PLOTS
AND PLOTTERS
Double Agents and Villains in Spy Fictions

Edited by Carmen Concilio
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MATA HARI: AN ICON OF MODERNITY

PAOLA CARMAGNANI

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Margaretha Gertruida Zelle was born on the 7th of August 1876 in the Netherlands. At nineteen she married a captain of the Colonial Army in the Dutch East Indies and two years later they moved to Java. In 1903, she left her husband and daughter and fled to Paris. After some failed attempts at employment as an artist’s model, she profited from her Javanese experience and exotic sex appeal, winning fame as Mata Hari, the oriental dancer who charmed the fashionable Parisian high society.

In 1914 she was living in Berlin, but her bright star had already begun to fade and in order to maintain her high standard of living she had to rely on her talents as a courtesan. Among her many lovers she showed a constant weakness for officers, whom she collected without paying attention to their nationality, oblivious to the suspicious atmosphere brought on by the outbreak of the war. Her Dutch nationality, which enabled her to freely cross national borders, and her connections with German officers, attracted the interest of captain Ladoux, head of the French counterespionage, who unofficially hired her.

In the autumn of 1916 she was in Madrid, where she contacted the German envoy, Major Kalle, doing “what a woman does in such circumstances when she wants to make a conquest of a gentleman”, as she said afterwards.¹ Kalle told her that submarines were going to land German and Turkish officers onto the Moroccan coast, a French military zone, and she thought that this meeting had successfully established her as a double agent for the French. While in Madrid, she also met the French military attaché responsible for French espionage, colonel Denvignes, with

whom she was seen on several occasions. Kalle began to grow suspicious and decided to test her to see how much information would get back to the French. He gave her some stale or even false news, which Mata Hari took at face value. In the meantime, Ladoux, who suspected Mata Hari of working for the Germans, had stopped answering her messages and she impatiently resolved to go back to Paris, without understanding that her cover had been blown, both with the French and the Germans. Afterwards, to strengthen the case against her, Ladoux produced a piece of so-called crucial evidence: French intelligence had intercepted some radio messages sent from Kalle to Berlin describing the helpful activities of a German spy code-named H 21, who could be identified as Mata Hari. However, Ladoux made several contradictory statements regarding what the messages actually contained. Moreover, the messages were written in a code that had already been broken by British intelligence and some sources claimed that the Germans already knew it had been broken. Would that be a proof that German intelligence had resolved to get rid of a useless agent?\(^2\) Whatever the case, Mata Hari was arrested in Paris on the 13th of February 1917. She was first taken to the Palais de Justice to be questioned by captain Bouchardon, who acted as the chief investigating officer of the military tribunal, and then to Saint Lazare prison. On the 24th of July she appeared before the Third Military Tribunal and two days later she was sentenced to death penalty “for espionage and intelligence with the enemy for the end of assisting their enterprise”.\(^3\) Notwithstanding the many appeals on her behalf, at dawn on the 15th of October Mata Hari was executed by firing squad at the Vincennes military camp.

\textit{Exotic femme fatale}

Mata Hari’s iconic status stems out from a particular moment in European culture, between the 1880s and the 1930s, which spe-


\(^3\) Wheelwright, p. 92.
cifically identified itself with the notion of ‘modernity’. As noted by Rita Felski, “the idea of the modern saturates the discourses, images and narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, an era “profoundly shaped by logics of periodization, by the attempt to situate individual lives and experiences in relation to broader historical patterns and overarching narratives of innovation and decline”. Marked by crucial metamorphoses in sexuality and sex roles, this culture of modernity found a central organizing metaphor in gender, through the use of images of femininity as the embodiment of its anxieties, fears and hopes.

When a journalist asked Mata Hari why she chose to go to Paris, she answered: “I don’t know, I thought all women who ran away from their husbands went to Paris”. By the end of the century, Paris had indeed become the epitome of urban modernity, where the traditional bourgeois ethos could be renegotiated in a “symbolic redistribution of relations between feminine and masculine”. If the symbols of the triumphant capitalist system of production were male figures, the flip side of the coin was definitely feminine: a dreamworld shaped by consumption, where the distinction between private and public spaces which traditionally relegated women to a premodern sphere appeared suddenly blurred. Department stores, exhibitions, theatres, races, balls and soirées were new kinds of public urban spaces, which male perception associated with a dangerous femininity. In Zola's *Au bonheur des dames* (1883), the department store from which the novel takes its title is a place where consumption has “abandoned all pretense to being a rational transaction grounded in objective need, and is shown to be driven by the inchoate emotional and sensual impulses of the female customer” (70). Here, everyday feminine objects are aestheticized by the stylistic manipulation of displays, offering women a visual pleasure and “encouraging them in a euphoric loss of self through the surrender to an irrational cult of ideal feminine beauty” (70). Breathless and excited,

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5 Wheelwright, p. 13.
6 Felski, p. 19.
oblivious to class differences, customers appear as an indistinct crowd of primordial, desiring femininity. This symbolic bond between consumption and desire is reasserted and further elaborated by Zola in *Nana* (1880) through the paradigmatic figure of the actress and courtesan, a *femme publique* whose “social and sexual identity is shaped by fashion, image and advertising” (75). An insatiable consumer of objects and men, Nana offers yet another representation of ferocious female desire, undermining the principles of economic rationality and tacitly challenging male authority. The threatening nature of these images of femininity lies in their ambivalence. Here, the traditional equation of women to Nature and the primordial forces of the unconscious coexists with the contradictory idea of style and elaborated artifice, that shaped feminine identity through the seductive clothing bought in department stores, the gorgeous costumes worn on stage and, ultimately, through the artifice that regulates women’s relationships with men.

*Mata Hari*’s career as a performer and courtesan in Parisian high-society perfectly fits in with these new images of femininity, with the significant addition of exoticism. Nourished by the seductive appeal of the colonial empires, the *fin-de-siècle* taste for exoticism went hand in hand with the cult of modernity. In the 1900 Exposition Universelle, Parisians could embark in a Tour du Monde pavilion displaying oriental architectures (among which, a Dutch East Indies pavilion) and with the same ticket admire the most spectacular achievements of western art and technology: the *Art Nouveau* of the Porte Monumentale entrance, the Pavillon Bleu and the Grand and Petit Palais; the massive Palais de l’Electricité, fitted with thousands of multi-coloured lights; escalators, panoramic paintings, films with recorded sound. In this context, Margaretha rapidly understood that she could profit from her Javanese experience. She invented a new public identity for herself as an exotic dancer and, as her fame increased, she artfully shaped her biography to match the desires of her audience: she declared herself a native of Java with European parents, the daughter of an Indian temple dancer, or even an orphan raised by Indian temple priests who had trained her as a dancer and
dedicated her soul to Shiva. By 1905, Paris was already talking about her: “Vague rumours had reached me of a woman from the Far East”, wrote Frances Keyzer, the Paris correspondent for a London society magazine,

a native of Java, wife of an officer, who had come to Europe, laden with perfumes and jewels, to introduce some of the richness of the Oriental colour and life into the satiated society of European cities; of veils encircling and discarded, of the development of passion as the fruits of the soil, of a burst of fresh, free life, of Nature in all its strength, untrammeled by civilization.7

In that year, Margaretha, who was still using her married name, Lady MacLeod, gave an astonishing dance performance at Madame Kierevsky’s salon. There, she met Emile Guimet, industrialist and collector who founded the Museum of Oriental Art. He organised her grand début at the Museum, transforming the library into an imaginary Hindu temple, with dimmed lights, incense floating through the air, columns adorned with white flowers, Persian rugs on the floor and a precious statue of Shiva presiding over the ceremony. After performing three dances, she tore off the veils covering her hips and stood almost naked in front of the audience’s subjugated gaze, dressed only in jewels and a breast plate. She had become Mata Hari – “eye of the day” in Malay – and stepped into fame.

“Mata Hari danced nude”, recalled many years later Louis Dumur, a novelist who had assisted to the performance, “her small breasts covered with two carved brass plates, held by chains. Glittering bracelets held her wrists, arms and ankles; all the rest was nude, fastidiously nude, from the nails of her fingers to the point of her toes” (15). The simple thrill of watching a nude woman dancing on stage, however, was enveloped in the refined setting of the Musée Guimet, the glamour of the costumes and the claimed intention of faithfully reproducing the dances of a primitive religion: “All Paris is talking of the beautiful woman known as Mata Kari [sic]”, reported The Gentlewoman. “On two

7 Wheelwright, p. 14.
consecutive nights the halls and staircases leading to the circular library were filled with all that Paris contains of the artistic, scientific and literary world” (15). “[She] danced like Salammbo before Tanit, like Salomé before Herod” (17), commented a review in *Le Gaulois*, obviously evoking Flaubert’s orientalist icon and, more significantly, Salome, who by the end of the century had become a sort of collective obsession – an Art Nouveau icon in Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings for Oscar Wilde’s play and a decadent *femme fatale* in Frédéric Moreau’s paintings. By 1907, Mata Hari herself had become obsessed with the idea of playing Salome, urging her agent to persuade Richard Strauss to cast her in the role of his opera ballet: “[Only] I will be able to interpret the real thoughts of Salome” (17). Though she never managed to play the role publicly, in January 1912 she performed a Salome dance at the residence of Prince San Faustino at the Barberini Palace in Rome. In a portrait reproduced on the programme, she appeared naked except for a thin veil covering her hips and a medallion lying between her breasts, smiling with St. John’s head at her feet. Comparing Frédéric Moreau’s *fin-de-siècle* Salomes with the former romantic Orientalism of Delacroix, Mario Praz noted the emergence of a very different attitude. While Delacroix seems to inhabit his lustful, sanguinary Orient, Moreau contemplates it from the outside, using it as a seductive decoration. Mata Hari’s incarnation of the exotic *femme fatale* definitely shares Moreau’s modern aesthetics, her appeal lying in the ambivalence between the expression of a “primitive”, “uncivilized” sexuality and the stylish artifice which informs it. The description of Moreau’s Salome in Huysmans’ novel, *À rebours* (1884), could indeed apply to Mata Hari’s exotic character: she was both “refined” and “savage”, bewitching and subduing male’s will with the charm of a “venereal flower”.

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8 Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1976), p. 213.

Double agent and femme fatale

With the outbreak of World War I, the Belle Epoque’s glamorous world was swept away, swallowed up by the enormous disaster that marked the western civilization’s utter failure and, at the same time, the apocalyptic climax of modernity. Mata Hari the exotic dancer belonged to that world and disappeared with it. In 1915 she wrote to her agent asking him to find her an engagement with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, but by then her oriental style was as outdated as the Grand Palais architecture and her dancing career was finished. Mata Hari’s public life could have ended there and she might have faded away, an ageing courtesan destined to become just another old picture from the Belle Epoque. Margaretha’s life, however, offered one more unexpected development. Arrested, tried and executed as a double agent, she became the archetype of the female spy, “the measure against which all other fictional women spies have been assessed for their competence, loyalty and femininity”.10

Mata Hari the double agent though, exists only because Mata Hari the femme fatale had, by reviving her and somehow revealing her deep nature. The dancing Salome of the Belle Epoque became “a sinister Salome, who played with the heads of our soldiers in front of the German Herod” (93). Mata Hari’s uncertain nationality and exotic legend were a sign of her untrustworthiness towards the country that had offered her hospitality and success; her many erotic intrigues with officers and wealthy men, a sign of her inclination to duplicity and to playing politics behind the scenes; her seductive power, a murderous activity. “The false temple dancer, the false nautch-girl, the great cosmopolitan dancer,” wrote Alfred Morain in 1930, “all these roles masked the international spy, paid by the enemy to worm out military, political and diplomatic secrets” (41–2).

In 1931, when Hollywood seized Mata Hari’s story, the symbolic double bind of the spy and the exotic femme fatale was significantly asserted by compressing the story’s time frame in

10 Wheelwright, p. 4.
wartime Paris, where Greta Garbo is a successful dancer who secretly conspires against France with the German secret services. We see her dancing in front of a statue of Shiva, adorned in the glamorous costumes inspired by the new Art déco style and being admired by officers and wealthy men. At the same time, she is snatching precious information from a reluctant Russian general who is desperately in love with her.

In the summer of 1917, when Mata Hari’s trial began, France’s demoralization was at its peak: mutinies were igniting on the battle front and Paris was overflowing with women’s strikes, demanding salary increases and their men’s return. Putting on trial a famous femme fatale, depicted as an evil enemy of the country, obviously offered a sort of public catharsis, but it also revealed those male anxieties which the war had further intensified. The women’s strikes in Paris showed just how much the sex roles had changed. “As young men became increasingly alienated from their prewar selves, immured in the muck and blood of no man’s land, increasingly abandoned by the civilization of which they had ostensibly been heirs”, write Gilbert and Gubar,

women seemed to become […] even more powerful. As nurses, as mistresses, as munitions workers, bus drivers, or soldiers in the “land army”, even as wives and mothers, these formerly subservient creatures began to loom malevolently larger. […] With little sense of inherited history to lose, […] they would seem to have had, if not everything, at least something to gain during the terrible war years of 1914 to 1918: a place in public history, a chance, even, to make history.¹¹

When the newspaper Le Gaulois reported the death of Mata Hari, “the hired spy who yesterday paid her debt to society”, it also reminded its readers that other female spies had faced firing squads all over France, sarcastically concluding that this was a true sign of women’s equality.¹²


¹² Wheelwright, pp. 99–100.
Of the many women spies executed throughout Europe, however, only two names were retained by collective memory: Mata Hari and Edith Cavell, the British nurse executed in Belgium, because they embodied two utterly opposite archetypes. While Mata Hari was the evil *femme fatale* justly put to death, Edith Cavell was the innocent victim, the martyr. Mata Hari was the “shameless spy” whose murderous seduction had caused the death of thousands of innocent soldiers; Cavell was the white angel who took care of them, tending to their wounds. “In trying to defend themselves, the Germans have pushed their insolence so far as to compare Edith Cavell to Mata Hari”, wrote Louise Thuillez, who was involved with Cavell’s Belgian escape network,

Edith Cavell had worked for her country, consecrating to this noble task all her career of faith and sacrifice. Mata Hari, thinking only of her own personal charms, had sold herself to the highest bidder. While Edith Cavell, at the bedside of the wounded men she was tending, wept over the sufferings of her fellow-countrymen, Mata Hari in the luxury of palaces betrayed indiscriminately all who approached her (120).

Contrary to Mata Hari, Cavell offered the possibility of reconciling the traditional, domestic image of women with the new place they increasingly occupied in society: the household’s angel had become the soldiers’ angel. However, the compromise offered by this reassuring image of femininity needed its evil counterpart and who better than a famous *femme fatale* to play the part?

*The tragic fall of the* femme fatale

Most of the *femme fatale*’s icons that saturate 19th-century imagination are triumphant, powerful women, as if the male fantasy that created them could barely begin to conceive “the death of the goddess, so entranced (it was) by her magic, and so dependent on her charms”.  

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13 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 22.
Mata Hari’s fall, on the contrary, is a crucial element of her icon. “The savage women who prepare murder in the shadow, and take advantage of their beauty contributing to the destructive endeavour of our enemies do not deserve anything but death. They are evil, grim creatures”, stated prosecutor Lieutenant Mor- net in his closing speech, emphatically concluding that “the evil that this woman has done is unbelievable. This is perhaps the greatest woman spy of the century”.

14 The reasserting of the patriarchal law is obviously one of the main symbolic elements of Mata Hari’s exemplary execution: the femme fatale’s threatening power had gone too far and it had to be destroyed. This narrative pattern had found one of its most exhaustive literary representations in Henry Rider Haggard’s novel, She (1885), which “was not only a turn-of-the-century bestseller but also, in a number of dramatic ways, one of the century’s literary turning points, a pivot on which the ideas and anxieties of the Victorians began to swivel into what has come to be called the ‘modern’”. 15 Haggard’s heroine, Ayesha, is an immortal white queen who rules a fantastic land in the darkest heart of Africa, an evil femme fatale named by her people She-who-must-be-obeyed, whose threatening power is symbolically contained within a set of ambivalences which make her a sort of Mata Hari’s alter ego. Blazing into the African darkness, the absolute whiteness of Ayesha’s skin situates her in an ambivalent space, where the enticing and somehow reassuring otherness of the exotic woman gets disquietingly closer to the male, dominating, western identity. Her African domain is indeed a matriarchal society, where the relationships between men and women appear unnaturally subverted: an uncanny, deadly domain located in the catacombs of a perished civilization, “a land of swamps and evil things and dead old shadows of the dead”, 16 where Ayesha lives shrouded like a corpse. When she strips off her funerary veils though, she reveals an extraordinary beauty that commands men’s absolute erotic devotion. The crucial sign that crystallizes the ambivalences of the femme fatale is Ayesha’s

14 Kupferman, p. 121.
15 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 21.
immortality, which reveals the artifice of her youthful beauty and allows her evil power to perpetuate forever:

I have heard of the beauty of celestial beings, now I saw it; only, this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was evil. [...] It had stamped upon it a look of unutterable experience, and of deep acquaintance with grief and passion. Not even the lovely smile that crept about the dimples of her mouth could hide this shadow of sin and sorrow. It shone even in the light of the glorious eyes, it was present in the air of majesty, and it seemed to say: “Behold me, lovely as no woman was or is, undying and half-divine; memory haunts me from age to age, and passion leads me by the hand—evil have I done, and with sorrow have I made my acquaintance from age to age, and from age to age evil shall I do, and sorrow shall I know till my redemption comes” (155–56).

Ayesha’s immortality brings with it the shadow of an eternal female otherness, which stands “in and behind the forces of history like a half-concealed fatality, a secret cause that transcends and transforms the currents of events”.17

It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and avenge itself for the long centuries of solitude [...]. [She] was now about to be used by Providence as a mean to change the order of the world [...] by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate. [...] Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed with immortal youth, godlike beauty, and power, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionised society, and even perchance have changed the destinies of Mankind.18

To this fatality Haggard’s story opposes the inexorability of the patriarchal law, which comes to interrupt the eternal return of the femme fatale. Thus, Ayesha is destroyed by the very source of eternal life which had preserved her—a rolling pillar of fire symbolically functioning as a sort of avenging phallus: “Naked and ecstatic, in all the pride of Her femaleness, She must be fucked

17 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 8.
18 Haggard, p. 203.
to death by the ‘unalterable law’ of the Father,” as Gilbert and Gubar put it (21).

Taking the femme fatale’s life though, is not enough for a law which seems to demand the humiliating sacrifice of her beauty, symbolically depriving her of the very source of her power. Pierre Bouchardon, chief investigating officer of the military tribunal, describes the grey showing through Mata Hari’s dyed-black hair, the ageing face that no make-up could now conceal. The prison doctor stresses how her features, “without fineness and not at all feminine”, “gave no impression of beauty”, and reiterates the power of artifice: “it was certainly through hard work before her mirror and by strength of will that this woman had succeeded in cultivating beauty, by gracious expert expression and by putting her body into the most pleasing attitudes”.19 In both testimonies, Mata Hari’s deteriorated appearance is significantly equated with racist stereotypes, as if her exotic legend had become an integral part of her identity: “hideous, heavy-lipped, copper-coloured” (68), “savage”, “of an Asiatic type, with plenty of long hair, black and sleek […], a low forehead, prominent cheek bones, a big mouth with lascivious lips, large ears, […] a large nose with wide nostrils” (85). Following the same pattern, Ayesha’s destruction takes the form of a real degeneration:

She paused, and stretched out her arms, and stood there quite still, with a heavenly smile upon her face, as though she was the very Spirit of the Flame. […] But suddenly […] a kind of change came over her face […]. I gazed at her arm. Where was its wonderful roundness and beauty? It was getting thin and angular. And her face – by Heaven! – her face was growing old before my eyes! […] “Look! – look! – look! she’s shrivelling up! she’s turning into a monkey!” […] Smaller she grew, and smaller yet, till she was no larger than a baboon. Now the skin was pucker into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age.20

By annihilating the threatening artifice of her seduction, Ayesha’s immortality is brought back to nature. Like Mata Hari, she

19 Wheelwright, p. 85.
20 Haggard, pp. 293–94.
is precipitated into the old age that she had managed to conceal and she is swept back into that space of exotic otherness whose boundaries had been blurred.

The black legend of Mata Hari’s rise and fall was told, a few years after her death, by two men who had been directly involved in her capture and conviction. Major Emile Massard, commander at the headquarters of the armies in Paris, who had attended the trial and accompanied her to Vincennes, wrote Mata Hari’s story in *Les Espionnes à Paris* (1922). Ten years later, Captain Ladoux himself dedicated her a chapter in his fictionalized memoirs, *Chasseurs d’espions* (1932), entitled “How I Captured Mata Hari”. In 1919, Mata Hari also inspired the fictional heroine of *The Temptress*, a novel written by William Le Queux, an amateur spy hunter hired by British Intelligence.

In 1931, the film produced by Metro Goldwyn Meyer, directed by George Fitzmaurice and starring Greta Garbo, marked a turning point in the representation of Mata Hari’s fall. In order to adapt the character to Hollywood’s melodrama, the evil *femme fatale* had to be redeemed, possibly through true love. To this end, the script used the figure of a young Russian aviator, captain Vladimir Masloff, with whom the ageing Margaretha had fallen in love.

She had met him in 1916, when he was on leave from the front, and afterwards went to see him in Vittel, where he was convalescing after mustard gas had burned his throat and destroyed the sight of his left eye. This visit to Masloff was a crucial event in Margaretha’s life, because it brought her in contact with the French counterespionage bureau. Vittel was in the military zone: not only a spa town for wounded soldiers, but also a training centre for the allied air forces, near a military airport used to bomb southern Germany. Non-residents needed police permission to visit Vittel and Margaretha was directed to Ladoux’s office: he gave her a pass, had her followed by his agents, and when she returned to Paris offered her money, unofficially employing her in the French espionage service. In his memoirs, Ladoux claimed that she had told him: “I want to be rich enough not to have to deceive Vadime (Vladimir) with
others”. According to many sources, she wanted to marry him, while he considered their relationship nothing more than a passing affair.

In Fitzmaurice’s film, Mata Hari’s affair with the young Russian aviator has been transformed into a romantic love story, that enables her to abandon the role of the dark lady. When her lover is taken back to France, blessed and blind, the cynical femme fatale resigns from the German secret services and starts imagining a brand new life for herself, taking care of her wounded lover whose blindness symbolically underlines the definitive surrender of her evil seductive power. Mata Hari’s dark past though, inevitably catches up with her. In order to save the young Russian, she kills her jealous former lover, thus revealing her spying activities against France. Exploiting the melodramatic resources contained in contemporary testimonies, the script transforms the femme fatale’s exemplary punishment into a tearful ending. In prison, Mata Hari is allowed to see her lover one last time: being blind, he believes her when she pretends they are in a hospital where she is waiting to have a dangerous operation. “Don’t be afraid”, he tells her. “I won’t be afraid, if you hold me”, answers Mata Hari, sobbing in his arms, “Goodbye my beloved”. The final sequences show her elegantly draped in a long, high-necked black dress, slowly descending a staircase at the bottom of which stands a military cortege waiting to take her to Vincennes. Among the officers, we also see Ladoux’s fictional alter ego, captain Dubois, who from the very beginning had been convinced of Mata Hari’s spying activities and eventually captured her. Flanked by two ranks of soldiers, a redeemed Mata Hari tragically walks away towards her death.

Other versions of Mata Hari’s fall will follow: a naive woman caught up in a big game she cannot control, an innocent victim of the French justice system. Yet, however the story is told, the tragic necessity leading the femme fatale’s glamorous life towards its ending remains its unalterable, symbolic core. Here lies

21 Wheelwright, p. 53.
22 Mata Hari, directed by George Fitzmaurice, with Greta Garbo and Ramon Novarro (Metro Goldwyn Meyer, 1931).
the fascinating power of Mata Hari, an icon who crystallizes the essential ambivalence of modernity, its high hopes as well as its tragic destiny.

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