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**Let Women be Unfettered from the Moon: The Metamorphoses of the Moon from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* to Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker***

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# Let Women be Unfettered from the Moon: The Metamorphoses of the Moon from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* to Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*

*Canchen Cao*

The moon, for Oscar Wilde and Mina Loy, in contrast to its traditional mythologised conception, is a symbolic representation of female subjective consciousness, as indicated by the forms of female sexual desire lying beneath the surface of Loy's poetic language and Wilde's allusions. This paper converts the moon motif into a critical apparatus that allows for tracing of both the misogynistic provenance of the metaphorical association and its reformulation in the hands of writers alert to these problematic notions; as the title suggests, 'metamorphoses' not only indicates the phases of the moon as a reflection of women's natural growth, but also alludes to the development of the symbolism of the moon from a traditional figuration of femininity into a critical feminist discourse.

## Introduction

The Latin verb *lucere*, which means 'to shine and to emit light,' is the root of the feminine noun *luna*, signifying both the moon and its personification in the form of a goddess; Selene, for example, is the female-gendered personification of the moon in Hesiod's *Theogony*. These etymological origins have produced derivations closely associated with qualities deemed feminine, such as the adjective *lunatic*, which refers to a state of intermittent insanity that is caused by the phases of the moon (and a synonym of which is *moonstruck*).

This is exemplified by descriptions of the lunacy of Bertha Mason in Charolotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Rochester's hyperbolic and unfeeling characterisation of Bertha presents female insanity with imagery of the moon:

> The moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball – she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. [...] I heard every word – the thin partitions of the West Indian house opposing but slight obstruction to

her wolfish cries.[1]

The madwoman's link to the moon also can be found in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, as Rebecca haunts the second Mrs De Winter's dreams: 'A cloud, hitherto unseen, came upon the moon, and hovered an instant like a dark hand before a face.'[2] The most important of the similarities *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* share is the ghostly mourning of a madwoman associated with lunar imagery.

Yet, while relating perceived female emotionality and sentimentality to the phases of the moon has served as a model enabling writers to portray female characters' bodies, personalities, and behaviours, it has, concurrently, reinforced stereotypes of the nature of women. Idealizing feminine beauty, symbolic depictions of the moon have promoted the male fetishization of the sexualised female object. We may ask, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have done: 'Where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women? If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?'[3] Inspired by this question, this essay will consider how narratives of the moon have been used as a device to reflect women's rebellion and power in opposition to the misogyny of such traditional symbolism. Although the patriarchal conceptualization of the moon may appear to appreciate the female in a romantic sense, it is grounded in a phallogocentric discourse that manipulates portrayals of women and continues to perpetuate 'lunatic' female characters in literature. This paper will explore how Oscar Wilde and Mina Loy rectified this misogynistic representation in their writings, including how the traditional figuration of femininity ascribed to the symbolism of the moon has been appropriated and altered by critical feminist discourse.

**'Unveiling' the Moon**

In Filippo T. Marinetti's early twentieth-century manifesto *Let's Murder the Moonlight*[4],

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1 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Classics, [1847] 2006), 354.
2 Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (New York: Haper, [1938] 2006), 3.
3 Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 7.
4 Filippo T. Marinetti, 'Let's Murder the Moonlight!' in *Futurism: An Anthology* ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University [1909] 2009), 54-61.

misogyny is promoted through the expression of an explicit disdain towards women and their moon-like nature that threatens to draw men into the realm of irrationality and weakness simply through proximity. Such discourse is imbued with the author's male gaze towards female bodies – his longing to 'murder the moonlight' may be said to reflect his fear of being subjugated by female beauty and feminine power. If moonlight is taken as a metaphor for the allure of female beauty, then the female body, such as that of Wilde's Salomé, can be likened to the moon of a misty night; the more elusive and mysterious a woman such as Salomé is, the more the instinctual curiosities of a man like Herod will be aroused. Elaine Showalter offers a feminist analysis of the descriptions of female bodies in *fin de siècle* literature, emphasising that the mystical imagery of 'veiling and unveiling' is an apparent sexual metaphor in literary texts that represents a symbolic incarnation of lust among both men and women[5]. We may liken the metamorphoses of the moon to Showalter's theory of 'veiling and unveiling', so as to highlight the growth of feminist consciousness in Wilde's allusions and Loy's poetics.

For Wilde, the changing images of Salomé are signified by the three colours of the moon: white, red, and black. Each colour not only respectively alludes to the changing identities of Salomé from the male gaze (virgin, sexual companion, and corpse), but also symbolises Salomé's subversion of the male gaze and her detachment from the patriarchal authority. For example, the depiction of the white moon is a proclamation of Salomé's defiance that replaces the male gaze of female beauty (the moon) with Salomé's own observation. In the opening scene, Salomé describes the white new moon as a virgin: 'She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin [...] She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses'[6]. Salomé regards the moon as a deviant goddess who would never surrender to any man, which foreshadows her ultimate fate in this story, namely: that of an innocent virgin turned dead woman. By associating the moon with Salomé's desire and power, Wilde lifts the mysterious veil of the patriarchal narrative of the moon.

The moon also promotes the growth of Salomé's female subjective consciousness to express her sexual desire. For instance, the moon encourages Salomé to unveil

5 Elaine Showalter, 'The Veiled Woman', in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991) 144-168, 149.
6 Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (Auckland: The Floating Press, [1894] 2016),19.

her desire for Iokanaan's love, which is explicitly expressed through her longing to touch Iokanaan's body: "Thy body is white like the snows [...] nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body."[7] Notably, the whiteness of the moon is stressed in Salomé's praise of Iokanaan's body, a dream-like vision of the observed, eroticised male form. In Salomé's imagination, Iokanaan's delicate body is an object to be longed for and fantasised about, the whiteness of the moon illuminating his caressed body as a sacred shrine, further associated with Salomé's pure longing for love and sexual pleasure. Put differently, the whiteness of the moon serves not only as an allusion of pure desire and an undefiled body, but also as a sign of Salomé's growth; an expression that explicitly unveils female desire. Salomé's articulation of desire unfetters herself from the cage of phallogocentric discourse: it has a titillating female tone that liberates feminine consciousness from the male eroticisation of the moon, thereby allowing her to present her own erotic universe to viewers.

Wilde's allusion of the white moon is reminiscent of Loy's poetic depictions of the moon in *Songs to Joannes*, which similarly describes a playful sexual fantasy through imagery that amalgamates the moon, female body, and 'milky' fluids: 'And laughing honey / And spermatozoa / At the core of Nothing / In the milk of the Moon.'[8] The 'laughing honey' imbues an explicit love scene with joyful, domestic feeling, and the texture of the milk provides silky, tactile sensation to the reader; these lines refer to the moon through an erotic rhetoric that portrays a messy image of sexuality and ascribes a sticky tenderness and warm texture to the female body. Furthermore, the imagery of the moon includes a biblical connotation that refers to the Promised Land of Judaism, which is perceived as a realm for the Jewish people's salvation.[9] It corresponds to the whiteness of the moon described in *Salomé*: the sexualised body is rendered into a symbolic and sacred place that a lover seeks to reach.

In Loy's poetic language, the colour of sperm and milk serves as a sexual metaphor dissociated from the traditional veiled image of the white moon. In other words, Loy not only presents an 'unveiled' female body but also an 'undressed' man to the reader.

7 Wilde, Salome, 2016, 34.
8 Mina Loy, The Lost Lunar Baedeker, *Poems of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1909] 1996), 56.
9 The Jewish Publication Society of America, *The Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1917), 20.

An unveiled female body subverts the otherwise obscure and 'veiled' discourse of women and their bodies, thereby conveying female desire for sexual gratification and delight. The description of fluids presents a binary gendered image of the moon: it pertains to both male production of sperm and to motherhood, rather than a single gendered representation of femininity. Moreover, the imagery of moonlit milk conveys a sweet and slippery impression of bodies, reminiscent of 'the breast of the moon'[10] referred to in *Salomé*, which portrays a woman who is immersed in her imagination of sexual pleasure. Both Wilde and Loy endow female characters with the capacity to imagine or fantasise an eroticised male body or sexual behaviour, which Mary Anne Doane describes as "female spectatorship"[11]; such female spectatorship possesses a subjective power that can convert masculine perceptions of sexuality into a feminine perspective.

## Further Phases

Loy's use of the colour white and its association with the image of the moon reoccurs in other ways in *Songs to Joannes*, such as in depicting the pain of love experienced by a woman: "To the recurrent moon / Bleach / To the pure white / Wickedness of pain".[12] In this case, the colour white is used to depict a weak and despairing woman. As Rodger L. Conover suggests in his preface, this poem might be a reflection of a combination of Loy's unpleasant relationship experiences with past male lovers, such as Fillipo T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini.[13] The name 'Joannes', for example, refers to Giovanni Papini; in *Songs to Joannes,* Loy's love of Papini can be said to have started from a vision of sexuality, and then progressed into the quarrelling of lovers and chaos, until the end of this relationship. In the above passage, the speaker utilises the imagery of the moon to describe her heartrending separation from Joannes (Papini): 'the recurrent moon' alludes to the capricious love between her and Joannes, while the pain of love is the 'bleach' that turns her body 'pure white.'

The pure white colour of the body echoes Salomé's death and pale corpse. Hélène Cixous' analysis of Medusa can be seen as parallel to Wilde's Salomé, which points out

10 Wilde, Salome, 2016, 34.
11 Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' in Screen 23, 3-4: 74-88.
12 Loy, Lunar Baedeker, 1996, 62.
13 Rodger L. Conover, 'Introduction' in The Lost Lunar Baedeker, Poems of Mina Loy (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), xi-xx.

that the *femme fatale* motif in literary texts poses a threat to masculine domination.[14] Yet, this paper argues that Wilde intended to portray Salomé's death as a resistance towards the patriarchal control of sexual autonomy; that is, in denoting that women have the right to decide on their sexual relations. The whiteness of both the moon and Salomé's dead body present her 'life-in-death and death-in-life'[15]; just as the moon was eventually revealed in the final scene, so too was Salomé's libido retained into the night, as it is only activated for Iokanaan. For Salomé, 'the mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death'[16]. Hence, the imagery of the disappearing moon indicates that the cost of Salomé's escape from phallocentric control is ultimately death: a female corpse remains in the mystery of Love.

Returning to Loy, we can observe again that she compares herself to the moon to express the pain of love, as exemplified when she declares: "And I am burnt quite white / In the climacteric / Withdrawal of your sun / And wills and words all white".[17] The voice of a shrivelled, dead heart floats around the figure of the moon, withdrawn from the 'sun'; Loy's detachment from an unhealthy relationship is represented as the moon disengaged from this glaring sun. According to Robert Graves, since men represented their virility through the power of the sun and its respective deities like Apollo, moon-inspired writers depicted women as a symbol of the moon to express their sexual homage to an 'auxiliary state personnel'.[18] In other words, the moon acts as an off-centric female assistant that was placed secondary in majesty to the grandness of the sun. Correspondingly, by affirming the primacy of the phallus, the 'auxiliary state personnel' is a misogynist perception that regards women as a sexual companion or a faithful consort. Incorporating this idea, it can be suggested that in the above passage, Loy describes herself as the moon in terms of a burned-out satellite of the earth; when night shifts to the day, her moon is 'abandoned' by the 'sun.'

In this sense, Loy puts forward a new and unique figuration of the moon as the unveiling of a woman's powerful emotions and intense, passionate love, by portraying her pain. We may look further to: "And the white dawn / Of your New Day / Shuts

14 Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Cohen and Cohen, in Signs, 1,4: 885.
15 Joan Navarre, 'The Moon as Symbol in Salome: Oscar Wilde's Invocation of the Triple White Goddess', in Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salomé (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 71-86 (82).
16 Wilde, Salome, 2016, 92.
17 Loy, Lunar Baedeker, 1996, 64.
18 Graves, Robert. The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 4

down on me".[19] The moment described here as day meeting night symbolises a joyful form of pain through which flesh is fulfilled, yet also an irreversible breakdown between man and woman has occurred. As these lines reveal the vulnerability and fragility of a female heart, they can be interpreted as constituting a self-revelation on the part of Loy, whose poetic voice relies on the image of moon to disentangle herself from both the male force and the painful relationship. Therefore, this metamorphosis of the moon also symbolises the growth of Loy's mind, demonstrating how a woman has escaped from a male erotic universe.

## Destroying the 'Moonlight Duets'

To shed further light on the image of the moon in Loy's feminist critique, it is necessary to turn to another female futurist critic, Valentine de Saint-Point, who wrote *The Manifesto of the Futurist Woman* (1912) in response to Marinetti's glorifications of misogyny and militarism. In another feminist work titled *The Futurist Manifesto of Lust* (1913), Saint-Point expresses her intention to destroy the phallocentric vision of women as follows:

> We must destroy the fatal rags and tatters of romanticism, counting daisy petals, moonlight duets, a false and hypocritical sense of shame. Let people who have been drawn together by physical attraction dare to express their desires, the allure of their bodies, their presentiments of joy or disappointment at the prospect of fleshly union, instead of talking solely about the delicacy of their hearts.[20]

In this statement, Saint-Point disregards the patriarchal tradition of vilifying female desire, and encourages women to realise the power of their lust. As Re points out, Loy takes the quest for futurist, feminist women in Saint-Point's writings as a perspective for offering her satirical critique of the misogynist rhetoric of futurism[21]. Both Loy and Saint-Point's writings attempt to provide a reconsideration of female bodies, asserting the legitimacy and value of female sexuality and lust. Saint-Point dares to

19 Loy, Lunar Baedeker, 1996, 65.

20 Valentine de Saint-Point, 'Futurist Manifesto of Lust' in Futurism: An Anthology (New Haven: Yale University, [1913] 2009), 131.

21 Lucia Re, 'Mina Loy and the Quest for a Futurist Feminist Woman', in European Legacy, 14,7: 799-819 (808)

discuss both female desire and the fragility of a woman's heart, whose writings deeply shaped Loy's vision of female sexuality. For instance, Saint-Point regards lust as a potent force rather than a sin of vanity; Loy applied this conception of lust to express her 'painful joy of flesh fulfilled'[22] in *Songs to Joannes.*

Indeed, Loy empowers herself via the imagery of the moon, light-heartedly emancipating female sexual desire and sentimentality from patriarchal interpretations of pleasure. These genuine emotions derived from 'fleshly union' are an essential part of a woman's experience of love and sex, and constitute a feminine power to be reckoned with. Although Loy does not regard lust as a force in the same terms as Saint-Point, she is in agreement with her vision that feminine strength involves possessing the qualities of courage, energy, and wisdom[23]. Therefore, Loy can be said to have provided a feminist critique of the mystification of the moon in her poems, freeing herself from the traditional masculinist realm of literary production.

In her poem titled *Giovanni Franchi*, Loy further encourages women to be 'unfettered' from the 'darkness' and move into the 'brightness' by breaking down the patriarchal interpretations of the moon and offering a satirical critique of the gender stereotypes that surround it. As the editor's notes make clear, *Giovanni Franchi* is a satirical poem that mocks the Italian journalist and futurist Giovanni Papini's foolishness and madness, as he engaged in a love affair with Loy in Florence while she was still involved with Marinetti.[24] Both Marinetti and Papini stress the inferiority of female eros in their writings, which sparked Loy's reflections upon the opposition between the masculine mind and feminine body. In *Giovanni Franchi*, we see Loy provide a feminist critique of masculine illusions of a virginal body:

> She chased by moon-and-morn light
> Philosopher's toes
> As virginal as had he never worn them
> Clear of 'white marks mean money'
> All quicks and cores
> They fluttered to her fantasy

22 Valentine de Saint-Point, 'Futurist Manifesto of Lust' in Futurism: An Anthology (New Haven: Yale University, [1913] 2009), 130.
23 Re, 'Quest', 2009, 812.
24 Conover, 'Introduction', 1996, xi-xx.

Fell into her lap.[25]

Through this passage, Loy offers a disdainful view of Papini that satirises the male fetishization of virginity and self-righteousness in sex; 'white marks mean money' refers to the materiality of men even gaining a sense of 'possessing' a female body through payment.

In this poem, therefore, moonlight is a reflection of both the fetishized female body and the fetishizing male desire. The 'fantasy', for men, is just a hymen that they are longing to 'unveil'; but for women, the 'fantasy' is the membrane-like substance of their bodies. The moonlight and the 'fantasy' refract the concept of *écriture féminine* (woman's writing) coined by Hélène Cixous; to be specific, women's writing about women that disrupts the oppressive order of mythologised imagery of the feminine.[26] Loy's depictions of the female body is not as an appendage for men, but rather a physical substance that women themselves have the power to use, to write with, and to sustain themselves through. Obviously, Loy's *écriture féminine* rejects the romantic transcendence of the mystification of sexuality; yet, in doing so, it does not devalue this mystical nexus between women and the imagery of the moon, but rather utilises this imagery to liberate the power of women from patriarchal renderings of the moon.

## Lust and Lunacy: A Masculine Fear of Moonbeams

While uncovering feminine power through the imagery of the moon, Wilde's discourse pinpoints men's fear of the metamorphoses of the 'moon' through its depiction of Herod's sense of dread towards Salomé. According to Johannes Burgers, the moonlight is a transitive medium that elicits Salomé's female sexual desire and takes her out of the 'darkness' of a man's control.[27] Certainly, the moon is a place where female sexual desire has traditionally been hidden; for example, Loy expresses her objection to sexual bias in *Love Songs*:

Evolution fall foul of
Sexual equality
Prettily miscalculate

25 Loy, Lunar Baedeker, 1996, 31.
26 Cixous, 'Medusa', 1976, 875.
27 Johannes Hendrikus Burgers, 'The Spectral Salome: Salomania and Fin-de Siècle Sexology and Racial Theory', in Decadence, Degeneration and the End (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 168.

Similitude
Unnatural selection
Breed such sons and daughters
As shall jibber at each other
Uninterpretable cryptonyms
Under the moon.[28]

Loy criticises the suggestion that men's sexual desire is superior to women, and the female eros and sexuality should be veiled in the forms of sentimental mystification, echoing Saint-Point once again, who writes that women should 'strip lust of all the sentimental veils that disfigure it'.[29] Phallogocentric discourse has covered the moon with a mysterious 'veil' that objectifies women's sentimentality and sexual appeal by pictorial tradition.

Wilde's moon counters this, used as a device that challenges the deeply entrenched masculine discourse, endowing Salomé with such power that she can frighten the empowered masculine in the story. Herod regards her as mad and monstrous when the moonlight has a strange shine, and becomes claimed by his fear of this in the final scene: 'I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars! Let us hide ourselves in our palace, Herodias. I begin to be afraid.'[30] Wilde transforms the moonlight into a striking source of power that can cause fear and anxiety in men. His 'ray of moonlight'[31] deconstructs the masculine aesthetics of the moon by depicting Salomé as a sexually deviant woman, who, through her own power, successfully destroys the association between men and virility.

Indeed, Salomé acts as a virile hero who dominates her sexual desire, the heroic image of which is not inherently 'feminine' in the phallocentric sense. Her lust is not her weakness, but rather a means through which she possesses a powerful body and mind, just as Loy and Saint-Point have emphasized. Salomé exists as a fascinating prototype of cross-gender acting, blurring the boundary between virility and femininity. In other words, the image of Salomé is aligned with the *femme fatale* that imbued the figure with aggressivity, attractiveness and autonomy, but embodies aspects of Mary Ann

28 Loy, Lunar Baedeker, 1996, 226
29 Saint-Point, 'Manifesto of Lust', 2009, 132.
30 Wilde, Salome, 2016, 93.
31 Ibid, 94.

Doane's *masquerade*, which doubles representation of women with a realignment of femininity.[32] In this context, to masquerade a female character is to de-fetishize the phallus that carries a threat, disarticulating male systems of viewing and writing.

## Conclusion

The writings of both Wilde and Loy present the growth of female autonomy, along with women's capacity to convert the masculine mythologisation of the moon. An appropriate way to conclude this essay is to answer to the question posed at its opening by Gilbert and Gubar: "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?"[33] Loy's poetry demonstrates how *écriture féminine* can be generated by depicting the female body without shame and fear. Her poetics of the metamorphoses of the moon record an evolution of a feminist consciousness, tracing a growth from the object of a love affair to a feminist-thinking poet. For Wilde, the depictions of the metamorphoses of the moon serve to 'castrate' the penis of patriarchy, to refine the gender stereotypes of literary narratives, and to reflect women's natural growth and decline in a feminist manner. Both of their portrayals of the moon not only unveil the female desire behind love and depict a daring vision of female sexuality, but also encourage a self-unveiling of feminine power that transcends male discourse.

32 Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', 1982, 82.
33 Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman, 1979, 7.

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