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The *Femme Fatale* Tells Her Story: Dorothy Hughes and WWII Crime Fiction

In the 1943 thriller *The Blackbird*, Julie Guille is a woman of mystery. Beautiful, intelligent, and strong enough to be independent of male support, she represents a challenge to every man in the novel. Part of her mystery and the threat she poses to masculine dominance is her endless ability to change her appearance, and thus change her already indeterminate identity; she confounds meaning by undermining the ability of the image to convey internal truth, a trait that feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane says is the trademark of the *femme fatale*, or the deadly woman, a central archetype of film noir and literary noir. In fact, Julie Guille troubles meaning itself, since as an orphan and then a refugee, her class and national identities are uncertain, even to her. Like many *femmes fatales*, her artificial disguises and her love of independence makes her the “problem” woman for male characters to solve or control. But Julie is not the *femme fatale* of *The Blackbird*- she is the heroine, the detective, the wrongly accused, and the novel’s only narrative point of view. The skills that usually define a *femme fatale* as an evil and destructive character that men both desire and despise are present in Julie, but they are what make her the heroine; she is cunning, perceptive, strong willed, independent, stylish, and a skilled actress. Rather than making her the villain, these attributes make her uniquely adept at maintaining her hard-won autonomy and self-preservation in a wartime nation dominated by paranoia, surveillance, and the threat of violence.

To write a noir crime thriller from the point of view of a heroic woman who bears a compelling resemblance to a *femme fatale* archetype is already an interesting choice for author Dorothy Hughes. But this re-orientation of a familiar formula in noir fiction produces an even more interesting twist; Julie must use her skills of detection to uncover and protect herself from the *homme fatal*, or the deadly man. Two men in particular in the novel are handsome, well-dressed, charming, and potentially deadly, and Julie's independence and even her life depend on her ability to correctly detect the evil or the good in alluring men. Like the *femme fatale*, these two men's true identities are hidden beneath artifice. Like the *femme fatale*, they perform what Mary Anne Doane calls a "moral strip tease," now seeming to be good, and now evil, so that, throughout the novel, Julie and the reader see only tantalizing glances of these men's hidden motives and morals. In male-authored and male-oriented crime fiction of the era, the hard-boiled detective must so often determine which of several beautiful but duplicitous women is a murderer. But the dynamics of the plot change when it is a single and independent woman who must use every skill and maneuver she can to protect her freedom, her autonomy, and her life from the threat of *hommes fatals* working to entrap and control her.

The Blackbird's heroine was born in the United States as Juliet Marlebone, but after the death of her parents moved to France to live with an aristocratic uncle, and changed her name to Julie Guille to fit in with her new family. After learning of her uncle's Nazism and finding herself to be in grave danger in France on the eve of war, Julie takes on a number of disguises to escape to the United States. But her Nazi uncle is intent on finding her and returning her to France, along with the priceless diamond necklace that she stole from the family, so Julie must always be on the lookout and live a quiet, anonymous life in New York as a refugee. When she runs into a young man named Maxl, an old friend from France, and he is gunned down in front of her

apartment by persons unknown, she knows that someone from her old life is after her. At the risk of later being accused of Maxl's murder she flees New York, in search of the man she loves, Fran, an anti-Nazi Frenchman who she thinks is being held in a concentration camp in Europe. As she flees from New York to Santa Fe (where, rumor has it, she might be able to purchase illegal passage from the U.S. to the relative safety of Mexico with the help of a "Blackbirder"), she notices a man following her. His name is Roderick Blake, a veteran with a charming British accent, handsome, tall, well-dressed and sophisticated. He is kind to her and endlessly chivalrous, and they are both going to Santa Fe to find the Blackbirder. Once in Santa Fe, Julie finds her beloved and handsome Fran, who escaped from the concentration camp. But as the plot thickens, Julie realizes that either Roderick or Fran must be working for the Nazis. The last act of the novel consists of her frantic effort to detect who is a Nazi, and who is a friend.

The *femme fatale* of this era was a figure of male fantasy and fear, a sexualized object that offered the possibility of erotic fantasy, high-class yet sleazy beauty, and even potential happiness with a smart and exciting woman. The *homme fatal* is not just a reversal of this patriarchal formula, because the *homme fatal*'s character is tied up with women's limited options and limited freedoms in the 1940s. The *homme fatal* and the women he attracts are very much the product of WWII and wartime gender relations. The *homme fatal* is often a veteran or a cop, that is, a man with an uncertain violent past. He is a man who might be a courageous patriot, or a soldier profoundly disturbed and broken by the horrors of war, or a one-time patriot who has been converted to the wrong side of the battle. In short, both the mysterious Blake and Fran represents Julie's romantic and fearful notions of war, as well as her own notions of masculinity.

Through my reading of female-authored crime fiction, I've been able to outline the characteristics of this archetype, characteristics that also apply to Blaike and Fran in *The Blackbird*. The *homme fatal* seems to promise several things by his suave appearance and his skillful seduction; he offers single and vulnerable women a fantasy of simultaneous independence and security as part of his loving protection. That is, he will keep her safe, but he will not seek to control her life and treat her like his property. In addition, the *homme fatal* represents a fantasy of economic security and domestic bliss. Finally, the *homme fatal* usually displays an alluring, exciting blend of both toughness and sensitivity.¹ At alternate moments in Julie's fight for her own freedom, she is tempted by the security these men offer, or is fearful of the violence and entrapment they represent. Up until the climactic reveal at the end of the novel, she chooses the dangers of being a woman alone to those of being associated with a man whose inner self is a mystery and whose duplicity could conceal chivalry or brutality.

Despite her wiser instincts, Julie is certainly tempted. She chides herself for indulging in pleasant chat and light flirtation with Blaike on the train to Santa Fe. "She must take care. Because she'd had a moment's conversation with an attractive man, she mustn't forget what any stranger could stand for... He was handsome and charming... It had been so long since she'd had any pleasant occasions" (38). Her love from her old life, Fran, is a temptation so strong that she barely allows herself "the luxury of thinking about him" (46). When she meets Fran unexpectedly in Santa Fe in the home of the notorious Blackbird, she greets him with

1 The main character in the current TV series *Mad Men*, Don Draper, is a good example of an archetypal *homme fatal*. He is not what he seems, he is keeping a terrible secret, and his handsome and prosperous exterior conceals violence, duplicity, and a dark wartime past. He at first appears to offer economic security and a fantasy of domestic bliss, but in fact he usually betrays and/or exploits the women who love him, leaving broken lives in his wake.

unrestrained desire. She hugs him and looks him over, observing that "Prison hadn't broken him. It must have been a western one where he could work out of doors. He was tanned and strong. He's grown bigger. The muscles under his coat sleeve were hard... she loved him so much, the ache of it burned hot " (147). She struggles to shed this desire for Fran when, through ingenuity and some detective work, she discovers that he is in fact a murderer who planned to kill her, a Nazi sympathizer, and a duplicitous lover who has another woman on the side. Like so many *femmes fatales*, Fran meets a bloody end, but only after he has revealed his true colors as a profoundly greedy and violent man with designs to control and destroy her. Perhaps what is most disturbing in this reveal is that, much like the *femme fatale*, Fran seems all the more alluring for his dangerous blend of artificial goodness and hidden evil. Feminist film scholars observe that the female viewer, or in this case the female reader, learns to identify with paranoid and masochistic women. Although Julie ultimately falls in love with the good and patriotic Roderick Blake, who, in the novel's final reveal, proves to be a brave and kind F.B.I. agent working to uncover Nazi spies, we can read Julie as being haunted by her attraction to the evil *homme fatal* despite, or because of, his capacity for violent control over women.

This sense of masochism notwithstanding, I would still argue that this scene of Fran's death (at the hands of a strongman working for the F.B.I) shows Julie forcefully asserting control over the male characters in the novel and over her own fight for autonomy. Thus, her strength as a character apart from male control or even desire for men distinguishes her from the more conventional figure of mainstream *film noir* and crime literature. After Fran is shot, in a locked-door style scene where all the male characters in the novel implore her to cast her lot with them, she pulls a gun and warns no one to move. She takes command of the situation, rejecting even Blake's offer of safety under his protection. With her gun drawn, she tells the men, "I'm tired of

violence... I'm tired of violence and threats and bullying. Stay where you are" (199). She steals a car, hijacks a plane, changes into a male pilot's uniform and flies herself to Mexico. It is only after she has made this escape that she meets Blaike again across the border, and he offers her not protection, but a dangerous and thrilling job as an international spy. In the end, then, she gets it all- the love of a good man, and the independence of a freedom fighter.

Both Fran and Blaike, like other noir *homme fatals*, represent a tangle of complex desires projected upon them by women in this wartime thriller. Examining how the *homme fatal* differs from his female counterpart opens up new avenues of critical inquiry into how femininity and masculinity function and are constructed in wartime crime fiction. Additionally, play with formula and Julie Guille's narrative position suggest a noir narrative where it is a female gaze upon a male object, rather than the more conventional reverse, as well as a strong sense of female desire for a masculine other, opens new questions about both the woman as storyteller and visual detective, and the man as a mysterious figure upon which Julie and heroines like her project fears, and fantasies. Julie is allowed to wield a gun, feel and express sexual desire, fight for her independence, and hide beneath an act when she prefers not to show her true colors; yet, despite this, she is also allowed to be a hero and a skilled detective. While I might not argue that this is a full-fledged feminist novel, it is certainly a space for those very attributes of the *femme fatale* to be part of the narrative point of view, casting the *homme fatal* in the role of other.

The prevailing critical assumption is that crime fiction is a masculine genre. In fact, Kathleen Klein asserts that the detective genre is "antithetical to feminism." Most studies of feminism in crime fiction begin with authors of hard-boiled female detectives in the 1970s and 80s. However, popular crime fiction of the noir and hard-boiled persuasion by women appeared

in a much earlier, and perhaps even more subtly radical form, with the work of authors like Dorothy Hughes. Our understanding of the WWII noir, the hard-boiled novel, and the narrative of patriarchal dominance in this genre may need a rewrite. The essentially misogynist or “male-only” roots of the crime novel cannot be ignored, but neither should the prevalent and fundamental contributions of female authors in the literary tradition of the American crime novel.