

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Liz Delf for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 19, 2011.  
Title: “Born of Ourselves”: Gendered Doubling and the *Femme Fatale* in Vernon Lee’s Ghost Stories.

Abstract approved:

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This thesis examines the characterization of the *femme fatale* and the implications of this trope for late-Victorian gender and sexuality in the ghost stories of female aesthete Vernon Lee. In her treatment of the *femme fatale* figure, Lee both reinforces and complicates the image of the sexualized, often bestialized woman as an object for the male gaze by blurring the boundaries of gender, sex roles, and forms of empowerment. In closely examining these figures in Lee’s work, I clarify the complexity and dynamism of Lee’s project as a woman on the threshold of a new century. Through close reading and analysis of the primary texts, as well as incorporation of secondary critical work and literary theory, I explore issues of doubling, androgyny, religion, and decadence in three *fin de siècle* stories. This thesis challenges the notion of Decadents and New Women as discrete categorizations, as well as recent critical attempts to claim Lee as a contemporary feminist. Acknowledging the liminality and ambivalence of Lee’s writing and life, my project complicates and expands on our understanding of gender politics and literature at the end of the nineteenth century.

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“Born of Ourselves”: Gendered Doubling and the *Femme Fatale* in Vernon Lee’s  
Ghost Stories

by  
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Liz Delf, Author

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“Born of Ourselves”: Gendered Doubling and the *Femme Fatale* in Vernon Lee’s  
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Introduction

Until the early 1990s, Vernon Lee (pseudonym of Violet Paget, 1856-1935), a major voice of the English Decadent and modern period, had been all but erased from the Anglo-Western canon. Yet throughout her ghost stories of the 1890s, Lee develops characters that play on the popular *fin de siècle* trope of the *femme fatale* in a manner that few if any other writers of the era manages. Her characterizations alternately censure fatal women for their toxicity and celebrate them for their power:

To suppose Medea a cruel woman is as grotesque as to call her an immoral woman ... Her magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of all her slaves to perish ... in this there is nothing unjust. The possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man; it would turn his head, make him forget even what he owed her; no man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right over her; it is a kind of sacrilege. (*Hauntings* 57)

In her representation of the *femme fatale*, Lee enters the conversation that reflects the culture and gender dynamics of her literary moment. The ubiquity of this characterization of sexualized and fatal women in the *fin de siècle* has often been explained by critics as an echo and reinforcement of cultural anxieties surrounding the tumultuous change in social and gender relationships at the time, albeit with some variation. Bram Dijkstra’s influential arguments in his book *Idols of Perversity*, posit that the depiction of women in nineteenth-century Western art was overwhelmingly

misogynistic, a dangerous reflection and reinforcement of scientific and cultural attitudes which eventually led to the genocidal horrors of the twentieth century (vii). Djikstra explores the image of the *femme fatale* most thoroughly in the biblical figures of Salome and Judith, and suggests that these deadly women embody a masochistic and misogynistic fantasy that incorporates male anxieties and cultural pressures around women's sexuality, prostitution, broad class shifts, consumerism, and a supposed female threat to male intellectualism. In other words, the fatal woman was employed as a scapegoat for the cultural anxiety and change at the turn of the century; they "proved to be a mere pretext for these men's need to find the source of all the wrongs they thought were being done to them" (398).

Similarly to Djikstra, many critics suggest that the prevalence of the *femme fatale* in the *fin de siècle* was a reflection of male apprehension regarding the shifts in gender roles and the emergence of the New Woman as a potential threat to patriarchal dominance. In her book *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter proposes that the art and literature of the 1890s reflects an "anti-feminist backlash" and severe opposition to any change in traditional gender roles (9). At its most severe, she argues, this reaction against female empowerment was depicted in "savagely 'gynecidal' visions of female sexuality," as an "exaggerated horror" of the "castrating potential" of this shift in power (10). In other words, the *femme fatale*, as well as representations of monstrous femininity in books such as Rider Haggard's *She* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, reveal the anxiety and insecurity of the late Victorian patriarchy as women began to challenge the restrictions placed upon them. Conversely, however, Lee critic Catherine Maxwell

argues that while some depictions of the fatal woman were indeed misogynist, any argument that claims that this is true in every case is overly reductive. Instead, she posits, some visions of the *femme fatale* actually celebrate female power in a way that directly opposes the idealization of the Angel in the House (“From Dionysus” 256). Offering examples in Swinburne and Shelley, Maxwell suggests that in some versions of the fatal woman “Beauty and Terror combined turn the Beautiful into the Sublime” (256). This interpretation frames the figure as another ideal of women’s possibilities, and as an early celebration of female empowerment through sexuality and domination.

Vernon Lee’s incorporation of *femme fatale* characters in her work, and the cultural implications surrounding these figures in *fin de siècle* literature, has been widely acknowledged. While critics have not explored Lee’s specific representation of the figure very thoroughly, critics such as Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell have made at least brief nods to the fact that the beautiful but deadly women characters that Lee creates in many of her ghost stories are examples of the *femme fatale* archetypal figure, or an expression of Western culture’s unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Lee’s use of the *femme fatale* trope in several stories is explicit and intentional; in addition to the recognizable pattern of beauty, passion, and death, some stories also make direct intertextual references to other portrayals of the *femme fatale*: “I have seen faces like this ... when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women” (Lee, *Hauntings* 162). As a visual reference, one story describes a painting of “the daughter of Herodias dancing” in association with one of the fatal women in these stories (*Hauntings* 69). While no extant painting has yet been discovered that

matches this description precisely, Lee's depiction of the represented dancer's "white turban with a scarlet tuft of feathers, and Herod's blue caftan" (69) may conflate a few of the many images of Salome in nineteenth century art,<sup>2</sup> suggesting the prevalence of *femme fatale* imagery in Lee's historical moment.

While the trope's existence in these stories is decided, then, what is less clear (and thus less charted territory) are the alterations, connotations, and complications of such a mythical figure as created by Lee, herself a transitional figure in literary, social, and gender history. As a writer in the *fin de siècle*, which Showalter refers to as a "borderline" in time and history (*Sexual Anarchy* 1), Lee's writing exists in a space between Victorian realism and modernism; as a woman interested in aestheticism, she crosses over between the Decadents' worship of beauty and the New Women's moral narratives. As I argue throughout this piece, Lee's intermediary position is crucial to understanding her work, and adds to her importance as a writer and thinker. As a figure in-between, Lee's work reveals more about the tensions and values of each group, challenges the dichotomy itself, and offers a new perspective of the themes with which each movement was working. This liminal position is further reflected in Lee's constructions of female identity and her characterization of the *femme fatale*, a figure who in Lee's work also negotiates a transitional space. Lee's representations of deadly women construe them as both sexualized objects of male fantasy and nightmare, and stronger figures that revel in their power. The popular images and myth are both reified and complicated in these depictions.

Lee's transitional moment makes her an author who was publishing not only across centuries, but across literary movements; she thus occupies an intermediary space in literary history. Biographer Peter Gunn argues that Lee's Victorian background left her with a distinct "period cast of integrity and humanity" (Gunn 4), and it is true that she embraced some nineteenth-century forms and themes, such as linear plot-driven narrative and the Gothic. On the other hand, she also seems to be inching toward modernism: some critics have argued that Lee displays a constructionist sensibility, and subjectivity is a repeated theme in her work. For example, stories such as "Amour Dure" and "A Wicked Voice" revolve around the consciousness, obsession, and thought-pattern of the narrators, even as they move through a series of fantastic events. In this case, her liminality between Victorian and modern literature makes Lee a valuable figure to study because it can lead to a more developed understanding of how one movement melds into another. This perception of the heavy influence of the Victorians on the modernists is in opposition to the way that modernist artists themselves wished to be seen; the literary movement of the early- to mid-twentieth century was long portrayed as a reaction to the stuffy morality and forms of the nineteenth-century, as wholly different from what had come before. This split between movements, however, is not as definitive as was once thought. Not only do earlier generations inevitably shape the work of later writers, but some authors near the end of the Victorian era share the modernists' interest in subjectivity, race, and gender; in this sense they can be read as a step between the two literary movements, or even as early or prototypical modernist authors. As scholar Christa

Zorn points out in *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, Lee's intermediary position can help to debunk this myth of the "gap" between the great writers of Victorianism and modernism, or the idea that modernism was wholly "new." Zorn posits instead that this notion of a break between one movement and the next was actually a creation of "modernist self-fashioning," as artists of the early twentieth century strove to emphasize the newness of the modern project (xii-xiii).

Nevertheless, there are notable differences between the art of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. More dramatic shifts were still to come within the modernist movement, both in substance and in form. The exploration of an individual's sexuality and psychology is more explicit in modernism than in Lee, and the themes of alienation, fragmentation, and creation of the self are much more central in modernist texts. Similarly, the formal elements of modernist writing are quite different from Lee and her *fin de siècle* counterparts: although the first-person voice in Lee's stories shows the inner thoughts of the narrator, these thoughts are written in aesthetized, even flowery language, which does not attempt to show the working of the mind in the way that high modernist free and indirect style and stream-of-consciousness do. Nevertheless, as the overlap and development of issues and styles show, they surely did not spring up fully formed in December 1910, as Virginia Woolf famously claimed ("Mr. Bennett" 194). The *fin de siècle* was a period of transition in art, literature, and social movements, and Lee is an exemplary transitional figure that offers another perspective of the space between Victorianism and modernism.

Beyond the space that Lee occupies between literary movements, I am interested in the unusual position that Lee holds within her own period. In the 1890s, history tends to split the avant-garde intellectuals of the time into two major groups based on social or artistic movements. The first, the male aesthetes or Decadents, championed *l'art pour l'art*, artificiality over the natural, neo-Hellenism, and the challenge of heterosexual normativity; the second, the female New Women, were often invested in social purity feminism, overtly political fiction, and change in the limited Victorian gender roles available to them. Lee, however, does not fit neatly into either one of these simplified categories; along with her female characters, Lee seems to embody what historian Carole Pateman describes as the common perception that women are “potential disrupters of masculine boundary systems of all sorts” (qtd. in Showalter 6). Echoing the Decadents, Lee considered herself a Paterian “aesthetic critic,” and in her early career suggested that “the creation of perfect beauty is the highest aim of the artist” (*Belcaro* 241). Furthermore, she made aesthetic use of Greek mythology in stories such as “The Gods and Ritter Tanhuser” and “Dionea,” and as an intellectual and independent woman who never married, Lee did not conform to traditional expectations of her gender. On the other hand, in an attitude that was common among New Women, it seems Lee in her earlier work was resistant to the Decadents’ radical challenges to masculinity, complaining about the “infiltration of effete or foreign modes of thought and feeling” in England, making the country’s citizens “less morally steady” (*Belcaro* 255-6). In addition, although Lee’s fiction was not explicitly political, in the manner much New Women’s writing was, her role as a

woman writer in the aesthetic movement and the fluidity of her characters' gender roles suggests that gender politics was a part of her work; furthermore, although she resisted any association with the suffragists, Lee's one piece that directly addresses the Woman Question is strongly in favor of women's economic independence, and displays her frustration with the cultural obsession with "what can or cannot or must not, be done, said, or thought by women, because they are not men" (*Gospels* 265). Her resistance to easy categorization is reflected in current scholarship; critics also disagree about where she should be placed within (or outside of) the movements of the 1890s. Elaine Showalter counts Lee as one of the "feminist thinkers and writers" among a list of New Women authors by including Lee's work in the anthology *Daughters of Decadence* (vii), but in their collection *Women and British Aestheticism*, Kathy Alexis Psomiades and Talia Schaffer claim Lee as a female aesthete, and separate from the New Woman movement. Similarly, Christa Zorn posits that one of the key reasons to study Lee is that as a woman, Lee offers a new way to look at aestheticism, a way of "reassessing intellectual history" as one dominated by men at the turn of the century (Zorn xxiv).

Part of the difficulty of placing Lee within one movement or another is that as a writer whose career spanned so many years, her ideas about aestheticism developed, changed, and contradicted themselves. Lee was clearly invested in aesthetic theory, making it a major portion of her life's work, but her place within aestheticism as a literary and social movement is more ambivalent. Her first novel, *Miss Brown* (1884), caricatured the burgeoning aesthetic movement and the dandies within it, yet she

admired both Walter Pater and Henry James, and dedicated books to each of them. In addition to friendships with both men, Lee claimed in a letter to a friend that she knew “no artist in literature equal to” Pater (qtd. in Pantazzi 115), and she referred to James as a “noble and exquisite Master” (*Handling* 280). However, although her dedication to Pater never faltered, Lee’s interpretation of aestheticism began to move away from the narrowest definitions of the movement in her later life. Though she resisted the notion of *l’art pour l’art*, believing that aestheticism should contain an ethical element as well, Lee nevertheless believed in and wrote about the intense effects that art and place has on one’s psyche, emotions, and connections to the past, culture, and history in works on aesthetics such as *The Beautiful* (1913) and *Laurus Nobilis* (1909).

Interested in language, beauty, high art, and aesthetic theory, yet a female writer who could not fully embrace all aspects of Decadence, Lee is a difficult figure to place if literary history is imagined in this way as a simplified dichotomy of men/women, Decadent/New Woman, Aestheticism/political fiction. This is a large part of what makes Lee such an intriguing figure; within the literary circles and social categories that have been placed on that era, she seems to be negotiating the boundaries, challenging the binaries, and expanding our sense (and possibly her contemporaries’ sense) of what women’s writing and relationship to aestheticism was in the 1890s.

Like the aesthetes, Lee places higher value on visual, literary, and musical art than on the natural world, and is interested in themes of decadence, obsession with beauty, and gender slippage in characters such as a feminized *castrato* and cross-dressing, masculinized fatal women. However, unlike many Decadents, Lee did not

fully believe in art alone, but claimed a connection between art and ethics; Lee subscribed to what scholar Sondeep Kandola calls an “ethical aestheticism” (Kandola 475), a term which has also been applied to New Women authors of the period.<sup>3</sup> This seeming contradiction in terms places Lee somewhat outside of the rest of the Decadent movement, and indicates the ways in which she altered and responded to the literary voices around her. While Lee denied any simplistic association of beauty and morality, claiming that “beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad; it is aesthetically good” (*Belcaro* 210), she made fine distinctions between the lack of moral didacticism in true art and the spiritual benefit of art itself: “Though art has no moral meaning, it has moral value; art is happiness, and to bestow happiness is to create good” (*Belcaro* 229). This version of the ethical and spiritual value of art foreshadows some of Lee’s later work on empathy and aesthetic theory. As critic Dennis Denisoff paraphrases this theory, Lee believed “empathy” to be the Beauty in the combination of the impression one got from a work of art and all of the memories and history of similar experiences; in other words, empathy is a “transhistorical beauty” (253). This spiritual experience of art and history is previewed in Lee’s stories of the supernatural; the tales often center on a haunting or obsession with a painting or song from antiquity, and the narrators are moved beyond their everyday experiences into a state of awe and sublime emotion by encountering the fantastic in these objects.

Aestheticism as a literary and art movement had developed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning with Théophile Gautier’s preface to

his novel *Mademoiselle De Maupin* (1836). In this seminal piece, Gautier criticizes the cultural expectation of Christian morality in literature, and rejects the notion of “utilitarian” art: “There is nothing but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need” (xxvii). This call to art for art’s sake, or *l’art pour l’art*, influenced Baudelaire and other artists across the continent for the remainder of the century. When the movement reached Britain, artists and aesthetes directly refuted John Ruskin’s argument that art should be moral and good. Instead, the British Aesthetes embraced the words of Walter Pater, who in the conclusion to his 1873 collection *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* calls on artists to eternalize moments of phenomenal beauty in order to “burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy,” which equates to “success in life” (Pater 210). In the final words of this formative piece, which in its neo-Hellenism and rejection of didactic morality was taken by Oscar Wilde and his circle as a defense and celebration of same-sex desire, Pater further invokes the need to embrace moments of beauty for their influence on passion, rather than as ethical lessons:

High passions may give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the ‘enthusiasm of humanity.’ Only, be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake. (2)

Building upon these values and the work of the Symbolists in France, the Aesthetic movement embraced the notion of *l’art pour l’art*; it rejected the natural, the didactic, and the moral elements of art and instead created a cult of beauty. The most famous

Aesthetes include novelist J.K. Huysman, whose book *Against Nature (A rebours)* is often cited as initiating the sub-categorical Decadence movement in British literature; poet and artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose involvement in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a precursor to full-blown British Aestheticism; and the most infamous Englishman of his era, Oscar Wilde, whose dandyism and elaborate witticism celebrated the height of the movement. Like Huysman, a smaller group of writers and artists within the Aesthetic movement followed French poet Charles Baudelaire's interest in decay and death, as well as extravagance, excessiveness, rarity, and the strange, and took as their own the epithet "Decadents."

Notably, the Decadents that have been celebrated and canonized over the last hundred years were almost exclusively male. Many of these men were committed to altering and challenging the Victorian definition of masculinity, and their dandyism and adoration of beauty and art marked them as a new kind of male. Nevertheless, this shifting of the terms of masculinity did not necessarily create a space for women artists to step into the movement. Thus, carving out an authentic place for herself as a writer and thinker was a conscious negotiation for Lee within this environment. This is the reason Lee cites for choosing her androgynous pen name: "I am sure no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics," she wrote in an 1878 letter about the name, "with anything but mitigated contempt" (*Letters* 59). Lee had good reason to be wary of her reception within the Aesthetic movement; although many Decadents ostensibly admired and celebrated the female form, a strong undercurrent of misogyny is detectable in many of their works.

One common argument of the period was that since art was higher than nature, women's close association with the natural world reduced their status as intellectual equals; Baudelaire in particular argued that women and sex drew man down toward nature rather than up toward the sublime. Similarly, some influential Aesthetes associated women with a threatening animalistic sexuality or a belittling childishness; in his poem "The Dancing Serpent," Baudelaire suggests that if the "abandoned beauty" of his lover's walk were to be described, it would be as though "a snake was dancing / at the end of a stick" (l. 18-20), due to the imbalance of her "infant head," her "sloth," and the balance of a "young elephant" (l. 21-4). In other Decadent works, male authors create a homosocial world where women are almost completely excluded; Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* is an example of this, where the only notable female character is an actress, whose profession is based on using artifice to cover up her true self, and women are merely a "decorative sex" (43). This literary homosociality was common to both Decadent and other adventure and mystery texts in the *fin de siècle*, whether due to anxiety over women's changing role or as a celebration of neo-Hellenic manhood. Although they too were pushing back against a patriarchy that belittled them, dandies were also threatened by these changes, and "the aesthetes who identify as somehow feminine or effeminate lay claim to a cultural mobility and power they would deny women" (Schaffer and Psomaides 10). These issues are one of the roots of the common antagonism between the decadents and the New Women, as the sexually liberal dandies continued to reinforce and even extend

the culture's antiquated attitudes toward women while simultaneously creating an aestheticized social space for the "effeminate" and often homosexual male.

To complicate matters further, or perhaps to suggest an explanation for Lee's connection to a movement that is sometimes viewed as misogynist, it has been suggested that the title "Decadent" may cast too wide a net over the various artists and attitudes of the movement. The broadness of the term claims to describe a range of thinkers that actually had disparate values and interests; as critic Kathy Psomiades points out, recent scholarship seems to describe the gender and sexual politics of the Aesthetic movement in two antithetical ways. One group of critics, typified by Richard Dellamora, portrays the Aesthetes as "liberatory" for both men and women as they "homo-apologetic[ally]" embraced same sex desire. Yet Showalter condemns the movement for its enforcement of women's status as objects and its emphasis on heterosexual male desire (Psomiades 21). Psomiades suggests that one of the reasons for these divergent perspectives is that they are interrogating two different groups of aesthetes: Wilde and Pater versus Swinburne and Rossetti.

Once again, however, it is difficult to neatly place Lee into either of these two categories. As a woman writer who had extensive passionate friendships with Mary Robinson and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and who explored the slippage of culturally defined gender roles in stories like "A Wicked Voice" and "Oke of Okehurst," Lee was involved in some of the same questioning and exploration of gender and sexuality as were Wilde and his circle. Yet the terms "liberatory" and "homo-apologetic" are too strong for Lee's work and life in the early 1890s.<sup>4</sup> The cross-dressing women and

effeminate men of *Hauntings* and other stories are not purely celebratory characters; instead, these figures are often the ghostly or the dangerous antagonists of the tale. Although her defense of same sex love became clearer as she called for “a queer comradeship of outlawed thought” in her 1896 piece “Deterioration of the Soul,” a review of Max Nordau’s 1892 *Degeneration* which also served as a response to the Wilde trial (*Gospels* 92),<sup>5</sup> Lee’s ghost stories from the turn of the decade are more ambivalent, and she once again places herself in an interstitial space by filling her stories with both blurring gender boundaries and men obsessed with the objectified beauty of women.

One of the ways to trace Lee’s position within the literary and theoretical movements of the *fin de siècle* is to explore her connections with other aesthetes and their work. As alluded to previously, she was indeed not only a follower of Walter Pater, but within her lifetime was understood to be his “disciple”:

[Lee and Pater] shared a vision of the aesthetic experience as a way of life because it combines pleasure with aspiration, the pursuit of the ideal. Pater’s endorsement of art for its own sake inspired her not because of its amoral, hedonistic possibilities but, the reverse, because of its commitment to the Platonic ideals of truth, purity, and beauty. In this respect she was indeed, as some of her contemporaries called her, “Walter Pater’s disciple.” (Colby 56)

Lee and Pater corresponded regularly after meeting in the home of Mrs. Humphrey Ward in 1881 (Gunn 79), and their friendship continued through letters and visits until his death in 1894 (Colby 65). Their intellectual connection and personal friendship was close enough that Lee dedicated to Pater her 1884 book *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance*.<sup>6</sup> The older man’s

influence is notable in the essays' subject and organization of the book despite Lee's tendency to comment on the ethical nature of the Italian Renaissance; while admiring the art of the time, she tends to condemn its morality (Colby 66-70). Upon hearing Lee's plan to publish the articles in a collection, Pater wrote Lee that the pieces "certainly deserve republication, and I shall be pleased and proud of your dedicating them to me ... I feel great interest in all you write" (qtd. in Colby 66). After his death, Lee wrote a memoriam for Pater entitled "Valedictory," which was published as an epilogue to her 1895 book *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, a collection of essays on Italian art and history. By this point in her career, Lee had clarified her vision that aesthetics should embrace an ethical aestheticism.<sup>7</sup> Lee states in her epilogue that her writing on the history of Italy and art is a "useful exercise for our sympathies," because it helps people to develop "more wholesome notions of justice and charity" (237). This is part of Lee's clear move away from pure aestheticism as others understood it, and toward a sense of aesthetics and art history as a moral project. As Kandola argues, Lee now embraced the "radical philosophies of the Decadents," but believed that they "should be harnessed for the purposes of social good" (479). Furthermore, as Kandola and others note, Lee implies in the valedictory that Pater, the father of British aestheticism, had also come around to this interpretation of the aesthetic movement by the time of his death, as a "parallel with her own development" (Gunn 145) and that he had developed new ideas about the "congruity" of art and health over the years. Lee suggests that Pater had in fact revised the defining phrase of Aestheticism in his later years to be "art, not for art's sake, but art for the sake of

life – art as part of the harmonious functions of existence ... and in a sense harmonising” (*Renaissance* 259). Although it is impossible to know how Pater would have reacted to Lee’s summary of his changing ideals, the “Valedictory” certainly offers a clear description of how she herself engaged with aestheticism, and the ways in which she was altering its definition to better fit her values.

In addition to her relationship with Pater, Lee had personal contact with a number of other major literary and artistic figures of the *fin de siècle*. Perhaps the most notorious is her relationship with Henry James; a friend and visitor to the Paget family, James corresponded with Lee and she dedicated her first novel, *Miss Brown* (1884), to him. James noted Lee’s intelligence and loquaciousness in a complimentary letter to Edmund Gosse: “She is one of the best minds I know ... really a superior talker” (qtd. in Colby 98). Yet her novel was an embarrassment. By sweeping consensus, it wasn’t as good as her other work, and her thinly veiled caricatures of friends and acquaintances (including Wilde) were hurtful; James complained about the book to friends, but wrote a kind and tactful critique to Lee (Colby 108). Nevertheless, James and Lee remained on good terms until her story “Lady Tal” was published in *Vanitas* in 1892; it contains a character clearly based on James who is pompous and removed, though not spitefully so. After warnings from friends, James refused to read the tale, and was so hurt that he warned his brother William against visiting the “tiger-cat” Lee at the Pagets’ home in Florence and discontinued his friendship with Lee (Colby 195-6). Nevertheless, over the years of their friendship, James encouraged Lee in her writing (109), and there are multiple

intertextualities between their bodies of work: in addition to Lee's dedication to and caricature of her contemporary, James's novel *The Princess Cassamassima*, which may in part be about Lee and her family (Maxwell, "From Dionysus" 268), is discussed at length by the main characters of Lee's story "A Worldly Woman" in *Vanitas*, and some critics argue that the main plot points for some of James's stories were inspired by Lee's ghost stories.<sup>8</sup>

Lee also met Wilde several times, and joked about his attitude in a letter to her mother: "He talked a sort of lyrico-sarcastic cultschah for half an hour" (qtd. in Gunn 78). Lee grew up with the artist John Singer Sargent, and was influenced by his mother's enthusiasm for travel and place (Gunn 33). She encountered Robert Browning in literary circles at the Paters' home (125-6), exchanged letters regularly with John Addington Symonds, and found many opportunities to meet other writers and thinkers through her relationship with the poet Mary Robinson. Lee was clearly very connected to the other voices and approaches of her time, and her story "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" was even published in 1896 in the quintessential *fin de siècle* literary magazine, *The Yellow Book*.

Despite coinciding with all these male writers, Lee's role as a female Aesthete allowed for an unusual perspective on the gender politics of the movement. Furthermore, she challenged and questioned some of the very tenets of Aestheticism, and while she employed some Decadent tropes such as the gothic, decay, the artificial, and obsession with beauty, she adapted others to suit her own goals. She challenged the beliefs and tropes of the Aesthetes in both her fiction and her essays, even as she

subscribed to a version of aestheticism. In this sense, she can be described as what critic Margaret Stetz terms a “participant-critic” in the movement rather than a direct antagonist to the movement, as many New Women were:

Unlike those positioning themselves as aestheticism's enemies, female participant-critics were out not to overturn the principle of art for art's sake but to revise the practices, in both literature and life, of its male advocates. Chief among their concerns was the objectification of women in the art of “appreciation,” a form of masculine connoisseurship dependent on silent and passive female spectacles. Their goal was to rescue the worship of beauty, so prominent in aesthetic doctrine, from its association with the exploitation of women as nothing more than beautiful “occasions” for masculine discovery, theorizing, and reverie. They wished, moreover, to rescue women themselves from the consequences of an exoticized and demonized vision of female sexuality that had established itself as a cliché in aesthetic literature. (Stetz 31)

Lee’s use of the *femme fatale* is an example of this adaptation, but I argue here that while she does in some senses challenge the male objectification and demonization, she reifies the exoticization and equation of violence and sexuality with power that has always been a part of the deadly woman.

The marked resurgence of interest in Lee’s life and work over the last twenty years reflects a number of projects and themes that have been embraced by literary scholarship as the century turns once again. The intentional recovery of marginalized texts and authors has been a part of this, certainly, but even more contemporary issues have also come to light in Lee’s work: her position as a woman and as a queer author have been explored, as well as her themes of art and the artist, androgyny, and antiquity. The most recent criticism tends to focus on gender and sexuality in Lee’s fiction, the aesthetic theory in her non-fiction, and her relation to other key figures, as

I have noted. It seems that part of this renewed interest is also a reflection of a larger significance placed on *fin de siècle* writers. As Showalter and others have argued, the ends of centuries tend to evoke an apocalyptic sense; in reaction to a cultural anxiety about beginnings and endings, there tends to be a simultaneous push against traditional boundaries (in race, class, gender, and sexualities) and a tightening backlash against such challenges to the norm (Showalter 4-5). In art, literature, and culture, this leads to tensions and conversations that are worth exploring in new ways. I, too, am strongly interested in the ways that Lee stretches and negotiates the boundaries of sex and gender in her work, particularly as these issues are negotiated through the recurring figure of the *femme fatale* in the stories collected in *Hauntings* and the 1896 story “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers,” which was later republished in the collection *For Maurice*.

The image of the *femme fatale* has been a trope in Western literature and art for thousands of years: the ancient Greek sirens that wooed sailors to their death, the Abrahamic tale of murderous Lilith, and the biblical stories of Eve and later Herodias’ daughter (later referred to as Salome) are all early examples of the sexualized violence that defines the figure. Although the term “*femme fatale*” was not invented until the twentieth century (Allen, *Femme* vi), the tradition of the beautiful, deadly seductress has been well established throughout Western cultural history. As I’ve noted, the myth was especially prominent in literature and art throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and poets such as Swinburne, Baudelaire, and Keats, visual artists such as Waterhouse, Klimt, and Moreau, and playwrights such as Wilde all depict

variations on the theme of the sexually alluring and destructive woman. Novels such as Rider Haggard's *She* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* juxtapose the fatal woman with the fantastic, emphasizing the surreal, nightmarish quality of the figure. The deadly Salome, who, according to the Gospel of Mark danced for her stepfather and received the head of John the Baptist in return (Mark 6:21-28), became a particularly entrancing and evolving version of the figure throughout the century. Gustave Flaubert's 1877 story "Herodias" depicts the dancing girl as an innocent who is manipulated by her mother into her bloody request for the head of John the Baptist, but this image mutated by the turn of the century into a more sexualized, severe, and active version of the fatal woman. In Wilde's *Salomé*, for example, the title character takes a dynamic role in the bloody killing. She lusts after the prophet Jokanaan (John the Baptist), and after demanding his head out of love and vengeance for his rejection of her, she kisses the lips of the head "as one bites a ripe fruit" (34), and is killed by her stepfather Herod's soldiers.

Although Freud did not address the figure of the *femme fatale* directly, his image of the phallic mother echoes many of the same cultural or psychological anxieties associated with the deadly woman. As a figure that possesses both breasts and a phallus, the phallic mother disrupts the patriarchal structure by taking on some of the traditional phallic power associated with masculinity; in this way, she is both an entrancing and horrifying figure as she shatters adult concepts of gendered authority. As Freudian scholar Marcia Ian points out, the phallic mother is a figure that embodies contradiction. Not only is she both masculine and feminine, but she also inspires both

fear and desire, is both powerfully independent and “reduced to the function of giving suck,” and is both a “fantasmatic caricature and a caricature of the fantasmatic” (Ian 8). The *femme fatale*, although operating culturally rather than psychologically, also engenders anxiety regarding the slippage of masculine power; in other words, like the phallic mother, the deadly woman “represents the conflation, compaction, and concretion of all the most primitive fears and desires of hegemonic heterosexist white bourgeois patriarchy” (7). Also, the mythical image is predicated on the belief that this masculine power and danger personified in a sexualized woman is both terrifying and deeply attractive. In these ways, the fatal woman is in fact a phallic woman, if not a mother. Lacan reinforces the notion of the phallic mother as “veiled, castrated, and castrating” (qtd. in Jonte-Pace 19), emphasizing the symbolic nature of the phallus and extending Freud’s argument by associating the mother with absence, otherness, and death (19). Both the phallic mother and the *femme fatale* can be further associated with the Freudian death instinct, or *thanatos*, wherein one’s pleasure increases as they get closer to quiet stasis, or death. Freud himself connected the mother with death and destruction of masculine power (Sprengnether 5), and the pleasure that he suggests is found in degeneration into death could be applied to the victims of the *femme fatale* as well: they take some strange joy in their deaths, as it is at the hands of these irresistible beauties. This pleasure in a painful situation suggests the masochism of the men who fall in love with these deadly characters and embrace a submissive role, and the sadism of the *femmes fatales* who often seem to take pleasure in their sexualized violence.

As noted in the opening of this introductory chapter, many have argued that the increase in the artistic representations of the *femme fatale* in the second half of the nineteenth century was a reflection of the zeitgeist for men of the moment: the figure is often interpreted as an embodiment of male fear and anxiety regarding changing gender roles and power dynamics. In her book *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale*, critic Rebecca Stott takes this argument further by positing that the figure is a response not just to gender tensions, but to a “plethora of anxieties at once,” as the *fin de siècle* fatal woman embodies the “intersection of Western racial, sexual, and imperial anxieties” (30). In other words, the *femme fatale* became a repository in the last decade of the century for not only the disquiet that many felt about women’s rebellion and shifting position in society, but also the mysterious and distinct nature of the Other. Late Victorian *femme fatales* indeed often take on an Orientalist tone; Wilde’s Salomé is swathed in veils, Haggard’s character She is a white giant among African natives, and Lee’s Infanta in “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” is a veiled and exotic Islamic princess whose difference and mystery entrances her suitor. These associations of sexualized danger with the exotic East are, as Edward Said first mapped out in *Orientalism*, “not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of *creation*” (87). In other words, these types of images both reflect and invent Western definitions of the East. These depictions also correlate the threat of female power with the “form of paranoia” that is Orientalism (72), and both gender and Orientalist discourse at the turn of the century displayed a simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward the female or Oriental Other.

In another aspect of the evolving trope, art scholar Virginia Allen argues that *femme fatale* visual images of the *fin de siècle* were more eroticized and more bloodthirsty than the depictions since antiquity (10-1). Allen suggests that the oft-cited scene describing Moreau's painting of the exoticised and Orientalist Salome in J.K. Huysman's *Against Nature* is a significant example of this shift into "new heights of lust and evil" (Allen, *Femme* 1):

Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches. (Huysman n.p.)

Although this is a particularly erotic and corporeal depiction of the legend, it is suggestive of the cultural image of the *femme fatale* as often portrayed by male artists at the turn of the century: an evil, uncontrollable, and lustful woman, who is the object of every gaze and who kills unflinchingly. This version of the figure suggests the perceived danger of women's shifting social power, as Djikstra and others argue. Lee's use of the trope is written from within this version and is also a response to it; her work grapples with this portrayal of the deadly woman, and indeed alters it in original ways.

In the four stories of *Hauntings* and "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers," Lee explores the interplay of aestheticism and gender through the figure of the *femme*

*fatale*. When the protagonists repeatedly become attracted to and then obsessed with the subjects and objects of visual art pieces, Lee seems to argue not only that we are changed by art, but that a work of art is such an intense experience that it becomes a possessive, integral experience. The protagonists in these stories become passionate, driven, and insane over their love or attraction to the objectified figure in the painting or sculpture. These love objects are generally accepted to be *femme fatale* figures, although in “A Wicked Voice,” it is actually a sexualized and deadly feminized male; following Maxwell and Pulham, I will refer to this figure as an *homme fatale*.<sup>9</sup> Although Lee’s use and alteration of the deadly woman character has been noted, it has not been fully explored as a trope across these stories. I believe that it is valuable at this point in Lee scholarship to dedicate deeper analysis to her representation of the *femme fatale*, and to the unwinding and reinforcement of the myth that takes place simultaneously in Lee’s work. Combining the concerns of aestheticism with the *femme fatale* figure, which was otherwise an almost exclusively male-created representation at the time, Lee challenges and complicates the image of sexualized, often bestialized woman as an object for the male gaze by blurring the boundaries of gender, sex roles, and forms of empowerment.

As I will discuss more fully in Chapter One, critic Catherine Maxwell, in her article “From Dionysus to ‘Dionea’: Vernon Lee’s Portraits,” argues that Lee’s *femme fatale* figures are a celebration of women’s power, an acknowledgement of the female Sublime, and an active and violent response to women’s oppression in Victorian society. While I agree that Lee portrays these women as truly powerful, it seems that

Maxwell's interpretation goes too far in projecting the values of a twentieth-century feminist back onto Lee's characters. In fact, Lee's representation of the *femme fatale* is more nuanced than that, and I would complicate Maxwell's argument by pointing out that this power is still limited to the sexualized violence of objectified figures. Lee's relationship to this figure is ambiguous, and in some moments she seems to reify the misogynistic undertones of the model. And yet, the extensive gender slippage, the agency of the *femmes fatales*, and the perspective of a female author still change the trope into something different, and I would argue, something more dynamic and multifaceted, than the traditional *femme fatale*. Each of the stories addressed in this project, for example, contains doubled deadly women, and utilizes this element of the Freudian *unheimlich* to explore subjectivity, overlapping consciousnesses, and identity.

At times, the combination of this doubling with the ghostly themes of the stories suggests that these tales may be considered part of the genre that Showalter terms the "Gay Gothic." This phrase refers to the body of literature in the *fin de siècle* that emphasizes doubling as a code for the double life and repressed desires of homosexual authors or characters, and suggests the haunting nature of such a hidden existence (*Sexual Anarchy* 106). In this genre, the double is a part of the inner self, a double consciousness, rather than an external force. Well-known examples of this supernatural doubling with one's own sexual identity include the split personality in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and the eponymous portrait and its model in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (106).

While Showalter's examples are all male, it stands to reason that as an artist negotiating same-sex desire in her writing and her own life, Lee adopts the strategy of the Gay Gothic to explore the anxieties and psychological experience of homosexuality at the end of the century. Furthermore, while Lee's *femmes fatales* are deadly, these stories also offer alternative, redemptive endings for the victims of the fatal women. This shift in the outcome of the *femme fatale* narrative highlights the possibility found in playing with the established character type and pushing beyond the reductive story of alluring deadliness.

Thus, in her hurry to claim Lee as a modern feminist, it seems that Maxwell oversimplifies the case. I would argue, however, that it is more valuable for gender and literary studies to back up a bit, and look carefully at such characters through a historical lens. Lee's characters are not empowered feminists by twentieth century standards, but they are different from what came before; they are liminal, transitional images of women's power. What Lee was rather doing, and what her work uniquely accomplishes, is more important than what we want it to accomplish.

Oversimplification does both Lee and literary studies a disservice, in that it ignores the true complexities of her work and the cultural moment of the 1890s. The purpose of this project, then, is to revisit this element of Lee's work that has often been brushed over or simplified. Lee's *femmes fatales* are complicated representations that both reify and challenge the trope, and also add new twists – the blurrings of gender, religion, and the supernatural all contribute to create an interstitial mythical figure, who moves beyond the images by Lee's male counterparts without leaping all the way

into second wave feminism. Close examination of these figures allows for a more complex, full, and dynamic articulation of Lee's project as a *fin de siècle* woman on the threshold of a new century.

While Lee wrote aesthetic theory, travel literature, personal essays, novels, children's books, dramas, and art histories and criticisms, this project will focus on her short stories, and even more specifically, her short ghost stories. Close study of this form is valuable because it was developing in the 1880s and 1890s, and many women writers embraced the short story as an alternative to the serial or three-decker novel; Showalter suggests that this may be one of the reasons that so many women of the *fin de siècle* were forgotten, since literature tends to honor the novel more than any other form (Showalter, "Introduction" viii). The ghost story in particular leads to a number of questions that I hope to answer as part of this project: How is the ghost story particularly well-suited to questions of gender and sexuality? Is it, for example, as Ruth Robbins argues, because "gendered indeterminacy" was especially haunting for Lee's audiences (Robbins 199)? Or because the fantastic nature of the form allows for more flexibility in otherwise rigid gender roles? How does Lee use the ghost story form to explore liminality and androgyny, sexuality, gendered beauty and roles? Most specifically, how do the tropes of hauntology and the mythos of the *femme fatale* interact and affect each other? Why are Lee's stories of dangerous women also stories of the supernatural? I explore these questions throughout my readings of three stories. In Chapter One, I examine questions of obsession, doubling, and the implications of same-sex erotics in the *femmes fatales* of "Oke of Okehurst." In Chapter Two, I delve

into issues of gender slippage, beauty and violence, and the Gay Gothic, with “A Wicked Voice” as my central text. In Chapter Three, I explore the decadent Catholicism and crumbling boundaries of the *femme fatale* in the story of “The Virgin and the Seven Daggers.”

Through close reading and analysis of the themes and language within these texts, it is my hope to push Lee scholarship beyond the simple acknowledgement of her use and even alteration of *femmes fatales* to show that these figures are complex, contradictory, and transitional depictions within the changing gender and social roles of the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, Lee’s fatal women both reinforce and challenge the demonization of women as the *femme fatale* and the cultural notions of women’s roles. Exploring these elements allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender politics and literary representations in the *fin de siècle*, and underscores the liminality of that moment in Western thought. As these stories investigate gender, desire, and beauty in the ghostly figure of the sexual and deadly woman, they engage Decadent themes through the eyes and language of a woman writer, and offer a new perspective on these issues at the turn of the last century.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the word “archetype” is often used in a casual way to describe a recurring pattern or character type in literature, a careful look at this term in psychoanalytic thought suggests that this is a slight misappropriation of the word’s intent. According to Carl Jung, an archetype is a “typical basic form, of certain ever-recurring psychic experiences” (qtd. in Frattaroli 173), or a “collective inheritance” of possibilities (Adams 108). In other words, the archetype is a type of universal unconscious, which is given a specific content or shape by individuals. This specific “concrete variation” on the “abstract theme” of archetype is an archetypal image (Adams 108); these

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images are not universal but vary across cultures, eras, and individuals. These are sometimes represented in the cultural myths of a moment; these legends can be seen as “distilled cultural expressions of archetypal motifs” (Frattaroli 173). Traditional Jungian theory outlines only a few key archetypes, such as the anima and animus, the persona, and the shadow, although the possibilities are expanded by later analysts. The figure of the *femme fatale*, then, is a pattern, a recurring theme in Western literature, and may be argued to embody archetypes such as the shadow or the anima. However, the figure is not an archetype in and of itself, but rather a concrete representation of a cultural unconscious.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most well known are Gustave Moreau’s painted representations of the Salome legend, which are similar in their composition, but vary in their detail. An 1876 version of Moreau’s *Salome Dancing Before Herod* shows the *femme fatale* in a white headpiece, which may be what Lee describes as a “turban” (*Hauntings* 69). Another version of the same painting (with the same title, c. 1874-6) depicts a nude Salome, but shows Herod’s “blue caftan” that Lee describes (69), as does Moreau’s *Salome Dancing*, which is sometimes referred to as “Salome Tattooed.” Yet the language that Lee uses to describe the work may refer to the painting by James Tissot, circa 1886-1896, titled *The Daughter of Herodias Dancing*. Since the date for this painting is approximate, however, it is impossible to know whether the story or the painting came first. Nevertheless, Tissot’s image includes red fringe on Salome’s clothing which might be described as “scarlet feathers” (69), and Herod is wearing a gold and “blue caftan” (69).

<sup>3</sup> Critic Theresa Mangum argues that in the New Woman novel *The Beth Book*, Sarah Grand negotiates between the categories of art and politics, creating a blend of the two which better addresses the specific experience, needs, and issues of contemporary women in order to further Grand’s feminist values. Mangum refers to this strategy as both a “woman-centered aesthetic” and an “ethical aesthetics” (64).

<sup>4</sup> Although sexologist Havelock Ellis believed that his contemporaries Lee and Robinson “might serve as a possible case-history for the section on Lesbianism in [Ellis’s book] *Sexual Inversion*” (qtd. in Colby 51), Lee’s most recent biographer Vineta Colby argues that it is more likely that Lee’s “Boston marriages” with Robinson and Anstruther-Thomson, as well as her romantic friendships with other women throughout her life, were not sexual relationships, but were rather based on affection and intellectual companionship (Colby 54). Despite the likely lack of sex in these partnerships, since all of Lee’s long-term committed and emotional relationships were with other women, and since she challenged gender norms in her dress, fiction, and intellectual role, Lee is often claimed as a queer author today.

<sup>5</sup> Critics Sondeep Kandola and Richard Dellamora both delve into the language and evolution of Lee’s feelings about homosexuality in their articles, to different

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conclusions. Kandola argues that Lee was resistant to men's same sex relationships in her private writing prior to the Wilde trial, but that in reaction to Nordau's book, she came to the defense of Wilde and others, calling for "comradeship." Dellamora focuses on the language that Lee uses to review Nordau's work, and suggests that Lee not only defends "intellectual friendships," as Wilde referred to his relationships with other men (536), but that she sees "sexual dissidence as necessary to the very existence of reason" (531).

<sup>6</sup> The book's dedication shows Lee's admiration for Pater's work: "In appreciation of that which, expounding the beautiful things of the past, he has added to the beautiful things of the present" (*Euphorion* n.p.).

<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have used this or similar phrases to describe Lee's interpretation of aestheticism: Kristin Mahoney labels Lee as an "ethical aesthete, as a moral hedonist" (43), Kandola refers to Lee's "ethical aestheticism" (475), and Colby goes so far as to call Lee a "puritan aesthete" who combined her concerns about social justice with her love of beauty (152).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Adeline Tintner argues that James's "The Way It Came" is a retelling of Lee's "Oke of Okehurst." Tintner believes that James's version is a dramatic improvement over Lee's tale.

<sup>9</sup> In their introduction to the 2006 Broadview edition of *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, Pulham and Maxwell refer to the alluring males in both "A Wicked Voice" and "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" as *hommes fatales*. Leaving the feminine "e" on the end of the second word suggests the slippage and traditional femininity of the role. This expression echoes an earlier phrase coined by Neil Davison; in a 2002 article, he describes the stereotype of the Jew as a kind of "homme/femme-fatale."

## Chapter One

Döppelgangers and Disguises: Familial *Femmes Fatales* in “Oke of Okehurst”

Vernon Lee’s collection *Hauntings* (1890), which Henry James described as “gruesome, graceful, *genialisch*” (James, *Letters* 276),<sup>1</sup> brings together four stories that were originally published elsewhere throughout the late 1880s. Lee’s own introduction to these tales frames them as stories of psychological haunting; she declares the most hauntingly “genuine ghost” to be that which is “born of ourselves” (*Hauntings* 39). In other words, we create our own ghosts and hauntings in our subconscious, as Lee explains further: “They are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters” (39). This notion of the interiority and the intimacy of haunting resounds across Lee’s stories, as she explores the variations of the ghostly experience in individual subjectivities. United by Lee’s preface, these stories echo each other with their themes of obsession, the supernatural, violent beauty, art, and the many ways that one can be rooted in, or taken over by, the history of a place or a people. Although the stories twist or obscure their representations of the figure, each tale centers on a *femme fatale* antagonist of some kind. For example, in “Dionea,” the title character is a reincarnation of Venus and a somewhat reluctant fatal woman: she is surprised and confused by men’s obsession with her, and it is seemingly only her sudden bursts of shame or frustration that kill these men. In “A Wicked Voice,”

which I will explore in Chapter Two, the traditional role of the *femme fatale* is taken on by a feminized male character; a *castrato* from the past haunts the narrator with his breathtaking song until the storyteller is driven to a form of artistic death. Although these portrayals alter the common image of the sexualized deadly woman, they are still within that aesthetic tradition, and in some moments mimic the elements of the character that was built by a patriarchal culture and male artists.

Within this collection, two of the stories are especially closely linked, as similar strategies and elements reverberate through both. In both “Amour Dure” and “Oke of Okehurst,” the *femmes fatales* are figures of the past that haunt the present day through their painted portraits. In both cases, the women are masculinized through their direct violence, and the narrators describe both women in bestial terms. Nevertheless, the differences between the two are also significant, as the first addresses revisionist history and the latter plays with gender slippage. In “Amour Dure,” the narrator is Spiridion Trepka, a Polish history professor who tells the story of his growing obsession with Medea da Carpi, a beautiful and dangerous figure from the Renaissance, through his diary entries on a research visit to Italy. After studying her portrait, Trepka becomes increasingly haunted by his admiration and love for the murderess, and even as he defends her actions to himself, he accepts her request to brutally shatter a local monument and thereby damn Medea’s killer and prove Trepka’s love.

Catherine Maxwell argues that Medea’s active power shows a “breaking through” of her static portrait of “cold grandeur” (“From Dionysus” 267), and that the

ghostly *femme fatale* effectively shatters the male artist's urge to immobilize women's beauty by depicting them as dead or sleeping: "The dead Beautiful is invaded by the disruptive power of the female Sublime" (267).<sup>2</sup> Associating Medea with both awe and fear, this interpretation of the character emphasizes her agency in her role as a *femme fatale*, a figure which reacts to and challenges the beauty of women's passivity and objectification. As mentioned previously, Maxwell carries this argument even further when she suggests that Medea is not only an active figure, but a purposefully feminist one: "Lee's sense of the thwarted Medea's power ... not only rewrites the *femme fatale* with a feminist purpose, but also testifies to a rage about the limitations of women's lives" (267). While it's possible that Maxwell is suggesting a parallel between Medea's and Lee's power, "rage" is too hyperbolic a term to describe Lee's experience of gender roles.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I agree that in this story and others Lee's version of the deadly woman does more than merely mimic the tradition of the *femme fatale*. As I've noted, however, I would complicate Maxwell's argument by pointing out that while powerful, these characters and stories reinforce cultural misogyny as often as they challenge it. As "Amour Dure" negotiates the boundaries of Past and present, as well as the real and imagined, the *femme fatale* figure of Medea also straddles the lines of oppression and empowerment. In Lee's hands, this deadly woman does indeed carry what we now recognize as feminist undertones, as she takes power and possession of her own body in the only way made available to her in the sixteenth century. Simultaneously, however, the tale appropriates a form and trope that was already structured predominantly by male artists, and it repeats and reifies

some of the stereotypes and motifs of the patriarchal image of the terrible and terrifying woman.

As one example of this duality, Maxwell posits that Trepka's perception of Medea's murderous behavior as necessary and justifiable suggests a "submerged feminist analysis" on his part (267). Yet while I agree that Trepka is the strongest defender of Medea as a powerful woman and justified killer, and that this superficially indicates an acknowledgement of women's historical position and possibilities for their empowerment within the gendered system, I differ from Maxwell's point by arguing that Trepka is not a reliable source for social commentary in this text. As an anxious sycophant who belittles the culture and dismisses the warnings of the people he has come to study, Trepka's insistence of Medea's worthiness takes on an ironic tone and implies that she is, in reality, simply a murderous and power-hungry woman without justification for her actions. As the physical aggressor who stabs and kills at least one of her six victims, and the direct instigator of others, Medea's power is also masculinized by its violent expression; this problematic representation of women's power is echoed in "Oke of Okehurst," and will be explored more fully in this chapter. Furthermore, the two possibilities offered by outside voices for Medea's identity in this tale are either a goddess or a witch, a dichotomy which reinforces both the exaltation and oppression within women's difference. Again, however, this dichotomy is created by Trepka and the villagers, and may be read as an ironic simplification; this would suggest a subversive and possibly feminist undertone to the

story, and thus a challenge to traditional representations of and reactions to women as either worshipped angels or ravenous demons.

The ghostly Medea, then, is not an embodiment of empowerment, but rather the creation of a woman writer who herself blurred social and literary boundaries, a representation of the ways in which gender politics are in transition at the turn of the century. Although I will not explore this story in detail, I've included this brief discussion of its play with the *femme fatale* figure, as well as my response to Maxwell's slightly reductive interpretation of the deadly woman, as a study in miniature of Lee's project as a whole. While her use of the fatal woman does in some ways disturb the common portrayal of the figure, as a woman of her time, Lee's stories often reinforce patriarchal tropes as well. While Maxwell's argument that Lee's *femme fatale* is a feminist figure responds to "Amour Dure" specifically, I will take this argument as a starting point that all of Lee's deadly woman stories can be read as somewhat alternative to the literary tradition of the character, but are complicated by misogynist elements.

Unlike "Amour Dure," Lee's short story "Oke of Okehurst" unfolds in a contemporary setting in the late nineteenth century. Yet the narrative reiterates the former piece's obsession with a deadly woman figure from the Past. In the latter tale, an artist tells the story of a summer spent in a country house, as he works on a portrait of the owners, Alice and William Oke. Over time, it becomes clear that the lady of the house is obsessed with a scandalous story in her family history and the ancestors involved in the event; another Alice Oke, now long dead, was involved in the murder

of a poet named Christopher Lovelock, who may have also been her lover. The present Alice becomes more and more immersed in the character of her forbear, wearing the dead woman's clothes and intimating that she has a spectral connection to the murdered poet. In doing so, she intentionally drives her traditional and simple husband William mad with jealousy and embarrassment, and he eventually kills her and himself. The *femme fatale* plot in this novella is more complicated than the common format of a sexualized woman wooing and destroying a man to gain power, and as one reflection of this, the story contains not one deadly woman, but two: Alice Oke and her ancestor are doubles, as the younger Alice mimics the elder and haunts through her obsession with the deceased Alice. This doubling echoes the dichotomy that emerges within a single *femme fatale* character in Lee's work, as the story doubles itself by both reinforcing and diverging from the traditional fatal woman figure. As I will illustrate, through suggestions of doubling, gender slippage, objectification, and women's power as both masculinizing and emasculating, "Oke of Okehurst" both plays with and adheres to cultural representations of women at the time.

The double is central both to the plot of this story and to the Freudian *unheimlich*, which suggests that the double is an "object of terror" because it is leftover from a more primitive time in human development and recalls a time "when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside" (Freud, *Uncanny* 143). In other words, doubles are discomfiting because they suggest the possibility of slippage between self and other. The structural and psychological doubling in this text certainly blurs these lines, and further complicates both the haunting and the *femme*

*fatale* elements of the story. The intuitive sense of being a double begins early for young Alice, whose identity with her ancestor has long been a part of her daily life. As cousins, Alice and her future husband played together as children, and even then, she horrified him with her revelry in the dark history of the deadly woman by “dressing up ... playing the story of the wicked Mrs. Oke,” while young William “always piously refused to do the part of [Alice’s husband] Nicholas” (123). The adult Alice continues her attempt to embody her deceased relative by emphasizing their “very singular resemblance” with her dress and accoutrements (118-9), and others also sense the doubleness of the two fatal women separated by centuries. The narrator indicates that the women’s appearance is not merely similar, but in some senses identical: the relatives have “the same strange lines of figure and face ... the same vague eccentricity of expression,” as he notes when seeing the ancestor’s portrait for the first time. “One could fancy that this woman had the same walk, the same beautiful line of nape of the neck ... as her descendant” (118-9). The narrator’s imaginary extension of these physical similarities into movement and mannerism suggests a duality beyond mere physicality, and the “sameness” of the relatives also indicates the conflation of the two Alices that reverberates throughout the text, both reinforcing their doubling and suggesting their interchangeability. Such insistence on the women’s equivalence implies that young Alice’s obsession is a form of narcissism, and belittles their relationship by suggesting the “phobic, often constituted ‘sameness’” that is often “attributed to same-sex couples by the heterosexual glance” (Allen, *Following* 19). Seen as transposable by the narrator, the two Alices’ reduction

to a single character objectifies them to the extent that they lose their individual identities. Although the younger Alice finds some power through this similarity, then, the equation of the two women denies them both individuality and agency, and reinforces cultural deprecation of women and homosocial relationships.

As the younger Alice has been shaped by her obsession, it seems that she too can no longer separate her sense of self from her relative; she is constantly “insisting upon her ... almost identity with the original Alice Oke” (140). This echoes Freud’s argument that someone who identifies with a Doppelgänger can “become unsure of his true self” and thereby become “duplicated, divided, and interchanged” (Freud, *Uncanny* 142) as the lines between self and other begin to blur. The impossible amount of detail that young Alice relays about the conversations and sensations the first Alice experienced indicates that the second Alice’s connection to her ancestor is something intense and unknowable. As she continues to self-identify as the double whose individuality has blurred with the other, the descendant Alice reads aloud the letters that the murdered poet Christopher Lovelock wrote for the first fatal Oke woman “as one might fancy a woman would read love-verses addressed to herself” (127). This scene suggests that either her obsession with her ancestor has passed into a delusional conflation of their identities, or, I would argue, that Alice is haunted and possessed by her ancestor, even if she creates this haunting herself. As the young woman is somewhat lost in her fantastic history, her personification of the deceased in which she “enter[s] completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman, this Alice,” and eliminates the separation between them so completely that the original

Alice “seemed not to be another woman, but herself [young Alice]” (131), she brings the long dead ancestor back through her intense empathy. In this way, the elder Alice is caught between the living and the dead, as a ghostly figure that haunts the sensibility and spirit of her descendant.

Beyond the traditional notion of haunting, scholar Julian Wolfreys argues in his book *Victorian Hauntings*, “haunting remains in place as a powerful form of displacement, as that disfiguring of the present, as the trace of non-identity within identity, and through signs of alterity, otherness, abjection or revenance” (1). This definition describes Henry James’ more famous and much later story “A Jolly Corner,” as it traces Spencer Brydon’s anxiety over and non-identification with his Othered self; Wolfreys’ classification of internal haunting applies equally well to “Oke of Okehurst.” Although the dominant theme of the Alices is sameness rather than otherness, I would suggest that the rooting of the ancestral Alice in her offspring’s identity forms a strange space of otherness within the latter’s sense of her own Being, or an element of “non-identity.” Young Alice’s embodiment of the original also acts as a form of revenance, or return: the long-dead relative is brought to the front of everyone’s consciousness once again and in this way is brought back from the grave, enacted by young Alice as a way to dominate the men around her. Within these parameters, the younger Alice is haunted by the elder, even though the latter never directly appears in the story.

Even more intriguing, however, are the ways in which the haunting of this tale takes place through the body of the young and living Alice. Although the ancestor is

ostensibly the ghost at the Okehurst manor, it is only through the behavior of the descendant that the haunting takes place, since there are no sightings or other manifestations of the elder spirit. The younger Alice is described throughout the story with ghostly language: she is “diaphanous” (123), “shadowy” (127), “elusive” (141), “ethereal” (143), a person of “incorporeality” (151), and the narrator claims to have never “thought about her as a body – bones, flesh, that sort of thing” (114). The immateriality of the young Alice underscores her role as a haunting figure, as the memory of the elder Mrs. Oke builds and destroys those around her. The younger Alice’s ethereality is so consuming, in fact, that at moments the narrator cannot describe her at all, and in fact is never able to represent her on canvas and complete her portrait: “If the pencil and brush ... can’t succeed, how is it possible to give even the vaguest notion with mere wretched words” (115). In her earthly spectrality, Alice eludes language. Her memory, however, apparently haunts the artist narrator long after her death, ultimately urging him to tell the story of her last weeks. This indescribability is also a recurring element of the gothic as it negotiates the fear of the unknown and the unspeakable; in this, the scenario creates a “radically unstable” discourse of the unspeakable gothic (Kincaid 8). In other words, the phenomenon of haunting disrupts language itself; Alice is indescribable because she is both haunting and haunted.

As a spectral presence, the young Alice also languishes in the room that none of the others in the family will enter; although nothing awful has ever happened there, the entire Oke clan senses something wrong and dangerous in the “yellow room”

(125). Alice, however, spends hours by herself in this space, sitting “in the dress of her ancestress, confronting, as it were, that vague, haunting something that seemed to fill the place” (130). Although the narrator suggests that it is the murdered poet Lovelock that inhabits the room as a phantom, it seems that like the ghost of the ancestor Alice, the spirit of Lovelock may be built within the memories and psyches of the characters in the story. Fitting with the rest of the narrative, the ancestral lover is arguably one of Lee’s ghosts that are “born of ourselves” (39), rather than a literal representation of haunting as a ghost trapped on earth. Rather than centering the haunting in this story on Lovelock, I would argue that it is the larger Past and history that actually haunt Alice, and that she in turn haunts the yellow room and those around her. It is through this web of haunting that the doubled *femmes fatales* in this narrative operate: the elder Alice is a fatal woman not only in her killing of Lovelock, but also in that her spectral presence so possesses the younger Alice that the descendant becomes a victim of the *femme fatale* and brings destruction on herself. In turn, the younger Alice becomes a deadly woman in her own rite as her obsession grows and she emotionally tortures and beguiles her husband into violence and death. This simultaneous destruction and empowerment reflects the larger construction of the *femme fatale* in these stories, as the figure both denigrates women by reinforcing cultural misogyny, and yet pushes back against these stereotypes by playing with normative gender roles.

In addition to the unusual doubling of the *femme fatale*, one of the most notable alterations of the traditional fatal-woman plot in this story is the way in which

it plays with gender and sexuality. Instead of the expected male obsession with a sexualized and deadly woman, in “Oke of Okehurst,” the primary connection to the original *femme fatale* is a homosocial one: although the original Alice’s most direct murder is of the poet Lovelock, this tale focuses on the younger Alice, who is so intrigued by her mysterious and violent ancestor that she destroys herself, a victim of the *femme fatale*. The doubling complicates this claim by depicting the descendant as a second fatal woman, whose victim is also a man. However, the central relationship is between the two Alices; it is this connection that sparks every other event in the piece. This relationship, though, is yet again one of memory and haunting. Although the Alices’ connection structures the story and dictates the younger Alice’s behavior, there is no indication of the elder Alice appearing in any form other than her portrait, and she does not have any real agency in the events that follow. Rather, this ancestral fatal woman is another example of Lee’s ghosts which are “things of the imagination, born there, bred there” (39); in other words, the specter of the original Alice is spawned in the descendant’s own being. Nevertheless, the homosociality of this *femme fatale* again alters the traditional narrative of the deadly woman. Perhaps most centrally, this relationship is not an explicitly sexualized one, as Alice is more interested in her ancestor as a possibility of power rather than physical beauty and lust. Yet the intensity with which the younger Alice is drawn to her ancestor, and yearns to enact her presence, suggests an erotic element to their relationship. According to Freud, Eros serves to “establish ever greater unities” and drives the urge “to bind together” (Freud, *Outline* 18), operating as a “fusion making one out of two” (Lacan

138). In this sense, the erotic connection between the two women leads to the blurring of their identities. Moreover, the connection between them is based on desire; young Alice wants to embody the elder, and to “resemble the Alice Oke of the year 1626 was the caprice, the mania, the pose, the whatever you may call it, of the Alice Oke of 1880” (122). Rather than controlling or possessing the *femme fatale*, in this same-sex reincarnation of the legend, the victim wants to become the fatal woman herself.

Furthermore, it seems that rather than completely destroying the victim, this version of admiration and desire in fact completes the self. The narrator claims that he can see “the real character of the woman” only when the young Alice is talking about her ancestor (122). This revelation of her true essence is so clear that the artist vows to himself that he will paint his subject wearing her ancestor’s white dress in the yellow room, even if he loses his commission, because her obsession “completed her personality” and this would allow him to paint “far away [his] best work” (129). In yearning after a deadly woman, the younger woman is made noticeably more whole. In the end, the younger Alice achieves her desires: she herself becomes a *femme fatale*, as she emotionally traumatizes her husband William through her deliberate mocking and obsession with the Past that ultimately leads to his murder/suicide.

While the murder of the fatal woman is not unheard of in the genre – the title character of Wilde’s *Salomé* was also murdered, for example – it is unusual; here it appears to suggest a retaliation for same-sex desire and platonic completion since it threatens the hold that men have over their wives. However, on a closer reading, Alice’s murder could be viewed as a victory. As a character that yearns for a woman and a time that

has been past for centuries, the ultimate and only way to join the elder Alice is in a ghostly afterlife. Although the young Alice's mouth is contorted in death, "her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly" (152). This not only suggests that the young Alice was at peace with her loss of life, but also recalls earlier language that connects her "eccentric passion in the past" with her "irrelevant and far-off smile" (122). This echoing of her expression and the language used to describe it in the moment of her death suggests that her murder re-connects Alice to history, and to the belief that she will finally be with the elder Alice. Her victory in death suggests a positive end to the homosocial fascination, as the Alices will be united for the first time as powerful women in a same-sex dynamic. This alternative ending twists the traditional sexualized violence of the *femme fatale*. Playing with the presumed dynamics of the myth encourages readers to re-examine the assumptions surrounding male dominance, and defies the standard tale of the *fin de siècle*.

Another notable element of the gender slippage in this short story is its brief scenes of cross-dressing. The younger Alice is described as wearing a "boy's cap" in the opening lines (105), and there are two dominant scenes of women in men's clothing in this story, which double and echo each other. In the first, the elder Alice dresses as a groom in order to join her husband on the night ride to kill Lovelock; the clothing is primarily a disguise.<sup>4</sup> Yet the costume seems to offer this Alice access to an aggressive masculinity, as if by donning it she has taken on the confidence, activeness, and violence that are traditionally gendered male. When she and her husband encounter her alleged lover on the dark road, Mrs. Oke hangs back from the

fight; when her husband is endangered, however, she “suddenly rode up from behind and shot Lovelock through the back” (134). This direct involvement in the murder of her victim is unusual in the *femme fatale* tradition, as these figures often torture or tempt men to their destruction, ruining them with the power of their sexual allure rather than this masculinized form of violence. It is notable that even in her male garb, Alice is costumed in a subservient role to her husband; while her gendered disguise apparently enervates her will to actively murder, the hierarchical binary still holds. Thus it seems that in Lee’s hands, even phallic women are still disempowered by the overarching assumption of patriarchy. In the second cross-dressing scenario, the younger Alice mimics her ancestor’s masculine costume, “profaning the clothes of the dead,” for a masquerade one rainy afternoon at Okehurst (138). She appears before the crowd as “a boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leather belt, and big buff boots,” and explains the costume as one that her “namesake Alice Oke” wore to go riding (138). While the earlier scene carries no valuing of the cross-dressing behavior, however, this vignette is shaded by the narrator’s discomfort with the situation. He describes Alice’s eyes as “preternaturally bright,” and her smile as “bold, perverse” (138). In other words, he suggests that in taking on a masculine costume, the younger Alice has gone against nature; the crowd, too, is startled into silence by the display, and finds “something questionable” in the gender-bending behavior (138).

While the elder Alice adopts male garb in order to take on a masculine role and aggression, the younger Alice seems to do so simply to shock her guests and her

husband. William Oke is a Victorian man of his time and is riddled with anxieties about class, social standing, and gender roles. In an imagined encounter between Oke and a dandy, the former “felt misgivings about a man who could wear a velvet coat in town” (107), and he later worries that the servants will hear the family gossip (124). Since he yearns for a more traditional middle class life, where his wife would fulfill her domestic role as a hostess and social director, her public manipulation of her husband’s social and gender anxieties is the most direct way for the younger Alice to hurt him. Upon seeing her in the outfit, William is deeply ashamed, and turns “white as ashes, and ... pressed his hand almost convulsively to his mouth” (138). In this instance, it seems that the younger Alice dons men’s clothing not as a way to cloak herself with traditionally male power, but as a way to rob her husband of the agency of his traditional masculinity; she gains control by shaming and emasculating William, negotiating his nineteenth-century values to her own benefit. The gender slippage in these instances is not an expression of an inner sense of gender’s fluidity, but rather a calculated device to alter the power structure of the world that the Alices inhabit.

While these moments of cross-dressing allow the women in this story to take power into their own hands, engage in a more active role than is traditionally granted to middle-class housewives, and challenge notions of essentialist gender, these scenes also reify some of the most deeply rooted stereotypes and fears of a patriarchal culture. When the elder Alice finds power only through aggression and active violence, her manly clothing merely highlights the fact that she must become masculinized in order to gain this authority. This implication echoes the Freudian phallic mother even more

closely than most *femmes fatales*, as Alice takes on male coverings and arms herself with the phallic symbol of the pistol. While the phallic mother is generally presumed to be both terrifying and alluring, as she takes on masculine power and disturbs the gendered binary, I would argue that the masculinization that occurs here goes beyond the symbolic. Instead, the elder Alice literally cannot find power without male clothing and weapons; she cannot maintain her womanhood and also have control in her life. Although Lee is experimenting with variations on the *femme fatale* here, and avoids the association of sexuality as women's only power, the suggestion that all power is masculine reifies the masculine/feminine dichotomy rather than challenging it. Furthermore, William Oke's consistent emasculation by his wife's powerful cruelty grows throughout the story, until he becomes "perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman" (144). His belittlement and figurative castration by his dominant wife echoes cultural stereotypes of the uxorious husband, and his complete impotence in the face of her taunting suggests that not only is female power cruel and nagging, but that a woman with power is emasculating to the men around her. In other words, women and men can't both have control – a slippery slope back to a fear and anxiety of women's voices and decisions.

The reinforcing of the traditional *femme fatale* structure as written by men is also clear in the role of women in this story as objects of the male gaze. This is particularly emphasized in a tale that centers on both a figure in a painting and a woman who is having her portrait painted; these ghostly spectral women are also closely connected to the visual spectral, from the Latin "specere," to see ("Spectre").

Despite his claim that she is indescribable, the narrator dedicates pages at a stretch to the attempt to depict the younger Alice's physical self as "exquisite and strange" (115), and most of their interactions take place as she sits for her portrait. While he draws at least 130 sketches of her, however, the narrator is never able to complete his portrait of Alice (143), yet "wished to go on studying her" (118). This incompleteness is not directly explained, but may underscore the previously mentioned gothic nature of the text, or may suggest an artistic impotence or death for the narrator after his involvement with the *femme fatale* duo. As the observer exerting his gaze over the young Alice and representing her on paper, the narrator is consistently in the more powerful role as he watches and judges her behavior and her physical self. Although she does not seem to resist or reject her position as the "gazed upon," the emphasis on her position as an objectified being to be looked at and classified suggests a reification of the *femme fatale* as a sexualized object for men to admire, even as she destroys them. This reading is slightly complicated by the role of the younger Alice in objectifying her ancestor, as the younger is engrossed with the visual representation of her relative. In gazing at the portrait, she seems to take on another masculine element by objectifying the elder Alice and largely reducing her to an outward physical appearance and one murderous act. This simplification of her ancestor hints that as much as young Alice yearns to embody her forbear, she bases her performance of the role on such superficial information that her interpretation cannot help but be a parody of the original; even as the stereotypical female imitator, rather than creator of ideas, the descendant cannot enact a full or round version of the elder Alice without

disproportionately emphasizing the body and violence of the deadly woman. Hence, young Alice, as the victim of the elder *femme fatale*, fetishizes her ancestor, and falls into many of the same perspectives as male victims; her objectification of the ancestral deadly woman echoes the traditional *femme fatale* tale, as told by a patriarchal culture.

Finally, in a story told through the voice of a male narrator, Alice is persistently labeled with misogynistic stereotypes and anxieties about women. Although he is superficially complimentary, a closer look at the narrator's list of adjectives and metaphors indicates that he is instead echoing centuries of reductive characterization. He frames Alice as "far-fetched," an "arrangement," with an "artificial perverse sort of grace and research" in her bearing (106), implying that her every move is a calculated performance and false. While she is so stunning that the narrator yearns to see her once more, she is also associated with animal life and the bestial. Over and over, she is labeled a "creature," albeit with flattering adjectives attached (107), and she is also cast as a peacock, a stag (114), and a snake (147). These animals are clearly representative of the cultural images of women and the *femme fatale* near the turn of the century, as "woman and animal were coextensive" in the artistic consciousness of the moment (Dijkstra 283). Women are often depicted in visual and literary arts of the time as strutting and proud, hunted, and devious although in this case, these animal descriptions are strangely masculinized. As Dijkstra points out, the serpentine representation was especially ubiquitous, as Eve and the snake were conflated (305). To round out the image, the narrator describes Alice as exotic (Lee, *Hauntings* 130), vain (116), and childlike with a "curious, inactive, half-

invalidish life” (129). This language not only reflects many of the most common derisions of women throughout Western culture, it also echoes some of the coded misogyny of male Decadents. Even as they claimed to worship women as part of the cult of Beauty, examples such as the centrality of the female body for men’s gaze in Wilde’s *Salomé*, and the torturous and devouring “sudden serpents” of Swinburne’s Venus in “*Laus Veneris*,” indicate the common dismissal and objectification of women’s value as well as the association of women with a natural and animalistic sexuality, revealing the suspicion that was engrained in the literary and artistic traditions of the time. In fact, this mimicry is so pronounced that this narrator could be read as a satirical version of a male Aesthete: he is an oppressive figure that paints himself as a supporter and lover of women’s Beauty, yet when it comes time to actually represent Her on the page, he is left dumbstruck, impotent, and unable to create a reasonable facsimile of the other sex. Nevertheless, in a story where this narrator maintains the dominant voice, and without any notable reasons for him not to carry the writer’s trust, it seems that this is not intended as a satire, but rather a haunted text in the well-established field of *femme fatale* writing.

As Lee employs these existing structures of thought and language surrounding women and the *femme fatale*, she confirms the extant models by reinforcing misogyny through her figurative language, and by suggesting the simultaneously masculinizing and emasculating effects of women’s power. Nevertheless, she concurrently challenges other elements of the tradition, such as gender structures and heterosexual desire. In complicating the web of obsession in this story through same-sex

fascination and a multiplicity of victims and fatal women, Lee offers different models of and reasons for attachment. She continues these challenges to heteronormativity, and further explores objectification, essentialized gender, and psychological haunting in her story “A Wicked Voice.”

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote from a letter that James wrote to Lee in response to her story collection, *genialisch* translates as brilliant, genius, and possibly eccentric.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell points out that this admiration of the “lovely, sensitive and vulnerable woman whose suffering culminates in death” and is thereby “fixed or frozen” on the page (254) has been a theme in Western art and literature for centuries. In particular, she points to Poe’s famous argument that “the death of a beautiful woman” is the ultimate “poetical topic” (qtd. in Maxwell 254), and the ongoing tension in Robert Browning’s poetry between the desire to possess and “freeze” a woman in death or art and an inability to do so (255), as particular examples of culture’s interest in the Beautiful dead woman. Following Dijkstra in his chapter on “Dead Ladies and the Fetish of Sleep,” I would add to these examples the sleeping or dead women in some of the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites, such as John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-2), Lord Frederic Leighton’s *Flaming June* (1895), and John William Waterhouse’s *Ariadne* (1898).

<sup>3</sup> As an economically independent woman who published over 40 books yet avoided the overt politicization of the popular New Woman novels, I would suggest that Lee didn’t experience the severe “limitations” placed on many women. While she was certainly aware of these issues as an intellectual woman of the time, and was likely frustrated and annoyed by her exclusion from education and the pointed and arguably misogynistic criticism of her personality and style by writers such as Max Beerbohm, her writing doesn’t suggest that she was enraged by the gender inequity. Lee’s political interests were more focused on antivivisectionism, socialism (which she explores in essays in *Baldwin* (1886) and *Vital Lies* (1912), among others) and, in her later life with the experience of World War I, pacifism (which was the lesson of her drama *Satan the Waster* (1920), and arguably one of the reasons for her decline in popularity).

<sup>4</sup> In the miniature portrait that the young Alice keeps of Lovelock, he is depicted as “a young man, with auburn curls and a peaked auburn beard, dressed in black, but with lace about his neck, and large pear-shaped pearls in his ears” (128). Scholar Ruth

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Robbins and others claim that these feminine accessories and flowing hair suggest that Lovelock is also an example of gender slippage and androgyny in this text. This argument, while fitting with the other gender-bending of the story, seems anachronistic since his character was killed in 1626, a time when many men had similar styles and the physical markers for masculinity were quite different. Furthermore, even in the late nineteenth century, these visual cues may render the character somewhat effeminate, but this seems most closely linked to the cultural vision of the dandy; the poet Lovelock's feminization may associate him with the Decadents.

## Chapter Two

“Violin of flesh and blood”: An *Homme Fatale* and the Gay Gothic in “A Wicked Voice”

As the last story in *Hauntings*, “A Wicked Voice” grapples with questions of essentialism and construction of gender and sexuality, and the protagonist is haunted by homoerotic longing and violent beauty through the ethereal voice of a ghostly sopranoist:

Once or twice I thought I had got hold of what I had looked to for so long ... But as soon as I tried to lay hold of my theme, there arose in my mind the distant echo of that voice, of that long note swelled slowly by insensible degrees, that long note whose tone was so strong and so subtle. (*Hauntings* 165)

A story of obsession and passion, this piece revises Lee’s earlier tale “A Culture Ghost; or Winthrop’s Adventure” (1881), and is her most radical alteration of the traditional gendering in the *femme fatale* mythos: in this tale, the deadly woman figure is in fact not a woman at all, but a feminized and homoerotically charged male. The story is framed by the lamentations and frustrated curses of the narrator Magnus, a young composer who yearns to write Wagnerian operas, but instead is haunted by vocals in the baroque style of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> As long as the voice fills his memory, Magnus rants, he can write only in this anachronistic form that he despises. As an explanation for his inability to control his own musical creations, Magnus tells the story of his encounter with the ghost of Zaffarino, an eighteenth-century operatic performer.<sup>2</sup> The singer’s name comes from the Italian word for the sapphire which

was supposedly given to him by the devil (157), and his androgynous face and vocal range imply that in life he was a *castrato*, an androgynous figure which I address in this chapter. Zaffarino's androgynous voice is almost supernaturally overwhelming in its beauty. Notoriously, when he was alive his song could kill a woman in moments if the singer so chose: "His first song could make any woman turn pale and lower her eyes, the second make her madly in love, while the third song could kill her off on the spot" (159). The singer's reputation of having a fatal voice is sealed by a legend related early in the tale, which details the death of a skeptical woman after only two audiences with Zaffarino. After seeing a portrait of the performer, Magnus is both repulsed and magnetized by the figure, and when he begins to hear the ghost's song in present day, the narrator rhapsodizes about the erotic experience of this "wicked voice" even as he claims to resist it. These hauntings build to a crescendo when Magnus witnesses a ghostly repetition of the singer's infamous vocal murder of a woman at Mistrà: "I understood that I was before an assassin, that he was killing this woman, and killing me also, with his wicked voice" (180). These experiences traumatize Magnus so intensely that they leave the narrator unable to write anything but old-fashioned solos filled with "nice roulades and flourishes" for a vocalist (163), a form of artistic death.

Although this story plays with many of the trappings of the *femme fatale* trope by bending the gender roles, imaging a same-sex attraction, and killing the victim's creativity rather than his physical self, it simultaneously reifies some of the misogynist and conservative attitudes toward the body and androgyny. In a crucial twist to the

traditional tale, Magnus is terrorized not only by the *homme fatale* figure, but also by his own sexual anxieties. While Zaffarino's manifestation as a ghostly apparition initially seems to be a more traditional form of literary haunting than the purely psychological haunting of "Oke of Okehurst," the singer's androgyny and vocal eroticism effectively destroy Magnus's identity as an artist by continuing to disturb Magnus indefinitely; he is haunted by memories long after the ghost has dissipated. After exploring the implications of how this story treats the body and skews gender in relation to dominant notions of women and identity, I argue that this intensive and ongoing haunting by the *homme fatale* suggests more than a passing erotic interest. Instead, the ghost reflects the narrator's own double consciousness of the phantasm of his forbidden and denied homosexuality. Playing off the traditional *femme fatale* figure, this story explores the beauty and eroticism of violence, the objectification and feminization of alternative masculinities, and the trope of the "Gay Gothic" (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*). Ultimately, Lee's representation of an androgynous *homme fatale* challenges normative gender and sexuality, while simultaneously reinforcing the physicality and objectification of the traditional deadly woman; exploring these moves complicates initial assumptions about Lee's radical revision of the popular trope.

One of the elements that carries through to this story from the traditional female *femme fatale* and other cultural notions of womanhood is the emphasis on the body. In this text, it is Zaffarino's body that is central, and despite the eroticism of his voice, the singer's body is mostly framed more negatively as a site of violence and

objectification. Mirroring the cultural treatment of women's bodies initially seems to be reinforcing the misogynistic and oppressive elements of the zeitgeist, as this move repeats the problematics of cultural views of women's bodies and projects them onto an emasculated male body. While this is certainly part of what's happening with this text, I would complicate this reification by suggesting the possibility that by assigning these traditionally feminine forms of oppression to a male character, the story in some sense highlights the prevalence and pain of such experiences, particularly to a late nineteenth-century audience that has been subtly taught by their patriarchal culture to give more weight to men's problems. In other words, mapping female oppression onto the male body serves to defamiliarize the pervasive distaste for and restriction of women's bodies, and therefore is a somewhat empowering move to highlight and thereby condemn this form of belittlement.

One example of the tale's scorn for the body is Magnus's reaction to the corporeal. As a projection of his body, Zaffarino's eponymous voice is clearly central to this entire story. While most characters find it breathtakingly beautiful, even dangerously so as women "turn pale and lower their eyes" after hearing one song, and could be dead by the third if Zaffarino wishes it (*Hauntings* 159), the narrator Magnus persistently claims that the voice as an instrument disgusts him. While his direct experience with the voice of the ghostly *castrato* is decidedly ethereal and erotic, Magnus insists that not only does he prefer the more mytho-heroic Wagnerian style, but that the human voice and the "execrable art of singing" (154-5) are overly admired, despicable, and even darkly misleading to otherwise great composers like

Handel: “O cursed human voice, violin of flesh and blood” (154). Although this rage and anxiety over the voice is certainly partly an expression of Magnus’s own haunting experience and his frustration over his inability to detach himself from the voice of Zaffarino, it also seems to reflect a deeper aversion for the physical body. The intensely visceral description of the voice as an instrument of flesh suggests the threat that Magnus feels by the incursion of the voice, and therefore the body, into his realm of aloof masculinity. He deeply mistrusts the voice “which was not invented of the intellect, but begotten of the body” (156). In other words, the voice unavoidably suggests a more earthy, primitive, and therefore culturally feminine music, which threatens to invade Magnus’s Wagnerian masculine intellectualism.<sup>3</sup> While great music affects listeners by “moving the soul,” Magnus argues that the voice instead “stirs up the dregs of our nature” (156). This suggestion that the voice is not only grossly corporeal but also primitively sexual again reflects cultural notions of women and the body in the late nineteenth century, and seems to reinforce the dismissal of women as controlled by their physical nature.

In addition to being an instrument of the body, Magnus claims that the voice is destructively evil; it is “fashioned with the subtle tools, the cunning hands, of Satan” (154), a form of “the Beast calling” to wake up true sin in the world (156). The accusation that the voice is in fact evil furthers this portrayal of Magnus as a somatophobic man who is terrified of the corporeal, and also underscores his concerns that the voice acts as a temptation that will damn otherwise great men to mediocrity. The combination of the corporeality and the treacherous enticement of the voice

underscores the ways in which issues that are usually gendered feminine are being mapped onto the male body in this story; both the raw physicality of the image and the Eve-like temptation are of course stereotypes that are not only generally associated with women, but with the *femme fatale* in particular. If these bombastic claims about the evils of the corporeal were made about a woman, they would be normalized and a familiar part of both the *femme fatale* trope and other cultural notions. However, associating Magnus's suspicions about the danger and primitive nature of the body with the male Zaffarino ironizes the repulsion, and renders it a strange and petty reaction to the physical. This incongruity further undermines and skews the Aesthetes' resistance to the body, as inferior to the mind. Therefore, while Magnus's aversion to the voice as an extension of the body certainly frames the traditionally feminized corporeality as disgusting and seems to reinforce nineteenth-century misogyny, associating these fears with a male singer in fact undermines the stereotype and calls attention to it. This move thereby deflates the devaluation of women as primitive and natural, and challenges the common gender values and *femme fatale* mythos.

Similarly to "Oke of Okehurst," this story also emphasizes the body as an object for the male gaze. As a long-dead figure, Zaffarino is once again reductively characterized only by his murderous ways and his physicality, which in this case includes both his "downy, veiled" voice (171) and his "effeminate, fat face" yet "almost beautiful" appearance (162), and it is again a painted portrait of him that kindles the narrator's obsession. Beyond the many descriptions of Zaffarino's

physical appearance, however, the most startling objectification of his character is only implied: through the depiction of the singer's androgynous face and voice, as well as his historical moment, the story hints that the beautiful singer is a *castrato*. Zaffarino's irresistible tone and timber is the result of this procedure, and sounds like "a man's voice which had much of a woman's" (170), since vocal development was halted before it could deepen. Yet because the *castrato* is not a boy, but a full-grown man, his lungs and technique are that of an adult, and the training for these performers developed their vocal cords so that the "high, flexible, and brilliant sounds of the voice could be augmented by prodigious power and almost superhuman breath control" (Somerset-Ward 65). The dramatic mutilation and training of the *castrati* results in Zaffarino's voice that is between sexes and ages: "Its youthfulness was veiled, muffled, as it were, in a sort of downy vagueness, as if a passion of tears withheld" (*Hauntings* 170). The emotional and physical power of these voices is well-documented, and as opera historian Richard Somerset-Ward posits, the voice of a *castrato* "could produce crowd-pleasing pyrotechnics" as well as containing "great subtlety and shades of emotion that could move listeners to tears" (65). While the intensity of Magnus's response is not surprising, then, this beauty was the result of a violent mutilation that was almost extinct by the late eighteenth century (64).

As a form of objectification, castration in this case is an extreme example of violence for an aesthetic purpose.<sup>4</sup> As the body of the young singer is transformed, even mutilated for the pleasure of others, the *castrato*, whose voice would have been similar to a soprano or countertenor, is effectively turned into an art object that lacks

agency or power in the exchange: most *castrati* did not choose the surgery themselves, but were volunteered by economically desperate families (Somerset-Ward 63). Unlike Zaffarino, few were ever in a position of admiration and fame. As I will address in a moment, this element of the tale raises many questions about the fluidity and stricture of gender and culture. Yet as an act upon the body, this aesthetic castration certainly seems to reinforce dangerous notions about the control of others through violence, specifically through sexual damage and repression. Considering this story as a mirror of the *femme fatale* tradition, this severe objectification and genteel brutality disturbingly reinforces particularly excessive forms of misogyny wherein women are powerless objects for the enjoyment of others, but also hints at and perhaps reifies some less dramatic forms of controlling the female body such as the discourse of eugenics and the cultural repression of women's sexuality. Of course, the *femme fatale* figure is traditionally provocatively sexualized, as a sign of her unnatural womanhood and danger; while Zaffarino is eroticized in other ways, this literal de-sexing is somewhat antithetical to that representation. The singer's allure may be a reflection of the *femme fatale*'s sexuality without procreation, which would have been a frightening element of the figure in a time of cultural shifting. Nevertheless, castration for any reason is striking, and suggests a medicalized oppression; since Zaffarino reflects the fatal woman in this tale, his mutilation suggests a commentary on the cultural treatment of women's bodies rather than merely a repetition. While the violent beauty in this tale reflects misogynist images of controlling the body, the physicality of the oppression and the rupturing of the gender positions calls attention

to these elements as horrific and notable. In this sense, Zaffarino's castration partially challenges the objectification of the *femme fatale* legend and *fin de siècle* women by underscoring the dark nature of oppression with shocking corporeality.

Notably, Zaffarino's castration does not completely undo him, and the singer does have some power as an *homme fatale* through his deadly voice and haunting presence for both men and women. Since his operatic distinctiveness, and thereby his one source of power, is a direct result of his castration, this story also suggests a corollary between oppression and hidden power, perhaps offering a challenge to the notion of women as weak or helpless, and paralleling the power of woman as a *femme fatale*. Since the *castrato's* voice is ethereal and irresistible, striking in its "strange, exotic, unique quality" (165), there is also a close relationship proposed in this story between beauty and violence. This association echoes the traditional version of the *femme fatale*, since her very appeal comes through her stature as a dangerous and deadly woman. In a subtler version of this trope, Zaffarino is also sexualized by violence, and arguably like his female counterparts, he is also a victim of a patriarchal culture that leaves him few other options for power.

While Zaffarino's castration suggests both subjugation and possible empowerment in the body, the violent de-sexing of the act clearly has implications for the definitions and treatment of gender in Lee's story.<sup>5</sup> While the *femme fatale* trope is clearly being recast when the fatal woman is male, Zaffarino's castration also seems to skew and question the binary gender structure itself: it turns the figure into not a masculine representation of the trope, but an androgynous one. When strangers hear

the *castrato*'s voice on the canals of Venice but cannot see who is singing, they "dispute whether the voice belonged to a man or a woman" (170), an understandable reaction to the incredibly high range of such a singer. The debate, however, suggests that Zaffarino in some sense embodies both the masculine and the feminine as defined by the crowd. Furthermore, the listeners in this scenario describe his voice with "incongruous adjectives," each person contradicting the other, as "every one had some new definition" of the sound (170). This suggests that Zaffarino is so dramatically outside of traditional gender norms that not only do strangers disagree about his sex, but they must develop new understandings of what gender means and how to categorize others according to these alternate definitions. Yet while these moments initially seem to suggest a redefinition of the dichotomous nature of gender,<sup>6</sup> the fact that it is a *castrato* that embodies this androgyny indicates that gender is less fluid than a "new definition" initially indicates; the physical facts of the character's body imply that alternative masculinities and challenges to normative gender occur only through the complete removal and denial of one's manhood, in this case a literal castration. The corporeality of this version of gender slippage actually reinforces more essentialist notions of gender: men who are born men can step outside of cultural masculinity only when they are completely and harshly emasculated. As an extreme version of a feminized man who dedicates his life to beauty, Zaffarino's castration may suggest a sharp critique of the male aesthetes contemporaneous to Lee, who were also bending dominant notions of masculinity, as it suggests an emasculation of these types of men. Furthermore, the underlying implication that the feminine or even

androgynous is really a butchered and partial aspect of the masculine, even if the result is pure beauty, reifies misogynistic cultural mythologies and aspersions of women being merely incomplete men, and of man being the true model of culture.

Similarly to the essentialism of Zaffarino's androgyny that comes only through castration, the narrator Magnus reinforces normative gender by continually depicting the sopranoist as feminized. According to the narrator, the singer is "a demon with a woman's face" (156) and has a smile "like a bad woman's" (180); this smile is "brazen and cruel" like that of the "wicked, vindictive women" in the *femme fatale* stories by his childhood authors Swinburne and Baudelaire (162). These direct associations of the singer and closely contemporary *femmes fatales* throughout literature both underscore his status as a feminized man, and also call attention to this text as a construction that is skewing cultural expectations of gender within the extensive fatal woman tradition. Even when Magnus does acknowledge that Zaffarino is male, he emphasizes his non-masculine qualities, and perhaps satirically connects him to the foppish Decadents by describing the performer as an "effeminate beau" (157). The use of the word "beau" not only suggests the singer's status as a love object for his admirers and his role as a boyfriend or sweetheart, but also indicates that Zaffarino is "an exquisite, a fop, a dandy" ("Beau"). This could again be read as a jab at the male aesthetes, suggesting once again that their challenge to gender normativity was so extreme that they had become emasculated and overtly feminine.

In another feminizing move, Magnus often describes the singer's voice as "downy" (170, 173), an adjective that critics have debated: while critic Carlo

Caballero argues that this language associates the singer with “the feminine, motherly breast” (390), scholar Angela Leighton responds directly to this interpretation by arguing that the downiness of the singer’s voice is reminiscent of the soft fuzz on a young man’s face, which in the case of the *castrato* is a “suggestion of a puberty stopped just in time” (7). While both points are well-argued, I would follow Caballero and suggest that downiness connotes a softness that is closely associated with the traditionally feminine; furthermore, when taken more literally the word of course refers to a bird’s tender feathers, an animal whose nesting and nurturing of its young is often used as a metaphor for human women’s domesticity. More importantly, however, the word “downy” is often used in descriptions that continue on to describe Zaffarino’s voice as veiled. Magnus remembers the “mysteriously downy, veiled notes” with a mixture of revulsion and longing (171); this description of the singer’s tone associates him solely with the feminine, as it hints at wedding costumes and exotic Orientalism.

This insistence on Zaffarino’s full feminization rather than a more fluid androgyny is arguably a reflection of the narrator’s and perhaps the text’s discomfort with blurred gendering. Critic Ruth Robbins claims that Lee’s use of androgynous characters is a move to play on the “fears and fantasies of gendered indeterminacy” in order to unnerve and better spook readers of her ghost stories with the uncertainty of androgyny (Robbins 199). This argument is incomplete, however, since it is not only the nineteenth-century audience that is discomfited by the slippage of traditional gender dichotomies, but the text itself (and perhaps Lee) as it insists on feminization

through emasculation and Magnus's recurring gendering of the singer as womanly. In the character of Magnus, this fear of undefined gender is notable not only in his descriptions of Zaffarino; it is also in his anxious insistence on his own masculinity. The narrator fervently denies any interest in the feminized Past that celebrated the *castrato*, and he performs his own robust maleness through multiple descriptions of his own more masculine magnum opus in the Wagnerian style. Although he is unable to follow through after his encounter with the operatic ghost, Magnus yearns to write an opera titled *Ogier the Dane* (*Hauntings* 155),<sup>7</sup> which he imagines to be a performance of mythical proportions that involves war, lineage, and a "song of the prowess of the hero dead for hundreds of years" (163-4). His imagined magnum opus emphasizes the war-like elements of the piece, as Magnus hears "the rattle of all that armour" and "swords swinging rusty on the walls" (166). His repeated insistence that this piece is his true calling does more than suggest his distaste for the older musical style and the visceral nature of the voice. Magnus's firm rooting of his own work in the aggressively masculine Wagnerian tradition of the heroic epic and chivalry seems to suggest that he views his own project as overtly masculine and historical, and he emphatically denies any responsibility for an association with the feminized style of the *castrati*.

Furthermore, while I agree with Robbins that Zaffarino's gendered liminality could be used as a device to frighten Victorian readers, it seems most plausible that in this particular example, the singer's physical emasculation is horrifying because it reflects a deep-seated psychological fear of castration. This may link to Magnus's

insistence on the singer's femininity as well, indicating that it is psychically simpler for him to imagine the ghost as a female rather than acknowledge the terror of the castrated male. As a physical representation of the deeply rooted fear of emasculation, both literal and figurative, the figure of the *castrato* is terrifying because he underscores the possibility of a loss of phallic sexuality and power. Within the Freudian tradition, it is the early desire for the mother's presumed phallus and then the startling recognition of the mother's "lack" which can lead to a lifetime of castration anxiety, and may be "the cause of psychic impotence, of misogyny, and of lasting homosexuality" (Freud, *Dictionary* 19). Interestingly, this is almost a textbook analysis of Magnus's character; through his encounter with Zaffarino, he becomes artistically powerless and is confronted with his own same-sex desire, to which I return shortly.

While castration anxiety and the phallic mother are linked in that both notions presume the value of phallic power for women, the *homme fatale* in "A Wicked Voice" is somewhat antithetical to the phallic mother. Though the latter, a more traditional association with the *femme fatale*, derives her terrifying and erotic power from the androgyny of her possession of both breasts and a phallus, Zaffarino is androgynous because he has neither. Yet the negation of these sex markers carries some of the same anxieties as the inclusion of both, and the *castrato* is a source of both fear and desire. The implications that the feminine is ultimately a version of the castrated male, and that narrator and text resist the duality of an androgynous or fluid gender, both adhere to some of the more conservative and dominant notions of gender

in the *fin de siècle*. Nevertheless, Zaffarino's erotic power offers a new possibility for the roots of authority; his own influence and power is based not on the phallus but on beauty and art. This move away from the phallus pushes back against the cultural norms of a dichotomous gender system, and suggests alternative hierarchies of power in a system based on art and beauty.

Ultimately, however, the most crucial reason that Magnus insists on Zaffarino's femininity is that the narrator is attempting to normalize his own undeniable attraction to the male performer by recasting it as a heteronormative desire: emphasizing the *castrato*'s difference from traditional masculinity highlights the difference between the two men, rather than the sexual sameness. This allows Magnus to sublimate his own sexual feelings and deny to himself that these are a subversion of dominant sexual norms, thereby more fully reveling in his erotic experience of the antagonist's androgynous voice that is "high, soft, enveloped in a kind of downiness" (173). Furthermore, homosexual relationships were often understood in the 1890s to involve a traditionally masculine male and a more effeminate male "fairy" that might adopt feminine mannerisms and even dress (Chauncey 71).<sup>8</sup> Although Magnus is unwilling to recognize the homoeroticism of his experience with the ghost, by consistently marking Zaffarino as "womanly" and "effeminate" he gives cues to his contemporary audience that the two men fulfill cultural notions of homosexual relationships. Both aspects of this scenario – that Magnus is unwilling to admit even to himself that he is attracted to a man, and that the culture expects partnered men to fulfill more traditional roles in a homosexual relationship – reinforce heteronormative

standards of essentialized sexual and gender roles. Nevertheless, the mere inclusion of an erotic communication between the performer and the narrator is an overt and drastic challenge to the sexual norms of the time. Casting the *homme fatale* as an enticer of not only the opposite sex but of his own sex as well, the story disputes the cultural notions of sexual normativity while simultaneously reinforcing the essentialization of gender through Magnus's depiction of his erotic object, Zaffarino, as feminine, and the final figuring of homosexual attraction as only between effeminate and masculine men.

Although there is no explicit sexual relationship between the two men of this story, the erotic nature of Zaffarino's voice and effect are clear, as "the mere name of that coxcomb singer" makes Magnus weak "like a love-sick hobbledehoy" (158). The singer's arias evoke intense reactions not only from Magnus but from everyone: it is central to the plot that women were also aroused by Zaffarino's voice within his lifetime, literally swooning and even dying from their pleasure in his performance. Yet the story points out with a sarcastic aside that the singer would no longer appeal to modern women, presumably because of his androgyny: "No woman had ever been able to resist ... the ideal changes a good deal from one century to another!" (159). While this perceived femininity may no longer appeal to women, however, Magnus's insistence on it aligns with his other descriptions of the singer, and points toward his own attraction; while heterosexual and cultural tastes have changed, the effeminate man still entices Magnus. Though women liked and were moved by Zaffarino's

performances, the most aestheticized and eroticized descriptions of the voice come directly from the narrator, signaling his intense attraction to the legendary ghost.

Part of the intensity of Magnus's reaction to the voice of the performer echoes his high valuation and sublime experience of creating his own art. Before the narrator's obsession stifles his creative life, he rhapsodizes about the ecstasy of creation; when inspiration comes to an artist, Magnus posits, it has "crossed the threshold of his soul and flooded it with rapture," and he "awaits its coming as a lover awaits his beloved" (165). This eroticized description of the spirituality of artistic creation indicates that the narrator is his own kind of aesthete already. This elation is not reflected in his experience of others' art until he hears the voice of Zaffarino: although Magnus admires Wagner, he does not expand on this experience, stating simply that the composer is a "great master of the Future" (155). So while the narrator is emotionally connected to art as an artist, his discovery of the sublime and erotic within the voice of another's art seems unique to this experience, thereby emphasizing his attraction not only to artistic beauty but to Zaffarino himself. Magnus's descriptions of the voice are highly aestheticized and awe-struck: "A thread of sound slender as a moonbeam, scarce audible, but exquisite" (167). The simile here once again emphasizes the singer's effeminacy, as it compares his voice to the lunar feminine. Similarly, the voice takes on a decorative and domestic tinge as it reaches the narrator across a lagoon, "cleaving, chequering, and fretting the silence with a lacework of sound even as the moon was fretting and cleaving the water" (166). These elaborate descriptions may also indicate the beginning of Magnus's haunting, as

the baroque style of language within these illustrations foreshadows his ability to write music only in this ornate style; the aestheticized language mimics the elaborate musical style of the eighteenth century, which was decorated with “a shower of little scales and cadences and trills” (166). While the narrator’s obsession with the ghost echoes his aesthetic valuation of beauty, though, his erotic response is not limited to an intellectual admiration.

Instead, upon hearing the voice of the “beautiful creature” Zaffarino (162), Magnus is often so moved that his responses to the voice mimic sexual experience. His “arteries throbbed” when he hears the voice on the canals of Venice (170), and when he comes across a ghostly performance in an old church, the narrator experiences a shakiness and warmth that suggests the “little death” of orgasm: “My hair was clammy, my knees sank beneath me, an enervating heat spread through my body ... I was supremely happy, and yet as if I were dying” (174). This reaction displays Magnus’ visceral response to the erotic experience of hearing the voice. Furthermore, Magnus twice describes his experience of the voice as physically liquefying; he senses himself “dissolve” upon hearing a “ripple of music” from Zaffarino (167), and later feels his “body melt even as wax in sunshine ... turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds” (179). This erotic imagery suggests that Magnus loses or releases himself in these encounters as his (heterosexual) identity dissipates, and he is able to suggestively “mingle” or couple with the singer and his voice. While Patricia Pulham suggests that these descriptions of physical warmth and melting are markers of female climax and thereby imply that

Magnus has been feminized by his homoerotic response to the singer (“Castrato” 431), I refute the premise of this argument. Instead, I posit that the erotic imagery and language in these passages is not specifically gendered, but instead an androgynous sexual response in that it could be either male or female. The “mingling” or union of the narrator with his erotic object is particularly open, as both male and female lovers in any sexual encounter experience the blending of two individuals.

Magnus persists in describing Zaffarino in feminized terms throughout the story, and as I have argued, this suggests his attempt to normalize his sexual response to the singer by re-gendering him as female, thereby making the attraction a more acceptably heterosexual one. Nevertheless, the imagery and descriptive language that depicts the eroticism between the men is often decidedly homoerotic and sometimes phallic, and so underscores that this is a specifically same-sex erotics. In a tumescent phallicism, Zaffarino’s voice often starts quietly before it “grew and grew and grew,” as the “exquisite vibrating note ... went on swelling and swelling” (165). The setting itself also suggests the homoeroticism of the experience; the climactic scenes take place in the very villa where while alive, Zaffarino killed a woman with his voice. This property is named *Mistrà*, a name which Magnus “began at length to grasp its significance, which seems to have escaped [him] until then” with a “feverish, impatient pleasure” (177). While the most explicit reason for Magnus’s recognition and excitement is to experience the scene of Zaffarino’s crime, the name *Mistrà* echoes the name of an ancient Greek town near Sparta that was once the Byzantine capital.<sup>9</sup> This connection to Greece reverberates with the homoerotic neo-Hellenism

of Pater and the Decadents, suggesting that the Mistrà of the short story will also be a site of same-sex desire and possibly fulfillment. This offers a more nuanced reason for Magnus's claim that the "name [of the manor] sent a shiver all down me" whenever he hears it (171). Furthermore, the narrator's response to the news of his destination may be read as one of the more resounding defenses of same-sex erotics in this story. When he finally understands the "significance" of the name of the villa, Magnus is mollified and accepting of Mistrà and its associations: "'Yes,' I said to myself, 'it is quite natural'" (177). This claim of the inherent normality of the destination not only explicitly indicates Magnus's understanding of the serendipitous coincidence that will lead him to the scene of Zaffarino's notorious crime, but also suggests an essentialist and naturalist defense of same-sex attraction and erotics, due to the Hellenic associations of the place's name. The implication that homoeroticism is natural, even in the midst of a tale about the cultural confusion and pain of these desires, thus challenges both the sexual norms of the late nineteenth century, and ultimately the traditionally heteronormative *femme fatale* plot line.

The homoeroticism of Magnus's experience with the singer is further underscored by descriptions of Zaffarino's voice as filmed with a "downy wrapper" that again and again breaks through a metaphorical veil for the climax of the aria (167). Within the context of the *femme fatale* tradition, of course, the suggestion of a veil echoes Salome's mysterious and sexualized dancing, which is highlighted in Wilde's *Salomé* as the dance of the seven veils. Although "A Wicked Voice" was published the year before the first French edition of Wilde's play, Lee's story

foreshadows the more well-known author's use of the veil as a gauzy element whose removal signals Salomé's ultimate sexual display and taking of power, as it is in this dramatically erotic move that she ensnares the extreme commitment of her stepfather Herod to do anything she asks (Wilde, *Salomé* 29). Similarly to Wilde's interpretation of the fatal woman tale, Zaffarino also moves beyond the gauziness around him to fully capture the narrator with his haunting song. Magnus portrays the performer's song as "burst[ing] through that strange and charming veil" of its own "downy wrapper" (167). This language suggests the breach of protective boundary, yet it is not the violent sundering associated with castration; instead, this break is "triumphant" and "superb" (167), and further enraptures and obsesses Magnus.

While Zaffarino's elimination of the "veils" of his own erotically-charged voice as a way to gain power over the narrator aligns with Salomé's dance of the seven veils, however, his approach to the veil of his voice is much more aggressive than the fluid movements of the Wilde heroine, perhaps echoing the violent beauty of the singer's castration and recalling the ultimately deadly nature of any *femme fatale* figure.<sup>10</sup> Zaffarino's voice not only "bursts through" the veil (167), Magnus also experiences it as "rending asunder" its enclosing veil of vagueness with such intensity that the "resplendent" voice feels like a "glittering blade of a knife that seemed to enter deep into my [Magnus's] breast" (180). While this penetrative experience of the performer's voice certainly highlights the homoerotic elements of Magnus's relationship to the ghost, its potentially masculine violence is somewhat undermined by the association of violence in this story with physical emasculation, once again

complicating definitions of masculinity. Nevertheless, while the more traditional figure sacrifices and removes layers of herself in a traditionally female maneuver to sexually entice and trap Herod into doing her bidding, Lee's *homme fatale* aggressively and erotically inserts himself knife-like into his target's psyche.

As mentioned previously, Elaine Showalter suggests that even as a homosexual subculture developed in the cities, the closeted nature of sexuality at the turn of the century led middle-class homosexual men to develop double lives and perhaps even doubled consciousnesses, in order to fulfill their desires. Many men were married and well-known in the daytime, but spent their nights in another part of town where they could take part in the working class sex scene. This doubleness shows itself in the doubled lives, consciousnesses, and literatures of many authors of the 1890s, such as the Bunburying plot line of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (*Sexual Anarchy* 106). Often, this homosexual doubling takes place in stories of the fantastic, thereby creating the genre Showalter terms the "Gay Gothic" (112).

Following Showalter, I would argue that "A Wicked Voice" is another example of the Gay Gothic and that the haunting that takes place is in fact a reflection of Magnus's own fears or anxieties about his sexuality. Zaffarino is terrifying to the narrator precisely because he is eroticized as a representation of Magnus's homosexuality, and while the narrator is startled and frightened by his direct encounters with the ghost, the true haunting begins after the specter has disappeared: the narrator is still obsessed with, tortured by, and yearning for the *castrato* or his own taboo sexuality. As an example of Lee's claim in her preface that these stories are

about the “spurious ghost[s]” that spring only from our own imaginations (*Hauntings* 39-40), it is Magnus’s own double consciousness that haunts him, as he grapples with his desire for men. This is indicated by the extensive homoeroticism of Magnus’s response to Zaffarino’s presence and song, as well as his extreme disquiet that anyone might mistake him for something that he finds shameful: an old-fashioned composer in the style of the eighteenth century, and more implicitly, a man who adores and responds to the erotics of the most famous performer of an earlier time. In his last physical experience with Zaffarino, the narrator feels as though he is chased by the performer’s homoerotic and phallic song before he is penetrated by it: “I rushed ... pursued, as it were, by that exquisite voice, swelling, swelling by insensible degrees” (180). It is this sense of being hounded by his inescapable desire that follows Magnus beyond his physical experience, as he is haunted by his own sexuality.

Furthermore, Magnus’s sexuality and desire continue to haunt him long after the ghost has disappeared, and the narrator’s mixed or doubled response to this haunting reflects his own ambivalence and deeply rooted anxiety about his sexual identity. Once the narrator has been forcefully clued in to his own sexuality by Zaffarino’s presence, he is unable to forget or move on; he is “conscious of the spell that binds” him, but his art, or fullest expression of himself, remains “enslaved” (155). His claim that he is only “half-bewitched” is representative of Magnus’s ongoing ambivalence about his experience with the ghost, and hence his own sexuality (155). He is in between two extreme responses to this new identity, and the language here suggests his enticement with and mesmerized response to the homoerotic ghost just

before the narrator declares the haunting an “execrable power” (155). Similarly, although Magnus’s physical reactions of dissolving and melting heavily suggest his sexual response to the ghost, he directly disputes his own claims about the figure, maintaining that he is both enthralled and repulsed. Just after his “arteries throbbed” at the sound of Zaffarino’s voice, Magnus claims that he “felt a repugnance, an impossibility almost, of speaking about that voice” (170), underscoring his denial and anguish at the realization of his homosexual desire. The suggestion that talking about the experience is an “impossibility” further connects this piece to the closeted doublings of the Gay Gothic, as there is no language or conceivable way for Magnus to discuss his experience of the “love that dare not speak its name,” as Wilde called his intimate friendships while on trial a few years later. Magnus’s warring responses to the ghost as he tries to simultaneously “expel the thought of that voice” and to “reproduce it in my memory” further suggest the confusion and complexity of culturally forbidden desire (171); even as he yearns for the singer and his voice, Magnus represses this inclination within himself. In fact, this very ambivalence may add to the appeal of the singer by acting cyclically to entice Magnus’s semi-conscious desire toward this culturally forbidden and erotic experience: “The more I tried to banish it from my thoughts, the more I grew to thirst for that extraordinary tone” (171). The attempt to repress his desire, then, has the effect of perpetuating the erotic energy that Magnus experiences with the voice, and it becomes not just a wish but an inescapable need.

The voice is both “persecuting” and “what [he] cared most for in all the wide world” (179), as a homoerotic attraction would have been in 1890.<sup>11</sup> Although Magnus condemns the voice in the end as a “violin of flesh and blood made by the Evil One’s hand,” he also begs “for pity” to “hear one note, only one note” of the phantom song (181). Although Magnus has internalized the cultural and religious censure of same-sex desire, and reviles the power of the *castrato*’s song, he simultaneously aches to acknowledge his desires, and begs to fulfill them. Yet he is unable to write his own music in the Wagnerian style, since his obsession with Zaffarino’s song drives him to create only baroque vocal pieces in an anachronistic style. After his confrontation with the ghost, Magnus “can never lay hold of [his] own inspiration,” or control his artistry (181), and seems doomed to write only in the voice of another for the rest of his life. While Magnus’s repression of and self-disgust at his sexuality echo the prescriptive sexual mores of the time, then, this pained ending certainly aligns with the tradition of the Gay Gothic and the Decadents; the doubles in Wilde and Stevenson’s gothic texts also end in agony and even dissolution.

Magnus’s loss of outside inspiration through his haunting by the *homme fatale* is most directly and often interpreted as a form of death,<sup>12</sup> although the fatal ghost has killed the protagonist’s creativity rather than his physical self. There is a more positive interpretation of this conclusion, however, which challenges both the traditional *femme fatale* narrative as well as the tragic endings to homosexual doubling in the Gay Gothic. Rather than a death of his art, Magnus’s old-fashioned stylings are in fact a sublimation of his desire for the beautiful singer and his wicked voice: since

the narrator cannot express his sexuality in a satisfying or public way, his desire and obsession have instead taken the form of arias. Although the composer is frustrated with his inability to break away from this “style of the great dead masters” such as Handel and Mozart (155), the baroque music that he writes after his encounter and sublimation of his libidinal energies is widely admired: he is complimented on his “supremacy of melody” and the “perfection” with which he follows the “divine” composers of earlier styles (154-5). In other words, Magnus is able to write strikingly beautiful music precisely because of his desire and his encounter with the fatal figure; although he resists the style, his art is a result of his experience and is recognized as exceptional. This development of beauty and creativity through the pain and repression of desire suggests an alternative ending to the dominant vision of the *femme fatale* and a somewhat more positive possibility for the Gay Gothic as well: although repressed, the erotic energy of the *homme fatale* allows for the creation of beauty. In this sense, Lee’s play with these tropes seems to acknowledge the pain and haunting experience of same-sex desire in a conservative society while simultaneously suggesting that art and beauty can come from these forbidden desires. The possibility of Magnus’s rebirth as a new type of artist at the end also challenges the vision of the *femme fatale* as an expression of women as sexualized and dangerous, presenting instead the alternative of creation through beauty and pain.

Ultimately, “A Wicked Voice” reifies some traditional patriarchal aesthetic tropes, such as distaste for and control of the natural body and some cultural anxiety over androgyny and feminization. Nevertheless, Lee’s story simultaneously

challenges the heteronormative vision of most *femme fatale* tales, and offers new possibilities for the outcomes of tangling with these powerful and sexual figures. In “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers,” these questions of appropriate objects of desire and the handling of unusual erotics will continue as Don Juan grapples with a royal *femme fatale* and the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> The name “Magnus” means “great” in Latin, and associates the character with his greatest desire: to complete his own magnum opus.

<sup>2</sup> As Lee’s biographer Peter Gunn points out, the character of Zaffarino is based on the famous Italian *castrato* Farinelli, who was reputed to have sung “the same three songs every night for ten years to ward off the incipient madness of Philip of Spain” (61). Lee was 16 when she first saw a portrait of the singer at the Accademia Filarmonica while visiting with John Singer Sargent, and was fascinated with the figure and the tradition (60-1).

<sup>3</sup> Lee herself was passionate about the eighteenth-century operatic vocalists, exploring the style and its practitioners in depth in earlier works such as *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) and *Belcaro* (1883). In direct opposition to the protagonist of “A Wicked Voice,” Lee disliked Wagner’s work, which she believed to be so dangerously emotional that it created a “violation of the privacy of the human soul” (*Laurus Nobilis* 137). Clearly, then, Magnus does not carry the author’s voice of confidence in his dismissal of the feminized vocalist in favor of the mytho-heroic Wagner.

<sup>4</sup> Critic Grace Kehler has also written about the artificiality of the castrated singer. Kehler argues that the entire story is a Barthesian “castrated text,” and explores the tension between the aesthetics of opera and the deliberate cruelty and brutal violence of castration: “the focus on the lack, emasculation, and the suggestions of brutality of what art lovers have nominated as an ideal” (para. 1).

<sup>5</sup> In her well-known article “The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?,” Martha Vicinus argues that queer authors in the late-Victorian period regularly represented the object of their true desire with a safer young male figure. These representations of same-sex erotics, she posits, are “hazardous and fleeting” and often notably violent, as this “violence metaphorically expresses the socially deviant desire and demonstrates its feared outcome” (84-5). She suggests that lesbian writers (and in

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this she includes Lee), identified themselves with the adolescent boy, as “his liminal sexual position and appearance gave him the necessary combination of familiarity, ambiguity, and distance” (90).

<sup>6</sup> Zaffarino’s blurring of the masculine and feminine is often read as an empowering vision of the fluidity of gender. See Caballero and Pulham for examples.

<sup>7</sup> Caballero further suggests that the title and style of Magnus’s opera are a direct satire of Wagner, and it is arguable that the warlike tones of the plot and title mimic Wagner’s nationalism.

<sup>8</sup> Chauncey explains, while identity centered on effeminacy versus masculinity more than homosexuality and heterosexuality, “fairies” were often interested in attracting men that fit the “aggressive masculine ideal”; conversely, these “masculine” men could engage in sexual encounters with other men without endangering their sense of manhood, as long as they maintained the dominant sexual role (16).

<sup>9</sup> Also spelled “Mistra” and “Mystras.”

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Maxwell and Grace Kehler both actually read this scene as a “ritual castration” of the narrator as the ghost asserts his power in the ultimate feminization of his victim. While I agree that the violence of the metaphor echoes the singer’s mutilation, I am resistant to the implication that this homoerotic encounter feminizes the narrator.

<sup>11</sup> The difficulty and ambivalence of same-sex attraction may have been a personal experience for Lee, based on her long-term romantic friendships. In her article “Sappho, Mary Wakefield, and Vernon Lee’s ‘A Wicked Voice,’” Catherine Maxwell argues that this story substitutes male homoeroticism for a “disguised lesbianism,” using Lee’s own sexuality, the dedication of the story to the singer Mary Wakefield, and Sapphic references throughout the text as evidence. This claim is supported by Martha Vicinus’s argument that adolescent boys were often used as stand-ins for female same-sex attraction in *fin de siècle* literature; although Zaffarino is of course not an adolescent, his developmental arrest links him to the image of the beautiful boy.

<sup>12</sup> See Caballero and Pulham, for example.

### Chapter Three

#### “My (Surely Venial?) Profanity”: The Decadence of a Marian *Femme Fatale* in “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers”

Bowing before a Marian icon in a seventeenth-century, the figure of Don Juan prays in adoration and supplication to the local Madonna, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, whose title refers to the seven sorrows of Mary:<sup>1</sup> “O great Madonna, O Snow Peak untrodden of the Sierras, O Sea unnavigated of the tropics, O Gold Ore unhandled by the Spaniard” (*Hauntings* 251). As it emphasizes both the purity and beauty of the figure and the materialist valuing of women and religious relics, Don Juan’s parodic revision of the Litany of the Virgin Mary echoes many of the larger themes in Lee’s “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers.” First published serially in French in 1896, Lee translated her story into English for a later reprinting; it was collected along with other fantastic tales and an extensive preface in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), which was dedicated to Lee’s close friend, author Maurice Baring.<sup>2</sup> Filled with extravagant descriptions and ornately aesthetic language, the story is set in seventeenth-century Grenada in southern Spain on the anniversary of the region’s “Liberation” from Moorish rule (273). Completed by a deeply ironic partial-frame narrative that suggests the story be performed as a play in order to “touch the heart of the most stubborn” and bring them into the Church (277), the central plot depicts Don Juan’s final and fatal escapade as he attempts to woo the mysterious and somewhat mystical Infanta. As the tale satirizes Catholicism, machismo, and ethnocentrism, and

blurs the lines between the holy and the erotic, it uses the *femme fatale* myth to offer alternative visions of women's power as both destructive and redemptive.

A devout worshipper of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, who is represented only as a statue and never as an actual holy figure, the "great sinner" Don Juan praises her beauty in his adoring prayers to the icon of the Madonna (253). He vows that if she will protect him "from the clutches of Satan" despite his murderous infidelities, he will always uphold her physical exquisiteness as far greater than any other woman's (*Hauntings* 252). As Lee notes, this Don Juan figure is a much darker vision of the character than other more famous accounts, and he is "not at all Mozartian or Byronian," but rather a more sinister "conquering super-rake and super-ruffian" that murders, blasphemes, and seduces at will (246). Despite his devotion to the Virgin, Don Juan has set his sights on a new female conquest, one that he claims is far greater than any of his seven great loves for whom he killed husbands, fathers, and even nuns: the daughter of a medieval Moorish ruler, the Infanta is allegedly and mystically buried under the Alhambra along with the caliph's treasure where she has slept the centuries away (258). In order to reach the princess, Don Juan employs "the Jew Baruch" (258) to create an elaborate magical ritual which will show them the way under the palace and wake the princess; after the rite is successful, however, the lover characteristically murders his associate.

Upon finally meeting the Infanta, Don Juan asks her to unveil, and is stunned by her beauty, reassuring her that she is more beautiful than any of his lovers. Yet when the princess asks her suitor if she is more fair than the Virgin of the Seven

Daggers, he refuses to betray his protector and tells the Infanta that she does not outshine the Madonna. In consequence, the lover Don Juan is beheaded on the spot by a “gigantic Berber of the Rif,” with the implicit approval of his *femme fatale* princess (276). Mysteriously, however, Don Juan wakes up outside the palace the next morning and rushes back into town to take part in the Liberation celebration. Frustrated by the way that people are ignoring him, he slowly notices the trail of blood that has followed him from the palace; he shakes a priest and pushes his way through a crowd at the hospital only to find a headless corpse laid out for public viewing and to realize “it was himself” (276). He rushes into the church of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, seeking solace and crying out to her to redeem him in these few moments before he is carried to hell, and a sudden miracle lifts Don Juan to heaven, “borne up as if on clusters of soap bubbles” (277). The last things he sees are the dark eyes of the *femme fatale* Virgin as he ascends.

Although the women in this story – the Madonna and the Infanta – are quite different from the traditional *femme fatale* figure in many ways, they can both be read as belonging to the fatal woman trope. In her preface, Lee herself frames the Infanta as alluring to the notoriously lusty Don Juan; the delicate princess is “a temptation worthy of his final damnation” (248). Although she is not conventionally or overtly sexual, then, the royal figure entices the protagonist like a fatal woman, perhaps even because she is apparently demure and covered: the removal of her veil and Don Juan’s “ravishment” at her beauty (269) echoes the erotic dancing and unveiling in Salomé’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” (Wilde 29), and adds to her exotic Otherness as a Moorish

princess. Similarly, though the Virgin is not explicitly sexual, she is objectified and somewhat sexualized through her persistent description in terms of her physical beauty, and Don Juan is drawn to her as an alluring and protective figure of ideal womanhood. In addition to the magnetism of both figures, both *femmes fatales* also play a role in Don Juan's death: while the Infanta is more directly associated with the man's execution, the Madonna carries his spirit from earth to heaven, in a sense completing the task. Furthermore, it was in the Virgin's honor that the lover denied the princess's beauty in the first place, thereby indirectly causing his death. In many ways, the two characters mirror each other, and as I argue, the doubling of these two characters complicates the dominant cultural narrative about women and adds to Lee's satirical criticism of the Church. Moreover, both are fantasy versions of woman as Other: one embodies the idealized maternal, while the other is a projection of the exotic, mysterious, and sexualized Other of Orientalist discourse. Although unusual, then, due to their physical enticement and fatal influence, both the Virgin and the Infanta are recognizable as *femmes fatales*.

Due to its arguably irreverent depiction of the Madonna as superficial and somewhat sexualized, and the suggested closeness of the sinful Don Juan and the Virgin, the potential controversy of the story could not be ignored. When it was reprinted in the 1927 collection, Lee addressed these presumable concerns with an offhand tone in her preface, which is written as a direct address to her Catholic friend Maurice. Lee defends her tale as playful, because though she is agnostic (243), if there were "anywhere in my soul a secret shrine, it is to Our Lady" (245).

Nevertheless, she openly declares her distaste for the “Spanish cultus of death, damnation, tears, and wounds” (245), and the Spanish representation of the Virgin as a “doll-madonna” (246), suggesting that it is these elements that she intends to satirize, rather than the whole faith. In closing, she offers “the tiniest little prayer in expiation of my (surely venial?) profanity” (248), and hints that any severe reaction to the light tale would be superfluous. Yet for all her dismissal, this story is not merely child’s play. “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” is layered with a heavy irony that acts as a staunch criticism of an ornate and decadent Catholicism, and its satire of machismo and bigotry suggests the crumbling hierarchies of Western faith and culture.

Furthermore, the doubled *femmes fatales* suggest some breakdown of the Madonna/whore dichotomy, and the redemptive Marian figure offers an alternative to the vision of women’s power as purely destructive. Nevertheless, the decaying boundaries have not disintegrated completely, and although the story presents some complications to the traditional constructions of femininity, it simultaneously sets up the Infanta and the Virgin as opposing versions of womanhood, thereby reinforcing these simplified idealizations of the pure maternal and the exotic sexual figures.

Ultimately, then, Lee challenges the absolutism of women’s roles as constructed by the Church and patriarchal society, yet simultaneously reifies the dichotomy as opposing versions of a *femme fatale*.

This story aligns in many ways with the artistic project of the male Aesthetes of the *fin de siècle*, as the ornate language, the excessive materiality, and spiritualism and deadliness of the tale all mark it as an example of Decadent literature. Moreover,

the lines between Catholicism and secularity, purity and the erotic, spiritual and material begin to break down in this text, and traditional power structures of race and gender are satirized and destabilized. Following the claims of decadence critics Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky that “decadent textual strategies interfere with the boundaries and borders” of culture and identity (11), I argue that the blurring of dichotomies and undermining of hegemonic power dynamics within “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” is both a reflection of and a contribution to the decadent nature of the story. These scholars also point out the distinction between Decadence as a specific literary movement and the ongoing trope of decadence that centers on “decline, decay, and the loss of traditional values” (2). I posit that elements of Lee’s text are both Decadent and decadent: while the style and subject matter reflects the work of the Decadents, the entire text probes the concept and experience of decadence as it relates to religion, power, and gender. Furthermore, the *fin de siècle* was filled with changing definitions and blurring cultural borders, as worldviews shifted and were redefined in response to imperialism, medicalization of sexuality, and changing gender dynamics, among other issues. As Elaine Showalter points out, intense anxiety and change near the turn of the century are common, and many of these same issues repeated themselves two decades ago. The “cultural insecurity” and fear that comes along with this mutability often exhibits itself as a “longing for strict border controls,” as a way to halt the decadent change (*Sexual Anarchy* 4). This story, as well as the others that I’ve discussed, reflects and plays with some of these changes and anxieties, as the borders around gender, sexuality, and the holy dissemble. Nevertheless, in “The

Virgin of the Seven Daggers,” some boundaries are partially reinforced even as others are crumbling; the Infanta is held distant as an unknowable Other, and while there is some blurring between the two, the idealization of the Madonna/whore dichotomy is still central to the text. While the story embodies the decadence of the era, then, it is simultaneously underpinned by some of the deeply-rooted borderlines around female characters, suggesting both the liminality and the limitations of the moment.

One of the most political aspects of decadence in this text is the undermining of culturally dominant groups and their control through oppressions of others. As it satirizes some of the pervasive cultural elements of machismo, ethnic bigotry, and religion, the tale suggests both that these values are intertwined, and that the power structures that they support are not infallibly stable. For example, Don Juan is an extreme example of the hypermasculinity in Spanish culture, yet he is clearly depicted throughout as ludicrously morally repugnant. Although he has “been beloved of all the fairest women in the world ... to the number of many hundreds” (252), it is the dark side of these trysts which is emphasized throughout in a jocularly blasphemous manner. The lover declares that for each of his seven most beloved conquests, he “broke a commandment and took several lives” (252), and his reminiscences about his amorous adventures include the “fierce joy” of waiting to murder an “inconvenient” protector and the “rapture even, spiced with sacrilege” of killing the “tell-tale” nun who would have revealed his affair with one of her convent sisters (254). His clear disregard for decency and religious morality disassociates Don Juan from the romantic tradition of Don Quixote’s forebears, and renders him instead amusingly depraved

rather than admirably masculine. Beyond his lack of moral compass, Don Juan's role as a heroic model of machismo is undermined by the voices of his seven most important lovers, which haunt him as he descends below the Alhambra. Ethereal voices call his name, and he is sure that these are his dead mistresses calling him back to Earth. He responds with insults and continues, but his assurance is shaken by the experience (262). Although the women's voices are faint, then, they push back against machismo, and the dominant and sexist power of hypermasculinity is thus destabilized.

In addition to critiquing the machismo of Spanish culture, this story also satirizes religious and ethnic bigotry, particularly through the discourses of Orientalism, including anti-Semitic language and figures. While Don Juan admires the veiled Infanta, who aligns with the traditional figure of the exoticized *femme fatale* and reflects the popular interest in and allure of the mysterious Middle East, the other Muslims with whom Don Juan interacts are prey to the more negative and derisive visions of Orientalist discourse by which "the Orient was reconstructed, reassembled, crafted, in short, *born* out of" these Western stereotypes and depictions of it (Said 87). As Lee notes in the preface, the Moors had ruled southern Spain for hundreds of years before the Reconquista. She argues that these "other folks" were "as terrible maybe, but far more brilliant and amiable, before the coming of Don Juan and his farthingaled madonna" (247). This suggests a sympathy with the Moors that plays itself out in the protagonist's satirical superiority complex. As a member of the dominant class in the seventeenth century, the lover finds it "odious to have to be civil to that dog of a

Mahomet of theirs” while wooing the Infanta (256), and takes pride in his lineage of relatives that terrorized Muslims: his forebears include El Cid, Fernan del Pulgar “who had nailed the Ave Maria to the Mosque,” and numerous “other ancestors [who] were painted with their foot on a Moor’s decollated head” (256). The echo of the apocryphal nailing of the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door to jumpstart the Reformation and the foreshadow of Don Juan’s own beheading by the Moors suggest the decaying boundaries between religions, as all seem to be oppressively violent. The jovial and proud tone used to list these barbaric ancestral actions, as well as the extremity of the acts, suggests once again the ludicrousness of these attitudes and the satirical nature of the pompous character and haughty Orientalist vision of Islam.

The depiction of “that Jewish hound, Baruch” further reflects the medievalist mindset of the Inquisition (256). Echoing well-known anti-Semitic narratives through the voice of the outrageous Don Juan, and placing them within the context of a farcical Inquisition, the story parodies and thus undermines the long-lived demonizing of Jews in Europe. These oft-repeated and bigoted constructions of Orientalist discourse are so integral to the Western worldview and power structure that they have become naturalized through reiteration. Even in prayer, Don Juan repeats cultural slurs against Jews: the lover metaphorically calls the pure Virgin “O New Minted Doubloon unpocketed by the Jew” (251). Furthermore, he consistently degrades his assistant in the mystic ritual that leads him to the Infanta, fearing that Baruch will cheat him (256) and calling him a “renegade Jew” among the “infidel dogs” and “nasty brutes” of the Jewish people (272). This abusive language is slipped in among the flowery

aestheticism of this story, and its incongruity with the tale, as well as the fact that these words are spoken by the untrustworthy, sinful, and extreme character Don Juan, suggest that these slurs are intended satirically, perhaps mocking the machismo or religious culture that would allow such views of other humans. Furthermore, while the characterization of Baruch reflects medieval notions of the Jewish sorcerer who colludes with Satan (Trachtenberg 60), these elements are described in an ironic tone that suggests the absurdity of these stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> As a “learned Jew,” Baruch uses his books and scholarship to guide Don Juan in the necromancy necessary to wake the palace (258). Part of this ritual includes “a pound of dead man’s fat, the bones of a stillborn child,” which he “proceeded to dispose of in the latest necromantic fashion” (258). The clear reference here to both the blood libel and Shylock tropes is contemporary to the early modern setting of the story. These elements both emphasize the Western tradition of prejudice and, in the extremity of the ingredients and the jovially ironic tone of the disposal, suggest a mocking undertone of the prevalence of this common depiction.

Combined with a parodic and offhanded representation of the Inquisition, which allows for a “grand bullfight on the morrow, and the grand burning of heretics and relapses in the square” (254), these sardonic attitudes toward the Moors, Jews, and by reflection, the Spanish themselves, satirize the cultural attitudes of the Spanish, the medieval values of seventeenth-century Europe, and the ethnic and religious superiority that was still prevalent in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, although these bigoted depictions aim to destabilize the oppressive rhetoric of

hegemony, the mere repetition of these powerful and long-lived stereotypes, even ironically, veers dangerously close to reinforcing these constructions through reiteration. Thus, the decadence of the text seems to undermine both the dominant power structure and Lee's own challenge to that structure; even as the cultural narratives of superiority are mocked as outdated and crumbling, the text unintentionally reinforces to some extent the Orientalist and anti-Semitic language and imagery simply by invoking it.

The most recurrent and obvious criticisms in Lee's story are aimed at the Decadent and decadent Catholic Church, as the depiction of the religion as overly artificial, excessively aestheticized, and highly unstable resounds throughout the tale. Although the connections between Decadence and Catholicism have been well documented,<sup>4</sup> this story is highly critical rather than celebratory of the Decadent elements of the Church. The elaborate sentences describing the visual and physical elements of both the church and the Madonna reflect a parodic aestheticization of Catholicism through the excessiveness of the decoration and the lack of practical use for any of it:

Everything on which labour can be wasted is laboured, everything on which gold can be lavished is gilded; columns and architraves curl like the curls of a periwig; walls and vaultings are flowered . . . like a gala dress; stone and wood are woven like lace; stucco is whipped and clotted like pastry-cooks' cream and crust. (250).

This passage suggests the vanity and superficiality of the Church through its comparisons to flowing wigs and gowns, and further hints at an artificiality or lack of substance through the repetitive pattern of similes, with no concrete language. The

elaborate and suggestively gaudy decoration, as well as comparisons to luxury items such as lace, cream, and formal wear, also indicates the wealth of the Church as a point of criticism and decadence.

This implied artificiality is further accentuated in the devotional elements of the Church. The Virgin of the Seven Daggers is surrounded by other icons, including a “train of waxen Christs with bloody wounds and spangled loin-cloths, and Madonnas of lesser fame weeping beady tears and carrying bewigged Infants” (250). This grotesque and irreverent depiction of the religious statues highlights and condemns the manmade theatricality of Catholicism as a false and garish comfort. Moreover, this story never associates Don Juan’s devotion with the “real” mother of God. His worship and chivalric adoration appear to be only for the statue, the representation of the Madonna. It’s notable that this figure is never personified in any way other than as a material mimicry, a doll of the Virgin, because it suggests an obsession or devotion to the symbol or icon rather than the actual faith, thereby implying an artificiality and decadence within Catholicism. Even when the Virgin manifests in the final moments of Don Juan’s ascension, nothing in her description differentiates her from the statue that has been made of her; she is still in her “farthingale of puce and her stomacher of seed-pearl, her big black eyes fixed mildly upon him” (277). The suggestion that Don Juan worships a doll – but that the doll actually saves him in the end – plays with the lines between reality and belief, and underscores not only the decadence of Catholicism and religious iconography, but also

the decay of many traditional boundaries in the historical moment of a changing century.

In addition to criticizing the aesthetic emphasis in the religion, however, this story also aims at the violence historically perpetrated by the Church. The aesthetic flourishes of the architecture of the Church of Our Lady of the Seven Daggers are compared to brutality as well as to cream puffs; the sharp angles in the building are like “spikes for exhibiting the heads of traitors ... line warring with line and curve with curve; a place in which the mind staggers bruised and half-stunned” (249-50). The setting of the story during the Inquisition further underlines this proposition of the hypocritical violence of the Church, and implies not only a physical violence, but a spiritual one. Although she claimed that the tale was not intended to offend, Lee’s criticism of Catholicism is thus unavoidable. Nevertheless, the decadence of the tale does more than condemn the Church; it also reflects the perceived decadence of Western culture as a whole and the anxiety around changing power structures and crumbling borderlines in the *fin de siècle*. And yet, while these traditional boundaries are decaying in this text, they have not disappeared completely. Lee’s story simultaneously reinforces some of the dichotomies of her time, even as she attempts to challenge them.

One of the most crucial areas of instability in this story is in the figures of the *femmes fatales* themselves. While both women are ultimately beautiful and deadly, there is a startling emphasis in this story on the figures’ lack of voice, lack of movement, and lack of subjectivity. While these are not attributes generally

associated with the *femme fatale*, since part of the figure's danger lies in her active influence over men, images of women as passive and silent were certainly prevalent in contemporary works.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, then, the depiction of these characters as voiceless objects seems to uphold and even add to the misogynist desire for women to be frozen and controllable. However, combined with their positions of tremendous power as earthly and celestial royalty, the extremity of these characters' objectification challenges the repressive vision of passively idealized women, indicates the decadence and instability of traditional categorizations of femininity, and transforms the common objectification of the *femme fatale* to a new use.

The Virgin of the Seven Daggers, of course, is the most literal version of this juxtaposition of objectification and power: an actual statue, her face "is made of wax, with black glass eyes and a tiny coral mouth" (250). As an iconographic sculpture, she is frozen, an object created as a visual spectacle at which others are meant to gaze. As Julia Kristeva points out in her article "Stabat Mater," the Virgin's silence is often emphasized through a focus on her nursing milk and grieving tears as "metaphors of non-language," which symbolize a "return of the repressed" (143). Interestingly, her objectification is undercut a bit here, as the statue consistently stares back: her eyes are open, and the last thing that Don Juan sees as he is lifted to heaven are "her big black eyes fixed mildly upon him" (277), hinting at her ultimate power and danger as a woman who returns the male gaze. The Virgin in this tale is highly materialistic and aestheticized, and is constantly described in terms of her ornate decoration and symbolism, as she sits "buoyed up by her vast farthingale," with "seven gold-hilted

knives” stuck into her bodice (250). She also remains voiceless, even as her power manifests itself and she redeems Don Juan; although she saves his soul, the voice that the lover hears is that of Syphax, the church’s *castrato* (277). Yet even as a silent figure, her power is immense and deific, and flips the traditional hierarchy of men as the holders of power.<sup>6</sup> As Lee notes in her preface, Mary is a redeemer, “in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured into the grace of the immortal spirit” (245). In other words, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers carries power beyond life and death, as she purifies Don Juan and rescues him from an admittedly deserved eternity in hell. Notably, there is no indication in this story that she is a Co-Redemptrix; instead, she appears to have complete control over the rogue’s redemption. The extremes of the Madonna’s example of objectification and power seem to suggest a satire of the aesthetes’ depiction of silent, immobile women, as this glamorously frozen object stands between Don Juan and hell. Furthermore, the statue both reflects and extends the ironies of Catholicism itself: although women have been silenced and objectified by the Church, and the Virgin Mary held up as an objectified model of perfection, she continues to hold the ultimate power as the intercessor and mother figure.

The Infanta’s objectification is similarly emphasized; as a silent and veiled figure, she has no subjectivity or flexibility in this story, only her physical appearance and royal lineage. Even before her awakening by Don Juan, the other powerful men in the princess’s life had reduced her to a material treasure: her father “judiciously buried his jewels, his plate, and his favourite daughter many hundred years ago” (258),

equating her to these other treasures, and hinting that she can be stored, sacrificed, or hidden for future use like gold. Don Juan suggests that this burial was ultimately “for my [Don Juan’s] benefit” (259), arrogantly aligning with the caliph’s attitude by heavily underscoring the patriarchal view of women as objects for male pleasure and profit. Beyond the perspective of the men in her life, the plot elements of the story and the depiction of the Infanta also reinforce her objectification. The “sleeping beauty” story that she and her servants have been deeply asleep for 400 years and could only be awakened by the arrival of the notorious lover echoes the popular image of the passive, dead, or sleeping woman (264-6), and suggests that a woman’s whole being centers on marriage and connection to a man. Furthermore, the princess is described as encased in jewels and luxe fabrics, with “painted” cheeks, “diaphanous veils,” and “demurely” folded hands (267). This emphasis on her appearance and dress, combined with her ongoing silence and lack of eye contact, seems to frame her as an exotic doll rather than a woman. She does not speak out loud in this story aside from one fantastical moment, although she does seem to voicelessly and motionlessly whisper to her guardians (271). While the Chief Eunuch suggests that this is a reflection of both propriety and the Moorish Infanta’s inability to speak Spanish (269), her complete lack of voice is notable and even emphasized as Don Juan is rebuffed when he tries to address her directly. This silence begins the association of the princess with the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, and their doubling as regal yet frozen women is further emphasized by the metaphorical description of the veiled Infanta as “an unfinished statue” who is “veiled in the roughness of the marble” (266) and sits

still with “the rigidity of a statue” (268). Her tiara that shines like a “lit-up altar” clinches the physical mirroring of the two figures (269), and suggests that both are worshipped as beautiful symbols of silent and demure beauty.

Nevertheless, like the Madonna, the Infanta also wields tremendous power despite her objectification, which suggests an irony to her silent statue-like depiction. In the moment that she whispers to the eunuch the question that will lead to Don Juan’s death, she “fixed upon the cavalier a glance long, dark, and deep, like that of a wild antelope” (271). In this first and only instance of the Infanta gazing directly upon her suitor, their roles are reversed to the extent that he becomes the objectified victim as she reveals and releases her deadly power. This moment is when the Virgin and the Infanta are most explicitly blurred: as he reels with the potential consequences for his response, Don Juan notes that the princess “seemed to turn into the effigy ... of the Virgin” (271), and the royal figure herself suddenly and fantastically speaks Castilian and asks the suitor directly if she is more beautiful than the Virgin. This stunning intersection of the two figures underlines the Infanta’s power in this moment, as she is inseparable from the great mother of Catholicism; it also furthers the decadence of the religion, to which I will return. When he answers in the negative, of course, it is one of the princess’s servants that beheads Don Juan, a “gigantic Berber of the Rif,” who is under the direct order of the Chief Eunuch (272). In the *femme fatale* tradition, the Infanta does not directly murder her victim, but rather lures him to his own destruction. Nevertheless, she clearly has the power in this instant to stop the execution if she wishes, but instead watches as Don Juan is decapitated. The

juxtaposition of the princess's objectification and empowerment as a royal figure and fatal woman highlights the irony of her silent and passive presentation in the story. While women may appear demure and obedient, these characterizations suggest that rebellion and destructive or redemptive power may be lurking beneath the surface as the traditional edifices of passive and powerless femininity shift and crumble in the *fin de siècle*. With these images of superficially submissive women and *femmes fatales*, Lee utilizes the tropes of the male artistic canon yet twists these common elements to her own ends, to challenge cultural images of women and empower them.

The Virgin herself offers the fullest and most extensive criticism of Catholicism, through her doubling with the sexualized and exotic Infanta and her embodiment of unstable dichotomies. Kristeva distinguishes the most popular variations of the Madonna within Western culture, such as the humanizing mother (141) and the opulent queen (140), before settling on the sorrowful incarnation that is the main subject of Kristeva's criticism and of Lee's story. Lee explicitly states in her preface that while she embraces and admires the former incarnation of the Virgin, she has a strong "aversion" to the "pomp and whalebone and sorrow and tears" of the Spanish Madonna (*Hauntings* 246). Yet it is a combination of the queen and the grieving mother that the Virgin of the Seven Daggers embodies. This is not a traditionally admirable Marian figure, however: doubled with a murderous and exoticized Moorish princess and fulfilling the role of a *femme fatale* herself, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers carries a dangerous edge and possible eroticism that distinguishes her from the traditional desexualized mother-of-God model. Through

Don Juan's emphasis on the physical beauty and eroticization of the figure, which reflects the common visual emphasis on the Virgin's milk and tears that carry comfort, mourning, and some sexual implication through the association of the breast and the tears of sexual climax (Kristeva 143), the traditional Madonna/whore dichotomy is challenged as strict categories crumble. Nevertheless, this Virgin is also admired and worshipped for her purity and celebrated for her redemptive qualities. This blurring of the borders between purity and sinfulness, erotic and religious, as well as the mere existence of a Marian *femme fatale*, once again reflects the breaking down of borderlines within this decadent text.

Don Juan's deep devotion to the Virgin of the Seven Daggers as a figure of purity and beauty is a direct reflection of chivalric principles of courtly love, which demanded commitment to one unattainable lady above all others. Fittingly, this element of chivalry developed as an extension of the medieval cult of the Virgin, which worshipped Mary as the perfect mother of the God-child. As historian Eileen Power points out, this "counter-doctrine of the superiority of women" is linked yet seemingly antithetical to the establishment by the Church and aristocracy of women as inferior and subservient (11). These oppositional tensions seem to rest comfortably in Don Juan's mind as a reflection of his time; he both adulates and feels possessive of the Infanta and the Virgin. His strict adherence to this one devotional aspect of chivalry is surprising, given his otherwise criminal and villainous behavior; as a murderer, philanderer, and scoffer at other codes of respectable conduct, Don Juan's behavior is a far cry from the virtuous code of the chivalric noble which celebrated

loyalty, generosity, strength, and courtesy (Keen 2). This twist in his character may reflect an ironic jab at the hypocrisy of some critical elements of chivalry, such as the valuing of a romantic purity even though some of the most famous relationships were notoriously sexual. Nevertheless, though often framed in physical terms, Don Juan's devotion to the Virgin is quite traditional within the chivalric code, even as other elements of her characterization and role in the story are more decadent.

The Virgin's role as the chivalric ideal, as well as a maternal, yet sexualized figure, offers an unusual twist to the familiar *femme fatale* narrative, and this subversion of the common depiction is extended into the resolution of the story. Although the Madonna in this tale has in some sense caused Don Juan's death through her inherent demand of such chivalric devotion that he cannot deny her beauty, and although she finalizes his death by ultimately taking his earthbound soul to the afterlife, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers is not merely fatal; she is also redemptive. Without her intervention, Don Juan is certainly hell-bound: between the murders, seductions, and necromancy that he practices in order to gain access to the princess, the famous lover, now ghost, is "infallibly within a few minutes of hell" when he calls out to the Virgin to save him though he died "unshriven, in the midst of mortal sin" (276). Nevertheless, villain though he may be, this one act of ultimate devotion saves him. Because he died avowing that the Virgin was the most beautiful woman in the world, in an odd conflation of beauty and holiness, she saves his soul with an "extraordinary miracle": he is raised to heaven "as if borne up on clusters of soap-bubbles" by a number of "palm-bearing angels" and "chubby celestials" (277). Not

only is Don Juan saved from damnation, but he is also spiritually redeemed as he floats toward the heavens, and “his heart suddenly filled with a consciousness of extraordinary virtue” just before the Madonna herself appears before him (277). This suggests an alternative ending to the *femme fatale* story, and another element of an idealization of female characters. As a figure of redemption rather than destruction, the Virgin reverts to her role as the maternal and feminine ideal, after she has swerved into somewhat darker territory as a deadly and eroticized Madonna.

Yet her reversion to the pure and redemptive role is not truly complete, and her role in the death of Don Juan further suggests that the boundaries between the sexualized yet deadly woman and the sainted mother are breaking down.

Furthermore, Don Juan’s ascension is not fully peaceful or heavenly in itself; the statues come to life as he floats and the virtues “brandish their attributes” at him, and the angels “pelt him with flowers” (277). These slightly aggressive interactions suggest that though the Virgin has chosen to redeem him, he cannot simply become a holy or pure man so quickly, and the inanimate objects around him know better.

Furthermore, it suggests a light form of violence to the redemption; that he is “pelted” rather than showered by the flowers, and that the virtues challenge him with their “brandished” virtues indicates a rough transition from life to heaven, or perhaps a violence to redemption itself. This violence is reinforced by the music that accompanies the ascension; Don Juan recognizes the voice of Syphax, the “chief soprano” and likely *castrato* of the Church, singing beautifully as he rises (277). As discussed in Chapter Two, the act of castration for the purpose of liturgical vocal

performance suggests a quiet brutality beneath the calm surface; furthermore, it here suggests Don Juan's possible feminization after the symbolic castration of his beheading. These subtle shifts in language and scene underscore the blurring or crumbling of the idealizations of both the pure maternal and oppressive and bigoted masculinity.

This decay of the strict boundaries between the maternal and the sexual, the familiar and the exotic, is a continuing theme throughout the textual association of the Madonna and the Infanta. While they are clearly set up as a dichotomy, doubling each other in order to highlight and challenge difference between them, there is also an ongoing melding and overlap of their qualities and characters, in both explicitly narrated and more subtle qualities of the two icons. For example, the purity of the Virgin is also an element of the Infanta's desirability, as her veil, her close chaperoning, and her "exquisite modesty" suggest (269). While Don Juan dismisses his former lovers by calling them "sluts" and "witch" when they call out to him on his journey underground (262), the Infanta is declared to be the only one truly "worthy of lineage as great as his" (255), emphasizing the importance of purity of bloodlines in addition to sexual modesty. Furthermore, the chivalric relationship to Mary echoes a courtly love adoration of a human woman, both in this story and in historical codes of chivalry. This further suggests the blurring of the two women and the crumbling of the dichotomy between desire and redemption; although both embody ideal versions of femininity, and propose themselves as separate and as a binary, they are in fact much closer than initially suggested. The lines between the Madonna and the whore,

or Mary and Eve, in more chivalric terms, are breaking down, and the two types cannot be contained.

This breakdown of the dichotomy is most explicit in the final moments of the Infanta's rage as Don Juan refuses to betray the Virgin for the sake of wooing her. Whether it's part of the surrounding magic and mysticism of the Orientalist setting or a hallucination on the part of Don Juan isn't clear, but once the princess for the first time "fixed upon the cavalier a glance ... like that of a wild antelope" and has the Chief Eunuch ask the deadly question (271), her shape and voice begin to actually merge with that of the Madonna:

Before his eyes rose the throne, all vacillating in its splendour, and on the throne the Moorish Infanta with the triangular patterns painted on her tuberoso cheeks, and the long look in her henna'd eyes; and the image of her was blurred, and imperceptibly it seemed to turn into the effigy, black and white in her stiff puce frock and seed-pearl stomacher, of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers staring blankly into space. (271)

While highlighting the exotic sensuality of the Infanta and the doll-like lifelessness of the Virgin, this climactic passage also directly overlaps the holiness of the Marian figure and the desirable exoticism of the Infanta. As an explanation of this blurring, Patricia Pulham suggests that if Don Juan's attraction to the Madonna is interpreted to reveal Lee's own attraction to other women, then the blurring of the sexualized Infanta and the holy Virgin suggests a "simultaneous authorization and 'purification' of same-sex desire" (*Art* 108). Although I don't necessarily read this story as a reflection of the author's own sexuality, I agree that the confluence of the Infanta and the Madonna blurs the lines between the pure and the sensual. Extending Pulham's argument, then,

this conflation of the two figures explicitly reveals the decadence of the boundaries between them, as both take on some qualities of the other. While this decaying boundary certainly suggests the decadence within the Church, it also reflects the anxieties and occurrences in the culture at large in the *fin de siècle*.

As we have seen, the decay of traditional categories and borders around sexuality, gender, race, and culture was a major source of worry at the turn of the century, and the fact that Don Juan becomes most startlingly and literally aware of the women's overlap in this moment of danger and death underscores the threat that the inability to control these borders represented for many late Victorians. In fact, the volatility of these categories seems to add to the chill of the ghost story, as the ultimate melding of the Madonna/whore figures comes in the climactic moment. Yet for the Infanta and the Virgin, their placement in a stereotypical dichotomy seems to suggest that the instability of these borders may be unsettling, but potentially beneficial or empowering for non-dominant groups; after all, moving away from a clear-cut binary allows for individuality and personality to emerge, and these women do carry real power in this story. While the crumbling boundaries may terrify Don Juan, it seems that they also celebrate a resistance to societal borderlines.

Nevertheless, while the societal boundaries in this story are blurred, they have not dissolved completely, and the cultural "fears of regression and degeneration" are revealed in the ongoing reinforcement of some borderlines in the text (*Sexual Anarchy* 4). The need to clarify difference and accentuate the lines around cultural types and images makes it difficult for such embedded categories to break down completely, and

so while the Infanta and the Madonna overlap and blur traditional concepts of the Mary/Eve dichotomy, it is important to note that the dichotomy still clearly exists in this story. By setting them up as celestial and secular idealizations of the *femme fatale* and women in general, the story to some extent reinforces the notion of the cultural type: although one is pure and one is exotic, both are unrealistic ideals of what women should be. While the two sides are here brought closer together than usual, and even push back against their borders a bit, the binary still clearly exists, and the good girl still wins. The doubling of the Infanta and the Virgin highlights the dichotomy, since it sets them up as opposites that may resist their roles, but cannot break them.

“The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” is a piece with a light and jocular tone, filled with irony and exaggerated characters. Nevertheless, its criticisms of religion, misogyny, and bigotry are clear as it posits the interplay between these types of oppression. The crumbling boundaries of decadent Catholicism and the *fin de siècle* may offer some relief from restrictive roles for women, but simultaneously discomfit those traditionally in power, and are difficult to break down completely. Yet the placement of the Virgin in a *femme fatale* role is a surprising twist, and offers another possibility for the fatal woman as a redemptive figure. Kristeva argues that the cultural narrative of the feminine maternal, specifically the Western vision of motherhood derived from the engrained obsession and adoration of the Virgin Mary, no longer fulfills the needs of the women who have previously looked to this icon as a model. This may explain why the division between the Eve and Mary figures in this story are crumbling, as neither image is entirely satisfying to a female intellectual at

the turn of the century. Ultimately, then, by blurring the traditional Madonna/whore dichotomy and rewriting the ending of the traditional *femme fatale*, Lee's story challenges the type as it had been understood by her male counterparts, even as it reinforces some of the other problematic elements of Victorian thought. In playing with the expectations of the audience, Lee once again both pushes against and carries forward the *Zeitgeist* of her moment, ultimately complicating the traditional image of the *femme fatale* by writing over the trope created by centuries of male artists.

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<sup>1</sup> This version of the Madonna is more commonly called Our Lady of Sorrows or *Mater dolorosa*, and emphasizes Mary's maternal grief over the sacrifice of her son. In this incarnation, she is often portrayed with a visible heart stabbed with seven daggers in the center of her chest, which represent the seven sorrows of Mary's life.

<sup>2</sup> For my work in this chapter, as in the others, I'll be referencing the reprint of the story in the 2006 Broadview edition of some of Lee's most notable supernatural tales, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham).

<sup>3</sup> As Trachtenberg points out, while the cultural image of the sorcerer Jew was a "time-hallowed cliché" in the early modern era (57), these stereotypes were not easily shaken off. The Jew continued to "figure as the sorcerer in fables and nursery rhymes" well into the twentieth century (57).

<sup>4</sup> Scholar Ellis Hanson explores these connections between the *fin de siècle* avant-garde and the Church in his thorough study *Decadence and Catholicism*. Throughout the literary movement, he argues, religion, aestheticism, and eroticism were irrevocably tangled, each one influencing and shaping the other. He points to the Decadents' fascination with the "spiritual quality of language" (5) as well as their many conversions (11) and biblical retellings (7). Furthermore, Hanson emphasizes the Decadent elements of the Church itself; Catholicism is a "beautiful and erotic work of art," he suggests, and the "sheer excess of the Church – its archaic splendor, the weight of its history, the elaborate embroidery of its robes ... has always made it an aesthetic and fetishistic object of wonder" (6). In other words, the pageantry and performance of the Church associates it directly with aestheticism's cult of artificiality.

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<sup>5</sup> As noted in Chapter Two (n. 2), images of dead and sleeping women abounded in the *fin de siècle*, and while the New Women novels of the era told a different story, many popular works of the time such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seem to minimize women to primitive, voiceless others.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Pulham suggests that this power stems from the Virgin's position as a phallic mother, based on the character's description as "cased like a knife in its sheath" (qtd. in Pulham, *Art* 109).

## Conclusion

As a woman writer involved with a male-dominated literary movement, and as a thinker in the midst of the rapid social change of the *fin de siècle*, Vernon Lee occupies an unusually liminal place in cultural history. Not quite a New Woman and not quite a Decadent, Lee's aesthetic stories nevertheless engage many of the questions of her moment: How is gender defined and enacted? What elements of gender are fluid, and which essential? How does same-sex desire fit into existing frameworks, and where does it change or challenge traditional heteronormative narratives? How are we connected to the Past, to culture, to each other? Where do religion and other traditional structures fit within a modern society? How does our subjectivity affect our lived experience? Lee's stories explore all of these questions and more, without ever coming to a definitive or didactic conclusion. Yet as a female aesthete, she offers a different perspective from the overtly political feminists such as Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner, and a view from outside the privileged male aesthetes of the Decadent movement. As her pseudonym and androgynous dress suggest, Lee was interested in challenging binaries in both her life and her work, and her intermediate position between historical and literary movements is yet another example of these blurring lines. A close study of her work extends and expands our understanding of the relationship between women and aestheticism in the nineteenth century, and indicates that the lines between the movements were not as strict as they are often imagined to be.

The stories that I've written about here further complicate traditional boundaries as they employ hauntings, gender slippage, and the *femme fatale* to explore the psychology of a character and a historical moment. Lee constantly destabilizes binaries such as masculine/feminine, self/Other, and real/imaginary, creating a space within her stories of slippage and blurring which adds to the haunting qualities of these "spurious ghosts" (*Hauntings* 40). Lee's representation of the fatal woman, in particular, plays with these instabilities; the *femmes fatales* in these three stories are at times both innocent and deadly, powerful and voiceless, sexualized and supposedly repugnant. These figures persistently push back against the traditional cultural definitions of the deadly woman, even expanding the term to include feminized men and deities. These challenges to the traditional icon and the dominant images of womanhood in the late nineteenth century question the idealization of women as either angelically pure or dangerously sexual, and open space for a more complex and developed character. Nevertheless, Lee is employing a long-lived trope and stepping into a tradition created by male artists, and as I have argued, these representations are not always empowering or confrontational to the stereotype of the *femme fatale*. Instead, these ghost stories simultaneously challenge and reify dominant images of femininity through gender slippage and reinforcement, idealization of women, and re-presenting the generic code for fatal women. Because of this complication and corroboration with the prototypical characterization of women, Lee's stories present a valuable example of resistance to repressive norms in a transitional moment, as she plays with and explores the possibilities of gender and sexuality within a familiar

framework. Without adhering to the overtly political realist fiction of her fellow women, Lee's challenges to gender binaries and roles indicate her ongoing interest in these questions even as she perpetuates some aspects of women's repression. Avoiding an oversimplification of her role in these discussions, then, complicates both the common construction of the *femme fatale* in literary studies, and our historical sense of gender politics at the end of the nineteenth century.

As previously mentioned, Kristeva asserts that the Madonna, who has been embraced and held up as a symbol of the maternal feminine for hundreds of years, no longer fulfills the needs of the "feminine psyche" (149). Although the Madonna is still present in our visual and religious culture, and the maternal feminine is certainly still resounding and reverberating as an expectation of what women are and should be, the image no longer answers the needs of women's array of experiences and values. This argument about the anachronistic quality of a key symbolic representation of women is also applicable in other situations: when old structures and legends no longer hold or answer our cultural experience, they must be altered or recreated to better speak for the human experience. Lee's rewriting of the *femme fatale* does just this as it shifts and re-presents the iconic figure, which while a powerful cultural icon, did not reflect the complications or experience of women in the *fin de siècle*; these stories offer instead the possibility of an attractive feminine figure who carries both power and the possibility for redemption. While this revision of the fatal woman is quite different from Mariology in that the deadly figure was never intended as an ideal for women to emulate, recreating the image nevertheless responds to the shifts in

women's experience at the end of the nineteenth century, and attempts to create a new and more complex image of womanhood.

While I have attempted to address the role and the depiction of the *femme fatale* in these three stories, there are still many other rich areas for critical work in this area. More of Lee's stories, such as "Dionea," contain fatal woman figures, and several of her non-ghost stories, including "Lady Tal" and "The Legend of Madame Krasinska," play with the potential threat of confident and intellectual women to male artists. These other stories could be brought into a larger project exploring Lee's representation of independent and dangerous women. Another element of Lee's project that could be more fully explored is her approach to endings in her stories. Most of her supernatural tales have narrative frames to remove the story from the present moment, which adds to the sense that Lee is often "writing beyond the ending" of a traditional narrative (Blau DuPlessis). For instance, all three of these stories continue beyond the climactic death or confrontation, a technique that was often used by twentieth-century female authors from Kate Chopin to Anne Sexton. A study of Lee's frames and endings, then, could lead to fruitful exploration of the development of this strategy, and the connections between Victorian and modern writers. Further research and discussion of Lee's impact on other female writers, both of her time and beyond, would also be welcome; although she herself was influenced mostly by male writers and thinkers, younger women writers such as Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf alternatively embraced and condemned Lee's style and content.<sup>1 2</sup> While some of these personal connections and references have been addressed by critics, a

thorough investigation of Lee's literary and cultural influence would be a valuable addition to the study of her work.

Finally, moving beyond Lee, a broader study of the *femme fatale* as represented by women in the *fin de siècle* and beyond is needed. While several thorough and valuable monographs have addressed the construction of the fatal woman throughout literary and art history, the alterations or implications of this figure as represented by women authors and artists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have yet to be explored. For example, another woman writer of the 1890s, George Egerton, also depicted an exoticised *femme fatale* figure in her story "A Cross Line." In Egerton's version, however, the figure is part of a female character's fantasy, a sexual idealization of herself. In some ways, then, this is a more freeing and empowering figure than the deadly women in Lee's stories, yet reinforces other issues such as the male gaze and Orientalism. These authors are both in a transitional moment in the representation of the *femme fatale*, as the icon moves from threatening demonization to celebratory empowerment. Over the last century, there has been a sweeping shift in women's perception of the *femme fatale*. Today, the image of the sexualized fatal woman is often held up as an intriguing icon to emulate, a way to embrace women's sexuality and feminine power. This current "girl power" version of the deadly woman is celebrated in an array of projects such as Britney Spears' latest album, *Femme Fatale* (2011); *Femme Fatale Fitness*, which emphasizes sensual movement and confidence; and *Salome Magazine*, an online feminist forum for women's poetry and writing. Beginning with earlier Victorian images, through the *fin*

*de siècle*, and then the later move into modernism, detective novels, and even the film industry, there has been a gradual shift in the representation and interpretation of the figure of the *femme fatale*. Women's writing and art have, over time, contributed to a reclamation of the figure as one to admire rather than revile. A thorough study of the contribution of women's voices to this cultural shift, as well as their complication and perpetuation of the traditional *femme fatale* image, would help to situate the ongoing development of the icon as it reflects and constructs the idealization of women in Western culture, and the ways that women have contributed to the iconography and its discourse.

Vernon Lee's contributions to the developing literary conversation about gender roles, androgyny, and sexuality in the *fin de siècle* help to complicate and illuminate a particular moment in the continuing discussion of gender. For that reason alone, Lee studies is a valuable area of scholarship to explore and extend. Her ghosts, goddesses, and *femmes fatales* complicate and enrich these central issues of gender and sexuality, and allow for more play within the fluid yet enforced borderlines of the turn of century. As she perpetuates and defies the cultural expectations and representations of idealized women, Lee complicates the standard cultural narrative which often simplifies the movement of ideologies and perceptions by jumping from the Angel of the House to the suffragette, and from Victorianism to modernism, without recognizing the transitional figures that helped these moves take place. An extended study of Lee's work, then, allows for a fuller and more complex

understanding of her contributions to the cultural conversations about gender and the *femme fatale*, and reveals her important place in the *fin de siècle* canon.

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<sup>1</sup> Wharton, who was a friend of Lee's, declared her 1903 play *Ariadne in Mantua* to be "exquisite, and so completely the kind of fanciful poetical thing that I long to see done" (Colby 268). On the other hand, Woolf, who reviewed some of Lee's nonfiction works for the *Times Literary Supplement*, once complained that Lee "turns all good writing to vapour with her fluency and insipidity" (qtd. in Colby 249). Nevertheless, even Woolf acknowledged that Lee's passion for aesthetic theory carried the "suggestive power of brilliant talk" which could "infect others with the same desire" (qtd. in Colby 348), and in *A Room of One's Own*, noted Lee as one of the authors that wrote "books on all sorts of subjects which a generation ago no woman could have touched" (79).

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