

## Mata Hari's Dance in the Context of Femininity and Exoticism

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### ABSTRACT

The Dutch dancer Mata Hari (alias Margaretha Geertruida Zelle) has achieved an iconic status within 20<sup>th</sup>-century dance history, partly due to her execution as a German spy in 1917. Although she lacked significant dance training, she successfully performed her works, primarily in eclectic oriental styles, before European audiences. My discussion considers Mata Hari's contributions against the backdrop of the pre-WWI European dance scene. It specifically explores the ideological and aesthetic framework within which she was embedded as a female artist in the context of related concurrent dance trends. Drawing on feminist theories, orientalism and post-colonialism (Edward Said), the paper examines how Mata Hari's on- and off-stage personae conformed to certain stereotyped images of women whilst at so subverting social conventions.

*Keywords:* Mata Hari, orientalism, nudist dance, feminism.

### Mata Hari's Dance in the Context of Femininity and Exoticism

In 1906, a critic from the *Neue Wiener Journal* wrote: "Isadora Duncan is dead, long live Mata

Hari! Dancing barefoot is a thing of the past, the modern-day female artist is more revealing ..." (anon. 1906: 9). As such contemporary reviews show, Mata Hari's dances – many of which she performed in states of undress – were all the rage during the decade of her artistic career. When Mata Hari, née Margaretha Geertruida Zelle,<sup>1</sup> entered the theatrical profession in 1905, she was already a scarred woman – separated and estranged from her husband, a Dutch officer, grieving the mysterious death of her young son and eking out a hand-to-mouth existence because her husband failed to pay her alimony. Her stage career and abandonment of her former bourgeois lifestyle was thus born out of necessity rather than any real artistic inclination or indeed professional training.

While Mata Hari's excessive private lifestyle and scandalous execution as a German spy in France in 1917 have been very well-documented, hardly any research has been invested in contextualising her dance within the framework of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century developments. This paper hence fills an obvious gap in existing literature. It will consider Mata Hari's contributions to dance against the backdrop of the pre-WWI dance scene; and more specifically explore the ideological and aesthetic framework within which she was embedded as a female artist, in relation to important dance trends of the time such as Ruth St. Denis's work, orientalism and nudist dance.

For someone without any prior dance training, Mata Hari enjoyed a remarkable career which spanned various genres: private salons, music halls, opera houses and musical comedy. She began by presenting her own choreographies in ethnic styles, loosely based on Indian and Javanese dances, in private Parisian salons in 1905. She declared these creations to be authentic Asian dances, though she possessed only a limited knowledge of Javanese and Sumatran dances as a result of several years (from 1897 to 1902) spent in the Dutch East Indies, as a housewife and mother alongside her husband who worked in the colonies. She probably

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<sup>1</sup> Mata Hari – Malay; literally: eye of the day – was an assumed name designed to make her dancing appear more authentic.

had no first-hand knowledge of Indian dance at all, but apart from a few sharp-minded critics no one seemed to notice or care.

She went on to perform her choreographies of primarily (semi-)nude dances in music halls and theatres, sometimes alongside variety acts such as juggling and trick dogs, for example at the Trocadero Theatre and the fairly prestigious Olympia Theatre in 1905. She also toured abroad, for instance in Spain and Vienna, and later even danced ballet interludes (this time fully clothed) in serious arts theatres, notably in the ballet of Massenet's *Le Roi de Lahore* in Monte Carlo in 1906. At the second apex of her career in 1911-12, after several years of keeping a low artistic profile, she was invited to perform her well-known *The Princess and the Magic Flower* in Gluck's *Armida*, and also played Venus in *Bacchus and Garbinus* at the world's foremost opera house, La Scala in Milan. She later danced in revues at the Folies-Bergère, in musical comedy styles and in 1913 at the Trianon Palace theatre in Sicily: a theatre-café offering cabaret with musical entertainment, which could be since as a comedown as she shared the stage with performers of questionable artistic merit. In 1914 she moved to Berlin and Holland where her career soon came to a halt due to the outbreak of World War I, prior to her arrest by the French on suspicion of espionage for the German government in early 1917.

This paper will focus on her own artistic creations. Mata Hari's dances shared many characteristic similarities with the works of other leading early modern dancers: solo dancing (occasionally framed by dancers or musicians in the background); dancing barefoot; actual or evoked natural settings (in Mata Hari's case, she often insisted that her scenery include palm trees and moonlight, and she sometimes danced outdoors, at least for private performances); the shedding of the corset; the use of 'reformist' clothing such as veils which enabled a wide range of movement; and her penchant for the fashion of orientalism, one of the two crucial dance trends expressing 'otherness' along with antique models.

Despite the commonalities she shared with other early modern dancers, Mata Hari has rarely been

perceived in literature as a serious artist on a par with figures such as the Americans Ruth St. Denis, who performed works with similar Indian themes, or Maud Allan, or even La Belle Otero who, like Mata Hari, worked as a courtesan. Puzzling discrepancies and contradictions emerge from contemporary accounts of her dancing. The French author Colette, who herself performed in oriental-themed music hall pieces and was thus effectively a competitor of Mata Hari's, and the art lover and patroness Misia Sert judged her dancing unequivocally negatively. Sert's report of her encounter with Mata Hari, who hoped to land a contract with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, is devastating: "She took a few 'sculptural' positions and marked two or three dance steps. I was fairly shocked, as she had no talent whatsoever" (1954: 212). Both Colette and Sert deemed her performances vulgar, superficial and merely exhibitionist, the former asserting that her dancing did not better in any way "the common platitudes of 'Hindoo acts' from the music hall" (Colette, 1991: 1072). On the other hand, Sam Waagenaar's well-researched book on her life and career collates a number of voices who declared Mata Hari a fully-fledged artist (1964: 66). Specifically, Waagenaar quotes the famous Italian operatic conductor Tullio Serafin from *La Scala*, whom we may ascribe some authority in the matter, as praising her as "very cultured, and with an innate artistic disposition". Moreover, according to Waagenaar, he termed her a "serious artist" (ibid: 98).

From the perspective of the lay audience, who were primarily acquainted with the (declining) art of ballet, there were relatively few points of comparison due to the novelty of modern dance in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Owing to a lack of filmed records and accurate descriptions, her actual degree of competence is difficult to assess in retrospect. Many descriptions of Mata Hari's dancing are irritatingly vague, most likely because she evinced a mystic aura rather than any vocabulary of recognisable steps. One of the most vivid descriptions is given by the anonymous critic of the *Neue Wiener Journal* from 15<sup>th</sup> December 1906. In an article entitled *Brahma Dances in Vienna*, the critic reviews her performance at the Viennese Secession Hall thus:

The auditorium was steeped in mystical darkness. Covered blue, green, white lights. A Brahma-altar, surrounded by a blossoming fruit tree, has been erected at the front side of the room. Steaming incense burners augment the almost solemn atmosphere of the small auditorium. Then the Hofburg actor Gregori enters the room ... he improvises a little introductory speech. [He says] Mata Hari's dances are like a prayer ...the Indian people dance when they venerate their Gods.

Mata Hari herself enters with measured tread. A Junoesque apparition. Big, fiery eyes lend her noble-cut face a peculiar expression. Her dark complexion [...] suits her marvellously. An exotic beauty of first order. A white, gathered veil envelopes her, a red rose adorns her deep black hair. And Mata Hari dances ... That is: she does not dance. She performs a prayer before the idol, as a priest performs a service [...].

[Then] Mata Hari dances the budding love of a chaste girl. A white veil – the *slendang* – serves as a symbol of chastity. Beneath the veil, the beautiful dancer wears on her torso a breast ornament and a golden belt ... nothing else. The audacity of the costume is a minor sensation. But without the slightest trace of indecency ... What the artist reveals in dance is art. Each muscle of the upper body is engaged. The dance ends with a victory of love over restraint ... the veil drops [...].

Finally the dance of Siva, the destroyer. The priestess, in a passionately engaged dance, sacrifices every piece of jewellery, so that He hears her prayer. One veil after another drops until in the end she stands in her pure, undressed beauty [...]. The priestess sinks, unconscious, to the floor in front of the feet of the stern god [...] Stormy ovations (anon. 1906: 9).

In this description, the merging of the profane (nudity, fashion, and jewellery) with the sacred (the priestess and god scenario, and the altar) is particularly noteworthy. The emphasis on the naked body around the turn of the century has been fairly well-explored, with Klaus Toepfer's 1997 book on *Empire of Ecstasy* providing a rich collection of sources along with some interpretation. Nudity in dance was, ideologically speaking, a very complex phenomenon, oscillating between conveying feminist aspirations and an eroticism that was clearly aimed at satisfying the male gaze. There are further dichotomies: while on one hand it was often employed (for instance in Laban's and Wigman's works) to provide a counterpoint to the 'unnatural'

postures and clothing of the industrial age, other forms of nudist dance (such as those of the chorus line) were seen to emulate the mechanisation of modern life (see for instance Siegfried Kracauer's discussion of the Tiller girls' precision dance in *Mass Ornament*, 1977: 55).

Mata Hari's nudity was extremely risqué and would have been even more so had she not softened the impact by spiritualizing the dance, embedding it into a religious Indian context. In its blending of sensual and spiritual elements, Mata Hari's dancing resembled that of the much more widely acknowledged American dance artist Ruth St. Denis, who began performing in Europe in 1906 – one year after Mata Hari's debut. Despite the similarities between a number of aspects of their dance – such as costumes, the use of nudity, and the iconography (i.e. similar postures and arm movements which can be seen on existing photographs) – no research has yet been invested in a comparative analysis. As Sally Banes has argued, Ruth St. Denis made use of religious connotations in what would otherwise have been unambiguously erotic choreographies to make nude dancing appear more respectable, particularly to women spectators (1998: 89 and 92); and the same may well be true of Mata Hari. We would otherwise be hard pressed to explain the fact both dancers were invited, often by female protégés, to perform before illustrious circles including many women spectators. Moreover, Western women incorporating Indian temple dancers were able to refer to common Indian practices such as the *Devadasi* system, where young girls were dedicated to temples ('married' to a god) and practiced classical Indian art forms such as *Bharatanatyam*. These women were sharply criticized during colonial times for their engagement in sex outside marriage and prostitution. The blending of spiritual and sensual planes had undeniably become part of their image; they could either be seen as "sexually exploited temple dancer/prostitute or the embodiment of sacred feminine power" (Ali 2001, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/daudAli.html>)<sup>2</sup> – or perhaps as both of these at once.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the history of the *devadasi* system and further literature see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi>.

However, Banes's inference that the successful mix of the sensual and spiritual was "a new message to Western eyes" (1989: 89) is incorrect. In fact, the marriage of the two was – even in Western society – anything but new. There are innumerable examples, particularly from the realm of the visual arts, of very ambiguous depictions of passionate saints and eroticised angels. Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's 1650s marble sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, whose body posture and facial expression have been interpreted both as expressing divine joy and as signalling a veiled orgasm, is perhaps the best known example (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy\\_of\\_St\\_Teresa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy_of_St_Teresa)). The 19<sup>th</sup>-century artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti also conceptualised the female form in terms of heaven and salvation, combining physical beauty and sensuousness with religious notions. Thus, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century educated audiences were well acquainted with the practice of merging sensuality and spirituality from the visual arts, and this did not necessarily constitute a feminist practice as Banes seems to imply.

One might surmise that Mata Hari's candid display of the female form and its acceptance in upper-class evening entertainment was facilitated by the fact that this type of performance had certain precursors. The *tableau vivant* (or 'living picture'), in particular, was a popular parlour entertainment for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century middle and upper classes in many European countries, including England, France and Germany, and was later used extensively in various forms on stage. The *tableau vivant*'s main function was to recreate paintings using real life, costumed participants – primarily women – to imitate well known works of art in static poses which were held for a certain period of time, as if in freeze-frames. This genre thus married the visual with the performing arts.

What is notable, however, is the fact that in the prudish 19<sup>th</sup> century, "woman's body [was] the site of interest" (Elbert 2002: 241) and that "men in the audience received a rare opportunity to observe women in dress and postures generally more provocative than those customarily allowed in polite company" (ibid: 235). A famous tableau, *Venus Rising from the Sea*, became notorious when it shifted from the parlour to cheap theatrical enter-

tainment. Although, as Elbert concedes, the tableau had largely degenerated to cater for pleasure-seeking men in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatres, its earlier incarnations in the *salon milieus* had allowed amateur female performers to experiment with unconventional and often eroticised identities in the safe havens of private homes and artistic exoticism. Their performances, Elbert argues, provided an escape route from their confined existences as housewives. Tableaux vivants were thus part of a "project of self-fashioning" (ibid: 236) and, like later modern dance works, allowed women to bring to light certain facets of their repressed, hidden selves – including their sensual desires.

The *tableau vivant* was still *en vogue* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Mata Hari is reported to have danced in at least two, which were transferred onto stage. She performed a Spanish dance – departing from her usual theme of Indian art – in a "living painting by Goya" during a show entitled *Le Revue en Chemise* at the Folies-Bergère in 1913 (see Waagenaar, 1964: 109) and a ballet based on Lancret's work *La Camargo*, entitled *Les Folies Françaises*, in The Hague, Holland (ibid: 126). More generally, the familiarity of the middle and upper classes with *tableau vivant* may have paved the way for Mata Hari's early salon performances, which could be integrated virtually seamlessly into the characteristic evening entertainment of the day. In particular her nudity, while still sensational, was simply pushing to new extremes a mild eroticism already inherent in the tableau and similar types of performance – a risqué interplay of bodily exposure and modesty for which the veil acted as a symbol.

Moreover, the fact that female masquerade – a practice of toying with different identities – was accepted as a society pastime could explain why Mata Hari was seldom outrightly or publicly ousted as an impostor. Clearly, her life and career were based on a fabrication of lies designed to promote herself. She took 'performativity', in the sense of constructing new identities for oneself (as opposed to Judith Butler's more limited sense of constructed *gender* identity) to an extreme by constantly changing characters and putting on different 'selves'. According to some sources, she was the granddaughter of a native Javanese regent (anon. 1906:

9). Valerien Svetloff, writing for the *Dancing Times*, wrote as late as 1927 that she was “the daughter of a Dutch planter in Java and a native woman” and that her mother, “knowing the fate for children of mixed European and native parentage, and wishing to save her from an existence where she would be despised, gave her up to a Buddhist temple as a religious dancer” (1927: 195). None of these stories were true; they were aimed at hiding the much less glamorous fact that she was of Dutch origin, the daughter of a woman who died shortly after separation from her husband, and a salesman who, after an initially successful career, found himself in precarious financial circumstances.

By making such false claims, Mata Hari successfully closed the gap between her onstage and off-stage personae. Moreover, her experimentation with different identities and images both in and outside of her performances is significant from a feminist viewpoint. Several studies in the humanities, such as Terry Castle’s (1986) and Catherine Craft-Fairchild’s (1993) examinations of masquerades in 18th century literature by female authors, have addressed the function of the masquerade disguise in patriarchal societies. Arguably, the masquerade opens up spaces of liberation for women to escape from the domesticity and confinement of their everyday lives. Masquerades in 18<sup>th</sup> century English ballrooms, for example, permitted women to don masks in order to disguise and transcend their true identities, as well as providing an erotically charged atmosphere. In the liberated context of the ballroom settings, women were able to express some of their otherwise suppressed erotic desires and, to some extent, exert power; the disassociation from their own selves offered them a space for resignification of identity and detachment from conventional morals. Castle, drawing on the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, notes that masquerade represents “a feminocracy... a gynesium – a realm pervaded by female desire, authority and influence” (1986: 254). In her view, the masquerade thus allows a (temporary) liberation from the burden of traditional structures and hierarchies, disrupting as it does categories of privileged class and, in particular, gender.

Taking a more guarded approach, Craft-Fairchild points out that female writers were cautious about assigning an emancipatory impetus to the masquerade disguise. She maintains that texts written by women on the topic of masquerade ultimately show that “cultural constraints make it impossible for a woman to achieve a full ‘identity’; whatever identity she can negotiate is always in a complex and complicitous relationship to the identity (identities) her society constructs for her” (1993: 163). She holds that masquerade did not “alter women’s status” (ibid: 53), arguing rather that the display of female bodies was counterproductive to real emancipation as it turned women into mere (sexual) spectacles, allowing men’s eyes to wander freely over their bodies, thus effectively rendering women passive objects of male desire.

The salons in which Mata Hari first performed (and, later, the variety-theatre and opera stages) provided an ideal playground for self-fashioning her identity and escaping the everyday reality of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Although she did not actually wear a mask like women in masquerade events, her incorporation of different identities, as well as her exotic appearance, fulfilled very similar functions. As mentioned earlier, she constantly nurtured the image of an ‘authentic’ Eastern woman. Whilst, moreover, the salons lacked the explicit eroticism and disguise of masquerade balls, they played an important role in socialising between the sexes and even women’s education, as many women (being barred from higher education) used them to participate in and lead political or intellectual discussions. As the women’s studies scholar Goldberg Moses notes, they were therefore sometimes perceived as a threat to male dominance (1984: 4). Like the masquerade ballrooms, salons disregarded social hierarchies and allowed people of different ranks and orders to mix. Hence, they were an ideal place in which to embed a daring dance form such as Mata Hari’s.

When it comes to transgressing given identities, Mata Hari’s career benefited greatly from the turn-of-the-century craving for the ‘oriental’ and the exotic. The year 1899 saw the publication of a fresh translation into French of *The Book of the 1001*

*Nights* (also known as the *Arabian Nights*) and the 1900 world fair in Paris featured performances by Javanese and Cambodian dancers; both of these sparked a new interest in all things oriental. Moreover, the widely-known 1883 translation of the *Kama Sutra* by the author Richard Francis Burton may have strengthened the perceived link between the Orient and an exotic sexuality and sensuality. Exotica, often from the spheres of Oriental art, were also instrumental in early modern dance developments, with a range of exponents from Ruth St. Denis to Sent M'Ahesa for whom oriental themes became principal motifs of solo dances.

Oriental dance was so much in the public consciousness that a number of books on dance at the time devoted whole chapters to the trend. For instance, Troy and Margaret West Kinneys' 1914 book *The Dance: Its Place in Art and Life* gives an intriguing account of the Western (or more precisely American) perspective on dancing in what were deemed 'oriental' countries: Arab nations in the first instance, India and her neighbouring countries, and also China and Japan. The authors maintain, in short, that the essence of oriental dancing is the display of the female body and its physical attributes. The eye, they write, "has time to dwell upon a posture, to revel in the sensuous grace into which it casts body and limb" (1914: 198). Movement, they further claim, is typically subordinate and often based on improvisation; this view might explain why only a handful of critics admonished the lack of proficiency and execution of Mata Hari's dances. Passion ("she is fired", *ibid*: 218) is cited as the principal theme of oriental female dancing (*ibid*), and indeed of oriental womanhood *per se* (for in the authors' descriptions, the female dancing body and oriental femininity often seem to coincide). Other characteristics include frequent dancing in postures, acknowledgement of weight, dancing with flat feet, sudden mood changes in the choreography, and multiple rhythms.

A closer examination of the descriptive reviews of Mata Hari's performances reveals poignant similarities between her dancing and the Kinneys' account of oriental dance. The theatre critic Edouard Le Page wrote that Mata Hari's "flexible body at times becomes one with the undulating flames, to

stiffen suddenly in the middle of contortions, like the flaming blade of a kiss" (quoted in Waagenaar, 1964: 52). Here, the critic points to several key elements which reflect the themes and practices of oriental dancing; namely, passion as the *raison-d'être* of the dance, expressed through the fire metaphor; an inherent eroticism ("kiss"); and use of sudden contrasts and mood swings – the dancer initially flexed and bent her body only "to stiffen suddenly". Another newspaper, the *Gaulois* (17<sup>th</sup> March 1905) perceived Mata Hari as "so feline, extremely feminine, majestically tragic, the thousand curves and movements trembling in a thousand rhythms, one finds oneself far from the conventional entrechats of our classic dancers" (quoted in Waagenaar, 1964: 53). Valerien Svetloff also noted her "slow, voluptuous movements" (1927: 193). Here again there are clear analogies between Mata Hari's dance and the Kinneys' observations, specifically concerning multiple rhythms and curvy, non-linear moves: a novelty to those who were accustomed to the geometrical, linear patterns of academic ballet. However, from what we can deduce from the existing sources, Mata Hari's dancing did not exhibit one of the key characteristics of much authentic eastern dance, namely the rotating hip movement and emphasis on abdominal muscles typical, for instance, of belly dance.

In the era of British and French colonialism, it comes as little surprise that dance artists chose orientalism as a main motif. Oriental artworks formed part of a powerful discourse during the colonial period, and being one of few Western women to have lived in a colony in the Dutch East Indies, Mata Hari was particularly well-placed to convey images captured there and to embed them within a narrative of her own experience, padding them with fictitious stories as she saw fit. The Orient, as a theme within Western literature and philosophy, has been scrutinised in some detail by Edward Said in his influential and widely-discussed book on *Orientalism*. Said maintains here that the Orient may be theorised as a "European invention" (1978: 1), a projection foil for images of otherness – specifically those which reveal the "surrogate and even underground self" (*ibid*: 3) of European culture. The relationship between East and West is

posited as one of cultural hegemony, with the West dominating and being deemed superior to the East. The binary of East and West is also compared with gender asymmetry, i.e. the dualism of the genders, and certain attributes of 'oriental' culture (such as the inability to speak for itself, sensuality and cruelty) seem to reverberate in discussions of the female. For instance, the Austrian cultural theorist Otto Weininger, in his well-known book on *Sex and Character* (1903), describes the female gender as unable to speak sense and as unproductive, amoral and consumed by sexuality. Like femininity in patriarchal cultures, oriental culture in the West is seen as the exotic 'other' that threatens male dominance. Indeed, in his essay *Orientalism Reconsidered*, Said writes:

We can now see that Orientalism is a praxis of the same sort, albeit in different territories, as male gender dominance, or patriarchy, in metropolitan societies: the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic – but curiously attractive – ruler. Moreover, Orientals like Victorian housewives were confined to silence and to unlimited enriching production (1985, p. 103).

Both Ruth St. Denis's and Maud Allan's works, which have close affinity with Mata Hari's in theme, style, and their use of scanty costumes, have been analysed within the theoretical framework of Edward Said's influential texts. Amy Koritz argues that descriptions of Allan's oriental-style performances in England reveal an interaction of racial and gender stereotyping that reinforced English assumptions about the 'Oriental'. This Orientalism (in Said's sense of the term) in turn depended upon a rhetoric that characterized as female those attributes that denoted the inferiority of England's colonized peoples (1994: 63).

Reviewers commented on both the binary construction of East and West on one hand, and the female and male genders on the other. The English Literature and Gender Studies scholar Amy Koritz maintains that while Allan's performances evoked an uncanny image of the sexualised female, this was transferred to an alien 'oriental' location and

thus distanced from the audience's reality. Moreover, the association of immoral behaviour (represented by the sexualised female dancer) with the East confirmed the superiority of European culture (1995: 38). Drawing on critical reviews from the time, Koritz also points out that Allan's works, which spiritualised oriental dance, were regarded as superior to 'authentic' eastern dances, which with their allegedly explicit sensuality were seen as somewhat vulgar. Allan's performances thus re-affirmed both culturally chauvinistic beliefs and gender ideology (see *ibid*: 39).

Descriptions of Mata Hari's works are encouched in a similar vocabulary to those of St. Denis's and Allan's pieces. Reviews suggest that her dances exuded the same mysteriousness, a comparable amalgam of sensuality and chasteness which reflects the two stereotypical representations of femininity (Madonna and whore), together with a similar nexus between femininity and orientalism. The French newspaper *Le Journal*, for instance, declared Mata Hari the incarnation of Indian culture: "Mata Hari personifies all the poetry of India, its mysticism, its voluptuousness, its languor, its hypnotising charm ... rhythm, poems of wild voluptuous grace" (Waagenaar, p.76; his translation). The critic clearly equates India with female attributes, notably those which elude the rational mind: voluptuousness, hypnosis and mysticism. Hence, while these uncanny and threatening characteristics are ascribed to the 'female' East, the critic's implication is that the West incorporates the opposite characteristics (rationality, efficiency, etc.) which are normally associated with masculinity.

The exotic, mysterious oriental woman (often of Middle Eastern or North African origin) is also a popular version of the *femme fatale*, a construction of femininity prevalent at the turn-of-the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had clearly misogynist (and possibly even racist) implications. Mata Hari has often been seen as paradigmatic of the *femme fatale*; charming and erotically titillating but also dangerous. (Indeed, she is still cited in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia as the incarnation of this image; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femme\\_fatale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femme_fatale)). Her nudity was sensational at a time when it was indecent for women in most European countries to be seen unac-

accompanied in public. Through her stage sets and public explanations of her dances,<sup>3</sup> Mata Hari attempted to frame her performances so as to bridge the gap between eroticism and a more chaste, spiritual image on stage. Judging from reviews, this strategy was apparently successful with some audiences and critics: "There was not the merest trace of indecency" (anon. 1906: 9). Other critics, however, were more cagey. The Austrian author Karl Kraus called into question the tendency to label nudist dance as "merely aesthetic" (1906: 39), satirically attacking "that culture which one day, upon an agreed signal, raises the exhibition of beautiful legs to a metaphysical revelation" (ibid: 42).

Despite the linkage of the eroticised *femme fatale* – an overwhelmingly negative image – with the Orient, it seems to me that the notion of oriental dancing as invariably connoting Eastern inferiority in the context of imperialism does not quite do justice to the complex array of ideologies surrounding the modern dance of this era. There were many voices in the European intelligentsia and the arts scene that argued in favour of foreign values, and which should be distinguished from the widespread imperialist propaganda of the time. Foreign (and in particular oriental) influences in dance were often cited when critically reconsidering the legitimacy of (European) culture, and not always in the conscious or unconscious attempt to denigrate other cultures as inferior. Hence, the dichotomy of East and West – and with it, perhaps, the binary notions of nature and civilisation – were not always used in the arts to further Eurocentricism, but have sometimes instead revealed Europeans' weariness with respect to their self-identity. As Brandstetter rightly notes in the context of her discussion of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century oriental dance, "looking at our European culture through foreign eyes confirmed a critical stance towards civilisation" (1995: 208).

The popularity of oriental dance reached its peak at a time when notions such as rationality, civilisa-

tion, etc., which had previously been viewed in strongly positive terms (and connoted with masculinity) experienced a dramatic reevaluation in intellectual and artistic circles. A number of artists and authors posited an oriental or ancient Greek 'other' as a legitimate alternative to Central Europe's own cultural norms. The Austrian author Hugo von Hofmannsthal, for instance, commented on Ruth St. Denis's *Radha* from 1906 as follows: "It will have nothing to do with education; it will not illustrate, will not elucidate. It presents us with something totally strange, without pretending to be ethnographic or interesting, just for the sake of beauty" (Hofmannsthal, 1979: 497). This was not an attempt to dismiss St. Denis's dancing or oriental culture *per se*; on the contrary, like other contemporaries, Hofmannsthal was dissatisfied with conventional learning and understanding based on purely rational thought processes, which he deemed to be insufficient expressions of our nature as emotional and sensual beings. He ultimately saw dance (a mute language) and foreign cultures as viable alternative means of knowledge acquisition, and even aimed to incorporate some of their principles into his writing. As is well known, much modern dance was based exactly on this premise: finding alternatives to the human being's existence in the industrial, rationalised age. Oriental dance, which in some respects represented an inversion of European values – favouring languor and mysticism over technological efficiency and an over-emphasis on cognitive thought – was a key expression of this yearning. Seen from such a perspective, oriental dance might have thus fulfilled precisely the opposite function to that stipulated by Edward Said; namely to point to the shortcomings of Western, as opposed to Eastern, culture.

Mata Hari's oriental dances manifest a deep ambivalence, perhaps characteristic of much female modern dance of the time. Her very choice of career was in defiance of the dominant norms for female behaviour given her societal background, although it was largely necessitated by circumstances. She was forced to adapt to a different situation after her failed marriage, due to her financial straitjacket and perhaps also the loss of (male) protection and the security of a domestic existence. In

<sup>3</sup> Karl Kraus quotes Mata Hari as saying in an interview that the explanations of her dances in an introductory speech prior to her performances resulted in her nudity being construed in quasi-philosophical terms by the audience, hence making them forget her (sensual) womanhood (1906: 40).



response, she clearly felt that she could capitalise on a female dancing body that conveyed an exotic otherness, and which was seen as a viable alternative to the rigid codes of European dance practice.

Oriental dance offered women certain freedoms as it shed confined balletic images of the female dancing body as fairy or nymph, together with ballet's corsets and strict movement vocabulary. Through the adoption of a disguising, romanticised ethnic aura, Mata Hari was conceivably able to express her frustration with the female condition in Western society (although due to a lack of primary sources by the dancer herself, we perhaps lack concrete evidence to this effect). In one respect, then, Mata Hari's dance might be seen as liberating. Viewed from another angle, however, it could be said to have replaced conventional balletic images with a different stereotype, namely the exotic woman (often enshrined in the image of the *femme fatale*) which equally tends to confine feminine identity. Mata-Hari's dancing conformed somewhat to patriarchal, hegemonic structures in that she tailored many of her dances to the male gaze. Her image as a *femme fatale* indeed found its ultimate expression in her execution, which was seen by some as fair punishment for a sordid lifestyle. Such a demise also corresponds to the endings of many *femme fatale* narratives in fiction as well as dance; such as Salome, Lulu or Potiphar's wife in *Joseph's Legend*.

With her numerous affairs, Mata Hari reflected the lifestyle of many a ballet girl from the Paris and other opera houses, who were often available to provide sexual gratification after their performances. However, this open expression of her sexual desires, as well her on-stage nudity, is open to different interpretations and assessments in feminist terms. She certainly went against the grain of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century middle-class expectations of female sexuality by refusing prudishly to cover her body and asserting her physicality outside motherhood. Moreover, she was no longer forced to lead a life of domesticity and subservience but enjoyed a truly cosmopolitan lifestyle, and, at the apex of her career, a substantial income of her own. This conflict between the progressive and regressive tendencies

of her dancing and biography is hard to resolve. Mata Hari constructed and deconstructed conventional roles for women; her dancing was emancipatory and yet confirmed certain hegemonic structures at the same time. This deep-seated ambivalence was typical of an era at the threshold of female emancipation.

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