Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale.* rbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xi + 339 pp. Figures, notes, and index. $70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-03083-4; $30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07323-31.

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Elizabeth K. Menon's *Evil by Design* seeks to make a new contribution to the study of the femme fatale, a topic so appealing to scholars from a variety of critical perspectives across a wide range of disciplines that it has already inspired well over a dozen different official Library of Congress subject sub-headings from "femmes fatales-biography" to "femmes fatales-women write pulp." Feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane has explored the femme fatale's representation in landmark movies such as G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929), Max Ophuls' *Signora di Tutti* (1934), and Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946); musicologist Stefan Wurtz has traced her appearance as Kundry, Salome, and Lulu in the successive operas of Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Alban Berg.[1] Literary critics and art historians such as Mario Praz, Virginia Allen, Bram Dijkstra, and Charles Bernheimer have all focused on the portrayal of the femme fatale in the nineteenth- and twentieth century novels and poems of Romantics, Realists, Naturalists, and Symbolists from Gustave Flaubert, Prosper Mérimée, and Emile Zola to Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Mallarmé, and Théophile Gautier; complementing the study of textual images with the study of visual images, these same scholars have also analyzed depictions of the femme fatale in the Salon paintings, Decadent drawings, pre-Raphaelite portraits, and avant-garde art of figures from William Adolphe Bouguereau and Alexandre Cabanel to Aubrey Beardsley, Edward Burne-Jones, Gustav Klimt, and Edvard Munch.[2] In 2003, the catalog of *Femmes Fatales: 1860-1910,* a joint exhibition that appeared at the Konenklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen and the Groninger Museum, combined introductory essays by academic experts in art history, classical archaeology, biblical studies, and literary criticism with additional contributions by a novelist and a clinical psychologist.[3]

Menon's own art historical work complements this wealth of information, interpretation, and analysis by focusing on the appearance of the femme fatale in yet another genre, the illustrations with which artists such as Henri Gray, Alfred Grévin, Félicien Rops, Henry Somm, and their hundreds of anonymous colleagues enlivened the pages of the popular Parisian press in the period from 1865 to 1910. Part one, "Genesis," features a single chapter on representations of women as "filles d'Eve" or "Eves nouvelles," seductive daughters of Eve or independent New Eves. Part two, "Marketing Temptation," includes three chapters on images of women in emerging public spaces such as the department store and the women's club, in modern advertisements for drugs such as alcohol and tobacco, and in contemporary visions of formal and informal prostitution in the streets, cafés, and cabarets of Paris and Montmartre. Part three, "Evil Motifs," contains four chapters each of which is devoted to a specific feminine type: woman as seductive flower of evil, woman as dominating mistress of puppet men, woman as unnatural androgyne, woman as satanic snake.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Menon's work is the way in which she brings together verbal and visual representations from sources as various as novels, plays, poems, political pamphlets, paintings, posters, and magazine illustrations. At the same time, one of the most frustrating aspects of Menon's work is the way in which this very inclusion of such a wealth of material makes it difficult to accord much analytic attention to any single element out of the entire array. On the one hand, for example, the

opening chapter on the "fille d'Eve" is remarkable for its inclusion of work by figures as various as canonical novelist Honoré de Balzac, period novelists Jules Bois, Arsène Houssaye, and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle Adam, popular illustrators Félicien Rops and Henri Gerbault, and feminist activists and authors Maria Deraismes, Eugénie Potonié-Pierre, and Marcel Tinayre. On the other hand, only rarely does any one of these authors', artists', or activists' individual work receive much more than about a paragraph of Menon's attention at a time. One of the most interesting images in the chapter, for example, is Henri Gerbault's 1903 illustration of two passing female pedestrians for <u>La Vie Parisienne</u>, a drawing with the didactic title "Natural History: products of the same sex, descendants of the same mother, Eve" (p. 38). Menon carefully describes Girbault's representation of the picture's two very different women: one "fashionable, the other more masculine," one "the consumer model, the woman who is fascinated by new accessories and fashions increasingly available and increasingly desired," the other "the stereotypical feminist, who, in her quest for freedom and equality has somehow compromised her femininity and therefore taken on a masculine appearance" (p. 37). Taken up with cataloguing the variety of images of Eve in the whole range of popular representations, however, Menon neglects to explore the intriguing relationship between the two female figures in this particular representation, the way in which Gerbault draws the plain woman in the background, with her spectacles, bowtie, flat boater hat, shapeless jacket, and dark skirt, gazing with an ambiguous expression that could indicate anything from frustrated desire to ferocious disapproval at the self-satisfied woman sweeping smugly by in the foreground to show off her lace collar, wasp waist, flowing skirt, flowered hat, and fashionable parasol.[4]

Menon's most interesting chapters appear in the third section of the book, where each individual chapter's focus on the repetitions of a single striking image enables her to make a clearer and more comprehensive argument about the implications of its appearance in a series of different settings. Chapter six, "La femme au pantin," for example, highlights a series of magazine illustrations that show full-sized women mistreating puppet-sized men – walking them on leashes, teaching them to do tricks, stuffing them in their pockets, dangling them by their strings, trampling them under their feet, cutting or biting their heads off, or even, as in the book's striking color cover illustration by Gustave Adolphe Mossa, the 1905 oil painting <u>Elle</u>, sitting almost entirely nude and totally triumphant atop a giant pile made up of the dead bodies of hundreds of miniature men, some of whom have left horrifying bloody hand-prints along the whole length of her right thigh before collapsing in death under her grasping hands. Comparing these images to "Droits des femmes," an 1881 watercolor by Henri Somm in which a tall, elegantly-attired woman holds the scales of justice in one hand while she shoots a series of tiny men in tailcoats with the pistol that she holds in the other, Menon argues that all these images of the "femme au pantin" represent men's uneasy reactions to the expansion of the women's movement in a period when the abolition of press censorship and the removal of restrictions on women's participation in political clubs made it possible for women to organize with new energy and effectiveness.

Chapter eight, "Serpent Culture," similarly, links images of Eve and the snake with several series of related images that include Alfred Grévin's and Henry Somm's turn-of-the-century portrayals of women as snakes, the simultaneous invention of the serpentine winter fur and summer feather boa, the appearance of snakes in the art nouveau fashion accessories of René Lalique and theatre posters of Alphonse Mucha, and the associated use of snake jewelry and other snake designs in the presentation and self-presentation of actress Sarah Bernhardt, dancer Loïe Fuller, and cabaret singer Jane Avril. Menon concludes, "The fusion of woman and serpent represents the fullest development of the fille d'Eve in the context of original sin. Artists and writers exploited the ambiguity of the Genesis seduction scene, depicting woman as the agent of the devil or alternatively as a seductress who was so powerful that Satan himself was overcome. This dual interpretation fuelled the continuing denigration of the women of Paris, for the feminist and the prostitute alike could be cast as agents of evil. … To the contemporary artist or writer with misogynistic leanings, high-profile feminist activists or merely supremely independent women seemed poised to cause the upheaval of the patriarchal structure" (p. 273).

Menon tends to write about these "high-profile feminist activists" and "supremely independent women" as if they were all interchangeable – her introduction links "*amazones, filles d'Eve*, and the *femme fatale*" with feminists, for example (pp. 1-2), while chapter seven, "Depopulation Demons," equates the figures of the "bas bleu" (p. 206), the "femme de lettres" (pp. 204, 207), the "femme en culottes" (p. 207), the "femme de demain" (p. 207), the Vésuviennes of 1848 (p. 207), the Pétroleuses of 1871 (p. 207), and the "femme-homme," the "homme-femme," and the "femme-garcon" of 1872 (pp. 207-211). These different figures of the feminist, the revolutionary, the emancipated woman, and the adulterous wife may have all seemed the same to the anxious men who experienced the fin-de-siècle as a period of full-fledged "masculinity crisis" – but a variety of French historians of nineteenth-century masculinity and femininity have found some advantages in considering at least some of these female figures separately instead.[5] Whitney Walton has shown how mid-nineteenth-century authors Hortense Allart and Marie d'Agoult adopted the potentially hostile epithet "amazon" as a proud positive alternative to the negative stereotype of the "bluestocking," for example (pp. 84-121, esp. pp. 117-119), while Mary Louise Roberts has distinguished between fin-de-siècle feminists, women who "often grounded their demands for legal and political rights precisely in their roles as domestic wives and mothers" (p. 8), with the New Women of the same period, women who "only rarely invoked a domestic self in their writings" but preferred to focus on public "self-development and self-fulfillment" instead (pp. 8, 21).[6] Menon's focus on male illustrators' uniform hostility towards all sorts of women who disturbed the status quo is perfectly appropriate for her material, but it would still be interesting to know more about why such men were so little willing or able to distinguish between the very different kinds of women whose lives they were so ready to characterize and caricature in print.

Menon concludes that "French feminists failed. By not producing their own images, they allowed those created by men to dominate the popular press" (p. 14). While anyone who reads Menon's book is bound to wonder why activist editors such as Maria Deraismes, Marguerite Durand, and Jane Misme published so many monthly bulletins, daily newspapers, and other periodical publications without more illustrations of, by, or about women, it seems harsh to conclude that these feminists failed simply as a result of such activists' focus on the written word instead of the visual image. Indeed, the same hostile caricatures that indicate how many obstacles women had to overcome in their quest for equality might not have come into existence at all if women had not also already been both instigating and experiencing significant social changes. While it is certainly true, as Menon points out, that "women and men continue to struggle with the legacy of the Genesis story …, which, despite attempts to ignore it, or rewrite it, is still responsible for stubborn gender stereotypes" (p. 276), it is also true that many aspects of women's private lives and public options have changed for the better in spite of the ways in which such negative images have continued to appear and reappear in the intervening decades.[7]

Menon's investigation into the visual representation of gender in French print culture has produced an invaluable first collection of fascinating images from the periodical press of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. Whether or not historians, art historians, and literary critics agree with all her conclusions, they will certainly want to use this collection as a basis from which to make their own arguments about the contested relationships between men and women in the decades from the establishment of the Second Empire to the outbreak of the First World War.

NOTES

[1] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Stefan Wurtz, *Kundry, Salome, Lulu: Femmes Fatales im Musikdrama* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

[2] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony,* 2nd ed., trans. Angus Davidson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); Virginia Allan, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Publishing Company, 1983); Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); and Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe,* ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[3] Henk van Os, ed, *Femmes Fatales: 1860-1910* (Wommelgem, Belgium: BAI, 2002).

[4] For one recent analysis of the potential complexity of women's gazes at other women, see Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[5] On the masculinity crisis, see Annelise Maugue, *L'identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle, 1871-1914* (Marseille: Rivages, 1987); Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984) and *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). On changing forms of femininity, see Michelle Perrot, "The New Eve and the Old Adam:" in Margaret Randolph Higonnet *et al* eds, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Debora Leah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Jo-Burr Margadant, ed. *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Whitney Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Patricia Tilburg, "Earning Her Bread: Métier, Order, and Female Honor in Colette's Music Hall, 1906-1913," *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005):497-530; Elinor Accampo, *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Andrea Mansker, "'Madame Arria Ly Wants Blood!' The Debate over Female Honor in Belle Epoque France," *French Historical Studies* 29 (2006):621-647.

[6] See Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants*; Roberts, *Disruptive Acts.*

[7] For a range of perspectives on the legacy of French feminist activism from the Third Republic, see Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Steven C. Hause, with Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Laurence Klejmann and Florence Rochefort, *L'égalité en marche: le féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques et Des femmes, 1989); Christine Bard, *Les filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes, 1914-1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Anne Cova, *Maternité et droits des femmes en France (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Anthropos, Economica, 1997); Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theater, and Republican Politics, 1870-1920* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

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