

## Bond Girls: The Dialectics of Gender Construction

My analysis considers a selection of female characters including Bond girls such as Honey Ryder (*Dr No*) and Pussy Galore (*Goldfinger*), as well as other 'Bond' women, such as Rosa Klebb (*From Russia With Love*) and Miss Moneypenny. The close reading of dress and body politics in the novels and films I consider in this paper unveils the crucial role played by female characters in relation to the archetypal male/female opposition that the Bond stories appear to represent. Their centrality is pervasive, as visually, they encase both novels – as in the covers recently illustrated by Michael Gillette (Fig. 1), and films – title sequences have always featured female silhouettes. My argument is that such opposition is essential to the construction of Bond's 'heroic masculinity', whilst, simultaneously, undermining the masculine/feminine hierarchical opposition in favour of a more dynamically dialectical construction of gender. Challenging the hierarchical male/female binary opposition, Bond girls expose their defiance of stereotyped gender, pointing to an ambiguous kind of femininity, which, far from invoking a reductive performance of femininity, erodes instead the foundations of gender categories.

I will start with Ian Fleming's *From Russia With Love* (1957).<sup>i</sup> More than any other female character in Fleming's books, Rosa Klebb represents the anti-feminine (Fig 2). 'Short' and 'squat', Klebb has 'thick legs', with 'very strong [calves] for a woman' (*FR*, p. 63). Her 'obscene bun' (*FR*, p. 64) and military uniform complemented by 'drab khaki stockings' (*FR*, p. 63) contribute to create the overall impression of a grotesquely deviant femininity. Moreover, Klebb's ambiguous sexuality is mentioned as one of her most powerful weapons; Fleming claims that 'Rosa Klebb [...] was a neuter'. Rather than neutral, Klebb's sexuality functions in fact as a manipulative weapon, which allows her to exceed the constraints of accepted gender norm and exercise her power over men and women. Her aggressiveness is associated with her ambiguous sexuality, making her synonym of the phallic woman, as theorised by Barbara Creed in her seminal work *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), the female archetype who challenges the male on the grounds of sexual sameness (as opposed to the castrating woman, whose threat on the male rests on the grounds of sexual difference).<sup>ii</sup>

Klebb's sexual ambiguity is foreshadowed in her butch appearance and behaviour. Her garments and accessories are suggestive of both emasculating power (brass knuckle duster) and a grotesque parody of lesbianism, visible, in particular, when she attempts to lure Tatiana. In the pseudo-seduction scene, Klebb offers Tatiana chocolate and champagne and plays the weak damsel in distress as she attempts to open the bottle: 'We girls really need a man to help us with that sort of work, don't we?' (*FR*, p. 77). In tempting Tatiana to take on the mission, Klebb presents the West as a fashionable kind of world: 'all those beautiful clothes, the jazz, the modern things' (*FR*, p. 78). This is particularly relevant since, earlier in the novel, through Tatiana's point of view, Soviet Russia has been presented as a place where fashion is the elitist privilege of few: choosing to have only soup for dinner allows Tatiana to save money to replace her 'well-worn Siberian fox' (*FR*, p. 67). In the film, Tatiana's penchant for luxurious clothing is made more overt: when travelling on the Orient Express, her role as Bond's wife is supported by a selection of honeymoon lingerie which Bond supplies to re-fashion her as Mrs Caroline Somerset. Capitalising on the girl's cravings for the consumerist excesses of the fashionable West, Klebb's promise – 'you will be equipped with beautiful clothes' (*FR*, p. 82) – reveals her awareness of the appeal of fashion. An appeal, which, somehow she falls victim to,

choosing to appear to Tatiana in ‘a **semi-transparent nightgown**, **displaying her brassiere**, and ‘One dimpled knee [...] between **the half open folds of the nightgown in the classic stance of the modeller**’ (FR, 84). As well as horrifying Tatiana, who runs away, risking her job and her life for a serious act of insubordination, such parody of excessive femininity amplifies the notion that Klebb’s sexual ambiguity represents a threat to heteronormativity, the order of which Bond remains harbinger: her body is able to perform both the ‘butch’ and the ‘femme’ roles. Tatiana’s resistance, whilst signifying her defiance of SMERSH hierarchy and protocols, simultaneously exposes her attachment to those gender norms she is not prepared to subvert. In the book Tatiana is portrayed ambiguously. Fleming allows us to gain insight into her point of view, which reveals her understanding of the politics of dress: ‘The [MGB] uniform put you apart from the world. People were afraid, which didn’t suit the nature of most girls’ (FR, p. 67).

In taking on the mission proposed by Rosa Klebb, Tatiana effectively accepts to use her body – and sexuality – as weapon, and an ambiguous hint of bondage discourse emerges when she lets Bond find her ‘wearing nothing but the black ribbon round her neck and black silk stockings rolled above her knees’ (FR, p. 185) (Fig. 3 and 4). Aware of the unconventional role her job requires in relation to normative femininity, Tatiana’s fetishised body is ambiguously positioned against her otherwise conventionally feminine image. This follows the suggestion, offered by Fleming’s text, that she may look like Greta Garbo (Fig. 4 and 5): conscious of her resemblance with the Swedish actor, Tatiana’s choice to style her hair to resemble Garbo’s emphasises her desire to construct her image according to certain parameters of feminine beauty (FR. p. 68).

In the pairing of female characters found in *From Russia With Love*, it is Klebb that represents the most subversive embodiment of deviant femininity, a fact reinforced by another important fashion reference played against Bond at the very end, when Klebb manages to attack him whilst camouflaged as an old woman:

The old-fashioned black dress with the touch of lace at the throat and wrists, the thin gold chain that hung down over the shapeless bosom and ended in a folding lorgnette, the neat little feet in the sensible black-buttoned boots that barely touched the floor. (FR, p. 253)

The ‘sensible black-buttoned boots’ conceal a lethal weapon, a ‘tiny steel tongue’ (Fig. 5), which, as we learn in the subsequent novel, *Dr No*, injects ‘*fugu* poison’, a drug derived from ‘the sex organs of the Japanese globe fish’ (DN, 15). Klebb’s performance as an ordinary elderly woman subverts any stereotype attached to gender and age: the harmlessness conveyed by her clever disguise is just another performance. In a novel that self-consciously undermines the foundations of fairy-tale romance, Klebb’s lethal shoe is a parody of Cinderella’s enchanting glass slipper. While Klebb’s fatal shoes suggest a reading of her character as anti-feminine, the cultural subtext behind this reference is more complex, and draws attention to the cultural readings of dress of the 1950s and 1960s. Klebb’s stilettos are evocative of the kind of shoe heel that became fashionable during the 1950s and which has been read as both oppressive and empowering in relation to the gender politics of fashion. Here I would like to argue that Klebb’s lethal shoes become a transposition of the cultural changes that brought in the stiletto heels. As Lee Wright has argued, the stiletto heel, frequently blamed as a symbol of fashion misogyny and patriarchal oppression, represents, in fact, in its evolution, the conscious choice of wearing a kind of femininity, which becomes excessive, and therefore, subversive in relation to accepted views of normative femininity.<sup>iii</sup> Conjuring up the image

of a sexually-liberated woman – Wright notes how the removal of the stiletto in 1950s film hints to a sexual experience – the stiletto points to a kind of femininity clashing with the decade’s pervasive centrality of the home-maker and housewife.

It could be argued that, it is Klebb’s grotesque unattractiveness that makes her ‘anti-feminine’; I would like to argue, however, that while beauty certainly belongs to the other female characters collectively known as Bond Girls, their appeal also conceals the nucleus of subversion, a challenge to the patriarchal values from which the hero they interact with emerges from. In fact, the most iconic - and sexually-charged - Bond girl moment may be read as another manifestation of phallic woman: I’m talking, of course, of the rise of Honey Ryder from the waters of Crab Key, Jamaica (Fig. 6 and 7). In 1962, the film producers would have found it difficult to present full frontal nudity, as Honey is presented in Fleming’s novel *Dr No* (1958), and so Ursula Andress emerges from the sea wearing the iconic white bikini. What’s important here is the presence of the belt from which hangs a hunting knife, a weapon she is ready to use against Bond. The film adaptation plays down Honey Ryder’s ability in rescuing her self, as well as supporting Bond with her knowledge of the Jamaican tides and geology. As a testimony to its iconic status in cinematic and fashion terms, Andress’s scene has been significantly repeated on at least two occasions, in *Die Another Day* (2002) and *Casino Royale* (2006), replacing Andress with Halle Berry playing the part of Jinx Johnson (Fig. 8) and Daniel Craig as Bond (Fig. 9) respectively. In different ways, both transpositions work to support the argument that gender roles are not completely entrenched in conventional heteronormative roles. Like Honey Ryder, Jinx Johnson wears a belt with a knife. Although Jinx ends up on Bond’s side, she also challenges his strength and stamina: in bed with Bond she uses her knife to slice a fig suggestively open. The importance of the knife – and the associations it bears – are also reinforced by another parodic reference in the film: perusing Q’s laboratory, Pierce Brosnan finds the old prop of Klebb’s shoe. Knives are not the only manifestations of phallicism amongst Bond girls; their elegant evening gowns and purses frequently conceal guns, as is the case, in *Licence To Kill* (1989), with Pam Bouvier (Carey Lowell) (Fig. 10) and Anya Amasova (Barbara Bach) (Fig. 11) in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). Similarly, in *Tomorrow Never Dies*, Wai Lin’s (Fig. 12) earring conceals a sharp blade, which she uses to set herself free, whilst leaving Bond chained to a pole; the motif on her shirt recalls the blade of her crescent earring. Phallicism also emerges clearly in the poses struck by several Bond Girls in still photographs and during shooting. A brief selection includes: Elektra King (Sophie Marceau) (Fig. 13) in *The World is Not Enough* (1999), Rosie Carver (Gloria Hendry) (Fig. 14), the first black Bond Girl, in *Live and Let Die* (1973), May Day (Grace Jones) (Fig. 15) in *A View To Kill* (1985) and Domino Vitali (Claudine Auger) (Fig. 16), who ends up killing the villain, Emilio Largo, with the harpoon, thus saving James Bond at the end of *Thunderball* (1965).

Phallicism is only one of the sartorial manifestations that support the range of deviant femininities among Bond girls. Butch, masculine and other kinds of androgynous styles also emerge as important strategies to subvert conventional gender roles. The archetypal butch Bond girl is, without a doubt, Pussy Galore, interpreted in the film adaptation of *Goldfinger* (1964; dir. Guy Hamilton) by Honor Blackman (Fig. 17). In Fleming’s novel (1959),<sup>iv</sup> Pussy’s hair is ‘worn in an untidy urchin cut’ (*GF*, p. 197), while her debut costume – ‘a black masculine-cut suit with a high coffee-coloured lace jabot’ (*GF*, 196) – is strongly suggestive of her lesbian butch appeal. While her lesbianism is played down, the film emphasises Pussy’s allegiance to Goldfinger much more overtly: a black suit worn over a gold-coloured top and gold nail varnish signify her loyalty to the gold-obsessed villain (Fig. 8). Interestingly, when Goldfinger asks her to wear ‘something more suitable’ in order to seduce Bond,

she changes into a lilac low-cut shirt and trousers, not, as it may have been predictable, a dress. That Pussy plays – in spite of her name – the anti-feminine archetype is also made clear by the problematic anti-maternal role she is to play in Goldfinger's mission: 'Operation Rock-a-bye Baby' to be performed by Pussy and her fleet of female pilots is to contaminate the water supply of Fort Knox using nerve gas. In both book and film, Pussy, in the end, switches sides, and becomes Bond's ally. Her switch is also signalled by a change of costume; in the end, Pussy is wearing a white suit, albeit over a gold top. Although at the end of the book – and the film – Pussy succumbs to Bond's charms, her resistance to conventional gender roles and, in the book at least, overt lesbian sexuality, mark her as an icon of positively deviant femininity.<sup>v</sup>

A lesbian subtext surfaces other James Bond novels and films. There is at least a hint of lesbianism in the five-minute sequence featuring Bambi and Thumper in the film adaptation of *Diamonds Are Forever* (dir. Guy Hamilton; 1971) (Fig. 18). Significantly, as with Pussy Galore, here the lesbian woman is represented as a spectacularly supple body, whose strength and aggressiveness challenge Bond's confidence. Amongst other reasons, Honor Blackman was cast for the part because she could do judo moves, which she had previously performed in *The Avengers*. Sportiness and lesbianism are also closely linked in *Die Another Day*, which stars Rosamund Pike (Miranda Frost), who is a competent fencer, and Madonna, who plays Verity, her instructor (Fig. 19). Verity wears a protective leather corset, which she asks Bond to fasten for her (Fig. 9). The corset, traditionally associated with oppressive fashion practices, here becomes an unstable tool of signification in relation to gender, reflecting the re-appropriation, via sub-cultural practices, of the garment.<sup>vi</sup> Endorsed by the intertextual reference to Madonna's re-appropriation of the corset in the context of her career as a pop icon – everybody will remember her performance wearing Jean Paul Gaultier's corsets with conical cups (Fig. 20) – the corset conveys, instead, the lure produced by a playful performance of homoeroticism, reinforced by Verity's admiration for Miranda, which allows her, nonchalantly, to dismiss men: 'I don't like cockfights' (Lee Tamahori, *Die Another Day*).

Corsetry, which features in several of the Bond Girl costumes, including the bathing suit worn by Claudine Auger as Domino Vitali (Fig. 21) and returns, more visibly, in *Goldeneye* (1995), the first of the four movies starring Pierce Brosnan as James Bond (Fig. 22).

This film's wide range of female characters confirms the notion that Bond's heroism rests on the fragile dialectic balance against the strength of the female heroines who support – and challenge – his masculinity. Such dialectic approach is also signalled by the opposition of two female characters, who embody polarised approaches to femininity. Xenia Onatopp (Femke Janssen) embodies the quintessential villainess (Fig. 23 and 24). A dark femme fatale, Xenia's costumes produce the dark allure evocative of the sub-cultural dominatrix, with the use of corseted tops and military uniforms. Juxtaposed to the more conventionally dressed Natalya Symonova (Izabella Scorupco), whose outfits include more ordinary items such as cardigans, blouses and miniskirts, Xenia's appearance overtly exemplifies the ambivalence of fetish fashion; far from being the objectified, passive recipient of masculine assertiveness, her role literally puts her on top of Bond (Fig. 25).

There are, however, other challenges posed by Bond in a film, which, for the first time, portrays M as a woman played by Judy Dench (Fig. 26), who notably, speaks her mind about Bond's sex politics:

'I think you're a sexist, misogynist dinosaur, a relic of the cold war, whose boyish charms although wasted on me obviously appealed to that young woman I sent to evaluate you' (Martin Campbell,

*Goldeneye*). For the part, Dench's outfits to date have always included suits with long blazers and square shoulders; though occasionally displaying her décolletage with low-cut tops, the only tributes to conventional femininity are small stud earrings and the use of lipstick. Significantly, the film also stars a new Miss Moneypenny (Samantha Bond), whose appearance has dramatically changed from the days of Lois Maxwell (first fourteen Bond movies) (Fig. 27) and Caroline Bliss (*The Living Daylights* (1987); *Licence to Kill* (1989)) (Fig. 28). The new Moneypenny (Fig. 29) brings home the necessary evolution of a female character who had been progressively aged and styled to incarnate the bitchy spinster, the social outcast of Bond's glamorous world. Unlike her previous embodiments, the new Moneypenny, who, just like M, wears her hair fashionably short, seemingly knows how to power-dress for work: her distinguished suits match M's gravitas. In discussing the impact of power-dressing manuals such as John. T. Molloy's best-selling *Women: Dress for Success* (1975), Joanne Entwisle's analysis of the career woman's sartorial appearance in the 1970s and 1980s draws attention to the individualistic drive pushing female executives to distance themselves, sartorially, from the soft femininity of secretarial staff.<sup>vii</sup> It could be argued, however, that power dressing, in enforcing a kind of masculine-gendered sartorial behaviour on the female executive, reinforces the masculine/feminine hierarchical structure. As Fred Davis has noted, rather than eroding sexual difference, such habits draw attention to the binarisms – and the consequent discriminatory practices – occurring in the workplace and the public sphere.<sup>viii</sup>

In spite of the ambivalent politics underpinning power-dressing, the new Moneypenny's suit, I would argue, signifies empowerment on at least two levels. On one hand, in wearing the suit, Moneypenny abandons her peripheral position, relegated on the margins of the world ruled by masculine sources of power embodied by M and Bond, to move into the centre, her sartorial appearance endorsing this movement through the seamless continuity that exists between hers and M's clothing. In this respect, Moneypenny's suit undermines the politics of Molloy's power-dressing, eroding, rather than reinforcing, the barrier between executive and secretarial staff. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Moneypenny adopts the dress of power without giving in what Entwisle, paraphrasing John Flügel, calls 'the great feminine renunciation'.<sup>ix</sup> Dressed in black lace (Fig. 30), when Bond notes that she is 'dressed to kill', she replies:

I know you find this crushing 007, but I don't go home every night waiting for some international incident, so I can rush down here to impress James Bond. I was on a date, if you must know, with a gentleman.

And as Moneypenny playfully warns Bond of the dangers of sexual harassment in the dialogue that follows, the character leaves behind her previous incarnation as a desperately ageing, bored secretary to become the embodiment of a renewed kind of playful femininity, one which combines professional efficiency with sexy elegance, drawing attention to sexual difference without undermining female emancipation.<sup>x</sup> Moneypenny's blurring of private and public image suggests a breakdown of power-dressing strategies indicating a different reading of femininity and the 'career woman', as well as blurring the boundaries between herself and the other glamorous girls in the Bond movies.

As I hope to have demonstrated through selected examples, Bond Girls, both in their textual and cinematic existence, pose a challenge to conventional gender roles, stereotyped femininity and heteronormativity. Though often scarred and carrying the traumas of abusive backgrounds, their lean and muscular bodies resist patriarchal control and attempt to find emancipation through a style,

which exceeds the conventional boundaries of stereotyped gender. Whether phallic, butch or androgynous, fetishised or dressed for power, the kinds of femininity sported by Bond girls are never monolithic, never static. Bond Girls refuse to sit still and look pretty. They move fast and they kicks ass.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Ian Fleming, *From Russia With Love* [1957] (London: Penguin, 2004). References to this edition will be given in brackets after quotations, using the abbreviation *FR* to indicate the title.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* [1993] (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 157-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Lee Wright, 'Objectifying Gender: The Stiletto Heel', *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, Ed. By Malcolm Barnard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 197-207 (203).

<sup>iv</sup> Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* [1959] (London: Penguin, 2004). References to this edition will be given in brackets after quotations, using the abbreviation *GF* to indicate the title.

<sup>v</sup> Jaime Hovey, 'Lesbian Bondage, or Why Dykes Like 007', *Ian Fleming and James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007*, ed. by Edward P. Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp.42-54 (51).

<sup>vi</sup> Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* [2001] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 176.

<sup>vii</sup> Joanne Entwisle, ' "Power Dressing" and the Construction of the Career Woman', in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Barnard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 208-219 (210).

<sup>viii</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 37

<sup>ix</sup> Joanne Entwisle, ' "Power Dressing"', p. 216.

<sup>x</sup> Tara Brabazon, 'Britain's last line of defence: Miss Money Penny and the desperations of filmic feminism', *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader* ed. by Christoph Lindner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 202-214 (211).