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**“A dame to kill for” or “a slut ... worth dying for”:
Women in the Noir of Frank Miller**

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Dedication

To K.T.L., who introduced me to film noir and taught me to love it.

To N.D., for everything.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Brian Bremen, and reader, Donna Kornhaber, for their guidance and encouragement, as well as their incredible patience, throughout this process.

I am also very grateful for the support of my family: Hannah, for editing and commiserating; Grandma and Mom, for talking about noir with me; Dad, for being a sympathetic ear; Jonathan, for telling me that neo-noir does not exist; and the three newest members of my family, Vonda, Devin, and Destiny, for enriching all of our lives so much over the past few years.

Abstract

“A dame to kill for” or “a slut ... worth dying for”:

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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The depictions of women in film noir and neo-noir have long been objects of interest for feminist scholars. In this report, I extend this scholarship to examine Frank Miller’s *Sin City* graphic novel series as a version of neo-noir that is both intimately connected to noir tradition and innovative in its approach, specifically in terms of his representation of women. Miller depicts his female characters in a variety of ways that reflect both the positive and negative imagery of women in classic noir and neo-noir; in doing so, he creates a new and complex vision of women in noir. This report uses three different characterizations of women in film noir—the spider woman, the femme moderne, and the angel—to explore the ways in which Miller’s female characters can be understood to simultaneously uphold and challenge these conventions.

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**“A dame to kill for” or “a slut...worth dying for”:
Women in the Noir of Frank Miller**

*“...and Sin City, she’s a big, bad broad flat on her back begging for it and I
take her for all she’s worth and then I take her again and still she’s begging”*

–Frank Miller, *The Hard Goodbye*

Since film noir became recognized as a genre, there has been much significant scholarship written on the role of women in film noir. Women’s roles are particularly interesting in film noir partly because of the time period—one that included a great deal of societal change in terms of women in the workplace—but also because of the many strong, dramatic roles offered to women in film noir. Some of the most iconic women of classic film were the femmes fatales of classic film noir—Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944), for instance—and these women give us insight not only into the era in which the films were made, but also the feminist possibilities of the powerful, dangerous women depicted. The femme fatale and her counterpoint—the demure conservator of traditional female roles, the angel—offer a striking way for us to understand male desire and fear in the face of women’s growing social autonomy and economic power.

Since the era of classic film noir, the 1940s and 1950s, women have continued to gain power, and newer versions of noir have delved into the same deep-seated fears about women’s roles. This continued interest in, and fear of, the deadly, powerful femme fatale can be seen in characters like Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct* (1992). In *Dames in the Driver’s Seat*, critic Jans Wager argues that modern “retro-noirs” like these recreate the sexual dynamics of classic film noir, but

have a “reactionary vision of gender: male characters become more violent and female characters more powerless” (26) than in classic film noir. Other films explore a more positive side of female sexual empowerment, as in *Jackie Brown* (1997). These neo-noirs usually revise the role of women; according to Wager, “the female protagonist often survives and thrives instead of winding up dead, in jail, or married, containments of female agency insisted upon by classic film noir” (27). In this paper, I examine yet another new version of noir, and its representation of women: Frank Miller’s first four *Sin City* graphic novels.¹ I explore how Miller’s female characters can be understood within a framework of three different film noir types: the deceptive femme fatale, or “spider woman”; the innocent (but no less dangerous) form of femme fatale, which I will call the femme moderne; and the chaste, domestic “angel.”

In *Sin City*, Miller depicts his female characters in a variety of ways that reflect both the positive and negative imagery of women in classic noir and neo-noir; in doing so, he creates a new and complex vision of women in noir. The role of women in film noir—both classic and neo-noir—continues to be an important way of understanding the genre and, further, the society it reflects. Indeed, it is in large measure through his female characters that Miller creates his unique vision of noir; *Sin City* is not simply, as one reviewer said of the film version, “referenc[ing] an already created interpretation of the world for the purpose of imitation” (Marcus). While much of the film can certainly be seen as nostalgia or pastiche, in his characterization of women Miller troubles the

¹ These novels are: *The Hard Goodbye*, *A Dame to Kill For*, *The Big Fat Kill*, and *That Yellow Bastard*. In parenthetical citations throughout this report, they will be abbreviated as *THG*, *ADtKF*, *TBfK*, and *TYB*, respectively.

expectations of both classic film noir and neo-noir. His female characters do play into noir conventions in many ways, but Miller simultaneously creates an alternative view of women in noir—one that emphasizes not only positive and negative female power but also male fear of female sexuality and autonomy.

It might seem counterintuitive to examine a graphic novel using the language and conventions of a film genre, but film noir and comic books actually have common roots in pulp fiction² and, in *Sin City*, share many comparable thematic and stylistic elements. As Douglas Wolk argues in *Reading Comics*, “comics are not a genre; they’re a *medium*. Westerns, Regency romances, film noir: those are genres—kinds of stories with specific categories of subjects and conventions” (11). Studying a graphic novel in terms of film noir, then, is simply another way of looking at the genre of noir. Further, the panels of *Sin City* (the graphic novels) worked as storyboarding for the film version of *Sin City* (2005)—so much so that Miller was credited with co-directing the film (with Robert Rodriguez). In *Sin City*, we see the familiar characters of film noir (both classic and neo-noir)—the male hero/detective, the femme fatale, the angel, the villain—and the unusual format of a graphic novel gives us, perhaps, the ability to look at these familiar faces with new eyes. We can see not only the broad cultural influence of noir, which is evident in neo-noir, but also how *Sin City* diverges from the conventions of both classic noir and

² In *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context*, Greg S. McCue and Clive Bloom assert that before the first superhero comic book appeared in 1938, “‘books’ were bound with low grade paper and used stories that had illustration but not sequential art. They were ‘the pulps’, and comic books owe much of their history to pulps” (8). Frank Miller also notes that *Sin City* specifically was inspired by pulp or hard-boiled fiction by Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain, among others (*Comic Book Rebels* 218-219). Several of Chandler’s and Cain’s novels were made into iconic films noirs, including *The Big Sleep* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

neo-noir. What is more, in these novels we can envision noir as it looks at the turn of the 21st century: what it looks like, what new (or old) cultural anxieties it evokes, and how modern gender roles are treated. Most importantly for this paper, in *Sin City* we can see a new vision of the role of women—one that is both an homage to classic film noir and quintessentially modern; both conventional and revolutionary, both repressive and liberatory.

The Spider Woman

In E. Ann Kaplan's seminal feminist critique of film noir, *Women in Film Noir*, Janey Place outlines the archetypal female characters of the film noir genre: the femme fatale, or "spider woman," and her counterpart, the "angel." The femme fatale is beautiful, deadly, powerful, ambitious, and, whether she intends it or not, she threatens to destroy the male detective. The femme fatale typically uses her sexuality to entrap a man in order to achieve her own goals (for example, as in *Double Indemnity*, convincing a lover to kill her husband for profit). In film noir, these women are ultimately mastered or conquered in one way or another, whether through death, imprisonment, or marriage. Place notes that even as our society needs archetypes like the femme fatale in order to express cultural fears and desires, "by its limited expression, ending in defeat, that unacceptable element is controlled" (36). Film noir demonstrates the full fearful threat of the "spider woman," almost like a monster in a horror film. Through her ultimate onscreen defeat, the male hero—and, vicariously, the viewer—manifests symbolic control over the threat of female power in postwar society. In the example of *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale (the married Phyllis Dietrichson) seduces the male hero (insurance agent Walter Neff) and convinces him to help her murder her husband. By manipulating Neff into committing this crime, she leads to his destruction, but she, too, must be destroyed in the end. With the destruction of the male hero, we see the full scope of the femme fatale's power, but she cannot be fully successful. The male hero also manages to destroy her—killing her after she shoots him—and, in the end, law and order are restored via the belated efforts of the hero, who confesses his crimes.

Place argues that both the “dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress” (35) and her alter ego, “the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer” (35) are cinematic manifestations of societal upheaval and male anxiety about women’s roles in the 1940s and 1950s. As middle-class women gained financial power via the workplace, their social independence increased as well, since only a financially independent woman can live without a male provider. Women’s growing autonomy threatened male control both in the workplace—since women were occupying traditionally masculine roles—and at home, where the same could be said of the female wage earner. The femme fatale, portrayed as aggressive and ambitious, is the worst embodiment of those fears. Often the femme fatale is a working woman, but whether or not she is employed, her motivation is money and control.

The women of *Sin City* can be seen to fit a variety of roles within the range of film noir and neo-noir—from femmes fatales to angels. At the same time, Frank Miller plays with these conventions in his representations of women. Miller’s somewhat extreme version of the femme fatale is best exemplified by the character of Ava in *A Dame to Kill For*. A femme fatale like Ava fits into the well-known tradition of evil women who trap men like spiders—hence the term “spider women”—among them Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity* (1944), Cora Smith of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and Brigid O’Shaughnessy of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). “Spider women”—in both classic film noir and in *Sin City*—trap men and destroy them for their own benefit. Ava’s ambition for her husband’s money and independence from him lead to not only his death, but also the attempted destruction of the hero, Dwight. In “Women

in Film Noir,” Janey Place writes: “Often the original transgression of the dangerous lady of film noir ... is ambition. ... [T]his ambition is inappropriate to her status as a woman, and must be contained” (46). She continues, “her desire for freedom, wealth, or independence ignites the forces which threaten the hero” (46). Like the femme fatale of classic film noir, then, Ava’s crimes are motivated by her ambition for money and power to a certain extent. She follows in a long line of femmes fatales, among them Phyllis Dietrichson and Cora Smith, who enlist a lover’s help in murdering her husband for profit.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Dwight is mourning the loss of Ava, the woman who left him in order to marry a wealthy man. Ava reappears in Dwight’s life, however, seducing him and convincing him that she is being mentally and sexually tortured by her husband, the wealthy Damien Lord, and his chauffeur Manute. Eventually, she convinces Dwight to kill Damien Lord, ostensibly in order to protect her. Although Dwight repeatedly tells himself to stay away from Ava—“I should tell her to go to hell” (*ADtKF* 27)—he admits to himself and to her that he cannot stay away, saying, “You called and I came running. You’ve still got that much of a hold on me and maybe you always will” (*ADtKF* 35). Despite Ava’s past betrayal, the combination of her sex appeal and her vulnerability, as she convinces him that she fears for her life, are enough to override rational thought. After Dwight murders Damien Lord, Ava attempts to kill him, but he escapes with his life. With the help of the Old Town prostitutes, Dwight survives and returns to ultimately kill Ava. In Dwight’s survival and escape from Ava (and from any lasting punishment), he embodies a male hero that is more neo-noir than

classic noir—if only because the Hays Code prevented films in the 1940s and 1950s from depicting unpunished criminals. Unlike films like *Double Indemnity*, in which society punishes both femme fatale and male lead for their crimes, the world of *Sin City* punishes only the female perpetrator.

Like the classic film noir “spider women,” Ava couches her deadly ambition in sexual temptation and uses sex as a weapon of seduction and betrayal. As we see in Ava’s relationship with Dwight, she uses sex in order to manipulate and control him. Sex is her only source of power—she admits as much when she tells Dwight, after he murders her husband in order to protect her, “I knew I could count on you. Sex always made you stupid. Ready to believe anything” (*ADtKF* 110).³ Before Dwight gives in and has sex with Ava, though, he initially appears to have control over her and the situation—even telling her to leave his apartment when she arrives there naked (*ADtKF* 61)—but Ava is able to use even his anger over her betrayal to accomplish her goal. She begs Dwight: “If you can’t love me—hate me. If you can’t forgive me—punish me” (*ADtKF* 61).

Although their encounter might begin as Dwight punishing Ava, she never relinquishes control or subjectivity. Dwight recounts, “Before long my hatred’s spent but she won’t let me go ... I’m dragged to the ground by a jungle cat. She devours me and I thank her for it” (*ADtKF* 63). Jessica Benjamin, in her 1983 article “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” argues that from a psychoanalytic perspective,

Violence is predicated on the denial of the other person’s independent subjectivity and autonomy. Violence is a way of expressing or asserting

³ See figs. 1-2

control over an other, of establishing one's own autonomy and negating the other person's. ... It makes the other an object but retains possession of her or him. (285)

Ava's sexual role, then, is that of the subject who asserts control, a role that certainly echoes her motivation throughout the story. Dwight assumes the object position here, allowing himself to be possessed, even consumed by Ava. Dwight enjoys both the violence and the consumption (loss of control) as a loss of the self. As Benjamin puts it, submitting to another's will acts as a "merging" (285) which recalls "the original oneness with the mother" (285). This merging is a form of psychic death, or negation of the self, which is both feared (or hated) and, as a result of that fear, also desired. For Dwight, then, we can see Ava as representing that loss of the self that he both hates and loves—the loss of self, or "devouring," that he ultimately thanks her for.

Here, the sexual act can also be seen to mimic Ava and Dwight's overall relationship. Whereas Dwight is reluctant to admit that he is not in control, he does eventually submit to Ava's will and allow himself to be convinced to kill her husband. He does temporarily accept the object position, as he does in this sex act, but Ava's sadism extends beyond sex. Ava seeks control and a subject position in a world where only rich men like her husband have that power. Thus, she uses sex, her only form of power, to establish her subjectivity both within the sex act and beyond.

In the course of only a few hours, Ava manipulates Dwight into falling in love with her again, but more than that—Dwight admits, "She owns me. Body and soul" (*ADtKF* 65). Ava switches easily from sexual dominance—"owning" Dwight—to

displaying her own neediness and submission outside of the sex act. This ownership is established through Ava's apparent need for Dwight; she appears to submit to Dwight's anger and later begs for his help, trying to portray herself as less powerful than she is. Indeed, Ava's ploy works so well because she portrays herself as the powerless object of another man, inflaming both sexual jealousy and protective desire in the men she seeks to destroy. For instance, she claims to need Dwight to save her from her husband, and subsequently convinces the detective investigating her husband's murder that she needs him to save her from Dwight. We could see this as the man's attempt to regain the subject position he lost during sex; by defeating the man who is dominant over Ava, Dwight might hope to replace the other man and, like him, hold a dominant instead of submissive relation to Ava. Since Ava's deception is behind everything her lovers do on her behalf, though, Ava ultimately maintains control throughout her interaction with men—until, of course, one of them kills her.

As we have seen, Ava's power comes from her sexuality, and Miller portrays her as having almost supernatural effects on men. Manute, the chauffeur, tells Dwight that Ava has "tricked and ruined and murdered" (*ADtKF* 173) dozens of men: "The goddess takes no *lover*. The goddess [Ava] makes *slaves* of men. Damien Lord. You. Me. We serve. When she wishes, we die ... She *devoured* you, all of you. Sometimes for *profit*. Sometimes for *sport*" (*ADtKF* 172-173). Here, again, we see Ava's dominance working sexually as well as socially: Ava controls men, decides when they live or die, and uses them for her own benefit. Indeed, within the novel, Ava uses sex as an insidious form of power and control over not just Dwight, but every man in her life. Before the novel is

over, for instance, we see her seducing and exerting control over the detective in charge of her husband's murder case. Ava uses her sexual power for her direct benefit—whether for profit or to protect herself from criminal investigation—echoing the motivations of classic film noir femmes fatales.

At the same time, though, Manute's statement that Ava devours men "sometimes for *profit*. Sometimes for *sport*" (ADtKF 173) indicates that Ava's pleasure in destruction goes beyond the goals of the conventional femme fatale. While the seductresses of classic film noir can certainly be portrayed as heartless and calculating—and may even take pleasure in their violence—they do not act without motivation. Janey Place, for instance, argues that femmes fatales are driven by ambition, a "desire for freedom, wealth, or independence" (46), and Julie Grossman, in *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, agrees that "exigency for most so-called femmes fatales moves these women to express—in aggressive physical and verbal gestures—an insistence on independence" (22). Miller's depiction of Ava does, to a large extent, indicate her desire for independence and money, but he goes further. Ava does crave autonomy—as she puts it, "*I'm in charge*'—God, I've waited *years* to say that" (ADtKF 113)—but she also complicates her financial motivation when, only one page later, she declares that she is not crazy, but evil:

Insane? Ha! That's so *easy*, so *convenient*—and so *wrong* ... a *madwoman* couldn't have pulled this off. No. There's a word for what I am, but nobody uses it anymore. Nobody wants to see the simple truth ... they close their eyes and blather about *psychology* and say *nobody* is truly *evil*. That's why I've *won*. That's why I *always* win. (ADtKF 114)

In this passage, Miller seems to reject the psychoanalysis of femmes fatales. Instead of arguing, as Grossman does, that femmes fatales are trapped women reacting to “social worlds presented as psychotically gendered” (21), Miller presents a simpler—and more frightening—version of a femme fatale: a woman with no clear motivation to destroy men except, perhaps, sport.

As Grossman points out, in feminist analysis of classic film noir, the female viewer can “find grounds for empathy in understanding the ‘femme fatale’” (Grossman 25), largely because of our ability to see her as trapped by a repressive, highly sexist society. But Miller’s version of the femme fatale allows no such empathy. By portraying Ava as monstrous and evil—not trapped, but the one entrapping—he eliminates, to a large degree, the feminist possibilities in the character of the femme fatale. At the same time, Ava is *so* powerful that, in essence, she is responsible for every evil in the story, while the men are absolved. Not only is female power portrayed as dangerous to men, it is something monstrous and evil; male power, on the other hand, is portrayed as more essentially good but also vulnerable to female influence. Not only are men morally better than women within the story, but also men are not responsible for the crimes they do commit, since there is a woman behind them.

In Miller’s extreme version of the “spider woman,” the woman is not only capable of destroying one man, but, as Manute claims, dozens of men. In Manute’s estimation, Ava’s sexual power renders her almost devoid of humanity; images of a goddess and a devouring animal both deny her humanity and femininity. Despite her beauty and sex appeal, Ava is a monster; *because* of her beauty and sex appeal, men are rendered

helpless to her. Her portrayal goes beyond an homage or pastiche of the classic femmes fatales, and, indeed, stands out among postclassic films noirs as well. In Jans Wager's descriptions of retro-noir and neo-noir, for instance, she writes that the "retro-noir reverberates with reactionary gender images, while neo-noir portrays some revisionist possibilities" (16). Thus, in the retro-noir Wager sees "the reassertion (with a vengeance) of patriarchy" (16); neo-noir, by contrast, "features subversive politics, an attempted revolt against tradition, and at least a partial unmooring of patriarchy" (16). While the end of *A Dame to Kill For* does reassert patriarchy through Dwight's killing of Ava, in much of the story Ava appears much more powerful than most femmes fatales (given, for instance, her nefarious influence on so many different men). Instead of being a mere reactionary response to the classic film noir, with "male characters ... more violent and female characters more powerless" (Wager 26), Miller creates a version of noir that exhibits a complex interaction of female subjectivity and patriarchy. While Ava is undoubtedly powerful, her power does not go far enough to establish the story as a fully subversive one, and while Dwight does eventually reassert patriarchal control, he requires the help of women—the Old Town prostitutes—in order to do so. With more freedom than women in the postwar era, Miller's female characters prove a greater, more violent threat; simultaneously, many of his male characters appear weak and easily manipulated in contrast to Wager's formulation of the hyper-violent male characters in retro-noir. Perhaps, in Miller's interpretation of noir, men's weakness *and* the violent threat of female sexuality are dual objects of anxiety.

Despite the changes Miller makes to the classic film noir portrayal of the femme fatale, the ending of *A Dame to Kill For* fulfills the expectations of noir conventions. In film noir, femmes fatales are ultimately mastered or conquered in one way or another, whether through death or imprisonment. Place notes, “the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman ... [is] achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it” (45). After we see the full scope of Ava’s power—as she manipulates even the detective investigating her—and realize that, as Ava claims, she has the capacity to “*always win*” (*ADtKF* 114), the male hero finally destroys her. Ava, a deceptive and deadly woman, must be conquered in order to reassert the male power she threatens. In conquering Ava, Dwight regains control over himself and restores the balance of power—seizing it from the woman and taking it for himself—ultimately satisfying the expectations of the noir genre.

The Femme Moderne

Between the two extremes of femme fatale and angel, there exists a range of female roles in classic film noir, and in recent years, critics like Paula Rabinowitz, Julie Grossman, and Erin Smith have increasingly studied these “in-between” characters and their contribution to how we understand film noir. Julie Grossman, in fact, argues that there are very few uncomplicated femmes fatales, and that most women in film noir do not fit the conventional description of a femme fatale. Grossman suggests the term “femme moderne”—modern woman—as a replacement for “femme fatale,” to indicate, as she puts it, the “complex levels of female subjectivity but also the extent to which women are trapped in social roles they can’t change” (25). By re-naming the femme fatale, Grossman seeks to change the way women in film noir are viewed, and reinforce the empathy that many female viewers find in the femme fatale (25). Instead of seeing women as evil or “fatal”, she argues, we need a term that will reflect their moral complexity and their place within their society. The ambition and independence that characterize the “femme fatale,” after all, are also characteristics of the modern woman in the 1940s and 1950s.

In this context, I use Grossman’s term, femme moderne, as a way to describe the main female characters—as Grossman argues, the majority of women in film noir—who do not fit the expectations of the femme fatale or angel. Where Grossman suggests femme moderne as a replacement for femme fatale, here the term is used to describe the female character who, while she might be termed a femme fatale in terms of the threat

she represents to men, stands apart from the “spider woman” in that she embodies this threat without malicious intent.

These are women—like the eponymous heroine of *Laura* (1944)—who are dangerous to the men around them without intending harm. The men they influence are portrayed as driven to violence, not by the femme fatale’s manipulation, but nevertheless through the influence of their dangerous sexuality and power. The villain Waldo Lydecker, for instance, in *Laura*, attempts to kill Laura Hunt, a professional woman, when she refuses his romantic advances. Unable to control the expression of her sexuality through a romantic relationship with her, Lydecker is driven to murder to reassert masculine control. These “good” femmes fatales—as I call them here, femmes modernes—are dangerous via their ambition and economic independence, as seen in many cases through their having jobs. Despite their lack of malicious intent, their autonomy threatens male control in both social and economic terms. Their danger tends to be neutralized by some socially positive means, like marriage, rather than the punishment that must await the truly malicious femme fatale. For instance, although Laura is not murdered, her emasculating independence is resolved through marriage to a hypermasculine detective.

We may see another example of the femme moderne in the character of Stella from 1945’s *Fallen Angel*. Stella, a working-class waitress, supports herself and longs for a better life, which she hopes to gain through marriage to a rich man. Her foil is the wealthy and innocent June; June marries a drifter, Eric Stanton, who seeks to defraud her and use her money to woo Stella. In this case, the woman does not attempt to trick or

deceive the male lead, but her ambition and desire for money do lead to her downfall when she is ultimately killed by one of her rich boyfriends. Because Stella chooses wealth and her career over love and family, she represents the femme moderne's threat to stable gender roles and traditional values.

In *Sin City*, Frank Miller portrays women in ways that echo the variety of female roles in film noir but also complicate these film noir conventions—with his portrayals of women who are neither femme fatale nor angel, Miller also provides an exemplary model of the complicated femme moderne that Grossman and other scholars discuss. Like these critics, then, Miller works to re-envision what the femme fatale looks like and embrace, to some extent, the range and variety of female roles and female subjectivity.

In Julie Grossman's book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, she writes that “many female characters in original-cycle noir” (21) can be understood as responding to overwhelmingly male control over their lives. She continues, they “are shown to be limited by, even trapped in, social worlds presented as psychotically gendered. Exigency for most so-called femmes fatales moves these women to express—in aggressive physical and verbal gestures—an insistence on independence” (21-22). When femmes fatales act violently or threateningly, then, they may be seen as defending their independence and self-determination against encroaching male control. Instead of unmotivated violence, Grossman argues that these “bad women”—femmes fatales—are actually reacting to restrictive social forces. Their aggressive actions are a response, and retaliation, to aggression visited on them. As she reads them, even emblematic femmes fatales like Phyllis Dietrichson are *not* acting, as Paula Rabinowitz puts it, “without logical

antecedent” (27). Instead, their rage has a reason and a purpose behind it. This formulation, which proposes a new way of understanding female characters in classic film noir, also works for Frank Miller’s representations of femmes modernes. Within the male-dominated world of *Sin City*, female sexuality and the power associated with it becomes both a threat to male control but also a positive form of self-determination for women.

The positive forms of power held by femmes modernes can best be seen in the prostitutes of Old Town, and especially in their sometime leader, Gail. Indeed, they may also be considered similar to the “office wife,” Erin Smith’s way of understanding powerful women in film noir who cannot fit the category of femme fatale. In the figure of the office wife, Smith describes a woman who is independent like the femme fatale, yet not dangerous; she is helpful, not destructive, to the male detective. She cannot be categorized as a domestic “angel,” though, since she exists within the workplace. The women of Old Town embody the “office wife” through their assistance to Dwight, which would not be possible without the significant power they hold. When Dwight is near death after Ava makes an attempt on his life, Gail and the other women save him and subsequently help him get revenge by killing Ava. They are undoubtedly powerful here, but they use their power in order to help Dwight, the male hero. Smith’s concept of the office wife describes a woman “straddl[ing] two formerly separate spheres,” (Smith 155)—existing in the workplace and domestic space simultaneously—and encompassing the roles of both femme fatale and angel, just as the femmes modernes of Old Town

display, by virtue of their work as prostitutes, both their sexual power (and concomitant capacity for violence) *and* their dependence on men.

For many critics of film noir, the idea of women in the workplace is at the foundation of both the representation of positive female power and the threat to male economic and social control. Women's work, therefore, is intimately tied to the idea of power and female sexuality. In the postwar era of classic film noir, the creation of the sexually dangerous femme fatale was, in many ways, a response to the social upheaval wrought by women replacing men in the workplace. Thus, many femmes fatales at the time were working women—Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), for instance, as well as the good (but no less dangerous) women—femmes modernes—of the eponymous *Laura* (1944) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). These women's status in the workplace, as well as their ambition, is precisely what makes them dangerous to men used to a male-dominated workplace. One way of controlling the threat of women in workplace, though, is to connect the idea of women doing work to “women's work,” *not* men's work.

As critics like Paula Rabinowitz note, women doing work was virtually indistinguishable from “women's work” in film noir, and the idea that all women's work is domestic labor leads to the conflation of prostitution with all forms of women's work. In her chapter “Domestic Labor: Film Noir, Proletarian Literature, and Black Women's Fiction” from her book *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*, which discusses the sexualized and racialized nature of class and work, Rabinowitz analyzes the connection between domestic labor and prostitution as “women's work.” She writes that

this link “is central to the image of the femme fatale’s maid who can keep the house of a woman not known for her domestic virtues because she, too, exchanges her body for pay” (Rabinowitz 67-68). In other words, the (white) femme fatale and her (black) maid are intimately connected, across race and class, because their labor is read as sexual. While we see no black maids in *Sin City*, Rabinowitz’s analysis works well within the bounds of these stories. In fact, the link between “women’s work” and prostitution is made even clearer because there is no maid on which to displace the white woman’s sexual labor.

In a similar move to the universal conflation of sex and work for women, there is likewise a trend towards racializing virtually every woman in *Sin City*. When we first see Goldie in *The Hard Goodbye*, for instance, she is portrayed as white. In subsequent panels, however, she is entirely black (*THG* 10). While Miller’s use of solid black and white in severe chiaroscuro makes for limited nuance of color, and black often stands in for shadow, in some cases even shadows do not explain Miller’s coloration. In this particular instance, Goldie and Marv face each other, and Marv’s shadow extends behind him, leaving his skin white. Goldie appears with her back to us, and what we see of her skin is solid black, as if she is in shadow (see fig. 3). This racial ambiguity can be seen to collapse the classic film noir black maid/white femme fatale into one character, the sexualized woman who is simultaneously white and black. What is implied in classic film noir, therefore, is simply made explicit in Frank Miller’s *Sin City*, and his versions of the femme moderne are very effective examples of how the work women do can be both a form of power and, simultaneously, a way of containing and controlling that power.

While the expression of female sexuality and power can prove dangerous to the men around them, it can be positive for women in *Sin City*. It is their sexuality, after all, and the currency of that sexuality, that enables them to control Old Town—a section of Sin City run by female prostitutes. The women of Old Town use their sexual power to amass political power, economic power, and autonomy; not to harm or deceive men, but rather to achieve independence from them. Their independence is limited, however, because of the nature of their work, which must involve at least some level of submission to, and dependence on, men.

Gail, as the de facto leader of the Old Town prostitutes, best embodies this image of positive sexual power. In *The Big Fat Kill*, Gail and the Old Town women kill several men, including the policeman Jackie-Boy, who attempt to take advantage of a young prostitute, Becky. Dwight, who has a romantic past with Gail, enters the story when he follows Jackie into Old Town in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent him from causing trouble. When Jackie threatens Becky and is subsequently murdered, Dwight finds out that Jackie is a policeman, a fact that threatens the fragile truce between the prostitutes of Old Town and the Sin City police. While Gail and the other prostitutes prepare to go to war to defend themselves, Dwight attempts to avoid the necessity of a war by dumping Jackie's body and hiding his murder from the police.

In their interactions with Dwight, Gail and the other prostitutes behave not like fatal women tricking men but rather as adversarial equals. When Gail comes across Dwight attempting to protect Becky, she puts a gun to Dwight's head, informing him: "Everything's under control. Sit back and enjoy the show" (*TBFK* 46). Dressed in

bondage wear, complete with handcuffs, Gail demonstrates sexuality and power. Dwight notes, “There’s no use arguing with her. The ladies are the law here, beautiful and merciless” (*TBFK* 46). Within a limited, defined space, then, women *do* have autonomy and control in Sin City. Through Old Town, we can see both the extent of women’s power and its limits. The existence of Old Town is based on an agreement with two male-dominated groups: the police and the mob. If the women are able to enter into an agreement with them, and successfully negotiate their independence, then to at least some extent, they function as equals to the men. Their power is limited within Sin City’s male power structure, but within the boundaries of Old Town, the women do hold absolute control. They even, as evidenced by Dwight’s assertion that “the ladies are the law here” (*TBFK* 46), have the equivalent of the same power structures as the rest of Sin City; they have the independent equivalent of the Sin City police, with the same power and responsibilities, within limits. Indeed, when the Old Town prostitutes accidentally break the truce between them and the Sin City police, the women are ready to go to war, as one independent entity against another. In many ways, then, Old Town does function as an independent state within Sin City, and while the rest of Sin City may be more powerful than Old Town, the women’s autonomy is, by and large, respected within its limits.

Since the women control Old Town, Dwight has no standing to “protect” them. When Dwight explains that he followed Jackie into Old Town “to make sure he didn’t hurt any of you girls” (*TBFK* 50), Gail mocks Dwight in his patriarchal attitudes: “ ‘*Us girls,*’ she chuckles, ‘*us helpless little girls*’ ... *us girls* are as safe as we can *be*, Lancelot” (*TBFK* 50). In *The Big Fat Kill*, as in original film noir, the woman’s

independence and power need not be negatively directed at the male; instead, the very fact of her power threatens his masculinity. Gail also acknowledges, here, that Dwight's desire to help is rooted in a fantasy of being a hero and protector. She rejects his help and his male fantasy of being Lancelot; in doing so, she both asserts her independence and threatens the patriarchal power structure that Dwight is so invested in. By dominating Jackie-Boy and refusing Dwight's attempt to rescue them, Gail and her fellow prostitutes implicitly threaten male power and control in both negative and benevolent forms.

Dwight does seem threatened by Gail, but not because of anything she does. Instead, her appearance and attitude make him cautious: after noticing her revealing bondage attire and her "all-business smile" (*TBFK* 50), Dwight tells himself "*Don't look at her ... Stay calm. Stay cold. Don't play with fire. You know what happens when you play with fire*" (*TBFK* 50). He remembers his experience with Ava (mentioned above), when "playing with fire" leads him to kill Ava's husband, an innocent man. Ava, though, actively manipulates Dwight into murdering her husband, whereas Gail inspires Dwight's caution merely by being who she is. What a femme fatale like Ava and a femme moderne like Gail have in common, despite the major difference in motivation and intent, is the inherent danger for men implicit in contact with a powerful woman. Even a non-fatal femme moderne like Gail, then, is dangerous to the man via her sexuality and the power she derives from it, if only because *her* power and dominance threatens his own.

While the femmes modernes of *Sin City*, especially Gail, do hold significant power within the story, their power is also limited in many ways. Their sexuality, which holds the key to their autonomy and also embodies their threat to male control, is

simultaneously a limiting factor to their independence and dominance. One of the ways this occurs is through the connection between women's work and prostitution, which becomes explicit in *Sin City*. For the prostitutes in Old Town, their sexual labor is the source of their autonomy and of their limited power over men; they have freedom, moreover, only if they continue to offer their services to men. In other words, the women of Old Town are able to bargain with their sexual currency but are unable to do anything but perform sexual work. Their labor can be seen as a source of power, but it also traps them in the realm of women's work. Even the working women who are not explicitly prostitutes, such as Shellie, and Nancy, must use their sexuality in their work: Shellie notes that as a waitress, getting tips depends on her appearance, and Nancy, as an exotic dancer, could be seen as performing sexual acts for pay. Ava, a "spider woman" femme fatale in the vein of Phyllis Dietrichson, trades on sex to get what she wants; in effect, prostituting herself so that men will do what she asks of them. The difference between Ava, as femme fatale, and the other female characters is that Ava uses sex deceptively; her lovers are not aware of the price they will have to pay in order to be with her. The Old Town prostitutes, and to a lesser degree Shellie and Nancy, exact an open and honest price for their sexuality. Like the women in classic film noir, the women of *Sin City* have one currency, and that is sex.⁴ Instead of a moral hierarchy differentiating the chaste

⁴ There is one clear exception to the preceding example, and that is the character of Lucille, who works as a parole officer. It is in the character of Lucille that we can see the privileging not just of sexuality, but specifically of heterosexuality. Lucille is a lesbian, as her parolee Marv notes in *The Hard Goodbye*, and thus her sexuality is not available to men. Because of her orientation, then, Lucille is free to work a job that is not explicitly sexualized. Her manliness and physical power lend her gravitas and disrupt the notion of women's work as domestic labor. At the same time, however, the fact that Lucille is the only female

angel and the sexualized femme fatale, however, in Frank Miller's world it is not sexuality per se, but rather the use of sex as a form of deception and manipulation, that characterizes the femme fatale.

As discussed above, women's access to power via their sexuality and their work outside the home is not without complication. While any degree of female power can be seen as a threat to male control, women's power is limited by the sexual context and their freedom and autonomy is limited to a space—Old Town—that the (male) forces of Sin City grant them. While their work does grant them a limited degree of freedom, it simultaneously traps them in a larger system of sexual exploitation and commodification. Marv demonstrates this explicitly when, driving into Old Town, he remarks, “The merchandise is on display” (*THG* 139). Prostitutes may control Old Town, but their control depends on their willingness to be a sexual commodity—and, in fact, their willingness to offer their services free to the Sin City police (*TBFK* 74). These women are not completely free or autonomous; instead, their limited autonomy is contingent, to some degree, on making themselves subservient to men and men's desires. This can be seen even in the clothes they wear on the street: immediately after the comment mentioned above, Marv adds, “never mind the cold” (*THG* 139). Despite the cold and concomitant physical discomfort, the prostitutes are standing outside in lingerie. Their survival—both as individuals and politically, as Old Town—depends on their

character whose work is not sexualized reinforces the idea that for heterosexual women—for women who are available to men—all labor is sexual labor.

attractiveness to men, which leads them to put aside their own comfort in order to be a more appealing commodity for purchase.

Clothing is not necessarily only a sign of submission and objectification, however. Gail's mask, which she wears in *The Hard Goodbye* (147) and in *A Dame to Kill For* (142-146) works in several ways to both reinforce and potentially complicate her objectification.⁵ The mask is, most obviously, a fetish garment; along with her clothing, it marks Gail as a dominatrix, a woman who exerts sexual power over men. Echoing his description of Ava, discussed above, Dwight revels in Gail's violence, referring to her as a warrior and valkyrie. When the two kiss, Dwight narrates: "She almost yanks my head clean off, shoving my mouth into hers. So hard it hurts, and her kiss a savage thing, savage and endlessly angry, an explosion" (*TBFK* 83). In this excerpt, Gail claims a dominant role and inflicts pain on Dwight. It is important to note that immediately prior to the kiss, Dwight slaps Gail. Her violent kiss, then, is a direct response to the slap and can certainly be seen as her regaining sexual and physical dominance over Dwight. When Dwight temporarily threatens Gail's subjectivity through an act of violence—the slap—Gail is compelled to reclaim her subjectivity and establish Dwight as the object in their relationship. Gail as a dominatrix, then, asserts control over men and, in doing so, claims her subjectivity and objectifies the male submissive.

At the same time, however, Gail's control is not complete. Benjamin notes that

In adult erotic domination the sadist does not have the satisfaction of the other providing a limit, but has to control her or his own impulses. The

⁵ See figs. 4-5

masochist does get this satisfaction, but not for her own differentiating activity, only vicariously for the sadist's. Both partners are involved in controlling the other to conform to a fantasy. (293)

While Dwight submits to Gail's violence, he *chooses* that submission; as evidenced by his slap, he has the capacity to inhabit a subject position, but on the whole chooses not to do so. Benjamin's argument about intersubjectivity—that neither the dominant nor the submissive are entirely subject or object, but both—can also be seen through Gail's performance as a dominatrix. Like the other prostitutes, Gail does depend on men as customers and to initiate their sessions. She does not have unlimited control over men; instead, she performs that control within set boundaries. Even as Gail performs the role of dominatrix, she does so at the behest of men; even when she uses her sexual power to dominate men, the submissive man also controls Gail “to conform to a fantasy” (Benjamin 293).

Beyond its association with bondage and domination, the mask can be examined as a form of veil. Mary Ann Doane, discussing the significance of the veiled woman in film noir, argues that there are two kinds of veils: opaque veils, which block part of the woman's face completely, and translucent veils, which both “conceal and reveal” (49). She notes that when the veil is “concealing, covering, hiding, or disguising, the veil is characterized by its opacity, its ability to fully block the gaze” (48). Gail's mask, working even more overtly than a veil, covers half her face, which can be seen to protect Gail from the gaze. Her “veil” is certainly opaque, which Doane correlates to the motivation of “concealing, covering, hiding, or disguising” (48). If her mask works to protect her,

though, it simultaneously invites the gaze as part of her costume as a prostitute. It can be seen to emphasize, even, the part of her face that remains uncovered, and highlight her mouth—her mouth working here as potentially a sexual organ but also as an instrument of erotic dominance in her role as dominatrix. Again, her job requires her to invite the attention of men, so it is difficult to imagine that Gail would use a mask to hide, but as she draws their gaze, her mask might work to control what parts of her are able to be seen and what are not—thus salvaging a degree of self-determination from a situation in which she has, perhaps, little control. This interpretation of the mask fits better, perhaps, with what Doane describes as the use of the veil “in the service of the representation of the seductive power of femininity” (49); when the woman’s veil is not opaque, it “simultaneously conceals and reveals, provoking the gaze” (Doane 49). The veil works as a covering but is also translucent, so it “both allows and disallows vision” (Doane 49). Gail’s mask is opaque, so it serves as a stronger form of concealment, blocking the male gaze completely but, because of the eyeholes, it does not restrict *her* gaze.

Given the emphasis on Gail’s eyes and her unrestricted ability to see, we can even see her as appropriating the gaze. As a dominant, Gail claims a subject position and rejects the object position; it would seem to follow, then, that she rejects the object position inherent in being, as E. Ann Kaplan describes, “the recipient of male desire, the passive recipient of his gaze” (316). If, indeed, the male submissive is the one being objectified, then Gail could be seen as inhabiting the subject position even insofar as to project her gaze onto men. Kaplan, in her essay “Is the Gaze Male?,” argues that from a psychoanalytic perspective, women’s sexual pleasure “can only be constructed around

her objectification; it cannot be a pleasure that comes from a desire for the other (a subject position)—that is, her desire to be desired” (316). The female dominant, as Benjamin demonstrates above, interrupts this female-object/male-subject dichotomy; thus, it seems quite possible that a dominant female claiming a subject position, and objectifying men through erotic violence, can also be the owner of the gaze and not only its recipient. In sum, Gail’s mask works simultaneously, and ambivalently, to protect/empower her, allowing her to claim a subject position, but also, perhaps, to make her more attractive as a fetish object for men.

Like the *femmes modernes* of classic film noir, many women in *Sin City* enjoy a limited degree of power and only temporary self-determination. In *The Big Fat Kill*, for instance, when Gail, the assassin Miho, and the other girls successfully exert their power over Jackie-Boy and his friends, their power is tempered by the reassertion of male authority. After killing Jackie and his friends, Dwight and Gail discover that Jackie was a cop, a fact that threatens the survival of Old Town. Dwight explains, “It’s held for *years*, the shaky *truce*. The *cops* get a slice of the *profits* and free *entertainment* when they throw a *party*. The girls get to administer their own brand of *justice*. They get to defend their own *turf*” (*TBFK* 74). The truce also demands that Sin City policemen will not be killed: “Sure, they’ll shoot up his squad car. They’ll steal his gun and his pants ... but they’ll *send him back alive*” (*TBFK* 74). Dwight’s explanation indicates that the truce grants the women of Old Town limited freedom: they “get to” run Old Town the way they like, as long as they provide services to the police. In effect, then, the prostitutes’ sexual power works to give them a degree of power—without having sex as a bargaining

chip, they would not have the power they do—but simultaneously limits their autonomy because it traps them in a sexual exchange. They cannot be fully autonomous because they must trade sexual favors for the power they are granted. Because their truce with the police allows the prostitutes to defend themselves against the powerful Sin City mob, breaking of the truce would leave Old Town open to attack by both forms of male power in Sin City: the police and the mob.

Gail, who initially seems powerful and in control, becomes agitated at the idea of being caught by the police and returning to the “bad old days ... the pimps! The drugs! The beatings! The rapes!” (*TBFK* 81). Dwight, in contrast, remains calm even while Gail waves a gun in his face, controlling his demeanor and, eventually, the situation. He actually smacks Gail, despite Miho’s threatening his life, and with that violent act takes control of the prostitutes. The smack neutralizes Gail’s power and actually elicits a sexual response from her. Dwight narrates,

My warrior woman. She almost yanks my head clean off, shoving my mouth into hers. So hard it hurts, and her kiss a savage thing, savage and endlessly angry, an explosion that blasts away all the dull gray years between the now and that one fiery night when she was mine. She’ll always be mine ... Always and never. (*TBFK* 83)

Dwight qualifies his possession of Gail with the phrase “always and never,” echoing the complicated exchange of subject/object position discussed above. As the submissive object, Dwight can never possess Gail—rather, she possesses him; as the submissive subject who uses Gail as an object in his fantasy, he does possess her.

While he does not claim to possess Gail completely, he does control her to at least some degree. She might be a “warrior woman,” but she is *his*, and able to be dominated regardless of her own savagery or anger. After smacking Gail, and her response, Dwight takes control of the situation and demands of the other prostitutes what he needs in order to hide Jackie-Boy’s body. Despite Gail’s willingness to go to war to defend Old Town, Dwight views the women as powerless to defend themselves, and at this point, Dwight steps in to save them—to assert male control of Gail and of the entire situation. Gail cedes control to him, so that it is a man, in the end, who saves Old Town from the forces that threaten it; the women who purportedly control it are made helpless in this situation.

In the end, Gail and the other Old Town prostitutes demonstrate limited control and self-determination, despite their supposedly dangerous sexual power. While men like Dwight can extol Gail’s strength and violence, they simultaneously reject the idea that women are equals. Although Gail and the others are ready to fight a war to defend Old Town from the threat of the police and the mob, Dwight’s response is a dismissive, “Don’t be stupid, Gail. You wouldn’t stand a chance” (*TBFK* 78). After Dwight drives away from Old Town with Jackie’s body and notices that the car he requested from the women is low on gas, his anger seems connected to their gender. He fumes, “*Dizzy dames! Dizzy, scared, stupid dames! You couldn’t bother to fill the goddamn gas tank?*” (*TBFK* 89). Sexually, Gail might be a “valkyrie” (*TBFK* 83) and a “warrior woman” (*TBFK* 83), but eventually, all of the Old Town women are reduced to “dizzy, scared, stupid dames” (*TBFK* 89). While these women evince a large degree of independence and autonomy, ultimately their power is limited within a male-dominated power structure.

The Angel

The femme fatale's alter ego is the "angel" or redeemer. In contrast to the femme fatale, the angel portrays a traditional female role that is supportive, not threatening, to men. Her domesticity offers a haven, not competition, for men; she represents safety and stable gender roles in a rapidly changing society. Janey Place describes her as "offer[ing] the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into a stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding, [... and] asks very little in return" (50). Unlike the narcissistic spider woman, the nurturing "angel" is neither sexualized nor ambitious; instead, she is dependent, passive, and loving. In the example from *Fallen Angel* (1945) above, June, the wife, represents the domestic angel. Despite knowing that her husband is in love with another woman, scheming to steal from her, and, subsequently, even when he is suspected of killing the other woman on their wedding night, June remains steadfast and faithful to Eric. Her love and self-sacrifice ultimately redeems Eric and gives him the courage to face his accusers. Whereas his love for Stella—and Stella's love for Eric—inspires him to commit criminal acts and threatens his arrest, the love between Eric and June is restorative. June is also portrayed as sexually chaste and pure, in contrast to Stella. Stella dates multiple men at once and is sexually available to any man with money enough to offer her a good life; June, on the other hand, remains virginal throughout the film—even, remarkably, after her marriage.

Sin City certainly has its share of femmes fatales and femmes modernes, in Julie Grossman's terminology, but Frank Miller also incorporates the role of angel into his

version of noir. Like the “angels” of the classic films noirs, the angel characters in *Sin City* are portrayed as innocent, loving, faithful, self-sacrificing, and more passive than the femme fatale. Despite the many similarities between classic film noir and *Sin City*, there are some fundamental differences in portrayals of the “angel” character, most notably her sexualization. Unlike the chaste angel of film noir, Frank Miller’s angels are sexualized; indeed, as we will see, that sexualization can become a crucial facet of their angel-like devotion to men.

One of the most vivid examples of an “angel” within the *Sin City* yarns may be seen in the character of Nancy from *That Yellow Bastard*. The reader first encounters Nancy as an eleven-year-old girl who is the latest kidnap victim of Junior Roark, a pedophile rapist and son of the corrupt Senator Roark. Detective Hartigan, the rare honest policeman in *Sin City*, goes up against his corrupt partner and the Roark family in order to rescue Nancy. After rescuing her and castrating (and nearly killing) Junior Roark, Hartigan is framed for Nancy’s kidnap and rape and spends eight years in prison for the crime. Despite that punishment, Hartigan refuses to implicate Junior Roark or claim his own innocence for fear of putting Nancy at risk of retribution by the powerful Roark family. Nancy, unable to save Hartigan, nevertheless writes to him every week while he languishes in prison, effectively giving him the will to survive his imprisonment. When Nancy’s letters stop coming and Hartigan receives a woman’s finger in an envelope, he decides to confess and thus wins his parole. After searching for Nancy, Hartigan finds her working as an exotic dancer. In doing so, he accidentally leads Junior Roark—now a genetically modified monster, the eponymous Yellow Bastard—to Nancy, and he kidnaps

her again. And again, Hartigan risks death in order to rescue Nancy. This time, however, after rescuing her and once again castrating Roark/ the Yellow Bastard, Hartigan kills himself in order to protect Nancy from further danger.

Even through this basic plot synopsis we can see how Nancy works as an angel within Frank Miller's noir. Throughout the story she remains faithful and devoted to Hartigan, but plays the mostly passive role of innocent victim to his active one as detective and protector. Hartigan repays her innocence and devotion by saving her life. In the end, her love gives his life purpose and enables him to redeem himself through self-sacrifice.

As an "angel" within *Sin City*, Nancy Callahan is not as passive as the angels of classic film noir, and she does display limited strength and power in *That Yellow Bastard*. Ultimately, it is the man who carries the day, but Nancy's characterization as an angel is not without complication. When we initially encounter Nancy as an adult, she is an object of desire as an exotic dancer, but she does enjoy limited power within that role. While many men desire her, none take advantage of her, and when she first recognizes Hartigan in the bar, it is she who takes the initiative in their relationship. Without any action on his part, Nancy jumps off the stage and embraces him (*TYB* 145-147). When they leave the bar, Hartigan suggests, "Maybe *I* oughtta drive" (*TYB* 149), but Nancy rejects his offer, arguing "Nobody but *me* can keep *this* heap running" (*TYB* 149). She controls the car, relegating Hartigan to the role of passive passenger. In the next frame, Nancy also reveals she has a gun, which Hartigan needs but does not possess. For a brief moment, then, Nancy takes on a masculine, powerful role as possessor of both the car and the gun;

Hartigan is just along for the ride. In this momentary instance of control, she behaves similarly to many femmes fatales of classic noir and within *Sin City*, but her role does not remain static. Although Miller's intervention does complicate the uniformly passive role of angel, Nancy's powerlessness and dependency become clear in the pages that follow, where Hartigan regains his masculine role and Nancy is once again the rescued girl she was as a child.

As soon as the Yellow Bastard begins shooting at Hartigan and Nancy, she reverts to a needy, feminine role, screaming and crying, "Oh my *God!* Oh my *God!*" (TYB 151). Simultaneously, Hartigan assumes control, giving Nancy commands and telling himself, "She's *counting* on you, old man. Prove you're still *worth* a damn" (TYB 151). Her helplessness energizes Hartigan's desire to take control of the situation and rescue her. Indeed, it is the motivation of protecting Nancy that has given Hartigan the willpower to survive being shot and going to prison after the first time he rescued her. Despite Nancy's remarks after the two temporarily escape the Yellow Bastard—she bemoans, "I'm such an *asshole*. I *swore* if I ever *saw* you again I'd *show* you I grew up *strong*. But there I *was*. Just like *before*. *Scared*. *Helpless*" (TYB 157)—it is imperative for Hartigan that Nancy *not* grow up strong and able to protect herself. If she were strong, Hartigan would not be needed to rescue her; his purpose in life and his power depends on her helplessness and powerlessness. The sexual power that Nancy initially displays is replaced by a dependence on men that negates her earlier independence and self-determination. Like Gail and the women of Old Town, Nancy has very real power—within limits—but Nancy's loss of power is much more complete. In the space of a very few pages, she

essentially transforms from an independent woman into a helpless little girl. What control she does have is limited almost just to appearances: she has the car and the gun, and can act powerful, but she is ultimately rendered completely dependent on Hartigan.

During their interaction, in fact, Hartigan demonstrates that he views Nancy as not even in control of her sexuality. When she confesses her attraction and asks Hartigan to have sex with her, he says, “That’s just *nerves*, making you say things like that” (*TYB* 158) and later, “You’re *scared* and it’s got you talking *crazy*” (*TYB* 159). Instead of merely rejecting her advances, Hartigan dismisses them based on her emotional state, indicating that not only does Nancy not know what she wants, but that he, rather than Nancy, knows what is best for her. In this instance and in his rescuing Nancy from her would-be rapist, Hartigan proves himself as not only the protector of Nancy’s life, but also of her innocence. Like the angel of classic film noir, Nancy’s attractiveness depends in some measure on her lack of sexuality, and Hartigan can be seen here to enforce her sexual innocence even when she would rather him not.

Although many of Nancy’s attributes, as well as Hartigan’s reactions to her, identify her as an “angel” within the noir landscape, Miller also uses Nancy’s character to play with these conventions. While an angel in classic film noir would be portrayed as sexually pure, especially in contrast to the femme fatale, Miller implicates Nancy as a sexual object in much the same way as a femme fatale might be. One of the most striking facets of the way women, especially femmes fatales, are portrayed in classic noir is the visual or cinematic element—chiaroscuro lighting effects, domination of the frame, and sexualized posture, as Paula Rabinowitz notes (36). These elements, and others, work to

figure the female character as object of the viewer's and the male gaze, and perhaps no one in *Sin City* more exemplifies being the object of the male gaze more than Nancy, who we see through the eyes of Detective Hartigan.

When Hartigan is released from prison, he immediately goes to search for Nancy, now nineteen and an exotic dancer. As he arrives at the bar where he hopes to find her, Hartigan tells a waitress that he is looking for Nancy. The waitress responds: “*Everybody’s looking for Nancy. Eyes to the stage, pilgrim*” (TYB 125). Before we ever see the adult Nancy, we know her as the object of “everybody’s” gaze. In this bar, “everybody” is a man. Splashed across the fourteen pages that follow, we see no less than eleven full-body depictions of Nancy dancing across the stage, interrupted only by Hartigan’s words, “Skinny little Nancy Callahan. She grew up. She filled out” (TYB 128)⁶ and “Nancy Callahan. Age nineteen” (TYB 136). Immediately, the reader is placed in the same position as Hartigan and the bar patrons, viewing and fetishizing Nancy’s body. In the first several pages, we can see nothing except Nancy’s body surrounded by black space: it is as if Hartigan, and by extension the reader/viewer, is so transfixed by Nancy that we can see nothing *but* her. Several pages that follow include a partial view of Nancy’s all-male audience, who all appear entranced, with one man even visibly drooling (TYB 134).

Whatever Nancy’s role might be in the rest of the story, she has been introduced—and extensively so—as primarily and essentially an object of lust. Her job, as well as her function in the story, is to appeal to men, to be an erotic focal point of their

⁶ See fig. 6

gaze. Nancy fulfills the description of the passive looked-at female character in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Although Mulvey discusses how women function in film, her analysis can be used to understand how Frank Miller's drawings, as visual narrative, function in very similar ways to film. Nancy exists as a passive image for the male spectators look at. Her job as an exotic dancer, like the showgirl trope that Mulvey discusses (12), theoretically allows Nancy to be looked-at without interrupting the diegesis. The interlude of Nancy dancing, however, is so extensive that it does cause a break in the narrative, allowing the viewer to get lost in the act of viewing without needing to pay attention to plot or dialogue. When we see both Nancy and her male spectators, we can see, as Mulvey points out, that Nancy, "the woman displayed" (11), "function[s] on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator" (11). It is significant, too, that when we are initially introduced to Nancy as an adult, we do not see her face. Instead, the first seven images of Nancy portray her with her face either completely or mostly obscured. It is not her face, or her identity, which is important here, but her body and our view of it. In Mulvey's words, she becomes "a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and direct recipient of the spectator's look" (14). In these instances Nancy is not depicted in extreme close-up, but her body is fragmented by Miller's use of light and shadow to highlight certain parts of her body. What Miller finds as important for us to see is quite clear: while we do not see Nancy's face or any facial features for several pages, every single image displays either

Nancy's bare breasts or bare backside, and a few drawings show both. As the reader/viewer, we see Nancy as erotic object just as the characters within the story do.

Mulvey notes that at the start of the narrative, the female character serves as the "object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists ... isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised" (13). Over the course of the narrative, however, "she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalised sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone" (Mulvey 13). After the scene in the bar where Nancy works, we never see her body exposed again except for a brief, small view of a naked breast towards the end of the story. Nancy is only an object for speculation, then, until she sees Hartigan. Whenever the two are together, she is covered up—when they leave the bar together, she wears a full turtleneck and pants. We see her exposed breast only when she is in the kidnapper's custody; once Hartigan arrives to rescue Nancy for the second time, he covers her in a full-length coat. Before Hartigan finds Nancy and before she is aware of his presence, Nancy's nakedness is on full display; after he arrives, her sexuality belongs not to every male spectator, but only to him. It is not necessary here that Hartigan be in love with Nancy—indeed, he seems to regard her in large measure as an innocent child—because whether or not he falls in love with her, he does see her as his responsibility, his to protect; ultimately, his. Once Hartigan is physically present to take care of her and possess her (whether as a child needing protection or as a lover), Nancy and her body are "subjected to [him] alone" (Mulvey 13).

The depiction of Nancy is decidedly complex in terms of sexualization—Miller displays and fetishizes her as a sex object, but it is important that while her body is displayed, it is never penetrated. As a child, railing against the injustice of Hartigan being blamed for her kidnap and rape, she complains to him, “They wouldn’t even *check me out* and see I’m still a *virgin!* Still a *virgin* and still *alive*—thanks to *you!*” (TYB 71). When the Yellow Bastard kidnaps Nancy again, as an adult, again she is never raped; this, again, is due to Hartigan’s help. As she tells the Yellow Bastard, “Hartigan was right about you. You can’t get *turned on* unless I *scream*. You can’t get *it up* unless I *scream*” (TYB 196). Hartigan’s purpose, in both cases, seems to be preserving her innocence—and it is her innocence, despite her simultaneous sexualization, that helps create Nancy’s role as an “angel.”

Indeed, because of its ubiquity within *Sin City*, sexuality is largely not seen as a negative. The vast majority of the female characters are either prostitutes or engaged in some other sexualized form of work—as a “barmaid” who depends on her looks for tips, like Shellie, or as an exotic dancer, like Nancy. Because virtually *all* work done by women in Sin City is some form of sex work, sexualization becomes not a reading on a woman’s character but rather a function of the society in which she lives. It seems that almost the only work available to women in Sin City is to be a sex object of one form or another.⁷ Because of this almost universal conflation of sex and work, women in Sin City are all implicated by their sexuality; it is thus difficult to judge the negative workings of female sexuality. In much of classic noir, femmes fatales display their sexuality as a form

⁷ One exception to this is Marv’s parole officer, Lucille, as previously discussed.

of power that is dangerous to men—but one could not claim that every woman in *Sin City* is a femme fatale because they are sexualized. Indeed, as Marv shows in *The Hard Goodbye*, sex and work—even sex work—do not make women like the prostitute Goldie any less than angels.

The Hard Goodbye begins with Marv having sex with Goldie, a woman he believes to care for him. He narrates: “I’m staring at a goddess. She’s telling me she wants me. She sounds like she means it. I’m not going to waste one more second wondering how it is I’ve gotten so lucky” (*THG* 10).⁸ The next line reads: “She smells like angels ought to smell” (*THG* 11). For Marv, an “angel” is a beautiful woman who is not only kind, but expresses that kindness through her sexuality; she is an angel not least because she is willing to give him her body. The character of Goldie, along with many other female characters in *Sin City*, collapses the differences between angel and femme fatale in large measure due to the lack of negative associations with female sexuality. Goldie’s sexuality does not make her dangerous, does not correlate to her power over Marv; instead, it makes her a gentle, kind woman who is willing to help a man who is down on his luck. Marv, for instance, describes her as “an angel of mercy giving a two-time loser like me the time of his life” (*THG* 15). In *Sin City*, then, a woman’s sexuality can be both a measure of her power over men, as discussed above, but also a measure of her desire to please men and demonstrate their love and devotion. At the same time, we can see Goldie as exercising a certain degree of power over Marv in selecting him as her sex partner. Marv talking about his “luck” and describing Goldie as “an angel of mercy”

⁸ See fig. 3

demonstrates that she holds the active role of choosing Marv, whereas he is passive, the one chosen rather than the one choosing.

Even when Marv later discovers that Goldie was a prostitute, it does not change the way he feels about her. He says to Lucille, “I didn’t know she was a hooker. It doesn’t make any difference about anything. But I didn’t know that about her” (*THG* 102). Although some characters like Lucille, and later a priest, do make comments that indicate a negative perspective on the prostitutes of Old Town, Marv and the majority of the other characters seem to see prostitution as a job and not a sign of immorality. When Lucille remarks that Goldie was a hooker, Marv dismisses its importance. When a priest advises Marv, “Ask yourself if that corpse of a slut is worth dying for” (*THG* 73), Marv affirms that Goldie’s sexuality does not affect her worth as a person. He replies, “Worth dying for. Worth killing for. Worth going to hell for” (*THG* 74), as he shoots and kills the priest. While some in Sin City might view female sexuality as negative, Frank Miller’s heroes seem not to.

Conclusion

Like classic film noir, Frank Miller's *Sin City* reflects male fantasies and fears about women and their role in society. Instead of a reaction to changes in post-WWII America, however, Miller's version of noir is a response to societal changes in the late 20th century. Many of the same fears exist, to some degree, since women's role in the workplace continues to grow and women increasingly gain power in society. Through Ava's character, we can perhaps see that as women's power grows, so does the need for a more powerful form of femme fatale. Ava, therefore, is portrayed as an extreme version of the classic film noir femme fatale—she is as brutally violent as any man and there seems to be little external motivation for her actions besides money. She even admits that she is evil, not a trapped woman, as some critics refer to the femme fatale. While her declaration does not negate the influence of societal constraints on women, nor diminish the parallels between Ava and classic femmes fatales, it does, perhaps, demonstrate the male perspective—Miller's perspective—on society's role in creating dangerous women. Miller rejects the psychoanalytic explanation or the reasoning that femmes fatales react violently to a “psychotically gendered” (Grossman 21) world. Instead, he sees a femme fatale like Ava as being an anomaly, not so much a product of our society but an evil aberration. This serves to make Ava more frightening, but also lessens the perceived role of our society in creating women like her. Thus we can perhaps see Ava as embodying both the fear of female power and the denial of the repressive effects of our still-patriarchal society.

There are, of course, other ways of understanding Ava's role. If we, like Miller, reject the conventional psychological explanation for femmes fatales, then we can ask ourselves, what *new* fears does Ava represent? Part of what is frightening about Ava is that, on the surface, she represents a more traditional female role (despite her desire for money and power, which fits with the conventional portrait of a femme fatale). Instead of working, as the majority of the women in *Sin City* do, Ava is a housewife. In a strange reversal, then, in *Sin City* it is the domestic space that inspires male fear, and it is here that we can see one of the major societal changes that is reflected in Miller's version of noir. Whereas in classic film noir, the increasing numbers of women in the workplace inspired fear, Miller opens the possibility that perhaps working women are less threatening now. Instead, as we can see in the difference between the way Ava and Gail are portrayed, perhaps what men are threatened by is female deception. For, after all, Ava and Gail are very much alike—both are powerful, sexual, independent women—and both use sex as a form of power. Both Ava and Gail use sex as a currency to get what they want, but Gail and the Old Town women are performing an open and honest transaction, whereas Ava depends on deception. Perhaps the real target of male fear in *Sin City*, then, is the deceptive, gold-digging wife.

We cannot entirely dismiss the anxiety about women in the workplace, however, given the emphasis on women's work within *Sin City*. The sexualization of women's work in *Sin City* can be seen as a way of dealing with the powerful woman in the modern workplace. Indeed, the fact that virtually every woman in Sin City is employed in some form of sexualized work can be seen as a method of controlling women's power. If

women are employed only in sex work, then their work is dependent on their femininity and remains a form of “women’s work”—thus leaving male jobs and traditional male roles intact. In characters like Gail and the Old Town prostitutes, we see women working and gaining autonomy but within a well-defined context. In this modern version of noir, then, Miller solves the problem of women’s power by placing that power within a context that is to at least some degree submissive to men.

While sexualization of women can be seen as a way of controlling women’s power in the workplace, it also works as a male fantasy here. One of the most noticeable features of *Sin City* is the explicit sexualization of women, which certainly reflects the increased sexualization of women in our own culture. Our hypersexed culture can be seen in the way that all of Miller’s female characters are sexualized; even the “angel,” Nancy, who would have been sexually pure in a classic film noir, is sexualized in Miller’s version of noir. Like the classic film noir angel, however, Miller’s “angels” embody a male fantasy of womanhood. Instead of being pure and domestic, the modern version of angel is sexualized just as much as a femme fatale might be. The difference is in her motivation, how her sexuality is used. Whereas the femme fatale uses sexuality to manipulate, the angel uses her sexuality to please men, as Goldie does Marv. The new male fantasy of a woman is not domestic; it is, as the epigraph suggests, a sexually open and willing woman, submissive yet always eager.

Where the femme fatale tricks the man by making him feel needed, the angel *does* need a man to rescue or avenge her; in this, she represents another part of the male fantasy. Like the angel of classic film noir, Frank Miller’s angels still depend on men;

this dependence plays to the male fantasy of dominance and, simultaneously, helps resolve the fear of female autonomy and power. The epigraph, which describes a woman “flat on her back begging for it” (*THG* 71), also works to place female sexuality as under the control of men; the “broad” begs for the man, *needs* the man, and only the man can satisfy that desire. Here, we can see powerful female desire as not threatening the man, but substantiating the need for his presence.

Miller’s intervention, then, can be seen to reflect cultural changes in similar ways to classic films noirs. Even as he echoes the conventions of classic film noir—from the spider woman to the femme moderne to the angel—Miller’s version reflects new anxieties and modern fantasies about gender and power.

Appendix



Figure 1: "Sex always made you stupid." *A Dame to Kill For* (110)



Figure 2: BLAM! Ava shoots Dwight. *A Dame to Kill For* (111)



Figure 3: Marv and Goldie. *The Hard Goodbye* (10)

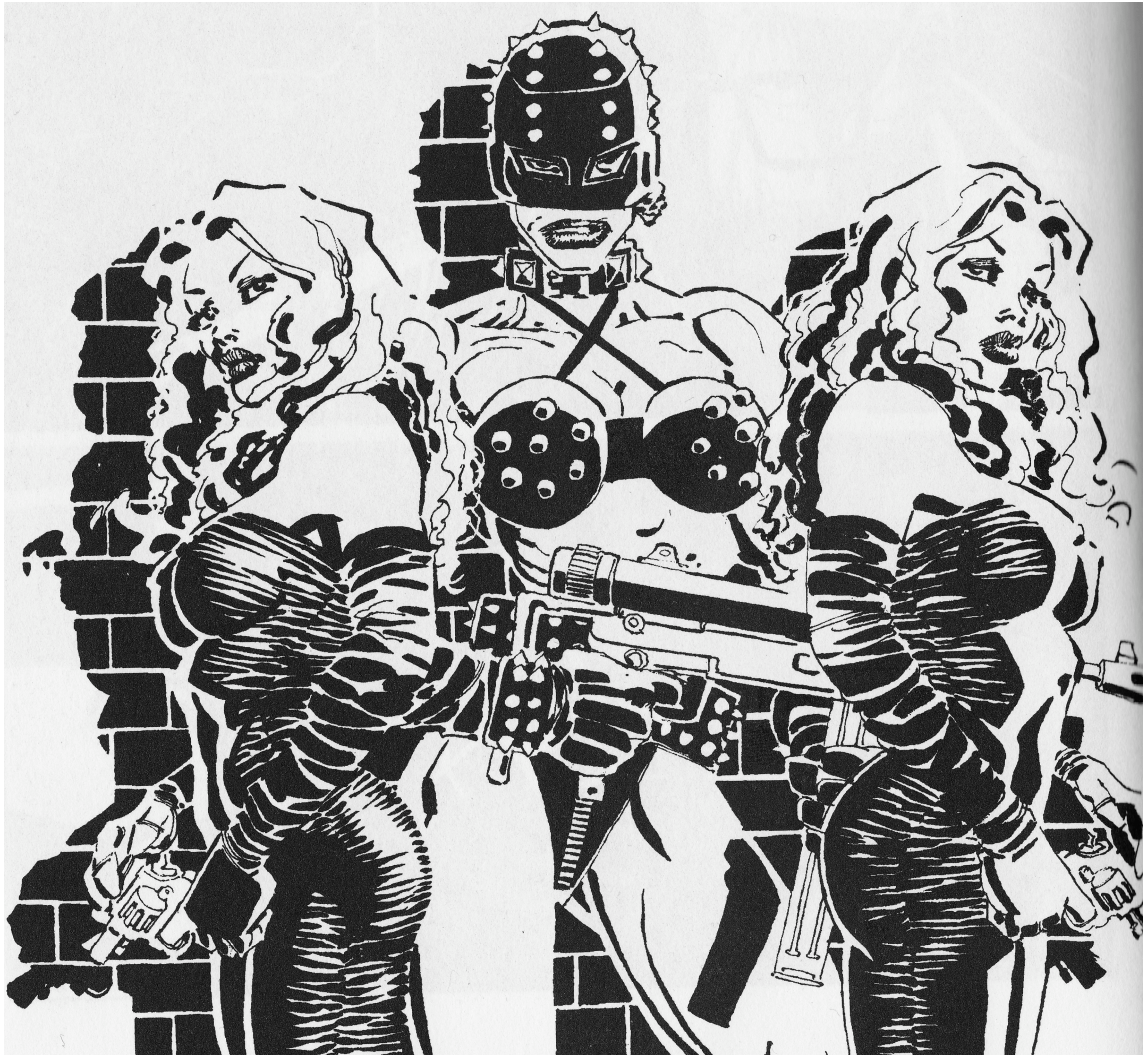


Figure 4: Gail and the twins. *A Dame to Kill For* (142)



Figure 5: Gail and her mask. *A Dame to Kill For* (146)



Figure 6: "She grew up. She filled out." *That Yellow Bastard* (128)

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