

**The Body as a Conflation of Discourses:
The *femme fatale* in Mercè Rodoreda's
Mirall trencat (1974)**

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The *femme fatale* is a product of the male imaginary, which emerges in literature and the visual arts under contingent socio-political conditions as a challenge to coherent and stable identities. This study therefore reads the *femme fatale* as symbol and symptom of patriarchy's fears and anxieties, a sign of multiple alterity, and a bodily surface where divergent discourses of power specific to early twentieth-century Catalonia conflate and argues that, by imbuing her female heroines with some of the characteristics of this literary and cinematic female figure, Rodoreda not only exposes fissures within a hegemonic system which feels increasingly under threat but also rewrites this emblem of multiple otherness ultimately displacing it from the confines of the male imaginary.

The emergence of the *femme fatale* motif in literature, art and cinema generally coincides with periods of social or political instability and is not specific to a culture, society or era, but exhibits countless masks as she may manifest herself in diverse historical or geo-political contexts, and through a variety of artistic and literary forms. She embodies traces of a myriad of powerful, as well as menacing, historical, biblical and mythical female figures, such as Cleopatra, Salome, or the Sirens; yet this wicked and barren creature is always imbued with an alluring beauty and rapacious sexuality that is potentially deadly to man. The *femme fatale* figure is a recurrent patriarchal construct, a projection of all that exists beyond that which is normal, familiar, or safe. As Rebecca Stott observes, she is a multiple sign, or 'the Other around whom the qualities of all Other collect in the male imagination' (1992: 39). As such, her appearances are always symptomatic of a society in crisis. This article will explore Mercè Rodoreda's redeployment of the *femme fatale* trope in her novel *Mirall trencat* by arguing that by endowing her female heroines with traits of this signifier of multiple alterity, Rodoreda not only

exposes a hegemonic system that feels increasingly under threat but also reinscribes culturally and socially binding notions of femininity and female sexuality current in *fin de siècle* Catalonia.

Mirall trencat is loosely set between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the Francoist regime. During this period, Catalonia underwent profound social, economic and political changes, yet contextual specificity in this novel is skilfully disguised in the text, subtly and sporadically surfacing out of inconsequential data or as mere trivia. As time and historical detail elide into each character's personal experience, several layers of embodied cultural, social and political signification converge on the figure of the *femme fatale*. Divergent discourses on Catalonia's political sovereignty, interclass conflict and social unrest, female agency and fears about social, cultural and moral degeneration all conflate on this signifier of danger and multiple otherness. Traditionally, the representation of the *femme fatale* in the visual arts and literature has served patriarchy's purpose to assert its authority and control and consequently she is invariably either punished or destroyed for challenging gendered social norms and undermining masculine power. As Frank Krutnick reminds us, in film *noir* '[t]he *femme fatale* is often a scapegoat [...] for a more extensive and much less easily acknowledged erosion of confidence in the structuring mechanisms of masculine identity and the masculine role' (1991: 64). By no means do all of Rodoreda's *femme fatales* escape their transgressions unscathed. However, in adapting and modifying the generic conventions that render woman a danger to man and society, Rodoreda disarticulates the mechanisms whereby this patriarchal construct functions as a means to stabilise and re-establish identity coherence.

In *Mirall trencat*, Teresa Goday, the daughter of a fishmonger and the young mother of an illegitimate son, uses her bewitching beauty to climb the social ladder by means of marriage. In the course of her life, she lures two rich men into matrimony and another one into adultery and from each one of them she obtains either influence and wealth, or a means to satiate 'her thirst for love' (182) / 'la seva set d'amor' (232). The novel's opening chapter constructs parvenu Teresa as the duplicitous *femme fatale* as it unveils her ploy to deceive her first husband, elderly and frail Nicolau Rovira, into believing that

she has lost the valuable diamond brooch that he gave her as a gift just a few days before. In fact, Teresa has cunningly re-sold the expensive piece back to the jeweller in order to raise enough money to pay for the maintenance of her son, whose existence is unknown to Rovira, and ensure that he is adopted by his father. In this first chapter, Rodoreda adapts formulaic conventions of the *noir* genre, thus heightening Teresa's *fatale* qualities of the deceitful seductress entering a masculine space, the atmosphere charged with sexual tension, and the agreed deal to con the woman's ingenuous husband.

Mary Ann Doane observes that in cinema, the cunning nature of the *femme fatale* is intensified as visual certainty is denied to the viewer by means of partially concealing her body, either by leaving her in shadow or by use of a veil, fan or mask (1991: 46). In the same way as her cinematic counterpart, Teresa's dark motives are alluded to at the moment she enters the jeweller's dimly lit office, rendering her presence and actions suspicious, '[a] lamp on his desk with a green shade left her in shadow. Better that way; she felt protected' (6) / 'un llum amb el pàmpol verd que la deixava mig a l'ombra. Valia més així, protegida' (34). Indeed, there are numerous occasions throughout the novel when Teresa's identity is partially obscured, or masked, and these are always suggestive of her devious intentions. For example, a few years later, Teresa, by then a spendthrift widow, attends a carnival ball and dances all night with the smitten Salvador Valldaura. On that occasion a masked Teresa, cools herself down after the dance using a fan that has 'an apple painted on the fabric' (20) / 'a la tela hi havia una poma pintada' (49) which not only further accentuates her duplicity but, in featuring an apple, the symbol of temptation and original sin, it also associates Teresa's seductive strategies with the downfall of man.

If the fragmentation of the female body by means of visual obstruction intensifies the instability of the *femme fatale*'s identity, the uncertainty of her bodily integrity is further problematised as she transgresses regulatory gender boundaries in her struggle to access the realm of the masculine. Doane notes that in the process of attaining power and authority, the *femme fatale* becomes masculinised. Therefore, in order to neutralise her acquired masculinity she needs to flaunt femininity and female sexuality or 'masquerade the feminine by

presenting femininity in excess' (1991: 225). Indeed, Teresa is often seen performing hyperbolic femininity to turn a situation to her own advantage. However, her outward coyness and concealment, contradict the deadly sexuality common to the *femme fatale*. Thus when besotted Valldaura calls around to her apartment in order to propose, Teresa saunters into the parlour to greet him in a silk gown lightly covering her voluptuous naked body and wearing a heady perfume. The tactile texture of the silk and its scooping sound add to an atmosphere of excess and sensuality:

Teresa, who was dressing to go out, took off her clothes in a hurry and, clad in her most sumptuous robe, entered the living room amid waves of perfume and the rustling of silk, asking Valldaura to forgive her for receiving him in such a manner but she had been resting and hadn't wanted him to wait. (21)

La Teresa, que s'estava vestint per sortir, es despullà amb quatre esgarrapades i, amb la bata més sumptuosa que tenia, entrà al saló voltada d'onades de perfum i de cruiximents de seda i digué a Valldaura que la dispensés de rebre'l d'aquella manera però que estava descansant i no l'havia volgut fer esperar. (50)

At the jeweller's office, Teresa's flaunted femininity entails an apparently innocent but sexually inviting gaze thus finally persuading the jeweller to re-buy the brooch and profit in its future re-sale, 'And, looking at him with honeyed eyes, she added, "My husband does not know, nor should he ever know." (6) / 'I mirant-lo amb els ulls melosos afegí: "El meu marit no ho sap ni ho ha de saber mai"' (35). A few years later Teresa will again 'perform' femininity and deceit in a similar setting and in comparable circumstances when she visits the attorney Amadeu Riera (who later becomes her lover) and convinces him to stop Valldaura from selling one of his properties to his friend, Quim Berguedà. On that occasion, after excessive initial coquetry, Teresa reveals her ploy and clearly sets out her need for "a powerful ally" (105) / 'un aliat poderós' (139). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is not 'essential' or natural but culturally inscribed in the body by the reiteration of 'gendered' acts. Gender is thus a

choice of acts performed by the body and '[t]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms' (Butler in Salih 2002: 46-7). Butler contends that it is possible to expose the artificial quality of gender and therefore destabilise the mechanisms whereby fixed categories of identity are reproduced and sustained. In re-writing the *femme fatale* formula through Teresa's body, Rodoreda subverts period specific notions of bourgeois womanhood. Indeed, in flaunting femininity in excess, Teresa is exposing the constructedness of gender, therefore challenging coherent and stable class specific gender identities. Moreover, in adapting the *femme fatale* motif, Rodoreda is also able to dislodge notions of femininity and female sexuality from the specific social, spatial and sexual coordinates of the domestic sphere.

Yet there is another fundamental aspect to the *femme fatale* figure which renders her a major threat to established social and gender norms, and that is her quality as the intrusive and multiple 'other'. Rebecca Stott observes that 'the major common feature of the *femme fatale* is that of *positionality*: she is a multiple sign singularised by her position of Otherness: outside, invading, abnormal, subnormal and so on' (37-8). Before Teresa's ruse is fully disclosed to the reader, her duplicitous nature is insinuated by 'el senyor Begú', the jeweller, who is circumspect about her class otherness, '[h]e knew their story: Senyor Rovira, in his old age, had married a girl of low origins; who knew what those seemingly innocent eyes and that great beauty might hide?' (4) / '[c]oneixia la història: que el senyor Rovira s'havia casat amb una noia d'origen molt baix, i vés a saber què hi havia darrera d'aquells ulls que semblaven tan innocents i darrera de tanta bellesa' (32). Interestingly, Begú, the reputable owner of a jewellery, a few days later will '[look] at her complicitly' (7) / 'amb els ulls plens de malícia' (35) and agree to swindle Rovira out of a substantial amount of money. The financial transaction is charged with sexual connotations which render Teresa sexually dishonest, '[t]hen Senyor Begú, who had softly brushed her fingertips in giving her the bills, put the brooch in one of the drawers of his desk' (7) / 'Aleshores, el senyor Begú, que en donar-li els bitllets li havia fregat les puntes dels

dits amb suavitat, posà la joia dins d'un calaix de la taula' (35). By daring to touch Teresa as he hands out the money, Begú not only constructs Teresa as a sexual commodity but also as a class and sexual 'other' in relation to the period stereotypes of bourgeois femininity.

Barbara Creed observes that, in film *noir*, the lethal *femme fatale* 'who carries a gun in her purse, is regarded as a classic example of the phallic woman' (157). In *Mirall trencat*'s subplot however, the *noirish* deadly gun is substituted by the significantly less lethal but equally phallic brooch and tiepin. Indeed, references to pins and sharp objects, such as knives, recur throughout the novel and connect female deceit with seduction, unbounded female sexuality and emasculation. Rovira wishes to buy Teresa a jewel and chooses a precious diamond brooch to be pinned on her breast. Further, he describes Teresa as 'a pearl' (5) / 'una perla' (33), but the only pearls that feature in the novel are associated with male characters. At the jewellery shop, one of the first things that Teresa notices about Begú is the pearl that he wears pinned to his tie, '[s]he glanced at him on the sly: he must have been over fifty, but he looked as though he'd just turned forty – tall, elegant in his dark pin-striped suit, and wearing a gray pearl on his tie' (4) / '[l]i donà un cop d'ull d'esquitllentes: devia tenir ben bé cinquanta anys, però semblava que acabés de complir els quaranta, dret, elegant, amb el vestit fosc ratllat i una perla grisa al mig de la corbata' (32). And significantly, when Teresa marries Valldaura, she buys him a similar pearl tiepin which, upon his death, she secretly removes from his tie and gives to her lover. By placing the pearl, a symbol of hidden beauty, love and femininity, on men, Rodoreda resignifies the realm of the masculine. However, unlike the sailor in her short story, *La meva Cristina*, whose pearl encrusted skin is charged with connotations of female pollution and social exile, in *Mirall trencat* the pearl is suggestive of both emasculation and unbound female sexuality.

Sofia suspected everyone of the staff, but it was she, Teresa Valldaura, the wife of Salvador Valldaura, who had taken the pearl from the dead man's tie. Too beautiful to end up in a graveyard. She had pinned it to her bodice before leaving the library, and no one would ever find it. Not ever again. Two men had worn that pearl. She had given it to the second to

forget the first. A gray, pink, and blue pearl that seemed alive and that she removed from Amadeu's tie with her teeth. (181)

La Sofia pensà mal de totes les minyones i era ella, Teresa Valldaura, muller de Salvador Valldaura, la que havia tret la perla de la corbata del mort. Massa bonica per acabar en un cementiri. Se l'havia clavada al cosset abans de sortir de la biblioteca i no la trobaria mai més ningú. Aquella perla l'havien lluïda dos homes. I l'havia regalada al segon per oblidar el primer. Una perla grisa rosa i blava que semblava una cosa viva i que ella treia de la corbata de l'Amadeu amb les dents ... (231).

Although neither Teresa's brooch nor the pearl tiepin are used to commit a crime, they are both imbued with connotations of female agency, phallicism, duplicity and fatality. Instead, it will be Maria's phallic implements that will prove to be far more dangerous than those associated with Teresa. Maria, like Teresa, is an outsider. She is the illegitimate daughter of Eladi Farriols and a cabaret dancer, Lady Godiva, brought to the family home as an adopted child by Sofia in order to spite Eladi. Maria's 'otherness' is often brought out by members of the family, especially by little Jaume, who frequently calls her 'adopted' (96) / 'recollida' (121) in retaliation for the constant physical and psychic abuse that she and Ramon subject him to. Maria's *fatale* qualities are discernible at pre-pubescent age. Eulàlia, a family friend and the epitome of bourgeois femininity, finds Maria:

very pretty – more than pretty, stunning. A face of pure beauty and, at once, slightly diabolical. A girl capable of anything. Of anything, really? She could not explain it. Capable of taking and capable of letting go. An unusual face, with an original expression. Eulàlia had her intuitions. If that girl were her daughter, she would be a little afraid of her. (120)

molt bonica; més que bonica, desconcertant. Una cara d'una bellesa pura i, al mateix temps, lleugerament diabòlica. Una noia capaç de tot. ¿De tot què? No sabia explicar-s'ho. Capaç d'aconseguir i capaç de renunciar. Una cara poc corrent, insòlita d'expressió. L'Eulàlia tenia intuïcions. Aquella noia, si fos filla seva, li faria una mica de por. (156)

Phallic Maria, carries a pin attached 'behind the tie of her tartan uniform' (91) / 'clavada darrera de la corbata del seu vestit escocès' (127), and regularly plays with knives which she furtively takes from the villa's kitchen (120 and 192-3). In the same way as Teresa, and Cecília Ce from *El carrer de les Camèlies*, Maria's bewitching beauty is feared as it is seen to mask a devilish capacity to deceive, a trait that is associated to her low class origins or, as in the case of Cecília, unknown parentage. Diabolical Maria is imbued with some of the characteristics of the vampiric *femme fatale* as she is a nocturnal creature, like the adolescent Cecília who spends the night at the cemetery with Eusebi, or later on, whilst living with Cosme, yearns for the time when she was a prostitute and had the freedom of 'wandering at three o'clock in the morning' / 'passejar a les tres de la matinada' (114). Vampiric Maria is attracted to a world forbidden to her, a world associated with danger and vice, inhabited by social outcasts or prostitutes like Cecília, and only accessible to men. She spends the nights under the moonlight on the villa's rooftop with Ramon (130) and relishes the sight of blood: 'Ramon and Maria played at bleeding; they pricked each other's fingers on purpose, and blood appeared on their skin, red, round, shiny.' (93) / 'En Ramon i la Maria de vegades jugaven a fer-se'n; es punxaven els dits espessament i sortia de la pell, lluenta, vermella i rodona.' (128-9). And it will be Maria, with the help of Ramon, who will puncture Jaume's neck with a needle eventually causing his death:

Maria caressed his cheek, like his mama did, and said, "Poor little wimp." Her hand felt sweet, and her eyes shone like the tiny stars falling from the leaves. Ramon yelled, "Now!" Maria held the needle with her fingers. Feeling the prick on his neck, he looked at her like one who did not understand and started sobbing with his mouth open. (96)

La Maria li passà una mà per la galta, com la mamà, i li digué: "pobre nyicris..." tenia la mà dolça i els ulls li brillaven com les estrelletes que anaven caient de les fulles. En Ramon cridà: "¡Ara!" La Maria tenia l'agulla de picar als dits. Quan sentí la punxada al coll la mirà com si no ho entengués i arrencà a plorar amb la boca oberta (131)

The crime, notwithstanding the fact that it has been carried out by two adolescents, has many *noirish* ingredients. The youngsters are both involved in the murder of their younger and feebler brother, an event that instead of bringing the incestuous lovers closer will eventually destroy them. A few years later, after discovering that they are siblings, Ramon, a broken man, runs away from the family home and Maria commits suicide. This incident also marks the final collapse of family life and briefly predates the outbreak of the Spanish Civil war. In any case and unlike the generic *femme fatale* who is severely reprimanded for her transgressions and independent ways, Rodoreda's heroines somehow manage to hold onto their power. Maria refuses a life without her beloved Ramon and escapes punishment by committing suicide; Cecília Ce, empowered by her sexual *fatale* qualities, becomes financially emancipated; and Teresa, whose flawed motherhood and excessive femininity had been scorned by Sofia, becomes an object of her admiration upon her death:

She had not expected the good memories her mother left her. Sofia could see her mother's beautiful face, with that air of hers of feeling happy in life even if her life had not always been golden. After all, she reflected, I owe my power to Teresa Goday' (182)

Trobava curiós el bon record que li havia deixat la seva mare. La veia amb la cara preciosa, amb aquell aire de sentir-se feliç al mig de la vida encara que la vida no hagués estat sempre d'or. Al capdavant, pensava, si sóc poderosa, ho dec a Teresa Goday. (234)

Geraldine Nichols has divided Rodoreda's female fictional characters in two distinct groups, 'the innocents or victims' (171) and the *triomfadores*, or those powerful women 'who have seized control of the signifier' (171). One could add that in re-writing the *femme fatale* motif, Rodoreda not only grants her heroines access to the realm of the symbolic but also crystallises many positions of social, sexual, gendered and political otherness, thus layering the text with boundless contextual as well as intertextual detail.

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