally considered a private practice. Therefore, I wanted my audience to feel like they were invading a personal and vulnerable moment, watching something they were not supposed to.

Additionally, in this part of my solo, I wanted to signal discomfort to my audience by explicitly displaying my personal uneasiness. When dancing in this section, I felt particularly uncomfortable and exposed. Historically, I have tried to conceal my human traits, such as my physical or emotional exhaustion, because, in my training, there has always been an explicit emphasis on being “aesthetically pleasing” and “beautiful” when performing. However, when choreographing this moment, I felt strongly that I must embody my character’s mental anguish. That is, canonically, the femme fatale is always viewed as pretty and only pretty, but to tell her true story, I needed to demonstrate to my audience that she is more than just a pretty face. I needed to step outside my comfort zone and explicitly emphasize my physical exhaustion so my audience could not overlook it. Demonstrating this character’s emotional complexity meant showing my own humanity, too.

Two sections in *LABOUR* particularly capture my intended narrative arc of the character away from her stereotypical portrayal towards a more complex, human one. First, before the second chorus, one dancer at the downstage stage left corner of the stage dramatically removes their heel (Appendix B, 10:48-11:11). At this point in the music, the lyrics reference the character’s recognition of her powerlessness to protect either herself or future generations of women from enduring gendered violence and oppression. I felt strongly that this moment choreographically needed to highlight that this awareness does not bring our character peace but is entirely overwhelming for her. In becoming self-aware that being beautiful did not protect her from patriarchal violence and that she never had power over her fate, the facade has shattered, and she can no longer bear to perform for the patriarchy as she had previously. Additionally, this moment carries a distinct sense of anger to develop this character's emotional complexity further. She feels betrayed that, despite her best efforts to align with the physical beauty ideals of the

patriarchy, she was always fated to be powerless. Therefore, looking to relieve her frustration regarding a social structure that could not care less about her well-being, she directs her anger towards her heels, which have come to symbolize that perceived betrayal. Thus, removing her heel and throwing it offstage represents yet another feeble example of her clawing for a sense of control and power in her life.

Second, during the bridge and final chorus of *LABOUR*, the dancers repeat a choreographed gestural phrase in three disparate iterations (Appendix B, 11:38-12:48). I decided to create three differing repetitions of the same phrase to demonstrate the emotional and mental breakdown of our character, once again emphasizing the notion that, once she becomes aware of her lack of control, she completely falls apart. In the first iteration, one downstage dancer performs the gestural phrase in its entirety, facing the audience. While the downstage dancer does the gesture phrase, the rest of the ensemble is slightly upstage of them, facing the downstage stage left corner of the stage. While maintaining a crouched, pounce-like position on the floor, they complete four repeated chest isolations while maintaining an intense gaze toward the corner, generating a palpable sense of anger. They then complete two isolated, mechanical movements to shift their focus and face towards the audience. This moment creates an inescapable feeling that these people both are seeing and confronting the audience. Finally, the ensemble slowly transitions into various positions from the gestural phrase.

In the second iteration, the downstage dancer repeats the gestural phrase, and each individual in the ensemble joins her at different moments in the phrase. By the final few gestures of the phrase, everyone in the ensemble moves together as one. Notably, everyone in the ensemble completes the four slaps of the floor, followed by the audible exhalation, a moment that I intended to forcibly confront the audience with the labor and exhaustion of this character.

In this repetition, I intended to generate a sense of overwhelm of the audience, building up to so much movement performed by so many people on stage that it is almost too much for them to process.

In the third and final iteration, each dancer performs their own version of the gesture phrase. Intentionally, there is no apparent cohesiveness of the movement in this section, indicative that our character has completely broken down. I intended this section to be entirely overwhelming for the audience. I hoped that generating a sense of complete overwhelm at the culmination of my piece could help my audience understand, at least in some part, how this woman feels. By giving them a taste of her emotional experience, I hope my audience re-evaluated our shared inclination to judge and punish women like her.

Lighting

For my piece, I chose to have no cyclorama (“cyc”) projecting color at the back of the stage. Instead, dropping the black curtain at the back of the stage generated a sense of closeness between the dancers and the audience, bettering my intended narrative arc for my piece.

For *Escalate* and *6 Inch*, I intended to mimic the environment of a private club, emphasizing the notion of explicit performance. The piece starts very dark and red in a way that silhouettes the dancers (Appendix B, 0:04-0:37). Throughout *Escalate*, the lighting remains fairly dark and red, generating a sense of mystery that is alluring for the audience. *6 Inch* begins with a flashing upstage center spotlight to introduce a new “character” – the first dancer in heels – to the audience, which is followed by the creation of a spotlit center stage catwalk that she uses to walk toward the audience (Appendix B, 1:28-2:03). For the entirety of *6 Inch*, we remain in this club-like lightscape, as even when the stage is fully lit, the stage still seems dark and

shadowy, with red undertones. Finally, in the final group ensemble of *6 Inch*, the stage is flooded with red and blue light (Appendix B, 4:43-5:23). I intended this moment to look incredibly visually dynamic, emphasizing the notion that the dancers are truly performing for the audience. This section ends with four dynamic lighting changes –which I intended to mimic freeze frames in videography.

An abrupt lighting shift denotes the thematic shift from *6 Inch* to *the fruits*, away from a dramatic and multicolored visual landscape to a singular white spotlight at center stage (Appendix B, 5:10-6:12). In using just one light source to highlight a single dancer at center stage, this signals a change from this character performing for the audience to a more intimate, private practice of confession that is not intended to be a show for a third party. Notably, while the first half of the dance (*Escalate* and *6 Inch*) includes many lighting shifts, the second half (*the fruits* and *LABOUR*) features relatively simple lighting choices and fewer changes. This choice was intended to allow the audience’s focus to fall mainly on the dancer’s movement and message. Additionally, when the lighting does shift during *the fruits* from a single white spotlight to muted yellow-orange light emerging from the wings, the stage overall remains quite dark, intended to invoke a haunting feeling for the audience (Appendix B, 8:23).

This “haunting” and dimly-lit landscape remains until the pre-chorus before the second chorus in *LABOUR*, at which point the entire stage goes black except for a singular spotlight at the downstage stage left corner (Appendix B, 10:48-11:11). One dancer is illuminated as they remove one of their heels dramatically as if we are “zooming in” on them before quickly broadening our focus back to the whole group. I intended for this moment to further build a sense of intimacy between my dancers and their audience, seemingly shrinking the perceived distance between these two groups. For the final ensemble movement in *LABOUR* that culminates the

work, I returned to the same dark red color landscape from the very beginning of the piece. However, while this landscape represents something alluring and mysterious at the piece's start, at this point in the dance, this environment instead generates feelings of rage, frustration, and emotional overwhelm. These emotions are highlighted by the lights pulsing darker with the beats of the music, emulating a heartbeat. In the final repetition of the song's chorus, the lights flash erratically, mimicking both the overwhelming sound of the music and the staggering amount of disparate movement being performed by the dancers. These choices felt essential to highlight the emotional overwhelm of the character for the audience by the story's culmination.

Post-Performance Reflection

Performing this piece was the most emotional performance experience I can recall from recent memory. As previously discussed, I felt compelled to create this project because I relate to the gendered pressures, oppression, and violence that the femme fatale endures. However, I did not expect this piece to elicit such an intense emotional response from myself when performing, as I do not usually feel emotionally overwhelmed even when performing intense or emotional pieces. Additionally, I do not often share my feelings or experiences with gendered oppression with others, let alone on such a public platform, as these sentiments make me feel vulnerable and small. Performing this dance emphasized for myself the internal work I still have to do unpacking my own internalized misogyny and discomfort regarding discussions of my experiences of gender-based oppression and violence.

Additionally, at the end of each performance, many of my cast found ourselves in tears, having truly experienced the sense of emotional overwhelm we sought to portray. We discussed that this resulted from feeling an overwhelming sense of liberation and empowerment in openly

sharing our experiences and feelings regarding living within a social structure that has hurt us. Additionally, countless people who saw the show approached me to share similar feedback and sentiments. It was validating that my work generated a sense of community among people who felt silenced within our patriarchal social structure. I am proud, grateful, and honored to have created art with which many people resonate. This response to my piece emphasizes that art continues to be a vital and effective avenue through which people can process the oppression they have faced, thus demonstrating the continued need for future works that openly comment on the oppressive and violent social structures that shape our lives and communities.

Conclusion

This project researched the narrative trope of the femme fatale in the media with the goal of further developing her character to illustrate her humanity. More specifically, this work highlights her emotional complexity as she attempts to seek empowerment through the avenues of physical beauty and sexuality within a patriarchal social structure. This research culminated with the creation of a choreographed work for a concert dance setting entitled “The Original Sinner,” which was showcased at the *Scripps Dances 2024* concert on April 12th and 13th, 2024, at Garrison Theater. The reception of this piece indicates the continued need for future work that openly discusses the various oppressive social structures that shape our lives. Although I do not know how exactly dance and generating choreography fit into my future plans, I know that creating this work has left lasting impacts on me. Specifically, this piece’s subject matter of violence within a hegemonic gendered social structure will remain something I am passionate about and center in my public health career. I look forward to exploring how this research can be applied in non-dance academic spaces and research. Dance will always be a part of my life and

identity. Still, I am excited to see how my relationship with this incredible art form evolves as I move into a chapter where I regard dance as my hobby rather than my central subject of study.

Appendix

A: [Full music file](#)

B: [Performance video from April 13, 2024](#)

C: [Taylor Swift's performance of *Vigilate Shit* from *The Eras Tour*](#)

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