ends with the self-inflicted death of the slave girl Liu, who dies while being tortured on the orders of Turandot. This scene is reminiscent of a tragic incident which deeply affected the composer. The touching character of Liu is probably Puccini's tribute to the servant girl Doria Manfredi, driven to suicide by the persecution of Puccini's wife, who wrongly suspected her of having an affair with the composer.

By a curious coincidence both Puccini and Strauss were married to women who were notorious for their domineering behaviour, and both wives found their way into their husbands' operas. Elvira Puccini, who was not above doctoring her husband's coffee with anti-aphrodisiacs when he received visits from attractive women, made his life a misery with her neurotic jealousy. Strauss seems to have delighted in the peculiarity of his formidable wife. His blithe portrayal of her as an aggressive harridan in his autobiographical opera *Intermezzo* would today surely be grounds for divorce.

Like Puccini's *Tosca*, Strauss' *Salome* originated in a play written for Sarah Bernhardt. Strauss himself pointed to the affinity between his glittering score and the paintings of Gustav Klimt. It was very important to Strauss that the soprano look the part. What he wanted, he said, was 'a sixteen-year-old with the voice of Isolde'. He was not at all happy with the stolid appearance of the first Salome, Marie Wittich, whom he referred to as 'Aunty'. But the part was a magnificent opportunity for those sopranos with voices strong enough to make themselves heard over the massive orchestration, and figures supple enough to perform the 'Dance of the seven veils'. Strauss's second 'shock' opera, *Elektra*, has the magnificent character of Clytemnestra, a femme fatale of the grotesque aging type depicted so often by Beardsley and Lautrec.

In the inter-war period, in addition to Puccini's *Turandot*, there were Strauss' *Egyptian Helen*, the 342-year-old Emilia Marty in Janacek's *Macropolos Case* and Alban Berg's *Lulu*, based on Wedekind's plays. By this time opera, like the femme fatale, was becoming anachronistic. *Turandot* was one of the last operas to win a firm popular place in the repertory. The last refuge of the femme fatale was in a new art form distantly descended from opera, the Hollywood film. In the 1920s, exotically clad vamps such as Theda Bara, Barbara La Marr and Pola Negri had great box office successes; in the 1930s, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo cultivated the mysterious impassivity and the hint of androgyny characteristic of the fatal woman.

From Baudelaire to Marlene Dietrich is a time-span of more than 75 years. During this period the cult of the femme fatale spread throughout the civilised world affecting painting, sculpture, illustration, the decorative arts, the performing arts, literature – both popular and esoteric – fashion and no doubt the thinking and behaviour of ordinary men and women. It would certainly be illuminating to apply the knowledge of modern psychology to the personalities of Baudelaire, Swinburne, Rossetti, Moreau, Munch, Strindberg and Klimt, to look for common psychological factors and to trace the origins of their attitudes to women to the neuroses born of childhood experiences. But the phenomenon of the femme fatale was far more than the artificial creation of a small number of artists who had problems with their mothers and mistresses. These men sensed and expressed the underlying anxieties of the age, which resulted from profound social changes.

Before the Women's movement had made women conscious of their subservience and given voice to their grievances, poets and artists had realised that male dominance, which had endured since the beginning of civilisation, was becoming increasingly precarious. The first phase of the struggle ended with the enfranchisement of women. After an interval of more gradual change, the pace has again quickened. The reluctant and anxious male is once more under siege. What is left of his dominance is increasingly threatened and undermined. In the meantime women have become more articulate and men can no longer give vent with impunity to their fears and prejudices. Whatever the outcome of the struggle it will not be recorded in the art of our age with the partiality of the nineteenth century. In the painting and poetry of the nineteenth century the femme fatale endures as one of the most powerful images of a troubled age. But in the present period of social revolution she is no longer, as she was for Pater, 'the symbol of the modern idea'.

Top Maria Jeritza as *Turandot*. The brilliant voice and glamorous personality of the Viennese soprano were an inspiration to Puccini when he wrote his last opera.

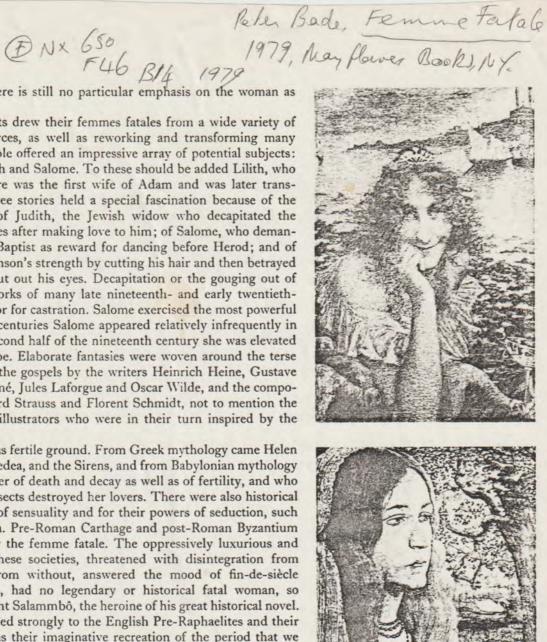*Above* 'The Vamp'. Theda Bara in a publicity pose of 1918 makes the most of her abundant hair.

much in evidence; but, there is still no particular emphasis on the woman as destroyer.

Nineteenth-century artists drew their femmes fatales from a wide variety of historical and literary sources, as well as reworking and transforming many traditional themes. The Bible offered an impressive array of potential subjects: Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, Judith and Salome. To these should be added Lilith, who according to Jewish folklore was the first wife of Adam and was later transformed into a demon. Three stories held a special fascination because of the fate of the victims: that of Judith, the Jewish widow who decapitated the Philistine general Holofernes after making love to him; of Salome, who demanded the head of John the Baptist as reward for dancing before Herod; and of Delilah, who destroyed Samson's strength by cutting his hair and then betrayed him to his enemies who put out his eyes. Decapitation or the gouging out of eyes can be seen in the works of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists as a metaphor for castration. Salome exercised the most powerful attraction of all. In earlier centuries Salome appeared relatively infrequently in European art, but in the second half of the nineteenth century she was elevated to the status of an archetype. Elaborate fantasies were woven around the terse and equivocal narrative of the gospels by the writers Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jules Laforgue and Oscar Wilde, and the composers Jules Massenet, Richard Strauss and Florent Schmidt, not to mention the innumerable painters and illustrators who were in their turn inspired by the writers.

The ancient world too was fertile ground. From Greek mythology came Helen of Troy, Circe, Medusa, Medea, and the Sirens, and from Babylonian mythology Astarte, who was the bringer of death and decay as well as of fertility, and who in the manner of certain insects destroyed her lovers. There were also historical figures famed for excesses of sensuality and for their powers of seduction, such as Messalina and Cleopatra. Pre-Roman Carthage and post-Roman Byzantium offered an ideal setting for the femme fatale. The oppressively luxurious and decadent atmosphere of these societies, threatened with disintegration from within and destruction from without, answered the mood of fin-de-siècle Europe. Carthage, in fact, had no legendary or historical fatal woman, so Flaubert was forced to invent Salammbô, the heroine of his great historical novel.

The Middle Ages appealed strongly to the English Pre-Raphaelites and their followers and so potent was their imaginative recreation of the period that we still tend to view the medieval world and in particular its heroines through Pre-Raphaelite eyes. Iseult, Guinevere and Francesca, through their beauty and their illicit passions, were, like Helen of Troy, the unwilling cause of discord and death. Venus in her medieval guise as the villainess of the Tannhäuser legend, La Belle Dame Sans Merci and the two evil women of the Arthurian legends, the witch Morgan-Le-Fay and the enchantress Nimue, were femmes fatales of a more malignant kind.

Top Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, *Circe* 1895. Despite the Leonardesque smile and the galleys of Odysseus whose men she has changed into pigs, this enchantress, with her champagne glass, has the look of the 1890s.

Above Richard Holst, *Helga* 1894. The diabolical beauty of this heroine of ancient Irish myth drove men to fatal combat.

Left Henri Martin, *Towards the Abyss* 1897. This kind of apocalyptic vision became fashionable as the turn of the century drew near. Characteristically, it is a woman who leads mankind towards its doom.

Notes to the colour plates

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

1 *Astarte Syriaca* 1877, oils.

The sultry features of Jane Morris are immediately recognisable in Rossetti's awesome depiction of Astarte, the cruel Babylonian fertility goddess. In an authoritative biography of Rossetti published in 1904, A. E. Benson wrote of this picture, 'Here indeed the two attendants with their torches and upward glance seem to testify to some dark, unholy power, the cruelty that is akin to lust. The strange sights that she has seen in grave and shrine seem to have fed her beauty with lurid and terrible royalty, where she reigns in a dark serenity which nothing can appal.'

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98)

2 *Sidonia von Bork* 1860, gouache.

Sidonia von Bork is the heroine of the German novel, *Sidonia the Sorceress*, by Wilhelm Meinhold. Her beauty fascinates all who see her, and she uses magical powers to destroy all those who impede her evil plans. The novel was greatly admired by Rossetti, and the choice of this subject as well as Sidonia's physical type and the compressed space of the composition show Burne-Jones' debt to Rossetti at this early date in his career. The elaborate pattern of Sidonia's dress, which effectively suggests a spider's web of sinister intrigue, was borrowed from a portrait by Giulio Romano.

3 *Laus Veneris* 1873-5, oils.

Burne-Jones' painting was inspired by Swinburne's poem 'Laus Veneris' which was dedicated to Burne-Jones and which was published in *Poems and Ballads* in 1866. Swinburne's treatment of the medieval legend of the knight Tannhäuser, who fell into the clutches of Dame Venus, may itself have been inspired by Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* which received its controversial Paris première in 1860. In Burne-Jones' painting, narrative is subordinated to a general feeling of malaise. Henry James commented that Venus had 'the aspect of a person who has had what the French call an intimate acquaintance with life' and that her companions were 'pale, sickly and wan in the manner of all Mr Burne-Jones' young people'.

Frederick Sandys (1829-1904)

4 *Morgan Le Fay* 1864, oils.

Frederick Sandys, who was heavily influenced by Rossetti, was a largely self-taught artist on the periphery of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. For this painting Sandys has drawn upon Malory's *Morte Darthur*, one of the favourite source books of Pre-Raphaelite subject matter. Morgan Le Fay was one of the sisters of King Arthur. She possessed magical powers which she used for evil purposes.

John William Waterhouse (1849-1917)

5 *Circe Poisoning the Sea* 1892, oils.

Waterhouse was one of the most accomplished of the numerous minor followers of the Pre-Raphaelites. He successfully combined Pre-Raphaelite subject matter and mood with a looser and more painterly technique and developed a distinctive type of youthful feminine beauty based on that of Burne-Jones. According to classical legend, Circe was a sorcer--- ---- the

power to transform men into animals. She poisoned the sea in order to be rid of the nymph Scylla who was a rival for the love of Glaucus.

6 *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* 1893, oils.

> *I saw pale kings and princes too,*
> *Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;*
> *They cried – 'La Belle Dame sans merci*
> *Thee hath in thrall!'*
>
> John Keats

Although Keats described 'La Belle Dame' as having long hair, the image of the man entrapped in a woman's hair was propagated by Rossetti rather than by Keats. This image was also used by Swinburne, Munch and by Maeterlinck in a famous and frequently illustrated scene in his play *Pelléas and Mélisande*.

Maxwell Armfield (1882-1972)

7 *Faustine*, oils.

'Faustine' is the title of a poem by Algernon Swinburne. Among those who were excited by the poem's publication in 1862 was John Ruskin, the most influential critic in Victorian England. The high-minded Ruskin wrote to Swinburne that 'Faustine' had made him 'all hot like pies with the devil's fingers in them'. Maxwell Armfield's painting is not a literal illustration of Swinburne's poem, which describes a Roman Empress who takes a sadistic delight in gladiatorial games. Instead Armfield shows Swinburne himself gazing at a woman who represents the poet's ideal of sultry and malevolent beauty.

Thomas C. Gotch (1854-1931)

8 *Death the bride* 1895, oils.

Thomas Gotch began his career as a member of the Newlyn School of painters who are best known for their realistic and anecdotal pictures of fisherfolk. In the early 1890s he was much affected by a visit to Florence and turned to painting symbolic and allegorical works which show the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism and French Symbolism, as well as of the Quattrocento masters. The equation of seduction and death in this painting and the depiction of death in female form are typical of the period.

Gustave Moreau (1826-98)

9 *Salome dancing before Herod* (*The Tattooed Salome*) 1876, oils.

Moreau was the first of many late nineteenth-century painters to become fascinated with the character of Salome. This painting is one of the best known of his numerous versions of the subject. Moreau's tendency to concentrate obsessively on decorative accessories, leaving his heroine insubstantial and hieratic, recalls Flaubert's treatment of the heroine of his novel *Salammbô*. There is a striking parallel between the accumulation of precious and glittering detail in this painting and the detailed verbal descriptions of Flaubert.

10 *Cleopatra*, watercolour.

The lines of Cleopatra's body form a graceful and decorative arabesque. This exquisite watercolour is as far removed as possible from the academic historicism of Cabanel's *Cleopatra* or from the gross substantiality of the nudes of the realist school.

Once again Moreau's picture might serve as an illustration for Flaubert's *Salammbô* who worshipped the moon from the roof of her father's palace.

11 *Helen on the ramparts of Troy*, watercolour.
J.-K. Huysmans described Moreau's Helen: 'She stands out against a sinister horizon, drenched in blood, and clad in a dress encrusted with gems like a shrine. Her eyes are wide-open in a cataleptic stare. At her feet lie piles of corpses. She is like an evil goddess who poisons all that approach her.' Whether he painted Salome, Cleopatra, Helen on the ramparts of Troy above the heaped bodies of her victims, or the Virgin seated on a throne 'drenched with the blood of martyrs', Moreau essentially depicted the same blood-thirsty, destructive woman.

Georges de Feure (1869-1928)
12 *The voice of evil* 1895, oils.
Although de Feure was of Dutch and Belgian parentage, his work as an artist and designer typifies the exquisite and precious elegance of Parisian Art Nouveau. He worked as a designer for the entrepreneur Samuel Bing, whose shop, 'L'Art Nouveau', gave its name to the style. De Feure was strongly influenced by the poet Charles Baudelaire. The favourite theme of his highly decorative paintings in oils and watercolours is the malignancy and evil fascination of women. The title of this work and the undertones of lesbianism, with the two writhing female figures apparently in the mind's eye of the melancholic woman in the foreground, are redolent of Baudelaire.

13 *The door of dreams* c. 1897-8, watercolour.
De Feure produced this watercolour design in connection with his illustrations for a collection of short stories by the Symbolist writer Marcel Schwob, published in 1899. The adulation of woman as an evil idol and the blasphemous inversion of Christian imagery are characteristic of de Feure's work.

Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer (1865-1953)
14 *Eve* 1896, pastel and gouache.
Lévy-Dhurmer has endowed the first femme fatale with the gentle Leonardesque beauty tinged with Pre-Raphaelitism which characterised his work in the 1890s. The snake has a decorative beauty very different from the slimy serpent of Stuck's *Sensuality*. According to the contemporary critic Léon Thévenin, the woman in this picture 'exiled from Eden, is a symbol of the pagan world, of the rule of nature and of the senses'.

15 *Salome* 1896, pastel.
Lévy-Dhurmer executed this gruesome pastel in the same year that Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* received its Parisian première, though the phosphorescent glow around the severed head accords more with the account of the death of the Baptist in *Les moralités légendaires* by the French poet Jules Laforgue, published nine years previously. The particular horror of this version of the subject lies in the intimacy and tenderness of Lévy-Dhurmer's depiction. The illusionistically drawn slip of paper in the top left hand corner of the picture bears the inscription: 'The severed head was given to the young girl – St Matthew'.

Xavier Mellery (1845-1921)
16 *Autumn*, watercolour, pencil and chalk.
Mellery was an important precursor of the Belgian Symbolists and the teacher of Khnopff. Mellery's women are suspended in a web, like human spiders. The spider who devours her mate was a metaphor frequently used by writers for the supposedly predatory nature of women.

Jean Delville (1867-1951)
17 *Portrait of Mrs Stuart Merrill* 1892, coloured chalk.
The Belgian artist Jean Delville was closely involved with the Symbolist Salon de la Rose+Croix, founded by the eccentric Joséphin Péladin in 1892, and he enjoyed his greatest successes there during its five year existence. Péladin dabbled in the occult and claimed magical powers. The eerie quality of this portrait, which can hardly have been a physical likeness, indicates that Delville shared Péladin's occult interests.

Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921)
18 *The Caress* 1896, oils (detail).
This elegant and enigmatic painting is the most famous of Khnopff's strange and compelling depictions of female hybrids. The features of his sister, who haunted so much of his work, can be discerned in the head of the sphinx. The heads of the young man and the sphinx have a curiously similar androgynous quality which heightens the mood of decadent ambiguity.

Jan Toorop (1858-1928)
19 *Fatality* 1893, drawing.
This complex and mysterious picture by the Dutch-Javanese artist Jan Toorop is a symbolic depiction of the fate which hinders the search for a higher spiritual world. As Toorop explained, the woman in black is 'ensnared by the sinuous power of fatality which she tries to repel with her hand, while to the left three other symbols of fatality emerge from their tombs to trap and destroy their prey'.

Franz von Stuck (1863-1928)
20 *Sensuality* 1891, oils.
Franz von Stuck, the wealthy 'painter-prince' of Munich, achieved the greatest success of his career with the painting *Sin*, which was hailed as a work of genius at the 1893 exhibition of the Munich Secession. Rows of seats had to be placed in front of the painting for the crowds of fascinated viewers. *Sin* was a variant of the yet more suggestive *Sensuality* which Stuck had painted four years previously. So great was the demand for these pictures that Stuck painted at least eighteen versions of the subject of a woman entwined with a snake under the titles of *Sin, Sensuality*, and *Vice*.

Giovanni Segantini (1858-99)
21 *The punishment of luxury* 1891.
The punishment of luxury is one of three pictures by Segantini inspired by a passage in the Indian poem 'Pangiavahli', which describes the punishment meted out to women who have rejected the biological role of motherhood. 'Thus the bad mother in the livid valley, in the eternal cold where no branch turns green and no flower blossoms, turns ceaselessly.'

Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926)
22 *The death of the grave-digger* 1895-1900, watercolour and gouache over pencil.
The German-born Carlos Schwabe moved to Paris in the 1890s, where he was much influenced by literary Symbolism and exhibited at the Symbolist Salon de la Rose+Croix. *The death of the grave-digger* is yet another representation of death in female, though not especially malignant female form.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)
23 *Te Arii Vahine (The Queen of Beauty)* 1896, oils.
The queen of beauty reigns in a mysterious and exotic paradise, far removed from the reality of Tahiti in Gauguin's day. Despite the setting, the mood of the painting is that of fin-de-siècle Europe and the composition derives from a long European tradition of reclining female nudes.