Opera as Text: 
Reading Representations of the Female in Opera Performance

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Abstract

Despite its prevalence as a school of critical thought in other disciplines, feminist criticism is rarely applied to musical arts like opera. The systematic degradation and death of the diva that typically defines great opera works calls out for such an application. I read opera as a text and the plight of these women allows for a dynamic exploration of female agency within patriarchal worlds and their victimization by circumstances like class, lineage, and ethnicity as these ideas are manifest on stage. Thus, my research looks at these concerns in performance, investigating how elements like costuming, direction, and casting may celebrate, condemn, and rethink traditional tragic female representations. Dissecting the diva archetype of the *femme fatale* in four opera masterworks, I aim to examine the fascination with beautiful female death on stage, shedding light on the causality of such persistent, troublesome representations.
—I—

Introduction

“Once upon a time—this is true story—there was a poor old woman who loved opera to death, and who probably was not rich enough to afford herself the luxury of a whole production. Consequently, throughout her entire oldladyhood, the woman who ushered saw her arrive just before the curtain went up on the final act; she took advantage of the seats that were empty, and explained in embarrassment: ‘I come for the death.’”

(Clément 49)

First peeking out from the wings in 1987 with the publication of Catherine Clément’s Opera, or the Undoing of Women, feminist analysis of operatic masterworks has yet to fully make its grand entrance on the stage of music criticism. Despite its prevalence as a major school of critical thought in other humanities disciplines, the application of gender criticism to opera has lagged behind. Clément writes: “Opera is not forbidden to women. This is true. Women are its jewels…the ornament indispensable for every festival. No prima donna, no opera” (5). In the popular imagination of the opera scenario, this is undoubtedly a common image: the diva at the heart of the grand spectacle. Clément proceeds to deconstruct this image, seeking to find its sources in history, in literary theory, and in the opera itself. She claims women have been “undone by society and by society’s mirror: opera” (8). Arguably, this “undoing” resulted in the women of the operatic canon being reduced to stock characters, “Dead women, suffering women, women who are torn…preyed on by their womanhood” (Clément 9). Dreams of opera as society’s mirror cloud our ability to view these characters and storylines at face value: as narratives of sexual mistreatment, drug abuse,
systematic denial of rights and voice, and violent death at the hands of male characters. Feminist theory is not surprisingly somewhat at a loss to address these widespread and widely accepted issues with the tragic diva’s representation.

Taking Clément’s work a step further, my research explores the causality behind these representations through a close examination of opera’s performative and textual aspects, seeking to determine what in the fundamentals of certain operas supports, negates, and perhaps even celebrates these troublesome interpretations. At its core, opera seria presents a phenomenal aesthetic of spectacle centered on beautiful female death, requiring our engagement with it in order for the opera to succeed. In his essay, “What Are These Women Doing in Opera?” Ralph Locke expands on these overly stereotypical and problematic positions the opera’s heroine finds herself in on stage: “Whether you’re costumed in a Paris ball gown or a Japanese kimono, whether you’re princess, prostitute, or pure-minded peasant, you will drag your tuberculosis-wracked body around the stage till you collapse like a rag-doll” (60). The unfortunate truth behind Locke’s description of the operatic female calls out for a critical reconsidering and a thorough examination of the how’s and why’s behind these staged scenarios. Year after year, audience members pay hundreds of dollars to lose themselves in their grandeur and “beauty” for four hours, applauding the dramatic representations of each woman’s plight. Centuries of reverie leave little room for questioning why the tragic diva always dies and why the beauty of her feelings allows for this treatment. This beauty keeps audiences coming back and it is intrinsically necessary for us to participate in and engage with this aesthetic in order for the opera's pathos to flow. Thus, we risk an unsuccessful opera experience, at least traditionally speaking, were
we not to buy into the beauty of what we are being shown, however tragic and denigrating the storyline may be.

Narrowing our focus, the divas explored in this argument fall neatly under the archetype of the *femme fatale*, but express her definitive qualities differently and to different ends. The operatic *femme fatale* is unmistakably “the demonic beauty who could lure men to damnation, and therefore aroused in her beholder fear along with attraction, terror along with desire” (Hutcheon 210). The manifestation of fear/attraction and terror/desire in the moving, singing female body becomes inexplicably fascinating. More importantly, her death, and the death of the tensions she represents, remains continually compelling, even in twenty-first century productions of classic masterworks. In a noteworthy and often overlooked conclusion to the opera, Samuel Barber’s Cleopatra dies as her opera’s hero, a role traditionally reserved for the tenor. Richard Strauss’s Salome presents audiences with an example of the erotized path to self-possession through a temporary domination over patriarchal symbols like Herod, as she is apt at using what he wants to get what she wants. Memorably, Georges Bizet’s Carmen presents a nearly proto-feminist portrayal of sexual and personal freedom until she is literally murdered by the fearful masculine archetype. Lastly, though the title of *femme fatale* suits Lulu, it stops short of the total and utter objectification of the diva occurring in Alban Berg’s 1934 opera.

Complicating these ideas further, taking a close look at all of these female character’s typified positions, *Lulu* scholar Leo Treitler writes: “The *femme fatale* has only to be, she does not have to act in order to activate man’s fear of woman in a male dominated society” (282). Applicable to all four stories, this notion of simply being, of being stripped of one’s ability to self-direct or act outside of a type, compounds these women’s tragedies, which far
surpass their suicides and murders. Each is a skilled performer in a delicate death dance, negotiating and trying to master an existence not created by them, but for them by the surrounding masculine desire and fear. Thus, in the visual and audible drama of the opera stage, the intricate, eroticized negotiation of this dichotomy by Cleopatra, Salome, Carmen, and Lulu becomes deeply provocative. Providing a full-treatment of each diva’s story and the ideological considerations behind the fascination with female death on stage would be an impossible task within the scope of this project. Instead, I will attempt to expose the plight of these women—women who die yet are also deadly—allowing for an investigation into the ideas of heroism, isolation, autonomy, and victimization by circumstances like class, lineage, and ethnicity as they are manifest on stage.
In the last four hundred years, Cleopatra’s story has seeped into every crevice of artistic representation, from painting to dance to symphonic orchestration. The grandeur and complexity of her representation in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, seems especially suited to the swelling, swirling world of the opera stage. This artistic translation from playtext to opera understandably affected the role of Cleopatra, in many ways furthering her representation of Shakespeare’s Queen of the Nile. Looking at Samuel Barber’s opera as a text, his decision to reduce the number of acts from three to two, thus shortening the opera’s length and internal passage of time, Cleopatra’s character arc suffers. Her arias are often condensed versions of her words in the play, juxtaposing words from scenes that are acts away from each other in the playtext. Not surprisingly then, as is typical of the tragic diva, she becomes in many ways an over-dramatic, affected character left to chase her elusive love interest until her dreadful and untimely death by suicide.

Fortunately, in terms of my argument, however, Cleopatra’s case cannot be so easily classified or dismissed. Her character’s methodology makes Cleopatra the diva deeply interesting, as she overcomes intense and intentional cultural Other-ing that feed attempts to thwart her power both as a woman and as a ruler. To clarify, the male characters first separate and then justify Cleopatra’s oppression and exploitation not only because she is female but also because she is non-Western and thus, somehow savage and lesser.
Representationally, within the play and in the Western imagination, Cleopatra has much to overcome en route to autonomous conclusion. The composer’s changes to Shakespeare’s story highlight both sides of this situation through Cleopatra’s performative functions, simultaneously expanding and decreasing her heroic status, her sexuality, and her connections as lover to Antony and as diva for the audience.

Egypt, 40 B.C. Mark Antony falls in love with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra in Alexandria, but returns to Rome with the news that Pompey is raising an army to rebel against the Roman ruling triumvirate and that his wife, Fulvia, has died. In Rome, Antony agrees to marry Caesar’s sister, Octavia, to heal the rift between her brother Octavius Caesar and himself. Enobarbus, Antony’s closest friend, predicts to Caesar’s men that, despite the marriage, Antony will surely return to Cleopatra. In Egypt, Cleopatra learns of Antony’s marriage and flies into a jealous rage. Antony, still in love with Cleopatra, returns to Egypt and raises a large army to fight Caesar. Caesar, incensed over Antony’s betrayal of his sister, responds in kind. After a tender reconciliation with Queen Cleopatra, Antony is ultimately defeated by Caesar in a climatic sea battle. With Caesar victorious and thinking Cleopatra has killed herself, Antony falls on his sword. Cleopatra, to avoid being humiliated by being dragged through Rome, allows herself to be bitten by an asp and dies. (Edited from http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/)

Effectively forgotten contemporary major opera companies, Samuel Barber’s English-language opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, with a libretto adapted from Shakespeare’s text by Franco Zeffirelli was commissioned in 1966 to commemorate the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera house at New York’s Lincoln Center, but played to that house only once (Rothstein). Considered an unequivocal failure by critics of music and stage, as well as audiences, no major opera houses attempted to resurrect Barber’s work for close to thirty years. Following the 1975 rewrites to the libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti, it began seeing festival and concert performances. British television director Elijah Moshinsky was hired to helm the 1991 Lyric Opera of Chicago revival and additional changes were made to the language and staging of the opera (Rothstein). In many regards, the magnificence of the
opera diva suits the Shakespearean Cleopatra’s dramatic and diverting intensities. However, specifically in Catherine Malfitano’s 1991 performance at Lyric Chicago, some of the threaded subtleties of the character’s motivations are lost in the coloratura ether. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra remarkably straddles the realms of cunning politician, devoted queen, and exotic seductress. In her move to diva, she has a great deal of emotional ground to cover in much less time, and in the spectrum of her dynamic personality, Cleopatra the lover becomes dominant.

The operatic Cleopatra is a woman who chooses to live entirely for her Antony. When lost in her thoughts and feelings, even in her death, her energies are poised towards him and connecting with him. A fine scene for describing the changes from play to opera and to explore her overarching characterization as lover occurs relatively early in the production, as Cleopatra learns of Antony’s marriage and delivers her “Give me some music” speech. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, after returning to relative stillness following her tirade, rationally asks for information about his wife, Octavia, and then requests to be left alone: “Bring me word how tall she is. Pity me, Charmian, / But do not speak to me. Lead me to my chamber” (II.v. 120-122). Conversely, the opera lessens the number of speeches Cleopatra makes about Antony in his absence, combining Act I, Scene V’s highly-sexual “happy horse” dialogue with Act II, Scene III’s “Laughed him out of patience” moment in her “Give me some music” aria in Act I, Scene V. As the aria concludes, diva Cleopatra is anything but sad and alone. Not surprisingly, the libretto’s changes cast her as a nearly-obsessive, pouty, powerfully sexual woman.
In a complete departure from Shakespeare’s text, elevating her character to an extreme performative level by expanding her sexual metaphors, emphasizing her connection to Antony, and identifying her further with Egypt, Cleopatra sings:

Iris, bring me hot water. I would steep me in it deep / I'll wash out this temporal pain and / let the waters creep into the muddy Nile, thence to open sea / Up the Tiber's mouth / Into Italy / Into Italy / Into Italy / Then when my Antony but wash his curled beard / He will be kissing me / He will be drinking me / Bring me hot water, water, torrents of it / Cloud bursts, floods!, floods!, bring us floods. (From Married!, II.i.)

Her melodic line here seems almost haphazard, the notes placed randomly at the poles of her tessitura. Here again, as in her other arias, the musicality is so forceful, so jarring and repetitive, it is difficult to remain uncaptivated by her performance. The language, too, is creatively breathtaking, decorated with gorgeous sexual metaphors. In the 1991 production, Cleopatra begins this aria completely alone on the massive stage, sparkling from head to toe in luxurious golden robes. By the end of the number, as Zeffirelli indicates: “Cleopatra is lifted up on the shoulders of the whole chorus and carried about the stage as the chorus continues to sing ‘Bring on floods.’” (II.i.) The build in this scene’s language and staging draws the audience into Cleopatra’s court, literally and figuratively, as her emotional and sexual prowess easily oozes over the footlights.

Continuing the consideration of the opera’s Cleopatra as a highly sexual and exotic form of diva, it is necessary to explore the finest love duet in Barber’s work. “Oh, take these lips away” fills the emotional gap left by the libretto’s holes and is made to stand in for the romance between the title characters. Though we saw them fight early on (‘I am sick and
sullen!”), shared stage time is rare for the lovers. In a fascinating decision, composer and
librettist choose the scene prior to the play’s Act IV climatic battle for the love scene. In the
play, this is a rather insignificant moment, relative to the fire so often displayed by Cleopatra.
Seemingly subdued by her “gaudy night,” Shakespeare’s Cleopatra observes Antony’s armor
and asks: “Is not this buckled well?” (IV.iv. 10). She then remains silent for her kiss
goodbye. Zeffirelli’s original libretto presents new text, a duetting dialogue for the lovers:
“Those eyes, like break of day, lights that do mislead the morn. / But my kisses bring again,
seals of love, though sealed in vain. / But first set my poor heart free, bound in those ivy
chains by thee” (II.ii). Truly, watching the lovers kiss, caress, and roll around on the great
opera stage, Malfitano half-undressed with hair free-flowing, presents a strong erotic visual.
At the midpoint of the aria, as Antony stands to dress into his armor, all the scene’s softness
evaporates—musically and visually. With the imminent departure of Antony, Cleopatra too
dresses in a regal robe and frantically circles him, clawing at his legs. As the scene ends,
Malfitano’s expression is one of extreme and violent emotion, as if possessed by her desire to
reclaim Antony. Painting Cleopatra as the intimate devoted lover at this point in the opera
profoundly increases the drama of her disputed betrayal toward Antony and his coming death.
Where Shakespeare lets a moment be, the opera capitalizes on the romantic, dramatic
potential.

Importantly though, the most dramatic departure from Shakespeare’s text occurs in
the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*. The fate of our heroine remains unchanged. As she
declares to her beloved, dying Antony in Act IV, “none but Antony should conquer Antony,”
Cleopatra too chooses suicide—a historically fitting finale for both leading lady and dramatic
diva. However, changes made in the libretto eliminate the final appearance of Caesar and
Dolabella, leaving no occasion for final remarks on the gravity and meaning of her death. In
the play, Caesar declares: “Bravest at the last, / She level’d at our purposes, and being royal /
Took her own way” (V. ii. 339-341). In the opera, these qualifying remarks are absent and
insistence on Cleopatra’s regality and bravery comes instead from aspects of staging and
orchestration. The final image of the entire show is the dead queen on her throne, lit in
golden spotlight, with the dead Charmian prostrate at the base. The choral notes
accompanying her dying breathes do not ring like the ascending death pangs of Cleopatra and
fall flat, muddy with the abbreviated, convoluted message contained in Caesar’s final play
lines. Almost nine and a half minutes elapse from Cleopatra’s “Give me my robe, put on my
crown” request and the final curtain, an incredibly long period of time focused completely on
the queen. In these final minutes, both Barber and Zeffirelli restore Cleopatra’s heroic status.
In so doing, where Shakespeare chose to shift the dialogue from the dying Cleopatra to
Charmian, the opera allows her to continue her own narrative. Then, in a moving, brilliant
linguistic moment, the libretto allows an encore of Cleopatra’s language from Act I: “Now I
feed myself / With most delicious poison…that I may sleep out this great gap of time / my
Antony is away…My man of men!” (v. 5-6, 24-25, 72). The dual connotation latent in both
“sleep” and “death”—both literally and as metaphor for orgasm—is deliciously played-up.
Moreover, one finds oneself surprisingly moved at the passage of the time and the expanse of
emotion contained in the three hours of this opera. The audience recalls the moment when
Cleopatra first sang those words—to Antony whom she loves—and now to the snake.

Moreover, the visual eroticism of her death is greatly magnified by Malfitano in this
production. In dying, Cleopatra the diva is heroic and sexy. Seated center stage in her throne,
dressed in glittering blue and silver silk and a snake-adorned diadem, Malfitano pulls her
gown completely off her chest and places the entire snake inside. As the serpent literally glides around her breasts, the audience watches her eyes roll back and her body shake and squirm. Once again, and in a most intense way, even as she sings of Antony, the audience acts as witness to a deeply personal and completely self-possessed moment for Cleopatra. Importantly, the story being told is in fact hers, rather than Antony’s or Caesar’s. If a hero could be defined as one who lives by her own terms, Malfitano’s Cleopatra attains such status.
—III—

Salome

Presenting another side of the *femme fatale* coin, where Cleopatra overcomes, Richard Strauss’s *Salome* becomes buried. Her death, and the deaths of the men around her, are caused by the extreme, unceasing projection and manipulation of her own impulsive desires. The tension apparent in Strauss’s score mirrors the collision between Salome’s yearnings and the masculine gaze that so oppresses her and her wants. Her passionate opposition, her lust, her disobedience to the patriarchal figures in the opera are registered as insanity, allowing yet another diva death to be dismissed as necessary, or in some way as the purging of an evil. This is a grand simplification of the diva’s intricacies, as Anne Hutcheon, author of “Staging the Female Body: Richard Strauss’s *Salome*” explains: “The power of Salome as a character comes from her progressive, staged embodiment of that perverse disjunction between the pathological, dangerous sexuality of the castrating *femme fatale* and the innocence and willfulness of the young, biblical girl” (214).

*Set in Judea, 30 A.D.*, Salome begins as King Herod celebrates his birthday in his palace. From a moonlit terrace, Herod is captivated by his step-daughter Salome’s beauty. As Salome tries to escape Herod’s lustful stares, a voice holds her spellbound. It is the voice of the imprisoned prophet Jokannan, who calls for the Messiah and predicts the ruin of Herod’s kingdom. Salome persuades the guard Narraboth to defy orders and fetch the prisoner. Jokannan appears. Salome is first repulsed by his hateful words towards her mother, Herodias, and then is drawn to him. As she lusts for the prophet, Narraboth, despairingly in love with Salome, stabs himself to death. The prophet rejects Salome’s advances. But she pleads for his kiss. Jokannan is returned to his cell. Salome swears that she will kiss his mouth. Herod bursts onto the terrace and tries to lure Salome. Herod begs Salome to dance
for him. In exchange, he promises her anything she wishes. Ignoring her mother's objections, Salome dances the 'Dance of the Seven Veils.' Delighted, Herod asks what Salome desires. She insistently asks for Jokannan’s head on a silver platter. Herod is hesitant at first but eventually consents. When the head is delivered, Salome triumphantly kisses Jokannan’s mouth. Suddenly, disgusted at her affections for the dead prophet, Herod commands his soldiers to kill her and the men crush Salome to death with their shields. (Edited from http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/)

At its core, and in the consciousness of history, the Salome story is truly frightening. Though her story seems particularly well-suited to the Romantic and Aesthetic imaginations, it is important to remember that the nineteenth century did not invent Salome. She is one of many women of the Bible whose story has captivated artists’ creativity with her fearsome, feminine fatalism. Although she does not appear by name in the New Testament, the roots of her legend—including the dance, the relationship with her mother, and Herod’s perverse gaze—are all present. Two of the four Gospels, Mark and Matthew, tell her story to explain the death of John the Baptist. The text of Matthew states:

But on Herod's birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced before them: and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath, to give her whatsoever she would ask of him. But she being instructed before by her mother, said: Give me here in a dish the head of John the Baptist. And the king was struck sad: yet because of his oath, and for them that sat with him at table, he commanded it to be given. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. And his head was brought in a dish: and it was given to the damsel, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body, and buried it, and came and told Jesus. (14:6-11)

In the ongoing questioning of Salome’s autonomy and selfhood, the biblical portrayal of the young woman does nothing to initiate her self-definition. She is known only as “the daughter
of Herodias,” and behaves at the will of her mother and step-father. She acts as an instrument of pleasure for Herod, and despite his being “struck sad,” he emerges from the parable remarkably unscathed. The Gospel of Mark details the story with slight differences and more detail; however, neither story depicts Salome’s teasing resistance to dancing. This will be a major change in Wilde’s play, as that tense situation forms the content of a large portion of his *Salome*, coupled with encouragement from her mother to resist as well. Wilde published his one-act French drama, *Salomé*, in 1891. Considered to be the definitive telling of the Salome myth, many mistakenly believe Wilde to be its original author. In his play, Wilde expands on the core of the biblical version, as Salome takes a perverse fancy for Jokannan, causing him to be executed when he spurns her affections. In the finale, after manipulating Herod’s lust for her own ends, Salome takes up Jokannan's severed head and kisses it before being murdered by Herod’s soldiers. Wilde, giving Salome her own motive for dancing for Herod, restores a measure of subjectivity that the Bible, to the point of even omitting her name, denies her.

Situating Salome in Wilde’s fin de siècle is important to her transition to the stage. The late nineteenth century spawned great turmoil in the arena of gender relations and sexual politics. Salome’s story became a natural artistic outlet for masculine fears regarding these changes. Mary Simonson, author of “The Call of Salome: American Adaptations and Reconstructions of the Female Body in the Early Twentieth Century” explains that Salome is a “launchpad for…late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century insecurities and fascinations with women…the Oriental ‘Other,’ and the female body, coming to stand for anxieties about cultural disorder, describing a desire to legitimize male control of female bodies and behavior” (1-2). Certainly, as Strauss crafts his *Salome*, the themes of disorder and control of the
female body are deeply present for many reasons. Another feminist scholar, Patricia Juliana Smith further discusses in her essay “Gli Enigmi Sono Tre: The [D]evolution of Turandot, Lesbian Monster” Strauss’s cultural climate at the time of Salome’s composition:

By the fin de siècle, dangerous women who disrupt male friendship, undermine male authority, usurp male prerogative, and take pleasure in male destruction loomed largely in the iconography of the day. As the forces of feminism grew more visible in the political realm, so did that ultimate personification of the deepest male anxieties: the female castrator/decapitator. She became a dominate figure in the artistic realm. (258)

In this historical moment of thinking on Salome as siren, Richard Strauss’s Salome premiered in operatic form in Dresden, on December 9, 1905, with a German libretto translated from Oscar Wilde’s French by Hedwig Lachmann. The opera opens with the line: “How beautiful is the Princess Salome this evening.” Two years later, Strauss's opera premiered in the United States at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in January 1907, before what the New York Times called a "vast audience, tense with a sort of foreboding expectancy as well as with evident and insistent interest” (Becker-Leckrone 251). The directors at the Metropolitan withdrew it after one public rehearsal and one performance on account of protests from “the pulpit and the press” (Simon 454). Called a “blood-sucking harpy” by an opening night reviewer, Salome would not sing and strut again until the Manhattan Opera House bravely revived her two years later. With the twentieth century barely begun and the Victorian image of the “angel in the house” still very much revered, the shock came from the “willfully vivid projection of degeneracy” that is even written in the score itself. At one point in the music, Strauss’s composer notes call for the double-bass
players to tightly pinch the thumb and forefinger together on the string while “administering quick, hammer-like strokes of the bow to produce a noise like the suppressed, choked moaning of a woman” (Simon 454). Seen here musically, the *femme fatale* presents “a pretext for compositional misbehavior” (McClary 102). Strauss recognized that the overwhelming sexual component of the story, and thus of the music and performance, could not be overlooked.

*Salome’s* final act slips and slides through chromatics reflective of the monstrous violence occurring on stage. The musical tension is only resolved in the moment of her silencing in death. In “Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen,” Susan McClary explains: “The triumphant C# major conclusion of *Salome’s* is greeted by Herod’s command that his guards crush her to death beneath their C-minor shields” (100). The clashing of the major and minor modes explodes with the same intensity as the conflict in the plot. Moreover, the dualist nature of *Salome’s* character, both as a tactic and a circumstance of her womanhood, “is shown by her participation in both keys” (Hutcheon 214). Critics often point out the disjuncture between Wilde’s lyrical text and Strauss’s raw orchestration, calling it “a lack of fit” and quickly choosing one side or the other.

However, this irreconciliation is intentional, reflecting *Salome’s* character “as she incarnates and embodies on the stage a psychic lack of fit that makes her powerful and, finally, terrifying” (Hutcheon 209). In a theoretical examination, McClary looks at Strauss’s choices with his *Salome* score, indicating the recognition that “the treacherous chromaticism to which European composers and audiences had increasingly become addicted could no longer be rationally contained” (100). By her argument, and likely Strauss’s own, *Salome’s*
violence and complexity called for a musical representation that transgressed social and tonal customs of the day, and Strauss succeeds.

The musical irregularity flickers like Salome’s feet as she prances and disrobes before Herod’s vulgar eyes. In the modern imagination, “Dance of the Seven Veils” is synonymous with the Salome story and character. As a moving, eroticized body on stage just beginning her dance, Salome declare: “I am ready, Tetrarch.” Strauss’s score suddenly bubbles up from the heavy brass to the dancing flutes. The dance element of the story, while not explicitly detailed in Wilde’s play, takes center stage in Strauss’s adaptation with over eleven minutes of libretto-less score placing great emphasis on the female body. Calling the piece “the first operatic striptease in history,” Hutcheon explains: “Strauss set up a tension between distance and recognition for the audience. Familiar waltz movement is interwoven with oriental(ist) sounds that to a turn-of-the-century European would have connoted sensually” (216). Truly, it is in this moment that the power of the operatic medium’s versatility becomes obvious and overwhelmingly powerful. Salome the diva is not just a disembodied voice, a sounding board, or an emitter of Wilde’s text—she is an expressive, moving vortex of these entire aspects manifest in one dangerous, persuasive being.

For the purpose of studying the Dance of the Seven Veils, the Deutsche Opera Berlin’s 1990 production of 
Salome will serve as example. Petr Weigl, acclaimed director of multiple productions of this opera, directs Catherine Malfitano as Salome, Simon Estes as Jokannan, and Horst Hiestermann as Herod. The production values are high and consistent with the setting in 30 A.D. Judea. This production is rich in its faithfulness to the libretto, and the symbols of the moon and of blood for female sexuality, moodiness, and madness are very much at play. The cistern containing Jokannan looms in the center of the stage like a
dark, gaping wound that later resembles a bleeding uterus. In this way, Salome the diva is both wounded and empowered by her void—ready to consume and absorb yet also left dangerously vulnerable. Late in this production, as her dance begins, Malfitano appears covered in cream and red veils that completely hide her face and her form. She begins to bend and dance and contort. The building minor chords do not allow any ease. The score reveals a great deal of building erotic tension between Herod and Salome, without allowing room for release, and he struggles to touch her, pulling on her veils and throwing them aside. She sways and grinds against the bodies of the male guards who will eventually murder her. Strauss’s strings are violently dissonant, concluding with a high-pitched, very shrill fermata on the “most sickening chord in the whole of opera,” as Malfitano finishes, collapsing to the floor completely nude (Hutcheon 215).

As Salome dances and strips herself bare, her body is the focus of both the audience’s and her fellow characters’ eyes. Representative of meta-themes for women on its stage, Salome is an opera oozing with competing gazes and power struggles that arise from all this cross-looking. Salome’s complexities become evident through the ways she manipulates these gazes for her own ends. This is her solitary path to autonomy, or agency. Laura Mulvey’s widely accepted claim regarding the phenomenon known as “to-be-looked-at-ness” generally places the looked-at female character of film or visual art in an inescapable position of powerlessness. Salome inverts Mulvey’s point, at least in a fleeting sense, when she recognizes that “to-be-looked-at-ness” gives the object of the gaze great potential for power and control. Hutcheon dramatically asserts: “This is a young woman who is not objectified by the gaze, but is instead empowered by it” (218). Notably the female gaze is absent in the
1990 Malfitano production, as Herodias turns her head away from her dancing daughter and shields her eyes with a large, elaborately decorated fan, never looking towards the action.

Unfortunately, but interestingly in terms of an argument for her agency, Salome still remains trapped in a persona: she is forced to project an aestheticized image of herself to the public in order to gain control as an object of desire. It is not a stretch to see why her actions become destructive. Her limited ability to define a self or assert her will causes her sole opportunity for control to become perverted and highly dramatic. By the conclusion of the 1990 production, Malfitano is standing on the severed head of Jokannan, covered in blood and nearly screaming with obsessive delight. Visually, the contrast between her white robes and the bright red blood cascading down her chest and arms is quite disturbing. Some productions, including the 2004 Metropolitan Opera Salome, thrust this moment even more explicitly into the necrophilic realm, as Karita Mattila’s Salome grinds her body on the corpse’s head. When the Met released this production in high-definition podcast format, both her dance and eroticized finale were edited. Met general manager Peter Gelb explained: "The broadcasts are family-friendly events and we decided early on that the Salome broadcast would not feature nudity" (Ng). This remark is indicative of the larger issues presented in this argument, and with gender issues in the media as a whole. The crushing of a young woman’s body by military men with shields is appropriate to air, but sexual perversity does not make it past the censors.

Similarly, Salome’s male characters do not long permit the young woman’s domination of their wills. Keeping Wilde and Strauss’s fin de siècle mentality, and Salome’s eternally male authorship in mind, Hutcheon points out: “Her open display of sexual desire for Jokannan would have been seen by most as a sure sign of mental disease and proof of her
nymphomania” (214). This negative image of Salome’s desire forgets her early resistance to Herod’s entreats for sexual favors, saying: “I won’t do it, I am a decent woman.” Moreover, the masculine attempt to dehumanize and villainize Salome and her sexuality make her murder more easily committable. By this argument, her murder is not a moral transgression because this woman’s life has become such a perversion. The libretto makes much of the point, frequenting relating Salome and her actions to those of Eve, Medusa, and Pandora, cursed representations of evil-causing women.

To conclude this discussion of Salome and her function as a *femme fatale*, while her manipulation of the masculine gaze is undoubtedly on display, she also reflects the gaze. Arguably, her function as a mirror leaves Salome feeling ultimately unseen. She sings to the severed head of Jokannan: “Well, thou hast seen thy God, Jokannan, but me, me, thou didst never see. If thou hadst seen me thou wouldst have loved me” (Wilde 428). Her actions can be seen as just that, an attempt to be seen and appreciated as a person, not an object. When Salome questions why he never looked at her when alive, she is asking in other words, “why he never granted her the power that others did” (Hutcheon 219). The spent gazes lying on the stage along with our dead diva seem a failed attempt to stifle or understand a female character that excels at defiance. Salome embodies her typified position and is remarkable because she inverts it. One scholar argues: “Salome and her dance have become a figure for that which can, and cannot, be represented for the putative cruelty and inscrutability of Woman. In its non-description, in its indescribability, lies the story's power and its availability for cultural inscription and appropriation” (Becker-Leckrone 240). Thus, then, being seen is also complicated as it opens the door for the cycle of inscription of the body and projection to begin again with every new *Salome*, every new audience.
Leaving Salome, it is helpful to briefly return to Leo Trietler’s description recalling the definitive qualities of the \textit{femme fatale}: a woman who does not have to act to inspire fear in men, she has simply to be. Looking thirty years back in time, the next diva questions Trietler’s assertion regarding actions at the same time that she exemplifies it. In Georges Bizet’s \textit{Carmen}, the opera’s titular female figure is a gypsy, a figure looked at and down upon as cultural and societal Other by all concerned. Moreover, both musically and textually, especially in comparison with her foil Michaela, Carmen appears over-confident and over-sexualized. Most importantly, among her clan of dead divas and specifically in further consideration of her as a \textit{femme fatale}, Carmen is the proto-feminist. Clément asserts this early on in \textit{Opera: The Undoing of Women}: 

\begin{quote}
Carmen, in the moment of her death, represents the one and only freedom to choose…. She is the image, foreseen and doomed, of a woman who refuses masculine yokes and who must pay for it with her life. (46)
\end{quote}

Clément’s final point folds Carmen neatly and tragically into a category, perhaps singularly, as an autonomous tragic diva. Carmen is arousing, intriguing, and fatal because she acts as she wants, even when that action is inaction. More importantly, her choices are unpredictable: “She arouses desire, and because she apparently has the power to deliver or withhold gratification of the desires she instills, she is immediately marked as a potential
victimizer” (McClary 57). Finally then, as criticism and analysis of *Carmen* in performance help to illustrate, her story is different because even in her death, Carmen is a diva of action. Her death is not a sacrifice; it is an affirmation of the life she chose to live.

Seville, Spain, 1830s. Soldiers are on guard when Michaela appears seeking Don José, a corporal, but he is not yet on duty. Carmen appears and states that she loves the man who does not love her in the famous “Habanera.” When they plead for her to choose a lover from among them, she tears a bunch of cassia from her bodice and throws it at Don José. Michaela returns and gives him a letter - and a kiss - from his mother. Michaela is embarrassed but Don José declares that he will marry her. Immediately, Don José and Zuniga find that Carmen has been fighting with another woman. To escape her prison sentence, Carmen seduces José with a Seguidilla. José gives in and unites her, as she pushes him to the ground and escapes [end of act]. The gypsies are celebrating at Lillas Pastia’s tavern when the sound of a procession hailing Escamillo, the Toreador, arrives. He flirts with Carmen, but she can only think of José, who was demoted and has been in jail since letting her escape. Don José arrives and Carmen dances for him alone, interrupted by the sound of bugles calling the soldiers back to barracks. She asks him to join her gypsy life if he really loves her. He begins to leave when Zuniga enters. Don José draws his sword on his superior officer and Zuniga is made a prisoner. José has no alternative but to flee with Carmen [end of act]. As the smugglers travel along, Carmen tires of José. Michaela arrives and vows to take him away from Carmen. Escamillo arrives and José challenges him to a knife-fight but Escamillo fights defensively, infuriating José. Escamillo leaves, but invites Carmen and the smugglers to his next bullfight in Seville. Michaela tells José that his mother is dying. Vowing that he will return to Carmen, he departs [end of act]. Carmen and Escamillo are greeted by the crowds on the day of the fight where she is confronted by the desperate Don José. He begs her to return his love and start a new life with him. She calmly replies that she loves him no longer—free she was born and free she will die. He stabs her, and as Escamillo is acclaimed in the arena, she dies. The spectators flock out of the arena and find José confessing his guilt over her dead body. (Edited from http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/)

Containing several of the most recognizable arias in the whole of opera, *Carmen* is perennially extremely popular and often becomes an introductory and favorite opera experience for many. Even Nietzsche preferred *Carmen* to other operas. To this end, one hopes the feminist aspects of Bizet’s work are as evident as the gorgeousness of the setting and scoring. Importantly though, Carmen sang first from the pages of literature and her story has not always been venerated. Susan McClary’s treatment of *Carmen* is thorough and
valuable in terms of locating Carmen, both musically and textually. Bizet’s opera is based on Prosper Merimee’s 1845 novella of the same name. Differently from the opera, and importantly, the novel presents a love triangle between Carmen, Don José, and an “objective” unnamed scholarly narrator who too loved the gypsy and now tells her story in a frame narrative. Bizet suggested the piece to the librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy, and pressured both men and the managerial staff at the Opera-Comique to see the opera through to completion and production (McClary 56). Carmen first sang herself to death at the Opéra Comique in Paris on March 3, 1875. Bizet’s personal investment in the project led to great struggle, as “this was largely Bizet’s project, and he had to suffer the consequences when the opera was, predictably enough, rejected as immoral by its first audiences” (McClary 56). Its opening run was so denounced by the majority of critics that Carmen was almost withdrawn after its fourth performance.

The adaptation process from novel to opera included major structural changes to the story, as McClary points out: “By contrast with the novel, the opera is organized in terms of the traditional Western dichotomy between proper and improper constructions of female sexuality: between the virgin and the whore” (56). Thus, Carmen becomes a noteworthy, dramatic example of the Good Woman—Bad Woman duality that profoundly informs artistic representations in the West. Composing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Bizet created Carmen as a “male—rather than a female—fantasy: a male fantasy, moreover, that was especially characteristic of a particular moment in European history” (65). Interestingly, Coventry Patmore’s highly-regarded poem “The Angel in the House” was published in the same year that Carmen is translated into French. It was 1845 and the Victorian sensibility suctioned “pure” women to the home and the role of wife, mother, servant. Bizet creates
Michaela in this image, making Carmen’s self-awareness and impulsivity towards pleasure even more exotic and attractive.

Musically, Michaela navigates the northern-most notes on the soprano compass, aesthetically echoing her innocence and purity. Moreover, as McClary explains: “Her melodic lines are diatonic, never deviating into insinuating inflections, her rhythms innocent of physicality” (57). Conversely, Carmen’s fire swirls and spins between the lines and spaces on the staff, suitable to her position as opera’s most sought-after mezzo-soprano role. Carmen’s chromatic slides and hip- swaying pulses indicate her roles as “the dissonant Other who is necessary for the motivation and sustaining of the plot” (57).

Before Carmen had even premiered, the opera was thought to be so scandalous that Bizet had a very difficult time finding a singer to sing the meaty mezzo-soprano leading role. Her sexuality lies as much in her voice as in her body and much of the content of Carmen’s character is expressed musically. Carmen’s femme fatale-ness extends into her murder of musical regularity. As McClary explains: “Her erratic means of descending through the tetrachord…often withholding it sadistically at the last instant before implied gratification, reveals her as a ‘master’ of seductive rhetoric. She knows how to hook and manipulate desire” (58). To this end, all three of her power arias begin with precarious spills down the chromatic scale. Our ears respond to the closeness of her pitches and her teasing refusal to resolve chords. Like the men she controls, we are both captivated and turned off: “In her musical discourse she is slippery, unpredictable, maddening: hers is the music we remember from the opera. She becomes José’s obsession—and likewise the listener’s” (58).

Carmen’s meta-themes, like sexuality and subversion, are perhaps best explored by observing living, breathing representations of this diva. For the purpose of theatrical study, a
look at Francesca Zambello’s 2006 production for the Royal Opera at Covent Garden proves illustrative. She directs Italian Anna Caterina Antonacci as Carmen and Jonas Kaufmann as Don José. Zambello’s goal was to create a “realistic” Carmen, set in mid-nineteenth century Seville, reaching “the truth of the visual world” of the gypsy’s story (McHugh). For Zambello, this “truth” is grounded in the elements—fire, water, wind, rain, sun—capturing the animalistic, organic nature of this society. Zambello succeeds visually, as earth tones dominate the sets and costumes, radiating the heat and earth of Spain and of the characters’ desires.

“Being a woman and a lesbian is very much part of my ethos as a director,” Zambello explained in a recent interview. Her work in opera direction is a cutting-edge example of feminism in performance and has been greeted with much success and also much criticism. Her words on her Carmen and its diva reveal much about her revolutionary ideas rethinking representations of female characters on the opera stage:

Carmen is a contemporary woman. She’s extremely independent: she tells us from the beginning that ‘Live free or die’ is her motto and that love doesn’t mean anything. She's quixotic, and she's a woman who controls her own destiny: it happens to be that she's murdered, but she drives the man to murder her. She's a woman's woman: most women like her and respect her because of her independent spirit. She also has the iconic sensuality, the femme fatale aspect, but I think her free spirit is the most important part of her. (McHugh)

Looking specifically as Antonacci’s Carmen, the influence of both Zambello’s feminist and lesbian gaze is apparent. Carmen is still a male fantasy, but a self-possessed woman as well. The soprano’s skin is consistently wet and shinny, glistening with stage sweat, causing her
gypsy gown to fall further off her shoulders and chest. In direct opposition to Michaela’s blue-gray, modestly long-sleeved and high-necked dress, Carmen is costumed in bright red and gold prints and wears her corset tied tightly on the outside of her other garments, nearly completely exposing her breasts.

Similarly eroticized, every time she is seated, Antonacci’s Carmen spreads her legs wide, and seems especially satisfied when one man or another finds his way in between them. In fact, she dramatically throws them over Don José’s shoulders at several points during the production in an almost puppet-like fashion. Her agility reminds us that Carmen is a dancer and in the dangerous, manipulative world she inhabits, her moving body is her greatest asset. Very similarly to Strauss’s *Salome*, McClary explains: “Carmen’s rhythms indicate that she is very much aware of her body. The energy of the opera is in her and her hips” (57).

Fittingly then, *Carmen’s* two most memorable arias are, not surprisingly, referred to by titles of Spanish dances: the Habanera and the Seguidilla. During her famous “Habanera,” echoing the biblically sinful Eve in profound ways, Antonacci coquettishly juggles an apple as she dances, eventually throwing it to the drooling soldiers over her shoulder. We see her movement as a gateway into unholy desire and lust. After her arrest, as Don José attempts to assert his control over the enraged Carmen, he literally binds her body with rounds of rope, at first preventing her dance. The “Seguidilla” begins, and Carmen channels her rage into her sex appeal, slowly slipping out of the rope and into her role as seductress, allowing her eventual escape.

Later in Act III when Carmen “dances for his honor,” Zambello stages Carmen’s dance on top of Lillas Pastia’s table, leaving Don José forced to look up and reach up to her moving, fleeing form. They leave the table and roll around on the floor for the center section
of the aria. Finally, during her climatic passage of flirtatious, ascending la-la-la’s, Antonacci throws her skirt over Kaufman’s face, squatting and swiveling her pelvis on top of him. Sexually, this Carmen holds the cards and her strong use of her body indicates her incredible prowess. Her dance allows for the power to shift dramatically, and permanently, from Don José and his societal correctness to Carmen and her scorching sexuality—she becomes a \textit{femme fatale}. The opera’s remaining hours detail Don José’s horribly pained quest to regain that lost control, a quest requiring his lover’s death.

Importantly, Zambello’s production shows an unwillingness to accept \textit{Carmen} as purely Don José’s journey into iniquity. The two leads play out a visually interesting tête-à-tête with their identities, with neither one willing to let go completely. In the third act, as Don José is forced to desert and camp in the frozen mountains with the gypsies, we first see Carmen wearing his corporal uniform jacket. Her appearance here is striking, as she materially adopts Don José’s former identity at the same moment that he has forcibly chosen her lifestyle over his own. After their first confrontation, she violently removes the coat and whips it onto the jagged rocks, abandoning its warmth for the warmth of the fire and her gypsy companions.

The same fierce physicality is present between the two characters in Zambello’s climatic death scene. They push and claw desperately at one another, all over the floor and scenery walls for nearly four minutes before the actual stabbing. These moments are difficult to watch and listen to, as the tensions between the two characters and their two worldviews clash violently. She may be bleeding to death, but she is not through being liberated as “infuriatingly, the male-constructed Carmen refuses to be contained in accordance with
José’s fantasies,” and as Don José throws her writhing body to the stage, Carmen’s final line rings out: “I want to be free and do what I like!” (McClary 59).

When looking at Carmen from the angle of gender criticism, the diva’s fearless commitment to her own free will is deeply attractive. While her murder cannot ultimately be overlooked, Carmen’s autonomy in all aspects of her life is unmatched in opera’s potpourri of disintegrating divas. She is not to be tamed and the insinuation of a life bound to anything is repulsive to her. Don José’s final aria in Act Three, declaring “The chain which binds us will bind us till death” is meant to be a loving avowal of unending devotion where it instead indicates a definitive lack of understanding about the creature he loves. Carmen is a gypsy; she has broken from her social system and decided to live her life by her own rules. In this way, she becomes doubly fearsome as a femme fatale, sexually predatorily and always already normatively out of bounds. It is impossible for her to simply be, left to be acted upon, because as a gypsy she does not exist in one fixed place. The compulsion to finally fix her freely dancing body forms the root of Carmen’s feminist tragedy and pulls her unavoidably towards her own death.

Conclusively, Carmen will continually intrigue, as her movements and her music haunt long after her silence. The idea of her life, the idea of loving her, simply intoxicates the operatic imagination. Jean Starobinski, author of Enchantment: The Seductress in Opera, concludes his discussion of Carmen with these words:

Carmen, an adventurer and simple laborer, is a free, sovereign woman who accepts risks of her demands and decisions in love. Her means are those of the body: a look, a dancing movement, and especially her voice and song that give full meaning and force to the word “enchantment.” (38)
Alban Berg’s 1934 masterwork, *Lulu*, presents a unique kind of loss and a different kind of tragic diva. In contrast to Cleopatra and Carmen, Lulu does not exist as a subject distinct from her position as the object of the masculine gaze. Her selfhood and agency simply are not present, making her a difficult character to grasp and develop. Notably, Berg’s opera has of late seen a resurgence in popularity, once again being performed by the world’s finest opera companies. In performance, attempts to account for Lulu’s lack compound Lulu’s emptiness and further expose her male-made construction as the ultimate death-driven, hyper-sexualized *femme fatale*. The *Chicago Tribune* recently ran a feature interviewing the cast and directors of the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s November 2008 *Lulu*. German coloratura Marlis Petersen, star of the Lyric production and opera’s current “Lulu of choice,” described her character as “slippery,” saying: “Lulu can’t be put in a pigeon hole…She doesn’t know anything else other than belonging to somebody and fulfilling the wishes of men in order to survive” (von Rhein). Her director, Scottish *Lulu* veteran Paul Curran, spoke even more transparently about Berg’s diva: “Lulu is part of all of us as human beings. The more I direct this piece, the more I discover…Lulu is like a blank canvas—whatever the day is, whatever is happening, that’s the creation she’s going to be that day” (von Rhein). The question of where Lulu’s subject position lies is thus suspicious and the most convincing arguments seem to assert that she is in fact completely void of one. Lulu is
whatever another wants her to be and as this opera’s heroine, she most often becomes a vision of sex and death in their most interconnected and dramatically played out fashions.

Lulu, the wife of Dr. Goll is having her portrait painted. Alone with Lulu, the Painter makes heavy passes at her; she rejects him initially but then agrees to have sex. Dr. Goll unexpectedly walks in, and finding Lulu alone with the Painter, suddenly collapses and dies of a heart attack. Lulu is left with the corpse of her husband and reflects that she is now rich [scene]. Lulu has now married the Painter who has been very successful since their marriage. She receives a telegram announcing her former lover, Dr. Schön’s, engagement. Dr. Schön arrives to ask Lulu to stay out of his life from now on, since it would be scandalous for them to see each other socially. Dr. Schön tells the Painter about their affair and the Painter slits his own throat. Lulu appears to be unmoved by this suicide [scene]. Lulu is now working as a successful dancer and returns after having "fainted" on stage, but she actually refuses to go on because Dr. Schön and his fiancée are in the audience. Dr. Schön comes in to try to convince her to perform. When the two are left alone, Dr. Schön realizes that he cannot live without her and is convinced by Lulu to write a letter to his fiancée breaking off his engagement, which Lulu herself dictates [end of act]. Lulu marries Dr. Schön, who is full of jealousy over her many admirers. An usher announces the return of Dr. Schön, but it is his son Dr. Alwa Schön who arrives. Alwa declares his love for Lulu as well. When Dr. Schön, the elder, "returns," he gives Lulu a revolver and orders her to kill herself, but she is distracted and shoots Schön instead. The police arrive to arrest Lulu for the murder despite her pleas to Alwa to let her remain free [end of act]. The Countess Geschwitz, Lulu’s female lover, and Alwa are waiting to take the Countess to the hospital. She is going to sacrifice her own freedom by taking Lulu's place so that nobody will discover Lulu has escaped until it is too late. Alwa offers the Countess a lot of money to cover her expenses but she refuses and leaves for the hospital. Lulu then seduces Alwa and they agree to go away together [scene]. The next scene is a party in a casino. Lulu is being blackmailed and is still wanted for Dr. Schön’s murder in Germany. The party quickly breaks up, and in the confusion, Lulu manages to change clothes with a young waiter. She escapes with Alwa just before the police arrive to recapture her [scene]. Lulu and Alwa are now living in London in poverty and Lulu is working as a prostitute. She arrives with a client, a creepy professor. Lulu goes out and returns with another client, the Negro. He refuses to pay and kills Alwa in a struggle. Eventually, Lulu goes out and returns with a third client. He haggles over the price and Lulu decides she will sleep with him for less than her usual fee. This client, who is actually Jack the Ripper, murders Lulu and then kills the Countess as well. (Edited from http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/)

Turning first to the deeply important musicology of Lulu, the idea of Lulu as type, perhaps as archetype, for existing as nothing besides an objectified, universal symbol of sexuality is mirrored by Berg’s composition for her. Most notably, Lulu’s “row,” or the
series of notes repeated around her as a type of identifying theme, contains all twelve pitch-classes. Lulu’s twelve pitches, ranging from the middle to upper ranges of the soprano *tessitura*, “form the basic material of the opera’s entire musical universe,” Mitchell Morris explains in “Admiring the Countess Geschwitz.” Thus, musically, Lulu is everything and everything is Lulu. To the Western ear, Lulu’s atonal repeating sounds are nearly incomprehensible and unpleasant. Unmistakably, Berg wrote these notes with intention. Looking at the opera as a work of visual and musical art in tandem, the physical structure of Lulu’s score itself becomes fascinating. This is the tone row associated with Lulu:

![Tone Row](treitler265)

(Treitler 265).

The row not only visually mimics the many manifestations of Lulu, it also displays three marked climaxes, symbolizing Lulu’s three murdered husbands who return as Lulu’s three clients when she is a prostitute (Treitler 265). Also, visually, the pitches’ rapid ascents and descents mirror her feminine sexual experience. Notably, the final climax, correlating with Lulu’s third husband, Dr. Schön, who returns as her murderer, Jack the Ripper, is the steepest and largest. Even in the score, Lulu is sexualized and a manifestation of the trajectory toward her ultimate death—two forces that are further complicated by Berg’s language.

Moving now to the opera’s text, Berg’s libretto systematically denies Lulu’s any nuanced or sympathetic turn—she is always acted out and acted on. Berg’s libretto makes no secret of its facade. Early in Act II, Alwa declares about his lover: “To be sure, she could become the subject of an interesting opera” (Redlich 173). By objectifying the character’s actions from the inside of the story and as they occur, it furthers the feeling of emptiness
spilling out of Lulu’s behavior and the haphazard-sounding score. Her life, with all its potentially rich contents, are best suited for nothing more than spectacle. Our gaze, as we watch and judge Lulu from the audience, only serves to magnify her position as a fractured self subjected to hundreds of eyes. There is a great deal of looking going on on Lulu’s stage—Lulu is on the stage, looking at herself playing Lulu in a portrait, while the man of the moment looks at Lulu and is able to compare her to her portrait. She merely bounces around the stage from object position to object position, drawn purely to the highest bidder, or the most attentive stare.

Moreover, as Karl Kraus explains in his essay, “Pandora’s Box,” this condition is unrelenting: “The succession of those who, loving her, want her for themselves is ineluctably followed by the succession of those who just want sex” (106). Kraus’s essay cuts to the core of Lulu’s emptiness, connecting it most explicitly to the actions and gaze of the men around her:

The men succumb to Lulu, who is sex personified. They are the true prisoners of their own love for her. They seem to lap up every disappointment and every hurt that comes from a loved one incapable of non-physical gratitude, and they go on affirming her good points even at the brink of each new abyss. (105)

Kraus’s mention of the opera’s many abysmal moments is advantageous to an exploration of Lulu as emptiness personified. Karin Littau brings up issues of Lulu’s inherent deconstruction. In a Derridean turn, Littau’s argument establishes the idea of Lulu as an always-already mise-en-abyme that both alleviates and complicates attempts to understand her character. Littau writes: “We are forced to recognize the impossibility of grasping it
[Lulu’s character]” (901). After all, “attempting to grasp Lulu’s essence, her uniqueness, would seem to fill the abyss, that is, a lack” (901). As the men of Lulu quickly realize, but are unable to accept about their empty lover, her “abyssal operation is infinite. The very filling up leaves one ‘full of abyss’ and the series of images is without end as each additional image changes all the others in the series” (901). This notion fits with the first description the audience receives of Lulu as a “soulless creature,” indicating a personality tabula rasa upon which her various identities can be ascribed.

Littau’s essay continues and looks at Lulu’s many artistic manifestations and aims to explain the reoccurring, “soulless” void:

It is this sense then that woman, or Lulu, is without history, an empty screen onto which has been inscribed whatever images or representations he [husband/male client] chooses to project onto her…she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition. (890)

In fact, the character goes through at least six distinct visual presentations—a snake, the harlequin Pierrot, a dancer, a wife, a whore, a prostitute. Each identity is associated with one of the opera’s six dominant men, each of whom gives Lulu her own name, including Eva, Nelly, and Mignon (Treitler 278).

For the simplicity of argument, analyzing the launch of Lulu’s image in Berg’s famous prologue may prove most valuable. The circus menagerie that begins Lulu is like nothing else in the whole of opera, as the audience meets Lulu first as the ultimate symbol of fallen temptation, the snake. Lulu’s Prologue “establishes the separateness of actors and characters. It sets up in the viewer’s mind a perception of the characters as stage creatures
that is reinforced by Berg’s device of the double roles” (Treitler 267). Clément’s poetic description of Lulu’s prologue and its artifice is helpful in this discussion. Clément is well-aware of the two major ideas being presented—Lulu as archetype of everything distasteful about Woman and Lulu as empty receptacle, ready to be judged and filled up by the opera’s men and the opera’s audience:

Look. In the middle of the ring, a luminous circle lit by white spotlights and a trainer wearing a ringmaster’s uniform magnificently decorated, officer-style. He holds a long whip in his hand as if to tame a wild cat. In fact, he has a wild animal act. Here comes the wildest of all, the animal that spelled man’s ruin: the snake…Her name is Lulu...she is one of those so-called femme fatales, you know, those evil women. (25)

Clément effectively sets up the types, the object positions that allow such a grotesque and violent plot to play out upon this woman’s body. These characters are not human, they are ideas, symbols, concepts prepared to be violated and exposed in their emptiness. Moreover, because Lulu is empty, one cannot feel for her, one can only feel at her. It is a dark idea, tragic in a way that is far removed from the tragedy of opera’s other, dime-a-dozen tragic divas.

Establishing Lulu as a death-driven, hyper-sexualized deconstructed construction of male fantasy and the masculine gaze presents disadvantaged terrain for gender theorists attempting to validate, vindicate, or de-victimize Lulu. In her article “Reclaiming Gender in Modernist Music,” Susan Borwick muses on the absence of the feminist voice in Lulu criticism: “Perhaps modernist music, then, was simply too masculinist in intent and result for serious feminist music theorists to seek to describe and explain the inner workings of
modernist compositions as they cohere into a meaningful whole” (191). Berg’s musical construction is undoubtedly exemplary of Borwick’s theory and as a result, feminist theory is also seemingly at a loss to provide Lulu substance. However, French feminist Hélène Cixous, author of the free-form theoretical piece Sorties, writes: “She does not exist, she can not be; but there has to be something of her. He keeps, then, the woman…always virginal, as matter to be subjected to the desire he wishes to impart” (Cixous 65). Taking Cixous’s broader comment of gender relations and applying it specifically to Lulu’s continual redefinitions, even the ultimate femme fatale can, and seemingly is, a reborn virgin to each lover in his own projection.

In some questionable arguments, thinking of a female lover in this act-on-me position is natural and proper. However, Cixous’s counter-explanation continues: “Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery’s functioning” (65). While Sorties looks at phallocentric society as a conceptual whole, the “machinery” to which she refers can easily be focused on the world of Lulu as its sex-as-currency, female body-as-commodity realm. After all, as Cixous expounds: “Desire must not disappear. You women represent the eternal threat, the anticulture for us…Your kind of love is death for us” (67). Especially as she writes in French, Cixous’s choice of the word “death” is an important indicator, as Lulu portrays both literal death, and the orgasmic le petit mort, in grand and repetitive fashion. By inducing death in life, orgasm, to be followed by murder, in all her interactions, Lulu becomes dually fearsome. Certainly, these tropes that so inform feminist discourse are at their most visceral and visual when projected onto opera’s stage. It is as though, for the sake of culture’s highest performing art, the systematic and over-dramatized dissembling of the female is acceptable. Trying to prescribe
meaning to Lulu where there may not be any indicates an alternative state should potentially exist for her. However, Lulu’s situation, and her tragedy, is that she may not be redeemable. So, where is Lulu and what is Lulu?

Leo Treitler, in his noted essay “The Lulu Character and the Character of Lulu,” struggles with this apparent lack of Lulu. Looking at her from all angles, he eventually concludes: “To Lulu as a sexual person, freedom of choice and the fulfillment of her identity are one in the same” (264). By Treitler’s argument, because she is denied choice, outside of her weapon of choice, Lulu’s identity remains unfulfilled. If there is a real tragedy in Lulu, this would seemingly be at its core. Lulu may not actually be empty but in the position she inhabits, she has not been given a means to develop identity. Douglas Jarman’s assertion that Lulu’s message is one of moral and societal responsibility seems an unsuccessful attempt to rectify what is likely to ultimately be Lulu’s empty death. It is distressing to consider that maybe she is to blame, that maybe her death was meaningless because it had actually occurred long before Jack the Ripper got to her. Jarman claims:

We are finally compelled, through the intensity and power of the music, to feel pity for and to identify not only with Lulu…but with all the characters helplessly trapped in this grotesque Totentanz. It is through that act of identification that we are made to feel our moral responsibility for the society depicted on stage. (98)

Jarman’s allusion to Totentanz is useful as one attempts to explore death-in-life on the opera stage. In Lulu, the danse macabre has transformed into an exhaustively sexual and horribly dissonant death march. However, calling for “moral responsibility” as a reaction to this opera seems a steep request. Moreover, to say that audiences can “identify” with Lulu
further complicates her position as object and magnifies her tragedy. We cannot identify with Lulu because there is no Lulu. Any sympathy we have for her is born from our helplessly fraternizing with the enemy, falling into the mindset of the men who constructed her in a way that arouses our empathy. It is a deeply unfortunate Catch-22 that is not resolved by the final curtain, even after Lulu’s death.

Thus, Jarman’s discomfort with dismissing Lulu’s death is a valid one and the discomfort is worth pressing further. Perhaps the emptiness one senses in viewing her story is more closely related to death than the focus on sexuality first allows one to see. The void we hear in Lulu’s notes and sense in her actions may be a type of living death, resulting from this inability to live for herself. Keeping the intricate relationship between sex and death at the front of one’s mind, it seems beneficial to contextualize Lulu as a 1920’s German woman and as the product of a long-line of German opera tragediennes. When Berg adapted the Wedekind Lulu plays into his libretto, he changed the setting from the fin de siècle to 1920’s Berlin. McCabe explains the implications of the shift: “The emphasis upon outlaw sexuality has been associated with the aesthetics of the Weimar Republic. Modernity in the Berlin of the mid-1920’s entails a sexual expressivity outside the constraints of law or convention” (647). This world is Lulu’s world, stripped raw by the destruction of World War I and drowning in the recessions of the 1920’s. That Berg had death on his mind in 1930 as he began Lulu is therefore not surprising.

Furthermore, German philosophy is very familiar with the death drive, and without great interpretative leaps, the connections between their philosophy and their art and culture emerge as strong, informative ties. Arthur Schopenhauer’s 1819 philosophical work, The World as Will and Representation, speaks to Lulu’s void in surprisingly profound ways, so
much so in fact, that Lulu can almost be read as performative Schopenhauer. His concept of
the “phenomenon of the will” is useful to discussions of Lulu in that it addresses both her
lack and her death, as well as the actions of the men in her world. “Above all,” he writes of
the will, “it is the form of life or of reality that is really only the present, not the future or the
past” (135). The idea of Lulu’s projected identities as completely present-tense fits with her
continued, forced redrawing by the men who dictate her present for her. Each man wants his
own present, his own Lulu. Schopenhauer continues: “Therefore, whoever is satisfied with
life as it is, whoever affirms it in everyway, can confidently regard it as endless, and can
banish the fear of death as a delusion” (135). Lulu is attractive, then, as a means to keep
away death, as a blank place to write and re-write a present that excludes the idea of a future
or a past, or anything less pleasurable than sex.

Looking at Schopenhauer’s writings on death provides insight for those attempting to
understand, and maybe even enjoy, an opera about nothing. For Schopenhauer, the primary
and default human condition is one of suffering, stemming from a ceaseless striving of “the
universal Will,” from which death provides the only relief (138). Several scholars assert
Berg’s interest in these theories and claim that Lulu may represent the playing out of the
uninhibited Schopenhauer “Will” (Morris 357). Again, looking at Schopenhauer on death, as
applicable to Lulu:

Dying is certainly to be regarded as the real aim of life; at the moment of
dying, everything is decided which through the course of life was only
prepared and introduced. Death is the result, the resume, of life…namely that
the whole striving was a vain, fruitless, and self-contradictory effort. (236)
Morris explains: “Berg writes the music for the deaths of Dr. Schön and Lulu as if to provide an audible representation of the process Schopenhauer describes” (358). Tuning one’s ear to Berg’s dissonant twelve-tone structure is a challenge, a process that does not realize its worth until its successful completion, much in the way Schopenhauer describes the life process. The question of what constitutes success in that endeavor, or if it can be attained at all, remains perhaps Lulu’s most alluring quality. Morris continues: “The relationships between Lulu and her men, in terms of the play, are liaisons foredoomed to appalling failure. The music here speaks in the accents of what is impossible; everything is driven toward loss in death” (358). Pulling these ideas together, it becomes obvious why Dr. Schön is so quick to name Lulu “the Death Angel.” Everything about Lulu pulls toward the void, her abyss as frightening as it is tempting. Reading the opera through Schopenhauer’s lens makes the unpleasantness of the characters and the plot more understandable. Finally, one cannot feel with Lulu because she is always-already dead, absent, and as mentioned, she exists only in the present-tense, a tense constructed and deconstructed by men.

For an audience member watching Lulu’s death and feeling no sympathy, it would be easy, and within historic critical practice, to begin blaming the victim. Truly, Lulu’s death is not a sympathetic one. It is difficult to mourn a void, to feel for the physical loss of a character’s life when she has never been fully alive. However, it is important to this argument as a whole to remove fault from the equation: “She [Lulu] became the destroyer of everyone, because she was destroyed by everyone” (Kraus 102). The process is simply reciprocal and attempting to find the depth and reasoning behind Lulu as the destroyed diva turns quickly to a can of exceedingly ugly worms. When Lulu’s lack is ultimately left to uncomfortably fester for hours on stage, the idea that violences can more easily be committed
against concepts as opposed to nuanced, fleshed out individuals becomes very evident and
Lulu arrives as the perfect object of theatre—her nothingness makes her the ideal woman of
opera, incapable of being anything besides the object of other’s projected whims. This is her
tragedy.
Lulu, Carmen, Salome, all murdered; Cleopatra left to murder herself. Each diva’s final notes fall silent and her absence is felt; the space of her life and her sound left empty before the audience, inviting our empathy, shock, relief, or sadness. In this lingering moment, one recognizes the magnitude of what has been lost and the poignancy of what one has just seen. These operatic *femme fatale* leave a haunting musical legacy: an experience so compelling and intriguing that their tragic stories are magnificently told again and again. As the centerpiece of the opera spectacle, the divas examined here serve as mirrors for our fears and our desires or embody tragic examples of exploitation and oppression. However, to conclude this brief discussion and look to the future, it is crucial to accentuate their individuality and their actions rather than dismiss them as unwitting, helpless victims. Importantly, each diva makes choices, choices that ultimately affect her fate. In illuminating and experiencing the presentation of that fate—through text, music, and performance—opera creators and audience engage with these stories in profound but perhaps not fully realized fashions, neglecting the dreadful treatment of the diva that remains overshadowed by history, costume gowns, and gorgeous arias.

Thus, I do not intend to suggest doing away with opera in its current form but, rather, encourage a re-examination of all sides of these essential narratives, incorporating and accentuating feminist concerns. The emergence and application of a feminist consciousness
has not destroyed the literary or visual arts; instead, it has expanded the potential for interpretation and conversation. The exquisiteness and complexity of opera’s tragic females has left them historically less penetrable. Truly, beautifully painted female death is fundamental to the opera art form, speaking to long-standing preferences in the Western musical and representational traditions. To call for a redefinition of these ideological structures is highly impractical and unnecessary. We are moved by the diva’s dying melodies in indescribable and very personal ways that ultimately define the opera’s relationship to its audience. Thus, female death on stage straddles an uncomfortable fence, being both stunningly beautiful and woefully problematic to the modern artistic conscience. Looking to the future, a sophisticated feminist production would not ignore or be intimidated by these issues. Instead, director and designers could positively manipulate the storylines to heighten the moments of violence and oppression in tandem with the moments of choice and autonomy. Both elements are then entered into the audience’s perceptions, discussions, and eventually expectations for what women look like on the opera stage. The last idea, of expectation, may be the most important. After all, music echoes. As it fades into silence, it leaves an impression on those who have listened. The tragic diva’s story also floats into silence, into a reflective space, as her music dies away with her. In that reflective space, the potential for new expectations, for new thinking about her life and death emerges. The beauty can remain, the grandeur as well, both becoming magnified by this increased awareness of the tragic diva’s complexity as a female character in a created world.
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