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Gilda's Gowns

Fashioning the *Femme Fatale* in Film Noir

Rachel Anne Wise

The 1940s brought the rise of a cynical, nihilistic film form in America, stereotypically characterized by its hardboiled detective crime plot starring a dominating female adorned in a black slinky dress with a pistol in her purse, seducing men and masterminding plots of cruelty and greed. This genre, film noir, grew out of the ashes of post-WWII America, lasting through the 1950s and satisfying the growing market for pessimistic and violent thrillers.¹ Film noir has generated much scholarship since its mid-century inception, particularly for feminists, with the landmark publication of Laura Mulvey's 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," an article that analyzed the male gaze, explicit voyeuristic elements, and inherent misogyny within the genre. Using a Freudian and Lacanian lens, she claimed that the *femme fatale* character, or "fatal woman," symbolized the ominous threat of castration. In 1978 Janey Place further explored the deadly sirens of the screen and claimed that their sexuality signified power: "men need[ed] to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it."² Following the lead of Place and the trends of mainstream feminist scholarship, by the 1980s and 1990s film studies scholars began considering how *femme fatale* figures, with their unchecked ambitious sexual prowess, were actually empowering to women.³ Social-cultural historians added fuel to these arguments as they claimed that the films portrayed 1940s male anxieties over the threat of female power and prestige—a

1. Film Noir continued on after the 1950s outside the United States, but largely disappeared in American cinema between the 1960s and 1980s. Neo noir began emerging in the 1970s, a genre dependent on film noir principles.

2. Place's essay was originally printed in the first edition of *Women in Film Noir*. It was also included in the 1998 edition as Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*. Ed. F. Ann Kaplan. London: BFI Publishing, 1998, 49.

3. Some examples include Elizabeth Cowie and Christine Gledhill.

true concern for returning GIs who found their jobs taken by a new workforce of females who were hesitant to relinquish their profitable positions.

But these interpretations, both that film noir is an enactment of the 1940s male fear of female power and that the *femme fatale* is a signifier of ruthless seduction, are too narrow in scope and too outmoded. Agreeing with the revisionist scholarship by Julie Grossman on film noir, and especially the *femme fatale*, I instead contend that the genre is too complicated for historical generalizations or to only be analyzed from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. In order to examine how, as Grossman writes, “narrative, social contexts, and mise-en-scene” shapes the *femme fatale*, scholarship now should move beyond discussions of the male gaze that overly objectifies women, or beyond interpretations that only acknowledge barbaric female power; especially when the *femme fatale* is a character who when read in context is far more complex than simply objectified sexuality or potent female power (Grossman 5). In this way a nuanced understanding of the *femme fatale* can be created that will debunk myths of the satanic seductress in the slinky black dress and that will address both her power and that power’s limitations within the genre (5).

In this paper I will specifically examine an aspect of the *femme fatale* that has been surprisingly ignored by scholars,⁴ but which is paramount for understanding the allure and power of such women—the *femme fatale*’s use of, exploitation of, and subservience to fashion. Indeed, it is her lavish gowns and excessive accouterments that distinguish the *femme fatale* from other females: almost universally film noir has consciously been aware of portraying the *femme fatale* as an irresistible fashion icon. As exemplified in the 1947 thriller *Out of the Past*, the fashion-conscious siren Kathie wears form-fitting gowns and luxurious fur coats made to sharply contrast with the homespun, overly modest clothes of Ann, the virtuous hometown girl. Much of the sexual charm of a *femme fatale* stems from her revealing clothes, though in their luxuriousness they also signify her wealth and power. As one bedizened *femme fatale* comments to another in the 1953 film noir *The Big Heat*: “I’ve been thinking about you and me; how alike we are, the mink-coated girls.”

To stay within the scope of this paper, I will address only one “mink-coated girl” to decode the complex signification of *femme fatale* fashion. Specifically, I will be analyzing the couture of Gilda, the *femme fatale* of Columbia Pictures’ 1946 movie of the same name, *Gilda*. The film takes place in Argentina at a gambling hall run by the brooding megalomaniac Ballin Mundson, who employs American Johnny

4. Two notable exceptions are Stella Bruzzi and Ula Lukszo. I will address their main concerns later on in my discussion of Gilda’s fashion.



Fig. 1: John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1884.



Fig. 3: John Singer Sargent, *Madame X* (in its original state), 1884.

Farrell to patrol his tables. After leaving for a business trip, Mundson returns married to the glamorous Gilda, an old lover of Johnny Farrell. An uncomfortable love triangle ensues, defined by jealousy, hatred, and abuse, until Ballin fakes his death, allowing Johnny and Gilda to wed. When Ballin returns envious and rancorous, he attempts to kill Johnny but is instead stabbed by Uncle Pio, a worker at the gambling house, after which Gilda and Johnny safely return to America as happy newlyweds.

I chose to use *Gilda* as my case study because, more than other film noir, *Gilda* is consciously aware of the acts of dressing and undressing and their narrative importance to plot and shaping of the *femme fatale*. Additionally, Columbia Pictures employed Jean Louis, a well-known French costumer, to design the clothes for *Gilda*—he spent an astounding sixty thousand dollars on her wardrobe. His sleek black satin dress for Gilda's performance of "Put the Blame on Mame" is arguably the most famous *femme fatale* dress in all of film noir, in part because he modeled

it after the highly controversial attire of John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* (Fig. 1).⁵ I argue that Gilda's continual dressing and undressing in the film indeed serves a diegetic purpose, as her variety of wardrobe (negligees, white evening gowns, and black slinky dresses) signifies the complexity and multifarious personalities of the *femme fatale* character. Dressing and undressing Gilda's body are actions pregnant with power in the film, as characters Ballin Mundson, Johnny Farrell, and Gilda all compete for the control to create/dress and dismantle/disrobe the *femme fatale*. In understanding Gilda's character via her diegetic, fashionable, and mutable clothes, the *femme fatale* is exposed as a complex being defying stereotype by the variety of her wardrobe, but who nonetheless is fashioned in her black slinky dresses by masculine constructions of the fatal woman.

Before I begin my analysis, I must first clarify two points. First, as any film historian will corroborate, film noir is an artificial genre made up of a diverse array of heterogeneous movies.⁶ Yet I agree with the scholarship of Ula Lukszo that the costuming in film noir, particularly of the *femme fatale* and stock male characters, is essentially uniform (Lukszo 65). While my analysis of *femme fatale* fashion is limited to one movie, I do feel legitimized to make broader conclusions about the couture of dangerous women in the whole of the genre. Second, there has been contention in scholarship over whether Gilda really constitutes a true *femme fatale* because she is pitiable and "knowable" (Dyer 91-99). I agree with *The Film Studies Dictionary* definition of *femme fatale*—"a female character who uses her beauty to lure and entrap men, leading to their downfall and, usually, death" (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 95-96)—and also hold that the *femme fatale* is an elusive character. Because Gilda fits the requirements of my definition, I contend that Gilda is a *femme fatale* and that her unusual personality and non-traditional actions broaden our understanding of and add to the complexity of the sirens of the silver screen.

Indecently Underdressed

In *Gilda* the *femme fatale*'s clothes are a synecdoche for her character. Johnny Farrell most brazenly makes the connection when he refers to Gilda as Ballin's "laundry" that he has been assigned to drop off and pick up. Of course meant as an insulting slight, this nickname accurately associates Gilda's character with her clothing. Such a connection is consistent with film noir, where a *femme fatale*'s clothing often signifies

5. Even today the dress is commemorated for its bold fashion statement: in 2009 *The Independent* listed Gilda's satin dress as one of "the ten best film fashion moments" in history. See Laura Davis.

6. The name was given after the fact by French film critics who noticed commonality between American movies produced in the 1940s. Some films categorized as film noir lack an actual *femme fatale* character or detective.

the key elements of her character: allurements and power (Lukszo 62). Even more generally, as Jane Gaines writes in her essay on women's dress in classical Hollywood, "costumes are fitted to characters as a second skin," rendering and relaying narrative information about the character to the viewer (181). More specifically in her treatment of women's costuming, Gaines argues that "a woman's dress and demeanor, much more than a man's, indexes psychology; if costume represents interiority, it is she who is turned inside out on screen" (181). Gaines's scholarship facilitates my analysis of Gilda's clothes, for I strongly contend that her costumes reflect her "interior" thoughts and function as critical narrative signs. Indeed, Gilda's wardrobe is more complicated than simply slinky black dresses, necessitating an examination of her clothing as signifiers for the complexity of her character.



Fig. 2: Rita Hayworth in her *désabillé* as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.

Gilda spends much of her on screen time wearing transparent sleepwear/underdresses, on one level connoting beds and her lecherous activities as a *femme fatale*, but on another connoting her inability to choose how to dress and act, mirroring her indecision and qualms about her old lover, Johnny Farrell, and her disastrous marriage with Ballin. Appearing in underdresses gives Gilda verisimilitude—glimpses of who she truly is—and a humane look at the *femme fatale* unmasked and exposed. However, the full revelation of Gilda will not occur until she is completely exposed, stripped of clothes and character. Nevertheless, these thin underdresses reflect the multi-layered nature of Gilda.

Gilda is first introduced in the film wearing a three hundred dollar pink *désabillé*, posed as a seductress in her bedroom lair, a potent image that undeniably defines Gilda from the outset as a *femme fatale*. Before Gilda appears on screen, the camera leads the viewer to her ornate and feminized bedroom, replete with a long vanity table and wall-sized mirror, setting the stage for the entrance of a seducing siren. Answering her husband's question, "Gilda, are you decent?" Gilda appears on screen and responds in a throaty voice while throwing her mane back and simultaneously exposing her shoulders, "Me?" (Fig. 2). The screenshot captures a very "indecent" woman—a *femme fatale* half-undressed in her boudoir directly gazing at the viewer and taunting them with a reply that indicates she is anything but decent. Of course "decent" is a double entendre in this context, referring to both her state of dress and her overall moral character. The question, then, merges the mean-

ing of the clothes and the character of Gilda, a connective relationship that will remain constant throughout the film. This first impression of the indecent Gilda aligns her with the stereotyped *femme fatale* character: sexually alluring, powerful, “the Other,” and the object of desire.

As the scene progresses, however, Gilda’s self-assured posturing falters for a moment and her costume transitions from fashionable and alluring to exposing and embarrassing. Johnny Farrell is close behind Ballin when they enter Gilda’s dressing room. As Gilda looks to the right of Ballin and sees Johnny Farrell in her boudoir, her self-assured façade breaks, and she lifts the sleeve of her negligee to cover an exposed shoulder. This moment is crucial, for it marks not only a change in the demeanor of Gilda from appealing and confident to disconcerted; it also marks a change in the signification of her nightgown. Now Gilda feels unmasked, stripped by a staring Johnny Farrell who not only penetrates her negligee with his gaze, but also the reason for her sham wedding. Farrell’s presence has changed Gilda’s *déshabillé* from a fashionable symbol of sexual power to a coarse mockery of her sexuality. But in metaphorically



Fig. 4: Rita Hayworth in beige tunic as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.

stripping Gilda of her clothes (foreshadowing the literal stripping of Gilda later in the film), Johnny has given the audience a candid glimpse of a used woman, terrified and scrambling to regain lost control—a view that adds another dimension to the usual imperious and unbreakable *femme fatale*. However, Gilda soon recovers from the shock of seeing Johnny and regains power in the scene by adjusting her nightgown and mercilessly teasing Johnny in dialogue.

In lifting the shoulder of her nightgown, Gilda attempts to retake power over her body and sexual allurements, to cover what Farrell has laid bare. Her action of covering her shoulder makes the first reference to John Singer Sargent’s iconic painting, *Madame X*. Sargent’s original painting, displayed at the Paris Salon of 1884, depicted Madame Gautreau with the right shoulder strap of her dress hanging dissolutely off her shoulder—a choice that elicited much consternation in audiences viewing the painting (Kilmurray and Ormond 102) (Fig. 3). For them the loose shoulder strap exposed too much of her bluish-tinted skin and suggested undress and immoral behavior.⁷ To appease the vitriolic audience, Sargent repainted Madame Gautreau with her shoulder strap properly in place. Gilda’s ex-

7. For a more detailed account of Madame Gautreau’s skin, see Susan Sidlauskas.

posed shoulders signify similar lecherous behavior and indecency. For both Madame Gautreau and Gilda, the action of covering an exposed shoulder restores decency to some extent. While Sargent had control of the portrayal of Madame Gautreau's body, Gilda has the power to restore modesty to her own body.

Gilda wears other underdresses in the movie which, unlike her *déshabillés*, do not overtly suggest sexuality but rather add complicated layers to Gilda's character. Ballin assigns Johnny the difficult responsibility of following and attempting to control the movements of Gilda, who proves elusive in her nightly escapades. After returning from an evening of swim-



Fig. 5: Rita Hayworth in nightgown as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.

ming Gilda sneaks into Ballin's casino in the early hours of the morning and sings her first rendition of "Put the Blame on Mame" in a beige dress, to casino employee and father figure Uncle Pio (Fig. 4). Unlike her negligee, Gilda's beige dress does not immediately suggest that she is "underdressed" or indecently dressed. Rather, the thick material of her outfit covers her body and is belted in the center. However, when Johnny comes into the room and yells at her to "get dressed," he unequivocally labels her as underdressed. In this state of quasi-undress, Gilda first reveals to Johnny her fears about Ballin: "I'm afraid! Getting married on the rebound is so stupid." Hayworth delivers the lines with a sincerity devoid of sexual undertones, and the close camera shots give her character verity. Stripped down to this utilitarian gown, Gilda psychologically and physically exposes herself to Johnny, candid about her disastrous relationship. Furthermore, Uncle Pio's presence gives credibility to Gilda's sincerity. Addressing the character of Uncle Pio, film historian Mary Ann Doane argues that he signifies the "common man and down-to-earth folk wisdom" of the movie (Doane 104). Uncle Pio, then, functions in the scene as a symbol of Gilda's trustworthiness.

It is fitting that Gilda wears another thick underdress/nightgown on the evening of her climactic kiss with Johnny Farrell, which finally proves the mutual and sincere love between the characters (Fig. 5). Donned in a thick nightgown that looks shapeless even on Hayworth's curvaceous body, Gilda's costume again suggests a moment of truth, unscripted and deviant from the stereotypical seducing *femme fatale*. While Gilda has an ostentatious ring on her manicured hand, the overall sense of her costume is one stripped down, subtly sexual in its connotations of beds and sleeping but predominately modest and



Fig. 6: Rita Hayworth in the “Fra Angelico dress” as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.



Fig. 7: Rita Hayworth in the first white evening gown as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.

genuine. When Gilda kisses Johnny, her costume signals she is being candid, affording the audience another glimpse of the knowable and relatable side of the *femme fatale*.

In closely analyzing the role of sleepwear and casual wear in *Gilda*, it is evident that these dresses show Gilda’s more feeling and accessible side. Gilda’s nightgowns conform to the stereotypical 1940s negligees in length and material (Peterson and Kellogg 232). Except for her French negligee, Gilda’s underdresses and nightgowns do not make a bold fashion statement, but rather showcase standard 1940s sleepwear. As opposed to the glittering tightly-laced gowns of the usual *femme fatale*, these normative and loose nightdresses reflect the more knowable and sincere aspects of Gilda’s character, helping to reveal a three-dimensional and multi-layered *femme fatale* persona.

The Angelic Dominatrix

Whereas I have been treating the “lesser” costumes of Gilda’s wardrobe, I shall now turn my attention to the fashionable dresses with cinched-in waists that she adorns to seduce men—dresses more typical of a *femme fatale*. However, even these canonical *femme fatale* gowns cannot simply be summarized as alluring and decorative in *Gilda*; they also carry unexpected symbolism and narrative importance about power.

Writing about the fashion of femmes fatales in both classic film noir and neo noir, Stella Bruzzi argues that when a dangerous woman wears white it is a “clear example of inverse symbolism” (Bruzzi 126). While Bruzzi does not use Gilda in her analysis, she still contends that the pale clothes of Kathie in *Out of the Past* and Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* function as “narrative interjections that question, as well as underline, the *femme fatale’s* duplicity” (127). Deriding psychoanalytic scholarship, Bruzzi contends that the supposed omnipresent male gaze is “mocked” by these costumes, because they signify greater complexity than is perceived by such narrowly focused eyes. Bruzzi’s analysis is succinct and can easily be applied to the wardrobe of Gilda, which consists of three white gowns. Her pale wardrobe not only attests to her more angelic side, it also references her newlywed status, and heightens the contrast and discrepancy of her black satin dresses.

In describing the white evening gown Gilda wears to perform a dance after she has run away from Johnny, *Life* magazine⁸ claims that the embroidered design was taken from a Fra Angelico painting in an attempt to make Gilda look both “angelic and alluring” (34) (Fig. 6).⁹ Calling a Fra Angelico painting “alluring” is a misnomer, for his paintings were not intended to be sexually tempting to viewers. Instead, the elegance of his style renders his figures, and specifically angels, innocent and graceful. Supposedly, then, modeled after the art of an early Renaissance master, Gilda’s gown carries connotations of goodness, religion, and innocence. However, Gilda wears this belly-exposing gown in her performance of an exotic dance, somewhat weakening its connections to the innocent angels of Fra Angelico’s paintings. Unlike when she is attired in nightgowns, Gilda appears more of the siren in her white evening dress as she dances with the intent to attract another male to marry her. Nevertheless, the gown still functions as a “narrative interjection,” illustrating on a more general scale the multifarious character of Gilda.

While her other white evening gowns do not feature elements copied from artistic masters, they too still hold the supposed “alluring and angelic” elements of her Fra Angelico gown. Gilda wears a gold-encrusted white gown her first night at Ballin’s casino, that shimmers in the light (Fig. 7), and then a white halter-top gown belted in the middle the second night (Fig. 8). With Rita Hayworth’s soft dark hair billowing around her shoulders, she looks truly angelic in these dresses. However, her actions in these gowns are anything but angelic. In her gold tunic,

8. The very month *Gilda* was released, *Life* magazine published an article on the wardrobe Jean Louis prepared for Rita Hayworth’s portrayal of Gilda.

9. I have been unable to find any documentary evidence that Jean Louis truly used a Fra Angelico painting as inspiration for this gown; nevertheless *Life* magazine’s interpretation is still valid and shaped the way her gown was perceived by 1940s audiences.



Fig. 8: Rita Hayworth in a second white evening gown as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.



Fig. 9: Gilda being dressed by Ballin, *Gilda*, 1946.

Gilda even walks in a seductive hip-swiveling manner, her body's curves accentuated by the tightness of the dress around her stomach and thighs. She coyly taunts Johnny while drinking and then, against protocol, dances with an unidentified Argentinian gentleman whom she graces with her telephone number. The next night, when she is adorned in her halter-top dress, Gilda again behaves "badly": she gambles and runs off drinking with a young man she meets at the casino. Of course as proved above, despite these typical *femme fatale* actions, Gilda does have a kind and morally good side—it is merely alluded to, not manifested, while she wears her white gowns.

While I agree with Bruzzi's argument that pale dresses serve as "narrative interjections" in *Gilda*, they also carry other meanings specific to the film. It is significant that Gilda only wears these white dresses in the beginning of the film, a detail that suggests her gowns reflect her newlywed state. Gilda's white gowns constantly remind the audience of her unfortunate marriage to Ballin. After knowing him one day, she married him "on the rebound." While signifying her stupidity and potent *femme fatale* charm that ensnares men even as powerful and controlling as Ballin, the dress also reminds viewers that she is a victim. Caught in a relationship with a frighteningly ruthless man, the audience cannot help but be sympathetic toward Gilda. Her white gowns even connote martyrdom—not only married to Ballin, Gilda is constantly victim to verbal and physical abuse by Johnny. Furthermore, her white wardrobe could even suggest a Gothic novel iconography, with Gilda playing the part of the young and pale naïve girl constantly running and hiding from the vampiric Ballin, who is always elegantly dressed in black and even dons a Dracula-like cape the night of the masquerade party. Likewise, the whiteness of her gowns symbolizes virginity, a virtue that Gilda most likely lost long ago. While a naïve and

virginal *femme fatale* might seem contradictory, Gilda's white wardrobe signifies the possibility of these characteristics for a fatal woman. So in mocking, pitying, and celebrating Gilda, these white gowns convey mixed meanings of a complex character.

The white gowns also dramatically contrast with Gilda's black wardrobe that pervades the second half of the film. It is of note that Jean Louis used binary models for the centerpieces of Gilda's white wardrobe and black wardrobe: a nameless Fra Angelico painting and John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*. Not only do their representations differ visually, they are binary symbols—the angel and the devilish woman. By initially only dressing Gilda in white, Louis creates a strong visual contrast for Gilda's appearance in black, overtly emphasizing her evilness and *femme fatale* status. While the extreme color symbolism of the black and white gowns is mediated by Gilda's more neutral colored negligees, the evening gowns still heighten the symbolic and visual effect of their opposite color.

And yet despite the power inherent in her clothes, Gilda does not have full rein over her sexual allurement because she is dependent upon others to dress her body. Gilda has trouble “with zippers.” Unable to ever get into one of her white gowns without Ballin's help, Gilda is incapable of dressing herself (Fig. 9). She calls to Ballin as she is putting on her gold-beaded gown for her first night at the casino: “Ballin, will you come up and help me into this thing, my darling?” Consequently, she also needs his help to get out of her form-fitting dress—as he eases her dress off she says, “zippers throw me.” It is symbolically important that Gilda does not have complete control over the fashioning of her body. In order to appear as a *femme fatale* in her slinky dresses, she is reliant on Ballin. He becomes her dresser, and therefore has substantial control in creating Gilda's stereotypical *femme fatale* look. In dressing Gilda, Ballin also marks his ownership of her look, both as her husband and as a representative of the male spectator. The film insightfully makes clear that the stereotypical *femme fatale* is a male construction.

But on the night of carnival, Ballin's dressing services are replaced by the maid-servant Maria. This shift in power also mirrors the change in Gilda's wardrobe: after this evening of revelry and murder, Gilda begins appearing in black gowns and suits. And as her wardrobe reflects her interiority, it also marks the end of Gilda's marriage and subservience to Ballin. However, new men are relegated to the role of helping Gilda remove her black dresses, a power dynamic I shall discuss in my next section.

Gilda's angelic, slinky white dresses convey a complex iconography on screen that matches Gilda's depth of character. In suggesting that her portrayal as a *femme fatale* is dependent upon a male, I corroborate my earlier argument that Gilda has more power in defining herself when dressed in an un-gilded negligee. While her pale dresses signify a variety of meanings, it is Gilda's black wardrobe that epitomizes Gilda's stereotyped *femme fatale* identity.

Madame Mame

The only dress in *Gilda* that has been treated by scholars is the *Madame X*-inspired black satin gown Gilda wears to perform her final rendition of "Put the Blame On Mame" (Fig. 10). While universally acknowledged as Jean Louis' masterpiece and visual climax of the film, only Jill Fields has truly attempted to read the dress in terms of its origin. Her discussion of the gown (Fields 149-50), however, does not address the implications of fashioning Gilda as a modern day *Madame X*. A more clear view of the significance and reception of Sargent's controversial painting is needed to understand why this dress worked so well in conveying the sexual potency and power of Gilda. However, unlike *Madame Gautreau's* gown, Gilda moves in her dress, demanding an analysis of how she is both restrained and able to exert power via her dance and striptease. Similarly,

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the words and music of "Put the Blame on Mame" must be examined to see how they help define the meaning and significance of Gilda's gown. Indeed, like her *déshabillés*, Gilda's black satin dress undeniably expresses the most stereotypical aspects of her *femme fatale* nature, via its color and sensual fit to her body—referencing *Madame Gautreau's* debauchery and role in temporarily ruining Sargent's career—and its movement during the dance number. Gilda's striptease and then Johnny's ultimate "disrobing" of Gilda provide evidence that the conventional *femme fatale* is just associated with Gilda's gown and can consequently be removed simultaneously from her character and body.

Madame Gautreau's biography aligns her with typical *femme fatale* features, exacerbated by her portrait and its contribution to the financial downfall of John Singer Sargent. Her rise to popularity in Paris was in part mediated by her mother, who helped establish her reputation as a "professional beauty" (Sidlauskas

11). Known for her eccentric skincare (Madame Gautreau applied lavender powder to her body every day, resulting in bluish skin tones), contemporary accounts also spoke of her graceful movements and overt ambitions to rise in social status (11). Not surprisingly, Madame Gautreau eagerly accepted Sargent's offer to execute her portrait—a painting that exaggerated her siren-like features. As Susan Sidlauskas, an American scholar interested in the portrayal of skin in nineteenth-century art, poetically states, Sargent painted a woman “who had already painted herself,” in terms of her bizarre maquillage and carefully constructed social appearance (11). Adorned in a dangerously low-cut dress made of a velvet bustier and a satin skirt designed by Félix Poussineau, a famous Parisian couturier, Madame Gautreau haughtily turns her gaze away from the spectator in order to display her profile and body as sexual objects to be enjoyed. Sargent portrays her having control over her body, especially as she steadily holds her back and neck in an awkward and nearly impossible position and wills her body to be visually consumed by a male gaze. Her ivory and lavender skin vividly contrasts with the blacks in her dress and the artificially reddened hair and ear tip. Sidlauskas argues that such contrast suggests imminent “death and decay,” making relevant the violent and macabre aspects of the *femme fatale* (12).



Fig. 10: Rita Hayworth in film still of the black satin *Madame X* gown. *Gilda*, 1946.

Furthermore, as Jill Fields points out, in this context the color of her dress becomes a “risqué sensual statement” (145). As Anne Hollander further notes, by the nineteenth century “black clothing had . . . its connotations of fatal sexuality . . . A lady in black is not only dramatic and dignified but also dangerous” (376). Though the history of black clothes is rich and varied,¹⁰ it is late nineteenth-century artworks like *Madame X* that specifically imbue dark gowns with a *femme fatale* iconography, later employed and expanded in film noir. Indeed, during the *fin de siècle* period black evening gowns were increasingly worn, not just by widows mourning death, but by socialites like Madame Gautreau and Sarah Bernhardt. As Valerie Steele maintains, during this period the black dress was the most “becoming” and “distinguished” gown a *femme fatale* could wear (“Femme” 325). Sargent’s imperial positioning of Madame Gautreau, as well as his choice to paint her in

10. For a brief overview see Valerie Steele, *The Black Dress*.

a fashionable black dress that carried connotations of seduction and dangerous woman, evinces why Jean Louis would have considered this painting the quintessential *femme fatale* model.

But Madame Gautreau proved most deadly and *femme fatale*-like when her image marred Sargent's career in Paris. Critics and Parisian society vehemently objected to the portrait of a ghostly woman, exuding lechery. The Hon. Evan Charteris, K.C. wrote in the 1920s about the painting's reception: "Here was an occasion such as [the Parisian public] had not had since *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, *L'Olympia*, and the Exhibition of the Independents" (60). In elevating Sargent's painting to the status of Manet's revolutionary artworks of female nudity, Charteris overly emphasizes the avant-garde aspects of Sargent's work. Yet spectators did yell "Detestable!" "Boring!" "Monstrous!" at its salon viewing, primarily commenting on its indecency (Davis 178). Critics claimed that Sargent had marred Madame Gautreau's real life beauty: "This portrait is simply offensive in its insolent ugliness and defiance of every rule of art (178). By the second week of its showing, Sargent's painting had been blamed for the failure of the entire exhibition. Sargent was left stripped of artistic credibility in Paris's eye, and certainly had no chance of selling his portrait for a large sum. After fixing the slipped shoulder strap in the painting, Sargent left for England, hoping to improve public opinion. In 1916 he sold the blighted painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, making it likely that Jean Louis saw the painting in person. The lethal woman had marred Sargent's reputation, only adding greater significance to her *femme fatale* status in the public's eye.

In costuming Gilda in a *Madame X* dress for her show-stopping performance of "Put the Blame on Mame," Jean Louis chose a model of deadly femininity. Not just in dress, Gilda held much in common with the life of Madame Gautreau: Gilda, a red-headed expatriate who married for money, plays the part of socialite in Argentina, brings ruin to two men, and dresses as a fashion icon. Madame Gautreau's black evening gown had continued its connotations of risqué sensuality into the twentieth century, making the gown an ideal choice for adorning a *femme fatale*. Louis modified a few aspects of the *Madame X* dress to better fit Hayworth's body and the 1940s style. Because Hayworth had recently given birth, Louis designed a bow to wrap around the front of the dress, cinching in the waist, and requiring that Hayworth wear a corset (Chierichetti 161). In an interview years after *Gilda*, Jean Louis explained that he fashioned a "harness like you put on a horse" inside the dress with "grosgrain under the bust with darts and three stays, one in the centre, two on the sides" ("Obituary"). The result was a slimming, dazzling dress that Hayworth could dance in confidently. Unlike

Madame X, Louis only used satin in the dress, giving her costume a lustrous and tangible appeal on film.

Additionally, to update its style to the contemporary 1940s fashion, Louis made the dress strapless, exposing more of the *femme fatale*'s skin, and added long black gloves and a diamond necklace (Fields 149). While women often wore long gloves to nightly affairs, evening gowns were not strapless in the 1940s—women wore floor length dresses, often high necked and with shoulder pads (Chierchetti 158, Steel Berg 266). It was not until 1947, when Christian Dior introduced “The New Look,” that strapless gowns with fitted bodices became the rage in America (Peterson 237). Jean Louis, then, predated Dior in introducing the strapless gown, giving further significance to Gilda as a fashionable trendsetter.¹¹ Despite these alterations, the dress still functions in a manner similar to the *Madame X* portrait. The dress symbolizes diabolical power and objectifies Gilda's body. The satiny texture makes it lustrous on film, and the gown hugs Gilda's form in a revealing way. With a literal audience watching Gilda perform “Put the Blame on Mame,” the dress draws attention to her body and sexual charm. Like Madame Gautreau, Gilda is haughty and imperious in her gown. She enters the casino with great self-confidence, sweeping a black cape from her back and immediately beginning her performance. Her dance moves consist of long strides, bold horizontal arm movements, and swaying of the hips—actions that put her dress in confident and assertive motion. The aristocratic feel of *Madame X* does not transfer to Hayworth's portrayal of Gilda. Instead, Gilda becomes a showgirl, inviting spectators to feast on her body.

Her song “Put the Blame on Mame” illustrates the life of a *femme fatale*, coordinating seamlessly with Gilda's dress and body language. Written specifically for *Gilda* in 1946 by Allan Roberts and Doris Fisher, the song narrates how Mame's deadly sexuality caused the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Great Blizzard of 1888, and the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. Of course Mame was chosen as the woman's name in order to rhyme with the word “blame,” and that is precisely what the song suggests—blame Mame's sexuality for all natural disasters, whether “hot or cold” (Fields 14).¹² Of further note, “Mame” is a derivative of the term “ma'am,” which in turn is a contraction of the French term “Madame.” Gilda's song, then, creates further connections with *Madame X*, as it describes the nameless “Mesdames” who have caused great sexual and natural disasters. In this way, the song and Gilda's dress together reference Sargent's *Madame X*.

11. Note that in 1943 Hayworth's costumer, Travis Banton, used a strapless gown for her role in *Chorus Girl*. While Louis was innovative in making Gilda's dress strapless, he was not the first.

12. “Hot or cold” also carries sexual connotations.

The song is addressed to a male audience: "Put the Blame on Mame, Boys," indicates that it is males who associate lethal actions with the *femme fatale* character. In terms of motifs in the film, putting the blame on Mame is akin to dressing a *femme fatale* in her seductive evening wear, helping construct her potent image. In this particular scene, putting the blame on Mame results in fashioning Gilda in a black dress, full of licentious connotations, which is why it is paradoxical that as Gilda performs, she starts removing her clothes. First, Gilda slowly peels her black gloves off, leaving her white arms bare. Next, she removes her diamond necklace and throws it out into the audience. Then she makes a move to strip away her *Madame X* dress, but having trouble with zippers asks for a male audience member's help. Her actions evince her defiance of the male-constructed *femme fatale* type. Un-fashioning her body, she releases herself from the constructed, stereotyped *femme fatale* image. Of course striptease is a highly sexualized act and it would be wrong to argue that the striptease is not sexualized in this scene, but the dance can also be read as a simultaneously liberating act for Gilda.

Gilda never fully exposes her body, and an enraged and embarrassed Johnny Farrell takes her off stage, confirming his power over her body, dress, and image. Violently slapping her outside the dance hall, Farrell truly does cinematically strip her of her clothes: while she is still wearing her dress, the camera stays focused only on her bare shoulders and crying face. The strong and controlling *femme fatale* figure of the dance floor has been subverted in the film by an overriding male character. Nevertheless, Gilda's performance still showcased a truly powerful woman able to expose the artificial masculine construction of the *femme fatale*.



Fig. 11 (above): Rita Hayworth in pinstripe skirt suit as Gilda, *Gilda*, 1946.

Fig. 12 (left): John Rawlings, Mrs. William S. Paley in Jean Louis' "Carnegie Suit," 1946.

Conclusion: A Newly Suited Gilda

After her harrowing experience with Johnny Farrell, Gilda changes her wardrobe one last time, a change in costume that is no longer controlled by a male dresser. Donning a pinstripe skirt suit, Gilda takes charge of her situation (Fig. 11). However, this is not the first time Gilda has worn her business suit. When she left Johnny Farrell for the first time, Gilda returned to Argentina in a suit, ready to take the legal action necessary to get an annulment. With equal confidence Gilda dresses herself in her pinstripe suit again at the end of the movie, her outfit for traveling back to America and for leaving Johnny Farrell again. Lukszo suggests this change in wardrobe signifies that Gilda is penitent (Lukszo 62). To a certain extent, I agree with Lukszo. However, Gilda's penance started when she was still wearing negligees. Instead, her pinstripe business suit suggests that she has finally stripped all stereotypical *femme fatale* layers of clothing from her body and has adorned her figure anew with clothes signifying a new type of power. As many scholars have noted in the past, almost all film noir men dress the same way: gray suits, fedoras, and trench coats. Gilda seems to cross over to their wardrobe styles in wearing a fedora-like hat and a suit, albeit a feminized one. In doing so, she no longer appears as "the Other" in the film or the sexual object for males to watch and enjoy. Subsequently, her clothes no longer signal feminine sexual power, but instead a liberating type of female power that is not dependent upon male fashioning or the male gaze. Additionally, it seems likely that Gilda's suit was inspired by the Carnegie suit that Jean Louis designed in the 1940s while working for Hattie Carnegie's maison de couture (Fig. 12). The suit had a fitted top, square shoulders, and cinched-in waist, a style similarly used in Gilda's pinstripe suit. In its day, Louis's Carnegie suit was worn by "everybody who was anybody," suggesting the suit signified societal and personal power (Staggs 255).

Analyzing Gilda's fashion allows for deeper conclusions to be made about the genre of film noir as a whole. As evidenced in my paper, the *femme fatale* cannot be pigeonholed into narrow definitions. And as her clothes reflect her interiority, they too become complex signifiers of the *femme fatale* character. Gilda's vacillation in wardrobe between negligees, white evening gowns, and black satin gowns suggests the vacillations in her character. Furthermore, Gilda makes the process of getting dressed meaningful in terms of who has the ultimate control over the fashioning of the *femme fatale* body. The film endorses the misogyny of film noir, for it is males who construct the stereotyped image of the *femme fatale* in the black slinky dress. Yet when Gilda's costumes are understood as narrative symbols, they also become Gilda's means to power and signifiers of her complex character. While other film noir may not allow costuming the same diegetic powers, their slinky *femme fatale* dresses

should not be read purely as an objectification of the siren's sexual power but rather as key to understanding the multifaceted nature of the *femme fatale* character.

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