

# ***The Femme Fatale Exhibition, Curator: Nerida Campbell Justice and Police Museum at The Rocks Sydney***

Jessamine Finlayson

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney*

Currently running at The Justice and Police Museum is an exhibition dedicated to the history of the female criminal called “The Femme Fatale”. This exhibition is a provocative and honest investigation into the lives and crimes of both notorious female criminals that inhabited Sydney’s underground crime scene during the late 1800’s early 1900’s as well as the more common criminals who engaged in petty crimes such as theft and prostitution. It should be noted that the focus of this exhibition is solely based on the experiences of European women who came through the colonization of Australia during this period of time and does not include the experiences of indigenous women.

Also included in this exhibition is a partitioned off section that examines the women who were arrested and imprisoned for the organisation of illegal abortions. This particular instalment of the exhibition is both shocking and intriguing as it causes the observer to feel ambiguous in their opinions of these women as the line between moral rights and legal rights is all too grey.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the relationship between both the traditional methods of dealing with and understanding wayward women, and the theories established in the Modernist era during the late 1800’s to early 1900’s. Primarily the focus of this article will be on prostitution, abortion and the more sinister characters of the underground who committed more serious and violent crimes. Furthermore this article will also discuss the changes in the perception of the female criminal in regards to popular culture. Using case studies from the exhibition I will attempt to highlight the issues within social structures as well as the influences of traditional religious beliefs that were maintained and applied to many of the laws that saw these women incarcerated. I will also examine some of the psychological theories that were utilised in understanding the psyche of the female criminals.

When first entering the exhibition, the first observation made was that of a plaque highlighting the comparison to Eve as the first sinner. From the beginning of time, women have been seen as the corrupter of humanity and the ruin of mankind. Christianity enforced this belief and this principal was the main basis for the persecution of so many women accused of witchcraft in the Spanish inquisition. The Spanish inquisition is known as one of the darkest times in human history particularly that of Christian History. This terror swept across Europe as an attempt to weed out those who would oppose the church. Spanning a timeline of almost 300 years this gruesome era saw the execution and wrongful imprisonment of thousands of innocent women. Drawing on the word of the bible those women were seen as a threat to the orthodox teachings of the church and purity of humanity. This terrible era saw the sprouting of many vile condemnations of woman-kind such as this statement made by the inquisitors who wrote ‘The Hammer of the Witches’, “because the female sex is more concerned with things of the flesh than men, because being formed from man’s rib, they are ‘only imperfect animals’ and ‘crooked’ whereas man belongs to a privileged sex from whose midst Christ emerged” (Ellerbe, 1995). Those who were dependant of men were of particular

concern as well as those who exhibited qualities of inner freedom such as gypsy women became a target, “the women who makes free use of her attractiveness-adventuress, vamp, femme fatale-remains a disquieting type”(De Beauvoir,1983).

This concept of the wicked women is not isolated to Christianity alone, many religions tell of women who lead men astray. The Talmudic Judaic tradition speaks of Adams first wife Lilith who leaves him for a life of transgression “seducing men and murdering male children” (Campbell, 2008). Moreover tales of wicked and powerful women are riddled throughout mythology and fairytales. The witch in Snow White and the evil stepmother of Cinderella are only some examples. Mythology speaks of dangerous and troublesome women such as Medusa, Pandora and the Harpies.

As I made my way further into the exhibition and began to notice a pattern within the convictions of many of these women. With the exception of a few who were convicted of severe crimes like murder and infanticide, many were arrested and imprisoned for prostitution. Traditionally prostitution has been looked upon as the profession of corrupt and degenerate women, but the reality is that this was the only option for many of the women sent to Australia as convicts from Britain during the colonization. Prostitution has been a means of support for many women throughout time and is in no way restricted to recent times. The stigma attached to prostitution can be largely attributed to the influence of religious beliefs, however there were many who believed prostitution to be a necessary evil essential in maintaining the purity and order of society. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas referred to prostitutes as sewers which are needed to guarantee the wholesomeness of palaces. They consequently prevented male lust from spreading out of control (Brock, 1996).

The influence of Western Christianity on the legal definition of prostitution is profound with many of the beliefs of religion being reflected in the prohibition of prostitution. In 1908 the American courts debated the implications of such practices with constant references to the violation of “Holy” matrimony. It has been said that the policies surrounding prostitution are generally base on the male perception. “Their acts have nothing to do with lust, sexual desire, personal choice or self-inflicted harm” (Brock, 1996).

In the far recesses of the exhibition there is a section dedicated to those imprisoned for illegal abortion. This section displays case studies of particular women who set up illegal abortion clinics. Also on display are graphic photographic examples of the filthy conditions these women had to work in as well as some of the instrument utilised in these operations. During the depression of 1890’s the rise in illegal abortions began to rise as many families found the economic struggle too much to endure (Summers, 1975). This is one of the major contributing factors to desperate women resorting to backyard abortions performed by women like those seen in this exhibition.

Much like prostitution, the issue of abortion has been largely decided and influenced by the beliefs and structures of religious tradition. Christian and Jewish communities (among others) were and still are adamantly opposed to abortion and this act was in the past closely compared to the sin of adultery. However the debate over abortion entered a new stage during the middle Ages as the discussion of when exactly the soul enters the body came into question. It was suggested by St. Anslem of Canterbury that no human intellect would believe that an infant has a rational soul at the time of conception (Schoenherr, 2008).

This theory however did not transpose into the abortion Laws until many years into the future. The most disturbing factor in this section of the femme fatale exhibition is the thought of so many women dying unnecessarily due to botched abortions. The legal issues regarding this subject are far reaching but the moral implications stretch far beyond the death of the foetus. This is still in this day and age a sensitive issue and is still challenged by many pro-life organisations as well as religious traditions. The religious influence on legal issues are widely regarded as fact and it has been stated that “there is visible religious impact on public policy” (Minkenberg, 2002). It has also been established through a 10 year research project following the well known case of Roe vs. Wade that the anti-abortion movement was primarily recruited by religious networks (Blanchard, 1994).

When considering this exhibition in relation to modernity, it is important to understand the social and historical characteristics associated with Modernity. Scientific advancements, industrialization and human rights being among the changes as well as the rise in the colonisation of countries to advance western empires was also one of the major changes associated with this era.

The colonisation of Australia by the British Empire is no exception as. As stated by Gillen and Ghosh (2007), modernity and colonization have shaped the cultures of the world. When the first shiploads of convicts were brought to Australia in 1788, approximately 20% of these convicts were women (Campbell, 2008). The society of colonies being structured around a Patriarchal system left many women isolated and on the fringes of this newly established country and vastly at the will of men, “the position of women usually marked the social status of the male so that women’s behaviour had to be managed according to social and cultural orthodoxy” (Gillen, Ghosh, 2007).

Very little consideration was put into the future of these women and many were unemployed or sent to work for the free settlers. Other women could be assigned to husbands or allocated jobs or otherwise left to find their own way which subsequently led to prostitution. This is the situation that many of the women in the Femme Fatale exhibition found themselves in as an alternative to poverty and starvation.

The concept of liberation for women has often been associated with modernity; however this element of freedom largely came into fruition during the postmodernist era. It has been suggested that prostitution like many other erotic practices is a characteristic of consumerism and commodity as an aesthetic (Felski, 1995). It would seem that survival was more of a motivation for the women displayed on this exhibition and the commodification of the female body is more “a disturbing example of the ambiguous boundaries separating economics and sexuality, the rational and irrational, the instrumental and the aesthetic” (Felski, 1995).

When observing the domination of illegal abortionist displayed in the femme fatale exhibition it is not difficult to see the limited rights that women had over the fate of their bodies. As it became harder and harder to survive during this period of time, abortion was largely the only option for many women particularly those who were without a man or any form of income. Australia still functioned under the British ‘offences against person’s act’ of 1861 which deemed abortion illegal. It was not until Australia became a Federation in 1901 that it instituted its own laws on abortion which still maintained this legal standpoint (Aust.Gov, 2004). This meant that abortions were performed in illegal backyard clinics with little or no professional medical attention which led to the deaths of many women. Those who performed these operations could be sentenced to up to five years for this crime (appendix 1).

Although modernity is known for its advances in science, these advances were of limited access for the women who were forced to undertake or perform these illegal abortions as an attempt to regain control over reproduction. Anne Summers (1975) states that particularly during the Depression which followed the rise and fall of consumerism, women were forced to “shoulder the burden of anguish and often to risk, or lose their lives in a form of suffering that men did not have to endure”. However, it has been suggested that many members of the police and juries were reluctant to pursue illegal abortionists during this period of time except in the case of death, and that many hospitals attempted to set up abortion clinics based on psychiatric grounds for abortion (Gleeson, 2008).

Further examination of the *Femme Fatale* exhibition led me to discovering the more sinister underground of Sydney during the early 1900’s. One of the most well known women displayed in the exhibition was the infamous brothel owner Matilda “Tilly” Devine (appendix 2). Devine was imprisoned for slashing a man’s face with a razor and her rivalry with Kate Lee a “sly-grog” queen was also widely publicized (Campbell, 2008). Also among these more serious offenders were Emily Gertrude Hemsworth who was found guilty of murder for the death of her child due to insanity (appendix 3). She was detained in custody until deemed fit for society, but records of her release are unknown. Other serious offenders included Dorothy Mort who was convicted of murder after she shot her lover when he attempted to break of their relationship (appendix 4) and Eugenia Falleni (appendix 5) alias Harry Crawford (dubbed the man-woman murderer) who married a widow and eventually murdered her, apparently after she discovered the true sex of Falleni (Campbell, 2008).

Trying to understand and analyse women who commit violent offences has remained a fairly ambiguous study. Many have attempted to label the psychological reasons behind such crimes, and it has even been said that women have the same moral sense as children, that it is inferior and undeveloped and that man has a higher understanding of right and wrong (Lombroso, Ferrero, 2004). Freud on the other hand associated criminal acts committed by women as an aspect of ‘penis envy’, that this apparent aberration of the female psyche is connected to feelings of envy and that particularly violent acts committed by women were an attempt to alleviate feelings of inadequacy and to “come to terms with the fact that she lacks a vital organ” (Smart, 1976). Feminist philosophy expresses a different view, that the fact that female criminals are regarded as hard to define due to the general disinterest in female criminology (Smart, 1976).

Whatever motivations these women may have had remains somewhat a mystery. Whether it is psychological, sociological or economic factors that contributed to their behaviour is still largely up for debate. One thing that was particularly highlighted in this exhibition was the stark difference between the reality of these criminals and the portrayal of the ‘femme fatale’ in popular culture. Also featured in this exhibition were posters from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. These book covers and movie posters depict a very different image to that seen of real women as they entered into imprisonment for their crimes. Popular culture portrays beautiful and seductive vixens dressed to the nines in extravagant dresses make-up and draped in expensive jewellery (appendix 6). The film noir industry played a major role in the popularization of this image, however it has been said that this new image was a reaction to social unrest in regards to the traditional gender roles as women began rebelling against the status quo and seeking freedom from the good house wife image (Campbell, 2008). In conclusion, the *Femme Fatale* exhibition was an interesting and enlightening insight into the workings and evolution of the image of female criminals. From Eve to colonialism to the

fantasy realm of femininity this exhibition was both moving and entertaining and revealed many aspects of social change which women of current times may often take for granted. In choosing to interpret this exhibition from the perspectives of tradition and modernity, I have attempted to highlight the vast differences in approaches regarding their influences on society and the changes associated with the rights of women. It has been asserted that “tradition and modernity are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change” (Gusfield, 1967). That being said, the *Femme Fatale* exhibition is an accurate account into not only the changes but also the underlying influences that helped to shape tradition and modernity as well as the portrayal of women who commit crimes in modern society.

## References

- Australian Government, 2004, *The State of Our Public Hospitals*, Australian Journal of Health and Welfare, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hse/ahs02-03/ahs02-03-x07.pdf> [retrieved 28 September 2009].
- Blanchard, D.A. 1994, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest*, Twayne Publishers, New York.
- Brock, R.N. 1996,  *Casting Stones: The Theology of Prostitution*, [www.furman.edu/~ateipen/brock.html](http://www.furman.edu/~ateipen/brock.html) [retrieved 28 September 2009].
- Campbell, N. 2008, *Femme Fatale: The Female Criminal*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Australia.
- De Beauvoir, S. 1983, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books Ltd, England.
- Ellerbe, H. 1995, *The Dark Side of Christian History*, Morningstar Books, USA.
- Felski, R. 1995, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, USA.
- Gillen, P., Ghosh, D. 2007, *Colonialism and Modernity*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Australia.
- Gleeson, K. 2008, *Whitewashing and Women's History: Freakonomics and That Very Convenient Abortion Myth*, <http://www.polsis.uq.edu.au/apsa2008/Refereed-papers/Gleeson.pdf> [retrieved 25 September 2009].
- Gusfield, J.R. 1967, 'Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change', *The University of Chicago Press*, Vol.72.
- Lombroso, C., Ferrero, G. 2004, *Criminal Women, the Prostitute, and the Normal Women*, Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, USA.
- Minkenberg, M. 2002, 'Religion and Public Policy', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol.35.
- Schoenherr, N. 2008, *Abortion and the Catholic Vote*, <http://news-info.wustl.edu/tips/page/normal/12819.html> [retrieved 27 September 2009].
- Smart, C. 1976, *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London.
- Summers, A. 1975, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin Books Ltd, England.