CHAPTER FIVE

THE MOON AS SYMBOL IN SALOME: OSCAR WILDE’S INVOCATION OF THE TRIPLE WHITE GODDESS

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My Salomé is a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Saint Thérèse who worships the moon.

Oscar Wilde (Ricketts 51-52)

On an early page of Wilde’s French manuscript of Salomé1 a drawing appears which shows Wilde’s set design for his play. Wilde places the “escalier” on the right, the “citerne” near the middle and the “Balcon” center left. On top of the page, looming high above the stairs, the cistern, and the balcony, Wilde draws the moon: “O la lune.”

Fig. 1 Drawing by Oscar Wilde
Salomé: drame en une acte, manuscript vol 1
Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia
O la lune

The queen of heaven rules Wilde’s Salome. A number of scholars recognize that the moon plays a central role. For example, Robert Ernest Cowan and William Andrews Clark, Jr. state:

The play might have well been called “The Drama of the Moon,” so often is that satellite invoked and into so many moods is her appearance translated. (43)

This essay proposes to analyze Wilde’s drama of the moon in light of the Triple White Goddess, otherwise known as the Triple Lunar Goddess. Poet and critic Robert Graves was one individual who recognized the need to uncover historical myths as a means of interpreting literature. His anthropological-historical book, The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth, presents an archetypal study and system of interpretation that defines one specific literary issue: woman as symbol. Graves sheds light on the earliest European deity, the Triple White Goddess of Birth, Love, and Death (New, Full, and Old Moon). By observing these three phases he felt readers could better understand literature’s power in treating woman as symbol. Graves’ system is primarily a thoughtful approach to the purest of poetic themes—the fertility rite, the most primitive of human truths. He contends that the Triple White Goddess is a source of inspiration for poets, but paradoxically he also states that to be in love with her is to hate her. Because of this dilemma, most intellects, says Graves, have turned their attention to Apollo, the Sun God, the god of rational powers who teaches the intellect to despise woman. Despite this, moon-inspired writers invoke woman, the “White Goddess,” in her three stages as virgin, sexual companion, and crone. She is the archetypal fertility goddess and, since her history is part of our collective unconscious, she belongs to both life and death.

Woman as symbol is central to literature. With Salome, Wilde draws upon this symbol, enhancing characterization, enlarging the artistic horizon of the stage, and evoking strong emotional responses. One means of appreciating such literary power is to recover the historical myth of the Triple White Goddess. By understanding this myth, it is possible to understand that the purest poetic theme is the fertility rite and that women—and their insatiable sexual powers—inspire.