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The *Fin-de-Siècle* 'Femme Fatale' and the God Pan: Tracing Aestheticizing Practices and Orientalist Modes of Discourse in the Female Villains of the 'Yellow Nineties'

1. INTRODUCTION

If a contemporary reader were to trace the history of the various representations of an archetypal figure such as that of the 'Femme Fatale', they would soon be faced with an obstacle: where to stop on a chronological line that appears to be overcrowded with examples of this persona, dating back to Classical antiquity and beyond? The idea of the "dangerous woman", whose allure can summon dire – indeed, fatal – consequences upon those who fail to resist her charms, finds its expression in characters such as Euripides' Medea or the biblical Delilah no less than it does in Brigid O'Shaughnessy, the duplicitous dame who is arguably the most important character of the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon*. Even though the noir tradition has certainly contributed to the popularization of the 'Femme Fatale' trope, it is undeniable that the underlying structure of this archetype predates the first recorded use of the term in the English language (1912) [1] by more than two millennia. Yet, in discussing the extraordinary persistence of this archetype, Italian critic Mario Praz dismissively wrote: "There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and in literature,

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[1] According to Heather Braun, the first mention of the term in the English language appears in George Bernard Shaw's private correspondence (Braun 2012, 2).

since mythology and literature are imaginative reflections of the various aspects of real life, and real life has always provided more or less complete examples of arrogant and cruel female characters" ([1933] 1956, 189). Even though, as Praz laments, the mimetic aspect of literature demonstrates its insufficiency as a venue of analysis, a judgement concerning literature's role as a reflection of reality is far from exhaustive; it does not consider, for instance, how the appointment of certain functions to a text's characters or settings is the result of a deliberate choice on the author's part. The author is not merely a mirror, and fiction affects the reader in ways that are also determined by authorial intent. Thus, if the representation of 'Femmes Fatales' has been so successful throughout the history of Western literature, it is because these characters must have fulfilled specific goals within the textual economy of the works they inhabited. Focusing on the functions assigned to a Fatal Woman within the text, rather than on the depiction of the character herself, raises some important questions: what are these functions, exactly, and how do we talk about them? In this study, I contend that contemporary readers already possess the tools for the type of analysis proposed here, and that in respect to our recent literary history, these tools are surprisingly similar to those employed by postcolonial theorists in the analysis of Orientalist modes of discourse.

Let us consider the period of unparalleled European expansion as noted by Edward Said: "from 1815 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from about 35 percent of the earth's surface to about 85 percent of it" ([1979] 2003, 41). In the same period Praz detects the surging of "a type of Fatal Woman which is more highly penetrated with aestheticism and exoticism, the type which arose with Gautier and Flaubert, which had its full development in Swinburne, and which then passed to Walter Pater, to Wilde, to D'Annunzio" ([1933] 1956, 200). Following the impression of a correlation between these two phenomena, my approach reconfigures the relationship between the male and female figures treated in this study as the one between Occident and Orient: a "relationship of power" (Said [1979] 2003, 5). The method presents unique possibilities for the examination of 'Femme Fatale' figures in literary fiction, which I intend to illustrate through a study of the role assigned to the character of Helen Vaughan in Arthur Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894).

For this superimposition of critical discourses to become clear, however, the contemporary implications regarding the depiction of the 'dangerous seductress' need to be understood within the context from which they originated. It is possible that the artistic concerns of a specific period of literary history influenced later representations of the trope. Specifically, I believe that modern

and contemporary iterations of the 'Femme Fatale' share a common trait: that of being, to some extent, 'daughters of Decadence', involuntary recipients of an aestheticizing treatment typical of the Decadent movement based on distancing and estranging processes. The truth of this statement depends on the demonstration of three fundamental theses: first, that among the corpus of Decadent texts produced in Britain there appears to be a remarkable aesthetic consistency which transpires, in its most visible form, as a near-constant echoing of certain recurring themes; secondly, that persistent themes of the Decadence, such as the plethoric use of pagan imagery, firmly tie the pursuit of Aestheticism carried on by the key figures of the movement to some of the most frequently identified issues of Orientalist discourses, albeit with a Classicist bent; and lastly, that the literary figure which was deemed more apt to assume these connotations was that of the dangerous, eroticized woman, a trope whose workings are inherently intensified by the adoption of an Orientalist bias. First, I will highlight these phenomena where they are most evident and critically acknowledged: in the Decadent appropriation of the Classical figure of the god Pan and in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1893). Wilde's play will provide the touchstone for assessing the Aestheticist positions still present within Machen's controversial, yet vastly influential work – later popularized by American master of horror H. P. Lovecraft in the essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927) and regarded as "one of the best horror stories ever written. Maybe the best in the English language" by Stephen King (King 2008). This comparison will show how the rhetorical construction of 'deadly women' as a distant Other through the *fin-de-siècle* ended up with them being characterized, more and more literally, as something monstrous.

2. The 'Yellow Nineties' and the cultivation of the pagan Other

The designation of the decade between 1890 and the turn of the century in Britain as the 'Yellow Nineties' is quite fortunate for two reasons: firstly, it describes concisely the leading taste in the visual arts; secondly, the use of a color to represent social costumes and tendencies is in keeping with the trend of aestheticization of the time. In the 1890s, the yellow hues of the British Regency were once again fashionable, popularized not only by Oscar Wilde, who at the beginning of the decade was at the height of his popularity, but also by Wilde's

illustrator Aubrey Beardsley [2]. Yet, the responsibility for designating the color of the decade can be said to rest for the most part on the shoulders of Bodley Head publisher John Lane, whose controversial and well-known periodical, *The Yellow Book*, ensured that Wilde's aesthetic sensibilities continued to attract the attention of readers and writers alike years after the writer's condemnation in 1895. Indeed, even though critics have noted "the trace of opportunism that lay behind [Lane's] promotion of […] decadent work" (Sturgis 1995, 203), as well as Wilde's expressed distaste for the publication, it is difficult to deny the close correlation between author and publisher, and by extension, between the publisher and the whole artistic current. For years, the mission of Lane's outspoken editorial venue consisted in the diffusion of aestheticizing values popularized by Decadent poets, novelists, and dramatists. By promoting similar themes and stylistically analogous texts, Lane's *Yellow Book* determined the presence of textual affinities among several published works. This phenomenon can be illustrated through the analysis of recurring pagan tropes and imagery borrowed from Classical antiquity. Such a feature can hardly be claimed as distinctive of the British Decadence: it is well-known that French *décadentisme* owes its name to Verlaine's poetic musings on the degeneration of pagan Rome ("Langueur", 1884). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the extraordinary receptivity of British Decadence towards this thematic aspect so typical of the artistic milieu of nineteenth-century France. To the effect of narrowing down the analysis even further, the reader is invited to consider the position of prominence attained by the figure of the Classical Greek god Pan.

The presence of the caprine god in *fin-de-siècle* literature was, indeed, so pervasive that critics have long formulated what Merivale considers a key question: "why was there, between 1890 and 1926, that astonishing resurgence of interest in the Pan motif, and that rich harvest of its varied possibilities?" (1969, vii). It would be partial to ascribe the merits of the recovery of this classical figure solely to Decadent authors: it was already present in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as in John Keats's poem "Endymion" (1818). Later texts, such as Elizabeth Barren Browning's "A Musical Instrument" (1862), indubitably cemented the reputation of the Panic figure among Romantic writers. Within the scope of this study, however, we must notice the presence of a deliberate project of retrieval and perpetuation of Panic images in John Lane's editorial strategy. In December 1894, Arthur Machen's *The Great*

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[2] Apparently, Beardsley was so fond of the color that "he also painted his studio a deep rich yellow with contrasting black trim" (Eiseman 1998, 44).

God Pan (a title referencing Keats's and Browning's poems) was published in the fifth volume of Lane's 'Keynote' series, featuring a cover illustration by none other than Beardsley; just a few months before, in April, Laurence Housman's illustration "The Reflected Faun" had appeared in the very first volume of *The Yellow Book*. Both depictions continued a well-established trend: for instance, Kenneth Grahame's *Pagan Papers* – also illustrated by Beardsley – had appeared in 1893.

The repeated mentions of these mythical wild creatures from Classical antiquity, as well as the consistent employment of selected artists, constitute an attempt to maintain a readily-identifiable, and thus marketable, aesthetic integrity. Even though one cannot exclude the possibility that Lane was merely trying to capitalize on Wilde's pre-trial popularity and artistic intuition – Wilde himself had previously published a few poems centered around the figure of Pan [3] – this editorial undertaking was influential enough for its repercussions to be felt on the portrayal of women in contemporary works. These apparently unrelated outcomes are both the result of the employment of Otherization as a device to obtain an aesthetic effect, which is sought in the work of fiction regardless of the object depicted (be it a faun, a piece of statuary, or a mysterious temptress). The technique of Otherization, as we are about to see, often involves the employment of supernatural and mystical elements, further explaining the metamorphosis of fictional women into sirens.

3. THE AESTHETICIZATION OF REALITY IN DECADENT FICTION

The appellative 'Decadent' can be used to indicate a variety of characteristics defining a text, from its adherence to a stylistic canon reminiscent of Symbolist practices (such as the generous employment of synesthesia and evocative descriptions) to the prevailing focus on the insular community of a well-to-do, aristocratic society, one clearly set apart from the working masses. The scope of this study does not include a dissection of the various parts that comprise the literary label, so the present section will center on a single constituent of what we designate as Decadent style: the idea (already present in Joris-Karl

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[3] A prominent example of this being the poem "Pan – A Villanelle" (1880), first published in the inaugural issue of the satirical literary journal *Pan*. The short-lived publication was directed by Oscar's brother, William Wilde.

Huysmans's Decadent manifesto *À rebours*, 1884) that the representation of reality is to be made more appealing through a process of aestheticization by distantiation.

The concept of distance, in our case, is to be intended both metaphorically (as an analogue, for instance, to emotional detachment or distance within the class system) and quite literally: geographical and chronological distances are, in fact, part of what appears to be a complex strategy of displacement constantly at work in the texts here considered, underlying Wilde's *Salomè* and stemming directly from his aesthetic philosophy. One can infer, from Wilde's essays (such as "The Decay of Lying", 1891), that the rationale behind this artificial distancing is grounded on the *desideratum* to transform life into image, an operation seemingly facilitated by the writer's ignorance of the subject of his imagination; the most immediate way to achieve this effect being, of course, to resort to spatial or temporal remoteness. The production of distance is, after all, a readily available tool in a writer's arsenal. In its most elementary connotation, distance is a physical quantity, one that the reader can immediately associate with notions of unfulfilled knowledge and deviation from the physically approachable norm. As Said reminds us, "space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time" ([1979] 2003, 55).

Critics who set out to examine the employment of intercultural references in Wilde's works have found numerous signs of the author applying this technique to these two texts, whether they are set in a mundane context (the London parlors portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance) or, rather, in an intensely exotic context (the palace of King Herod in *Salomé*). In both cases, the protagonists of the works are placed in an artificially Orientalized context, which serves the purpose of letting the setting's exoticism justify an exceptional imaginative effort on the part of the author.

The use of the term Orientalized is deliberate: the geographical displacement of the various *objets d'art* – and of the analogies these items suggest – featured in *Dorian Gray* points almost exclusively eastward, and the geographical positioning of the court of Herod is self-explanatory. We are not dealing with a displacement whose aestheticizing importance finds its realization merely in the act of distancing itself, but one in which the direction of the contextual shift seems to relate to the trending status of Eastern art in British consumer culture and, more importantly, Wilde's views about the autonomy of the arts (Xiaoyi 1997, 50). The East proved itself to be fertile ground for the application of a

philosophy that theorized the existence of art as a "beautifully coloured surface, nothing more" (Wilde 1913, 134).

The strategies of displacement at work in *Salomé* are immediately made evident by the setting of the play: an exotic Middle-Eastern locale. This stage accommodates a king and a queen, a princess and a prophet: characters whose social standing signals a semi-mythical subject matter. Critics have detected how, in this respect, "*Salomé* is rather an anomaly in the works of Wilde, whose forte was in the comedy of manners set in high society of Victorian aristocracy" (Im 2011, 362). As Yeeyon Im notes, "Wilde's stage direction evokes the atmosphere of the Orient, a dreamlike space distant from reality" (2011, 364). Furthermore, *Salomé* introduces an alternative form of displacement, one related not only to space alone but to time. Wilde's play heavily relies on distancing techniques to elicit an aesthetic response in the spectator. The language itself of the play shows the influence of this process: *Salomé*'s style is mystical, dense with repetitions which respect a precise numerology (objects and concepts are always referred to in sets of three) and compose an exotic panoply:

> Jokanaan's eyes "like black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry … They are like the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs", his white skin as "lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed, … the snows that lie on the mountains, like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea" […] his mouth like "pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the garden of Tyre … the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped with coral". (Im 2011, 365)

This system of repetitions, strongly reminiscent of Maurice Maeterlinck's drama, enabled the spectator to linguistically associate the play with iconic representations of the past. The inventory of Jokanaan's features cited by Im resembles, in structure, the famous catalogues of Classical antiquity. Spectators of the play could have been affected by their knowledge of the *Iliad*, thus associating this description to the "catalogue of ships" listing the contingents of the Achaean army. Wilde must have been well aware of repetition as a means of mimicking Greek epic, especially after John Milton's use of the same strategy in *Paradise Lost* (1667). The literary association set up by *Salomé*'s style operates on two levels: first, the employment of a literary trope associated with the past reinforces the effect of chronological distancing; secondly, the mythical dimension introduced by this oblique reference to Greek epic is added to the antecedent mythos of the biblical narrative, which is present throughout the play, confirming and reinforcing the extraordinary qualities of the characters on stage.

In light of these considerations, any reading of the figure of Salomé centered on the detection of exoticism will note how the tried-and-true distancing strategies associated with Jewishness are here fully in effect, an interpretation which finds confirmation in Wilde's elective choice of Sarah Bernhardt as the leading actress for *Salomé*'s intended London premiere. As Im reports, "Wilde's association of Bernhardt with the East is unmistakable. Bernhardt's exaggerated and histrionic style negated her 'Europeanness'" (2011, 364). We should also note, on this occasion, Sander L. Gilman's conflation of the *belle juive* archetype with that of the dangerous, seductive woman (*ibid.*), an aspect that the Salomé represented in the play clearly embodies. It is also important, however, to note two elements of innovation introduced by Wilde himself: the 'Dance of the Seven Veils', by which Salomé is singled out as a foreign object of desire, and her ultimate death which, contrary to the self-immolation initially elaborated by Wilde, serves the function of recovering the loss of *status quo* experienced by Herod in his subjection to the girl's seductive practices.

4. THE DISTANT GOD PAN

At first glance, *The Great God Pan* does not indulge in the Orientalist-bent delocalization witnessed in *Salomé*. The scene opens, instead, in a setting that must have been very familiar to most British readers: the countryside at the border between England and Wales [4]. The scenery that surrounds Dr. Raymond's house, enveloping the two male protagonists of the novella, is almost an Arcadian landscape:

> The sun still hung above the western mountain-line, but it shone with a dull red glow that cast no shadows, and all the air was quiet; a sweet breath came from the great wood on the hillside above, and with it, at intervals, the soft murmuring call of the wild doves. Below, in the long lovely valley, the river wound in and out between the lonely hills. (Machen 1894, 7-8)

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[4] Though the text does not provide the reader with a specific location to set this part of the story, subsequent references in the text make this a most likely interpretation: for instance, part of the action of the narrative is set in Caermaen, a fictional Welsh village heavily based on Machen's hometown of Caerleon. Even the "western mountain-line" cited below refers, in all likelihood, to the Welsh Cambrian Mountains.

In these lines, one can find very little in the way of Wilde's rejection of imitation as elaborated in "The Decay of Lying". Instead, by interspersing this bucolic description of familiar nature with lines of dialogue hinting at the forthcoming dangers of a yet-unnamed surgical procedure, Machen appears to be reaching out for the opposite effect: the superimposition of familiar and jarring, and, if the title of the chapter ("The Experiment") is to be of any indication, of nature and artificiality as well. If the whole narrative were to maintain the same contrast, one could argue that the aesthetic practices of Machen are fundamentally different from those of Wilde: the latter relying on the substitution of nature with artifice, the former on the overlay of the two notions. As the reader soon finds, however, Machen uses Orientalist modes of discourse to better convey the central theme of the narrative: the dread-inducing outreach of paganism and secretive mystery cults into late Victorian society. The author's employment of exoticism, in this case, doubles up as a representation of supernatural appurtenances. The elusive figures of *The Great God Pan* and of the equally mysterious Helen Vaughan represent the embodiment of exoticism as a literary device. The intended effect of this representation might escape us, were we not adapting Said's mode of reading exoticism, according to which "imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" ([1979] 2003, 55). Let us investigate, then, how the text proceeds to make Helen an embodiment of history and geography.

As previously exposed, the Panic theme was hardly Machen's invention: Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater had, among others, revived the "period's interest in Greek chthonic ritual" (Mantrant 2014, 2). It is interesting to note, however, how Machen focuses on the mystical element of the figure: rather than subsuming into the tropified imagery of the goat-legged reveler, Machen's Pan is rendered as a metaphor, a remote (yet tangible) abstraction which represents esoteric truth. As Dr. Raymond explains to the point-of-view character, Clarke:

> Look about you, Clarke. You see the mountain, and hill following after hill, as wave on wave, you see the woods and orchard, the fields of ripe corn, and the meadows reaching to the reed-beds by the river […] but I tell you that all these things – yes, from that star that has just shone out in the sky to the solid ground beneath our feet – I say that all these are but dreams and shadows; the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes. There *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, […] beyond them all as beyond a veil. […] You may think this all strange nonsense; it may be strange, but it is true, and the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan. (Machen 1894, 9-10)

This said, Raymond's Pan is not only a metaphor for the concealed nature of the world, but a looming presence capable of interfering with contemporary British society. At the same time, its presence defies the inquirers' attempts of description. Machen's Pan is vague and mysterious, although its preternatural manifestations into the real world share an extremely physical trait: their masculinity. Trevor W., the unlucky child who witnesses Pan's presence in the novella, will not mention any of the salient features of a satyr, but merely a "strange naked man" (Machen 1894, 38). Masculinity is also the force that drives Dr. Raymond's experiment to its tragic conclusion, not only because the patient subjected to the invasive practices of the surgeon is a young woman at the hands of two male representatives of Victorian high society, but also because the doctor's operation upon this virginal Mary (a name that further blurs the line between Gothic supernaturalisms and archaic Christian mysticism) will result in her sacrificial pregnancy. By the end of the novella, there is little mistake that the Great God Pan itself fathered Mary's daughter, Helen, later to become the object of inquiry and terror at the center of the tale.

Before proceeding with the analysis of Helen, however, it is important to link back these essential facts about Machen's Pan to the exoticizing aesthetic practices so far discussed. Machen's tale emphasizes how neither the physical aspects nor the most abstract facets of Pan can be investigated through the observation of the natural world: nature is, Raymond reminds us, merely a "veil". This is a judgement over the discounted epistemic value of the real. Although profoundly misguided, the character of Raymond appears to voice Machen's personal suspicion towards the idea that nature can be analyzed without the artist's spiritual mediation. Machen's participation in the late Victorian occult revival appears to have influenced the narrative of *The Great God Pan* by focusing the author's attention on metaphysical concerns. The same views on the role of nature, or 'Life', can be found in Machen's aesthetic theory as well, as expressed in his major work of literary criticism, *Hieroglyphics; a Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902). The importance of nature in artistic production is here altogether dismissed: "Art and Life are two different spheres, and […] the Artist with a capital A is not a clever photographer who understands selection in a greater or less degree" (Machen 1913, 34).

These considerations lead us to a fundamental question that is bound to affect our understanding of Machen's Pan as well as that of the closely related character of Helen Vaughan: if nature is not the object of inquiry that allows the characters, and by proxy the reader, to pierce the veil and discover the platonic essence of things, what can fulfill the function of intermediary between indi-

vidual experience and truth? The answer to this question can be obtained by considering how the presence of the god Pan is experienced by those who are unfortunate enough to be faced with it. I have already mentioned how a minor character of the novella, Trevor W., is confronted by an apparition of Pan which leaves him unable to properly describe the entity. This is not the end of Trevor's suffering: the child is later offered an opportunity for recognition which takes place at a remove from the domain of natural resemblance.

> The father perceived that the child was pointing at some object, and heard the old cry, "The man in the wood", and looking in the direction indicated saw a stone head of grotesque appearance, which had been built into the wall above one of the doors. It seems the owner of the house had recently made alterations in his premises, and on digging the foundations for some offices, the men had found a curious head, evidently of the Roman period, which had been placed in the manner described. The head is pronounced by the most experienced archaeologists of the district to be that of a faun or satyr. (Machen 1894, 41-2)

Machen's Pan does not resemble anything that can be found in nature; however, its likeness to an artistic depiction originating in the country's pagan past is striking enough to induce a paroxysm of terror in the young boy, leaving him mentally scarred for the rest of his life. It is telling that the moment of recognition is here realized through the exposition to a work of art: the ekphratic description of the piece of statuary, like the textbook example of *ekphrasis* provided by Keats's "Grecian urn", delivers even more exoticizing associations to the reader. Every time the characters in the novella come dangerously close to an understanding of Pan, they do so through an encounter with one of the many forms assumed by the reified past: the village in which Helen Vaughan is raised, for instance, is only described as "a place of some importance in the time of the Roman occupation, but now a scattered hamlet" (Machen 1894, 33). The same identification of Welsh landmarks with the Roman civilization occurs numerous times in the text. Nature is not altogether absent from these descriptions, but when it does appear, it is most often in conjunction with some feature of the landscape that reminds the reader of remote pagan practices. On her way to the woods where she is made privy to the mysteries of her occult ancestry, the young Helen traverses an "old Roman road" (Machen 1894, 37), an expression which manages to encapsulate the chronological distance and the ensuing exoticism of a pre-Christian culture. Helen's identity can only be accessed via these remnants of the past, and such moments of awareness of the ruins scattered along the Welsh landscape dictate the rhythm of all major

breakthroughs in the protagonists' investigation. Consider, to this effect, the following example:

> On the evening of the day which I received Phillips' letter I was at Caermaen, and standing beneath the mouldering Roman walls, white with the winters of seventeen hundred years, I looked over the meadow where once had stood the older temple of the "God of the Deeps", and saw a house gleaming in the sunlight. It was the house where Helen had lived. (Machen 1894, 147-8)

Machen's protagonists constantly employ the past, and suffer its return, in order to interpret the present. This is what led Évelyne Caron to formulate a concise and eloquent judgement on Machen's supernatural fiction, which she labels as "archaeological" because of the contrast it enacts between resurgent past and unseeing modernity (Caron 1972, 38)[5]. To this evaluation, Sophie Mantrant correctly adds that "[Machen's] supernatural tales of the Nineties often stage the 'anachronistic conflict' Robert Mighall sees as the defining feature of the gothic mode, a conflict which opposes an 'uncivilised' past and the present it disrupts and disturbs" (2014, 2). This opposition can be read as the manifestation of an Orientalist form of discourse, as it tends to typify the exotic Other (which, in this case, is constituted by the aesthetic style and physical features of Mediterranean Europe) by contrasting it with representatives of British modernity – the gentlemen of London high society. What is most remarkable about the text, however, is that this opposition is not solely realized through the persistence of the past in the British landscape: the protagonists of the novella seem to experience both the ancient Roman ruins and the character of Helen in much the same way.

5. THE 'FEMME FATALE' AND PROTEAN HORROR

Among the cast of characters that govern the action of *The Great God Pan*, no other figure has endured the scrutiny of literary criticism as much as Helen Vaughan, the woman capable of bringing the horrific disruption of a resurfacing past to contemporary upper-class society. The amount of attention this charac-

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[5] In the original French, Caron affirms: "Le fantastique de Machen est un fantastique d'essence archéologique. Sous la surface du quotidien se trouvent des profondeurs historiques" (Caron 1972, 38).

ter has been subjected to appears to be warranted, at first glance, by her pivotal role in the novella's plot: Helen – alternatively known in her shifting identities as Mrs. Herbert or Mrs. Beaumont – is at the center of the string of suicides that constitutes the major thread of the narrative, and she is obviously the enabler of the conflict which prompts several amateur investigators to inquire. Her centrality to the plot, however, is not the most remarkable element of this character. Most critics have detected in Helen's unconventional femininity the keynote element of the narrative, a fact that did not escape the notice of Machen's first reviewers. As Christine Ferguson notices:

> Famously dubbed by a contemporary reviewer 'an incoherent nightmare of sex', *The Great God Pan* is a pagan-themed horror tale about a shape-shifting *femme fatale* that seems almost to have been written as a gift to future anxiety theorists in its fixation on the threats of sexual menace, gender instability, the primitive past, and decadent science. (2016, 50)

The features that define Helen's unconventional femininity seem to justify the opinion that, as the cited review attests, the woman's depiction must have been considered profoundly upsetting by Machen's readers. Pan's daughter wielded a considerable destabilizing power against the traditional gender norms in Victorian society, a power deriving from traits that most of Machen's contemporary readers would have considered aberrant – ranging from her behavioral patterns to her very own biological composition. Case in point, Helen's predatory nature, which allows her to move from man to man while leaving a trail of moral corruption, is only the most glaring of her protean qualities. Machen's narrative presents the reader with a *crescendo* of degenerate features, first exhibiting a series of deplorable, though mundane habits (changing identities, moving from place to place, climbing the social ladder), and ultimately dissolving the dead woman's body into a grotesque mass during the narrative's horrendous climax.

> I was then privileged or accursed […] to see that which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable […] began to melt and dissolve. […] I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. (Machen 1894, 143-4)

One cannot help but notice how the shocking description of Helen's death assumes the function of a salvific *a posteriori* measure, an unambiguous (by

virtue of its supernaturalism) justification that confirms the righteousness of the protagonists' witch-hunt. Proponents of the anxiety theory have rightfully analyzed this passage as demonstrative "of discrete and construable forms of collective cultural anxiety, usually related to sexuality, gender, race, class, evolution, and the body" (Ferguson 2016, 41), but my reason to bring it to the reader's attention is rather that of underlining how Helen's monstrosity, as expressed in her deathbed, serves the purpose of stripping Helen of her humanity, thus making identification with her nearly impossible. The normative function of this paragraph has often been overlooked by critics, who nevertheless have detected, in Helen's protean qualities, the response to the rising threat posed by a new model of woman.

The Otherization of Helen Vaughan suggests an alternative reading of this crucial character: even though the events in *The Great God Pan* completely revolve around her actions, an analysis of her function within the text reveals that Helen is, in truth, a character forced to the margins of the representation. At first, this statement might appear paradoxical, but all it asks of the reader is to separate Helen's centrality as the vehicle of the plot (here intended as a mere sequence of actions) and the position of marginality to which she is relegated in respect of the narrative's point-of-view characters. This separation allows us to realize how the author makes no concessions in his effort to portray Helen as a quintessential Other. Helen is the recipient of numerous exoticizing strategies, starting from the author's conscious exploitation of her physical aspect, which is described by contrasting it with the familiar features of the local Welsh population: "She was […] of a very different type from the inhabitants of the village; her skin was a pale, clear olive, and her features were strongly marked, and of a somewhat foreign character" (Machen 1894, 35). Later in the text, the author compares the young Helen with Rachel, a local child that displays all the features of the archetypal 'English rose': "The two girls […] presented a singular contrast, the one with her clear, olive skin and almost Italian appearance, and the other of the proverbial red and white of our rural districts" (Machen 1894, 43). Helen's skin tone distances her from the beauty standard of British society, and even though she was born not far from Rachel's home, she is still presented as a foreigner. Her looks are even assigned a geographical label, associating her with a country which could count not only on a remote pagan past, but also on the imagery evoked in British readers by the not-so-remote decades of Gothic fiction (Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* deserve a mention).

If Helen's physical aspect is a telling sign of Otherization at work, even more so is the text's astonishing lack of any kind of verbalization on her part.

The Great God Pan's antagonist is never given the chance to speak in her own voice, a fact that appears even more striking when one considers how even very minor characters like Rachel usually get to recite at least one poignant, pathetic line ("Ah, mother, mother, why did you let me go to the forest with Helen?") before expiring. As I anticipated, there is no fundamental difference between the textual functioning of the pagan ruins in the Welsh landscape and that of the role Machen assigns to Helen: she is a voiceless, mysterious mark upon the land, the representative of a past long gone now threatening to resurface. This consideration does not intend to depreciate the character's dynamism – rather, it means to point out how all of Helen's actions are inevitably aimed, within the economy of the text, at the fulfilment of a specific role: to be the embodiment of all that is exotic and removed. This personification is meant to facilitate those manners of oppositional discourse which populate the genre of the supernatural tale. Through this extreme Otherization, the character of Helen also incarnates what Wilde first and Machen later would have referred to as an aesthetic object. By realizing what is effectively a functional transmutation of Helen into an ancient Roman wall or a piece of statuary, Machen certainly does not aspire to create a realistic, believable character: instead, he establishes a narrative presence that surpasses the boundaries of nature, not least because Helen, a fundamental and profoundly mistreated character, is the result of a failed experiment, and artificial in every sense of the word.

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Abstract

This study offers a reading of the widespread character type of the 'Femme Fatale' which focuses on the developments of this figure as a trope of Decadent literature in British works of the 1890s. In particular, the paper finds an element of comparison between the Decadent orientation towards an instrumental depiction of the Orient and the portrayal, in theater and fiction, of mysterious and seductive women corresponding to the trope. The texts used to illustrate the functional role of these female characters are Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* and Arthur Machen's novella *The Great God Pan*, both of which employ aestheticizing strategies that are meant to elevate the object of desire by making it inaccessible. These strategies are ultimately defined as a process of identification between Wilde's and Machen's female protagonists and the features, or remnants, of a remote, pagan past.