



**Mata Hari and the Femme Fatale**  
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“Sharing a Birthday with Mata Hari” is a poem by Susan Gubernat:

*She refused the blindfold, faced twelve raised guns,  
Men’s erections so familiar to her,  
She blew them a kiss before the last captain  
Emptied his charge into her ear to ensure  
Her death. Already dead, wasn’t she?  
And in the arms of Shiva.*

Mata Hari was said to be an evil woman. They spoke of her as a perverted Eve: woman as schemer and corruptor of man and mankind. They hurled the “witch” insult at her. Like Amelia Dyer, they accused her of murdering innocents – 50,000 French soldiers allegedly died due to her treachery. As Prosecutor André Mornet proclaimed at her court-martial, Mata Hari was “perhaps the greatest woman spy of the century.... The evil that this woman has done is unbelievable”.

But Gubernat’s poem points to cultural conceptions of evil that have not been explored yet in this series of talks. These are evil femininity as deadly – the “little deaths” of multiple orgasms, those “Men’s erections so familiar to her” – and the war-time deaths of betrayed French soldiers. The poem draws attention to the performativity of femininity – the story that she blew a kiss to her executioners. And then there is Shiva, the god of destruction, into whose four arms she fell after death. For me, Mata Hari’s evil was nothing more (or less) than the terror of unbounded female sensuality in wartime, coinciding with assumptions of female duplicity.

But before we turn to her transgressions, who was Mata Hari? She was born Margaretha Geertruida Zelle in the northern Dutch town of Leeuwarden in 1876. Her much-loved father was a well-off hat merchant and her mother a wealthy Dutch aristocrat. What started out as an idyllic childhood turned sour when her father became bankrupt and deserted the family and her mother died. She and three brothers were sent to live with different relatives. She was a pretty girl, in a male world. An affair with the headmaster of her school saw her expelled. He doesn’t seem to have suffered any consequences. To the rescue, came Captain Rudolph MacLeod who was twice her age and served in the colonial army of the Dutch Indies. Within a week of their first meeting, they were engaged; marriage came four months later. Margaretha accompanied him to Java and Sumatra. But he was a violent alcoholic who took pleasure in publicly humiliating her. She divorced him and fled to Paris where she adopted the nom de stage Mata Hari from the Malay word meaning “eye of the day”.

This was when she began performing as an exotic dancer. She was one of a number of famous dancers (mostly of the expressionist dance movement) of the time, including Maud Allan (of whom we will hear more later), Isadore Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Adorée Villany, and others who danced nude or in scanty costumes. They were a new kind of dancer – very thin (unlike their large hipped and bosomed predecessors) – and self-styled “new women”, unafraid of risqué performances of the

Salomé dance, named after the archetypical *femme fatale* who demanded that King Herod kill John the Baptist and deliver his head to her on a plate.

But Mata Hari was different. Her *entire* life was a highly gendered performance. She was a liar. She would tell people that she was born into a sacred Indian temple. Her father, she claimed, was a Brahman priest and her mother, who died in giving birth, had been a sacred dancer of the temple dedicated to Shiva. Mata Hari told her fans that she was adopted by the priests and dedicated to the service of the temple Kanda Swany. That was when she claimed to have “learned the ancient dances of the Kama Sutra”.

Mata Hari also performed as a spy. Well, almost. She had agreed to spy twice. In May 1916, she accepted 20,000 francs from a German diplomat to pass on intelligence. But did not actually do anything because she regarded the money as compensation for some furs that the Germans had confiscated. The second time was September 1916, when she was approached by the French to become Agent H21. She had fallen in love with 21-year-old Russian Captain, Vladimir de Masloff (she was twice his age) and desperately needed the large sum of money they offered her. From the start, however, the French authorities were suspicious: her multiple liaisons and frequent crossing of borders (which she could do as a citizen of neutral Holland) made Captain Georges Ladoux, head of French counter-espionage, sceptical of her trustworthiness. When she seduced a German officer and passed on some insignificant information to Ladoux, he had the proof he needed. The German officer she seduced also suspected her. Knowing that the French had access to their radiograms, he sent out messages identifying her as their informant. Ladoux probably knew that the radiograms were false but did not reveal this in the court-martial. We might ask: who was the evil one here?

Mata Hari was arrested in Paris on 13 February 1917 and court martially. She was accused of revealing state secrets including the movement of French troops. The tribunal took less than 45 minutes to find her guilty and sentence her to death.

Numerous stories surround her final days in Saint Lazare prison. My favourite one is about her actions when told that she would not be given a reprieve. One of the nuns watching over her was crying, so (it was said) Mata Hari jumped up, saying,

*“Sœur Marie – you have never seen me dance, well dry your tears, I am going to dance for you alone”. Throwing off her dress, she wrapped a gauzy veil – which was amongst her clothes – around her, and danced, danced as she had never danced before; and the poor little nun, the tears still wet in her cheeks, stared fascinated at this dance of death, the last that Mata Hari, so full of life, would ever perform.*

She was executed on 15 October 1917. No-one came forward to claim her body, so it was unceremoniously sent for dissection by the Parisian medical faculty. She was 41 years old.

These are the bare bones of the story. Although Mata Hari was no saint, these facts don't deserve the label “evil woman”. But, “evil” was the accusation. Lieutenant André Mornet, prosecutor at her court-martial, succinctly identified her main offences. He turned what sound like *admirable* traits into suspect ones. For example, he pointed to “the ease with which she expresses herself in several languages, especially French... her subtle ways, her aplomb, her remarkable intelligence” – making these attributes sound damning. He also spoke of “her numerous relations” (meaning sexual ones) and “her immorality, congenital or acquired”, thus hinting that she was a degenerate, a topic that obsessed French and German psychiatrists at the time. Interrogation officer Pierre Bouchardon was similarly harsh. After wrongly implying that Mata Hari suffered from a sexually transmitted disease, he denounced her for being...

*feline, supple, and artificial, used to gambling everything and anything without scruple, without pity, always ready to devour fortunes, leaving her ruined lovers to blow their brains out.*

She was “a born spy”, he concluded.

In the decades following her execution, Mata Hari has continued to be vilified. Her name is synonymous with “spy” – it was even the code word used by the CIA after 1919 to refer to their operatives. In 1930, for example, *The Saturday Review* published an assessment of Thomas Colson’s biography of the dancer-spy. The reviewer criticised Mata Hari for her “clever elusiveness”. He added that “far from being mystic, æsthetic, romantic, Mata Hari was greedy, sensual, and totally abandoned”. The “disarming kisses” and “deadly treachery of this voluptuous creature... caused more deaths than can be computed”, he concluded. *Scientific American* also reviewed the biography, commenting on “the loathsomeness” of her “moral fiber”. In 1986, a reviewer of Russell Warren Howe’s biography felt it proper to focus on Mata Hari’s appearance. The first sentence of the review informed readers that “She stood five feet nine inches, and had absolutely no bust. She rarely smiled and was rarely on time”. Readers quickly learn what the reviewer found most objectionable when he informed them that Mata Hari...

*slept with lovers on an “almost industrial” scale, made the striptease acceptable, and, when she was shot by the French in 1917 on charges of espionage for Germany, blew a kiss to her executioners.*

His review concluded that Howe was unable to “disclos[e] by what magic of personality” Mata Hari “charmed men as infallibly as sugar and arsenic charm flies”. But, the reviewer contended, Howe “made at least one reader – who agrees that Mata Hari was ‘superficial, supercilious, and self-indulgent’ – nevertheless feel a pang of response [sic] towards this girl”. The “girl” was 41 years old. Such patronising comments are not the preserve of male reviewers. As late as 2007, novelist and essayist Florence King contended that “it is impossible for a woman to like Margaretha because we know only too well what women like her think of the female sex and how they treat us”.

Yet, she has become a popular villain. Like Eve, the Evil Witch in Snow White, and Amelia Dyer, people can’t seem to get enough of evil women. Since 1993, the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, where Margaretha spent her childhood, have dedicated an exhibition to her. During the centenary of her execution, 93,000 visitors visited the museum’s exhibition, which also generated at least 733 press articles. The book accompanying the exhibition listed 61 original publications on Mata Hari in at least seven languages. Sam Wagenaar’s biographies have been translated into 26 languages. Films have popularised her image: in 1931, Greta Garbo starred in one directed by George Fitzmaurice while, in 1964, Jean-Louis Richard cast Jeanne Moreau in the role. People seem obsessed with her breasts, which were reportedly so small that she kept them covered with beaded brassieres. Feminist scholars have also revived interest in her – most notably, the work of Julie Wheelwright which hailed her as a victim of a patriarchal society.

Clues to why Mata Hari has attracted so much attention can be found in Harry Ashton-Wolfe’s *Warped in the Making. Crimes of Love and Hate*, published in 1928. He described attending a “mystic performance” in Paris’ Musée Guimet, a museum of Asian art. This was where Mata Hari had first danced in 1905, on a stage decorated with authentic Hindu statues from the museum’s collection. On entering the room, Ashton-Wolfe remembered that a “dusky attendant” had given him a sheet of paper containing a translation of an “eastern poem”. He recalled that the room had a “penetrating perfume resembling sandal wood”. The setting transported him “to some far-away shrine of the Orient”, watched over by a “menacing” Shiva (“the destroyer”) and an “immense golden Buddha”. The music was “strangely disquieting... monotonous, dreamy, eternal, that caused the

skin to creep". He described Mata Hari's dance as a "slowly writhing with a sinuous undulating motion like a huge serpent". He noted that,

*If it were possible for a sinuous reptile to enter the body of a woman, then the miracle was accomplished before my dilated eyes. Writhing, twisting, coiling, with arms, legs, and even the skin undulating and shivering with serpentine grace".*

As she danced, her "veils were torn away" until she was naked except for "heavy glittering chains and necklets of gleaming stones". It was a "dance of death, embodying the cupidity, cruelty and capricious nature of a woman who willingly accepts the sacrifice of a humble [man's] life merely to satisfy a whim!" Ashton-Wolfe maintained that he had never before "seen such subtle expressions of voluptuous languor".

Note the words he uses: mystical, dusky, the East, "shrine of the Orient", music that makes his skin creep, and Mata Hari herself as a sinuous serpent, who embodies "the cupidity, cruelty and capricious nature of a woman". Her nakedness epitomised "voluptuous languor". These are the main themes that enabled her to be portrayed as the ultimate Evil Woman: animalistic, racialised, and sexually orientalised. As we shall see, these tropes are all intertwined, and they were a dangerous mixture when placed in the cauldron of the Great War.

First, Mata Hari's performance of femininity played into tropes of women as animalistic – irrational, primitive, and wild. According to one Viennese reporter, she was "slender and tall with the flexible grace of a wild animal". Another journalist judged her to be "so feline". She epitomised a "wild voluptuous grace"; she was "snake-like". As late as 1999, an historian writing in *Military History* began his article with the sentence, "Her long, snakelike limbs writhed with sensuality to the Eastern music that flowed from the strings of a lone sitar".

Second, she was racialised. Connections between the exotic and darkly pigmented skin are a racist staple. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was not uncommon for dancers (such as Ruth St. Denis) belonging to the expressionist dance movement to paint their bodies a dark shade. These subtle expressions of the "primitive" as "natural", free, and ungovernable became flagrant when commentators turned to Mata Hari. Highly prerogative, racist terms were banded about. Even though all the protagonists knew that she was Dutch, they described her (in the words of interrogation officer Pierre Bouchardon) as "a tall woman with thick lips, dark skin and imitation pearls in her ears, who somewhat resembled a savage". During another interrogation, she was described as a woman with "the swollen lips of a negress, teeth as big as plates". Léon Bizard (chief doctor to the police) described her as "of Asiatic type.... Something of a savage". In *Warped in the Making*, Ashton-Wolfe could only make sense of her dance by suggesting that she was not really Dutch at all. He noted that Mata Hari was of "pure Dutch descent" but "was without a shadow of a doubt Asiatic – in features, body and soul". He pondered whether her transformation into an oriental woman was due to both the "power of auto-suggestion" and being steeped in "the lore of India". Whatever the reason, she had metamorphosed "into a capricious courtesan and a graceful exponent of the sacred dances of Siva [sic]". This racialisation of Mata Hari's body made her all the more suspect: an "Other" to whiteness and western civilisation.

Third, Mata Hari performed orientalism and was orientalised in turn. Edward Said has famously defined "orientalism" as "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')." Power and domination are at its heart. Fantasies about the oriental "Other" include assumptions about "eternal wisdom" and spirituality – an imagined geography that was primitive, sensual, chaotic, and mysterious. In Said's words, in the East "one was suddenly confronted with unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance".



Mata Hari's dance was modelled on her vision of the East as mystical, expressive, exotic, and erotic. Her dance celebrated wildness, unbridled passion, spirituality, and the irrational. As we shall see, it had little to do with Java, India, or any other actual location, but was intended to appeal to western desires, projected onto a timeless, geographically exotic, and primitive fantasyland. Admittedly, there was a germ of subversion in her performance: after all, her dance was a rejection of repressive discourses of her time; it offered her audiences respite from materialism, moralism, and stale domesticity. But her dance could only ever be a form of cultural imperialism which took traditions out of their original context and appropriated them to serve the needs and fantasies of white, western, and largely male audiences.

This is another way of saying that Mata Hari's Orient was a fantasy. She claimed to have been born in Java to a mother who was descended from a Javanese regent. She immodestly professed to having been a priestess in the cult of Shiva. Undaunted by facts, she would regale people with stories of "India", meaning both the subcontinent and the isles of the Dutch Indies. She claimed to have "real Indian blood in my veins", adding that "it is this mixture of blood which binds me to the Buddhists although I am a Christian". She announced that,

*As a child I learned in the house of my grandmother the holy dances performed before the statues of gods. Actually[,] these are not dances, but ceremonies. For each god there are special prayers accompanied by special gestures.... When I'm dancing the dance of the Vishnu, one must understand that Vishnu is the god of life, love, and fertility. When I'm dancing for Indra, you need to know that he is the god of war and when I'm dancing for Shiva that he is the god of destruction.*

These were lies. It is highly unlikely that she had any training in Javanese dance. Matthew Isaac Cohen, expert on Javanese history, observes that although Mata Hari would probably have witnessed *ronggeng* (that is, Javanese "dancing girls"), it is unlikely that she would have participated in local social dances or studied the complex dance-form. Cohen contends that although an "acquaintance from Banyu Biru recalls Margaretha 'dancing like a goddess'", it was "almost certain" that what he was observing was "polka and waltz, not Javanese court dance". He dryly commented:

*Needless to say, there are no Javanese temple dancers in Islamic Java, no Javanese traditions of nude dancing, no dancing before idols.... Her exposed midriff and beaded metallic bra referenced images of Hindu dance found on ancient Javanese (as well as Indian) temples, but the style was unknown in modern Java. Mata Hari created her own fantasy of Java, weaving together a variety of sources – including classical Javanese statuary she might have observed in Dutch museums.*

Cohen is also incredulous that anyone in the audience would have believed

*her half-baked mixture of European fashions; theosophy; (mis)-use of Javanese props such as keris and slendang and occasional references to hoary Indies myths such as the intoxicating power of the kecubung flower; Indian and Orientalist notions of the temple dancer; and figments of the dancer's own fertile imagination.*

Indeed, some did not believe her. The famous ballerina Carlotta Zambelli (who once appeared on stage alongside Mata Hari) reportedly sneered that "she is as much an Indian dancer as I am a Chinese waitress!" But veracity was not what Mata Hari was selling.

And that was the problem. Her animalised, racialised, and sexually orientalist performances were a dangerous blend during a world war that was slaughtering thousands of people, mainly young men, every day. This was a new form of warfare – total, all-embracing, ruinous. In France, there was turmoil, even talk of revolution: the French army was suffering defeat; on the home front,

rationing was creating unrest. For the first time, the war required governments everywhere to mobilise the full power of the state – and not only to the destructive effort but also to morale. Vast propaganda machines were assembled, fostering fears that internal traitors were (wittingly or not) providing intelligence to the enemy. A typical example was this post from 1915, warning people to “Keep Quiet! Be on your Guard! Enemy Ears are Listening.” The fact that only 56 people in France were convicted and executed for espionage during the First World War strongly suggests that the “spy mania” was exaggerated.

Exaggerated or not, the “spy mania” that swept throughout the globe was highly influenced by assumptions about women’s innate deceptiveness. As young men were being slaughtered on the battlefields, questions were asked about the conduct of their womenfolk. Were they profiteering from the war? Even French “munitionnettes”, who were doing extremely dangerous work, were vulnerable to this accusation because their high wages were being spent on luxuries. Heedless of the sufferings of the men in war, were women exploiting the war situation to “grab” social and economic privileges that were previously the prerogatives of men only.

Mata Hari was an ideal scapegoat. Rumours even spread that she had demanded large quantities of rationed milk to be sent to the prison in which she wanted to bathe. Worse: her treachery was estimated to be responsible for the deaths of 50,000 French soldiers – a preposterous claim propagated by Police Captain Jean Chatin. Newspapers blamed her for the disastrous battle of Verdun, calling her (in the words of *Le Journal*), “a sinister Salomé, who played with the heads of our soldiers in front of the German Herod”.

Of course, this scapegoating of Mata Hari as a modern-day Salomé was not untypical. If we fast-forward to 1963, the 21-year-old show girl Christine Keller’s sexual entanglement with John Profumo (Secretary of State for War) and a Soviet naval attaché/spy Captain Eugene Ivanov led to accusations of threats to national security and espionage. The scandal helped bring down the Conservative government in 1964. Keeler’s humiliation emerged in the contexts of the Cold War, racism (Keeler’s Caribbean boyfriends), and her sexual “deviance”. The twist in this espionage scandal is its Britishness: working-class Keeler was also the victim of a rigid class system. She had no chance of justice when faced with aristocratic privilege. The affair saw the invention of the term “horizontalize”. In the words of the authors of “Among the New Words” for 1999, the word emerged in connection with Keeler: “She was a call girl whose second profession was espionage.... Christine horizontalized herself to the secrets she wanted to obtain”.

A similar response can be seen in relation to Jane Fonda. After visiting Vietnam in 1972, she was held responsible for the deaths of thousands of American men, as well as the loss of the war. While little attention was paid to the more than 300 other American peace activists who visited Vietnam around the same time as Fonda, she was demonised due to her sexualised celebrity status.

In other words, what made these women “evil” was not simply that they were (wrongly) accused of undermining the war effort. What was unforgivable was that they were sexy. Slutty spies are incredibly dangerous because of men’s uncontrollable sexual needs; they “unfairly” exploit this innate vulnerability. Evil women are castrating ones. They use their erotic talents to manipulate men and, in the process, to free themselves from the shackles of normative femininity.

This point can be illustrated by looking at the representation of female spies in film. Raymond Bernard’s 1937 film *Marthe Richard* was based on the spying exploits of this eponymous heroine during the First World War. The lead character, played by Edwige Feuillère, spied for the French by infiltrating a German spy network in Stockholm. In the film, the German who ordered the execution of Richard’s parents has a mistress – a famous dancer whose name is “Mata Hari”. While Richard is portrayed as elegant, patriotic, and chaste (although she offers promises of marriage); the character named Mata Hari is vulgar, morally degenerate, and slutty (Richard once exclaims:

“You’re dressed! I didn’t recognize you”). Richard is the acceptable female spy; the Mata Hari character points to the dangers of female sexuality. Spies like Mata Hari (the real one) are incapable of true patriotism (the “good spy”) but act only out of the urge to sexual power. In *Spies and Secret Service* (1914), Hamil Grant even claimed that appealing to patriotism leaves the female spy...

*cold and unenthusiastic, since love of country is a quality which depends too largely on an essentially platonic and impersonal principle to attract and hold for long her undivided interest and attention.*

In other words, the female spy was incapable of the abstract thought required for espionage. In contrast, appealing to her lusts was invariably effective.

In 1918, only a few months after Mata Hari’s execution, the sexual treachery of women in times of war focused on another dancer. The person at the centre of the scandal was Maud Allan who, like Mata Hari, was part of the expressionist dance movement and famous for her performance of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*. Britain, too, was struggling in the war and spy mania was rife. Allan’s erotic dancing style – much like Mata Hari’s – had made her famous but, by 1918, her popularity was fading. As historian Jodie Medd put it, “the very attributes which had once enticed the Edwardian public had been re-inscribed as national dangers by this time”. Allan was also a very close “friend” and probably lover of Margot Asquith, the wife of the Prime Minister, who was a known “sapphist”. The scandal erupted after Noel Pemberton-Billing, MP and leader of the Vigilante Society, published a report on the front page of *The Vigilante* entitled “The Cult of the Clitoris”. He accused Allan of sexual degeneracy and being part of a movement that was “responsible for all the British failures in the war”. Pemberton-Billing believed that she was one of 47,000 “German agents who have infested this country for the past twenty years, agents so vile and spreading debauchery of such a lasciviousness as only German minds could conceive and only German bodies execute”. Alluding to Allan’s friendship with Margot Asquith, he complained that “wives of men in supreme position were entangled. In Lesbian ecstasy the most sacred secrets of the State were betrayed”, opening up “fruitful fields for espionage”. In other words, Allan was being accused of using her erotic dance as a sexually “degenerate” lesbian to spy for the Germans. Allan was the lesbian equivalent of Mata Hari. She sued for obscene and criminal libel but, after an extremely public trial, Pemberton-Billing was acquitted. As with Mara Hari, this is a powerful example of how in the heightened passions of war, panics associated with spying were linked to anxieties around female sexuality.

In conclusion: Mata Hari was the embodiment of the Evil Woman for her role as an alleged spy who provided military intelligence to the Germans. In 2017, the French government released a report nearly 1,300 pages long, which included the evidence used at her court-martial. It revealed that she probably did not do what she was accused of and, if she had spied, the information she passed on to the Germans was insignificant. Although her death was a direct result of her bugled attempts as a spy, her *demonisation* as “evil” was never about her acts of treachery. In the midst of a bloody war, which France seemed to be losing, Mata Hari was an ideal scapegoat. Even though her erotic “powers” were waning, and her dancing career had collapsed, she represented a performance of femininity that directly threatened a beleaguered masculinity. Her delirious, orientalisised eroticism had no place in a France reeling after the death of more than 377,000 French soldiers during the battle of Verdun, the longest and most deathly battles of the war. While men were making the ultimate sacrifice, Mata Hari’s sensuality made her the perfect Evil Woman.

Perhaps her true legacy, though, should be her defiance. Let me conclude, therefore, with a beautiful poem – this time, by Judith Berke, entitled “Mata Hari in Saint-Lazare Prison, 1917”. It ends thus:

*Dance for me, my cellmates said, and the Sister,  
Too, all of them... I realized  
Again, I had no country.*

*The only country I ever had was my body –  
And I danced then, forty years old,  
My hair horrible, gray from not dyeing –*

*But from their faces it could have been  
Opening night at the Musée Guimet –  
The place dark, Shiva, his four golden arms  
Behind me – and I'm almost naked –  
Just the two little cupolas on my breasts,  
Pearls around my wrists and ankles,*

*And I'm not dancing for them,  
I'm dancing for my life.  
Which I give to them,  
Just for these few moments.*

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### Further Reading

Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World* (London, 2014)

Matthew Isaac Cohen, *Performing Otherness. Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952* (Basingstoke, 2010)

Jodie Medd, "The Cult of the Clitoris': Anatomy of a National Scandal", *Modernism/Modernity*, 9.1 (January 2002)

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978)

Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* (London, 2007)

Julie Wheelwright, *Fatal Lovers: Mata Hari and the Myths of Women in Espionage* (London, 1992)

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