

Rashomon, Personality Disorder, and Stalking in a New *Fatal Attraction*

Based on *Fatal Attraction* by James Dearden. Developed by Alexandra Cunningham and Kevin Hynes. Paramount+. First episode of eight aired April 30, 2023.

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The iconic film *Fatal Attraction*¹ has recently been reimagined into an eight-episode miniseries, 36 years after its 1987 release. For forensic psychiatrists, the modern retelling of *Fatal Attraction* is of interest because of its themes of severe personality disorder being confused with severe mental illness, female stalkers, and *Rashomon*-style² storytelling: the idea of different truths experienced based on one's point of view. In fact, it is specifically in this style of storytelling that retelling this particular story is worthwhile.

Joshua Jackson reimagines the gregarious male lead, Dan Gallagher, updating Michael Douglas's 1980s character into this millennium. Mr. Jackson is no stranger to *Rashomon*-style storytelling, having played one of the main characters in *The Affair*.³⁻⁵ Lizzy Caplan plays a more nuanced version of Alex Forrest, the *femme fatale* bunny-boiler^{6,7} made infamous by Glenn Close's portrayal. (Ms. Caplan previously starred as sexology pioneer Virginia Johnson in *Masters of Sex*.⁸) Amanda Peet completes the love-triangle as Dan's wife Beth. Both female characters had suffered in the original film from being rather one-dimensional, in contrast to the more fully fleshed out characterizations allowed by the miniseries format. In this update, undertones of feminism and misogyny remain omnipresent.

The series opens as Dan is speaking at his own parole board hearing after being convicted of Alex's murder 15 years earlier, although no body was ever found. Yet his heart-warming speech about his supposed remorse for the killing was only because he would not have been paroled had he declared his innocence.

The story is told with dual timelines: the present, as Dan is released and trying to reforge a relationship with Beth and his now-grown psychology student daughter while attempting to prove his innocence; and the past affair. (His daughter explains relevant concepts for the lay viewer through her nascent psychology training and her own therapy.) In the past timeline, Dan is a golden boy district attorney in Los Angeles who occasionally binge drinks, and Alex is a recently hired victims' rights advocate. When Dan is passed over for a judgeship that he thought was in the bag, their whirlwind affair begins. Eventually it is revealed that the emergency sprinklers' going off in the restaurant, leading to Dan inevitably undressing and drying his clothes in Alex's apartment, was very much engineered by Alex (though the canny forensic psychiatrist might have suspected as much).

Where the miniseries shines is in portraying the complexity of its two female leads, Alex and Beth, in contrast to the film. The third episode begins the *Rashomon*-style storytelling. The past timeline that we've seen in the first two episodes is turned on its head by showing Alex's point of view and life experiences. Bunny boiling is replaced by other forms of violence. The two-hour movie's Alex contrasts with the series, which shows the detritus of other broken romances, her deep loneliness with various frantic efforts to avoid abandonment (including by feigning an overdose), self-harm (with an electric kettle and a cowbell barbell), and flares of intense anger and manipulation. Her trauma history, her relationships with her parents, and her fraught relationship with a former therapist are also eventually revealed.

Later we see the story through Beth's eyes, another female perspective that the original did not highlight. This *Rashomon*-style storytelling has the potential benefit of increasing the viewer's empathy for the choices and plights of the characters and helps to illustrate how Alex's life might lead her to such a desperate situation. In this revision, Alex is reimagined as a complex character, a whole person, not the evil monster audiences loved to hate in the original. Alex shares characteristics commonly found in studies of real-world female stalkers,⁹ such as being single, educated, employed, demonstrating borderline traits, threats, and stalking a known victim. While she begins as an (undetected) intimacy-seeking stalker, she morphs into a rejected stalker after their affair's abrupt ending, which in itself was perpetuated by her own fears of abandonment.

Ms. Caplan met with a forensic psychiatrist in preparation for the series role.¹⁰ The original film has been a useful touch-point for teaching about severe personality disorder, but also of confusion in the lay public regarding mental health.⁷ A decade ago, Ms. Close had described regret regarding the 1987 portrayal playing into stigma.¹¹ Fascinatingly, it was only after the original movie's filming and viewing by test audiences that Alex was portrayed as so very predatory, with Beth losing her career as a teacher and being "transformed into the complete Victorian hearth angel" (Ref. 12, p133). Misunderstandings of the Alex character as "psychotic,"¹³ perhaps related to gendered perceptions of mental illness, as well as misunderstandings about insanity defenses, have real-world implications for court cases involving mental illness, as well as implications for stigma and prejudice against people with mental illness.

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