

Ekphrasis and the Other Point of View: Reinterpreting Grimké, Loy, and Rukeyser Through a Queer Lens

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This paper reinterprets ekphrastic modernist poetry through a queer lens, examining works by Angelina Weld Grimké, Mina Loy, and Muriel Rukeyser to challenge the patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions embedded in traditional ekphrastic analysis. The research asks: how does applying queer theory to modernist ekphrasis illuminate suppressed meanings and desires within these poems? Using a comparative literary methodology grounded in queer and feminist theory, the research is based on three poems that, when "queered," reveal subversive expressions of female and androgynous desire that dismantle the male gaze and disrupt the subject-object binary that underlies canonical interpretations of ekphrasis. The results demonstrate that Grimké rewrites the blazon form to express lesbian desire, Loy constructs androgynous poetics to subvert gender binaries, and Rukeyser uses poetic fragmentation and female-centered motifs to reject patriarchal artistic legacies. This paper concludes that queer ekphrasis offers a powerful interpretive tool, reshaping understandings of visual-verbal relationships in modernist poetry and expanding literary canon formation. The implications suggest that integrating queer analysis into ekphrastic studies can recover marginalized voices and transform how we engage with the intersections of gender, identity, and art.

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Virtually all of the canonical, published poets from the first half of the twentieth century have written an ekphrastic poem. Evidently, ekphrasis, the literary description of visual art, was a popular genre throughout the modernist era.¹ Ekphrasis continues to be important as contemporary scholars commonly recognize the relevance of images in wider society: "... when ekphrasis, broadly considered, may be the paradigmatic act in a culture of images" [11, p. 28]. A "culture of images" indicates the influence of art on the masses, so ekphrasis is significant because it represents how the public interacts with art. Notably, women and people of color also began to receive recognition in the modernist era, however, a standardized, white patriarchal lens has remained dominant in the ekphrastic genre, resulting in either a lack of recognition or a variety of views among scholars on many of those poets. This issue clearly manifests in W.J.T Mitchell's seminal essay "Ekphrasis and the Other," although recent feminist interventions have played an essential role in revising his argument. Nonetheless, LGBTQ writers could rarely be "out" in the modernist era, so it may not yet have seemed instinctive to pursue queer analyses of ekphrastic poetry.

Reconsidering modernist ekphrastic poetry with a more radical viewpoint is necessary to uncover alternative messages that are excluded by scholarly deficits. One way to do this is by applying a queer ekphrastic lens illustrated in a case study of poets Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958), Mina Loy (1882-1966), and Muriel

Rukeyser (1913-1980). In her poetry, Grimké expresses explicit lesbian desire for a female art object, thus applying queer content to traditional poetic forms. Loy uses formal poetic innovation alongside androgynous imagery. Finally, Rukeyser expresses lesbian eroticism in innovative feminine forms that draw on queer precedents like Gertrude Stein. After applying a new method for analysis to Grimké's "A Mona Lisa," Loy's "Brancusi's Golden Bird," and Rukeyser's "Waterlily Fire," the poems' meanings transform: they display greater attention to female desire and simultaneously deconstruct masculine understandings of Western art.

Scholar of literature and art history, W.J.T Mitchell, presents a well-known theory about the relationship between poetry and art in his 1994 essay, "Ekphrasis and the Other." Mitchell defines the concept of 'the other,' as "rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" [14, p. 156]. Specifically, he argues that ekphrasis is a means of confronting and engaging with the "other" by bridging the verbal and visual realms; a reader's empathy and imagination bolsters this concept, allowing them to understand others' experiences through this bridge [14, p. 152]. Mitchell explores how authors can utilize ekphrasis to represent and engage with marginalized voices, as art and literature can challenge dominant narratives [14, p. 162]. While Mitchell provides extensive insight into the effects of ekphrasis, his essay falls short in discussing female writers. He addresses this, saying, "My

examples are also canonical in ... the image identified as feminine, the speaking/seeing subject of the text identified as masculine. All this would look quite different, of course, if my emphasis had been on ekphrastic poetry by women” [14, p. 180]. Here, Mitchell is working within the male-dominated canon, completely overlooking poets like Grimké, Rukeyser, and Loy.

In an introduction to the 2008 book *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, scholar Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux offers a revised reading of ekphrastic poetry that complicates the established binary by including women writers. Like Mitchell, she looks at the longstanding popularity of ekphrasis, connecting ancient Greece and modern poetry; this highlights the genre’s potential as a tool for understanding social dynamics, as an ekphrastic poet is always responding to an artwork that already presents some certain view of the world [11, p. 5]. Loizeaux recognizes influential scholars writing about ekphrasis, and consequently, praises Mitchell’s recognition of the inherently social nature of ekphrasis. However, she contends that “Otherness is not always ‘rival,’ even when it is ‘alien,’” because ekphrasis transcends physical boundaries to connect the poet, art, and audience [11, p. 16]. Loizeaux also explains that ekphrasis is closely tied to its context, allowing for interpretations such as “Moore and Rich forging a twentieth-century American feminism through ekphrasis” [11, p. 18]. Along these lines, context will be crucial to understanding the poetry of Grimké, Rukeyser, and Loy. Furthermore, Loizeaux asserts that looking is not ethically neutral: she references Richard Wilbur’s 1947 poem “A Dutch Courtyard,” which exemplifies a male gaze imposed onto, and controlling, a female image [11, p. 8]. Loizeaux presents a valuable intervention by demonstrating the confines of ekphrasis and considering female poets, but she ultimately does not fill the gap in queer ekphrastic theory.

As follows, I will reexamine ekphrastic poems by three women poets: Grimké, Loy, and Rukeyser. Although none of these poets publicly identified as lesbian, Grimké and Rukeyser express same-sex erotics while Loy offers an androgynous perspective. Applying a queer lens to these poets entails critical analysis that “dismantles traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities, challenges traditional academic approaches, and fights against social inequality” [7]. “Queering” a text does not necessitate that a writer is definitively queer, as the framework is intended to create avenues for new possibilities or readings. In addition, to battle the masculine narrative in the arts, it will be necessary to invert Mitchell’s theory of ekphrasis by studying women poets looking at male artists and building on Loizeaux’s deconstruction of the binary between poet and artwork. The remaining question is, how does looking at Grimké, Loy, and Rukeyser’s poems through the same queer ekphrastic lens offer transformative, unconventional readings?

Despite numerous analyses of each of the three poets over time, there are gaps in the overlaps of queer and ekphrastic readings. Scholar Maureen Honey, however, does consider sexuality in relation to ekphrasis, specifically looking at Angelina Weld Grimké. Honey writes, “Another way Sapphic modernism offers us a useful perspective is that it refers to Grimké’s generation of New Women, who challenged traditional gender roles through art and unconventional lives with a particular emphasis on love between women as a counterweight to male dominance” [6, p. 35]. This observation reflects a theme among scholars of Grimké: they connect the poet’s evident queerness to their interpretations of her love

poems. Honey looks at the 1927 poem “A Mona Lisa,” with an erotic interpretation. She compares Mona Lisa to an “irresistible siren” [6, p. 46] who the speaker engages with intensely and passionately. Though Honey considers Grimké’s queerness, she does not show that the poet expresses her same-sex desire within traditional forms of love poetry, in turn subverting the male observer versus female object norm.

Grimké was a biracial woman raised by her Black father. She was born to a well-known family in 1880 in Boston and completed a degree in Physical Education, but then started teaching English, which allowed her to pursue poetry and playwriting with a focus on the injustices faced by African Americans [6]. But, largely in the 1890s and 1920s, Grimké turned to love and female erotics as poetic inspiration [6, p. 32]. Grimké’s diaries and journal entries romantically focused on both males and females, though she would not have been able to publicly identify as queer. Many scholars believe her father knew of and disapproved of her romantic attraction to women [6]. Along these lines, much of Grimké’s love poetry expresses the torment of unachievable desire; she revealed in a letter that she is fascinated with the forbidden [6, pp. 29-31].² Therefore, it should be no surprise that these feelings manifest in “A Mona Lisa.”

In Grimké’s two-part poem, a speaker addresses “A” Mona Lisa—not “*The*” Mona Lisa (Fig. 1). They first think of Mona Lisa’s features, imagining interacting with them: the speaker “creeps” (line 1) and “sinks” (line 12) and “drowns” (line 15) in Mona Lisa’s eyes and lashes, creating a dangerous tone [5]. Yet, a sense of desire underlies these mysteriously vague lines and phrases, with the repetition of “I should like” (lines 1, 4, 8, 12) and soothing imagery of “leaf-brown pools” (line 6) and “glittering waters” (line 10) [5]. The use of first-person pronouns by a female writer, with the absence of an objectifying or otherwise obviously male gaze, indicates that the speaker is a female desiring a Mona Lisa, also female. Given the poem’s queer context, this speaker is likely Grimké or inspired by Grimké’s experiences. In fact, Honey notes, “Strengthening a reading of her speakers as female is the fact that Grimké often uses the pronouns ‘I’ or ‘my,’ reinforcing a connection between the poet’s gender and that of her speakers” [6, p. 33]. By closely observing Mona Lisa’s body, Grimké rewrites the blazon form and breaks down the subject-object dichotomy presented by Mitchell. Blazon poetry, traditionally by males and especially popular in the Elizabethan era, closely observes and lists a subject’s desirable physical features [3]. Through her observation of the Mona Lisa, Grimké removes the male gaze imposed onto the female body and embraces lesbian sexuality.

Though Grimké learned traditional verse in her schooling, she later practiced a modernist style of writing, including imagism and free verse. This shift allows for the intimate expression of “feeling and mood, immersion in the moment, and exploration of sexuality as a site of self-realization” [6, p. 37]. For example, in the first part of the poem, a consistently-structured description of the speaker’s cautious advance ‘into’ Mona Lisa transitions to a climax: “I should like to sink down / And down / And down . . . / And deeply drown” [5, lines 12-15]. Here, each line indents further than the prior, so that repeated words and sounds build on top of each other while visually pushing further into the page. The choice and arrangement of words conveys an impeding image that immerses the reader and then sets up a conundrum of the self and sexuality. After

the speaker moves closer to Mona Lisa and even seems to reach an erotic culmination, she existentially questions her place in her relationship with the subject: “Would I be more than a bubble breaking? / Or an ever-widening circle / Ceasing at the marge?” [5, lines 16-18]. While Honey views Mona Lisa as a dangerously alluring siren here, the danger doesn’t seem to come from Mona Lisa, but rather something internal in the speaker. When “A Mona Lisa” was written in the late 1920s, Grimké was fixated on death, often including motifs related to suffocation, burial, and drowning in her poetry—as is the case here. This imagery recalls the forbiddenness of queer relationships; therefore, the poem’s dark tone reflects the impossibility of a Sapphic lifestyle in Grimké’s contemporary world [6, pp. 68, 37].

Mona Lisa being Grimké’s subject is also significant because it challenges the traditional understanding of women in Western art. A large majority of recognized painters are men, often that represent idealized nude female bodies. In fact, Leonardo da Vinci’s famous 1503 painting was so desirable that it was stolen from the Louvre in the early twentieth century. “A Mona Lisa” undermines these expectations by pulling the speaker into unusual details of the painted woman and subverting the heterosexual norm. For example, in the painting, Mona Lisa has brown eyes, but no lashes like the subject of the poem, and Grimké’s “grasses” and “waters” are just hazy background elements of da Vinci’s composition. In addition, the title being “A Mona Lisa” rather than “The Mona Lisa” removes the societal hyperfixation on a certain woman. Loizeaux’s reimagining of a female subject from Wilbur’s “A Dutch Courtyard” is similar, to consider alongside “A Mona Lisa”: “When combined, as it often is, with the female gendering of the work of art in ekphrasis, the moving image can exert her power over the typically male viewer, sometimes rising up and speaking” [11, p. 20]. Neither the female in Wilbur nor Grimké’s poems literally confronts the viewer, however, Mona Lisa is undoubtedly exerting her power by rejecting the male viewer, and so is Grimké by actively creating this narrative.

While there is ample evidence of Grimké’s homosexuality, that is often not the case with other female poets. Nonetheless, queer ekphrastic theory is even illuminating in the case of heterosexual poets, such as Mina Loy who had queer aspects of her identity. However, due to this seeming contradiction, analysis of Loy’s 1922 poem “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” is strictly ekphrastic, as is the case for scholar Ashley Lazevnick. Lazevnick compares Loy’s poem to Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture (Fig. 2) and contextualizes the publication of the poem, including images of its composition in *The Dial* magazine (Fig. 3). She argues that Loy uses syntax to create a new understanding of artistic space. For example, the line indentations of “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” mirror the shape of the sculpture, and Loy uses alliteration and consonance to make the poem sound both “hard (like metal) and soft (like a bird)” [10, p. 196]. This reading of Loy’s poetry rarely strays from descriptions of words and art. In contrast, a queer ekphrastic reading of Loy’s poem reveals that she uses formal innovation with androgynous imagery.

Loy was born in 1882 in London and studied art in Munich. In 1916, she moved to New York, where critics labeled her a “modern woman,” and she found her place alongside magazine writers and artists. Loy’s early poems are autobiographical, satirically pulling on her view of misogynistic Futurists and observations of female oppression. These works received little critical attention but

anthologies such as *Others* and *The Dial* published them [10]. Loy was traditional in so far as she had male romantic partners, yet she still subverted the social norm in her explorations of androgyny. Poets from *Others* who explored hermaphroditism also surrounded Loy (i.e. Frances Gregg and H.D.). She even depicted figures of unclear gender in her paintings, such as “L’amour Dorloté par les Belles Dames” (1913) (Rosenbaum). However, most notably, scholars understand Loy to have been androgynous, and she is even quoted as saying, “Of course being the most female thing extant—I’m somewhat masculine.”³ Further evidence that a queer ekphrastic framework is applicable is that Loy can also be thought of as queer in her rejection of traditional female sexuality. For example, in her 1914 “Feminist Manifesto,” she writes, “For the harmony of race, each individual should be the expression of an easy & ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments... Woman must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved—” [13]. This excerpt demonstrates a clear rejection of the submissive female/dominant male expectation.

Applying a queer ekphrastic reading to “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” allows for unconventional, unfeminine aspects of Loy’s identity to manifest. Loizeaux writes of minimalist art, “It understands the work of art as an object and is principally concerned with the relation of the beholder to that object: ‘the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation - one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder’” [11, p. 10]. Loy acts as the beholder in “Brancusi’s Golden Bird,” and she is thus included in her interpretation of the artwork. In the first half of the poem, the speaker imagines God creating the sculpture. But, more relevant to Loy’s position, themes of androgyny and the body are particularly noticeable in the second half of the poem through the combination of masculine and feminine imagery. For example, in the fourth stanza, Loy writes, “The absolute act / of art / conformed / to continent sculpture / —bare as the brow of Osiris— / this breast of revelation” [12, pp. 16-21]. The naming of Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of death and rebirth, is an interesting reference to androgyny: he is a male figure, but also associated with creating life, and then here is followed by the image of a breast. However, the sculptural form itself restricts this “act of art,” serving as a possible double message: conformity among the masses ostracizes people who oppose the mainstream, and art constantly objectifies female bodies.

Another possible example of androgyny can be found in the fifth stanza. Loy continues to describe “The Golden Bird,” saying, “an incandescent curve / licked by chromatic flames” [12, pp. 22-23]. The “curve,” an image used to describe females, merges with the “flames,” where fire would be traditionally associated with masculine energy and gender expectations. Considering the smooth and solid material of Brancusi’s sculpture, one can read the curve and flames as becoming one, gender-fluid form. Loy’s poem connects an androgynous speaker and an androgynous art object, in turn breaking down Mitchell’s male-female binary. Loy also rejects the traditional poetic forms utilized by Grimké, for instance using fragmented lines and a complete lack of punctuation. This style leaves no semblance of male love poetry, allowing for a demonstration of queerness outside of masculine frameworks.

Another poet who utilizes stylistic innovation, but who is more evidently lesbian, is Muriel Rukeyser. Scholar Raphael C. Allison discusses Rukeyser’s ekphrasis generally, with a political, biography-based angle. Allison argues that by incorporating multiple

perspectives—image and word—through political ekphrasis, Rukeyser was supporting post-WWI democratic pluralism [1, p. 3]. This point of view is attributed to Rukeyser's time working in the 1940s as a "Visual Information Specialist" for the Office of War Information, which distributed 1.5 million war-posters [1, pp. 2, 4]. Rukeyser's 1962 poem "Waterlily Fire" has not attracted much attention from scholars in recent years, but Allison argues that it follows this legacy politically and ekphrastically. Allison also adds that "It is worth suggesting here that the war-poster was a particularly "masculine" genre, at least in terms of its reception, something else that perhaps turned Rukeyser's attention toward a different way to present visual experience" [1, p. 9]. Although Allison recognizes Rukeyser's use of ekphrasis to present alternative, overlooked perspectives and create societal change, he does not discuss Rukeyser's sexuality, excluding a major component of her life that is affected by political landscapes. A queer ekphrastic reading of "Waterlily Fire" would situate Rukeyser's poetic innovation within the legacy of other queer writers and reveal specifically-female desires.

Rukeyser was born in 1913 in New York City and grew up with aspirations to be a writer. She attended Vassar College, where she helped create an alternative literary magazine, reflecting her interest in political poetry. From then on, she wrote poetry about injustices facing people globally [9]. Her subjects range from international wars to her own identity as a Jewish woman, with popular themes including eroticism, passion, and love as responses to harm in the world [17]. During and after World War II, Rukeyser turned to life-writing, exploring her own and others' emotions [8, p. 258]. Considering this in conjunction with her work's popular themes, it is necessary to discuss Rukeyser's queerness, to try to understand the personal sentiments underlying her writing. She was in a long-term romantic partnership with her female literary agent, Monica McCall. Towards the end of her life, she was supposed to speak at a 1978 Lesbian Poetry Reading, but never did—and as such, her sexuality was never confirmed, and her intimate life continued to be private [8, p. 260].

Rukeyser's queerness nonetheless translates into her five-part poem "Waterlily Fire," inspired by the poet's experience seeing Claude Monet's *Waterlilies* (Fig. 4) catch on fire in the Museum of Modern Art. The first part of the poem, titled "The Burning," describes the destruction of the painting: "An arm of flame reaches from water-green glass, / Behind the wall I know" [16, lines 15-16]. Whereas Loy spends the entirety of her poem describing *Golden Bird*, Rukeyser proceeds to focus on everything but the painting, from the deterioration of New York to the birth of children. Similarly, the second section of "Waterlily Fire" focuses on change and growth rather than the painting, for example, seen in the floral line "Where blossoms like sex pink, dense pink, rose, pink, red" [16, line 68]. Despite this line solely consisting of flowers and colors, the repetitive listing is too definitive and intense to describe Monet's painterly composition of water lilies. Rather, the imagery metaphorically conjures female sexuality and genitalia, producing a sense of intimacy. Furthermore, Rukeyser's use of free verse and repetition is reminiscent of openly lesbian poet Gertrude Stein's, as seen in Stein's "Tender Buttons" (1914): "A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing" [18]. By evoking lesbian eroticism through

modernist forms, Rukeyser propels the legacy of formally innovative queer ekphrasis.

In addition to lesbian desire, "Waterlily Fire" expresses matriarchal desire in section five, which is about the changes one's body encompasses throughout their lifetime. The body, particularly as it relates to female sexuality, childbirth, and motherhood, is a motif in Rukeyser's work [2, p. 104]. The following lines describe the creation of life, removed from any indication of heterosexuality: "We pray: we dive into each other's eyes. / Whatever can come to a woman can come to me. / This is the long body : into life from the beginning, / Big-headed infant unfolding into child, who stretches and finds" [16, lines 134-137]. Rukeyser's focus on female subjects and experiences here is similar to ideas posed by *écriture féminine* ("women's writing"), a 1970s French feminist movement that sought to express a specifically feminine perspective because Western societies repress women's desire and language alike. Prominent thinker from the movement, Hélène Cixous, relevantly critiques the standard that "men create and women procreate" to establish a role for women as both mothers and writers that also deconstruct patriarchal binaries [4]. This seems to be a similar message conveyed by Rukeyser, where she centers matriarchal desire in her writing to challenge the notion that desire is inherently tied to traditional gender roles.

Rukeyser also defies gender roles by applying ekphrasis to the ruin of male art. Loizeaux considers other poems about Monet's *waterlilies*, but only ones by men, specifically Robert Hayden and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In both cases, the poets described an eternal, ethereal quality in the artwork [11, p. 22]. Funnily, Rukeyser conveys exactly the opposite: she highlights the corporeal nature of art, despite its attempt to withstand the tests of time, by describing the destruction of Monet's painting. This poem reinforces that idea of time, such as in the lines "Stigma of dead stone, inert water, the tattered / Monuments rivetted against flesh" [16, line 80], which evoke something like a crumbling classical temple. Given that Rukeyser was surrounded by so many masculine war posters in the 40s, it is especially powerful that she describes art radically by separating it from its male creators.

Looking at Grimké, Loy, and Rukeyser through one, queer ekphrastic lens liberates them from specific, exclusive readings. Thus far, there has been a discrepancy in how scholars look at poets. Honey does not describe the artistic implications of Grimké choosing "The Mona Lisa" as a subject, and neither Lazevnick nor Allison consider their poets' queerness. In conclusion, the exploration of ekphrasis within the context of queered modernist poetry reveals its potential for uncovering hidden meanings through alternative perspectives and challenging dominant narratives within the genre. Grimké, Loy, and Rukeyser radically reimagine both visual arts and poetic forms, challenging established patriarchal norms across their unique styles. As scholars continue to engage with and critique the intersections of poetry, art, and identity, it becomes increasingly clear that the study of queer ekphrasis offers a fertile ground for reexploring the modernist canon.

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Appendix

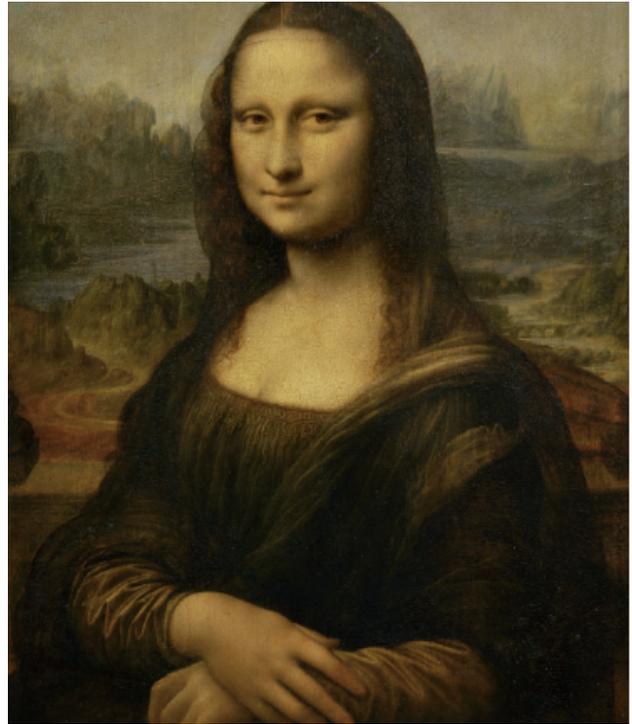


Figure 1: . Leonardo da Vinci. Mona Lisa. c. 1503-1506. Artstor, library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490423.



Figure 2: Constantin Brancusi. Golden Bird. c. 1919-1920. The Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/91194/golden-bird>.