

Moreau and the lure of the *femme fatale*

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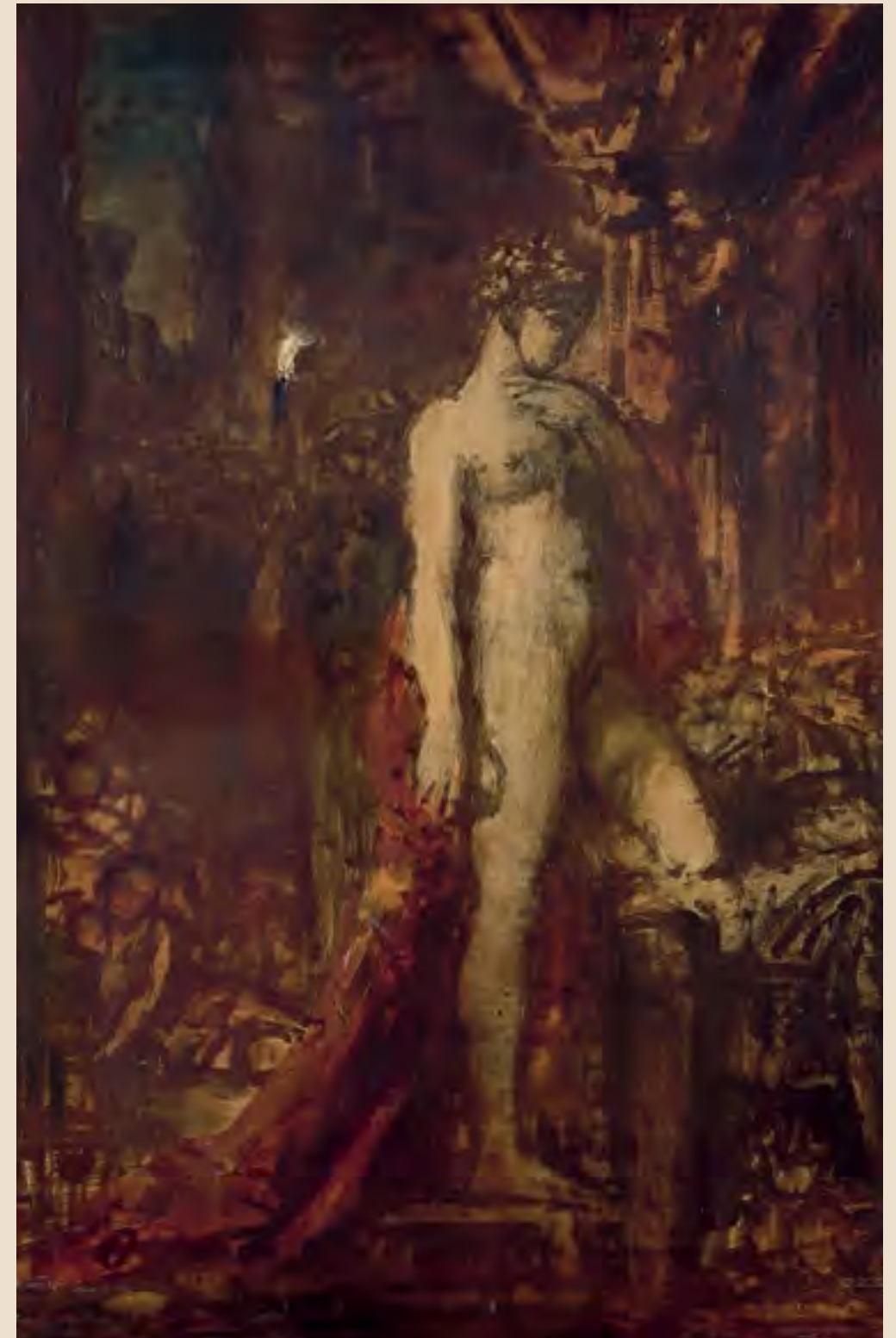
The term *femme fatale* emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, when patriarchal attitudes to women began to shift as a direct outcome of the growth of the middle class. Greater prosperity, brought about by the opening up of trade and the adoption of new technologies, also saw women beginning to advocate for access to higher education, married women's property rights, equal status in sexual mores and, ultimately, the vote.

In France, where the *Code Napoléon* had defined the status of women as being the property of man¹, the 'new woman' challenged the traditional image of woman as mother and homemaker, virtuous, sexually repressed and above all else subordinate to her husband. The *femme fatale*, as the extreme contrast, was characterised as worldly, alluring and independent, with a predatory nature that was ultimately destructive to any man who fell victim to her seductive powers. Unlike the passive, Romantic heroine who existed in an aesthetic realm of erotic lassitude, she propelled a negative energy of malevolence and sadomasochism.²

Well into the twentieth century and to the present day, the theme of the *femme fatale*, often drawn from classical mythology and the Bible, has provided numerous artists, writers and filmmakers with material to explore voyeuristic fantasies that have at their base a fear or resentment of feminine power. From the biblical Delilah, who emasculated Samson by cutting off his hair, to Marlene Dietrich as Lola in Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930), to Hollywood's tough heroines of early 'film noir', and more recently Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, the theme of the predatory woman has been explored to full effect in numerous visual interpretations. In one of the earliest filmic adaptations, *A Fool There Was* (1915), Theda Bara's sexually voracious character became a vampire bent on destroying the married family man she had seduced, and thereafter the term 'vamp' came to epitomise the 'modern woman'.³ In 1917, Theda Bara featured in the title role of one of the most significant *femme fatales* in history - Cleopatra.



Delilah
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Cat. 193)



Messalina
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Cat. 98)

Gustave Moreau and the exotic

Sophie Matthiesson

In an age of the gentleman explorer, Gustave Moreau fitted the profile: a bachelor of private means, fascinated by distant lands and cultures. Instead of exploring, however, he lived in his parents' Paris home and never ventured beyond Europe. Moreau was anchored in both life and work by a group of fundamental and defining myths that he would paint until his death – the *femme fatale*, the poet and his muse, the carnal and the divine. In many respects he was a hostage to these themes, compelled endlessly to repeat and undo them, increasingly loathe to complete or ever part with them.

Moreau's paintings themselves abound in metaphors of captivity, in enslavement of the body, heart or imagination: the tied Prometheus, Saint Sebastian, Andromeda, the abducted Europa and Deianira, the love-tamed unicorn and the bewitching sphinx. Other artists of his age, most famously the Pre-Raphaelites, also revelled in similar intoxicating and morbid fantasies, now associated with the encroaching *fin-de-siècle*. Moreau is alone, however, in his creation of paintings that were, literally, gilded cages of such refinement and ornate originality that they serve perversely to unleash the imagination, even as they ostensibly represent restraint.

Moreau's use of exoticism can be seen as part of this quest to render his themes infinitely novel, mysterious and even sacred. In 1856, Moreau turned down an invitation from a friend and fellow painter, Narcisse Berchère, to go to Egypt¹ but went to Italy the next year, where he gained mastery of Italian and classical forms. Yet, following his return to France, Moreau eventually wearied of that familiar classical repertoire and began to seek foreign motifs to introduce into his images; hopeful, perhaps, of restoring to his mythic themes something of their once strange and menacing power. Moreau's interest in the esoteric is evident as early as 1857, in paintings such as *Hercules and Omphale* (MGM, Inv. 13989, p. 47), where he includes a medieval arch and an ornate gilded capital with inset lapis blue medallions, reminiscent of thirteenth-century Limoges enamel.



Woman caressing the head of a unicorn
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Des. 3817)



The unicorns
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Cat. 213) (detail pp. 2–3)