

Femme Fatale: Guilty as Charged?

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If... as they say, hysteria is the exaggeration of the feminine character, then Medusa is the hysterical woman beyond time, and if... prostitution is among women the category of crime that leads to all others, Medusa is the type of criminal woman...

—Edouard LeFort, 1892

...Dancing Salomes... princesses of lewdness and unconscious cruelty who offer, with the swooning grace of monstrous flowers, the mystery of their sex and their smile... have incarnated... all the debaucheries of ancient Asia, all the ambiguous and bloody mysteries of lost religions, all the crimes committed by and about that sex...

—Jean Lorrain, 1893¹

In the ancient figures of Medusa and Salome, Edouard LeFort and Jean Lorrain unearth an inherent deviancy and, significantly, a *criminality* residing in women of all eras. LeFort, a man of science and champion of criminologist Cesare Lombroso, and Lorrain, a Symbolist writer and critic, make for strange bedfellows. Symbolism, both in theory and practice, stood in staunch opposition to the empiricism and positivism of modern science, and science, especially as filtered through Max Nordau's cultural critique, was similarly antagonistic to the "degenerate" production of Symbolist artists. Yet these two statements, written in France just one year apart, deny a clear demarcation between the ideology of criminal science and the evocative expression of Symbolist art practice. This nearly indistinguishable pairing of scientific and Symbolist commentary offers a view into the general cultural consciousness of the last decades of the nineteenth century, and it poses questions of the correspondences and contradictions between the aesthetic of the criminal woman presented by criminal anthropology and the Symbolist depiction of female deviancy in the femme fatale. Other studies have invoked Lombroso's degenerate female to prove a general misogynist cultural impact on the construct of the femme fatale. This paper further complicates the question of the identification between modern criminality and the archetype of the "fatal woman," given the inspirational role of her dark beauty for male artists of the period.

Elaine Showalter has aptly described the *fin de siècle* as an anxious period of cultural crises, marked by heightened threats to traditional social, cultural, and gender power structures. In particular, the rise of feminism and of the New Woman elicited new fears of women and a new brand of misogyny. Patriarchal structures were jeopardized as women broke through the confining boundaries of motherhood and of the home, and the very nature of "woman" came into question.²

Symbolist femmes fatales are well known manifestations of the *fin de siècle* construct of the inherent dangers presented

by the female sex. Almost entirely the product of male artists, such imagery is widely discussed as evocative of the threat, felt by men, of woman as inherently mysterious and seductively evil. Femme fatale images, most famously Salome, corresponded with Symbolist theory and practice, evoking the otherworld and rejecting realist descriptions of contemporary events.

Concurrently, new scientific theories, buttressed by Darwinian concepts of biological determinism, "proved" woman as naturally more primitive and less developed than man. A brief, though damning, passage in Darwin's 1871 study entitled *The Descent of Man* highlights the disparaging possibilities his text offered to nineteenth-century gender theorists: "The female... assumes certain distinctive characters, and in the formation of her skull, is said to be intermediate between the child and the man."³ The field of criminal anthropology, largely dominated by the work of Cesare Lombroso, posited the theory of the born criminal and employed extensive physiognomic analysis to determine atavistic traits. Lombroso's work on the female criminal not only naturalized and supported notions of female inferiority, it determined the potential for danger and evil lurking within all women. "And women are big children; their evil tendencies are more numerous and varied than men's, but usually these remain latent. When awakened and excited, however, these evil tendencies lead to proportionately worse results."⁴ Grounded in empirical analysis and statistical data, Lombroso's research and findings had the forceful appeal of scientific truth.

The comparison of LeFort's Medusa and Lorrain's Salome illuminates a relationship between the misogynist ideology of *fin de siècle* criminal science and the mysterious danger of the femme fatale. Both statements figure female crime as a condition disassociated from economic, political or historical circumstance and locate the notion of crime in mythical and fantastic subjects. Neither Lorrain nor LeFort were unique among their artist or scientist peers in their identification of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. Edouard LeFort, *Le Type Criminel d'Après les Savants et les Artistes (Documents de Criminologie et de Médecine Légale)* (Lyon: A. Storck, 1892) 90. Jean Lorrain, quoted and translated in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 386.

² Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 1-18.

³ Quoted in Dijkstra 168.

⁴ Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, The Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 183.

an ahistorical, universal criminality or deviancy in the female sex.

The Symbolist group of dark women comprises a long list of subjects, although few stem from depictions of contemporary individuals. Notably, Symbolists showed no interest in depicting individual *femmes criminelles* (or real-life criminals) so popular in Parisian courtrooms, weekly newspapers, and in anthropological texts. The diverse roster instead includes ancient and timeless murderesses and enigmatic creatures of violence: Biblical and historical “heroines”—Salome, Judith, Delilah, Messalina, Lilith, Eve; mythological characters—Medusa, sphinxes, sirens; as well as abstract allegories—death, animality, or the apocalypse. Representative of the “enduring past,” these dark women re-enforce the notion of female atavism.

Stereotyped Darwinian identifiers link femme fatale subjects to the specific idea of criminal “dangerousness” in the *fin de siècle* atmosphere. The emerging field of criminology set forth a “new” criminal, born as a deviant and therefore identifiable as dangerous even before committing an unlawful act.⁵ Lombroso’s theories in particular emphasized the potential of danger. He presented the possibility of hidden criminality within all women because of the weakness of the sex: “Cruelty, in sum, tends increasingly to become an exception and compassion to become a normal condition in women. Nevertheless, in every woman there remains a substratum of cruelty which erupts either when she has a wicked character or when she is assailed....”⁶ Dangerous criminality therefore lay within the unmarked, mysterious boundaries between good and evil and in hidden or veiled dangers. This construct of danger relates to a common signifier in Symbolist imagery in general and in the femme fatale in particular: the trope of veiling. In his “Literary Manifesto—Symbolism,” Jean Moréas argues that Symbolist poetry is “an enemy of... objective description... [It] endeavors to clothe the Idea in a form perceptible to the senses....”⁷ Showalter devotes a chapter, “The Veiled Woman,” to demonstrating the significant and pervasive role of veiling in *fin de siècle* artistic manifestations that reveal the fear and distrust of woman’s sexuality.⁸

The femme fatale frequently veils her dangerous nature within a seductive beauty. Edouard Toudouze’s *Salome Triumphant* (1886), for example, offers the viewer an attractive

young girl, whose head is dressed in blooming flowers (Figure 1).⁹ This coquette engages the (intended male) viewer with an alluring gaze, seductively sucking her thumb. She lies upon an animal skin on a couch, with her legs parted as her right leg hangs off of the cushion. Only secondarily does the viewer depart from her gaze, follow the line of this curvy leg from the bed to the floor, and discover the decapitated head of John the Baptist. The grotesque head, mouth still agape in a scream of pain, betrays the faux innocence of the scene, and it bespeaks the evil lurking within the nymphette on the couch. This highly sexualized image of a too-young seductress hides the machinations of Salome’s criminality and is a reminder of the depth of evil within woman’s beauty. Toudouze does away with the physical veils of Salome’s dance for Herod and more abstractly disguises her true deviant nature beneath an alluring beauty.

Toudouze’s Salome also serves to exemplify the signals of atavistic danger that originated with social Darwinism and became reinforced by Lombroso as gendered stereotypes. This picture implies a link between the young Salome and a threatening animality. She cozies up to the sculpted animal head that rests on the arm of the couch as she lies on the fur of an animal skin. Bram Dijkstra has offered a comprehensive exploration of the pairing of woman and beast that is a common misogynist trope in many femme fatale images.¹⁰ The link to animality posits the Darwinian connection between woman and the primitive, and implies the threat, designated by Lombroso, of criminal behavior that resides in baser human traits. Salome’s youth further emphasizes the Darwinian / Lombrosian concept of woman as less-developed and more childlike. Lombroso’s charting of traits developed a code-like system to identify and reveal ethical deviance through abnormal or ugly features. However, Toudouze’s femme fatale denies any easy dichotomy between good and evil, or beauty and ugliness. Her angelic face, sensuous curves, and languorous demeanor are woven together with the narrative of her awful act. Delight and terror are fused in this realm of Symbolist fantasy.

In contrast to the Symbolist’s lack of interest in current reality as a source of inspiration, the field of criminology was fueled by the study and physical documentation of contemporary women criminals. Criminology sought to unveil the criminal body through visual classification of the physiognomic

⁵ David Horn has demonstrated this. Horn notes that Lombroso’s albums of real criminal faces portraying predictable traits of deviancy appeared to be: a montage of citizens of the modern European city; readers could reasonably be expected to bring the scrutiny of the criminologist to their encounters on the streets of Turin, Paris, London, and New York. A generalized anxiety—that everyone was potentially dangerous... was only partly assuaged by the hope that bodies of the truly dangerous would signal their difference.

David G. Horn, *The Criminal Body: Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 143. On the nineteenth-century concept of criminality see Michel Foucault, “About the Concept of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychology,” in *The Essential Foucault*, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003). Also see Peter Hutchings, “Modern Forensics: Photog-

raphy and Other Suspects,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 9.2 (Autumn-Winter 1997): 229-43.

⁶ Lombroso and Ferrero (2004) 72.

⁷ Jean Moréas, “A Literary Manifesto—Symbolism,” in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 151.

⁸ Showalter 144-68.

⁹ Georges Olmer and Saint-Juirs, *Salon de 1886: Cent Planches en Photographure par Goupil et Cie* (Paris: 1886) facing p. 34.

¹⁰ Dijkstra 272-332.

traits of criminals. The practice and theory of criminal science included a diverse range of graphic illustrations, photography, and pictures culled from art history, creating its own aesthetic system of evidentiary documentation. Allan Sekula has demonstrated the field's extensive application of documentary photography.

Despite the acute differences between the warring factions of the emerging criminological profession, a common enthusiasm for photographic illustration of the criminal type was shared by almost all of the practitioners.... The photograph operated as the *image* of scientific truth.¹¹

Frontal and profile-view portraits of criminals were integral to Lombroso as evidence for his categorization of physiognomic traits innate to the criminal. His texts include photographs paired with true stories of individuals that describe their descent into criminality and expose their physical differentiation from the normal. The descriptions of subjects Berland and Thomas in Lombroso's 1893 book *The Female Offender*, present the occasion for a typical Lombrosian analysis (Figure 2):

...Another female criminal, Thomas by name, who was alcoholic and libidinous, had committed hundreds of abortions, falling into a dipso-epileptic stupor immediately after each crime. Her face was asymmetrical, her protruding ears were abnormally tight against her head, her nose was oblique and twisted, her lips were thin and crooked, and her wrinkles were extraordinarily painful.¹²

The portrait image functioned as a document of proof to be read, analyzed and categorized, and in Lombroso's analysis, abnormality or ugliness revealed the inborn potential for ethical transgression.

To confirm the universality and timeless truth of atavistic theory, scientists sought comparable examples from historical sources. Lacking photographic evidence of criminal atavism before the nineteenth century, men of science like Lombroso, LeFort, and Charcot (perhaps best-known) looked to the history of art. Seeking hard and fast truths about criminal nature, scientists located atavistic deviance in Biblical, mythical and historical miscreants—a pool of subjects analogous to femme fatale imagery. Lombroso's daughter, Gina Lombroso Ferrero indicated the usefulness of art history to criminology:

painters and poets... divined this type long before it became the subject of a special

branch of study. The assassins, executioners and devils painted by Mantegna, Titian and Ribera embody with marvelous exactitude the characteristics of the born criminal.¹³

The structure of criminology's established representational system of photographic images enabled Lombroso to treat artwork as indexical objects, just as he employed portrait photographs. Matters of subjective, emotional or symbolic content became irrelevant as these pictures were incorporated into a scientific, ahistorical archive of evidence.

Lombroso used a sculpture of the ancient Roman empress Messalina as an example of "those who most clearly manifest exaggerated and unceasing lustfulness...both born criminals and born prostitutes" (Figure 3).¹⁴ He reproduced an unidentified bust of the empress to provide visual proof of her atavistic traits: "Messalina...flattered though she was by contemporary writers, yet offers many of the features of the criminal and born prostitute—having a low forehead, very thick, wavy hair, and a heavy jaw."¹⁵ The selected statue operated as a portrait subject for Lombroso's creative identification of this ancient woman's criminal traits. While a text contemporaneous with Lombroso's *The Female Offender* described Messalina as "a woman like so many others of the Roman aristocracy of the day, young, beautiful, capricious, frivolous, fond of pleasure," Lombroso's description instead reinforced a correlation of her moral deviance with abnormal attributes.¹⁶ His reproduction of the sculpture echoes the format of the frontal, bust-length photographic portraits pictured elsewhere in *The Female Offender*, and, like the photographs, it corresponds to his representational system in which images are revealing and function as "straight," indisputable documentary proof.

Edouard LeFort's characterization of Medusa, with which this essay begins, follows Lombroso's method. Printed as a part of a series of documents of criminality and medical science, his book first dryly outlines theories of criminology, and then proceeds to diagnose the atavistic criminal traits in artists' renderings of Biblical and mythical subject matter. His canon of art historical evidence compiles works from varied time periods and national origins. LeFort's main objective, as he declares in his conclusion, is to demonstrate the "perfect analogy between artwork from all periods of the past and Lombroso's concept of the born criminal."¹⁷

Pairing LeFort's criminal Medusa with Lorrain's Salome, who evokes "all the crimes" committed by women, suggests a correspondence between these men from the opposite poles of scientific fact and artistic imagination. Both statements reveal a misogynist anxiety that infected the *fin de siècle* cul-

¹¹ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter, 1986): 37-40.

¹² Lombroso and Ferrero (2004) 140.

¹³ Quoted in Horn 64.

¹⁴ Lombroso and Ferrero (2004) 171.

¹⁵ Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Female Offender* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897) 98.

¹⁶ Guglielmo Ferrero and Corrado Barbagallo, *A Short History of Rome* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919) 170.

¹⁷ LeFort 96.

tural consciousness. In light of the present study it seems an ironic coincidence that the term *criminalité* is gendered feminine.

A close examination of LeFort's and Lorrain's specific phrasing and context, however, reveals a significant difference in their meaning, and offers an analogy for understanding the femme fatale's relationship to criminology. LeFort's project was to demonstrate Lombroso's concept of the born criminal. He describes the specific atavistic qualities of a Medusa statue before labeling her "*le type criminel*." His physiognomic evidence includes her large open mouth; large, long nose; large, prominent chin; massive cheeks and cheekbones.¹⁸ Working within the Lombrosian aesthetic system, LeFort identifies and labels Medusa a corporeal criminal.

Lorrain, on the other hand, waxes poetic about the entertainer La Laus' dance performance of the Salome character, which leads to his reverie on several manifestations of the Biblical seductress (including Moreau's). He alludes to her "electricity," her adornment in jewels, her "swooning grace of monstrous flowers."¹⁹ He concludes: "La Laus incarnates all the debaucheries of ancient Asia, all the ambiguous and bloody mysteries of lost religions, all the crimes committed by and about that sex...." Lorrain has no intention of identifying La

Laus, or the Salome character, as a particular criminal or even as a criminal type. Unlike LeFort, he does not "undress" her physiognomy to discover and identify the criminal within her. Instead, he "clothes" her in metaphor; he embellishes the physical reality of La Laus' depiction of Salome.

The projects of criminal science and Symbolist creation were at odds. Criminal science sought quantifiable evidence in order to unveil the individual criminal, and thus protect society against the violence of deviance. Symbolist imagery functioned instead through systems of veiling and mystery, therefore eliding boundaries between good and evil. LeFort's Medusa is a criminal, guilty of hysteria, and he makes the leap to the specific crime of prostitution. Lorrain's femme fatale is instead subjective; she embraces a multitude of unspecific, ambiguous, criminal acts; she is an exciting evocation of a phenomenon of deviancy. While femme fatale images corresponded to some of the constructs of nineteenth-century criminality and misogyny, they rejected the ethical and scientific identifiers of the criminal body. The femme fatale is not a representation of the body of a criminal. She embodies criminality.

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¹⁸ LeFort 89.

¹⁹ Quoted in Dijkstra 386.

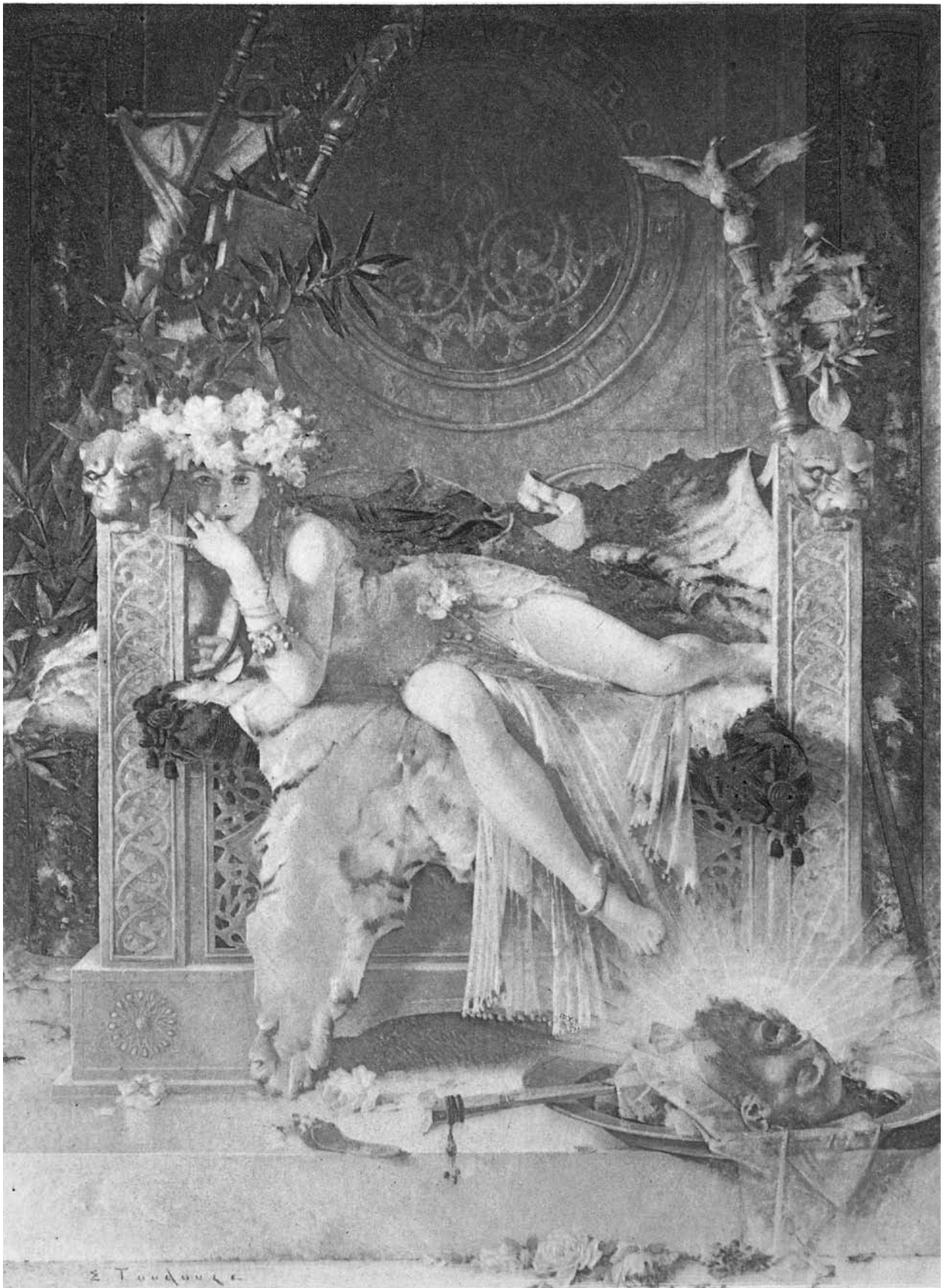


Figure 1. Edouard Toudouze, *Salomé Triumphant*, 1886. Georges Olmer and Saint-Juirs, *Salon de 1886: Cent Planches en Photogravure par Goupil et C^{ie}* (Paris: 1886) facing p. 34. Art & Architecture Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Fig. 7.

(Berland).

Fig. 8.

Fig. 9.

(Thomas.)

Fig. 10.

Figure 2. Cesare Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897) facing p. 98.



MESSALINA.

Figure 3. Cesare Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897) before p. 99.