

The Decadent Renaissance:  
The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon Lee

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the phenomenon of Renaissance mania in Decadent and Aestheticist literature of the 1880s and 1890s. It locates a variety of works by the Italian *poeta vate* Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Anglo-Italian intellectual Vernon Lee within what it terms the "Decadent Renaissance," a version of Renaissance Revivalism that privileges fantastical transformation and anachronistic revelry over positivist approaches to historiography. Concerned with the possibility of embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounters with the past, this *fin-de-siècle* literary and artistic current merges its interest in aesthetic freedom and sexual perversions with its backward-looking gaze.

"The Decadent Renaissance" identifies in the works of these two writers a web of interrelated questions about the power of the aesthetic imagination, the imbrication of erotic and historical knowledge, and the simultaneous lingering *in* and lingering *of* the past. As this study argues, both D'Annunzio and Lee negotiate the past through the female figure, which comes to serve as a bodily site of contested chronology and aesthetics and further underscores the sexual dimension of *fin-de-siècle* Renaissance fantasies. It is in their shared preoccupation with staging this encounter with the past — an encounter that is at once powerfully corporeal and disquietingly ghostly — that the dissertation finds a major source of its inspiration. In placing these concerns against the backdrop of British and Italian Aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelitism and the criticism of Walter Pater and Angelo Conti, "The Decadent Renaissance" follows a comparative and interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges the transnational, cosmopolitan character of Decadence as well as its interweaving of the verbal and the plastic. Throughout its chapters, the dissertation returns to its core questions: what promise does the Renaissance come to hold for these Decadent writers, and what do their works gain from the tentative channels of transhistorical communication that they seem to open?

Chapter One focuses on the turn to the Renaissance in D'Annunzio's illustrated poetry collection *Isaotta Guttadàuro* and Lee's fairy tale "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," arguing that these works center on a Paterian notion of the Renaissance as a sensibility

rather than a concrete historical period. In conceiving of the Renaissance past as a type of magical fairyland, these texts disrupt the binary opposition between the real and the imaginary even as they gesture towards the fragility of this realm. Chapter Two shifts from utopic visions to violent confrontation, as it concerns the impingement of the past onto the present through female revenants who erupt into the modern scene and embody antimodern sensibilities. It posits that Lee's supernatural tale "Dionea" and D'Annunzio's play *La Gioconda* transform the vampiric Mona Lisa of Pater's famous ekphrasis in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* into atavistically Greek, sculptural *femmes fatales* who queer historical chronology and reinforce the centrality of carnal knowledge. Chapter Three considers D'Annunzio's novel *Le vergini delle rocce* and Lee's short story "Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka" through the lens of necrophilic desire. It proposes that necrophilia operates as an aesthetic principle in these texts and makes possible their examination of the permeable boundaries between self and other, reality and fantasy, and past and present.

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I first encountered D’Annunzio’s works, via *Il piacere*, in an undergraduate seminar with Rebecca West while she served as a visiting professor at Yale, and I would like to extend to her my profound gratitude. Angela Capodivacca and David Lummus co-chaired my senior thesis on D’Annunzio’s early poetry, and I am forever appreciative of their sustained mentorship during my undergraduate years. My training as an Italianist would furthermore not have been possible without the generous intellectual guidance of Giuseppe Mazzotta, Millicent Marcus, and Francesca Cadel, inside and outside of the classroom, and I remember our many chats fondly.

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## Introduction

I maintain that we have but a narrow  
conception of life if we confine it to  
the functions which are obviously  
practical, and a narrow conception of  
reality if we exclude from it the Past.  
And not because the Past has been, has  
actually existed outside some one, but  
because it may, and often does,  
actually exist within ourselves.

Vernon Lee  
*Renaissance Fancies and Studies*

La poesia italiana comincia con 200  
versi di Dante e – dopo un lungo  
intervallo – continua in me.

Gabriele D'Annunzio  
*Di me a me stesso*

In his 1894 essay *Giorgione*, the Italian Aesthete Angelo Conti proclaims that “[i]l critico deve essere poeta” [“the critic must be a poet”].<sup>1</sup> He then laments the current state of the field, since it seems that dry erudition has drained the Renaissance of all life: “Oggi le sorgenti dell’entusiasmo sono inaridite; e dinanzi alla luce dell’opera geniale, è proclamata la necessità d’una osservazione fredda e severa, quale si praticerebbe soltanto sulle tavole di marmo di una sala incisoria” [“Today the wells of enthusiasm have dried up; and in front of the light of brilliant work, they proclaim the necessity of a cold and severe observation, like that which one would practice only on the marble slabs of the dissection room”].<sup>2</sup> In Conti’s estimation, the late-nineteenth-century art historical demystification of the Italian Renaissance, with its shift away from Vasari-inspired myth-making and towards positivist research, fundamentally misunderstands the allure that the period holds.<sup>3</sup> His own study of *Giorgione*, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Angelo Conti, *Giorgione* (Firenze: Fratelli Alinari, 1894), 10. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> The selection of *Giorgione* for this discourse is no accident. His mysterious legacy, cryptic subject matter, and haunting style rendered him a perfect subject for the Aesthetes, while, at the same time, positivist scholars fiercely debated the proper attribution of his works. Conti’s essay, furthermore, is in large part indebted to Walter Pater’s essay “The School of Giorgione,” included in the third (1888) and fourth (1893) editions of *The Renaissance*, which engages directly with contemporary debates about attribution and connoisseurship. In his essay, Pater laments the current state of art historical scholarship, selecting Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s *History of Painting in North Italy* (1871) as emblematic of a dispiriting trend: “And now, in the ‘new Vasari,’ the great traditional reputation, woven with so profuse demand on men’s admiration, has been scrutinised thread by thread; and what remains of the most vivid

contrary, will respect, and reflect, the mysterious pull that this “bello e tremendo” [“beautiful and tremendous”] Quattrocento artist exerts over both his historical and his contemporary audience.<sup>4</sup>

Conti’s friend and collaborator Gabriele D’Annunzio would praise *Giorgione* in his preface to Conti’s *La beata riva: trattato dell’oblio* (1900), noting that, in his estimation, the work’s true value lies more in pleasure than in accuracy:

Riesce Angelo Conti per tali modi a mostrarci la vera essenza dell’arte giorgionesca? È lecito dubitarne. Ma che importa? Noi non ci troviamo forse davanti a Giorgione, ma certo davanti a uno spirito eletto il quale, pensando e sentendo con profonda sincerità, cerca di comunicarci con tutte le virtù della parola le emozioni da lui provate al cospetto di quelle forme della bellezza che per lui rappresentano la più pura e più luminosa manifestazione della vita. Non ci offre egli così un piacere assai superiore a quello che ci potrebbero dare alcune pagine di documentazione scientifica precise e fredde?<sup>5</sup>

[Does Angelo Conti succeed through these methods in showing us the true essence of Giorgionesque art? We may well doubt it. But what does it matter? Perhaps we do not find ourselves in front of Giorgione, but we certainly are presented with an elect spirit who, thinking and feeling with

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and stimulating of Venetian masters, a live flame, as it seemed, in those old shadowy times, has been reduced almost to a name by his most recent critics. Yet enough remains to explain why the legend grew up above the name, why the name attached itself, in many instances, to the bravest work of other men.” Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 129-30. Pater ultimately decries this arid, demystifying scholarship, as it overlooks the essential “truth” of Giorgionesque impressions. As seen in *Giorgione* and *La beata riva*, Conti and D’Annunzio adopt a similar position, and the idea of Giorgione as a “live flame” will be a *leitmotiv* in D’Annunzio’s novel *Il fuoco* (1900). Vernon Lee herself would, in her critical writing, stake out a position between the scientific and Aestheticist stances. She writes, for instance, that “mere scientific inquiry into the difference between originals and copies, into the connection between master and pupil, make us alive to the special qualities which can delight us. As long as we looked in a manner so slovenly that a spurious Botticelli could pass for a genuine one, we could evidently never benefit by the special quality, the additional excellence of Botticelli’s own work.” Yet, “[i]t seems as if at present the development, the contagion, so to speak, of scientific methods applied to art were making people forget a little that art, besides being, like everything else, the passive object of scientific treatment, is (what most other things are not) an active, positive, special factor of pleasure.” Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896), 241-42. For a deeper study of these debates surrounding attribution and connoisseurship, and the broader emergence of art history as a field of inquiry in the latter half of the nineteenth century, please see Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15-39; Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Jeremy Norman Melius, “Art History and the Invention of Botticelli” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010, ProQuest, AAT 3555821); and Rachel Teukolsky, “The Politics of Formalist Art Criticism: Pater’s ‘School of Giorgione,’” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2002), 151-169.

<sup>4</sup> Conti, *Giorgione*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> D’Annunzio, “Ragionamento,” preface to *La beata riva: trattato dell’oblio*, Angelo Conti (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1900), xviii-xix.

deep sincerity, tries to communicate to us with all of the virtues of the word the emotions he feels in the presence of those forms of beauty that for him represent the purest and most luminous manifestation of life. Does he not thus offer us a pleasure much superior to that which we could gain from a few pages of precise and cold scientific documentation?]

D'Annunzio's reference to the "spirito eletto" hints at a perceived elective affinity between *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and Aestheticism and Giorgione's Renaissance. Conti may not provide scientific documentation, or even concern himself much with trifling matters like attributions or facts. His pleasure, and D'Annunzio's pleasure, instead derives from his ability to feel, and to express his feelings, when in front of these brilliant paintings. Rhetorically, in turn, the reader is enveloped into D'Annunzio's "noi," included among these elect spirits who rise above the constraints of "documentazione scientifica." Objective analysis is thus replaced by subjective experience, and rather than claiming truth value through factual accuracy, these writers will claim that a type of spiritual accuracy renders their works fitting explorations of the Italian Renaissance.

As D'Annunzio and Conti themselves explicitly acknowledge, such a vision of subjective, or impressionistic, criticism owes a great debt to the work of the British Aesthete Walter Pater, who, in the preface to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), contrasts his own approach to that of the major nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold: "'To see the object as in itself it really is,' has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly."<sup>6</sup> If, for Arnold, seeing the object involves *objectively* placing it into its proper cultural context in order to situate it in the great history of ideas, for Pater, seeing the object necessitates an inward gaze, a focus on the critic's *subjective* impression. The first step is not to situate the art object in a historical or socio-cultural context, but rather to ask oneself a series of personal questions: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence?"<sup>7</sup> It is this repositioning, or subjectivizing, of the critical gaze that sets the tone for the entire volume and that allows for the Aestheticist and Decadent transcendence of traditional historiography in both their non-fictional and fictional works. Rather than scientific, their encounters with the past will be personal, affective, and embodied.

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<sup>6</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 3. Matthew Arnold first used the formulation "to see the object itself as it really is" in "On Translating Homer" (1862) and then referred to it in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). The full quote, from the latter essay, reads as follows: "Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is." Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Essays in Criticism* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 3.

It is hardly surprising that Pater and his followers articulate this approach through their discussions of the Italian Renaissance. After all, it is by now a truism to state that the nineteenth century itself created “the Renaissance,” in a process inaugurated, in large part, by the mid-century tomes of Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>8</sup> The French historian Michelet would inaugurate the term as a historical category in his 1855 *History of France*, while the Swiss Burckhardt would put forth an expansive cultural history of the period in his 1860 *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. The following decades would see no shortage of volumes devoted to establishing the period’s fundamental characteristics and its temporal boundaries. Such interventions into Renaissance historiography invariably also engaged with contemporary concerns, and what Hilary Fraser notes of the British context might well be applied equally throughout much of Europe in the latter half of the century: “There was considerable disagreement over when the Renaissance actually happened, what its essential characteristics were and whether it was a good or bad thing, but there was no doubt as to its usefulness as a vehicle for the critical examination of contemporary cultural, political and intellectual issues.”<sup>9</sup> The Italian Renaissance thereby became a terrain over which to wage debates about not only how to understand the period itself but also about a range of topics, from aesthetics to historiography, and from epistemology to sexuality.

The central claim of this dissertation will be twofold: firstly, Aestheticist cultural production plays an essential role in the nineteenth-century construction of the Renaissance; and secondly, the Aesthetes’ engagement with the Renaissance enables their inquiries into the nature of historical, aesthetic, and sexual knowledge. The dissertation groups a variety of works by the Italian *poeta vate* Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938) and the Anglo-Italian intellectual Vernon Lee (1856-1935) under the umbrella of what I term the “Decadent Renaissance,” a version of Renaissance

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<sup>8</sup> For a sampling of studies of nineteenth-century Medievalism and Renaissance Revivalism in Northern Europe, please see J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); William F. Gentrup, ed., *Reinventing the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Constructions of the Medieval and the Early Modern Period* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998); Lynne Hinojosa, *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Loretta M. Holloway and Jennifer A. Palmgren, eds., *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Yvonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen, eds., *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Martin A. Ruehl, *The Making of Modernity: Renaissance Italy in the German Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For the Italian context, please see Sandra Migliore, *Tra Hermes e Prometeo: il mito di Leonardo nel decadentismo europeo* (Firenze: Olshcki, 1994); Rosanna Pavoni, ed., *Reviving the Renaissance: The Use and Abuse of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Italian Art and Decoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Giuliana Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin de siècle Italy* (London: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007); and Amedeo Quondam, *Tre inglesi, l’Italia, il Rinascimento: sondaggi sulla tradizione di un rapporto culturale e affettivo* (Napoli: Liguori, 2006). D. Medina Lasansky’s *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), though not dedicated to the nineteenth century, offers an excellent analysis of how the appropriation of the Middle Ages and Renaissance continued and evolved into Italy’s twentieth century.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 2.

Revivalism that privileges fantastical transformation and anachronistic revelry over positivist approaches to historiography.<sup>10</sup> Concerned with the possibility of an embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounter with the past, this *fin-de-siècle* literary and artistic current merges its interest in aesthetic freedom and sexual perversions with its backward-looking gaze.

The dissertation thus participates in the reemergence of critical interest in Decadence and Aestheticism but it foregrounds Italian contributions that have often been marginalized within broader discussions of the European *fin de siècle*. Furthermore, through its pairing of D'Annunzio and Lee, it emphasizes the cosmopolitan nature of Italian cultural production in the period. As part of the scholarly revival of Aestheticism, these figures are both experiencing reassessments of their works yet they have not widely been discussed alongside one another.<sup>11</sup> This project insists that their overlapping social circles and literary influences manifest in their works through the questions they pose about the power of the aesthetic imagination, the imbrication of erotic and historical knowledge, and the simultaneous lingering *in* and lingering *of* the past.<sup>12</sup> As I argue in the following chapters, both D'Annunzio and Lee

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<sup>10</sup> I very consciously use the term Anglo-Italian to describe Vernon Lee, who preferred her pseudonym to her given name Violet Paget. She resided in Florence for the majority of her adult life but made frequent trips to England and participated in the cultural life of both countries. Still, as evidenced by a letter to her mother in 1886, quoted by Christa Zorn in her expansive study of Lee's life and work, she considered Italy her home: "For all my interest in England, this is *my* country." Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 2. As Zorn notes, "Since England was her country of choice for publishing, critics have largely discussed her as a British author. But her extensive knowledge of French, Italian, and German literature, history, and science brought her the attention of a more international intellectual community than most of her British contemporaries enjoyed." Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 2. See also Hilary Fraser, "Vernon Lee: England, Italy and Identity Politics," in *Britannia Italia Germania: Taste and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Carol Richardson and Graham Smith (Edinburgh: VARIE at the University of Edinburgh, 2001), 175-191.

<sup>11</sup> In their introduction to the recent *Forum Italicum* special issue "Reawakening Beauty: d'Annunzio's Seduction of the Senses," Lara Gochin Raffaelli and Michael Subialka offer an incisive interpretation of the author's "relative oblivion" in Anglophone scholarship and argue that the "reawakening of interest" in his work can be linked to renewed attention to Decadence in the European context and modernism in the Italian one. Lara Gochin Raffaelli and Michael Subialka, "Introduction: D'Annunzio's Beauty, Reawakened," *Forum Italicum*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Aug. 2017): 312-13. They subsequently provide a concise catalogue of recent trends in D'Annunzio scholarship. Like D'Annunzio, Lee has experienced oscillating scholarly attention over the years. For an excellent overview of both Lee's life and her shifting critical fortune during and after her lifetime, please see Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham's introduction to their edited volume *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Not only did their social circles overlap – they were also familiar with each other's work. D'Annunzio (writing as "Il Duca Minimo") references Lee's work on eighteenth-century music in his review of Stanislao Falchi's *Giuditta* (1887), published in two parts in *La Tribuna* in March of that year. Please see D'Annunzio, "A proposito della *Giuditta*," I-II, in *Scritti giornalistici*, v. 1, ed. Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 853-860. In her later critical writing, Lee would describe D'Annunzio's style with equal distaste and attraction: "[D'Annunzio's] long, latinized sentences, where adjectives are rare and verbs vague, leave the impression of everything happening far slower than it possibly could in reality; his people take as long to put on their hat and walk to the door as real mortals to change all their clothes and walk to the other end of the town; hence a feeling of watching colossal ghosts or huge, unfinished, barely animated statues; an impression of something empty, featureless, gaping, but irresistibly emphatic, eerie and tragic, which allows one to read the most revolting or preposterous stories without, as one otherwise would, disbelieving in their possibility outside a madhouse." Vernon Lee, *The*

negotiate the past through the female figure, which comes to serve as a bodily site of contested chronology and aesthetics and further underscores the sexual dimension of *fin-de-siècle* Renaissance fantasies. In their poetry, criticism, plays, and novels, the past is repeatedly feminized, and it is in their shared preoccupation with staging a sexualized encounter with the past — an encounter that is at once powerfully corporeal and disquietingly ghostly — that the dissertation finds a major source of its inspiration. Ultimately, it is through these antimodern seductions that D’Annunzio and Lee assert that any experience with the past involves a delicate negotiation of self and other, of imagination and knowledge, and of intellect and eros.

While the central focus of the dissertation remains on a select number of works in different genres by D’Annunzio and Lee, it situates them within the broader context of British and Italian Aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelitism and the art criticism of Conti, Pater, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. In placing its major questions against this backdrop, “The Decadent Renaissance” follows a comparative and interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges the transnational character of Decadence as well as its insistent interweaving of the verbal and the plastic arts.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is in part this attention to the interdisciplinary that leads to the selection of D’Annunzio and Lee as its major subjects. Both writers were prolific in a variety of genres during their lengthy careers: to name just a few of their myriad pursuits, D’Annunzio penned poetry, novels, plays, society columns, and exhibition reviews, while Lee occupied herself with supernatural tales, essays and dialogues on the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, volumes on visual arts and music, and treatises on physiological aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> There were few debates of their time into which they hesitated to intervene.

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*Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Limited, 1923), 60.

<sup>13</sup> This period’s interart aesthetics have been a major scholarly preoccupation over the past decade, particularly in the British context. Please see, for instance, Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2008); Elicia Clements and Lesley J. Higgins, eds., *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater across the Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer, eds., *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Rachael Langford, ed., *Textual Intersections: Literature, History and the Arts in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); and Paola Spinozzi and Elisa Bizzotto, *The Germ: Origins and Progenies of Pre-Raphaelite Interart Aesthetics* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> While an in-depth discussion of physiological aesthetics is beyond the immediate purview of this dissertation, Lee’s engagement with Renaissance art and concern with embodied encounters with the past would ultimately form the backdrop for her later studies on the psychology and physiology of art appreciation. For analysis of Lee’s work on physiological aesthetics, please see Joseph Bristow, “Vernon Lee’s Art of Feeling,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring, 2006): 117-139; Carolyn Burdett, “‘The Subjective Inside Us Can Turn into the Objective Outside: Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,’” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2 June 2011), <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>>; Hilary Fraser, “Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse,” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1999): 77-100; Susan Lanzoni, “Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics of Empathy,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2009): 330-54; Kathy Psomiades, “‘Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace’: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21-42; and Catherine Anne Wiley, “Warming Me Like a Cordial: The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics,” in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2006, 58-74.

My comparative approach originates in the conviction that D'Annunzio and Lee cannot be understood in exclusively national contexts, and my adoption of the transnational terms Decadence and Aestheticism – coupled with my decision not to employ the specifically Italian term *Decadentismo* – reflects this stance.<sup>15</sup> I view their works as part of what Matthew Potolsky has recently identified as the “decadent republic of letters,” seeking to rectify what he sees as the current state of the field, in which, “with surprisingly few exceptions, the history of the decadent movement has been told from the perspective of a single national tradition.”<sup>16</sup> Desirous of a new approach to Decadence, he asserts that no nation can be seen in a vacuum and that the Decadent movement is reliant upon its cosmopolitanism: “Defined by more than the familiar set of images, themes, and stylistic traits normally associated with the movement, decadence, as I present it here, is a characteristic mode of reception, a stance that writers take in relationship to their culture and to the cosmopolitan traditions that influence them.”<sup>17</sup> Decadence, of course, is a very self-consciously *literate* literary movement, and this literacy extends across boundaries of nations, arts, and genres. As Potolsky states, these texts “move within a recognizable network” and “each text borrows from and expands the network, locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.”<sup>18</sup>

Not only do the texts move within this network, but so too do their writers. Lee spent the majority of her adult life in Florence, where she was close friends with the Florentine intellectual Carlo Placci and the important literary critics Enrico Nencioni and Mario Praz, whose 1930 work *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* remains an immensely useful text for studying not only the early-twentieth-century reception of Decadence, but also the role of Italian writers and critics in that movement, a subject that has unfortunately been sidelined in many assessments of the *fin de siècle*. As the recently published volume of her correspondence suggests, Lee was equally involved in both the British and Italian contexts and at times served as a cultural

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<sup>15</sup> For an exploration of terminology in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian literature, please see Guido Baldi, *Le ambiguità della “decadenza”: D'Annunzio romanziere* (Napoli: Liguori, 2008); Walter Binni, *La poetica del decadentismo* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1936); Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, ninth edition (Firenze: Sansoni, 1992); and Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, eds., *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), particularly Moroni's chapter, “Sensuous Maladies: The Construction of Italian *Decadentismo*,” 65-85. Of course, there have been extensive debates over the term Decadence across *fin-de-siècle* European literature. Please see, for example, Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, eds. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Dennis Denisoff, “Decadence and Aestheticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31-52; Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Kirsten Macleod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

mediator.<sup>19</sup> The history of Pater's reception in Italy, for instance, is largely inaugurated by Lee, who introduced his work to both Nencioni and Placci and corresponded with him frequently.<sup>20</sup> D'Annunzio lived for a time in France, and there was a tremendous vogue for his works throughout Europe, evidenced, in part, by the fact that many of his major works saw almost immediate translations into French and English. James Joyce would count him among his literary influences, and Henry James would analyze his work with equal unease and fascination.<sup>21</sup> During his years in Rome, he was also instrumental in shaping the Italian reception of British artists. In sum, Lee and D'Annunzio cannot be isolated to individual contexts of national literature.

The "decadent republic of letters," therefore, is based on an ever-expanding network of texts and intellectuals. In other words, it involves encounters. One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that the cosmopolitan approach towards Decadence should be expanded to a transhistorical one as well, broadening Potolsky's notion of Decadence as "a characteristic mode of reception." Decadent writers do not only look to other contemporary cosmopolitans (e.g. D'Annunzio to Swinburne, Swinburne to Baudelaire, Baudelaire to Poe), but they also look to texts and artworks of the past, filter them through their own gaze, and thereby reveal complex methods of reception and adaptation.

It is precisely this meditation on transhistorical communication that renders the Renaissance an ideal period for these Decadent writers and artists, and their works seem at times even to anticipate contemporary scholarship on Renaissance temporalities. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, for instance, Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood explore how certain artifacts "resist anchoring in time"<sup>22</sup> and describe the peculiar place of the aesthetic object within the stream of linear time:

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<sup>19</sup> Please see Vernon Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935*, vol. 1 (1865-1884), edited by Amanda Gagel (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> In the prefatory timeline of *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. Stephen Bann, the first item listed is Lee's 1885 review of *Marius the Epicurean*, "La morale dell'estetica: appunti sul nuovo libro di Walter Pater" in *Fanfulla della domenica*, to which she was a regular contributor. Stephen Bann, ed., *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), xviii.

<sup>21</sup> In his essay on D'Annunzio, James writes of Aestheticism as a foreign, not fully digestible phenomenon: "It remained for us a queer high-flavoured fruit from overseas, grown under another sun than ours, passed round and solemnly partaken of at banquets organised to try it, but not found on the whole really to agree with us, not proving thoroughly digestible." Henry James, "Gabriele D'Annunzio," in *Literary Criticism*, vol. II (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 908. James thereby sees D'Annunzio's work as emblematic of European Aestheticism, and he will strikingly compare D'Annunzio's extraction of beauty from all that exists around him to the Latin spirit of the Renaissance: "Does it not really all come back to style? It was to the Latin spirit that the Renaissance was primarily vouchsafed; and was not, for a simplified statement, the last word of the Renaissance the question of taste?" James, "Gabriele D'Annunzio," 935.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 7. Nagel and Wood opt for the term "anachronic" over "anachronistic," since they believe that the latter is "a judgmental term that carries with it the historicist assumption that every event and every object has its proper location within objective and linear time." Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 13. Throughout this dissertation, however, I freely adopt "anachronism" and "anachronistic" and believe that the judgmental overtones that cling to these terms actually render them ideal for discussing the culture of *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism – "anachronistic," like "decadent," is a pejorative transformed into a badge of honor.



No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or by a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a meaningful event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting.<sup>23</sup>

As Nagel and Wood note, Renaissance writers and artists were particularly attuned to such shifting messages and to the creative (mis-)interpretations that works of art may elicit; this “bending of time” both enables and derives from the work’s “reactivation.” And herein lies the spiritual accuracy to the Renaissance that Conti claims in his criticism and for which D’Annunzio lauds his brilliance: the aesthetic object points backwards and forwards and resists positivist stabilization. D’Annunzio’s own assertion, in one of the epigraphs that open this introduction, that Italian poetry commences with Dante and continues, after a long interval, with his own literary production, is thus more than simple braggadocio – though, of course, he was no stranger to that. Instead, it reflects a conviction that he and his Decadent brethren are the worthy inheritors and interpreters of this grand Renaissance legacy.

The works explored in the following chapters fully embrace imaginative collaborations across space and time, and increased attention to such issues might ultimately enable a shift away from the view of Aestheticism as a culture of absolute retreat from reality and towards an understanding of its yearning for intellectual and aesthetic communion.<sup>24</sup> After all, as the chosen epigraph from Lee indicates, Aestheticism’s backward-looking gaze reflects not a retreat from reality but rather an enlargement of it. Reality contains the past: not just the historical past of dry fact but also the imaginative legacies and emotional entanglements that we carry within ourselves.

## Chapter summaries

Inspired by their chosen subject matter, the chapters do not aim to trace a diachronic progression across D’Annunzio and Lee’s *oeuvres* but rather they aim to explore different modes through which their works “feel backward,” a phrase I adopt from Heather Love.<sup>25</sup> While the chapters engage with a variety of their critical texts, they focus more directly on fictional and poetic works. This emphasis reflects the fact that these authors do not approach the chronicling of the past as a factual enterprise but

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>24</sup> For a fascinating recent reassessment of retreat in Pater’s *oeuvre*, please see Rachel O’Connell, “Reparative Pater: Retreat, Ecstasy, and Reparation in the Writings of Walter Pater,” *ELH*, vol. 82, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 969-986.

<sup>25</sup> Please see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

rather as an embodied, affective encounter that is “activated and reactivated” through the power of the aesthetic imagination. Their works thus disrupt the binary opposition between the real and the imaginary, and between the historical and the fantastic; in so doing, they furthermore often lay bare the constructedness of the supposedly objective historical inquiry to which they object.

Chapter One focuses on the turn to the Renaissance in D’Annunzio’s illustrated poetry collection *Isaotta Guttadàuro* (1886) and Lee’s fairy tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” (1896), first published in the Decadent quarterly *The Yellow Book*. The poems and the tale are inspired by medieval and Renaissance culture as well as by the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite interpretation thereof, and they reveal complex processes of cultural mediation and nostalgia. The chapter opens by exploring how the texts are indebted to Pater’s notion of the Renaissance as a sensibility more than a historical period, and it then posits such a Renaissance as a magical space, a type of fairyland *locus amoenus*, accessible only to those who can “feel backward.” Such a space can enable aesthetic fantasy but is also burdened by a sense of belatedness or even impossibility, and if D’Annunzio’s collection generally revels in its backward-looking fantasy, seeing in this Renaissance fairyland a space for intertextual play and demonstrations of poetic bravura, Lee’s fairy tale ends in tragedy, as the fairyland is never actually allowed to exist in this world. Finally, in exploring the fabric of these texts, the chapter foregrounds the interaction of visual and literary Aestheticism.

Chapter Two shifts from nostalgia to confrontation, as it explores the characterization of the eponymous *femmes fatales* in Lee’s supernatural tale “Dionea” (1890) and D’Annunzio’s play *La Gioconda* (1898), in both cases with particular reference to Pater’s famous ekphrasis of the vampiric Mona Lisa in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Both works feature disruptive women, love triangles, ambitious male artists, deadly and dismembering statues, and the enactment of pagan-inflected ritualistic sacrifice. Arguing that Lee and D’Annunzio transform the mysterious presence that we find in Pater’s reverie into a fully embodied revenant in their own texts, the chapter is particularly interested in how they stage a violent encounter between past and present and negotiate this conflict through the female body. I locate the possibility of such transformation within Lee’s and D’Annunzio’s shared preoccupation with the sculptural art form and its troubling three-dimensionality. Noting the imbricated legacies of the Renaissance and pagan Greece, the chapter concludes that Dionea and Gioconda may be read as pagan “gods in exile” who queer historical chronology and insist upon the overlapping realms of carnal knowledge and aesthetic contemplation.

Chapter Three considers D’Annunzio’s novel *Le vergini delle rocce* (1895) and Lee’s short story “Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka” (1890) through the lens of necrophilic desire. It asserts that the necrophilic overtones that some critics have briefly nodded towards are actually of vital importance within the imaginary of these texts, as D’Annunzio and Lee transform necrophilic perversion into an aesthetic principle that makes possible their examination of the permeable boundaries between self and other, reality and fantasy, and past and present. In other words, in these works, necrophilia opens a space of dizzying possibility. Whether figured explicitly as “the Past” or merely as individual love object, the dead Renaissance woman focalizes her spectator’s erotic, epistemological, and imaginative

concerns, allowing him to transcend perceived aesthetic constraints. For the protagonists, Claudio Cantelmo and Spiridion Trepka, the transgressive love of dead women forms the foundation for their creative fantasies and highlights their status as elect figures of rarified sensibilities and sensitivities.

Throughout its chapters, “The Decadent Renaissance” returns to its core questions: How does a discourse of historiography become entangled with a meditation on the power of the aesthetic? What role does erotic desire play in the irrepressible urge to look back to the past? And, most importantly, what promise does the Renaissance come to hold for these Decadent writers, and what do their works gain from the tentative channels of transhistorical communication that they seem to open?

## Chapter One: Renaissance Fairylands

O knights and lords, it seems but little skill  
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

William Morris  
“The Defence of Guenevere”

Signori e cavallier che ve adunati  
Per odir cose dilette e nove,  
Stati attenti e quieti, ed ascoltati  
La bella istoria che 'l mio canto muove

Boiardo  
*Orlando Innamorato*

The great stalwart naked forms of  
Greece no longer leap and wrestle or  
carry their well-poised baskets of  
washed linen before us; the mailed and  
vizored knights of the Nibelungen no  
longer clash their armour to the sound  
of Volker's red fiddle-bow; the  
glorified souls of Dante no longer  
move in mystic mazes of light before  
the eyes of our fancy. All that is gone.  
But here is the fairyland of the  
Renaissance.

Vernon Lee  
“The School of Boiardo”

Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) opens not in Quattrocento Italy but in thirteenth-century France with Aucassin and Nicolette, and it closes in nineteenth-century Germany with Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “the last fruit of the Renaissance.”<sup>1</sup> In between are the essays on more traditionally “Renaissance” figures – Pico della Mirandola, Sandro Botticelli, Luca della Robbia, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Joachim du Bellay. As this list of names suggests, Pater does not confine himself strictly to a chronological period or geographical area; instead, as he notes in his preface, he has given the word *Renaissance* “a much wider scope than was intended by those who originally used it to denote only that revival of classical antiquity in the fifteenth century.”<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Renaissance exists in fifteenth-century Italy, yes, but there is also an “earlier Renaissance within the middle age itself,” just as there is “an aftermath, a wonderful later growth.”<sup>3</sup> In the opening essay on Aucassin and Nicolette, Pater explains his idiosyncratic definition:

For us the Renaissance is the name of a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt, prompting those who experience this desire to seek first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment, and directing them not merely to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to divine new sources of it, new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.<sup>4</sup>

Strikingly, Pater describes this Renaissance not as a historically discrete period but rather as a movement of desire: “the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake” *makes itself felt*, “prompting those who experience this desire” to fulfill it through both a turn to the “intellectual or imaginative enjoyment” of the past and a determination to create “new sources” of such enjoyment. But who are “those who experience this desire”? Who belongs to Pater’s “us,” which seems to prefigure Oscar Wilde’s phrasing of “our English Renaissance” in his 1882 lecture “The English Renaissance of Art”? And how does this vision become *the* Renaissance of the Decadent imagination?

In part, “for us” – the sense of a shared Renaissance, be it historical or, in Wilde’s case, contemporary – resonates with Matthew Potolsky’s argument that Decadent writers “construct a new and more amenable imagined community, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, composed of like-minded readers and writers scattered around the world and united by the production, circulation, and reception of art and literature.”<sup>5</sup> As Potolsky notes, the Renaissance that emerges from Pater’s volume is a mirror for the critic’s own movement, since it is a similarly “transnational community of spirit and taste, populated by individuals who are always literally in motion, always crossing national borders, seeking out new patrons, forming new erotic and intellectual bonds, and selecting among political, religious, artistic, and philosophical traditions.”<sup>6</sup> This notion, indeed, lies at the origin of Pater’s redefinition of the term, his expansion of its meaning beyond the “revival of classical antiquity” and into the realm of “the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake.” This cosmopolitan vision transcends both time and space; the borders crossed are as temporal as they are national. Decadent elective affinities, so to speak, lead writers and artists across the centuries in search of fellowship.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 80.

Not all of Pater's readers considered themselves part of his "imagined community" (his "for us"), however, and they declined to share his expanded definition of the Renaissance. In the *Westminster Review* in April 1873, for example, Emilia Pattison objects to the title of the essay collection, arguing that the volume is not actually interested in its purported subject – the history of the Renaissance:

The title is misleading. The historical element is precisely that which is wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book... the book is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance. For instead of approaching his subject, whether Art or Literature, by the true scientific method, through the life of the time of which it was an outcome, Mr Pater prefers in each instance to detach it wholly from its surroundings, to suspend it isolated before him, as if indeed it were a kind of air-plant independent of ordinary sources of nourishment.<sup>7</sup>

In Pattison's estimation, Pater has deviated from the models established by Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt and has eschewed "the true scientific method" in favor of isolating his case studies from their historical context, resulting in his inability to contribute to the "history of the Renaissance." For Pattison, whatever value Pater's essays have is decidedly ahistorical, a matter less of fact than of feeling.<sup>8</sup>

Yet we might fruitfully consider the Renaissance itself as a feeling (rather than a historical category) within the imagination of Decadence and Aestheticism. And it is this notion of *feeling* or *sensibility*, I argue, that provides the extra-ordinary sources of nourishment that sustain Pater's "air-plants." The plants are, quite simply, fed by their reception, recirculation, and reinterpretation; they live on recycled air and gain their power through the new combinations in which they are placed. Such is the effect of Pater's act of Renaissance canon formation.

In conceiving of the Renaissance as a feeling, we may recall Sianne Ngai's explanation of criticism's fraught relationship with feeling in her study of affect, *Ugly Feelings*. In her chapter on tone, Ngai analyzes the "'soft' impressionism which has always haunted feeling's role in any analytic endeavor, and which theorists of aesthetic and critical judgment have repeatedly attempted to ward off."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this is the non-scientific "softness" that Pattison finds so offensive in Pater's misnamed volume. Instead of treating this as a threat, though, I posit "'soft' impressionism" as a

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<sup>7</sup> [Emilia Pattison], *Westminster Review*, April 1873. Quoted in Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 214. Lene Østermark-Johansen comments on Pattison's review as well and argues that for Pater, "the Renaissance is a state of mind, an imaginative event rather than a temporal one." Lene Østermark-Johansen, "On the Motion of Great Waters: Walter Pater, Leonardo and Heraclitus," in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, eds. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 87.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Pater's historicism (or lack thereof), please see Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 212-256. See also Paul Barolsky, *Walter Pater's Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987); Jay Fellows, *Tombs, Despoiled and Haunted: "Under-textures" and "After-thoughts" in Walter Pater* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Jeffrey Wallen, "Alive in the Grave: Walter Pater's Renaissance," *ELH*, vol. 66, no. 4 (1999): 1033-1051; and Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 42.

precondition to understanding the Decadents' deployment of the Renaissance in their works – Pater's *oeuvre*, after all, elaborates an impressionistic criticism that his fellow Aesthetes adored and later critics abjured. As is clear from my usage of feeling, I am not working in the realm of the affective categories that Ngai herself analyzes (envy, irritation, disgust, etc.); rather, I am proposing the Renaissance as a category of feeling unto itself, a general mood created by the text, or a mode of “feeling backward,” a phrase I borrow from Heather Love.<sup>10</sup> My specific interest in “feeling backward” stems from its multiple meanings: a person can feel backward, ill at ease in their own time, or a person can *feel* backward, groping into the past in search of something. And a text can itself feel backward, anachronistic.

All of these interpretations are at play in the two main works that I analyze in this chapter: the *editio picta* of Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Isaotta Guttadauro ed altre poesie* (1886) and Vernon Lee's fairy tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” (1896), first published in the infamous British quarterly, *The Yellow Book*. The poems and the tale construct their Paterian Renaissance feeling through complex webs of intertextual and interart references, and in both works, the imagined past becomes a *locus amoenus*, a garden imbued with possibility. This fantasy enables a blurring of medievalism and Renaissance mania, as the distinctions between periods become irrelevant and the boundaries between past and present, and between reality and fantasy, cease to matter.

As the title of this chapter and the epigraph from Lee suggest, I adopt her phrase “the fairyland of the Renaissance” in order to describe this full-fledged embrace of anachronistic fantasy. Like fairyland, the Aestheticist Renaissance is accessible only to those who possess the proper spirit, those who can both “feel backward” into the past and unshackle themselves from a narrow conception of the real. The fairyland comparison therefore arises from the texts themselves, both of which envelop the reader in heady, sensual atmospheres that mix the chivalric with the erotic and include fairies as a part of their magical worlds. Giulio Aristide Sartorio's illustration for the “Ballata d'Astioco e di Brisenna” (fig. 1), the first image of D'Annunzio's poetry collection, for example, presents a chivalric scene that would feel at home in William Morris's Kelmscott Press, while Giuseppe Cellini's illustration for “Melusina” (fig. 2), one of the *Sonetti delle fate*, depicts a nude snake-fairy luxuriating across the rocks in an open-air scene.<sup>11</sup> Lee's fairy tale will weave a story of tragic romance around another snake-

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<sup>10</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). Love explores the side effects or paradoxes of a dominant narrative of queer overcoming, positing that it finds itself forced to escape the past. *Feeling Backward* therefore aims to take account of the past not as solely a repository of negative, shameful queer history that must be overcome, but also as an integral part of queer experience. Her “aim is to create an image repertoire of queer modernist melancholia in order to underline both the losses of queer modernity and the deeply ambivalent negotiation of these losses within the literature of the period.” Love, *Feeling Backward*, 5. This renders Pater a perfect figure for Love's project, and she is particularly interested in his “forced exile” and “backward modernism.” Love helpfully remarks that Pater's status as living “‘before’ the invention of modern sexuality” both makes him difficult for contemporary queer critics and lends him to her own study, since his pre-modern homoerotic circle is characterized by an intense attachment to the past. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 24-25.

<sup>11</sup> Melusina is the fairy Melusine of European folklore, most strongly associated with the royal house of Lusignan that reigned over Cyprus from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, and D'Annunzio will reference the house of Lusignan in his sonnet.

Fig. 1, Giulio Aristide Sartorio, “Ballata d’Astioco e di Brisenna,” *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 5. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.

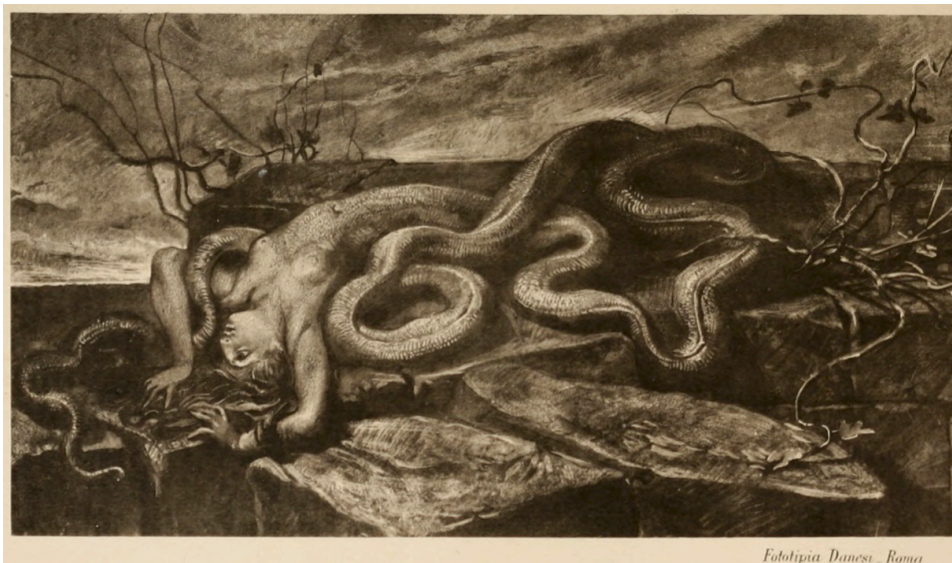


Fig. 2, Giuseppe Cellini, “Melusina,” *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 59. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.



fairy and her young paramour. Paradoxically, such snake-fairies will become emblematic of a pre- rather than post-lapsarian fantasyscape, and thus the lure of a golden age permeates these texts, even as they gesture to the fragility of this realm.



In 1886 a young Gabriele D’Annunzio published the illustrated edition of *Isaotta Guttadàuro*, a collection of poems heavily influenced by early Italian poets, particularly of the Quattrocento, as well as by the art and literature of the British Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, the work is typical of D’Annunzio’s so-called “Roman period” insofar as it is characterized by Anglophilia, medievalism, and a Decadent notion of Pre-Raphaelitism that includes such disparate figures as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edward Burne-Jones, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Given this eclecticism, many critics have been in the habit of ridiculing D’Annunzio’s apparently superficial knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelites, but Italian artists and writers in the 1880s generally had a broader notion of the *preraffaelliti* that encompassed not only the Brotherhood but also emerging strands of Aestheticism. In part this was due to the later dissemination of the British works in Italy, which meant that the artistic production of the second wave of the Pre-Raphaelites – Dante Gabriel Rossetti included – proved more directly influential than the works of the original 1848 members. Giuliana Pieri’s comprehensive study of the reception of the Pre-Raphaelites in Italy makes this point quite convincingly, referring to it alongside the “equally blurred notion of Aestheticism.”<sup>13</sup> John Woodhouse, considering both sides of the debate surrounding D’Annunzio’s *preraffaellismo*, believes that while “nelle sue opere letterarie D’Annunzio si servisse soprattutto di un preraffaellismo alla moda” [“in his literary works D’Annunzio mainly makes use of a fashionable Pre-Raphaelitism”], “vero è che si vedono spesso sulle pagine di D’Annunzio riflessi più profondi degli scopi originali dei preraffaelliti” [“it is true that one often sees on D’Annunzio’s pages deeper reflections of the Pre-Raphaelites’ original goals”].<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 1500 copies of this illustrated edition were published by *La Tribuna* on Christmas Day 1886, and the project was clearly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite trend of highbrow illustrated volumes. The opening section, the *Libro d’Isaotta*, shares its name with a Quattrocento text in Latin by Basinio da Parma, the *Liber Isottaetus*, written to celebrate Sigismondo Malatesta’s mistress, Isotta degli Atti. The name also evokes the famous Iseult of Arthurian legend, whose tragic love story with Tristan proved inspiring for the late Pre-Raphaelites. Finally, the imaginary family name seems to contain the “oro” so obsessively invoked in the volume’s early pages.

<sup>13</sup> Giuliana Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin de siècle Italy* (London: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007), 76. Pieri offers a succinct overview of the historical trends in scholarship on D’Annunzio’s relation to English and Italian Pre-Raphaelitism in “The Effect of the Pre-Raphaelites on the Cultural Consciousness of D’Annunzio,” in *Textual Intersections: Literature, History and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Rachael Langford, 175-192 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> John Woodhouse, “D.G. Rossetti, D’Annunzio e il preraffaellismo,” in *I Rossetti tra Italia e Inghilterra. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi (Vasto, 23-24 settembre 1982)*, ed. Gianni Oliva (Roma: Bulzoni, 1984), 355. See also Woodhouse, “Preraphaelite truccate: le donne dipinte dal

While the question of what constitute “the original goals” of the Pre-Raphaelites is beyond the scope of this chapter, I am interested in whether D’Annunzio’s “preraffaellismo alla moda” might be precisely the point of his own Pre-Raphaelite project, whether the eclectic, name-dropping, decorative tendencies of the collection – its “superficial” *preraffaellismo* – is what allows D’Annunzio to cultivate his Renaissance mood. In other words, I am interested in how D’Annunzio constructs his Paterian impressionism through intertextuality and thereby renders *Isaotta Guttadauro* a Decadent Renaissance text. The self-conscious exhumation of past glories leads to an anachronistic, geographically unfocused, but quite purposeful amalgamation of influences, in a process that embodies Pater’s notion of the Renaissance’s animating spirit of seeking enjoyment in the old, the new, and the combination of the two.

In positing the collection’s “superficiality” as a positive, constitutive element of the text rather than a defect, I am influenced by Forest Pyle’s reading of the “depthless surfaces” of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s paintings and poetry in his evaluation of “radical aestheticism” in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> For Pyle, the “radicality” of Rossetti’s work is precisely its “insistence on its superficiality,” its overwhelming preoccupation with the semblance of things.<sup>16</sup> While I do not argue for the presence of a radical aestheticism in *Isaotta Guttadauro*, I am interested in how its obsession with surfaces animates, and is in turn animated by, its chosen intertextual (and interart) references. To adapt Woodhouse’s “riflessi sulle pagine,” we might say that D’Annunzio’s Pre-Raphaelitism is indeed manifested quite literally *on* the page, through both text and image. The “riflessi più profondi” that Woodhouse identifies are paradoxically created through a surface ornamentalism.

### **The *editio picta* as *locus amoenus***

To link these deep reflections to the surface is to move away from a dominant reading of the battle between content and style in D’Annunzio’s Decadent works. In this respect, Gaia Staniscia’s recent description of *Isaotta* stands in for a general critical consensus: “È una materia che perde ogni riferimento con il reale, dove ciò che interessa al poeta è il culto per l’esercizio stilistico a scapito del contenuto; egli stesso ce lo comunica, paragonandosi ad un orafo che elegge gemme e quelle gemme sono le parole” [“It is a material that loses any reference to the real, in which what interests the poet is the cult for stylistic exercise at the expense of content; he himself communicates this to us, comparing himself to a goldsmith who chooses gems and those gems are words”].<sup>17</sup> Yet, particularly in the *editio picta*, the retreat from the contemporary “real” itself constitutes the collection’s core content, as do the stylistic games and the prevalence of verbal and plastic Pre-Raphaelite markers. D’Annunzio may indeed be the “orafo” selecting his “gemme,” but those gems are not only words but references

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D’Annunzio.” In *Letteratura italiana e arti figurative. Atti del XII convegno dell’associazione internazionale per gli studi di lingua e letteratura italiana (Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal, 6-10 maggio 1985)*, II, ed. Antonio Franceschetti (Firenze: Olschki, 1988), 929-39.

<sup>15</sup> Forest Pyle, *Art’s Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 172.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>17</sup> Gaia Staniscia, *Il preraffaellismo nell’opera di Gabriele d’Annunzio* (Lanciano: Carabba, 2016), 107.

that enact a process of “Renaissance” world-building.

The illustrations in the volume, created by artists active in the Roman milieu and affiliated with the “In Arte Libertas” movement, reflect the broad array of influences that animates D’Annunzio’s poems.<sup>18</sup> In his *Cronache del Caffè Greco*, written in 1939, Diego Angeli ascribes the volume’s origins to the meeting of the minds between D’Annunzio and Cellini, frequent collaborators during D’Annunzio’s Roman tenure:

Quando Gabriele d’Annunzio pensò di riunire le sparse poesie dell’*Isotteo* in un volume di gran lusso, il Cellini, che voleva opporsi al cattivo gusto sommarughiano allora imperante nel libro, propose di ricorrere ai suoi amici del Caffè Greco e tanto fece e così validamente fu aiutato da Angelo Conti che il d’Annunzio si lasciò persuadere, e furono iniziate le trattative che approdarono alla pubblicazione del magnifico volume.<sup>19</sup>

[When Gabriele D’Annunzio thought of gathering the scattered poems of the *Isotteo* in a volume of great luxury, Cellini, who desired to fight the Sommarughian bad taste that then reigned over the book, proposed to seek assistance from his friends at the Caffè Greco and so much did he accomplish and so effectively was he helped by Angelo Conti that D’Annunzio allowed himself to be persuaded, and thus were initiated the negotiations that resulted in the publication of the magnificent volume.]

While Angeli presents a historical overview of the edition’s origins rather than an analysis of its poetics, he nonetheless offers a compelling reading of *Isotta*’s trajectory from infancy to maturity: the “sparse poesie” cannot become a “volume di gran lusso” until they are illustrated and united into a single aesthetic object. The plastic and the poetic will elevate one another into the realm of magnificence.

Sartorio’s “Astioco e Brisenna” illustration therefore serves as the reader’s visual entryway into the text, given its placement before the title page, while D’Annunzio’s opening “Prologo,” placed immediately after the title page, serves as the reader’s verbal entrance. D’Annunzio’s poem, though, strikingly shifts from the medievalizing world of Sartorio’s image into a High Renaissance Roman scene, as he presents the reader with a poetic account of Lucrezia Borgia’s nuptials. From its first

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<sup>18</sup> The illustrators include Giuseppe Cellini (“Melusina,” “Diana inerme,” “Grasinda,” “Donna Francesca, IV,” and “Donna Francesca, XII”), Giulio Aristide Sartorio, (“Ballata d’Astioco e di Brisenna,” “Ballata VI,” “Vas spirituale,” and “Viviana”), Mario de Maria (“Eliana,” “L’alunna,” and “L’alunna”), Vincenzo Cabianca (“Morgana,” “Romanza,” and “Romanza”), Alfredo Ricci (“Il dolce grappolo II” and “Donna Clara, I”), Alessandro Morani (“Diana inerme” and “Romanza”), Onorato Carlandi (“Nympha ludovisia”), Cesare Formilli (“Hyla! Hyla!”), and Enrico Coleman (“Oriana”). For more on D’Annunzio’s collaboration with artists in this period, please see Diego Angeli, *Le cronache del Caffè Greco* (Milano: Garzanti, 1939); Maurizio Fagiolo and Maurizio Marini, eds., *Pittori dannunziani: letteratura e immagini tra ’800 e ’900* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1977); Renato Mammucari, ed., *Dal naturalismo al simbolismo: D’Annunzio e l’arte del suo tempo* (Marigliano, Napoli: LER, 2005); Maria Teresa Marabini Moevs, *Gabriele D’Annunzio e le estetiche della fine del secolo* (L’Aquila: L. U. Japadre Editore, 1976); and Ferruccio Ulivi, “D’Annunzio e le arti,” in *D’Annunzio e il simbolismo europeo*, ed. Emilio Mariani (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1976), 103-144.

<sup>19</sup> Angeli, *Le cronache del Caffè Greco*, 106-107.

stanza, the poem develops a sensuous visual experience, opening on the scene of Lucrezia's wedding *in media res*, thus enveloping the reader in the ceremony's heady atmosphere:

Mentre Lucrezia Borgia, in nuziale  
pompa, venia con piano  
incedere (la veste liliale  
risplendea di lontano)<sup>20</sup>

[While Lucrezia Borgia, in nuptial  
pomp, arrived in soft  
stride (the dress, lily-white,  
shone from afar)]

In commencing *Isaotta Guttadàuro* with this image, D'Annunzio focuses attention on a number of elements that will prove integral to the entire collection: historical beauties, Renaissance splendor, and, of course, pomp and luxury. The quick pace further thrusts the reader into the world constructed within the poem, an effect reinforced by the many enjambments that D'Annunzio utilizes throughout the stanzas.

The poem continues to luxuriate in Lucrezia's alluring beauty, Giulia Farnese's corporeality as she bares her breast, and the cardinals' lechery as they gaze upon the bride. Cupbearers and greyhounds race across the floor; the dogs are variously described as "i veltri barbareschi" ["the barbaric greyhounds"] and "i belli atroci cani" ["the beautiful atrocious dogs"].<sup>21</sup> And so the "gran lusso" that Diego Angeli lauds emerges in full force in the poem's visual imagination.<sup>22</sup>

While the poem remains entranced by this scene of the Borgia family, the final five quatrains shift to the poetic speaker, who asserts his presence at the events in question as he introduces the poems to come. Directing himself to his audience of beautiful women, D'Annunzio slowly shifts from the historical scene of Lucrezia's wedding to the fantastical vision of his muse, Isaotta:

Or non così, mie belle, o voi che tanto  
amai e celebrai  
e incoronai del mio lucido canto  
ne' boschi e ne' rosai,

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<sup>20</sup> D'Annunzio, "Prologo," 1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20, 28. Greyhounds were quite popular in Cinquecento courts, and they also proved alluring for the Decadent imagination. Sartorio would later depict a nude woman with a greyhound as a promotional image for D'Annunzio's novel *Il piacere*. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 298-299. The image of the "belli atroci cani" at the wedding may also recall Boccaccio's *Nastagio degli Onesti* and Botticelli's panel paintings of the tale. Such a reference would reveal a hint of violence beneath the luxurious surface.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, it comes as no surprise that such luxury exists in relation to the Borgia family, as they also served as inspiration for rich Pre-Raphaelite compositions, perhaps most famously in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolors of *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860-61, Tate Britain) and *The Borgia Family* (1863, Victoria and Albert Museum).

or non così venite al mio festino  
ove l'Amor v'aduna?  
I vostri baci, più dolce de 'l vino,  
a 'l sol ed a la luna

io colsi un tempo; e, come entro una rara  
coppa di fin lavoro,  
mentre i nuovi desii cercanvi a gara  
– veltri da 'l guinzal d'oro –

la profonda dolcezza entro la rima  
sottilmente infusa  
io vi rendo. Gioite voi. Ma, prima,  
Isaotta, la Musa,

quella ch'io più cantai, con un baleno  
tra i cigli e con protese  
le bellissime braccia, offre il suo seno,  
come Giulia Farnese.<sup>23</sup>

[Now won't you, my beauties, o you who so much  
did I love and celebrate  
and crown with my bright song  
in forests and rose gardens,

now won't you come to my feast  
where Love gathers you?  
Your kisses, sweeter than wine,  
by the sun and the moon

I gathered once; and, as in a rare  
cup of fine craft,  
while new desires search for you  
– greyhounds on golden leashes –

the deep sweetness in the rhyme,  
subtly infused,  
I offer to you. Rejoice. But first,  
Isaotta, the Muse,

she whom most I lauded, with a flash  
between her lashes and outstretching  
her beautiful arms, offers her breast,  
like Giulia Farnese.]

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<sup>23</sup> D'Annunzio, "Prologo," 37-56.

With his apostrophe to “mie belle,” D’Annunzio places himself within the Renaissance scene, loving, celebrating, and crowning these beauties, and positions his audience, eager to attend the “festino” and receive the sweet rhymes, within the scene as well. The “voi” thus becomes a double subject that vacillates between the diegetic past and the poetic present. Isaotta offers her breast to us, the readers, and our eyes will drink in this vision just as we would the liquid in the “rara / coppa di fin lavoro.” Ending the poem with Giulia Farnese then transports the reader from this poetic present back to the past.

This vacillation between present and past characterizes the volume overall, and it illustrates how *Isaotta Guttadauro* seeks to “make itself felt” as a transporting volume, one that carries its readers across time and space. In his review of the collection, the critic Enrico Nencioni describes D’Annunzio as one of the “[a]doratori della bellezza plastica... trovatori di parole e di note che evocano belle immagini e dilettoni fantasmi” [“adorers of plastic beauty, finders of words and notes that evoke beautiful images and delightful ghosts”].<sup>24</sup> According to Nencioni, this adoration of beauty places the young poet among his cosmopolitan contemporaries – Nencioni mentions Keats, Swinburne, Rossetti, Morris, and Gautier – yet it also links him to his forebears within the Italian tradition: “Il sentimento vivo, quasi estatico, della pura bellezza; e una simpatia intuitiva della poesia romanzesca e cavalleresca. Un alito insomma di quel soffio poetico che ispirava i nostri poeti del Rinascimento, il Poliziano e il Boiardo, sembra rivivere nelle poesie intitolate da *Isaotta*, e nelle *Ballate*” [“The living, almost ecstatic, feeling of pure beauty; it is an intuitive sympathy with romance and chivalric poetry. A whisper, therefore, of that poetic breath that inspired our poets of the Renaissance, Poliziano and Boiardo, seems to live again in the poems named for *Isaotta* and in the *Ballate*”].<sup>25</sup> Reading Nencioni’s “simpatia intuitiva” alongside Pater’s redefinition of the Renaissance, we might reconcile the chivalric, Pre-Raphaelite, and Decadent elements of *Isaotta Guttadauro* as constitutive elements in “a many-sided but yet united movement.” In this sense, the “trovatori” of beauty both find it in “old and forgotten sources” and “divine new sources of it” in their combinations of influences.

In the very next paragraph Nencioni will list the collection’s defects – “le raffinatezze e lo stile *précieux* di certe poesie,” “l’abuso e l’affettazione di *latinizzare* il vocabolo italiano,” “la ricerca troppo evidente dello strano, del nuovo ad ogni costo” [“the refinements and the affected style of certain poems,” “the abuse and affectation of *Latinizing* Italian words,” “the too evident search for the strange, for the new at any cost”] – but the overall impression left on the reader is one of admiration for “l’architettura poetica del libro” [“poetic architecture of the book”] and for the volume’s poetic architect.<sup>26</sup> This praise of the collection’s poetic architecture proves quite suggestive as it seems simultaneously to open up the path towards understanding the volume as a participant in the emergent Aestheticist “book beautiful” tradition and to gesture towards the poet’s self-conscious construction of the book as *locus amoenus*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Enrico Nencioni, “Isaotta Guttadauro,” *Fanfulla della domenica* (6 February 1887). Much confusion has been caused due to a typo in the original publication listing the year as 1886, but it is indeed from volume IX, no. 6, 1887.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> For two intriguing discussions of the book beautiful tradition, please see Gerard Curtis, *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and Daniel Patrick

Poetic architecture appears in perhaps its most literal form in “Sonetto liminare,” the opening poem of the hyper-medievalizing first section. As suggested by its title, the sonnet contemplates spaces and realms and marks the entrance into the world of this text:

Palagio d’oro, nobile magione  
de la Speme, de ’l Riso e de’ Piaceri,  
ove sotto i belli archi alti e leggeri  
danzano i Sogni cinti di corone;

Selva d’oro ove amor, nudo garzone,  
con i Desiri, cupidi sparvieri,  
con i Peccati, veltri agili e neri,  
attende a la sua dolce cacciagione;

Fonte d’oro ove candidi e tranquilli  
vanno i cigni di Venere per torme  
facendo a ’l dorso calice de l’ale;

O mio libro, convien che più sfavilli  
sonante il verso e più ridan le forme  
quando Isaotta Guttadauro sale.<sup>28</sup>

[Palace of gold, noble dwelling  
of Hope, of Laughter and of Pleasures,  
where under the beautiful arches, tall and airy,  
dance Dreams encircled in garlands;

Forest of gold where love, nude youth,  
with Desires, lustful sparrowhawks,  
with Sins, agile and black greyhounds,  
attends to his sweet game;

Fountain of gold where snow white and tranquil  
pass the swans of Venus in swarms  
making at their backs a chalice of their wings;

O my book, let the singing verse most  
glimmer and the forms most smile  
when Isaotta Guttadauro rises.]

The early verses build this poetic world of pleasures, greyhounds, and swans – a literal golden retreat. Yet the final tercet transports us from the physical *locus amoenus* to the

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Williford, “The Aesthetic Book of Decadent Literature, 1870-1914” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015, ProQuest, AAT 3724864).

<sup>28</sup> D’Annunzio, “Sonetto liminare,” 1-14.

textual one, from palaces, forests, and fountains, to D'Annunzio's book. No longer the mere vehicle for praising the beloved, the poem becomes the focus of the poet's admiration; her name even comes to represent the volume itself in the sonnet's final line. This entry into the *Libro d'Isaotta* thus invites the reader to admire "il verso" and "le forme" as much as the beauties they celebrate. As Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti notes, the sonnet clearly stands as a "dichiarazione di poetica trascritta in forma metaforica" ["declaration of poetics transcribed in metaphorical form"].<sup>29</sup> D'Annunzio's precious book promises to breathe new life into the golden palace of the chivalric imagination.

Alfredo Ricci's illustration for "Il dolce grappolo II" (fig. 3), placed between the section's title page and "Sonetto liminare," occupies a similarly self-conscious and liminal space. Isaotta looks out through a stained glass window depicting a knight at prayer. Ricci illustrates lines taken from the second stanza of D'Annunzio's "nona rima," in which "madonna Isaotta" is depicted in an Abruzzese landscape.<sup>30</sup> As Giuliana Pieri has shown, Ricci was particularly interested in Tennyson, and she identifies "Il dolce grappolo" as "the most intensely Pre-Raphaelite drawing of the whole collection."<sup>31</sup> Ricci's fascination with Arthurian legend, by way of Tennyson, renders him the perfect illustrator for this section, which is infused with the atmosphere of the Round Table as well as that of the *stilnovisti*. Beautiful ladies and their amorous knights wander through lush landscapes of fountains and forests, declaiming their love in a chivalric paradise.

The prominence of Arthuriana alerts us that the realm of *Isaotta* is as magical as it is medieval. In the analysis of Anna Maria Damigella, the *editio picta* proved alluring to artists insofar as it offered them the "possibilità di immergersi in un mondo poetico, fiabesco" ["possibility of immersing one's self in a poetic, fairy-tale world"].<sup>32</sup> I link the collection's "mondo poetico [e] fiabesco" to its obsession with the category that Ortensia Venanzio has identified as "donne che appartengono al mondo della favola, sia medioevale (Isotta, Donna Francesca...), sia magistica: immagini femminili, dunque, che sono circondate da un'aura di leggenda e si muovono in un'atmosfera fantastica" ["women who belong to the world of fairy tales, either medieval (Isotta, Donna Francesca...), or magical: female figures, therefore, who are surrounded by an aura of legend and who move in a fantastic atmosphere"].<sup>33</sup> Venanzio's "sia medioevale... sia

<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, "Il sogno dell'Isottò," *Annali d'Italianistica* vol. 5 (1987): 111.

<sup>30</sup> D'Annunzio, "Il dolce grappolo," I, 1-2. Bárberi Squarotti engages at length with the Abruzzese landscape invoked in the collection and its simultaneously biographical and chivalric significance for D'Annunzio, noting that the collection transposes "forme poetiche e figurative [...] in un ambito geografico e topografico del tutto alieno, quale è quello abruzzese" ["poetic and figurative forms [...] into a completely foreign geographic and topographic setting – that is Abruzzo"]. Bárberi Squarotti "Il sogno dell'Isottò," 112.

<sup>31</sup> Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism*, 130. Tennyson, of course, with his medievalizing poetry and obsession with Arthurian romance, proved quite influential for British Pre-Raphaelite artists. Pieri draws particular attention to the compositional similarities between Ricci's "Il dolce grappolo" and John Everett Millais's 1857 illustration for Tennyson's *St. Agnes's Eve*. For an incisive reading of Tennyson's medievalism, please see Marion Sherwood, *Tennyson and the Fabrication of Englishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103-36.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Maria Damigella, *La pittura simbolista in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981), 48.

<sup>33</sup> Ortensia Venanzio, *Gabriele D'Annunzio, interprete delle arti figurative nel suo tempo* (Milano: La Rete, 1958), 81-82.





Fig. 3, Alfredo Ricci, "Il dolce grappolo, II,"  
*Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie*  
(Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 17.  
Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.

magistica” proves most suggestive, and I would argue that the text quite explicitly conflates the two categories. The realm of the past – be it medieval, Quattrocento, Cinquecento, or even Pre-Raphaelite – is clearly aligned with the realm of legend and artistic fancy. The fantastic atmosphere is at once a Renaissance atmosphere à la Pater, in which diverse sources of enjoyment are combined with one another. In this way, the knights and ladies of the *Libro d’Isaotta* mingle with the fairies of the *Sonetti delle fate*, and the “gentil mostro” [“delicate monster”] Hermaphroditus is placed a few pages before a Beatrice-inspired “donna, bianca e taciturna” [“woman, white and taciturn”], who plays the harp and contemplates “una verità teologale” [“a theological truth”] in the *Idillii*.<sup>34</sup> As is visible from the Cellini and Sartorio illustrations below (figs. 4-5), mythical fairies and medieval maidens even receive similar musical *accoutrements*, albeit differing levels of dress.

In *Isaotta Guttadàuro*, these figures all participate within the same project of fantastical world-building in which D’Annunzio yearns for a past beauty, as he expresses to his friend Francesco Paolo Michetti in one of the final poems:

Oh pomeriggi chiari e dilettoni  
 in cui fiori la tua nova fatica  
 e dentro i versi miei laboriosi  
 tremò il disio de la bellezza antica!<sup>35</sup>

[Oh clear and delightful afternoons  
 in which your new efforts bloomed  
 and in my laborious verses  
 trembled the desire for an antique beauty!]

The rhymes here – “dilettoni” / “laboriosi” and “fatica” / “antica” – simultaneously emphasize the poet’s hard labors and his immense pleasure from seeing his desires fulfilled in his trembling verses, and D’Annunzio will continue this theme in the following poem to Giuseppe Cellini. There, he praises a woman who awoke in him the ability to recreate such “bellezza antica” [antique beauty] and compares her to Giovanna Tornabuoni (and thereby compares himself to Botticelli):

Amico, le mie tristi passioni  
 or s’inchinano a lei, non più ribelli;  
 e volan alto, come lieti augelli,  
 per gran cieli d’amor le mie canzoni.

Vennero a lei le Grazie, in lor guarnelli  
 semplici a lei portando i rari doni,  
 come un tempo a Giovanna Tornabuoni  
 ne ’l bel *fresco* de ’l nostro Botticelli.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> D’Annunzio, “L’andrògine,” 15, and “Vas spirituale,” 1, 13.

<sup>35</sup> D’Annunzio, “A F. P. Michetti,” 21-24. In this poem alone, D’Annunzio references Guercino, Titian, Raphael, Poliziano, Leonardo, and Veronese.

<sup>36</sup> D’Annunzio, “A Giuseppe Cellini,” II, 1-8.



Fig. 4, Giuseppe Cellini, "Grasinda," *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 81. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.



Fig. 5, Giulio Aristide Sartorio, "Vas spirituale," *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 107. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.

[Friend, my sad passions  
now bow to her, no longer rebellious;  
and my songs fly high, like happy birds,  
in the great skies of love.

The Graces came to her, in their simple  
*guarnelli*, bringing her rare gifts,  
as once they did to Giovanni Tornabuoni  
in the beautiful fresco of our Botticelli.]

This invocation of Botticelli fits perfectly into the *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticist imagination of the Quattrocento artist's "peculiar" genius. Pater's own interpretation of the artist would prove particularly popular. In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, he writes that Botticelli is unique in his ability to position himself within multiple frames of reference, filtering influences through his own imagination: "But the genius of which Botticelli is the type usurps the data before it as the exponents of ideas, moods, visions of his own; with this interest it plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some and isolating others, and always combining them anew."<sup>37</sup>

### **(Dante) Gabriele (Rossetti) D'Annunzio**

D'Annunzio generally enacts this process of "new combinations" through the depiction of the beloved, and nowhere is this clearer than in the section *Donne*. Here, the Gorgon smiles "il sorriso / fulgidissimo e crudele / che il divino Leonardo / persegui ne le sue tele" ["the smile / most radiant and cruel / that the divine Leonardo / pursued in his canvases"],<sup>38</sup> while the Nympha Ludovisia and Athenais Medica emerge from the worlds of Raphael and Perugino, respectively. Donna Francesca is aligned with "la Titania di Shakspeare [*sic*]," and Cellini's two illustrations (figs. 6-7) turn to the High Renaissance as well as to Alma-Tademesque floral motifs.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 31. For more on the nineteenth-century cult of Botticelli, please see Stephen Cheeke, "'Fantastic Modernism': Walter Pater, Botticelli, and Simonetta," *Word & Image*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2016): 195-206; Adrian S. Hoch, "The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of Victorian Aesthetes," in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, eds. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005): 55-85; Jeremy Norman Melius, "Art History and the Invention of Botticelli" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010, ProQuest, AAT 3555821); and Paul Tucker, "'Reanimate Greek': Pater and Ruskin on Botticelli," in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2002), 119-132.

<sup>38</sup> D'Annunzio, "Gorgon," 5-8.

<sup>39</sup> D'Annunzio, "Donna Francesca," IV, 1-4. Pieri notes the inclusion of the Alma-Tademesque oleander in this image. Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism*, 132. Please also see Pieri, "D'Annunzio and Alma-Tadema: Between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism," *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 96, no. 2 (April 2001): 361-369. Cellini's second "Donna Francesca" illustration (fig. 7) is actually placed immediately before D'Annunzio's penultimate poem "A Giuseppe Cellini." This type of placement is quite common, as many illustrations are separated from their poems, a technique that simultaneously emphasizes the relative independence of image from text and reinforces the sense of the entire volume as a beautiful object unto itself, rather than a collection of disparate poems.

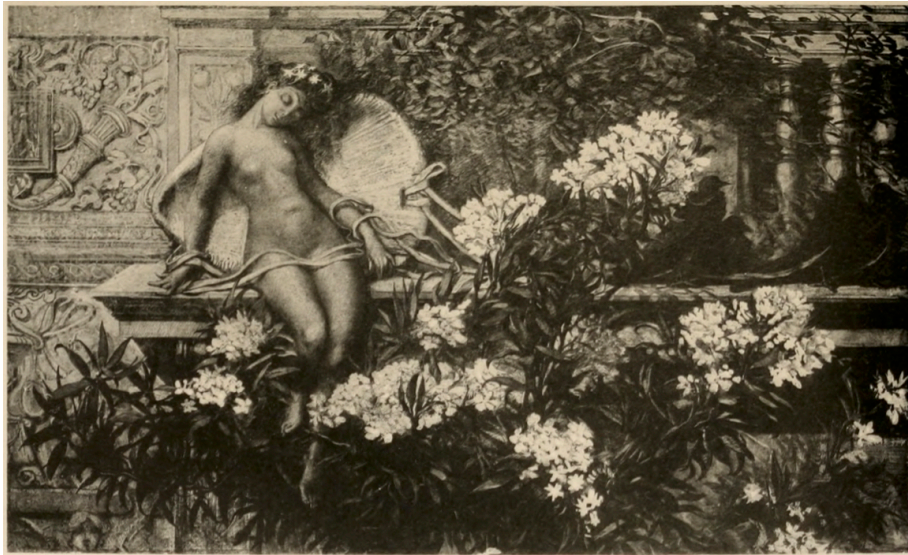


Fig. 6, Giuseppe Cellini, “Donna Francesca, IV,” *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 223. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.



Fig. 7, Giuseppe Cellini, “Donna Francesca, XII,” *Isaotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 275. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.

Such intertextual preoccupations reach a climax in “Viviana” and its accompanying illustration by Sartorio. In the opening stanza, an apostrophe to the eponymous heroine, the poet recalls her appearance to “Dante Gabriele,” a reference that not only invokes Rossetti but that also neatly links Gabriele (D’Annunzio), late-Ottocento *vate*, to Dante, the ultimate *poeta vate* of the Italian literary tradition:

O Viviana May de Penuele,  
gelida virgo preraphaelita,  
o voi che compariste un dì, vestita  
di fino argento, a Dante Gabriele,  
tenendo un giglio ne le ceree dita<sup>40</sup>

[O Viviana May de Penuele,  
gelid Pre-Raphaelite virgin,  
oh you who appeared one day, dressed  
in fine silver, to Dante Gabriele,  
holding a lily in your pale fingers]

Through the rhyme – “preraphaelita”/“vestita”/“dita” – Viviana literally embodies Rossettian aesthetics, and this “gelida virgo preraphaelita” is quite clearly modeled on the *donna angelicata*, in turn inspired by the Italian *stilnovisti*. Almost as explicit as the “preraphaelita” is the “giglio,” which, in D’Annunzio’s *oeuvre* as well as that of his contemporaries, serves as shorthand for the Pre-Raphaelite woman.

Given its overt reference to Rossetti, the poem has unsurprisingly inspired critics to search for specific paintings that D’Annunzio may have seen through reproductions. Bianca Tamassia Mazzarotto, for instance, is inclined to ascribe direct influences for D’Annunzio’s poem, selecting both *Beata Beatrix* and the *Salutation of Beatrice* diptych as source works for the imagery, even as she acknowledges that more important than “i richiami più diretti” [“the more direct references”] is the presence of a broader Pre-Raphaelite spirit “nella languida sensualità e nel raffinato simbolismo” [“in the languid sensuality and the refined symbolism”].<sup>41</sup> Giuliana Pieri instead emphasizes the Marian iconography of these verses; for her, Viviana “embodies the angelic Rossettian woman and could be related to Rossetti’s *Annunciation* (Tate Britain). D’Annunzio, however, has also clearly chosen as a model a Quattrocento *Annunciation*, and superimposed it on the Pre-Raphaelite imagery.”<sup>42</sup> Regardless of direct source works, though, the explicit invocation of Rossetti and the overwhelming Pre-Raphaelite imagery immediately announce the poem’s intention to align D’Annunzio with the exotic yet still familiar realm of British Aestheticism and Renaissance Revivalism.

As I will argue in the remainder of this section, the overall effect of the poem is to immerse the reader in self-conscious anachronism, as Pieri’s note about

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<sup>40</sup> D’Annunzio, “Viviana,” 1-5.

<sup>41</sup> Bianca Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le arti figurative nell’arte di Gabriele D’Annunzio* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1949), 499.

<sup>42</sup> Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin de siècle Italy*, 75. Pieri here refers to “Viviana” in its instantiation as the second half of the poem “Due Beatrici” in *Isottèo. La Chimera*. That poem offers us yet another example of the bifurcated Rossettian (and, more broadly, late-Pre-Raphaelite) conception of femininity, the pure angel alongside the sensuous *femme fatale*.

superimposition suggests, and therefore specific visual intertexts matter less than general mood. The rest of “Viviana” reinforces this impression, as D’Annunzio quickly leaves behind the mediating figure of “Dante Gabriele” and foregrounds his own relationship with Viviana, locating his memory of her in an explicitly Roman High Renaissance landscape:

Viviana, non più forse a la mente  
il ricordo di me vi torna omai.  
E pure allora, quando io vi parlai,  
mi sorrideste a lungo e dolcemente.  
Fiorian, Villa Farnese, i tuoi rosai

ne ’l mattino di maggio e su le antiche  
mura il sole una veste aurea mettea:  
tra le liete ghirlande si svolgea  
la bellissima favola di Psiche;  
navigava in trionfo Galatea.

O Viviana May de Penuele,  
or vi sovviene de ’l lontan mattino?  
Voi sceglieste le rose ne ’l giardino  
ove un tempo convenne Rafaele,  
muta, con lento gesto, a capo chino.<sup>43</sup>

[Viviana, perhaps no longer to your mind  
does the memory of me return.  
And yet, when I spoke to you then,  
you smiled at me, long and sweet.  
At Villa Farnese your rose gardens flowered

in the May morning and on the ancient  
walls the sun placed a golden garment:  
amid the garlands unfolded  
the beautiful tale of Psyche;  
sailing in triumph was Galatea.

O Viviana May de Penuele,  
now do you remember that distant morning?  
You plucked the roses in the garden  
where once convened Raphael,  
silent, with languid gesture and head bowed.]

Here, Raphael’s loggias in the Villa Farnesina serve as the fantastical backdrop for the romance, as the reunion of Psyche with her beloved Cupid and the apotheosis of

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<sup>43</sup> D’Annunzio, “Viviana,” 6-20.

Galatea adorn D'Annunzio's memory.<sup>44</sup> Notably, though, D'Annunzio does not delve into the more violent elements of these beautiful myths – the torments that Psyche endures, the death of Galatea's beloved Acis – the explicit acknowledgment of which might hint at a hidden, darker side to the poem's triumphant vision. Instead, the day at the Farnesina acts as its own moment of apotheosis, one that can apparently be re-accessed through the power of the poet's memory.<sup>45</sup>

Before the reader can contemplate the darkness behind “la bellissima favola di Psiche” and the “trionfo” of Galatea or the fragility of the poetic fantasy, the Roman setting immediately disappears, as the poet turns from Raphael – a strange bedfellow for a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelites – to Botticelli, a far more fitting companion for Rossetti:

Non vidi allor la Primavera iddia?  
Disser la vostra lode a me li uccelli;  
fiori parvero nascer da' capelli,  
come ne la divina Allegoria  
cui pinse in terra Sandro Botticelli.<sup>46</sup>

[Did you not then see the goddess Primavera?  
The birds sang to me your praise;  
flowers seemed to grow from your hair,  
as in the divine Allegory  
painted on earth by Sandro Botticelli.]

The stanza marks a temporal and geographical shift on multiple levels: Cinquecento to Quattrocento, Rome to Florence, and heaven to earth. Given the Paterian understanding of Botticelli, the shift also suggests that “play[ing] fast and loose” with data and “combining [influences] anew” is the animating principle of “Viviana.”<sup>47</sup>

In the poem's final stanzas D'Annunzio returns to the initial image of his beloved, who is now deemed “beata Beatrice”:

Io sol dissi a la notte alma e felice,  
solo dissi a le stelle il novo amore.  
Segreto in me de' vostri occhi il fulgore  
io custodii, beata Beatrice.  
Tale un raggio di luna il silfo ha in cuore.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on Psyche in D'Annunzio's work, please see Giuliana Pieri, “The Myth of Psyche in the Work of D'Annunzio and Burne-Jones,” In *Text and Image in Modern European Culture*, eds. Natasha Grigorian, Thomas Baldwin, and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2012), 15-31.

<sup>45</sup> “Il sogno della letteratura può tutto, anche mutare i tempi” [“the dream of literature can do anything, even change the times”], writes Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti of the poetic fantasies in the *Isottèo*, and yet “quello che fa esistere è pur sempre precario” [“that which it brings into existence is forever precarious”]. Bárberi Squarotti, “Il sogno dell'Isottèo,” 116-17.

<sup>46</sup> D'Annunzio, “Viviana,” 21-25.

<sup>47</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 31.



Or cantarti m'è dolce, o Viviana.  
Splendimi ne la chiara ode, vestita  
de la tunica verde e redimita  
d'argentei fiori, in calma sovrumana  
tenendo un giglio tra le ceree dita!<sup>48</sup>

[Alone I spoke to the noble, joyous night  
alone I spoke to the stars of new love.  
Secret in me did I guard the splendor  
of your eyes, blessed Beatrice,  
as the sylph carries a ray of moonlight in its heart.

Now singing of you is sweet for me, o Viviana.  
Shine for me in the bright ode, dressed  
in the green tunic, crowned  
in silver flowers, in otherworldly calm,  
holding a lily in your pale fingers!]

After the sojourn to the Renaissance through Raphael and Botticelli, we have come full circle, arriving in an ambiguous temporality that seems to privilege the visionary over the historical. If Viviana appeared one day to Dante Gabriele, she is now fully in D'Annunzio's realm, and he alone keeps the secret of the "fulgore" in her eyes and takes on the responsibility of singing her praises. The regression in time over the poem's stanzas – from Dante Gabriele to Raphael to Botticelli to Dante – further suggests that D'Annunzio has taken up the mantle of, or even replaced, Rossetti and that the Italian poet is now heir to both the Italian Renaissance and its British Revival. His "spirit and taste" – to echo Potolsky – have allowed him to become transhistorical and transcultural mediator *par excellence*.

Sartorio's illustration for the poem renders all the more vertiginous its proliferation of intertextual references (fig. 8). Having chosen to illustrate "beata Beatrice," Sartorio seems to bypass Dante Gabriele in order to return straight to the original source, Dante. Combining text from "Era venuta nella mente mia" (*Vita nuova*) with a pictorial reenactment, Sartorio draws inspiration from Rossettian subject matter and from the Pre-Raphaelite imbrication of literature and the visual arts. Beatrice, bathed in ethereal light, appears to Dante as he composes his poetry. The selection of this particular sonnet – written as an anniversary poem a year after Beatrice's death – reinforces not only the theme of the beloved as divine apparition or muse but also the short-circuiting of time that occurs through the power of the poetic imagination.<sup>49</sup> And,

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<sup>48</sup> D'Annunzio, "Viviana," 36-45.

<sup>49</sup> The incorporation of the *Vita nuova* text further reinforces the Rossettian imagery in "Viviana," given Rossetti's fascination with and translation of Dante's work in *Dante and His Circle* (editions in 1861 and 1874). Sartorio was indeed one of the foremost Italian experts on Rossetti's works, though much of his written commentary would come in the 1890s. Please see Giulio Aristide Sartorio, "Nota su Dante Gabriele Rossetti pittore," *Il Convito*, Libro II (1895): 121-150, and Libro IV (1895): 261-268. Enrico Nencioni published "Le poesie e le pitture di Dante Gabriele Rossetti" in *Fanfulla della domenica*, 17 February 1884.



Fig. 8, Giulio Aristide Sartorio, "Viviana," *Isotta Guttadàuro ed altre poesie* (Roma: Editrice La Tribuna, 1886), 285. Courtesy of Duke University Libraries and HathiTrust.

of course, the choice to illustrate D'Annunzio's poem through an illustration of Dante's poem – an illustration that even includes text from the latter – seems to adopt and adapt the commentary structure of the *Vita nuova*, making the collaboration transhistorical as well as inter-artistic.

D'Annunzio offered his own commentary on Sartorio's image as part of his *Cronache mondane* in *La Tribuna*. On November 11, 1886 – the month before *La Tribuna* published the illustrated edition of *Isaotta Guttadàuro* – he published “Un ventaglio,” in which he identified the painted fan as the essential female accessory for the coming year. After an introduction that references his other collaborators Vincenzo Cabianca, Mario de Maria, and Alfredo Ricci, D'Annunzio turns to Sartorio's composition (a commissioned version in the artist's studio) and describes the “specie di estasi” [“kind of ecstasy”] that illuminates Dante's face as “d'innanzi a lui risplende in un'aureola celestiale l'immagine di Beatrice, esile e bianca, in atto di benedire” [“before him shines the image of Beatrice in a celestial halo, delicate and white, in the act of benediction”].<sup>50</sup> D'Annunzio then lauds Sartorio's ability to “trarre alcune delle più belle e pure sue ispirazioni da Dante e dal Petrarca e dai minori poeti del dolce stil novo” [“draw some of his most beautiful and pure inspirations from Dante and Petrarch and from the minor poets of the *dolce stil novo*”],<sup>51</sup> yet he also particularly admires the way in which the entire composition is dictated by “un concetto decorativo” [“a decorative concept”] and is “miniato come una pagina di messale” [“illuminated like a page in a missal”].<sup>52</sup> In this way, the work's decorative schema proves just as significant as its thematic content.

D'Annunzio's reference to “una pagina di messale” is particularly suggestive, as Sartorio's composition plays directly with the traditional Annunciation imagery hinted at in the poem itself. In part, this may be seen as yet another play, like “Dante Gabriele,” on Gabriele D'Annunzio's own name. Yet it also “queers” the Annunciation, since Dante and Beatrice (or D'Annunzio and Viviana) play the roles of Mary and Gabriel, respectively; Dante sits under the vault, in front of a small window, as Beatrice appears to him with her outstretched hand. This queering seems to imply a peculiar parthenogenesis in which the artist's pregnancy is announced, or even facilitated, by his beloved, and Sartorio accomplishes such a suggestion through the composition's intertextuality and intervisuality.

Sartorio's “Viviana” thus exemplifies what Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has termed “impressionistic illustration” in her expansive study of illustration techniques in the *fin de siècle*. She links this particular approach, in which the image is not in a subordinate position to the text but rather asserts its own independence, to Oscar Wilde's famous notion of the critic as artist: “[i]mpressionist illustration is like [Wildean] criticism

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<sup>50</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, “Un ventaglio,” in *Scritti giornalistici*, v. 1, ed. Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 672. D'Annunzio used the pseudonym “Il Duca Minimo” for his *Cronache mondane*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 672.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 672. The attention to the decorative elements in Sartorio's work recalls D'Annunzio's writings on Alma-Tadema, whose paintings, with their attention to surface and color and their “gem-like” quality (“una pittura gemmea”), couldn't help but attract the poet. D'Annunzio, “Alma Tadema,” in *Scritti giornalistici*, v. I, 130. For more on D'Annunzio's appreciation of British painting, please see Susanna Scotoni, “D'Annunzio e ‘La Peinture Anglaise.’ Un aspetto della giovanile critica d'arte del poeta,” *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 1, no. 2 (1980): 79-91.

because it is a personal response to a creative work in another medium.”<sup>53</sup> The image thereby accrues paratextual significance, and, indeed, the placement of Sartorio’s composition within the volume emphasizes this role. Almost ninety pages separate the image from the text, since it actually opens the final section, *Note*, in which D’Annunzio offers brief commentary on a selection of poems. D’Annunzio’s line glosses include references to, among others, Fra Bartolomeo della Porta, Botticelli’s Villa Lemmi frescoes, and Gustave Flaubert’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony*.<sup>54</sup>

I therefore read Sartorio’s illustration as a visual gloss to “beata Beatrice,” one which makes explicit Dante’s relevance for D’Annunzio’s poem. Just as Dante and Beatrice bridge the gap between death and life, the speaker and the beloved in “Viviana” overcome temporal distance; the alternations in tense between the remote past and the present only serve to underscore this ambition. The reference to the *other* Dante – Dante Gabriel Rossetti – posits the British artist-poet as an exemplar for the young Italian Gabriele: just as the Pre-Raphaelite was able to peer into the past and recover, or even transfigure, its beauty, so too will D’Annunzio. Indeed, he is pregnant with it. The collection thus ends on a seemingly triumphant note, as the utopic ambitions of its poetic fantasy have been realized through the marriage of image and text.



In the opening sonnet of the *Sonetti delle fate* – addressed to Giuseppe Cellini – D’Annunzio turns explicitly to the realm of Arthurian fairyland, setting the subsequent sonnets in the myrtle- and nightingale-filled land of “Broceglianda.”<sup>55</sup> Broceglianda (or Brocéliande), with its ties to Arthurian legend, belongs to what Vernon Lee would refer to as “the fairyland of the Renaissance,” a phrase which we can fruitfully interpret as both reflecting the Renaissance’s own preoccupation with fairyland and capturing the nineteenth-century fascination with the Renaissance itself.<sup>56</sup> In both cases, this fairyland fantasy is tinged with a sense of belatedness and melancholy, which, while implicit in D’Annunzio’s poetry becomes explicit in Lee’s work. As Nicola Bown notes of “the regressive longings and escapist fantasies”<sup>57</sup> that constituted the nineteenth-century British fascination with fairies, the Victorians “shaped fairyland into the negative image

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<sup>53</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>54</sup> Given the overwhelming number of references present within the text, it may be somewhat surprising that D’Annunzio glosses so few, but I read this as further evidence that the volume is intended to envelope the reader in a general feeling.

<sup>55</sup> D’Annunzio, “A Giuseppe Cellini,” 12-14.

<sup>56</sup> Such doubled perspectives are quite common in the realm of British Renaissance Revivalism and medievalism, as we saw in Matthew Potolsky’s reading of Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. On a broader level, as Hilary Fraser notes, “[t]he past, and another country [Italy], provided access to nineteenth-century England.” Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

of their own disenchanting world.”<sup>58</sup> This nostalgic project proved bittersweet, though, since “fairies were associated with yesterday, with past glories, lost worlds and times that can never come again. And [...] ideas about fairies were coloured by the terrible paradox of the Romantic imagination: strive as one might to create another reality or to transfigure the world through the creative power of the imagination, in the end that effort must end in failure.”<sup>59</sup>

I devote the remainder of this chapter to tracing such notions of fantasy, belatedness, and failure in Lee’s engagement with fairyland in her essay “The School of Boiardo” and her Decadent fairy tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady.” The retreat into the fairyland of the Renaissance, as in *Isaotta Guttadauro*, seems at first to offer a world of utter aesthetic pleasure and freedom to those that can access it – those that can “feel backward” – yet it eventually collapses under the weight of impossible expectations.

### **Drowsy pleasures**

Vernon Lee’s engagement with fairyland and fairy tales dates from early in her writing career and spans across her non-fictional and fictional works. In her anonymous preface to *Tuscan Fairy Tales: Taken down from the Mouths of the People*, published in 1880, Lee laments that the Italian peasantry has started to lose its previous connection to indigenous folklore due to the encroaching of modernity (she specifically mentions emigration, emerging technologies, and military conscription). Yet, she insists that even the currently impoverished set of beliefs retains some traces of its past vitality: “There now exists, it is true, a really vital belief only in the class of superstitions connected with witchcraft, ghosts, and compacts with the Evil One; but traces may still be found of a well-nigh extinct belief in fairies, magicians, elves, and mermaids.”<sup>60</sup> These traces are now placed at a remove from daily existence, divorced from modern Italian life.

The fairies and their magical brethren have not completely disappeared, though, and Lee argues that these “well-nigh effete superstitions, inanimate relics of much earlier beliefs, have been woven into intricate and regular structures, into fairy tales to which the popular fancy has given the most symmetrical, and I might almost say, artistic shapes. It would be possible to fill a volume with such stories, called loosely, ‘*novelle, novelline, fiabe*.’”<sup>61</sup> Her examples of such transformations from superstition into art include tales of fairies and elves, creatures in whom no one truly believes yet who continue to entrance the popular, as well as the literary, imagination:

People have heard of the fairies (*fate*), who were lovely women six days of the week, and turned into snakes on the seventh; of the magicians, who kept kings’ daughters enchanted in castles; of the sirens, who are

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>60</sup> Vernon Lee [Anon.], *Tuscan Fairy Tales: Taken down from the Mouths of the People*. (London: Satchell, 1880), 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 7-8. It would indeed be possible, since this is precisely what Lee does, thus participating in a larger tradition of nineteenth-century highbrow folklore collections.

women down to the waist, and fish below; of the *folletti* and *linchetti*, tiny, scarce visible elves, who do the stable work for good people, and who plait the manes and tails of their favourite horses; but no one believes that any such creatures still exist, although they probably existed in former days: the general opinion on the subject being that of an old woman from Barga in the Garfagnana (who could remember people going to church in powder, apple-green coats, and top-boots, and whose husband had been a gardener of Napoleon at Elba): ‘All the fairies, *folletti*, and such like, were locked up by the Council of Trent,’ which she supposed to have taken place in the year thirty, and which had some mysterious connection in her mind with the deluge and the end of the world.<sup>62</sup>

Here the figure of the snake fairy takes pride of place and seems to contain in her polymorphous body the possibility of an enchantment that is simultaneously located within a past epoch and its imagined fairyland equivalent. For now, though, I’d like to pause on the notion of the Council of Trent as the end of “the fairies, *folletti*, and such like.” In the old woman’s chronology, the Council marks the end of these creatures who “probably existed in former days” and is mysteriously connected with an epochal shift, a moment of destruction followed by a paler version of the world.<sup>63</sup> While it remains implicit, there exists a suggestive link between the disappearance of the fairies, here mandated by the Council of Trent, and the decline that the Pre-Raphaelites saw in artistic production starting in the sixteenth century. In both cases, a primitive vitality has been snuffed out by what is perceived as a staid and oppressive institution.

Lee’s notion of the fairy tale and her attention to the “general opinion” of the Tuscan peasantry certainly participate in the broader nineteenth-century preoccupation with the genre as an organic outpouring of folk belief, a written version of oral tales, and a vestige of more primitive superstitions.<sup>64</sup> Still, her focus on “artistic shapes” and the symmetry of *novelle* and *fiabe* demonstrates another undercurrent of her argument, one that would take its own shape in her essay “The School of Boiardo,” published four years later in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance*. In that work, she reinforces the link between the fairy tale and the fairyland of chivalric literature, tracing epic and romance cycles across periods and languages and identifying Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* as the most vibrant incarnation of the chivalric spirit.

“The School of Boiardo” charts the progression of chivalric literature across Carolingian epics, Arthurian romances, and even Scandinavian sagas, with the purpose of analyzing “the metamorphoses of mediæval romance stuffs, and, more especially, the vicissitudes of the cycle of Charlemagne.”<sup>65</sup> Lee’s far-reaching approach to these

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>63</sup> The Council of Trent’s religious and literary implications will also serve obliquely within Lee’s *oeuvre* to identify Torquato Tasso as the end of a long tradition of the “fairy tale” in Italian chivalric literature.

<sup>64</sup> For a recent study of Victorian fairy-tale culture that engages with both anthropological and Aestheticist contributions, please see Caroline Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Vernon Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance*, vol. II (London: T. F. Unwin, 1884.), 56.

“stuffs” stems from her belief that the Middle Ages are “heterogeneous and chaotic,” characterized by “a series of false starts, of interruptions and of new departures.”<sup>66</sup> As she memorably phrases it on the next page, “mankind throughout the Middle Ages appears to have been in a chronic condition of packing up and unpacking, and packing up again,” as old tales were repackaged to suit new worldviews.<sup>67</sup> This strange process of grafting, patching, and retelling would eventually lead to the emergence of the Renaissance.

The crux of Lee’s essay on Boiardo concerns “the sudden ousting of the Carolingian epic by the cycle of Arthur” and, a few centuries later, the imbrication of the two threads in the literature of Italian Renaissance.<sup>68</sup> Lee makes clear that she holds in contempt the “[i]dle poetic fancies of an inert people, the Knights of the Round Table [who] have no mission save that of being poetically perfect.”<sup>69</sup> Still, she understands how the more realistic, earthy Carolingian cycle came to be supplanted by a set of tales more suited to the fatigued and enervated society of the later crusades:

The Kelts, early civilized by Rome and Christianity, had a set of stories and a set of heroes extremely in accordance with mediæval ideas, and requiring but very little alteration. The considerable age of their civilization had long obliterated all traces of pagan and tribal feeling in their tales. Their heroes [... were] men of a distant period of glory, which was adorned with every kind of perfection, till it became as unreal as fairyland. Fairyland, in good sooth, was this country of the Keltic tales; and there is a sort of symbolical significance in the fact of its lawgiver Merlin, and its emperor Arthur, being both of them not dead, like Sigurd, like Dietrich, like Charlemagne and Roland, but lying in enchanted sleep.<sup>70</sup>

Despite her judgmental tone, the allure of this “distant period of glory” infuses Lee’s entire essay and will similarly affect her literary production, in which the fantasy of the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 58. One might think of this packing, unpacking, repacking cycle in relation to the cultural production of Decadence and Aestheticism as well. Indeed, one of Lee’s examples – the Volsunga saga – is introduced via a reference to the 1870 William Morris edition. For a reading of Morris’s *Sigurd*, please see Richard Frith, “‘The Worship of Courage’: William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* and Victorian Medievalism,” in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds. Lorretta M. Holloway and Jennifer A. Palmgren, 117-132 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Lee’s particular interest in the Volsunga saga stems from the positive valence of incest in the original version and its eventual transformation into the *Nibelungenlied*, in which “[t]he old, consistent, grandly tragic tale of the mysterious incests and revenges of a race of demi-gods has lost its sense, its point in the attempt to arrange it to suit Christian and feudal ideas.” Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 67.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 71. Her greatest disdain is saved for Parzifal: “A world purely ideal, divorced from all reality, unsubstantial like the kingdom of Gloriana, but, unlike Spenser’s, quite unshadowed by any puritan sadness, by any sense of evil, untroubled by allegorical vices; cheerful, serene, filled with flowers and song of birds, but as unreal as the illuminated arabesques of a missal. In truth, perhaps more to be compared with an eighteenth century pastoral, an ideal created almost in opposition to reality; a dream of passiveness and liberty (as of light leaves blown about) as the ideal of the fiercely troubled, struggling, tightly fettered feudal world.” Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 83.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 70.

past (the more distant the better) exerts its pull on the contemporary imagination. Adornment, unreality, fairyland – all these terms will ultimately possess both negative and positive valences in the world-building exercise that is “The School of Boiardo,” as does the notion of past heroes lying in “enchanted sleep.” And, according to Lee’s logic here, the past itself, like its heroes, is not dead, just “lying in enchanted sleep,” awaiting its reawakening.

While the Carolingian cycles have largely been abandoned in favor of Arthurian romance and the daydreams of the Round Table, Lee notes that they retain their power in Italy, though even there they have been infected by “Arthurian colour.”<sup>71</sup> She unsurprisingly turns to the Este court of Ferrara and devotes several pages to recalling her first encounter with Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato*. She finds herself reading the poem “drowsily with absolute reluctance to leave off, like the reluctance to rise from the grass beneath the trees with only butterflies and shadows to watch, or the reluctance to put aside some fairy book of Walter Crane’s.”<sup>72</sup> Here, the reference to Crane hints at the strange temporalities suggested by Lee’s essay, as this fairyland world quite simply mixes up all time periods together into one enchanted garden:

It was like strolling in some quant, ill-trimmed, old garden, finding fresh flowers, fresh bits of lichen walls, fresh fragments of broken earthenware ornaments; or, rather, more like morning in the Cathedral Library at Siena, the place where the gorgeous choir books are kept, itself illuminated like missal pages by Pinturicchio: amused, delighted, not moved nor fascinated; finding every moment something new, some charming piece of gilding, some sweet plumed head, some quaint little tree or town; making a journey of lazy discovery in a sort of world of Prince Charmings, the real realm of the ‘Faëry Queen,’ quite different in enchantment from the country of Spenser’s Gloriana, with its pale allegoric ladies and knights, half-human, half-metaphysical, and its make-believe allegorical ogres and giants. This is the real Fairyland, this of Boiardo [...] the fairyland of the Renaissance [...] with] every quaint and beautiful fancy, antique and mediæval, mixed up together, as in some Renaissance picture of Botticelli or Rosselli or Filipino [...]<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 105. For more on Walter Crane, please see Morna O’Neill, *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting, and Politics, 1875-1890* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 106-107. Lee continues her reverie across several pages, often returning to the idea of the garden. Boiardo leads us “through the mazes of fairy gardens [...] where all the wonders of Antiquity — the snake-women, the Circes, the sirens, the hydras and fauns live, strangely changed into something infinitely quaint and graceful, still half-antique, yet already half-Arabian or Keltic, in the midst of the fairyland of Merlin and of Oberon — live, move, transform themselves afresh.” Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 108. This fairy garden, it seems, was also in full force in the “historical” Ferrara of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento: “In that garden, where the white butterflies crowd among the fruit trees bowed down to the tall grass of the palace of Schifanoia — a garden neither grand nor classic, but elegiac and charming — we can imagine Boiardo or Ariosto reading their poems to just such a goodly company as Giraldi Cinthio (a Ferrarese, and fond of romance, too) describes in the prologue of his ‘Ecatomiti’: gentle and sprightly ladies, with the splendid brocaded robes, and the gold-filleted golden hair of Dosso Dossi’s wonderful Alcina Circe; graceful youths like the princely St. John of Benvenuto Garofalo; jesters



The discursive quality of the prose in this lengthy description – apparent even in this condensed excerpt – attempts to reproduce Lee’s fragmentary, referential, and, indeed, drowsy reception of Boiardo’s text; she strolls through her memories of textual realms and historical places, thereby producing her own garden of earthenware fragments. The reference to the illuminated missal pages, meanwhile, recalls D’Annunzio’s ekphrasis of Sartorio’s Dante composition, a comparison reinforced by the notion of every element “mixed up together” (which further echoes Pater’s “combining them anew”). Ultimately, it seems that this “fairyland of the Renaissance” exists as a mental landscape, accessible both through texts and images of the period and through contemporary works, be they by Crane or Sartorio, or even, one imagines, Lee or D’Annunzio.

### **Fairy snake-mothers**

Lee creates her own version of this landscape in her fairy tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” first published in 1896 in the *Yellow Book* and later reprinted in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* in 1904. At its heart, “Prince Alberic” is a coming-of-age tale steeped in the fairyland of medieval and Renaissance chivalric literature. In the imaginary duchy of Luna at the close of the seventeenth century, a prince resides in his grandfather’s elaborate, baroque palace but is exiled as a young boy when he rebels against the removal from his rooms of an old, tattered Gothic tapestry depicting his ancestor, Alberic the Blond, and the Snake Lady Oriana. Sent from the Red Palace to the ruins of the older ancestral seat, the Castle of Sparkling Waters, young Prince Alberic is isolated from the court and surrounded only by peasants, with two key exceptions: a garden snake, who becomes his near-constant companion, and his beautiful godmother, who comes to his rooms for an hour each sunset to give him lessons. Unsurprisingly, given the tale’s genre and the ample foreshadowing of this revelation, the snake and the godmother turn out to be one and the same, the Lady Oriana from the tapestry. Meanwhile, court intrigue ensues, as the Duke’s Jesuit priest, Jester, and Dwarf all attempt to ingratiate themselves with the young heir. Eventually, Duke Balthasar calls his grandson back to the palace and orders him to marry. Alberic’s resistance to his grandfather’s demands – due to his faithful devotion to the Snake Lady – tragically culminates in the violent death of his beloved and in his subsequent death by self-starvation.

Such are the narrative events when placed in chronological order, but Lee’s fairy tale constantly loops backwards and forwards, presenting events and then introducing their backstories. The story opens with a seemingly dull tidbit of ducal history before turning to its main subject. The reader learns that in “the year 1701, the Duchy of Luna became united to the Italian dominions of the Holy Roman Empire, in consequence of

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like Dosso’s at Modena; brilliant captains like his St. George and St. Michael; and a little crowd of pages with doublets and sleeves laced with gold tags, of sedate magistrates in fur robes and scarlet caps, of white dressed maids with instruments of music and embroidery frames and hand looms, like those which Cosimo Tura painted for Duke Borso on the walls of this same Schifanoia palace.” Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 98-99.

the extinction of its famous ducal house in the persons of Duke Balthasar Maria and of his grandson Alberic, who should have been third of the name. Under this dry historical fact lies hidden the strange story of Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady.”<sup>74</sup> This introduction should come as no surprise within the context of Lee’s *oeuvre*; as we shall see, many of her tales concern the supposed detritus of history, the “strange stories” to be found beneath “dry historical facts.” They evince a fundamental conviction that behind recorded history and still-visible “facts” lies something stranger and somehow truer, something that is always worthier of literary exploration, even if it never actually came to pass. Alberic *should have been* third of the name but was not. His is an aborted history.

In linking Alberic’s tragic fate to Lee’s writings on the fairyland of the Renaissance, I am shifting away from two of the more dominant readings of “Prince Alberic.” One tendency is to analyze the fairy tale alongside Sigmund Freud’s writings on Oedipal desire and the castration fantasy, an undeniably tempting route given the presence of an amorous mother figure who spends most of her life as a snake. Jane Hotchkiss, for example, conceives of the tale as a “counterstory” to Freud’s “highly persuasive version of the old story of female lack.”<sup>75</sup> Another route is to read the tale in relation to Lee’s own sexual dissidence situated within the context of the *fin de siècle*. Margaret Stetz, for example, argues for a historically, materially conditioned response to its context; arguing that “[t]he fate of Alberic, the art-worshipping dreamer who is persecuted and imprisoned for refusing to renounce an outlaw love in favour of a socially approved one, is as much a political allegory as a fairy tale.”<sup>76</sup> She explores its placement in the July 1896 *Yellow Book* in order to establish the fairy tale’s allusions to the “contemporary circumstances of Oscar Wilde, who was halfway through his

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<sup>74</sup> Vernon Lee, “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 182-183. As Maxwell and Pulham note in this critical edition, Vineta Colby’s biography of Vernon Lee includes a letter to Maurice Baring (February 20, 1906) in which Lee writes that she based the imaginary Duchy of Luna on Massa Carrara, which had been ruled from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries by the Malaspinas and Cybo-Malaspinas and was then transferred to the Este through marriage. Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 354.

<sup>75</sup> Jane Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud: Vernon Lee’s Castration Fantasy,” in *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*, eds. Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 21. Hotchkiss argues that while “Prince Alberic” at first seems to lend “itself to the sort of retroactive psychoanalytic reading that Sigmund Freud performed on E. T. A. Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman,’” Lee’s articulation of the “phallic” or “clitoral” woman should instead be read as a “counterstory,” a revision in which the depiction of the snake lady “serves as a sort of litmus test for gynophobia.” Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud,” 21, 24. On a related note, Patricia Pulham has argued that the Italian Renaissance past generally serves the function of “‘pre-Oedipal space’ in which sexual subjectivity is explored” in Lee’s fictional works. Patricia Pulham, “Colouring the Past: Death, Desire and Homosexuality in Vernon Lee’s ‘A Wedding Chest,’” *Critical Survey*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2007): 7.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Stetz, “The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*,” in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 113. Stetz identifies numerous intertextual resonances between Lee’s fairy tale and Wilde’s works, including the prominence of the moon (the Duchy of Luna and the motif in *Salomé*), the dedication to Margaret, Lady Brooke (“Prince Alberic” and “The Young King”), and various potential allusions to “The Young King” and other tales in Wilde’s *House of Pomegranates*. For further analysis of Lee’s reaction to the Oscar Wilde trials, please see Richard Dellamora, “Productive Decadence: ‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought’: Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde,” *New Literary History*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2004): 529-546.

sentence of two years at hard labour” and to assert the presence of explicit Wildean intertextual influences.<sup>77</sup> In this reading, homosexual desire is displaced onto other manifestations of sexual dissidence (in this instance, the love of a boy for his snake-fairy godmother).<sup>78</sup> Though both of these approaches have resulted in compelling scholarship, they tend to minimize the significance of Lee’s chosen setting and therefore to ignore the tale’s participation within her broader engagement with Renaissance chivalric literature.

After all, “Prince Alberic” does indeed imagine a space in which dissident sexual desire might be cultivated alongside dissident aesthetics, a space in which “female lack” might be reconceived as female plenitude, but the space in which “outlaw love” can briefly thrive before being snuffed out by society is quite precise: it is the realm of a chivalric, fairyland past that may never truly have existed, a realm that is inextricably linked to a Gothic tapestry found in the rooms of the heretofore-neglected young Prince Alberic.<sup>79</sup> We first learn of this tapestry as Duke Balthasar orders it removed due to its outmodedness and its disturbingly fanciful nature.<sup>80</sup> The Duke, “a prince of enlightened mind and delicate taste,” disapproves completely of this “extremely worn” work that depicts “Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady Oriana, as described in the Chronicles of Archbishop Turpin and the poems of Boiardo,” while the little prince, on the other hand, finds the tapestry utterly entrancing and will rebel upon its removal.<sup>81</sup> The reader must wait until the following chapter, however, to discover the reason for his adoration.

It seems that much of the fascination that the tapestry holds for young Alberic stems from his lack of exposure to the world at large; more or less trapped in the Red Palace and its gardens, he is “usually satisfied with seeing the plants and animals in the tapestry” and resigns himself “to seeing the real things only when he should be grown

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<sup>77</sup> Stetz, “The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head,” 113. While Stetz is right to argue against decontextualized readings that lose sight of the importance of the *Yellow Book* context, I would argue that her characterization of the tale stripped of Wildean intertexts as “merely a highly wrought tale of the fantastic inspired by research into a distant past” is overly simplistic. To read “Prince Alberic” as a tale that appears to be “set in an imaginary Italian landscape at the end of the seventeenth century,” but whose framing instead “serves as an elaborate blind, concealing a narrative that refers to late-nineteenth-century British matters,” is to ignore the specificity of Lee’s chosen setting. Rather than an “elaborate blind,” the choice of late seventeenth century Italy reveals some of the same concerns that Stetz identifies through her comparison to Wilde, but it also suggests a host of preoccupations unrelated to him. Stetz, “The Snake Lady,” 122, and 112-113.

<sup>78</sup> For related analysis of the displacement of Wilde’s homosexuality onto seemingly heterosexual relationships in his fairy tales, please see Claudia Nelson, “Fantasies de Siècle: Sex and Sexuality in the Late-Victorian Fairy Tale,” in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*, eds. Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson, 87-107 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

<sup>79</sup> Hotchkiss labels the Snake Lady a “clitoral woman” rather than a “phallic woman”: “The Snake Lady, with her various potencies and her majestic coiled and folded serpent’s tail, represents what psychoanalysis calls the ‘phallic woman’ but more accurately might be called the clitoral woman, the woman who has ‘never already’ lacked anything until patriarchal history reified its own parapraxis.” Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud,” 22.

<sup>80</sup> This is described as the duke’s “first act of hostility [...] towards the Snake Lady, in whose existence he did not, of course believe.” Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 183. Jane Hotchkiss suggestively argues that this “oxymoronic statement [is] reminiscent of Freud’s ambivalent expressions concerning the ‘thereness’ of the clitoris.” Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud,” 28.

<sup>81</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 183-184.

up.”<sup>82</sup> The tattered tapestry thus becomes his whole world, and it expands in his mind day-by-day, year-by-year:

The centre of the tapestry was the most worn and discoloured; and it was for this reason perhaps that little Alberic scarcely noticed it for some years, his eye and mind led away by the bright red and yellow of the border of fruit and flowers, and the still vivid green and orange of the background landscape. Red, yellow, and orange, even green, had faded in the centre into pale blue and lilac; even the green had grown an odd dusty tint; and the figures seemed like ghosts, sometimes emerging then receding again into vagueness. Indeed, it was only as he grew bigger that Alberic began to see any figures at all; and then, for a long time he would lose sight of them.<sup>83</sup>

If Alberic at first allows his mind to be “led away” by the brightest colors, which boldly command attention, he later turns to faded, dusty, and, indeed, ghostly portion, from which figures emerge before receding into the decorative composition. He strikingly works his way from the outside in, from the borders to the center, from the vibrant present to the faded past, and thus gradually immerses himself into the tapestry’s world as he matures, and his patient pleasure resonates with Lee’s drowsy strolling amid the fairy worlds of Crane and Boiardo.<sup>84</sup>

Eventually, Alberic’s eyes and heart turn to the central figures of a knight and a beautiful lady, whom he comes to love the most, “although she was so very pale and faded, and almost the colour of the moonbeams through the palace windows in summer.”<sup>85</sup> One day, as a result of furniture rearrangement, Alberic and his nurse make an exhilarating discovery: “For where the big crucifix had stood, the lower part of the beautiful pale lady with the gold-thread hair was now exposed. But instead of a skirt, she ended off in a big snake’s tail, with scales of still most vivid (the tapestry not having

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>84</sup> Hotchkiss sees in Alberic’s gradual seeing a resemblance to “Freud’s account of the ‘sexual researches’ of childhood,” as “the tapestry literally takes shape under his gaze as he matures.” Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud,” 28-29. I am further interested in the notion of ghostly figures “emerging and receding,” which will return in Chapter Two in reference to Lee’s short story “Dionea.”

<sup>85</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 186. The reference to moonbeams, of course, recalls the Duchy of Luna. Ruth Robbins has noted that one reading of the tale might see it as a battle between feminine moon and masculine sun: “The duchy itself, allied linguistically through its name, Luna, to the feminine principle of the moon, is obliterated by the combined forces of earthly powers whose allegiance is to the sun. [...] Louis’s brief appearance in the story, as well as the annexation of the duchy by the Holy Roman Empire, because both King and Empire existed in ‘real’ history, suggest a return to the real, to the norm. The masculine force of history defeats the feminine anarchy of No-place, No-time.” Ruth Robbins, “Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?” in *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Stokes (New York: St. Martins, Press, 1992), 154-155. The privileging of the moon over the sun can thus also be read as a critique of the Enlightenment. In this reading, the fact that Alberic’s mind is at first “led away” by the bright colors at the borders of the tapestry and only later succeeds in seeing its dusty, faded center, charts a sort of reversal of traditional expectations: it is the Enlightenment that initially leads him astray and must then be overcome.

faded there) green and gold.”<sup>86</sup> The nurse, while frightened at first, soon tells her charge that the tapestry must depict his illustrious ancestor Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady. The reader must wait to learn the details of this tale, though, since the prince contents himself to speculative contemplation in lieu of a fact-finding mission: “Little Prince Alberic asked no questions feeling that he must not. Very strange it was, but he loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her.”<sup>87</sup> Here, the earlier “although” fully transforms into “because,” as Alberic ascribes the lady’s beauty to her polymorphous body and her faded, moonlit appearance.

Duke Balthasar finds no such charm in the work, however, and orders it removed, though Alberic soon destroys the Susanna and the Elders hanging and finds himself utterly alone; Since the tapestry of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady “had been his whole world” he has “discovered that he had no other.”<sup>88</sup> His life changes, though, once the Duke discovers his destructive act and exiles him “to a terrible place [...] where there was no furniture to destroy.”<sup>89</sup> And thus the boy is shipped off to the marvelously named Castle of Sparkling Waters, the old ancestral seat of the House of Luna that was abandoned centuries before in favor of the Red Palace:

The Castle of Sparkling Waters was little better than a ruin, and its sole inhabitants were a family of peasants. The original cradle of the House of Luna, and its principal bulwark against invasion, the castle had been ignominiously discarded and forsaken a couple of centuries before, when the dukes had built the rectangular town in the plain; after which it had been used as a quarry for ready-cut stone, and the greater part carted off to rebuild the town of Luna, and even the central portion of the Red Palace.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 187. The theme of furniture and furnishing rearrangement in the fairy tale is quite intriguing, and it seems to be related to the idea of history and the re-ordering of knowledge, a notion to which we will return in the final scene. It also resonates with the “chronic [medieval] condition of packing up and unpacking, and packing up again.” Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 58.

<sup>87</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 188. Alberic’s destruction of the new decorations might be read as a rejection of both the imperial regime and of its marriage practices. From the start of the tale, Lee frames the young prince’s emotional attachment to the Snake Lady as an as of yet passive, perhaps unconscious rebellion against normative heterosexuality and its implicit violence. Duke Balthasar’s determination to remove the tapestry stems from his realization that the prince has been neglected and that he must be given “at once an establishment befitting his age,” eventually be betrothed to “a princess worthy to be his wife,” and “somewhat earlier, [be introduced to] a less illustrious but more agreeable lady to fashion his manners.” The Duke thus wishes to insert his grandson into a regime of heterosexual spectatorship via the scopophilic scene of Susanna and the Elders. It is also fitting that the precipitating event for the tapestry’s removal is the arrival a present from “his Most Christian Majesty King Lewis the XIV” – tapestries “after the designs of the most famous Monsieur Le Brun,” Gobelins representing “the marriage of Alexander and Roxana.” It is their hanging in the throne room that leads to the palace-wide redecoration. Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 183.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192.

The castle has been dis- and re-membered, “discarded and forsaken,” packed up, unpacked, and packed up again; now it is used as a quarry to prop up the newer palace, made ever more ostentatious by Duke Balthasar, who disdains the Castle of Sparkling Waters as much as he does the outdated tapestry. Alberic, on the other hand, will come to love his new home as much as he did his old furnishings, and the centuries-abandoned Castle will prove to have much in common with the “tattered and Gothic” tapestry.

### **Anachronism and Apocrypha**

The transition from the Red Palace to the Castle of Sparkling Waters is clearly as chronological as it is geographical.<sup>91</sup> By this point in the tale, there already exist multiple narrative and temporal frames: the present, in which the reader learns of this ducal history; the end of the seventeenth century, the period of Prince Alberic, Duke Balthasar, and the extinction of the House of Luna; and the era of Alberic the Blond, aligned with the tapestry, the Castle of Sparkling Waters, and the world of chivalric literature. The tale of Prince Alberic at first seems to offer a fairy tale retreat for the nineteenth-century reader, yet Alberic himself yearns to escape his own era.

In part, the setting of the late seventeenth century serves as a shorthand indicator for the sort of decadent court life into which the once noble Italian Renaissance has descended. Ruth Robbins, for instance, links the *fin de siècle* of the story to the *fin de siècle* of Lee’s own times, seeing “the demise of Luna” as “a manifestation of [...] fin-de-siècle exhaustion.”<sup>92</sup> Yet she also urges us to remember that “the history is also fictional, so that the touchstone of normality is one which [is] already subject to some distortion; the Duchy of Luna never existed in fact and so the date of it (*sic*) is necessarily an apocryphal construct.”<sup>93</sup> Robbins’s use of the term “apocryphal” invites a deeper discussion of history and myth in the fairy tale, as I would argue that we may read the chivalric legend of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady and the fairy tale of young Prince Alberic and his fairy godmother as Apocrypha in their own right, necessary addenda to the “dry historical fact” of history, regardless of their historical reality.<sup>94</sup> They offer a potential refuge, though one that can only exist within the boundaries of the Castle of Sparkling Waters, the setting for what Caroline Sumpter terms Alberic’s “cultural regression [which] is pictured not only as a merging of fantasy and reality, but, like the Arts and Crafts production, a literal travelling back in time through Art.”<sup>95</sup> This, indeed, resonates with the cultural regressions in Pater’s *Studies in*

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<sup>91</sup> For Hotchkiss, for example, the temporal shift is epochal. She reads the transition from the patriarchal panopticon of the Red Palace to the more matriarchal Castle of Sparkling Waters – described as the “cradle of the House of Luna” – as resonant with Freud’s notion of the pre-Oedipal developmental stage as linked with the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization. Hotchkiss, “(P)revising Freud,” 33.

<sup>92</sup> Robbins, “Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?” 153.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the inclusion of Susanna and the Elders within the imaginary Duchy of Luna hints at the literal Biblical Apocrypha, since the Book of Daniel is accepted as doctrine by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches but not in the Protestant Church. As is her wont, Lee seems to be playing a game with what is accepted as official history and what lingers in the mind as part of popularly accepted legend.

<sup>95</sup> Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*, 141.

*the History of the Renaissance* – his fellowship with Botticelli, Winckelmann’s status as last fruit of the Renaissance – and D’Annunzio’s *Isaotta Guttadàuro* – his acceptance of the inheritance of Dante and Rossetti – but Lee will more explicitly link such regression to the melancholy realization of its futility. The refuge through the aesthetic object will peak in a moment of fairytale beauty – or, to echo the language of “Viviana,” an apotheosis – and then collapse into deathly tragedy.

But before the tragedy strikes, Alberic finds himself in a landscape as enchanting as his beloved tapestry. The Castle of Sparkling Waters even seems to have brought the tapestry to life, as he discovers his first morning there: “when, in the radiant autumn morning, he descended to explore the place of his banishment and captivity, it seemed as if those dreams were still going on. Or had the tapestry been removed to this spot, and become a reality in which he himself was running about? [...] Alberic rambled on, from discovery to discovery, with the growing sense that he was in the tapestry, but that the tapestry had become the whole world.”<sup>96</sup> The boundaries between art and life, past and present, thus break down in this magical space. If, as Mary Patricia Kane argues, the “tapestry operates as both a decorative inscription of the past and the site of supernatural or transhistorical communication with the past,” so too does this old ancestral seat in which the tapestry has been fully realized.<sup>97</sup> Here, we think, is the Boiardesque fairyland of the Renaissance.

The tapestry has become Alberic’s whole world, and unsurprisingly this world contains a beautiful snake. Due to a sudden thirst, Alberic approaches an ancient marble sarcophagus that has been repurposed as a well, though it has long since been abandoned: “it was quite dry and full of wild herbs, and even of pale, prickly roses. There were garlands carved upon it, and people with twisted snakes about them; and the carving was picked out with golden brown minute mosses.”<sup>98</sup> Like Boiardo, who “conducts us across the bridges where giants stand warders, to the mysterious carved tombs whence issue green and crested snakes, who, kissed by a paladin, turn into lovely enchantresses,” Lee will soon grant the twisted snakes in the relief a corporeal form:<sup>99</sup>

[T]here rose from the carved trough, from among the weeds and roses, and glided on to the brick of the well, a long, green, glittering thing. Alberic recognised it to be a snake; only, he had no idea it had such a flat, strange little head, and such a long forked tongue, for the lady on the tapestry was a woman from the waist upwards. It sat on the opposite side of the well, moving its long neck in his direction, and fixing him with its small golden eyes. Then, slowly, it began to glide round the well and circle towards him. Perhaps it wants to drink, thought Alberic, and tipped the bronze pitcher in his direction. But the creature glided past, and came

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<sup>96</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 192-193.

<sup>97</sup> Mary Patricia Kane, “The Uncanny Mother in Vernon Lee’s ‘Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,’” *Victorian Review*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2006): 43. Kane further argues that “[t]he metaphysics of presence, that construct of Western thought which leads us to perceive the present moment as ‘real’ and the past and future as ‘unreal’ is deconstructed in Alberic’s move to Sparkling Waters. Here the past is experienced as ‘real’ and the oppressive Red Palace loses its exclusive hold over the child’s developing mind.” Kane, “The Uncanny Mother,” 55.

<sup>98</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 194.

<sup>99</sup> Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 108.

around and rubbed itself against Albert's hand. The boy was not afraid, for he knew nothing about snakes; but he started, for, on this hot day, the creature was icy cold. But then he felt sorry. "It must be dreadful to be always so cold," he said; "come, try and get warm in my pocket." But the snake merely rubbed itself against his coat, and then disappeared back into the carved sarcophagus.<sup>100</sup>

It seems that Alberic's lack of learning, worldly experience, or, to put it more strongly, indoctrination, is precisely what allows him to form a bond with the snake, and he thus offers the creature friendship as it nuzzles against his hand. Though surprised by the snake's abnormal anatomy – normal, in this case, being the body of the Snake Lady – he feels no fear. And, while the snake's abode partially presages the tragic deaths to come later in the tale, we are perhaps invited to see her "disappearance" back into the sarcophagus as part of the cycle of emerging and receding that we saw in the tapestry. Given the atmospheric effects, we might even read this temporary disappearance in the tomb as echoing the "enchanted sleep" of Arthurian imagination.

Years pass. Duke Balthasar's Dwarf, Jester, and Jesuit determine to ingratiate themselves with the young prince of Luna, and they embark upon nefarious visits to the Castle of Sparkling Waters, armed with gifts. They are all surprised to discover that Alberic lacks for absolutely nothing and has grown almost impossibly beautiful: "Alberic was sixteen, but far taller and stronger than his age would warrant. His figure was at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of movement. His long hair, the colour of floss silk, fell in wavy curls, which seemed to imply almost a woman's care and coquetry. His hands also, though powerful, were, as the Dwarf took note, of princely form and whiteness."<sup>101</sup> He is lovely, graceful, and well educated – these qualities shock these courtly visitors, given the circumstances of his exile among

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<sup>100</sup> Lee, "Prince Alberic," 195.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 198. With his graceful, delicate, and feminine air, Prince Alberic fits perfectly into Martha Vicinus's discussion of the adolescent boy as another iteration of the fin-de-siècle *femme fatale*, one who gained particular prominence in Victorian gay and lesbian writing. In Vicinus's reading, "this handsome liminal creature" came to personify "a fleeting moment of liberty and of dangerously attractive innocence." Martha Vicinus, "The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Jul. 1994): 91. Engaging with Elaine Marks's notion of the "Sapphic school romance," Vicinus is particularly interested in how *over-determined* Alberic's love for his fairy godmother proves to be: "Lee brings together every explanatory model for the boy's passion: he is fetishistically attracted to the tapestry and its narrative; he is a direct descendant in blood and resemblance to the previous two Alberics; he owes all he knows to his beloved godmother. Nature, nurture, and maternal care have all conspired to commit Alberic to an unnatural love." Vicinus, "The Adolescent Boy," 110. See also Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," in *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts*, eds. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 356-358. Such emphasis on the student-teacher element of Alberic's relationship with his godmother might further invite exploration of the role of pedagogical eros in Lee's tale. For an intriguing reading of the topic as it pertains to Lee's fellow late-Victorian fairy tale writer, Oscar Wilde, please see Naomi Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2002): 156-170. Please also see Caroline Sumpter, "Innocents and Epicures: The Child, the Fairy Tale and Avant-garde Debate in fin-de-siècle Little Magazines," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2006): 225-244. For a more expansive study of the Victorian child and eros, please see James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).



peasants. At first, even the reader remains in the dark as to the prince's upbringing, but Lee soon explains that all of this is due to the tutelage of his godmother, who, like the snake, appeared immediately after Alberic's arrival: "The very evening after his arrival, as he was sitting by the marble well in the vineyard, looking towards the sea, he had felt a hand placed lightly on his shoulder, and looked up into the face of a beautiful lady dressed in green."<sup>102</sup> This lovely woman announces herself as his secret godmother, of whose company Duke Balthasar disapproves, and she will spend an hour with him every evening at sunset.

While Alberic's shyness prevents him from asking his godmother about his ancestor and his serpentine beloved (and from mentioning his own snake companion to her), the hazy figure of Alberic the Blond remains a central preoccupation in the boy's mind:

About Alberic the Blond he knew indeed but little, save that he had reigned in Luna many hundreds of years ago, and that he had been a very brave and glorious Prince indeed, who had helped conquer the Holy Sepulchre with Godfrey and Tancredo and the other heroes of Tasso. But, perhaps in proportion to this vagueness, Alberic the Blond served to personify all the notions of chivalry which the boy learned from his Godmother, and those which bubbled up in his own breast. Nay, little by little the young Prince began to take his unknown ancestor as a model, and in a confused way, to identify himself with him.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Lee, "Prince Alberic," 202. Much has been made of the seemingly incestuous nature of the love between the boy and his godmother, though Vicinus is, in particular, disinclined to see a mother-son relationship: "For years Alberic lives in an isolated, self-contained idyll of sensual love that needs no sexual consummation. The oedipal implications of a boy fixated on an erotic mother are irrelevant, for Lee is constructing the ideal lesbian romance. The godmother has created Alberic without reproduction; rather, their relationship is one of reciprocal need." Vicinus, "The Adolescent Boy," 107. Kane, on the other hand, sees in their love "a reunion with the God/Mother from whom Alberic and all of his ancestors have been separated as a necessary precondition to their assumption of identity in the phallogocentric symbolic order." Kane, "The Uncanny Mother," 56. I am inclined to read the incestuous overtones in relation to the "mysterious incests" that Lee explores in the Volsunga saga; such a reading would further place into relief the clash of cultures and historical eras that is presented in the fairy tale. Lee, "The School of Boiardo," 67. An alternate route would be to read the incest along political lines. Carl Lehnen argues that while the Red Palace "represents a compromised and decadent Italy, focused on trivialities and compromised by forces from without," the Castle of Sparkling Waters "represents an original plenitude and autonomy." "Because Alberic's death leads to the duchy's annexation by the Holy Roman Empire, his queer love for Oriana is also allied to Italian independence." Carl A. Lehnen, "Sex, Aesthetics, and Modernity in the British Romance of Italy, 1870-1914" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011, ProQuest, AAT 3503648), 137. The incestuous overtones of their love would thereby acquire yet another valence, as the incest would mark an authentically endogamous Italian love.

<sup>103</sup> Lee, "Prince Alberic," 203. The reference to Alberic the Blond's presence at the Holy Sepulchre is striking. As Albert Ascoli notes, one can argue that "the liberation and adoration of the Sepulchre [...] should be taken as *the* central action of [Tasso's] poem." Albert Russell Ascoli, "Liberating the Tomb: Difference and Death in *Gerusalemme Liberata*," *Annali d'Italianistica*, vol. 12 (1995): 161. Of course, as we shall soon see, Alberic, after liberating the Holy Sepulchre, will find yet another tomb, an enchanted sepulchre from which he will liberate the fairy Oriana. It seems that the Counter-Reformation cannot quite vanquish the fairies after all.

The notion that Alberic the Blond personifies the boy's chivalric ideals "in proportion to this vagueness" resonates with the little prince's earlier enchantment by the vague figures in the tapestry – in both instances, Alberic is allowed, though his ignorance, to project his desires onto these personages and to identify with them. Yet though the details of his ancestor's life remain hazy, what little Alberic knows at this point of identification proves quite suggestive. Clearly, the first Alberic reigned while the Castle of Sparkling Waters was still the seat of the Duchy of Luna, the era of Gothic taste that produced the tattered hanging. Having himself taken up residence in the abandoned ruin, the boy seems destined to reenact his ancestor's vague chivalric adventures and to align himself with these "heroes of Tasso."

Though Alberic is at first content with such hazy notions, his curiosity turns into a "thorn in his flesh" when he becomes a "gallant-looking youth," and the unexplained tale of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady Oriana begins to "haunt his dreams."<sup>104</sup> He soon persuades an elderly travelling singer to tell him the details, and the entire sixth chapter is comprised of the man's "stanzas."<sup>105</sup> It seems that the valorous Alberic was shipwrecked on a mysterious island while returning from Jerusalem. He explores the island's enchanted castle and stumbles upon a sepulcher:

And when the Knight of Luna had feasted his eyes upon this marvel, he saw among the grass, beneath a flowering almond-tree, a sepulchre of marble, cunningly carved and gilded, on which was written, "Here is imprisoned the Fairy Oriana, most miserable of all fairies, condemned for no fault, but by envious powers to a dreadful fate," — and as he read, the inscription changed and the sepulchre showed these words: "O Knight of Luna, valorous Alberic, if thou wouldst show thy gratitude to the hapless mistress of this castle, summon up thy redoubtable courage, and, whatsoever creature issue from my marble heart, swear thou to kiss it three times on the mouth, that Oriana may be released."<sup>106</sup>

Alberic the Blond follows the inscription's plea, and though stricken with horror, he kisses the serpent that appears and soon finds it transformed into "a damsel, richly dressed and beautiful beyond compare."<sup>107</sup> Here, it seems, is the climactic scene of fairytale passion, romance, and transformation.

Alberic determines to replicate his ancestor's magical meeting with Oriana and sets off towards the sarcophagus once he recovers from his illness. Tellingly, the chromatic scheme of the beloved tapestry infuses the evening:

Opposite, the moon had just risen, immense and golden, and the pines and the cypresses of the hill, the furthest battlements of the castle walls, were printed upon it like delicate lace. It was so light that the pomegranates were pink, and the pomegranate flower scarlet, and the

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<sup>104</sup> Lee, "Prince Alberic," 204.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

lemons pale yellow, and the vines bright green, only differently coloured from how they looked by day, and as if washed out with silver.<sup>108</sup>

The “washed out,” moonlit evening echoes the faded, ghostly center of the hanging; just as in the artwork, colors lose their vibrancy but gain an infinite mystery in proportion to their vagueness. The outsized presence of the moon, furthermore, seems to reinforce the notion that Alberic – heir to the Duchy of Luna – seeks to solidify his ancestral heritage. He kisses the snake and then faints:

When he awoke the moon was still high. The nightingale was singing its loudest. He lay in the grass by the well, and his head rested on the knees of the most beautiful of ladies. She was dressed in cloth of silver which seemed woven of moon mists, and shimmering moonlit green grass. It was his own dear Godmother.<sup>109</sup>

Here again, it is as though this woman has emerged from the faded, moonlit tapestry; all she is missing is her serpentine lower body. This idyllic scene is thus a reunion, of sorts, between the young prince and his beloved childhood companion, who, we now learn, has been with him throughout his entire life, first in the Red Palace tapestry and later as his godmother and snake.

Yet the next chapter abandons Alberic (the Third) and the Snake Lady and shifts back to the Red Palace, where, in a fit of pique against his three counselors, Duke Balthasar calls for his grandson’s return. He finds in the prince nothing but annoyance – Alberic’s beauty, youth, and gracefulness are an insult to his grandfather, and, moreover, he refuses to marry. This is particularly galling, since Duke Balthasar requires an influx of funds for the completion of his rockery garden and sepulchral chapel. The duke slowly deprives the prince of all luxuries, until Alberic has nothing but his grass snake and a book of hours for company in his imprisonment, yet he remains steadfast in his determination to remain unmarried. The duke and his counselors make one final attempt to convince him otherwise; during this visit, they brutally kill the serpent. Duke Balthasar leaves the room with one last jest: “Who knows [...] if you were not the Snake Lady? That foolish boy made a great fuss, I remember, when he was scarcely out of long clothes, about a tattered old tapestry representing that repulsive story.”<sup>110</sup> Alberic falls into a deep depression, refuses all nourishment, and dies within a fortnight.

The decadent, dissolute court seems to have destroyed the true sexual dissidence, which is counter-intuitively aligned with the Castle of Sparkling Waters and an earlier, purer, late medieval or early Renaissance space – quite simply an edenic garden.<sup>111</sup> Yet when we actually move back into that past, we see nothing but failure: as

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 214-215.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>111</sup> Sumpter argues that Alberic’s belief in and adoration of Oriana is linked to “a primal innocence: an innocence that not only contrasts with the decayed aestheticism of his grandfather, but is a counterbalance to Lee’s own passages of decadent excess.” Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*, 142. While I would disagree with her reading of Lee’s “decadent excess,” which seems ironically aligned with Prince Alberic rather than Duke Balthasar, Sumpter’s reading of the boy’s “primal innocence” certainly

the young prince learns from the priest summoned to care for him in his delirium, the Alberic the Blond who fought alongside “Godfrey and Tancredo and the other heroes of Tasso” did not succeed in maintaining his vow of ten years of fidelity to the cursed fairy Oriana, nor did his successor, the Marquis Alberic.<sup>112</sup> They succumbed, respectively, to the institutions of marriage and the church. And Prince Alberic also ultimately fails in his vow of fidelity to Oriana, though not by choice. That such failure is linked to the heroes of Tasso makes sense in light of Lee’s analysis in “The School of Boiardo,” wherein she locates in the poet “the pallor of autumn.”<sup>113</sup> Tasso is belated, and his heroes are belated. Alberic, third of his name, may be triply belated, and his anachronistic desire will never come to fruition, despite his deepest longings.

And so we learn that the utopic union between Alberic and his snake fairy can never exist and that there can be no true golden age in the “real” world. There is no golden age, that is, outside of the tapestry and the Castle of Sparkling Waters, which spur the emotional imagination of the young Prince Alberic and become his “whole world.”<sup>114</sup> After recounting his death, the tale closes with a more complex version of its incipit, reinforcing the suggestion that the *locus amoenus* in which the reader has immersed herself cannot last:

Be this as it may, history records as certain that the house of Luna became extinct in 1701, the duchy lapsing to the Empire. Moreover, that the mosaic chapel remained for ever unfinished, with no statue save the green bronze and gold one of Balthasar Maria above the nameless slab covering Prince Alberic. The rockery also was never completed; only a few marble animals adorning it besides the Porphyry Rhinoceros and the Verde Antique Apes, and the water-supply being sufficient only for the greatest holidays. These things the traveller can report. Also that certain chairs and curtains in the porter’s lodge of the now long-deserted Red Palace are made of the various pieces of an extremely damaged arras, having represented the story of Alberic and Blond and the Snake Lady.<sup>115</sup>

Just as the Castle of Sparkling Waters became a quarry for the Red Palace, now the damaged tapestry has been dismantled and repurposed for new furnishings. We return to the theme of official history occluding apocryphal lore, and the language itself retreats from the ornateness of the fairy tale and returns to travel reportage. Having

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resonates with the notion of the Castle of Sparkling Waters as a space imbued with the promise and purity of chivalric romance.

<sup>112</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 203.

<sup>113</sup> Lee, “The School of Boiardo,” 113.

<sup>114</sup> Lee, “Prince Alberic,” 193.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 228. Mary Patricia Kane, inspired by Julian Wolfrey’s notion of spectrality in *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), reads a ghostly presence in these chairs and curtains: “Those traces of the once great tapestry, like the text of the official history of the Duchy of Luna, are haunted with spectres that disrupt the settled order of things from within and in ways we least expect. Like the statement of ‘dry historical fact’ in the incipit, the ruined tapestry is haunted with spectral voices that undermine the authenticity of the official histories from which they have been excluded.” Kane, “The Uncanny Mother,” 59. Such hauntings will be the main preoccupation of Chapter Two.

ventured into the marvelous, tragic story of Alberic (the Third) and the Snake Lady, we are tragically thrust back into dry fact.



D'Annunzio's *editio picta*, the tapestry of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady, the Castle of Sparkling Waters, and, indeed, Lee's own fairy tale, are all, to borrow Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood's formulation in *Anachronic Renaissance*, "anachronic artifacts," and they short-circuit linear time by disturbing the boundaries between past and present, between fantasy and reality, through their embrace of anachronistic emotional and aesthetic attachments.<sup>116</sup> The "fairyland of the Renaissance" is thus accessible to those who, as Pater describes in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, possess "the finer nerve and the keener touch" and can translate this sensibility into their own artistic and literary productions.<sup>117</sup> And yet, as the tragic tale of "Prince Alberic" suggests, while the aesthetic object might enable such transcendence, the transhistorical realm that it constructs is always fragile. To be outside of the stream of linear time, it seems, is at once liberating and melancholy.

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<sup>116</sup> Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

<sup>117</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 66.

## Chapter Two: Re-nascence and Revenants

Non so se tra rocce il tuo pallido  
Viso m'apparve, o sorriso  
Di lontananze ignote  
Fosti, la china eburnea  
Fronte fulgente o giovine  
Suora de la Gioconda

Dino Campana  
"La Chimera"

The Gods are dead: no longer do we bring  
To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive-leaves [...]  
And yet – perchance in this sea-trancèd isle,  
Chewing the bitter fruit of memory,  
Some God lies hidden in the asphodel.

Oscar Wilde  
"Santa Decca"

Evoe Bacche!

Heinrich Heine  
"The Gods in Exile"

In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Walter Pater writes one of the most famous ekphrases in the Western tradition, which hinges on the assertion that the Mona Lisa, or the Gioconda, "is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave."<sup>1</sup> Pater's preoccupation with the undead woman traversing time and space, whose beauty contains "[a]ll the thoughts and experience of the world,"<sup>2</sup> permeates the entire essay and adapts his notion of Michelangelo lingering on as "a revenant, as the French say, a ghost out of another age, in a world too coarse to touch

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70. The critical scholarship on Pater's Lady Lisa is far too vast to enumerate here, but several works over the past twenty years have offered intriguing readings of her status as vampire. Please see Michael J. Dennison, *Vampirism: Literary Tropes of Decadence and Entropy* (New York: P. Lang, 2001); Andrew Eastham, "Aesthetic Vampirism: Pater, Wilde, and the Concept of Irony," in *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*, ed. Kelly Comfort (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 79-95; Catherine Maxwell, "From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's Portraits," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1997); Lene Østermark-Johansen, "Swinburne's Serpentine Delights: The Aesthetic Critic and the Old Master Drawings in Florence," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2002): 49-72; and Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 227-262.

<sup>2</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 70.

his faint sensibilities too closely.”<sup>3</sup> The vampire, the revenant – both figures emerge as bodily sites of contested chronology and aesthetics. Their lingering presence seems to deny the possibility of a coherent teleology of art historical inquiry. Indeed, these figures reinforce Pater’s conception of the Renaissance as a sensibility or a general feeling, instead of a concrete historical period, and they seem to hold the promise of a secret, dangerous knowledge that bubbles below the surface of modern life.

There is a less famous ekphrasis in the essay on Leonardo, in which the revenant morphs into the clairvoyant, the delicate instrument who becomes a receptacle of the “subtler forces of nature.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Pater describes Leonardo’s type of womanly beauty and contemplates how his painted clairvoyants “feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others” and “pass them on to us in a chain of secret influences.”<sup>5</sup> Leonardo’s women gesture towards a mode of perception that has since been lost, or perhaps they even embody that mode – the passage allows for both interpretations through its use of “instruments” and “receptacles.” The reverie furthermore lingers on the subtlety and faintness of these figures. Among the implications of this faintness is the thought that only those with “the finer nerve and the keener touch can follow” where the clairvoyant leads.<sup>6</sup> Only a certain type of aesthete can fully comprehend the secrets whispered by these (re)animated works of art, Pater seems to say, and through such influences, this rarefied figure can regain the spirit of the Renaissance.

Yet, as the decadent imagery surrounding Pater’s Lady Lisa suggests, such a chain of influences can also carry with it the threat of violent disruption. After all, the supernatural figures of the clairvoyant, the revenant, and the vampire are threatening and destructive, not only because of their potential tendency toward violence but also due to their ability to overthrow the natural order. They flout the firm line that separates life from death: the clairvoyant peers into the *aldilà*, the revenant returns from it, and the vampire refuses to go there altogether. Lisa’s knowledge of “the secrets of the grave” is as frightening as it is alluring.

The incantatory and ritualistic style that Pater uses in this ekphrasis is key to his historiographical model for the Renaissance, an approach that curiously short-circuits chronology and subverts the normal progression of time. For Pater, as explored in the previous chapter, the Renaissance is a feeling more than a period, and the essay is meant to evoke that feeling, to reanimate it. The idea of Lady Lisa as the “presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters”<sup>7</sup> is particularly suggestive here, and J. B. Bullen identifies this notion of “presence” as key to Pater’s peculiar brand of impressionistic criticism: “Pater seems to be winding up a charm; he seems to be weaving some kind of hypnotic spell where words are being used as an incantation which summons up that weird ‘presence’ rather like a genii from a lamp.”<sup>8</sup> Pater thus lures his reader into a sort of hypnotic state through both the images conjured in the passage and its sinuous, repetitive prose style, an effect similar to the “state of trance”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>8</sup> J. B. Bullen, “Walter Pater’s Interpretation of the Mona Lisa as a Symbol of Romanticism,” in *The Romantic Heritage: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Karsten Engelberg (Copenhagen: Department of English, University of Copenhagen, 1983), 140.

that Lene Østermark-Johansen finds in Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Notes on the Designs of the Old Masters at Florence."<sup>9</sup>

This sinuous language and hypnotic state obviously carry an erotic charge as well. As many scholars have noted, Pater's Lady Lisa shares a number of characteristics with the figure of the Decadent and Aestheticist *femme fatale*.<sup>10</sup> She belongs to what Mario Praz identifies in his 1930 essay *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* as the "tipo di donna fatale più penetrato d'estetismo e d'esotismo, il tipo che sorge con Gautier e Flaubert, ha pieno sviluppo in Swinburne, da cui, poi, passa a Walter Pater, a Wilde, a D'Annunzio" ["the type of *femme fatale* most imbued with aestheticism and exoticism, the type that rises from Gautier and Flaubert, has full development in Swinburne, from whom it later passes to Walter Pater, to Wilde, to D'Annunzio"].<sup>11</sup> Pater's Gioconda, in turn, will inspire a long chain of "Leonardesque" women in the *fin de siècle* – we might see this as a concrete adaptation of the "chain of secret influences." As Catherine Maxwell has argued, Mona Lisa and her descendants "feed not only on their male victims but also on the past, absorbing their energy from multiple references to other texts. They incarnate or reincarnate the power of other fatal women."<sup>12</sup> Their omnivorous vampiric feeding amplifies their power, hence their frightening allure.

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<sup>9</sup> Lene Østermark-Johansen, "Swinburne's Serpentine Delights," 61. Indeed, Østermark-Johansen compellingly argues that Pater derives much of his style for the Leonardo essay from Swinburne's work, a point with which Catherine Maxwell is in full agreement. Østermark-Johansen further links this to Michelet's reference to "animal magnetism and mesmerism [...] in his evocation of Leonardo's powers over the spectator's subconscious." Østermark-Johansen, "Swinburne's Serpentine Delights," 61. As she notes, this discourse also contains erotic overtones: "From the very beginning animal magnetism had highly erotic connotations; the relationship between the magnetiser and his subject was often one of male dominance over a female patient, and the gasps and groans which issued forth from the clinics and the mesmeric salons were all subject to much moral criticism. [...] French art criticism had repeatedly employed the relationship between the mesmerist and his subject as a metaphor for the powerful influence of works of art on the spectator." Østermark-Johansen, "Swinburne's Serpentine Delights," 61. Through all of this, it is important to acknowledge that here the male writer (or mesmerist) is fully in control. Pater is the one coaching the genie out of the lamp (in this case Lady Lisa). As we will see, though, this power dynamic is reversed in the texts by Lee and D'Annunzio.

<sup>10</sup> For a small sampling of scholarship on the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*, please see Heather Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012); Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2008); Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Mario Praz, *La carne la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, ninth edition (Firenze: Sansoni, 1992); and Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Praz, *La carne la morte e il diavolo*, 175. Translations mine unless otherwise noted. This typology rendered Leonardo's *Gioconda* a fitting symbol, in the Aestheticist mind, for Woman and Art in all their ineffable mystery. See Sandra Migliore, *Tra Hermes e Prometeo: il mito di Leonardo nel decadentismo europeo* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994), 32-33. For an Aestheticist view direct from the source, please see Angelo Conti, *Leonardo pittore*, ed. Ricciarda Ricorda (Padova: Studio Editoriale Programma, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Maxwell, "From Dionysus to 'Dionea'" 257. In many ways, this description of the *femme fatale* elucidates her centrality in Decadent literature. After all, as Matthew Potolsky has argued, the hyper-literary Decadent movement is "a characteristic mode of reception" that derives much of its power through its interconnected network of texts and tastes. Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia:



This chapter does not aim to re-litigate the vast scholarship on the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* but rather to explore how this figure converges with the Decadent variation on the “gods in exile,” a discourse that posits chthonic deities as haunting presences. It argues that Lady Lisa’s peculiar brand of female sublimity relies as much on her perceived link to an atavistic past, a past coded as both dangerous and erotic, as it does on her allure in the present.<sup>13</sup> She is depicted as a kind of corporeal palimpsest, a living reminder and embodiment of the past who carries within herself a force that stands in opposition to modern norms and values. She becomes, in other words, a haunting and atavistic presence, “a revenant,” “a ghost out of another age.” Whether as the pagan Leda, mother of Helen of Troy, or the Christian Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, Lady Lisa is marked by generational difference.

The legacy of Pater’s Lady Lisa infuses a number of texts by Vernon Lee and Gabriele D’Annunzio, but her specific role as revenant informs Lee’s story “Dionea” from the collection *Hauntings* (1890) and D’Annunzio’s play *La Gioconda* (1898) in particular. Both works feature disruptive women, love triangles, ambitious male artists, deadly and dismembering statues, and the enactment of pagan-inflected ritualistic sacrifice. In the Decadent imagination, the eponymous women of the titles emerge as embodiments, like Lisa, of artistic creation and the danger inherent in such enterprise, even as they gesture toward a violent Renaissance and pagan past.

At first it may seem strange to discuss haunting in relation to these texts by Lee and D’Annunzio – after all, here we seem to be confronted not with specters but with powerful (female) bodies, hyper-visible, with blood coursing through their veins. As I will argue, though, it is precisely the centrality of the corporeal revenant – the depiction of the woman’s body as a receptacle of the past – that marks these works as part of a Decadent Renaissance and gestures towards alternative modes of affective and carnal knowledge. It is a knowledge as troubling as Lady Lisa’s beauty, and one that seems to be a precondition for their aesthetic endeavors.

This corporeality also marks a shift from Pater’s famous ekphrases of Leonardo da Vinci’s mysterious women. Within the imaginary of these texts, Dionea and Gioconda Dianti are not paintings offering the spectator a framed view into another world (or, into the otherworld); rather, they are statues, rendered explicitly in three dimensions, who invade our world and share our space.<sup>14</sup> Visitors from a different

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University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 4. The idea of the Decadent *femme fatale* – or, to use Maxwell’s terms, the Paterian and Swinburnian variation on the *femme fatale* – gaining her power through her link to previous iterations of the “Eternal Feminine” thereby serves as a fitting mirror-image for Decadence and Aestheticism.

<sup>13</sup> It is true that one could see this as an example of women being excluded not just from a teleological approach to history, but also from the actual historical and social structures of power relations. For an excellent analysis of the problematic tendency to dehistoricize the female body in both art and criticism, please see Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). As Psomiades argues, such an approach can occlude the concrete and historical ideological valence of gender categories and dynamics of power and ideology: “Thus, in aesthetic theory, as in aestheticism, femininity is an ideological formation that serves a specific function: when you see a pretty girl, you see an end to theory, a marker for what need not be explained.” Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> The centrality of sculpture in these texts is particularly interesting given Leonardo da Vinci’s famous disdain of the art form in his *Paragone*. I see this as an additional way in which Lee and D’Annunzio play

realm, Dionea and Gioconda in this way subtly upend the relation that Pater describes between the viewer of the “finer nerve and the keener touch” and the painted clairvoyant. The aesthete is no longer granted a privileged and limited vision into another world but is instead violently confronted with that world in an embodied form.

Both Lee’s story and D’Annunzio’s play present complicated visions that interweave the unraveling of the self, artistic and intellectual production, and the dangerously alien and seductive allure of the past. Dionea and Gioconda remind us that, as understood by Avery Gordon, the essence of a ghost “is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way [...] we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.”<sup>15</sup> These female revenants, in all their corporeality and sensuality, in all their material if ineffable presence, will demand and receive their dues.



Renewed critical interest in Vernon Lee’s work over the past few decades has often concerned itself with her 1890 short story collection *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, and with good reason.<sup>16</sup> These stories dramatize Lee’s engagement with aesthetics, eros, and the overwhelming legacy of the past, making them fertile ground for scholars whose interests range from gender and sexuality studies to intellectual history. With the important exception of “A Wicked Voice,” in which the ghost is the androgynous castrato Zaffirino, all of the stories feature female hauntings, and, as Catherine Maxwell has compellingly argued, the supernatural element of these tales is what allows Lee “to accredit female creativity and power — unacknowledged energies which demand their registration in representational fields which conventionally deny their existence. Thus these female energies appear as revolutionary, as elusive disruptive forces breaking through the established order.”<sup>17</sup> These disruptive, ghostly figures all come from the past, for as Lee asserts in a number of works, the historical (albeit often fictionalized and romanticized) past is the locus of our most powerful fancies and fantasies, and, again with one exception, they are all set in Italy, the site of, as Angela Leighton

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with our expectations and transform the relationship that Pater sees between the Lady Lisa and her viewer of “the finer nerve and keener touch.”

<sup>15</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

<sup>16</sup> The full-fledged Lee Renaissance reached a peak in 2003, which saw the publication of Vineta Colby’s *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003) and Christa Zorn’s *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003). Mary Patricia Kane’s *Spurious Ghosts. The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Roma: Carocci, 2004) would be published in January of the following year and focuses on *Hauntings* in particular.

<sup>17</sup> Maxwell, “From Dionysus to ‘Dionea,’” 268.

memorably phrases it, “a framed moment of the past, ghostly with absence yet hauntingly recuperable.”<sup>18</sup>

Though the volume was published during the height of scientific and scholarly interest in the paranormal, it eschews such an approach. Instead, in her preface to the collection, Lee takes pains to note that the tales “tell of no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than presenting what she terms “genuine” ghosts, of the modern, scientific type, she will delve into the world of “spurious” ones; the existence of such vague specters cannot be verified, and they remain “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.”<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, these ghosts haunt both the individual and the collective, arising, as they do, from personal as well as historical memory, and they will furthermore insist on a sexual dimension of knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given her sustained fascination with the dustbins of history, Lee identifies “the more or less remote Past” as the perfect space for imaginative fancies:

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Leighton, “Resurrections of the Body: Women Writers and the Idea of the Renaissance,” in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, eds. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 223. Of course, “framed” here also reminds us of the centrality of artistic works in *Hauntings*. Both “Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka” and “Oke of Okehurst,” for example, participate in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century preoccupation with the power of the seemingly enchanted portrait, while “A Wicked Voice” revolves around the disquieting voice of an eighteenth-century castrato. As we will see in this chapter and the next, though, these fantastic tales will destabilize the presumed fixity of the art object in time and space. This is particularly true in the case of “Dionea,” in which, as I briefly mentioned in the introduction, the eponymous character bursts into our world. As Pulham has noted, “[u]nlike Medea and Alice Oke [the protagonists of, respectively, “Amour Dure” and “Oke of Okehurst”], who are initially contained within portrait frames from which they ‘escape’, Lee’s Dionea refuses the frame entirely.” Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 138.

<sup>19</sup> Vernon Lee, “Preface,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 40. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882. For more on the imbrication of science and the supernatural in Victorian Britain, please see Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), and Richard Noakes, “Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain,” in *The Victorian Supernatural*, eds. Nicola Brown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23-43.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, “Preface,” 39.

<sup>21</sup> Christa Zorn has already pointed out the extent to which Lee’s narratives in *Hauntings* present sexuality and history as overlapping dimensions: “Lee’s narratives often create fantastic moments as conflation of sexual and historical dimensions. Evidently, with its momentary suspension of reality, the fantastic can become an ideal site for the exploration of the unconscious side of cultural memory as it is stored and activated in the body.” Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 151. Zorn links this insight to her argument about the misogyny displayed by the first-person male narrators and their inability to acknowledge the sexual underpinnings of their supposedly academic interests. While it may be true that the texts sometimes mock the narrators and encourage the reader to see the misogyny inherent in their accounts, it is also the case that Lee repeatedly links the past to the female body in a manner that emphasizes sexuality as a means of knowledge, however provisional or illusory it may be. Her narrators may well deserve some mockery, I would argue, but so do we all; in Lee’s works, both fictional and non-fictional, we are all confronted with the inevitable mingling of knowledge and desire, of the historical and the personal, and of the collective and the individual.

That is the thing — the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance — that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past, in houses looking down on its troubadours' orchards and Greek folks' pillared courtyards; and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present.<sup>22</sup>

Here, it is the Past (capitalized as it so often is in Lee's works) that exerts an inexorable pull on us, a fascination rendered all the more potent by the fact that there exist even in our present times reminders of that which has come before us. Living on the borderland of the Past, among medieval orchards and Greek columns, we are never quite so modern as we seem to believe. And it is the "legion of ghosts" – plucked from a Past of poetical fancy and not dry prose – that offers us our intermediaries. As we shall see, Lee anticipates a structure of haunting that Avery Gordon outlines in *Ghostly Matters*: "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition."<sup>23</sup> The stories of *Hauntings*, in which protagonists are confronted by and overcome with the sexual allure of the past, illustrate this "magical" and "transformative recognition," as received wisdom is repeatedly upended and confronted by primordial desire.

### **A goddess in exile**

As one of the stories in *Hauntings*, "Dionea" shares the collection's preoccupation with the overlapping of historical memory and personal fantasy, and with the imbrication of aesthetic and erotic desire. Combining a meditation on the legacy of Hellenistic paganism in contemporary, Catholic Italy with a reformulation of the Renaissance-inflected, Leonardesque *femme fatale*, Lee uses the figure of Dionea to gesture toward an anti-teleological, queer notion of history that privileges the synchronic over the diachronic.<sup>24</sup>

Like the other stories in the volume, "Dionea" relies on the device of the first-person male narrator.<sup>25</sup> In this instance, the tale takes shape through the letters of Doctor

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<sup>22</sup> Lee, "Preface," 39.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> As Zorn notes, Lee's conception of the "genius loci," in particular, allows her to combine her focus on haunting with her interest in places as palimpsests: "By visualizing historical time synchronically (rather than diachronically) in one and the same place, Lee develops a psychology of the 'genius loci' dominated by movements of repetition and disruption. Places for Lee, like memories, submerge the collectively forgotten past, which yet comes to haunt individuals unconsciously." Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 151. For one of Lee's more explicit and sustained engagements with the theme of the *genius loci*, please see *The Enchanted Woods and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905).

<sup>25</sup> This type of frame story is quite common in late-nineteenth-century supernatural fiction, particularly in its highbrow iterations. The device of the first-person narrator, whose account of events may be unreliable, encourages the reader to shift between two stances: taking the paranormal seriously or viewing

Alessandro De Rosis to Lady Evelyn Savelli, the Princess of Sabina. In his first letter he recounts to her the curious appearance of a little girl, four or five years old, washed up on the beach of the fictional village of Montemirto.<sup>26</sup> His initial – rather overwrought – description of the sea prepares the reader for the story’s insistent pairing of the exotic and the erotic, and of the beautiful and the deadly: “a wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness, wickeder than your grey northern ones, and from which must have arisen in times gone by (when Phœnicians or Greeks built the temples at Lerici and Porto Venere) a baleful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men’s lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week.”<sup>27</sup> According to the narrative constructed by De Rosis in his letters, Dionea will indeed prove to be an iteration of this destructive Venus Verticordia, a “turner of hearts,” leading the inhabitants of the village to fall in love “usually where it is far from desirable” and ultimately causing the violent deaths of the sculptor Waldemar and his wife Gertrude.<sup>28</sup> In this way, Dionea seems to belong squarely within the category of what Susan Navarette has termed Lee’s “despotic femmes fatales and destroying bitch-goddesses.”<sup>29</sup> She will come to the town, promote immoral sexuality, wreak atavistic violence, and then disappear back into the sea, leaving naught but destruction in her wake. And yet, as we shall see, Lee deepens this depiction of Dionea as *femme fatale* by suggesting that she belongs in the category of the pagan gods in exile.

From her first appearance on the shore, Dionea exists within a matrix of pagan and exotic references. Like Venus, she arrives by sea, and when De Rosis describes her initial appearance to him, he emphasizes both her beauty and her foreignness: “She was lashed to a plank, swaddled up close in outlandish garments; and when they brought her to me they thought she must certainly be dead: a little girl of four or five, decidedly pretty, and as brown as a berry, who, when she came to, shook her head to show she understood no kind of Italian, and jabbered some half-intelligible Eastern jabber, a few Greek words embedded in I know not what.”<sup>30</sup> With her dark skin, her Greek-inflected patois, and her foreign clothing, Dionea is clearly an interloper into this Catholic Italian community.

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the narrator as mad. In Lee’s *Hauntings*, as Zorn has pointed out, we are asked to wonder whether the male narrators are getting carried away by their repressed libidos.

<sup>26</sup> The fictional Montemirto (“myrtle mountain”) is located in the Gulf of La Spezia, and De Rosis refers to Porto Venere, whose overlapping of pagan and Christian traditions transfixed John Addington Symonds in his *Italian Byways* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1883). For more on the potential influence of this text on Lee, please see Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 83-84. The name Montemirto itself reinforces Dionea’s association with Venus, given that the myrtle is one of this goddess’s trees.

<sup>27</sup> Vernon Lee, “Dionea,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, 77-78.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, “Dionea,” 85. The Venus Verticordia, turner or changer of hearts, was understood to turn virgins hearts from lust to chastity, though Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting of the subject (1864-68) seems to depict quite the opposite figure, one who hardly turns the mind away from sensual pleasure. For deeper analysis of Rossetti’s treatment of the theme, please see Ileana Marin, “Rossetti’s Aesthetically Saturated Readings: Art’s De-Humanizing Power,” in *Art and Life in Aestheticism*, 42-61. It seems clear that De Rosis, with his reference to “a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word,” has this Rossetian model in mind.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 155.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, “Dionea,” 78.

But even as this and later descriptions will emphasize her status as an alien heathen, Dionea ultimately seems to mix pagan and Christian referents. Her appearance on shore contains echoes of the Moses story, while her lashing to a plank and eventual resurrection nod towards Christ. The pigeons that will take to following her around obviously remind us of Aphrodite's doves, but they also belong to the tale of Saint Francis and recall the Holy Spirit. It seems that she is not quite as much of an interloper as initially suspected, or that perhaps she is an interloper in the dimension of time rather than space.

Even Dionea's name gives lie to the idea that she is completely extraneous to this community. What at first appears to be a scapular, "[p]inned to her clothes – striped Eastern things, and that kind of crinkled silk stuff they weave in Crete and Cyprus," proves to bear the name Dionea, leading everyone to debate whether "such a name [could] be fitly borne by a young lady at the Convent of the Stigmata."<sup>31</sup> The girl is about to be given the sturdy Christian appellation of Mary, when the "sister-book-keeper, who apparently detests monotony" finds fitting precedent for the name on the scapular: "Saint Dionea, Virgin and Martyr, a lady of Antioch, put to death by the Emperor Decius."<sup>32</sup> Even this little brown girl with her Eastern jabber, we learn, has a potential common lineage with the Doctor and his educated, modern, and Catholic community.

The name Dionea, of course, also carries a pagan flair and a hint of godly origins. After all, in the *Iliad*, Dione is a lover of Zeus and the mother of Aphrodite. This godly frame of reference thus suffuses the entire text. Throughout his account of his young charge, De Rosis insists upon Dionea's links to the ancient Greek deities, and, as becomes clear from his letters, this desire to place her within the framework of paganism is linked to his scholarly work. In his letter of July 15, 1886, he tells Donna Evelina that he is collecting material for his book "about the ancient gods in their days of adversity."<sup>33</sup> Although he acknowledges that the data is scant, he expresses his confidence in the continued existence of the pagan divinities:

Certain it is that the Pagan divinities lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes in their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints. Who knows whether they do not exist to this day? And, indeed, is it possible they should not? For the awfulness of the deep woods, with their filtered green light, the creak of the swaying, solitary reeds, exists, and is Pan; and the blue, starry May night exists, the sough of the waves, the warm wind carrying the sweetness of the lemon-blossoms, the bitterness of the myrtle on our rocks, the distant chant of the boys cleaning out their nets, of the girls sickling the grass under the olives, *Amor—amor—amor*, and all this is the great goddess Venus. And opposite to me, as I write, between the branches of the ilexes, across the blue sea, streaked like a Ravenna mosaic with purple and green, shimmer the white houses and walls, the steeple and towers, an enchanted Fata Morgana city, of dim Porto Venere; ... and I mumble to myself the verse

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 91.

of Catullus, but addressing a greater and more terrible goddess than he did: — “Procul a mea sit furor omnis, Hera, domo; alios age incitatos, alios age rabidos.”<sup>34</sup>

As De Rosis claims in this reverie, it is folly to doubt the continued existence of the pagan gods. Indeed, all that surrounds us assures us of their presence, and to deny the existence of Pan is to deny the primal fear of the woods, to deny the existence of Venus is to deny the beauty of a May night. The gods have not ceased to exist; rather they surface occasionally in disguise and are part of the very air that we breathe. Their religion may have been supplanted in popular consciousness by Christianity, but they have never relinquished their primordial power.

The notion of the gods donning Christian disguise belongs to the nineteenth-century theme of “the gods in exile,” which can, in large part, be traced back to Heinrich Heine’s eponymous essay.<sup>35</sup> In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater will open his essay on Pico della Mirandola with a description of Heine’s text that culminates with the story of Apollo’s life as a shepherd in lower Austria and his eventual execution:

On the rack he confessed that he was the god Apollo; and before his execution he begged that he might be suffered to play once more upon the lyre and to sing a song. And he played so touchingly, and sang with such magic, and was withal so beautiful in form and feature, that all the women wept, and many of them were so deeply impressed that they shortly afterwards fell sick. And some time afterwards the people wished to drag him from the grave again, that a stake might be driven through his body, in the belief that he had been a vampire, and that the sick women would by this means recover. But they found the grave empty.<sup>36</sup>

Apollo’s music causes the women to fall into a strange sort of lovesickness. This sexual allure, in turn, prompts the villagers to fear that they are dealing with a tricky figure, one who might be only undead and not truly dead. They equate the pagan god’s continued, underground existence with the supernatural existence of the vampire, and their discovery of the empty grave does nothing to assuage their fears. And the vampire, of course, loops us back around to Lady Lisa, who herself now seems revealed to be, as Denis Donoghue notes, “a pagan god in exile.”<sup>37</sup>

Pater locates much of this pagan sensibility in his concept of the “Renaissance,” and he finds in Pico della Mirandola a fitting figure for the Renaissance spirit: the scholar, in Pater’s imagination, strives towards a reconciliation of Italy’s pagan and Christian legacies. Pater closes the essay with a famous passage on Renaissance

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> De Rosis explicitly traces his own interest back to Heine: “I am enthralled by a tragic history, the history of the fall of the Pagan Gods.... Have you ever read of their wanderings and disguises, in my friend Heine’s little book?” Lee, “Dionea,” 83.

<sup>36</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 135. Pater will return to the theme of the gods in exile in his tales of “Denys l’Auxerrois” (*Imaginary Portraits*, 1887) and “Apollo in Picardy” (*Harper’s Magazine*, 1893).

humanism, in which he upholds Pico's attempts at reconciliation as emblematic of the core tenet of the humanist spirit: "For the essence of humanism is that one belief of which [Pico] seems never to have doubted, that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality – no language they have spoken, nor oracle by which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate or expended time and zeal."<sup>38</sup> In this light, the theme of the gods in exile may be seen as an embodiment of this belief, an illustration of the persistence of the old within the matrix of the new. The vampiric body of the god in exile may occasionally disappear, but it refuses to remain buried for long.

As we have seen with De Rosiis, this conception of the pagan gods wandering in our midst appears in Lee's fictional works, but her most explicit variation on the theme occurs in her 1921 memorial essay for Pater, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," in which she links this exile to the structure of haunting. Considering the alternating appearance and disappearance of these divinities, Lee determines that theirs is a ghostly exile:

Exile like this, implying an in-and-out existence of alternate mysterious appearance and disappearance is, therefore, a kind of *haunting*; the gods who had it partaking of the nature of ghosts even more than all gods do, *revenants* as they are from other ages, and with the wistful eeriness of all ghosts, merely to think on whom makes our hair, like Job's, rise up; tragic beings and, as likely as not, malevolent towards living men.<sup>39</sup>

As Lee explains, when we think of these ghosts, we experience a fright and imagine their malevolence, but we are also lured into their mystery and invited to imaginatively reconstruct their tragic existence. That is the significance of their haunting. Describing Lee's supernatural approach to the gods in exile theme, Stefano Evangelista uses language strikingly similar to that of Avery Gordon when he argues that in Lee's works, "[t]he ghost is a figure of the violent separation between past and present and in the ghost story the specter is a historicising device through which the present comes to *see* the past, and perhaps to understand it and deal with its own unresolved conflicts with it,

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<sup>38</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Vernon Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," *The Contemporary Review*, vol. 120 (1921): 348. Lee will further argue that Dionysus is an appropriate figure for this paradigm of haunting, given his chthonic character and his "subterranean taint." Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," 348. She will end the essay with her own tale of encountering the god: "[A]mong the Euganean hills, haunted by legends of ancient enchantments and by the poetry of Shelley," she comes across the little village of Rovolon and witnesses the remains of a festival. She eventually comes to realize that "the recent procession had not really been in honour of the wax-doll Madonna" and that its true honoree is Dionysus, "the priestly, bearded divinity in Ionian feminine weeds, his wreathing tresses reddened with henna to match the russet vines still hanging from the elms." Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," 352-353. Here, as in so much of Lee's work, we see the conflation of the pagan and the Christian, the masculine and the feminine. Venus and St. Francis, Dionysus and the Virgin Mary. For an earlier reflection by Lee on the ghostly and its representation in the visual arts and literature, please see "Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art," in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1887), 70-105.



seeking harmony and reconciliation.”<sup>40</sup> Reconciliation, of course, brings us back to Pico’s stymied desire, his hope that typifies, for Pater, the entire spirit of Renaissance humanism. But Lee will emphasize violence as much as, if not more than, reconciliation; the figure of the ghost cannot always bring us to harmony.

### **Consummations and conflagrations in sculpture**

As a goddess in exile, Dionea is linked not only to Dionysus and Aphrodite, but also to the tradition of the Decadent *femme fatale*, particularly the *femme fatale* as constructed by Swinburne and Pater in their Renaissance art criticism. In the same letter in which De Rosis mentions his friend Heinrich Heine’s “Gods in Exile,” he compares the growing Dionea to the women of Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings:

Dionea appeared, rather out of place, an amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci’s women, among the plaster images of St. Francis, and the glazed and framed samplers before the little statue of the Virgin, which wears in summer a kind of mosquito-curtain to guard it from the flies, who, as you know, are creatures of Satan.<sup>41</sup>

Once more, we have the nod to her foreignness; this time it relates to both her physical demeanor – notable enough to De Rosis that he engages in a lengthy detour in the sentence in order to gape at her wicked loveliness – and to her dubious religion. Is the mosquito-curtain powerful enough, we are asked to wonder, to guard the Virgin from pagan threats as well as from the devilish flies? Viewing the passage in context, Dionea’s satanic associations are even more pronounced.<sup>42</sup> She is about to undergo an

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<sup>40</sup> Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, 81. Gordon also insists that the ghost is a device or a sign of a forgotten or repressed past: “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known, or apparent to us, in its own way, of course.” Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, “Dionea,” 84. There is an echo of this odd smile and its link to Swinburnian wickedness in Magnus’s description of the castrato Zaffirino in “A Wicked Voice”: “That effeminate, fat face of his is almost as beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel. I have seen faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women. Oh yes! he is decidedly a beautiful creature, this Zaffirino, and his voice must have had the same sort of beauty and the same expression of wickedness...” Vernon Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> De Rosis goes so far as to wonder how Dionea initially got past the convent’s protections from the devil: “Speaking of Satan, does your Excellency know that on the inside of our little convent door [...] is pasted a printed form, an arrangement of holy names and texts in triangles, and the stigmatised hands of St. Francis, and a variety of other devices, for the purpose, as is explained in a special notice, of baffling the Evil One, and preventing his entrance into the building? Had you seen Dionea, and the stolid, contemptuous way in which she took, without attempting to refute, the various shocking allegations

“an ecclesiastical tribunal” for having been found “seated on the edge of the altar, in the very place of the Most Holy Sacrament,” and she will be required as punishment, “among other things, to make the sign of the cross twenty-six times on the bare floor with her tongue.”<sup>43</sup>

Dionea’s odd, serpentine smile obviously evokes that of Lady Lisa and Leonardo’s other mysterious women in Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* – De Rosis does us the favor of making the reference as explicit as possible – but her appearance here also recalls the language that Swinburne uses to describe Michelangelo’s sketches of women in “Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence” (1868), a reference reinforced by Dionea’s association with the satanic. When looking at Michelangelo’s designs, Swinburne finds himself particularly drawn to a woman who seems to be “the deadlier Venus incarnate” or “Lamia re-transformed”<sup>44</sup>:

But in one separate head there is more tragic attraction than in these: a woman’s, three times studied, with divine and subtle care; sketched and re-sketched, in youth and age, beautiful always beyond desire and cruel beyond words; fairer than heaven and more terrible than hell; pale with pride and weary with wrong-doing; a silent anger against God and man burns, white and repressed, through her clear features.<sup>45</sup>

The woman’s “brand of beauty [is] fresh from hell.”<sup>46</sup> As Lene Østermark-Johansen notes, Swinburne finds in Michelangelo’s drawings “the same stereotypical melancholy dominatrix whom he had celebrated in his *Poems and Ballads* (1866).”<sup>47</sup> Despite her repression and weariness, though, this woman seems to transcend an inwardly focused melancholy and to threaten external harm to the Christian God and his human followers.<sup>48</sup> Here, there is no Pico-esque reconciliation between the pagan deities and the new Christian framework; instead, this Venus burns with a barely repressed rage.

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against her, your Excellency would have reflected, as I did, that the door in question must have been accidentally absent from the premises, perhaps at the joiner’s for repair, the day that your *protégée* first penetrated into the convent.” Lee, “Dionea,” 84-85.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, “Dionea,” 84-85. This punishment, read alongside the villagers’ and the nuns’ fear of the girl, gesture toward an alternate reading of the story as a tale of brutal suppression of female sexuality and of religious dissidence. In that light, we would not be dealing with a supernatural tale but rather with something all too real and familiar.

<sup>44</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence,” in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), 320.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>47</sup> Østermark-Johansen, “Swinburne’s Serpentine Delights,” 62. She further discusses the centrality of the Medusa figure throughout Swinburne’s impressions. See also Thomas Albrecht, *The Medusa Effect: Representation and Epistemology in Victorian Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), for a broader look at the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with the Medusa.

<sup>48</sup> Such passion is what leads Catherine Maxwell to draw our attention to the idea that this Swinburnian iteration of the *femme fatale* seems “to celebrate, albeit sometimes in a disguised mode, a female strength, passion and energy.” Maxwell, “From Dionysus to ‘Dionea,’” 256. Maxwell draws on Paul Mattick’s “Beautiful and Sublime: Gender Totemism in the Constitution of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 48, no. 4 (1990): 293-303. Maxwell turns to Mattick’s work in order to suggest the potential subversive quality of the *femme fatale*: “Mattick suggests that in the nineteenth century the transgressive female Sublime inflects certain images of the *femme fatale*, taking ‘such *fin-de-siècle* form

De Rosis's frame story seems to indicate that Dionea is indeed the Venus Verticordia "in the bad sense of the word" that the doctor imagined in his opening letter, another variation on Swinburne's "deadlier Venus incarnate." Dubbed "*La bella Dionea*," she turns the villagers' hearts to inappropriate love objects: "wherever she goes the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable."<sup>49</sup> Sister Giuliana disappears with a sailor boy, and De Rosis hints that other nuns have untoward thoughts: "Unknown things have sprung up in these good Sisters' hearts, as unknown flowers have sprung up among the myrtle-bushes and the rose-hedge which Dionea lies under."<sup>50</sup> This "extraordinary love epidemic" seems to reach even Father Domenico, the convent's confessor, who, De Rosis suggests, becomes transfixed by the beautiful Dionea and ultimately commits suicide to avoid such temptation.<sup>51</sup> Dionea scandalizes the doctor with her response to the news when she bids him to take a myrtle branch to the dead monk, "and raising her head with that smile like the twist of a young snake, she sang out in a high guttural voice a strange chant, consisting of the word *Amor—amor—amor*."<sup>52</sup>

The narrative of Dionea as supposed Venus Verticordia, with her embodiment of the beautiful and the deadly, reaches its culmination in the tale's final plot element, her encounter with a German sculptor and his wife.<sup>53</sup> At Lady Savelli's request, De Rosis will host her friends Waldemar and Gertrude. Though the doctor admits that he generally remains unmoved by modern sculpture, he is intrigued by Waldemar's style: "I have no love for modern sculpture, for all the hours I have spent in Gibson's and Dupré's studio: 'tis a dead art we should do better to bury. But your Waldemar has something of the old spirit: he seems to feel the divineness of the mere body, the spirituality of a limpid stream of mere physical life."<sup>54</sup> De Rosis's initial disdain of modern sculpture, and perhaps of sculpture in general, is not particularly surprising.<sup>55</sup>

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as Salome, sphinx, and vampire' (p. 300). This seems a useful perspective when reviewing the nineteenth-century fatal woman who is all too often now reduced to misogynistic male fantasy. For while undoubtedly various images of the *femme fatale* are misogynist, other do seem to celebrate, albeit sometimes in a disguised mode, a female strength, passion and energy, which are in counterpoint to the image of woman as domestic angel." Maxwell, "From Dionysus to 'Dionea,'" 256.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, "Dionea," 85.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>53</sup> This focus on artistic creation as narrative centerpiece is unsurprising. In "Dionea," as in many of Lee's other short stories, haunting is linked to the power of the art object. As Patricia Pulham notes, such a linkage "lends Lee's 'ghosts' a solidity: they become 'art objects' in their own right." Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, xvi. In this tale, such solidity is quite literal, since Dionea will prove a sculptural muse.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, "Dionea," 92.

<sup>55</sup> Østermark-Johansen has offered a fascinating study of this discourse and its relevance for Swinburne and Pater, who see the dead art of sculpture as perhaps ready for a resurrection: "This notion of sculpture as a 'dead art' connects marble with a dead past and a numbed audience in need of aesthetic stimulus. For both Swinburne and Pater aesthetic poetry and prose are the means of such a sensuous awakening; in dealing with ideal and undivided beauty, comprising both male and female, Swinburne's poem brings about a strange organic growth of the pagan spirit of sculpture. For Pater, Winckelmann is the last man of the Renaissance, connecting antiquity with the Renaissance and modernity, a traveller not just between North and South, but also between centuries as he revives antiquity in himself and makes his appreciations of sculpture available to posterity through his writings." Lene Østermark-Johansen, "Caught between Gautier and Baudelaire: Walter Pater and the Death of Sculpture," *The Yearbook of*

As Østermark-Johansen has noted, Baudelaire's view on the 1846 Salon was that "only apes and primitives enjoy the physical perambulation around a piece of sculpture, partly because they lack the imagination required for the understanding and appreciation of painting."<sup>56</sup> Such considerations bring us further back to Leonardo's famous *Paragone* in which he asserts the supremacy of painting over sculpture. Still, De Rosis generously agrees to engage with the German sculptor's work, finding in it an "old spirit" that revels in the body.<sup>57</sup>

This body, to be precise, is male. Prior to his arrival in Montemirto, Waldemar has displayed no interest whatsoever in sculpting the female body, convinced as he is of its inherent inferiority to the male nude: "the female figure, he says (and your Excellency must hold him responsible, not me, for such profanity), is almost inevitably inferior in strength and beauty; woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture. The point of a woman is not her body, but (and here his eyes rested very tenderly upon the thin white profile of his wife) her soul."<sup>58</sup> In a way, we

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*English Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1/2 (2010): 181. See also Lene Østermark-Johansen *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). She notes that Pater, more than Swinburne, was disturbed by the three-dimensionality of sculpture and preferred sculptural reliefs to free-standing works. For Baudelaire's critical writings, please see Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris, 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965). For more on Winckelmann and sculpture criticism in the nineteenth century, please see Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed: The Story of the Venus de Milo* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005); and Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Østermark-Johansen, "Caught between Gautier and Baudelaire," 184.

<sup>57</sup> This physicality, of course, is part of what rendered the sculptural form so troubling for some critics. Jane Thomas, for example, draws particular attention to the problematic nature of the sculptural nude, located as it is between lofty aesthetic aspiration and base carnal engagement: "Though a representation of the body, the sculptural nude seeks to perfect and transcend the flesh rather than simply imitate it. However, the statue's three-dimensional anatomical accuracy, its palpability, and its coexistence with the viewer in the same space threaten its status as a wholly spiritual icon. The real and the ideal, the pure and the impure, the static safety of the aesthetic and the kinetic danger of the erotic are mediated through and by the sculptural nude, which becomes an object of legitimate, transcendental desire and also of illegitimate earthly lust." Jane Thomas, "Icons of Desire: The Classical Statue in Later Victorian Literature," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, ("The Arts in Victorian Literature," 2010): 253. Patricia Pulham notes that this is as true of fictional engagement with sculpture as it is of Winckelmann's and Heine's engagement with the form: "Whatever the reasons behind these stories of animated sculptures, however, what seems particularly significant for the purpose of my discussion is that each statue seems to act as a trigger for transgressive or 'unnatural' desires. Winckelmann's own engagement with the plastic form is, as we have seen, informed by his desire for the eighteenth-century castrato and, according to Ziolkowski, Heine's is likewise propelled by lustful longings." Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, 54. Pulham here refers to Theodore Ziolkowski's discussion of the tale of Venus and the Ring and the indebtedness of its nineteenth-century variations to the discovery of the Venus de Milo in *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 18-77.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, "Dionea," 96. As is clear from Waldemar's comments, and his German identity, Lee intends the reader to view him as an intellectual descendent of Winckelmann, Pater, and Symonds, who found in the classical male nude the height of artistic expression, and we should not forget the extent to which Victorian Hellenism invokes both covert and overt images of male same-sex desire. For explorations of the late-nineteenth-century imbrication of Hellenism, homoeroticism, and gender identity in Aestheticism, please see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Stefano Evangelista, "Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism," in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 91-111. Shanyn Fiske further notes that the formal study of ancient Greece in

can't help but laugh at Waldemar here, as he exalts the feminine soul at the expense of the body in the very moment that he gazes upon his wife's white body, and not, for example, into her eyes, as we might expect. Her "thin white profile," though, seems to be so idealized as to lose its materiality and corporeality: we see her in the process of becoming a colorless relief and retreating into two-dimensionality. De Rosis's responds to this masculinist proposal by reminding Waldemar that the ancients "did manufacture some tolerable female statues: the Fates of the Parthenon, the Phidian Pallas, the Venus of Milo," to which Waldemar rejoins, "those are not women, and the people who made them have left us the tales of Endymion, Adonis, Anchises: a goddess might sit for them..."<sup>59</sup>

And, indeed, Waldemar will soon encounter his own goddess, though it is Gertrude who insists that her husband sculpt a female figure, a position that De Rosis finds unseemly: "It is odd to see this pale, demure, diaphanous creature, not the more earthly for approaching motherhood, scanning the girls of our village with the eyes of a slave-dealer."<sup>60</sup> Though Waldemar has his heart set on "a fisher-boy, whom I much prefer to any woman," he agrees to use Dionea for a Venus once he sees her "where she stood under the olives, her white shift loose about her splendid throat, her shining feet bare in the grass."<sup>61</sup> Dionea's body, unlike Gertrude's, refuses to collapse into a relief. Instead, it grows more "immortally beautiful" as Waldemar "carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human."<sup>62</sup>

Dionea's brown skin is notably opposed to Gertrude's "thin white profile" as well as the idealized marble "flesh" of classical and neoclassical sculpture, and it is particularly striking when read in concert with Pater's ekphrasis. There he notes how troubling the white goddesses of antiquity would have found Lady Lisa's peculiar beauty: "Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!"<sup>63</sup> As we have seen, though, Lee associates Dionea precisely with the goddesses of antiquity, and this insistence on her dark skin can be read both as a critique of a certain strain of nineteenth-century idealizing neo-

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this period was a strongly masculine, homosocial endeavor, located within "elite, male domains." Shanyn Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 15. Still, as she compellingly argues, "women did feel deeply alienated from classical literature because of their lack of formal training, but this sense of alienation is precisely what made the classics — Greek in particular — so alluring and such a powerful means of self-expression. For women whose talents, aspirations, and characters led them to question social convention, ancient Greek and the distinctly alien world and foreign literature it offered provided a means of telling very different stories about themselves than the narratives prescribed by their own society." Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism*, 8. Stefano Evangelista has argued that Lee's choice of a female god in exile for "Dionea" is an implicit critique of this masculinist, and misogynist, model: "Through Waldemar, Lee exposes the misogynist practice adopted by male Hellenists of looking to ancient Greek art, especially sculpture, in order to promote a rigidly masculine gendering of the aesthetic valid for all times." Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, 85. For more on women writers and the classics in this period, please see Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Lee, "Dionea," 96.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>63</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 70.

Classicism and as a reminder of the more primitive elements of pagan Greece.<sup>64</sup> Dionea is therefore Dionysian, in the sense that Friedrich Nietzsche explores in *The Birth of Tragedy*; her pagan identity is less classical than atavistic, less Western than Eastern, less rational than erotic, less male than female.<sup>65</sup> And, indeed, Maxwell notes the embedded Dionysian reference in Dionea's name: "Lee's choice of this particular name for Aphrodite with its evident echo of Dionysus seems deliberate: Dione, rather than Semele, is also said by some ancient commentators to be the mother of Dionysus as well as that of Venus."<sup>66</sup>

Dionea is thus associated with an antiquity that shares little with those serene "white Greek goddesses." De Rosis's earlier reference to the sculptor John Gibson proves illuminating in this respect. In her discussion of the controversy surrounding Gibson's most famous work, the *Tinted Venus* (1851-56), Jane Thomas notes that while the sculptor intended the polychromatic work to honor and evoke the original Greek statues, newly discovered to have been painted, critics were outraged by the piece and found it vulgar. It is its realism, Thomas argues, and its emphasis on the body's engagement with the world, that draws unwelcome attention to the erotic potential of sculpture: "The tints that infuse Gibson's *Venus*, the friable flakes of colour testifying to the original polychrome realism of its classical antecedents, the trace of libidinous desire left by the 'stain' that mars the white purity of the thighs of the *Cnidian Aphrodite* draw attention to the disturbing erotic response that threatens to trouble the static aesthetic appreciation of the sculpture."<sup>67</sup> Gibson's approach seemingly bypasses centuries, or even millennia, of revival in order to reach the original source – a source that betrays a troubling carnal engagement rather than a harmonious aesthetic detachment. Dionea's own polychromatic image under the olive trees – brown skin, white dress, green grass – suggests a similarly troubling yet compelling earthiness.

Dionea's body thus has strongly divine and primitive resonances – divine precisely because primitive – and Waldemar determines to make a studio "of the long-desecrated chapel of the old Genoese fort, itself, they say, occupying the site of the temple of Venus."<sup>68</sup> He will soon borrow one of the doctor's antiquities: a small altar, "a little block of marble with a carved garland and rams' heads, and a half-effaced inscription dedicating it to Venus, the mother of Love."<sup>69</sup> Waldemar is particularly

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<sup>64</sup> Stefano Evangelista notes that this is also true of Pater's brand of Aestheticist Hellenism: "In the 1870s [Pater] moved towards an increasingly complicated vision of ancient Greece which accommodated primitive, chthonic, and irrational elements and which superseded Winckelmann's idealism and Matthew Arnold's concept of Hellenism formulated in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Pater used the knowledge of Greece to upset religious and sexual orthodoxies and to encourage readers to rethink some of the fundamentals of the nineteenth-century culture of art: the relationship between art and morality, and the place of art in public life. This passage from a radical reading of Greece to a counter-cultural aestheticism is particularly evident in the formulation of an 'aesthetic' subjectivity in the well-known 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*." Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, 19-20.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche's theater criticism is intrinsically tied to his broader historical scholarship. For more detailed studies of Nietzsche's historiography, please see Manuel Dries, ed., *Nietzsche on Time and History* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) and Christian J. Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Maxwell, "From Dionysus to 'Dionea,'" 263.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, "Icons of Desire," 254.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, "Dionea," 100.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

interested in the cavity that is either, he supposes, for burning incense or “for collecting the blood of the victim.”<sup>70</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, the tale culminates in an act of ritualistic, orgiastic violence. De Rosis tells us that Waldemar took Dionea to the studio at night and placed her “on the big marble block behind the altar, a great curtain of dull red brocade — you know that Venetian brocade with the gold pomegranate pattern — behind her, like a Madonna of Van Eyck’s.”<sup>71</sup> The altar of Venus sat before her, when Gertrude came upon the scene. De Rosis then describes the aftermath of a ritual sacrifice:

We found [Gertrude] lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood — she had but little to give, poor white ghost! — trickling among the carved garlands and rams’ heads, blackening the heaped-up roses. The body of Waldemar was found at the foot of the castle cliff. Had he hoped, by setting the place on fire, to bury himself among its ruins, or had he not rather wished to complete in this was the sacrifice, to make the whole temple an immense votive pyre?<sup>72</sup>

Gertrude is sacrificed to Dionea and the Venus altar, her blood given as votive offering to the pagan goddess, in a tableau that derives much of its power from the brutality of Waldemar’s idolatrous offering: the gothic image of Gertrude’s blood trickling through the garlands and rams’ heads on the altar is particularly striking, while the fiery immolation is stirring.

While we may well be skeptical of De Rosis’s use of “give” to describe Gertrude’s blood sacrifice – De Rosis himself spends most of his energy contemplating the husband’s motives – the interpretation of her as a willing victim may not be as far-fetched as it may at first appear. After all, it is Gertrude who insists upon her husband finding a female model, and it is Gertrude who first recognizes Dionea’s power and chooses her for her husband’s new muse. Though De Rosis earlier suggests that Gertrude is growing jealous of her husband’s model – that he must try to make her “understand” her husband’s aesthetic needs – could this pale, diaphanous figure’s unease be the result not of jealousy but rather of what Gordon terms “transformative recognition”?<sup>73</sup> This “Memling Madonna finished by some Tuscan sculptor,” a white goddess in her own right, finds herself confronted with a resurfaced maternal ancestor – the Leda to her Helen, the Anne to her Mary.<sup>74</sup> As we shall see with a similar female pairing in D’Annunzio’s *La Gioconda*, it is perhaps no wonder that Gertrude would give her life and blood to such a mother as this.

De Rosis’s final letter notes that Dionea has disappeared from Montemirto, though he says that a “sailor-boy” recounts having “met at dawn, off the island of Palmaria, beyond the Strait of Porto Venere, a Greek boat, with eyes painted on the prow, going full sail to sea, the men singing as she went. And against the mast, a robe of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100. Patricia Pulham notes a potential lesbian subtext in the relationship between Gertrude and Dionea. Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, 141.

<sup>74</sup> Lee, “Dionea,” 95.

purple and gold about her, and a myrtle-wreath on her head, leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling around her.”<sup>75</sup> Dionea has returned to the sea from whence she came, surrounded by the signs of her primitive and pagan power. She retreats back into the “out” part of her “in-and-out” existence, re-submerged but not forgotten.<sup>76</sup>



Late in Act I of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s play *La Gioconda* (1898), Cosimo Dalbo visits his friend Lucio Settala, a sculptor, and his wife Silvia. Cosimo has just returned from a trip to Egypt, and his recounting of his voyage hits all of the stereotypical Orientalist notes of the late nineteenth century – he ogles exotic adolescent bodies, finds himself awed by the famous statue of the Sphinx, and experiences an ecstasy of light induced by the sweet oblivion of the desert. He has also brought Lucio and Silvia souvenirs from his journey – fabric, perfume, scarabs – and the most notable of these is a blue amulet, a stone that is “[p]iccolo come una gemma, grande come un destino” [“small as a gem, great as a destiny”].<sup>77</sup> His account of the stone’s history stands as a perplexingly occult moment in an otherwise relatively bourgeois drama:

Sul Gebel-el-Tair, in un convento copto, ho trovato il più virtuoso degli scarabei. Il monaco mi narrò una lunga storia di un cenobita che, al tempo delle prime persecuzioni, essendosi rifugiato in un ipogeo, vi trovò una mummia e la trasse fuori dal suo viluppo di balsami e la rianimò. E la mummia risuscitata con le sue labbra dipinte gli fece il racconto della sua antica vita, ch’era stata un tessuto di felicità. Infine, come il cenobita voleva convertirla, ella preferì di ricorricarsi nei suoi balsami; ma prima gli donò lo scarabeo preservatore.<sup>78</sup>

[On Gebel-el-Tair, in a Coptic convent, I found the most powerful of scarabæi. The monk told me a long story of a cenobite who, at the time of the first persecution, took refuge in a vault, and found a mummy there, and took it out of its swathings of balm, and restored it to life, and the resuscitated mummy, with its painted lips, told him the story of its old life, which had been one whole tissue of happiness. In the end, as the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>76</sup> Zorn notes that the lack of resolution for Dionea’s character reinforces the sense of haunted memory: “It is obvious that Lee meant to keep Dionea’s ultimate identity in the dark, and it is this unresolved question which directs our attention to those who wish to control her representation. Her body becomes the constant reminder of individual and collective repression. In the end, all that is left at the place of crime is the Venus altar. And again, submerged in historical oblivion, the past may find this place, ready to repeat itself — and haunt us.” Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 152.

<sup>77</sup> D’Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, in *Tragedie, sogni e misteri*, ed. Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 2013), 251. All translations of *La Gioconda* are taken from Arthur Symons’s translation (London: W. Heinemann, 1901).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 251.



cenobite wished to convert it, it preferred to lie down again in its embalmings; but first it gave him the guardian scarabæus.]

According to the Coptic monk, the early cenobite flees religious persecution by returning to the earth, seeking refuge in the hypogeum. His encounter with the mummy is notable not only for its supernatural flair but also for the implicit reminder it provides. This place is a palimpsest: the mummy represents a preceding culture, the persecutors the current dominant one, and the cenobite the coming religion. The progression of religions does not lead to the extinction of all that came before; the mummy continues to exist and is ready to come in and out of wakefulness, much like the pagan gods of Vernon Lee's "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills." While this mummy certainly appears less malevolent than the chthonic deities of Lee's essay, its refusal to be converted and determination to slip back into veiled slumber resonate with the "in-and-out existence" that Lee chronicles.<sup>79</sup>

I open my discussion of *La Gioconda* with Cosimo's tale of the mummy and the scarab – despite its brevity and seeming disconnect from the play's main love triangle plot – in order to illuminate the play's occult underbelly, so to speak, and to disentangle its meditation on the haunting presence of gods in exile from the seeming banality of its plot. As seen in the previous section, Lee summons her deities through fantastical tales, but D'Annunzio will instead seek to revive ancient myths through his theatrical productions. On the stage, he will abolish the "errore del tempo" ["error of time"] through the power of his status as an "Imaginifico" ["Image-maker"]. As Mary Ann Frese Witt suggests, "[t]he phrase 'the error of time,' which reappears in several of his works, appears to be D'Annunzio's formulation of his understanding of Nietzsche's eternal return. In his drama, it acquires the specific significance of the fusion of ancient myth with modernity."<sup>80</sup> In his first major tragedy, *La città morta* [*The Dead City*] D'Annunzio creates such a fusion by transporting a contemporary Italian quartet to Greece, where they will excavate the tomb of Agamemnon and release the primeval forces therein. In *La Gioconda*, his second, he instead stages a type of séance, as the play's eponymous figure – Gioconda Dianti, whose mysterious veil shields her like the

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<sup>79</sup> Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," 348.

<sup>80</sup> Mary Ann Frese Witt, "D'Annunzio's Dionysian Women: The Rebirth of Tragedy in Italy," in *Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic*, ed. Mary Ann Frese Witt (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 75. For further analysis of D'Annunzio's aspirations to renew the grandeur of ancient Greek tragedy – a desire closely related to his appreciation of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* – please see Valeria Giannantonio, *Tra metafore e miti: poesie e teatro in D'Annunzio* (Napoli: Liguori, 2011); Anna Meda, *Bianche statue contro il nero abisso: Il teatro dei miti in D'Annunzio e Pirandello* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1993); James Nikopoulos, "The Spirit of the Chorus in D'Annunzio's *La città morta*," *Comparative Drama*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 155-178; Jessica Otey, "D'Annunzio, Eros and the Modern Artist: Tragedy and Tragic Criticism Reconsidered," *MLN*, vol. 125, no. 1 (January 2010): 169-94; Emanuela Scicchitano, *Io, ultimo figlio degli elleni: la greicità impura di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Pisa: ETS, 2011); and Vincenzo Terenzio, "La nascita della tragedia di Nietzsche e i suoi riflessi in d'Annunzio," in *Verso l'Ellade: Dalla Città morta a Maia, XVIII Convegno Internazionale, Pescara 11-12 Maggio 1995* (Pescara: Edizars-Oggi e Domani, 1995). For broader explorations of Nietzsche's influence in Italy, please see Thomas Harrison, ed., *Nietzsche in Italy* (Saratoga, Ca.: ANMA Libri and Stanford Department of French and Italian, 1988); and Gaia Michelini, *Nietzsche nell'Italia di D'Annunzio* (Palermo: S. F. Flaccovio, 1978).

mummy's embalming – will herself incarnate such primordial, terrifying power and unleash it in contemporary Tuscany.

### From mummies to muses

Written between the play *La città morta* and the novel *Il fuoco* [*The Flame*], *La Gioconda* was the first of D'Annunzio's major plays to be performed in Italy, and it demonstrates his aspiration to produce a modern tragedy.<sup>81</sup> Given its modern setting, its prose script, and its rather banal plot, one could be forgiven for initially ignoring the play's role in D'Annunzio's conception of tragedy and myth-making, but it is precisely this modern setting (as it is in Lee's "Dionea") that best puts into relief the antimodern, otherworldly forces that continue to exist in bourgeois modernity and that occasionally come up from the substratum into the surface. *Gioconda Dianti*, like *Dionea* – and like *Basiola* (*La Nave*) and *Fedra* (*Fedra*), two other "superdonna" ["superwomen"] of D'Annunzian theater – erupts onto the scene, and D'Annunzio clearly revels in her destructive and awe-inspiring erotic charge.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> As Valentina Valentini notes, *Il fuoco* is "il manifesto di poetica e il breviario di estetica teatrale" ["the poetic manifesto and the bible of theatrical aesthetics"] for D'Annunzio. Valentina Valentini, "L'attore virtuale e l'attore reale nel teatro di Gabriele D'Annunzio," in *Gabriele D'Annunzio: grandezza e delirio nell'industria dello spettacolo. Atti del convegno internazionale, Torino, 21-23 marzo 1988* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1989), 186. The novel offers a great deal of insight into D'Annunzio's approach to theater, given that the protagonist Stelio is a playwright, the aging actress Foscarina is based on Eleonora Duse, and the aesthetic critic Daniele Glàuro is inspired by Angelo Conti. For more on the centrality of Angelo Conti to Italian Aestheticism at the *fin de siècle* and to D'Annunzio's aesthetics more specifically, please see Diego Angeli, *Le cronache del Caffè Greco* (Milano: Garzanti, 1939); Anna Mazzanti, *Simbolismo italiano fra arte e critica: Mario de Maria e Angelo Conti* (Firenze: Le lettere, 2007); Gianni Oliva, *I nobili spiriti: Pascoli, D'Annunzio e le riviste dell'estetismo fiorentino* (Bergamo: Minerva italica, 1979); Aldo Putignano, *La più gran gioia è sempre all'altra riva: estetismo e simbolismo in Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Caltanissetta: S. Sciascia, 2010); and Laura Romani, *Il tempo dell'anima: Angelo Conti nella cultura italiana tra Otto e Novecento* (Roma: Studium, 1998).

<sup>82</sup> I borrow the term from Anna Meda, who notes that the theatrical "superdonna" for D'Annunzio is the "portatrice attiva di azione, di conflitto e di rottura con l'ambiente, portavoce del messaggio ideologico dell'autore tanto e spesso più del personaggio maschile." ["active bringer of action, of conflict, and of rupture with the environment, the mouthpiece for the author's ideological message as much as, and often more than, the male character is"]. Anna Meda, *Bianche statue contro il nero abisso*, 137-138. Luisetta Chomel has compellingly argued that in D'Annunzio's plays, unlike in his novels and poetry, women are the protagonists due to a structural difference; the theatrical genre renders impossible the filtering of the characters through the single, unifying viewpoint of a masculine protagonist – a technique that is quite common in D'Annunzio's novels and will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter. Luisetta Elia Chomel, *D'Annunzio: un teatro al femminile* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1997), 14. She further suggests that, given D'Annunzio's desire to renew Greek tragedy through his plays, masculine characters are too grounded in a "realtà storica" ["historical reality"] to become mythic heroes; instead, what is needed is "la donna, concepita come un essere di animalità divina; divina proprio perché animale" ["woman, conceived as a being of divine animality; divine precisely because animal"]. Chomel, *D'Annunzio: un teatro al femminile*, 49. This divine animality and heroic transgression perhaps find their fullest expression in *Fedra*. Meda views her as the perfect embodiment of "il tipo dell'eroe titanico d'ispirazione nietzschiana che D'Annunzio era venuto sviluppando in drammi precedenti" ["the type of Nietzsche-inspired Titanic hero that D'Annunzio had been developing in his previous dramas"]. Meda, *Bianche statue contro il nero abisso*, 135.

Like “Dionea,” *La Gioconda* features a sculptor, his wife, and a model, whose complex love triangle will ultimately lead to a climax involving a statue and an enactment of violent sacrifice. As the play opens, we learn that Lucio has attempted suicide as a result of being torn between his love for Silvia, and his love for his model, Gioconda Dianti. Silvia has nursed him back to health, and while he seems determined to renew his commitment to family life, he also reveals to his friend Cosimo that he is still drawn to the erotic and vitalistic aesthetic life that Gioconda represents. The third act features a climactic scene between the two romantic rivals in Lucio’s studio, and their meeting culminates in Gioconda’s attempted destruction of the statue of the Sphinx and Silvia’s preservation of it, which results in the bloody loss of her hands.<sup>83</sup> Finally, the fourth act focuses on Silvia, who has lost both hands and husband, and her conversation with the mysterious, nymph-like character la Sirenetta, who seems to belong to a different genre entirely.<sup>84</sup>

As is clear from this brief plot summary, D’Annunzio’s play, unlike Lee’s story, does not belong to the genre of the supernatural. It also appears quite banal when compared to D’Annunzio’s other theatrical experiments, which include the elaborate medievalist *Francesca da Rimini* (1901) and the mystery play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911), a collaboration with Claude Debussy and Ida Rubenstein. While many have argued, with good reason, that *La Gioconda* is D’Annunzio’s most bourgeois theatrical piece, hewing as it does to the tried-and-true melodrama of the contemporary love triangle, I contend that the play relies on a structure of haunting similar to that of “Dionea”: Gioconda Dianti, the sculptor’s mistress and model, is portrayed as a haunting, imperious, and atavistic figure, linked to Egypt, ancient Greece, and the Leonardesque Renaissance as described by Walter Pater. Indeed, we might even say that D’Annunzio names Lucio’s muse as much after Pater’s Aestheticist Gioconda as he does Leonardo’s Renaissance one.

The play will reach its climax with the violent meeting between Silvia and Gioconda, though even then, the “happening” – in Nietzschean and Aeschylean fashion – will occur offstage.<sup>85</sup> Throughout its acts, *La Gioconda* insists on the oppositional

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<sup>83</sup> This dismemberment is especially sadistic given the opening dedication of the play: “Per Eleonora Duse dalle belle mani.” For further readings of dismemberment, in D’Annunzio’s *oeuvre*, please see Susan Bassnett, “A Passion for Dismemberment: Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Portrayals of Women” in *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. Michael St. John (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 128-140; Julie Dashwood, “The Metamorphoses of a Fairy-Tale: Quillard, D’Annunzio and *The Girl With Cut-Off Hands*.” in *Romancing Decay*, 118-127; and Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). For more detailed analysis of the fraught artistic and romantic relationship between D’Annunzio and Duse, please see Piero Nardi, ed., *Carteggio D’Annunzio-Duse: superstiti missive, lettere, cartoline, telegrammi, dediche (1898-1923)* (Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1975); Paola Ottaviana, *Incantesimo solare: sul rapporto di dipendenza-codipendenza fra Duse e d’Annunzio* (Pescara: Ianieri, 2010); and Lucia Re, “D’Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: il rapporto autore/attrice tra decadentismo e modernità,” *MLN*, vol. 117, no. 1 (Jan. 2002): 115-152.

<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the final act seems rather extraneous, but several critics have pushed back against that sentiment. Chomel, for instance, argues that the fourth act, through the figure of la Sirenetta, reveals D’Annunzio’s distaste for bourgeois drama. Chomel, *D’Annunzio: un teatro al femminile*, 84. Barbara Spackman notes that it is this “excessive” fourth act that retroactively reveals the play’s logic of fetishism. Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, 195.

<sup>85</sup> As Witt notes, “[t]he argument that in true (Aeschylean) tragedy action and plot exist, as it were, offstage, before and after what we witness, appears throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*.” Mary Ann Frese

relationship between its two main female characters. Silvia, wife, mother, nurse, represents bourgeois values and comfort, while Gioconda, the adulteress, stands for an aesthetic life that lies beyond the realm of morality. The play thus charts Lucio's ultimate decision between a "donna angelicata" and a "donna fatale." In this case, though, the choice of the *femme fatale* over the beautiful and devoted wife will prove fruitful for his art, for, as Guido Baldi notes, Silvia, Lorenzo Gaddi, Lucio's "maestro," and Cosimo Dalbo do not understand that the sculptor's rebirth, or "vita nuova"<sup>86</sup> leads to an "impotenza creativa" ["creative impotence"].<sup>87</sup> In their minds, Lucio should be inspired by Silvia's luminous and chaste beauty, and by Andrea del Verrocchio's "Donna dal mazzolino," with whom she is associated.<sup>88</sup> Instead, it is the figures of Sphinx and the Medusa that inspire his work, as we learn from D'Annunzio's description of the artist's studio in the stage directions for Act III, and these have a troubling, violent, and carnal beauty that is quite distant from that of Verrocchio's bust: "La scelta e le analogie di tutte le forme rivelano qui l'aspirazione verso una vita carnale, vittoriosa e creatrice" ["Here the choice and analogy of every form reveals an aspiration towards a carnal, victorious, and creative life"].<sup>89</sup> As Lucio will proclaim, in language strikingly similar to Waldemar's, Silvia's ethereal beauty is not compatible with his art: "Ma io non scolpisco le anime. Ella non m'era destinata" ["But I am not a sculptor of souls. She was not meant for me"].<sup>90</sup> By the play's end, Lucio will have realized that he must leave behind domesticity and devote himself fully to Gioconda and this "vita carnale, vittoriosa e creatrice."

The reference to Verrocchio's bust implicitly identifies Lucio as Leonardo, the pupil who will eventually surpass his maestro, Gaddi/Verrocchio, and it also associates Silvia with a harmonious Tuscan Renaissance. As Michael Syrimis notes, Lucio will eventually abandon this idyllic space in favor of the violent pagan antiquity that

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Witt, "Introduction: Nietzsche as Tragic Poet and His Legacy," in *Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic*, 14. This is linked to Nietzsche's conviction that tragedy must be more lyrically-driven than plot-driven.

<sup>86</sup> D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 227.

<sup>87</sup> Guido Baldi, *Reietti e superuomini in scena: Verga e D'Annunzio drammaturghi* (Napoli: Liguori, 2009), 137.

<sup>88</sup> There is a copy of the famous bust in their home, and Gaddi marvels at the resemblance between the statue's hands and Silvia's hands: "Care, care mani, coraggiose e belle, sicure e belle! Sono d'una straordinaria bellezza le vostre mani, Silvia. Se troppe volte il dolore ve le ha congiunte, anche ve le ha sublimato, le ha rese perfette. Sono perfette. Ricordate la donna del Verrocchio, la Donna dal mazzolino, quello dai capelli a grappoli? Ah, è là!" ["Dear, dear hands, brave and beautiful, steadfast and beautiful! Your hands are extraordinarily beautiful, Silvia. If sorrow has too often set them together, it has sublimated them also, perfected them. They are perfect. Do you remember the woman of Verrocchio, the woman with the bunch of flowers, with the clustering hair? Ah, she is there!"]. D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 232.

<sup>89</sup> D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 287. D'Annunzio's stage instructions are famously detailed, literary, and atmospheric. Laura Granatella notes that this is especially the case for this play, and she argues that they reflect "un chiaro intento sacralizzante e ritualistico" ["a clear sacralizing and ritualistic intent"]. Laura Granatella, "La Gioconda": creazione fatale," in *Gabriele D'Annunzio: grandezza e delirio nell'industria dello spettacolo. Atti del convegno internazionale, Torino, 21-23 marzo 1988* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1989), 96.

<sup>90</sup> D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 266.

Gioconda Dianti seems to embody.<sup>91</sup> He will forsake the “Donna dal mazzolino” in favor of the Nike of Samothrace and the imperious Sphinx. D’Annunzio will thus reinterpret Pater’s Gioconda and incorporate her as a pre-classical revenant, upending linear chronology and making her, indeed, “older than the rocks among which she sits.”<sup>92</sup> The Renaissance – Leonardo excluded – it seems, may have revived antiquity, yet something primitive has perhaps been lost in this rebirth, something that itself predates classical antiquity; there exists, it seems, a generational chasm that has not truly been bridged, and the chthonic mother has now returned. Puzzlingly, it is Lady Lisa – reincarnated as Dionea for Lee, and Gioconda Dianti for D’Annunzio – who will trouble her forebears, be they the white goddesses of antiquity or the chaste beauties of the Tuscan Quattrocento, precisely because she paradoxically predates them; her body has thus seemingly conquered the “errore del tempo.”<sup>93</sup>

It therefore seems that the play chronicles Lucio’s journey to re-embrace his model and the powerful aesthetic she represents, yet, as many critics have noted, he hardly seems to be the main protagonist.<sup>94</sup> The sculptor fades into the background, especially when compared to Silvia, and his most dramatic actions – his attempted suicide and his eventual abandonment of his wife for his model – will occur offstage, while his time onstage is mostly spent vacillating. He will disappear from the stage entirely after Act II. Lucio’s fading presence cedes the stage to Silvia, played by Eleonora Duse, who seems to be the actual protagonist. Guido Baldi has argued that *La Gioconda* might best be read as a sort of “education of Silvia,” given that she is ultimately punished for her petty bourgeois jealousy and her inability to understand Gioconda Dianti’s place in her husband’s creative life.<sup>95</sup> Fernando Trebbi notes that the tragedy charts a necessary exile of the mother so as to make way for the male parthenogenesis of the sculptor.<sup>96</sup> Barbara Spackman, on a somewhat related note,

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<sup>91</sup> Syrimis pays particular attention to the contrast in décor between the artist’s home, cultivated by Silvia, and his studio, dominated by Gioconda, and he also notes that the stage instructions in the first act, which place Silvia in front of a window in her Tuscan home, position her as the subject of a Renaissance painting: “D’Annunzio creates an image that not only fixes Silvia into a Renaissance scene but, with its perspective tendency, itself assumes the form of a Renaissance painting, one whose main object is Silvia, while the lyrical landscape, as in Leonardo’s *Gioconda*, instills life into the background.” Michael Syrimis, “The Light that Blinds: On Art in D’Annunzio’s *La Gioconda*,” *Forum Italicum*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Aug. 2017), 382.

<sup>92</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 70.

<sup>93</sup> Such a concept resonates with the diva who incarnates the past onstage. In her discussion of the actress who has “mille maschere” and “mille anime” in *Il fuoco*, Lucia Re notes that the diva, through her interpretation of ancient roles from Antigone to Cleopatra, revives the past onstage; the actress’s body becomes a palimpsest, or, in Re’s terms, “un corpo-testo” [“a body-text”]. Re, “D’Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt,” 137-38.

<sup>94</sup> He may indeed be a failed superman, belonging to what Guido Baldi refers to as the D’Annunzian category of “antieroi deboli e sconfitti, corrosi intimamente da un’attrazione morbosa per la decadenza, la morte e la putredine” [“weak and vanquished antiheroes, thoroughly corroded by a morbid attraction for decadence, death, and decay”]. Baldi, *Reietti e superuomini in scena*, 128.

<sup>95</sup> Baldi argues that Lucio’s story plays a supportive role for the central tragedy of his wife. In Baldi’s interpretation, Gioconda is the one who properly understands the role of Eros in artistic creation and sees that the “donna angelicata” is the true obstacle to Lucio’s super-artist creed. Silvia, on the other hand, seeks to substitute herself for Gioconda and transform the tenor of her husband’s artistic project. Baldi, *Reietti e superuomini in scena*, 136-142.

<sup>96</sup> In Trebbi’s account, the presence of the Athena motif accentuates this notion of the exiled mother, while the drama as a whole seems to privilege spiritual over physical birth. Silvia’s physical motherhood

observes that Silvia's dismemberment derives from the play's logic of fetishism and castration anxiety: "the Medusan moment is the consequence of the decadent's occupation of the woman's body, of his appropriation of physical alterity as a figure for psychic alterity."<sup>97</sup> What all of these analyses have in common is an acknowledgment that Silvia is the play's emotional, theatrical, and ideological center.

While it seems irrefutable that Silvia is the heart of the tragedy, I would like to shift away from the notion of centrality and towards a dialectic of absence and presence. Following the play's example of mixing the literal with the figurative, I would like to take its title seriously and explore the idea of *La Gioconda*/Gioconda Dianti as the work's prime mover, without whom Silvia cannot become a tragic heroine. Though she will appear onstage only for one scene – and even then the audience will be denied a view of her face – Gioconda Dianti, and, through her, the Gioconda of Leonardo's mysterious painting and the Lady Lisa of Pater's ekphrastic reverie, haunts the entire play.<sup>98</sup> To be even more precise, Gioconda haunts Silvia. As suggested in regards to Gertrude and Dionea, we can fruitfully read Silvia's sacrifice – her mutilation – as a moment of "transformative recognition" in which she truly sees her rival, offstage via her statue, and belatedly realizes her power.

### The veiled Sphinx

Similar to Dionea, Gioconda is a marginal, liminal presence, and the play reinforces the air of inaccessibility that surrounds her. Referred to repeatedly as "l'altra" ["the other"] by the other characters, she will only appear on stage in the second scene of the third act; prior to that, all we know of her is hearsay, and everything contributes to the sense of her as monstrous Other. Silvia tells Gaddi that in the hour of his suicide Lucio was "tutto intero la preda di lei sola" ["he was her prey wholly"].<sup>99</sup> When speaking with her sister, Francesca Doni, Silvia says that she is not afraid of her predatory adversary: "Non temo di lei. Quel che fa è basso" ["I have no fear of her. What she does is base"].<sup>100</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Lucio is the only character who views Gioconda through a different lens. In his conversation with Cosimo Dalbo in Act II, he at times refers to her as a predatory figure who has conquered him – "ella s'è armata d'un fascino a cui io non potrò sottrarre la mia anima se non strappandola dal mio cuore" ["she is armed with a fascination from which I cannot free my soul except by tearing her out of my heart"] –

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is therefore secondary to Gioconda's spiritual motherhood. Fernando Trebbi, *Le porte dell'ombra: sul teatro di D'Annunzio* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998), 23.

<sup>97</sup> Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, 210.

<sup>98</sup> Spackman links Gioconda's time offstage to the figure of the Medusa: "The analogy between La Gioconda and Lucio's statue, with its juxtaposition of La Gioconda as all eyes and the statue as that which is unseen, offstage, *ab-scena*, and hence (etymologically) obscene, seems to be yet another memorial to Medusa. Lucio is surrounded by Medusas; no wonder then that, in the last mention of him in the play, he seems to have worked himself into a frenzy." Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, 209. The fact that the major actions in the play occur offstage may also be a sign of Nietzsche's influence on D'Annunzio.

<sup>99</sup> D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 231.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

but he also acknowledges that they are drawn together through artistic aspirations.<sup>101</sup> He imagines that one day, even if he abandons her and moves elsewhere, she will find him and knock on his door and he will welcome her: “Una mattina la Gioconda batterà alla nuova porta; io le aprirò; ella entrerà; senza meraviglia io le dirò: Benvenuta” [“One morning, Gioconda will knock at the new door; I shall open to her: she will come in: without surprise I shall say to her, ‘Welcome’”].<sup>102</sup> He then rapturously recalls their trip to Carrara to select a marble block:

Ai miei occhi la sua veste non la copriva. Una specie di affinità divina era tra la sua carne e il marmo che chinandosi ella sfiorava con l’alito. Un’aspirazione confusa pareva salire verso di lei da quella bianchezza inerte. Il vento, il sole, la grandiosità dei monti, le lunghe file dei buoi aggiogati, e la curva antica dei gioghi, e lo stridore dei carri, e la nuvola che saliva dal Tirreno, e il volo altissimo di un’aquila, tutte le apparenze esaltavano il mio spirito in una poesia senza confini, lo inebriavano d’un sogno che non ebbe mai l’eguale in me... Ah, Cosimo, Cosimo, io ho osato gettare una vita su cui riluce la gloria d’un tal ricordo! Quando ella tese la mano sul marmo che aveva scelto e volgendosi mi disse: “Questo,” tutta l’alpe dalle radici alle cime aspirò alla bellezza.<sup>103</sup>

[To my eyes her garments were no covering. There was a sort of divine affinity between her flesh and the marble that she leant over until her breath touched it. A confused aspiration seemed to rise to her from that inert whiteness. The wind, the sun, the grandeur of the mountains, the long lines of yoked oxen, and the ancient curve of the yokes, and the creaking of the waggons [sic], and the cloud that rose from the Tirreno, and the lofty flight of an eagle, everything I saw exalted my spirit into a limitless poetry, intoxicated with a dream that I had never equaled. Ah, Cosimo, Cosimo, I have dared to throw away a life on which there gleams the glory of such a memory. When she laid her hand on the marble that she had chosen, and turning to me said “This,” all the mountains, from root to summit, breathed beauty.]

Here, in a D’Annunzian gender reversal, it is the female model who seems to breathe life into the rough marble through an enigmatic “affinità divina.” Her breath settles over the entire landscape, and Lucio’s spirit is elevated and inebriated by the beautiful scene. It is a moment in which, in true Nietzsche-inspired Dionysian fashion, an orgiastic oneness is achieved; Gioconda and all of the natural world breathe together, while Lucio finds himself exalted in a “poesia senza confini.” Lucio will recount a similar experience when he proclaims that his model is present in all of his works: “Mille statue, non una! Ella è sempre diversa, come una nuvola che ti appare mutata d’attimo in attimo senza che tu la veda mutare” [“A thousand statues, not one! She is always

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 269.

diverse, like a cloud that from instant to instant seems changed without your seeing it change”].<sup>104</sup>

Lucio’s attitude toward his model in this discussion hints at Gioconda’s hidden depths and reveals her to be more than the predatory, monstrous adulteress depicted by the others. Still, Gioconda remains in large part an enigmatic figure, a cipher, and this has led numerous critics to argue that she is the least convincing character in the play. Valentina Valentini, for example, notes that Gioconda seems less a flesh-and-blood character and more an abstract ideal, “un’apparizione, una virtualità” [“an apparition, a virtuality”].<sup>105</sup> Rather than seeing this characterization as detrimental, I view Gioconda’s opacity as a constitutive element of the play.<sup>106</sup> Gioconda’s status as apparition is encoded into her character and her role in the drama; she will indeed haunt Silvia, who doesn’t truly know her until – in an offstage happening – she sees her statue and sacrifices herself to preserve it.

This opacity is rendered literal through Gioconda’s costume when she appears onstage; Lucio may have been able to see past her garments (“la sua veste non la copriva”), but Silvia and the audience are denied such a privilege: “Entra Gioconda Dianti, richiudendo la porta dietro di sé. Da prima, ella non scorge l’avversaria, poiché viene dalla luce nell’ombra e un velo denso le nasconde tutto il viso” [“Gioconda Dianti enters, closing the door behind her. At first she does not perceive the adversary, since she comes from the light into the shadow and a thick veil covers her whole face”].<sup>107</sup> The stage directions throughout the scene will repeatedly reference this veil, and it is perhaps the most conspicuous costuming choice in the play. Ironically, the model, whose body and visage constitute Lucio’s main source of artistic (and erotic) inspiration, will be shielded from view. Katia Lara Angioletti argues that the veil is a “necessità paradossale” [“paradoxical necessity”], since it simultaneously renders Gioconda visible and invisible, physical and meta-physical: “L’efficacia scenica di Gioconda Dianti è data dal suo essere creatura liminare: ella si colloca tra la presenza e l’assenza, la visibilità e l’invisibilità, la vita e la morte, la vita e l’arte.” [“Gioconda Dianti’s dramatic effectiveness derives from her status as a liminal creature: she is placed between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, life and death, life and art”].<sup>108</sup> In Angioletti’s account, Gioconda is able to represent a lofty artistic aesthetic

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>105</sup> Valentina Valentini, *Il poema visibile: le prime messe in scena delle tragedie di Gabriele D’Annunzio* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1993), 224.

<sup>106</sup> Of course, this did not always come through in actual performance. *L’Illustrazione italiana* noted, in an otherwise very positive review, that “l’attrice che interpretò il personaggio di Gioconda non fu, né per il fisico né per la recitazione, all’altezza del personaggio” [“the actress who played the role of Gioconda did not, in physique or performance, reach the height of the character”]. *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 4 giugno 1899, n. 23: 366. In this sense, Katia Lara Angioletti may be right to note that “[n]essuna attrice potrebbe degnamente incarnare Gioconda, preservando l’aura di mistero riecheggiata dal nome leonardesco” [“no actress could properly embody Gioconda, preserving the aura of mystery that echoes from the Leonardesque name”]. Katia Lara Angioletti, *Il poeta a teatro: Gabriele d’Annunzio e la riforma della scena drammatica* (Milano: CUEM, 2010), 121. For more on the early critical responses to the play, please see Piera Perria, *Tra applausi e fischi: La Gioconda di Gabriele D’Annunzio* (Firenze: Atheneum, 1992); and Valentini, *Il poema visibile*.

<sup>107</sup> D’Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 294.

<sup>108</sup> Angioletti, *Il poeta a teatro*, 121. Avery Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters*, draws attention to the “dialectics of visibility and invisibility” in ghost stories. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.



precisely because she is not bound to a unique physical form, even as she is supremely corporeal (a precondition, one supposes, for her erotic charge here). Her physicality and meta-physicality work in tandem with one another.<sup>109</sup>

This liminality stems from Gioconda's status as a revenant, as she shifts between presence and absence, between present and past, between visibility and invisibility. The veil both obscures her face and renders it occult, supernatural, like the Sphinx's enigma or the Medusa's terrifying visage. Trebbi's description of the staging in Act III reinforces this sense of a secret otherworld: the image of the studio behind the curtain suggests "elaborazioni fantasmatiche" ["phantasmatic elaborations"] and acts as the play's own "inconscio" ["unconscious"].<sup>110</sup> This dramatic unconscious, in turn, is a space in which transhistorical communication can occur; the sculptor's studio is like the mummy's vault, and the curtain is another variation on the metaphorical "velo antico" ["antique veil"], to borrow Valentini's phrase, with which D'Annunzio and his artistic compatriots clothe their women, transporting them into "un altrove temporale" ["a temporal elsewhere"].<sup>111</sup> Though the audience cannot fully access the "altrove temporale," they can sense it through the dialectic of presence and absence. The combination of costuming and staging, therefore, is what enables D'Annunzio to represent spectrality onstage and to attempt to dissolve the "errore del tempo." If, as Julian Wolfreys argues, the "efficacy of haunting is in its resistance to being represented whole or undifferentiated, or being 'seen' as itself rather than being uncannily intimated," then the veil and curtain provide the necessary resistance.<sup>112</sup>

Yet Silvia, at the opening of Act III, does not initially comprehend that she is witnessing an artistic séance, so to speak, and that she no longer finds herself in the realm of a bourgeois melodrama. Her brief conversation with Gioconda in the second scene emphasizes her misunderstanding. While Silvia believes herself to be a wronged woman, injured by a tawdry love affair between her husband and his insolent, monstrous model, Gioconda views her relationship with the sculptor on the level of a sacred artistic realm. Silvia views the model as a love rival and cannot understand what Gioconda tells her about her relationship with Lucio: "Io sono viva e sono presente; ed egli ha trovato in me più d'un aspetto, e mi inebriano ancora le parole ch'egli diceva per significare la sua visione diversa ogni mattina quando gli riapparivo" ["I am living and

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<sup>109</sup> Such a paradox may also be related to art's enigmatic power. Baldi sees the veil as a literalization of the mysteries of art and the Sphinx's enigma. Baldi, *Reietti e superuomini in scena*, 135. He also links the veil to the figure of the Medusa Ludovisia in Lucio's studio: "Il velo che fa sì che il volto di Gioconda non sia mai visibile assume allora un preciso significato: quello della modella è il volto oscuro dell'arte che ha le radici nella potenza dell'eros, ed è come il volto terrificante di Medusa, che non tollera di essere visto da occhio umano (non a caso nella sala dello studio dello scultore si scorge la 'Medusa ludovisia'). Per lo stesso motivo la statua non si vede mai, resta sempre celata nello studio dietro la cortina rosso sangue, il colore dell'eros." ["The veil that keeps Gioconda's face invisible then assumes a precise significance: the model's veiled face is the obscured face of art that has its roots in the potential of eros, and it is like the terrifying face of the Medusa, that cannot be seen by human eyes (it is no accident that we see the 'Medusa ludovisia' in the sculptor's studio. For the same reason we will never see the statue; it will remain forever hidden in the studio behind the blood-red curtain, with its color of eros."]. Baldi, *Reietti e superuomini in scena*, 135.

<sup>110</sup> Trebbi, *Le porte dell'ombra*, 12.

<sup>111</sup> Valentini, "L'attore virtuale e l'attore reale nel teatro di Gabriele D'Annunzio," 188.

<sup>112</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 6.

am here; and he has found in me more than one aspect, and the words still intoxicate me that he said when he spoke to me of his vision, different every morning when I come before him”].<sup>113</sup> As Gioconda explains, she is not the one who forced Lucio to attempt suicide; rather, it was his love for his wife, the “*donna angelicata*” that kept him back from pursuing his art to the fullest extent and led to his tragic decision.

Silvia responds with rage, humiliation, and a jealous lie, when she tells Gioconda that Lucio has renounced her. The spurned muse reacts with divine righteousness:

Io, io ero la sua forza, la sua giovinezza, la sua luce. Diteglielo! Diteglielo! Egli è divenuto vecchio; da oggi è vecchio e fiacco e senz’anima. Io porto via con me, diteglielo!, tutto quel che era in lui di più libero, di più ardente e di più fiero. Il sangue che versò là, sotto la mia statua, fu l’ultimo sangue della sua giovinezza. Quello che voi gli avete rinfuso nel cuore è senza fiamma, è debole, è vile. Diteglielo! Io porto via con me, oggi, quel che fu la sua potenza e il suo orgoglio e la sua gioia e tutto. Egli è finito. Diteglielo!<sup>114</sup>

[I, I was his strength, his youth, his light. Tell him! Tell him! He has become old; from to-day he is limp and soulless. I carry away with me (tell him!) all that was most free, ardent, and proud in him. The blood that he poured out there, under my statue, was the last blood of his youth. What you have re-infused into his heart is without flame, is weak, is vile. Tell him! I carry away with me to-day all that was his power and his pride and his joy and his all. He is finished. Tell him!]

Gioconda reminds us of the complete identification between her and Lucio’s statue of the Sphinx and of the conflation of her erotic engagement with the sculptor and their aesthetic partnership; they cannot be cleaved – if one is cast aside, then so too is the other. Like a Fury, she will enact her just revenge: “Il furore l’acceca e la soffoca. Sembra ch’ella sia invasa da una torbida volontà distruttiva, come da un dèmone” [“Fury blinds and suffocates her. It is as if she is invaded by a turbid destructive will, as by a demon”].<sup>115</sup>

In her demonic fury, Gioconda commands Silvia to “Diteglielo,” yet it is not Lucio who needs to hear her message; he has already experienced his tragic realization of her aesthetic power. Instead, the audience bears witness to Silvia’s own transformative recognition, though it will occur primarily offstage. Gioconda resolves to destroy the statue – which, she notes, belongs to her more than it belongs to Lucio – and Silvia throws herself before the Sphinx to break its fall. The act closes with Silvia’s “voce morente” [“dying voice”] as she notes that the statue has been saved: “È... salva” [“It... is safe”].<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> D’Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 302.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

Silvia's sacrifice might be read not as an attempt to save her husband's legacy or their marriage – which will have fallen apart by the time Act IV begins – but rather as an act of atonement, as an offering to Gioconda herself. Read in that light, her earlier reaction to the Sphinx proves suggestive. Toward the beginning of Act III, Silvia walks behind the sacred curtain in Lucio's studio and emerges transfixed by the beauty she has seen:

I suoi occhi restano intenti, allargati dalla meraviglia, abbagliati non da una visione di morte ma da una imagine di vita perfetta. Trema nelle orbite l'indizio d'un'onda saliente. Due meravigliose lacrime si formano a poco a poco nel cavo, brillano, sgorgano, solcano le gote. Prima che giungano alla bocca, ella le arresta con le dita, le diffonde su la faccia, quasi per lavarsene come d'una rugiada lustrale; poiché non dal ricordo o dalla traccia del sanguinoso fatto umano ella è commossa ma dall'apparizione dell'opera bella, immune e sola. Ella ha ricevuto il beneficio sommo della Bellezza: la tregua della sua angoscia, la pausa dei suoi timori. La folgore sublime della gioia ha traversata la sua anima sanandola per qualche attimo, rendendola cristallina come le lacrime. Non sono queste le sue lacrime se non l'offerta ardente e muta dell'anima al Capolavoro.<sup>117</sup>

[Her eyes are intent, widened by wonder, dazzled, not by a vision of death, but by an image of perfect life. The water gathers tremulously in her eyes. Two marvellous tears form little by little, shine, and slowly run down her cheeks. Before they reach her mouth she stops them with her fingers, diffuses them over her face, as if to bathe in lustral dew; for it is not by the remembrance or the trace of human bloodshed that she is moved, but by the weight of a thing of beauty, solitary and free. She has

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 292. This passage is the closest we come to seeing the Sphinx for ourselves, though earlier in the play Dalbo described his marvel at seeing the Sphinx in Egypt: “La prima volta la vidi di notte, al lume delle stelle, profondata nella sabbia che conservava ancora l'impronta violenta dei turbini. Soltanto la faccia e la groppa emergevano da quella specie di gorgo placato, la forma umana e la bestiale. La faccia, dove l'ombra nascondeva le mutilazioni, in quell'ora mi parve bellissima: calma, augusta e cerulea come la notte, quasi mite! Non v'è, Lucio, cosa al mondo che sia più sola di quella; ma la mia anima era come dinanzi a moltitudini che dormissero e su le cui ciglia cadesse la rugiada. La rividi, poi, di giorno. La faccia era bestiale come la groppa; il naso e le gote erano corrosi; il fimo degli uccelli bruttava le bende. Era il pesante mostro senz'ali immaginato dagli scavatori di sepolcri, dagli imbalsamatori di cadaveri. E mi riapparve nel sole la tua Sfinge imperiosa e pura che porta le ali imprigionate vive negli omeri” [“I saw it first at night, by the light of the stars, sunken into the sand that still keeps the violent imprint of whirlwinds. The face and the croup rose out of that quieted storm, all that was human and all that was bestial in it. The face, whose mutilations were hidden by the shadow, seemed to me at that moment exquisitely beautiful: calm, august, cerulean as the night, almost meek. There is nothing in the world, Lucio, so much alone as that; but my mind was, as it were, before multitudes who had slept, and on whose eyelashes the dew had fallen. Then I saw it again by day. The face was bestial, like the croup; the nose and throat were eaten away; the droppings of birds fouled the fillets. It was the heavy wingless monster imagined by the excavators of tombs, by the embalmers of corpses. And I saw, in the sun before me, your Sphinx, pure and imperious, with wings imprisoned alive in the shoulders”]. D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 244.

received the supreme gift of beauty: a truce to anguish, a pause to fear. The sublime lightning-flash of joy has shone through her wounded soul for an instant, rendering it crystalline as tears. These tears are but the soul's mute and ardent offering before a masterpiece.]

Silvia has received "il beneficio sommo della Bellezza," and her tears are a fitting votive offering to Lucio's masterpiece. While during her subsequent conversation with Gioconda, she reverts to bourgeois jealousy and retreats from this ecstatic moment in which she is moved by the "apparizione" of beauty, her final sacrifice reenacts and intensifies this initial "offerta ardente e muta," and she ultimately atones for her sacrilegious attitude towards the divine muse who has inspired the "Capolavoro."

When Silvia emerges at the opening of Act IV, her costuming shows how this white goddess has indeed been troubled, and transformed, by Gioconda's peculiar "beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!"<sup>118</sup> The chromatic scheme marks the transformation:

Ella porta una veste cinerizia alla cui estremità corre un piccolo orlo nero, come un filo di lutto. Le maniche lunghe nascondono i moncherini, ch'ella tiene distesi giù pe' fianchi e talvolta serrati contro, un po' in dietro, come per nasconderli nelle pieghe, con un moto doloroso di pudore.<sup>119</sup>

[She is dressed in an ash-coloured gown, with a hem of black, like a thread of mourning. Long sleeves hide her arms without hands, which she sometimes lets drop by her side, and sometimes sets together, drawn a little back, as if to hide them in the folds, with a movement of shame and sorrow.]

No longer Verrocchio's placid "Donna dal mazzolino," Silvia is bereft of her marvelous hands, which Gaddi had exalted early in the play: "Care, care mani, coraggiose e belle, sicure e belle! Sono d'una straordinaria bellezza le vostre mani, Silvia. Se troppe volte il dolore ve la ha congiunte, anche ve le ha sublimite, le ha rese perfette. Sono perfette" ["Dear, dear hands, brave and beautiful, steadfast and beautiful! Your hands are extraordinarily beautiful, Silvia. If sorrow has too often set them together, it has sublimated them also, perfected them. They are perfect"].<sup>120</sup> Her earlier sorrows may have rendered her hands perfect, and yet it is only her final sacrifice that changes her into a Hellenic statue – mutilated, yes, but sanctified. Cosimo's final description of Lucio's unrestored statue thus fittingly characterizes the play's tragic heroine as well: "Così, sul piedestallo, sembra veramente un marmo antico, disseppellito in una delle Cicladi. Ha qualche cosa di sacro e di tragico, dopo la divina immolazione" ["So, on the pedestal, it looks really like an ancient marble, dug up in one of the Cyclades. There is

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<sup>118</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 70.

<sup>119</sup> D'Annunzio, *La Gioconda*, 309.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

in it something sacred and tragic, after the divine immolation”].<sup>121</sup> Silvia, like Gioconda, the Sphinx, and the mummy before her, has finally dissolved the “errore del tempo.”



Such hauntings as these lead to a dizzying sense of deeper regression into the past: Dionea and Gioconda Dianti are indeed Renaissance revenants, Mona Lisas come to life, yet, as we have seen, Pater, Lee, and D’Annunzio conceive of Lisa herself as an ancient, chthonic deity haunting the Italian Renaissance and even the goddesses of a more classical Greek antiquity. D’Annunzio will further identify her with the ancient Egyptians, thereby accentuating her temporal, geographical, generational, and cultural distance from the modern, bourgeois Europeans she encounters. It seems that she has been in her “in-and-out existence” since time immemorial.

The “Concordanza” with which D’Annunzio closes *La Gioconda* reinforces this sense of Gioconda Dianti as a goddess in exile. The passage is taken from Book III of the *Iliad*, in which Helen of Troy goes to the Scaean gates, where she meets Priam and the elders and identifies the Greek heroes outside the gates. Though covered by a white mantle (“avvoltasi di veli bianchi”), Helen is resplendent, and her beauty awes the old Trojan warriors:

E, come videro Elena che saliva verso di loro, dissero gli uni agli altri sommessamente queste parole alate: – Certo, È GIUSTO che i Troiani e gli Achei da’ bei schinieri patiscano tanti mali e da sì gran tempo, a cagione di una tal donna; perocché ella somigli in sua bellezza alle iddie immortali.<sup>122</sup>

[Now when they saw Helen coming upon the wall, softly they spake winged words one to another: “Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for such a woman long time suffer woes; wondrously like is she to the immortal goddesses to look upon.]

“È GIUSTO.” It is right, it is just that such a war be waged over a woman such as this. D’Annunzio, of course, fittingly leaves out the rest of the passage, in which the warriors note that fair though Helen is, she must leave Troy lest she cause still more sorrow to befall them and their children. D’Annunzio thus frames the carnage of the Trojan War as a fitting ritualistic sacrifice to Helen, daughter of Leda, whose “bellezza,” visible even as, or perhaps because, she is veiled, elevates her to the status of the “iddie immortali.”

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 331. The English is taken from A. T. Murray’s translation of the *Iliad* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976-78), as Symonds does not include the concordance in his translation of *La Gioconda*.

Small wonder then that the Helens of “Dionea” and *La Gioconda* – Gertrude and Silvia – upon seeing their own Ledas, will, in turn, sacrifice themselves. Silvia’s arms, Waldemar’s sanity, Gertrude’s life, those on whom the vampiric Lady Lisa feeds over the centuries, all are violently, and seemingly willingly, sacrificed on the altar of a divine beauty.

### Chapter Three: The Necrophilic Imagination

Ah God, that love were as a flower or flame,  
That life were as the naming of a name,  
That death were not more pitiful than desire,  
That these things were not one thing and the same!

Algernon Charles Swinburne  
“Laus Veneris”

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine  
Qui vous mangera de baisers,  
Que j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine  
Des mes amours décomposés!

Charles Baudelaire  
“Une charogne”

L’aveva dimenticata viva,  
l’aveva amata morente,  
l’adorava già morta.

Iginio Ugo Tarchetti  
“Lorenzo Alviati”

Nineteenth-century culture positively teems with representations of the dead female body and with metaphors of resurrection and disinterment. From the tubercular heroines of opera to the beautiful corpses of Victorian literature and painting, the dead or dying woman takes pride of place in the cultural imagination, while the reanimated body becomes a lodestar of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction as well as scientific endeavors. The tomb, with its dead bodies and relics of the past, provides the perfect space for imaginative speculation, while the perennial coupling of Eros and Thanatos reaches a climax in the *fin de siècle*.<sup>1</sup>

As Mario Praz noted almost a century ago, this coupling of sex and death pervades Decadent literature, while the discourse of resurrecting the past is, of course, foundational to the nineteenth-century Renaissance Revival. In two texts by Gabriele D’Annunzio and Vernon Lee, in particular, these motifs merge and are adapted to suit their own aesthetic purposes of highlighting perverse desire and aesthetic creativity. In the novel *Le vergini delle rocce* [*The Virgins of the Rocks*] and the story “Amour Dure:

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship in this area is greatly indebted to Mario Praz’s 1930 essay *La carne la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*. For more recent volumes on the subject, please see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Centre, 2003); and Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka,” D’Annunzio and Lee depict the Renaissance not through a resurrectionist gaze but rather through a necrophilic one – one that seems to adore this past era precisely because it is in the grave. In these works, necrophilia opens a space of possibility — the possible collusion of reality and fantasy, history and literature, knowledge and desire. Whether figured explicitly as “the Past” or merely as individual love object, the dead Renaissance woman focalizes her spectator’s erotic, epistemological, and imaginative concerns, allowing him to transcend perceived aesthetic constraints. For the protagonists, Claudio Cantelmo and Spiridion Trepka, the transgressive love of dead women forms the foundation for their creative fantasies and highlights their status as elect figures of rarified sensibilities and sensitivities.

In exploring the Renaissance past as the site of necrophilic desire in these texts, I am indebted to Yvonne Ivory’s study of the intimate connections between emerging homosexual identity in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the “invention” of the Renaissance. Ivory emphasizes the extent to which nineteenth-century historians – as well as writers, artists, and the general public – came to conceive of the Renaissance as a period characterized in equal measure by its cultural accomplishments and its ruthless immorality (in both governance and sexual practices). Historians indeed came to see these two elements as inextricably related. As Ivory notes, figures such as Jacob Burckhardt and John Addington Symonds, in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) and *The Renaissance in Italy* (published in seven volumes from 1875 to 1886), respectively, tended to produce apologies for the era’s violence and sexual immorality by developing the argument that “the greatness of Renaissance Italians lay in their extraordinarily well-developed *Phantasie*, or imaginative faculty, a faculty whose one negative effect was to make them more experimental in the area of illicit sexuality than their predecessors, their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe, or their successors.”<sup>2</sup> Ivory sees in this notion of *Phantasie* and its valorization of individual desire and self-fashioning a space “within which criminal (sexual) activity [was] sanctioned” for “the newly-classified homosexual.”<sup>3</sup>

I shift away from *fin-de-siècle* homosexual self-fashioning and turn towards Renaissance sex crimes, so to speak, that serve as inspiration for Decadent necrophiliacs. The notion of *Phantasie*, an unencumbered imaginative and creative faculty, allows for a deeper engagement with necrophilic desire as an overarching aesthetic principle in the imaginary of *Le vergini delle rocce* and “Amour Dure,” a topic which critics have generally declined to explore at length. The prevalence of nodding acknowledgment recalls Jonathan Dollimore’s musings on the obviousness of the sex-death connection and its concomitant banality.<sup>4</sup> Dollimore notes that while we accept the pervasive coupling of Eros and Thanatos in Western culture, such a connection

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<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 34. For further analysis of the influence of these two historians on Vernon Lee, in particular, please see Alison Brown, “Vernon Lee and the Renaissance: from Burckhardt to Berenson,” in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, eds. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 185-209.

<sup>3</sup> Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Tracy memorably opens his essay on vampiric necrophilia in nineteenth-century literature by noting that “[i]f sex and death are constants, so is a tendency to equate them.” Robert Tracy, “Loving You All Ways: Vamps, Vampires, Necrophiles and Necrofilles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” in *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. Regina Barreca (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 32.



“become[s] confusing when we stop to think about it. Mostly we don’t think about it – especially when we think we know about it. What this suggests is that here the commonplace works as a kind of disavowal, allowing us to see and not see at the same time. We recognize and register the sex/death connection, but in a way which precisely allows us not to ‘see’ it.”<sup>5</sup> I would argue that this “seeing”/“not-seeing” binary is even more pronounced in regards to the sex-death subcategory of necrophilia, particularly in our understanding of *fin de siècle* literature and art in which necrophilic desire seems so omnipresent as to become almost banal.

In this chapter, I seek to “see” rather than merely “register” the “sex/death connection” by exploring how perverse fantasy becomes central to these two narratives. In this endeavor, I am influenced by Lisa Downing’s reminder that necrophilia can be understood not only as the physical act of sexual congress with dead bodies, but also as “a desirous and idealizing relation to death, manifest in actual perversion or in representation.”<sup>6</sup> As Downing explains, necrophilic desire “is as much an aesthetic, a mode of representation, as it is a sexual perversion.”<sup>7</sup> I argue that to accept necrophilia as an aesthetic means much more than noting its inclusion in decadent literature, which can result in a vulgar derision of perversity-for-perversity’s-sake. Instead, positing a necrophilic aesthetic requires us to interrogate the imaginative possibilities accessed through this sexual perversion in its literary representations. Whether portrayed as a literal sexual encounter or as a figurative desire, necrophilia performs an active role in these texts and it comes to stand for a particular mode of creative production, one that explores the permeable boundaries between reality and fantasy, present and past, self and other, and life and death. *Le vergini delle rocce* and “Amour Dure” conceive of necrophilic desire as a process of both transgression and creativity; indeed it is in the transgressive perversion that they find the seeds of creative fantasy.



In his proem to the first volume of the Aestheticist *Convito*, published in January of 1895, the editor Adolfo De Bosis describes the journal as a coming together of a group of elect artists, writers, and painters “accomunati da uno stesso culto sincero e fervente per tutte le più nobili forme dell’Arte” [“brought together by a shared sincere and fervent worship of all the noblest forms of Art”].<sup>8</sup> United in the desire to save Italy

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<sup>5</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 5. Downing cautions that “[r]educing necrophilia to a single, highly taboo act serves to distance us from its complexities. By maintaining focus on the alien nature of the behaviour, we do not have to consider the extent to which the necrophile’s desires and unconscious fantasies may resemble yours or mine, and may have wider cultural implications.” Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Adolfo De Bosis, “Proemio,” *Il Convito*, Libro I (Gennajo 1895): 3. All translations mine unless otherwise noted. For studies about D’Annunzio’s involvement with *Il Convito* and about its role within the broader culture of Italian Aestheticism, please see Benedetta Bini, “‘The sterile ascetic of beauty’: Pater and the Italian *fin de siècle*,” in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. Stephen Bann, 19-33 (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004); Elisa Bizzotto, “Pater’s Reception in Italy: A General View,” in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, 62-86; Maria Teresa Marabini Moevs, *Gabriele D’Annunzio e le estetiche della fine del secolo* (L’Aquila: L. U. Japadre Editore, 1976); Giuliana Pieri, *The Influence of*

from her current lowly state, they hope that “questo nostro *Convito* possa raccogliere un vivo fascio di energie militanti le quali valgano a salvare qualche cosa bella e ideale dalla torbida onda di volgarità che ricopre omai tutta la terra privilegiata dove Leonardo creò le sue donne imperiose e Michelangelo i suoi eroi indomabili” [“our *Convito* might gather together a lively bundle of militant energies that could salvage something beautiful and ideal from the dark wave of vulgarity that now covers all of the privileged land where Leonardo created his imperious women and Michelangelo his indomitable heroes”].<sup>9</sup> Among the works in the volume that aspire to renew Italic beauty is Gabriele D’Annunzio’s novel *Le vergini delle rocce*, to be published serially in the *Convito* throughout 1895. The novel introduces us to the young Claudio Cantelmo, who has decided to abandon Rome, now populated by the vulgar, democratic crowd, and venture into the countryside.<sup>10</sup> While there, he plans to select one of the three aristocratic virgins of the title to give birth to his child who will become the next king of Rome. Famous for its lack of plot and resolution, the novel showcases the quest for pure beauty that characterizes much of D’Annunzio’s Roman phase and shares De Bosis’s desire to return the land of Leonardo and Michelangelo to its former glory.

As is common in D’Annunzio’s work, and that of his Decadent contemporaries, death, perverse sexual and political desires, and purple prose intersect throughout the novel.<sup>11</sup> The aristocratic family is decayed, and death hangs over all the proceedings. In her article on the novel, Lucia Re readily points out the connection between death and the three virgins and notes that Claudio immediately establishes the virgins as members of a moribund family, “doomed to reenact a lugubrious fate.”<sup>12</sup> Barbara Spackman further analyzes how the theme of Thanatos masked by Eros involves both Freud and a decadent aesthetic that insists on the valorization of “Beauty threatened with destruction.”<sup>13</sup> Expanding on this theme, Sandra Migliore argues that the characterization of the virgins as deathly, disintegrating presences is precisely what allows for the representation of Claudio as “il superuomo protagonista del romanzo, colui che si erge vittorioso su ogni cosa e situazione e sa dominare ogni evento” [“the

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*Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin de siècle Italy: Art, Beauty, and Culture* (London: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007; and Giorgio Zanetti, *Estetismo e modernità: saggio su Angelo Conti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> De Bosis, “Proemio,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> For more analysis of Claudio’s (and D’Annunzio’s) dismissive attitude toward “la terza Roma” [“the third Rome”], please see Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, *La sabbia del tempo: ancora d’Annunzio*, 205-21 (Avellino: Edizioni Sinestesie, 2014). Ilvano Caliaro offers further analysis of D’Annunzio’s work in this period in *Da Bisanzio a Roma: studi su Gabriele D’Annunzio* (Verona: Fiorini, 2004). For a broader exploration of nostalgia in the era, please see Richard Drake, *Byzantium for Rome: The Politics of Nostalgia in Umbertian Italy, 1878- 1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> In a recent essay, Marja Härmänmaa notes the centrality of death in D’Annunzio’s *oeuvre* and links this obsession to the culture of Decadence and the general sense of decay that permeated the *fin de siècle*. Marja Härmänmaa, “The Seduction of Thanatos: Gabriele D’Annunzio and the Decadent Death,” in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, eds. Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen, 225-253 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). See also Jessica Wood, “The Art of Dying in *Trionfo della morte*,” *Forum Italicum*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Aug. 2017): 469-487.

<sup>12</sup> Lucia Re, “Gabriele D’Annunzio’s Novel *Le vergini delle rocce*: ‘Una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio,’” *Stanford Italian Review* III, no. 2 (1983): 245.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 108.

superman protagonist of the novel who rises victoriously over everything and can dominate every event”].<sup>14</sup>

This general obsession with deathly beauty proves integral for understanding both the political and fairy-tale narratives in *Le vergini delle rocce*, but the specific role of necrophilia as a sexualized and aestheticized relationship to death offers yet another entry point to the text and allows for an examination of how the perverse, and overlooked, tale of Umbelino and Pantea becomes a foundational episode within Claudio Cantelmo’s narration. Far from an irrelevant detour from the main narrative, this Seicento tale of incestuous passion, murder, and necrophilia, encapsulates many of the aestheticizing impulses present in the novel as a whole and also participates in a *fin-de-siècle* discourse that links the woman’s image with her death. Through its concern with establishing the *giardino chiuso* [“enclosed garden” or *hortus conclusus*] and its fountain as a fairy-tale location imbued with violent desire, this interlude illuminates Claudio’s understanding of his own role in “quel brano della trama di mia vita” [“that piece of the plot of my life”].<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Umbelino and Pantea episode offers a reading guide for the rest of the text, as Claudio provides the reader with both the story and his own interpretation of its meaning, and it can therefore be read as a synecdoche for the entire novel, a work that depends on the development of a necrophilic aesthetic. The paradoxically lively and creative nature of necrophilia, which as a sex act is in no way fecund, renders it the perfect perversion with which to characterize Claudio’s aesthetic philosophy, as will become clear through his understanding and retelling of the Seicento tale and through his depiction of the eponymous virgins.<sup>16</sup> Through his process of transforming this sexual perversion from act to aesthetic, Claudio comes to find in necrophilia the possibility of a beautiful state of suspended animation – one that is perfect for the ultimate lack of resolution in the novel.

### “Ricomponimenti” and the aesthetics of necrophilic desire

This necrophilic aesthetic permeates the entire novel but occurs most explicitly in the “episodio tragico” [“tragic episode”] of Umbelino and Pantea, which the prince relates to Claudio after their visit to Violante’s beloved fountain in the palace’s garden.<sup>17</sup> The fountain, it seems, was once the site of Pantea’s murder and subsequent

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<sup>14</sup> Sandra Migliore, *Tra Hermes e Prometeo: il mito di Leonardo nel decadentismo europeo* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994), 173.

<sup>15</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, ed. Niva Lorenzini (Milano: Mondadori, 1995), 3.

<sup>16</sup> While he is not established as an artist such as Stelio Effrena in *Il fuoco* or Alessandro in *La città morta*, Claudio certainly frames the novel in terms of his aesthetic project, and his political goal to inseminate one of the virgins with the next king of Rome relates to his sense of being one of the elect in both class and taste. As both Barbara Spackman and Guido Baldi have noted, it is impossible to separate Claudio’s political project from his aesthetic project (and, for that matter, from his sexual one). See Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, and Guido Baldi, *L’inetto e il superuomo: D’Annunzio tra “decadenza” e vita ascendente* (Torino: Sciptorium, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> As many critics have noted, there seems to be a dichotomy between the garden, generally coded feminine, and the rocks, which can be seen as a symbol of male (phallic) vitality. See, for example, Maria Teresa Marabini Moevs, *Gabriele D’Annunzio*, 75. Still, this opposing relationship is not as simple as it may at first appear. Marabini Moevs acknowledges that Violante herself is identified with the rocks, which may not be surprising given her status as imperious *femme fatale*, and Guido Baldi suggests that

rape by her brother Umbelino, and Claudio's reaction to the story provides us with a complex image of the narrator as both literary critic and literary creator.<sup>18</sup> Though the prince recounts the story of the siblings, Claudio explicitly notes that the textual account in the *Vergini delle rocce* is his own elaboration upon, and perfection of, the initial tale: "Ascoltando l'imperfetto racconto del principe, io ricomponevo interiormente l'ora di vita essenziale che aveva prodotto la morte di Pantea; e il delitto notturno assumeva ai miei occhi una bellezza indicatrice di cose profonde" ["Listening to the prince's imperfect tale, I recomposed internally the hour of essential life that had produced the death of Pantea; and the nocturnal crime assumed in my eyes a beauty that indicated profound things"].<sup>19</sup> In this moment, Claudio becomes both audience and performer, listening to the prince even as he transforms the "imperfetto racconto" and perfects it in his own imagination. Only Claudio's version of the story is capable of identifying and evoking the "ora di vita essenziale" in all of its beauty, and it is this process of retelling, this filtering of the external world through his internal consciousness, that proves crucial for Claudio's creativity.

The tale of Umbelino and Pantea encapsulates the larger themes present within the imaginary of *Le vergini delle rocce*, such as the beauty of the dead woman and the potential creative force within destructive violence. In Claudio's narration to himself, he introduces the drama by playing upon the dual nature of force as violence and force as ability, and he marvels at the particular beauty and violence contained in the fountain:

Era un dramma di passione e di morte, intimo e segreto, ben degno della virtuosa chiostra lapidea che ne aveva compressa e poi esaltata la violenza in rapida vicenda. Mi significava il potere esercitato dal genio dei luoghi su l'anima affine, per cui in questa ogni verace sentimento doveva concentrarsi fino all'estrema intensità comportabile dalla natura umana per esprimere quindi tutta la sua forza in un atto definitivo e di conseguenza certa.<sup>20</sup>

[It was a drama of passion and death, intimate and secret, worthy of the virtuous, stony courtyard that had compressed and then exalted the violence in rapid order. It signified to me the power exerted by the *genius loci* on the kindred spirit, through which each sincere sentiment

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the garden can be seen as a projection of Claudio's inner consciousness. While at first, Baldi argues, the garden seems aligned with femininity, sickness, and decadence, it ultimately seems that that it represents Claudio's own soul. Baldi, *L'inetto e il superuomo*, 237. This idea of Claudio's externalization and projection of his own consciousness onto the places and figures around him will return later in the chapter in regard to Claudio's depiction of the three virgins.

<sup>18</sup> This idea of the critic as creator resonates with many *fin-de-siècle* works influenced by Walter Pater's impressionistic criticism in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, D'Annunzio offers his own impressionistic manifesto in his preface to Angelo Conti's *La beata riva: trattato dell'oblio*, when he asks, "Riesce Angelo Conti per tali modi a mostrarci la vera essenza dell'arte giorgionesca? È lecito dubitarne. Ma che importa?" ["Does Angelo Conti succeed through these methods in showing us the true essence of Giorgionesque art? We may well doubt it. But what does it matter?"] D'Annunzio, "Ragionamento," preface to *La beata riva: trattato dell'oblio*, Angelo Conti (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1900), xviii.

<sup>19</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 93.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

must reach its most extreme intensity and come to express all of its force in a definite act of certain consequence.]

Claudio begins by describing the intimate, secret nature of the passion-death binary in the tale, asserting that such a powerful story is worthy of the virtuous stone courtyard. Formulating a relationship of causality between place and event, Claudio is amazed by the power of the *genius loci* when paired with the proper spirit, and seems to vacillate between his awe of the cloister and his fascination with the potential force of human action. The force of the place on this soul renders every sentiment acute, taking it to the extreme point of “un atto definitivo e di conseguenza certa.” Crucially, this interpretation of concentrated, extreme actions relies on Claudio’s interpretive capacities. Not only does he reformulate the story, he also provides a gloss on its meaning (“mi significava”), and links it to his own experience of the garden as a place of heightened experience that may even produce “ogni verace sentimento.”

Claudio’s preoccupation with the garden is natural, since it also serves as the sensual fairy-tale backdrop of his own story.<sup>21</sup> He imagines the sleeping *giardino chiuso* as awaiting his animating powers, explicitly conceiving of Massimilla, Anatolia, and Violante as sleeping beauties:

Ad intervalli il soffio della primavera investendomi d’improvviso col suo susurro e col suo tepore pareva rapirmi in un etere di sogno, abolire in me per qualche attimo la coscienza della persona reale e infondermi l’anima vergine e ardente d’uno di quegli amanti eroi che nelle favole cavalcano verso le Belle addormentate nei boschi.<sup>22</sup>

[At times the breath of spring suddenly came over me with its murmur and with its warmth and seemed to enchant me with a sleepy ether, seemed to overtake for a moment my real consciousness and instill in me the virgin, ardent soul of one of those heroic lovers who in the fairy tales rides to the Sleeping Beauties in the forest.]

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara Spackman notes the interesting linkage of D’Annunzio and the garden in the work of his critics, Benedetto Croce, G. A. Borgese, and Gian Pietro Lucini: “The text itself has become the sorceress’s garden, and the critic, rather than D’Annunzio, bewitched. As in the Circean gardens of Armida and Alcina, the promise of satisfaction held out in the moment of enchantment is later deluded by an unveiling: the text is nothing but a painted whore.” Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 28. In a way, the “giardino chiuso” becomes a kind of perverse *locus amoenus*, offering a deathly retreat from the bustling life, modernity, and democracy of vulgar Rome.

<sup>22</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 58. For a recent reading of the figure of Sleeping Beauty in D’Annunzio’s work, please see Giuliana Pieri, “Sleeping Beauties and Femmes Fatales: Tennyson, Gabriele D’Annunzio and Italian Pre-Raphaelitism.” In *The Reception of Alfred Tennyson in Europe*, ed. by Leonee Ormond (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 105-124. The reference to Sleeping Beauty also evokes Edward Burne-Jones’s *Legend of the Briar Rose* series at Buscot Park in Oxfordshire, painted between 1885 and 1890 and accompanied by the inscriptions of William Morris. Both D’Annunzio’s novel and Burne-Jones and Morris’s collaboration declare a desire for radical renewal alongside gender subversion and Medieval and Renaissance revivalism, although their politics are quite divergent. For more on the *Briar Rose* series, please see Andrea Wolk Rager, “‘Smite this Sleeping World Awake’: Edward Burne-Jones and *The Legend of the Briar Rose*,” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 438-450.

Here, Claudio represents the garden as a space of immobility, in which the still, never-changing virgins await his arrival. By fixating on the effect of the location on his imagination, Claudio reveals the relationship between landscape and characterization in the novel.<sup>23</sup> He furthermore portrays himself as the only possible hero in the story.

All actions in the *giardino chiuso* become more potent, more extreme, more condensed. In this way, compression and exaltation become fundamental for the Umbelino and Pantea story. As has been noted, Claudio emphasizes moments within the narrative (“l’ora di vita essenziale che aveva prodotto la morte di Pantea” [“the hour of essential life that had produced the death of Pantea”] and, later “l’ora della morte” [“the hour of death”]). The connection between the participles “compressa” [“compressed”] and “esaltata” [“exalted”] also hints at the dramatic and structural techniques of the novel, which compress Claudio’s spatial journey in order to exalt or concentrate his sentiments. Indeed, the story-within-a-story of the siblings is itself a locus of simultaneous exaltation and compression, as it lasts only three pages and yet comments upon the whole novel.

This idea of compression invites an intertextual exploration as well, since the three pages in the novel contain and transplant almost the entire plot of another of D’Annunzio’s works, *La città morta* [*The Dead City*], written in 1896. In the play, Leonardo, an archeologist, develops an incestuous desire for his sister, the beautiful Bianca Maria, who is also admired by his friend, the poet Alessandro. Alessandro’s blind, Cassandra-like wife, Anna, completes the quartet of characters. These Italian friends find themselves in Greece, where Leonardo eventually discovers the tomb of Agamemnon, and D’Annunzio’s tragedy insists upon elaborate descriptions of the relationship between the characters’ location and their emotions. Ultimately, influenced by the setting and drawn to the location of the fountain, Leonardo kills his sister in order to purify himself of his perverse passion.

Throughout the play, the setting of ancient tombs and the memory of Greek tragedy infuse both the plot and the characters’ motivations. As Guido Baldi notes, D’Annunzio seems to draw a parallel between Leonardo’s transgressive archaeological research, which bears a distinct “carattere mortuario” [“mortuary character”], and his incestuous obsession with Bianca Maria.<sup>24</sup> This pairing of the mortuary and the

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Bassnett argues that in this novel, D’Annunzio forgoes characterization of the virgins in favor of linking them to the landscape: “Throughout the novel, which contains long lyrical passages of great beauty, d’Annunzio does not depict character, but rather locates the women in a landscape, suggesting that they are actually part of that landscape, creatures adrift in time, rather than flesh and blood human beings.” Susan Bassnett, “A Passion for Dismemberment: Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Portrayals of Women,” in *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. Michael St. John (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 137. While Bassnett finds an inherent misogyny in this effacement of female characters, other critics have noted how this method reveals the influence of Leonardo – via Walter Pater and Angelo Conti. As Sandra Migliore notes, it is precisely this connection between person and landscape that interested Pater and his fellow *fin-de-siècle* admirers of the High Renaissance genius. Migliore, *Tra Hermes e Prometeo*, 22-23.

<sup>24</sup> Baldi, *L’inetto e il superuomo*, 277. Both Baldi and Marabini Moevs also draw attention to Friedrich Nietzsche’s discussion of incest and Oedipus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, noting the link between such criminal transgression and the possibility of enigmatic knowledge. See Baldi, *L’inetto e il superuomo*, 283-284, and Marabini Moevs, *Gabriele D’Annunzio e le estetiche della fine del secolo*, 330-331.

incestuous clearly links the play to the novel, and Leonardo's narrative seems parallel to that of Umbelino, who similarly lusts after his sister:

Profonda, in vero, doveva essere la volontà di quell'Umbelino che, acceso d'implacabile amore verso la sorella inconsapevole ma deliberato a rimaner nella sua colpa solo, meditò di ucciderla per dividere dall'anima quella carne che l'aveva infiammato di desiderio così terribilmente e per poter solo quella contaminare di tutte le carezze.<sup>25</sup>

[Deep indeed must have been the will of that Umbelino who, burning with relentless love for his sister yet determined to remain alone in his sin, planned to kill her in order to divide from her soul the flesh that had so terribly inflamed his desire and therefore contaminate only that with all of his caresses.]

According to Claudio's recounting of the episode, Umbelino plans to kill his sister, to separate her body from her soul, thereby liberating her innocent spirit from her carnal form and to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh with her corpse.

Yet although Umbelino's initial motivation seems similar to that of Leonardo, there is a crucial difference. At the end of the play, Leonardo begs forgiveness and, according to Jessica Otey, "[his] final words on his actions reveal that any relief from desire is illusory: the fountain's waters do not extinguish the flame of Eros. His sister's murder is neither his nor her salvation, but a futile crime for which he begs pardon. Eros's victory is complete."<sup>26</sup> While Leonardo finishes the play having failed to save himself from Eros's power, Claudio represents Umbelino's actions in a different light, one that revolves around the role of his forceful "volontà" ["will"] in his necrophilic act. Umbelino does indeed wish to keep his sister pure, but he glimpses another outlet for his urges, one that depends upon turning her into a corpse. Crucially, Umbelino never begs pardon.

I would argue that the presence of Claudio Cantelmo is what allows for this discrepancy between play and novel. It is precisely his role as intermediary and interpreter, a Paterian critic viewing and transfiguring the Renaissance past, that allows for the vindication of necrophilia perversely productive, as a transformative aesthetic rather than a destructive act. Claudio's understanding of necrophilia in his "ricomponimento interiore" ["internal recomposition"] points towards a potential creative capacity in Umbelino's murder that Leonardo, on the other hand, does not perceive in his own, ultimately futile, desire for self-preservation. Our narrator's emphasis on Umbelino's creative and productive solution recalls Lisa Downing's analysis of necrophilia as a transformative act of the imagination:

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<sup>25</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 93.

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Otey, "D'Annunzio, Eros and the Modern Artist: Tragedy and Tragic Criticism Reconsidered," *MLN* 125, no. 1 (2010): 193. Of course, it is debatable whether we should take Leonardo's justification of his murderous act at face value. Still, the play's insistence on his failure remains strong, regardless of the initial motivation.

Necrophilia hints at the imaginative collusion between life and death, an ambitious leap between the physical and the metaphysical. The obscure spark of desire in necrophilia lies precisely in the gap between the living erotic imagination and the object that is beyond desire. Fantasy operates by bridging the gap that is the threshold between the subject and the object of desire. In attempting to cross the threshold separating life from death, the ambition subtending necrophilia makes it one of the richest, liveliest and certainly most paradoxical desire types to be found in the lexicon of human sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

Seen in this light, Umbelino kills his sister in order to place her “beyond desire,” an operation that ultimately allows him to bridge the gap that he himself has made between his physical subject and her metaphysical object. This is quite different from Leonardo’s hope that in killing Bianca Maria and placing her “beyond desire” – beyond his desire but also beyond her own – he will succeed in overcoming his perverse attraction and saving both his and his sister’s pure souls. Instead, Umbelino – as characterized by Claudio – creates the very thresholds that he will cross through the power of his fantasy.

Just as D’Annunzio presents Leonardo and Alessandro as doubles in *La città morta*, he invites us to view Umbelino as a double for his protagonist in *Le vergini delle rocce*. What sets Claudio apart from Leonardo, though, is his repeated insistence on creating his own historical and literary alter-egos as well as his related tendency towards desirous identification with and internalization of the other characters in his story. In the novel’s first book we learn of the origins of his ghostly *demonico*, the voice that justifies all of his aesthetic and (a)moral imperatives:

Per confortare la mia solitudine, allora pensai di dare una figura corporea a quel demònico, in cui, secondo il documento del mio primo maestro, io aveva fede come nell’infalibile segno che mi conduceva all’integrazione della mia effigie morale. Io pensai di commettere a una bocca bella e imperiosa e colorita dal mio medesimo sangue l’ufficio di ripetermi: – O tu, sii quale devi essere.<sup>28</sup>

[To comfort my solitude, I then decide to give a corporeal form to that daemon, in whom, following the teachings of my first master, I placed my faith, who represented to me the infallible sign that would lead me to the integration of my moral effigy. I decided to commit to a beautiful, imperious mouth colored of my own blood the office of repeating to me:  
– Be what you must be.]

For Claudio, historical inquiry is profoundly subjective and impressionistic. With his own desires at the fore of his mind, Claudio turns to his portrait gallery in order to find the perfect candidate for this conspiratorial ghost and settles upon the one that is “sacra come una icona votiva” [“sacred as a votive icon”]: “È il più nobile e il più vivido fiore

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<sup>27</sup> Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 33.



di mia stirpe, rappresentato dal pennello di un artefice divino. È il ritratto di Alessandro Cantelmo conte di Volturara, dipinto dal Vinci tra l'anno 1493 e il '94..." ["It is the noblest and most vivid flower of my bloodline, represented by the brush of a divine maker. It is the portrait of Alessandro Cantelmo, count of Volturara, painted by da Vinci between 1493 and 1494..."].<sup>29</sup> Armed with the support of his Renaissance *demònico*, chosen for his link to Leonardo da Vinci and the flowering of Italian culture and power, Claudio finds the mouthpiece for his aesthetic and political goals.<sup>30</sup> Unsurprisingly, the mouthpiece must not only derive from the Renaissance past but must also belong to his bloodline ("colorita dal mio medesimo sangue"), and Claudio's choice thus echoes the endogamous desire central to the Umbelino and Pantea story.<sup>31</sup>

Without pretense to objectivity, Claudio creates and inhabits his own aristocratic ancestor, whose ghostly presence will in turn encourage him in his aesthetic and erotic pursuits throughout the rest of the novel. In this way, his desires become a genetic imperative. As Lucia Re has argued, the text thereby links its core themes of doubling and interpretation: "History (including literary history) becomes a repertoire of costumes, specular images for Claudio's self. History therefore ceases to be the locus of fixed meanings, crystallized truths, and transforms itself into a text yet-to-be-written, or

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 33. By this point in our reading, we are certainly not surprised that Claudio chooses a portrait painted by Leonardo da Vinci. After all, D'Annunzio has quite consciously relied on da Vinci throughout the novel, starting from its title, which multiplies the singular Madonna of the painter's *Vergine delle rocce* (first version, c. 1483-86; second version, c. 1494-1508) into the three mystical virgins found in the garden. As has been noted since its first publication, the work is replete with references, overt and covert, to the High Renaissance painter.

<sup>30</sup> As Migliore makes clear, the *fin-de-siècle* popularity of Leonardo da Vinci involved not only the appreciation of his artistic genius but also a political nostalgia for an era of Italian primacy: "Visto in quest'ottica celebrativa, poi, Leonardo assumeva una funzione salvifica, dalle forti implicazioni politiche: di fronte ad una civiltà che si sentiva morire, quale la latina di fine '800, egli rappresentava infatti la consolazione del passato e la speranza di un avvenire in cui alla latinità, tornata ad un 'Nuovo Rinascimento' nel recupero dell'integrità umana, spettasse un ruolo di guida nel mondo: così, guarderanno a Leonardo nostalgici sinceri, ma anche interessate voci di propaganda" ["Seen in this celebratory light, then, Leonardo assumed a salvific function with strong political implications: in front of a civilization that felt itself dying (i.e. the Latin one of the late 1800s) he represented indeed the consolation of the past and the hope in a future in which Latinity, returned to a "New Renaissance" in the recuperation of human wholeness, would play a role in guiding the world: in this way, sincere nostalgics would look at Leonardo, but so too would interested voices of propaganda."] Migliore, *Tra Hermes e Prometeo*, 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Claudio may indeed admire the brother's desire for his sister in part because this extreme endogamy, linked to aristocratic status, resonates with his political ambitions. And yet, no lineage will come of this union. Still, the fact that Umbelino consummates his desire with a corpse, unable to bear a child, seems aligned with the novel's ultimate lack of fulfillment and Claudio's lack of offspring – no future king of Rome will be born of such necrophilic desire. The link between incest and necrophilia may also derive from their extreme violation of the norm, and it is notable that in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing actually engages with these two perversions in consecutive entries, suggesting that both must be the result of "abnormal and decidedly perverse sensuality" and that each is a "decidedly pathological phenomenon." Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia and London: F. A. Davis, 1892), 430-431. For a broader exploration of Krafft-Ebing and the birth of sexology as a discipline, please see Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

interpreted.”<sup>32</sup> This approach is what allows him both to see himself in the characters that surround him and to use them in the elaboration of his own aesthetic project.

Claudio’s characterization of Umbelino thus becomes central for an understanding of the narrator’s own relation to the virgins and to his aesthetic process, repeatedly referred to as “volontà,” and it recalls the voice of the Renaissance *demònico* whispering in his ear. The preoccupation with violence and artistic capacity emerges as a theme in Claudio’s aesthetic discourse throughout the poema-romanzo, and a particularly beautiful example describes his goal of giving life to all that exists around him and his ability to call beauty into being:

“Quali sontuosità!” mi diceva il demònico apprendomi non senza letizia e orgoglio. “Quali magnificenze in un sol giorno! Tu non potresti meglio servire il tuo scopo, che è di vivificar tutto e di estrarre da ogni più arida cosa la vita. Non riconosci ora la saggezza del mio ammonimento mattutino? Non benedici al rigore della tua lunga costrizione, onde hai questo frutto che t’inebria? Tutto ciò che nasce ed esiste, intorno a te, nasce ed esiste per un soffio della tua volontà e della tua poesia. E pur nondimeno tu vivi nell’ordine delle cose più reali, perocché nulla al mondo sia più reale di una cosa poetica.”<sup>33</sup>

[“What sumptuousness!” the daemon said, appearing to me not without joy and pride. “What magnificence in a single day! You couldn’t better have served your goal of vivifying everything and extracting life from each and every dry thing. Don’t you now recognize the wisdom of my morning advice? Don’t you bless the harshness of your long constraint, since it has given you this inebriating fruit? All that is born and exists around you is born and exists through a breath of your will and of your poetry. And still you live in the order of the realest things, because nothing in life is more real than a poetic thing.”]

According to the *demònico*, all that exists around Claudio exists because of him, all that is poetic is real, and the external objects most capable of being poetic are those that are already desiccated and therefore ripe for “vivification.”<sup>34</sup>

In the *demònico*’s discourse, the word “soffio” [“breath”] recalls the scene of the sleeping beauties in which the “soffio della primavera” [“breath of spring”] invades the

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<sup>32</sup> Re, “Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Vergini delle rocce*,” 261.

<sup>33</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 117.

<sup>34</sup> In a recent article Cinzia Blum identifies a similar process at work in Iginio Ugo Tarchetti’s *Amore nell’arte* [*Love in Art*]. Approaching Tarchetti’s “necro logic” through the lens of ecocriticism, Blum argues that “[t]he desirable lifeless female body – an abject muse – thus reveals the workings of idealization as a form of devivification and a means of exploiting the other for the sake of limitless self-expansion.” Cinzia Blum, “Deathly Love: Tracing the Necro Logic of the Decadent Imagination in I. U. Tarchetti’s *Amore nell’arte*, *Italian Culture*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Mar. 2017): 28. As I will further explore with reference to the prologue of *Le vergini delle rocce*, such “limitless self-expansion” in D’Annunzio’s case relies not only on *de*-vivification but also on *re*-vivification: the endless play between the two is what ultimately proves attractive for the necrophile. For further discussion of the macabre and the perverse in the works of the Scapigliati, please see David Del Principe, *Rebellion, Death, and Aesthetics in Italy: The Demons of Scapigliatura* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

protagonist and endows him with his status as heroic prince in a fairytale.<sup>35</sup> It also relates to *La città morta*, in which all of the characters worry about Leonardo's unidentified sickness. In the play's first act, Alessandro confides in Anna and Bianca Maria that Leonardo has been possessed by Aeschylus's characters:

Io comprendo come Leonardo, che vive della più intensa vita interiore, ne sia turbato sino alla frenesia. Io temo che i morti ch'egli cerca, e che non riesce a scoprire, si sieno rianimati dentro di lui violentemente e respirino dentro di lui col tremendo soffio a loro infuso da Eschilo, enormi e sanguinosi come gli sono apparsi nell'*Orestide*, percossi senza tregua dal ferro e dalla face del loro Destino.<sup>36</sup>

[I understand how Leonardo, who lives the most intense interior life, is disturbed to the point of frenzy. I fear that the dead that he searches for, and does not find, have been violently reanimated within him and breathe within him with the tremendous breath infused in them by Aeschylus, enormous and bloody as they appeared in the *Oresteia*, beaten without mercy by iron and by the torch of their Destiny.]

Yet, in those earlier examples, the protagonist is the one possessed, whether it is Leonardo inhabited by the characters of the *Oresteia* or Claudio by a fairy-tale prince.<sup>37</sup> The *demònico*'s "soffio," however, is more closely related to the "soffio a loro infuso da Eschilo," which is the writer's power of animating his characters.

### The (de-)/(re-)animation game

This version of the breath draws upon the male fantasy of giving birth to artistic creation, which is a major theme in many of D'Annunzio's works.<sup>38</sup> In *La città morta*, when Alessandro confesses his love to Bianca Maria, he asserts that she appears to him and belongs to him as if she is one of his poetic creations: "Voi, voi sola! Io vi ho già incontrata nel sogno come ora v'incontro nella vita. Voi m'appartenete come se foste la mia creatura, formata dalle mie mani, ispirata dal mio soffio" ["You, you alone! I have already found you in a dream as I have found you now in life. You belong to me as if you were my creature, formed by my hands, brought to life by my breath"].<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, *La città morta*, in *Tragedie, sogni e misteri*, ed. Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 2013), 120.

<sup>37</sup> The topic of possession—closely related to the ventriloquism that this chapter will soon explore—also occurs in D'Annunzio's *Il piacere* in the form of Maria's diary, as Barbara Spackman explains: "The diary, then, bears witness to Maria's possession by Andrea, a possession that, as the phrase suggests, verges on the demonic. Possession is characterized as the repetition of the same words, sentiments, and desires that Andrea had used and expressed; the more Maria's voice resembles Andrea's, the more complete his possession of her." Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, 101.

<sup>38</sup> The fantasy of male parthenogenesis is, of course, hardly limited to D'Annunzio's *oeuvre*. For a particularly incisive reading of both the adoption and erasure of the female muse in this fantasy, please see Bronfen, "The dead beloved as muse," in *Over Her Dead Body*, 360-92.

<sup>39</sup> D'Annunzio, *La città morta*, 142.

Alessandro here identifies one of the main aesthetic impulses present in the men's appreciation of Bianca Maria and the virgins in *Le vergini delle rocce*. Literally, they come into being through the male protagonist's breath of life, and their perfection can only be accounted for through their aesthetic and imaginary origins.

This aestheticizing impulse proves crucial in understanding how Pantea, Bianca Maria, and the three virgins serve to illuminate the creative desires of their male counterparts. This impulse, though, cannot be separated from the constructive qualities of necrophilic desire that we see throughout the novel and that are showcased in the climactic scene of Umbelino and Pantea's tragic episode – the hour of death that is also the hour of essential life. As Claudio imagines the moment in which Umbelino kills his sister, he emphasizes its oneiric qualities:

E in una sera d'estate, piena di prestigî fatali, scoccò l'ora della morte. Tutto era inverisimile e favorevole come in un sogno. Entrambi stavano presso la fontana eloquente e rinfrescavano le loro mani nell'umida ombra, taciturni. Una febbre d'inferno ardeva nei polsi di Umbelino mentre egli teneva gli occhi fissi alla immagine di Pantea rispecchiata dall'acqua sotto il chiarore delle stelle. Come in un sogno le sue mani, con la stessa facilità con cui avrebber vinto lo stelo di un giglio, quasi magicamente, piegarono la persona di Pantea verso l'immagine profonda finché l'una si confuse nell'altra e la fontana tenne un candido cadavere...<sup>40</sup>

[And on a summer evening, full of fatal conjuring, the hour of death struck. Everything was unreal and auspicious as in a dream. They stood by the eloquent fountain and refreshed their hands in the humid shade, taciturn. An infernal fever burned in Umbelino's wrists while he kept his eyes fixed on the image of Pantea reflected in the water under the dim light of the stars. As in a dream, his hands, with the same ease with which they would have overpowered a lily's stem, almost magically, bent Pantea's body toward the deep image until one blended with the other and the fountain contained a snow-white cadaver...]

Here, the fairy-tale elements from elsewhere in the novel are clear: the dream, the aquatic and floral motifs, and the marvelous description of hands moving “quasi magicamente.”<sup>41</sup> The most remarkable moment occurs when Umbelino succeeds—or, to be more precise, his hands magically succeed—in uniting Pantea with her image in the fountain (“finché l'una si confuse nell'altra”). Pantea's absorption within her image further recalls the myth of Narcissus, though of course here it is Umbelino who projects the narcissistic reverie and death upon her body – his eyes linger upon her reflection,

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<sup>40</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> As a whole, the passage reflects not only Umbelino's “volontà” but also the extent to which his actions are filtered through a Pre-Raphaelite lens, replete with floral and aquatic symbols.

though it remains unclear where her eyes gaze.<sup>42</sup> As Umbelino watches Pantea through her reflection, he becomes, in a way, both Echo and Narcissus.

This dizzying *mise en abyme* of gazes and identification culminates in a death that is at once hallucinatory, sadistic, masochistic, and poetic – these various elements come together in Claudio’s imaginary voyeurism. The scene thus supports Andrea Mirabile’s assertion that vision, in D’Annunzio’s work, “has often erotic and violent overtones, as scopophilia mingles with both spiritual contemplation and sadistic eroticism,” just as the use of the alliterative “candido cadavere” renders this link between aesthetics and violence all the more clear.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the ellipses call for an interpretive completion of the story within the reader’s mind, inviting both Claudio and his readers to imagine the transformative moment of necrophilia.

In imagining this “ora di vita essenziale,” Claudio places himself in Umbelino’s position, just as he associates the three virgins with Pantea. On a stylistic level, he establishes this parallel when he describes his pause at the fountain with the prince after the story has been recounted. Here, Claudio reports his own vision of Pantea, a vision that is divided in three parts: “io vidi nella limpidezza glaciale *la funesta bellezza di Pantea e le bianche mani concave a fior d’acqua come due petali di magnolia e la molle capellatura fluttuante sotto le zampe dei cavalli*” [“I saw in the icy clearness *the tragic beauty of Pantea and the concave white hands on the water’s surface like two magnolia petals and the drenched hair floating under the horses’ shoes*”].<sup>44</sup> This tripartite structure recalls the famous tricolon in the novel’s opening line: “Io vidi con questi occhi mortali in breve tempo *schiuersi e splendere e poi sfiorire* e l’una dopo l’altra perire tre anime senza pari: *le più belle e le più ardenti e le più misere* che sieno mai apparse nell’estreme discendenza d’una razza imperiosa” [“I saw with these mortal eyes in short time *open up and shine and then fade* and one after another perish three souls without equal: *the most beautiful and the most ardent and the most miserable* ever to have appeared in the last descendants of an imperious race”].<sup>45</sup> Just as Claudio establishes that the three virgins are both three and one—playing upon the Christian trinity—this vision of Pantea insists upon a tripartite structure on a stylistic level. Our narrator’s appreciation of the incestuous and murderous brother is thus reinforced through his own imagination of the sister.

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<sup>42</sup> Paola Culicelli suggestively links this narcissistic absorption within (and projection of) the self to incest: “Considerando quanto spesso in d’Annunzio il legame tra amante e amata acquista un carattere sororale, l’amore tra fratello e sorella sia adombrato dal fantasma dell’incesto e l’immagine dell’io proiettata all’esterno, sull’altro, venga investita dalla libido, si può ipotizzare che il fratello che guarda la sorella, l’amante che contempla l’amata e l’io narcisista che mira se stesso coincidano” [“Considering how often in d’Annunzio the link between lover and beloved acquires a sisterly character, how often the love between brother and sister is clouded by the phantom of incest, and how often the image of the self projected externally onto the other, comes to be invested by the libido, one could hypothesize that the brother who looks at the sister, the lover who contemplates the beloved, and the narcissistic ‘I’ who looks at himself coincide”] Culicelli, *L’archetipo dell’anima: miti e immagini femminili in d’Annunzio* (Roma: UniversItalia, 2015), 30-31.

<sup>43</sup> Andrea Mirabile, “Visual Intertextualities in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*,” *MLN* 128, no. 1 (2013): 128.

<sup>44</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 94. Emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis mine.

Claudio's call for the aesthetic imagination recurs in other moments in the novel that associate the virgins with their deathly images. Claudio's appreciation of Violante's beauty, in particular, conjoins desire and violence:

Pieni della desolazione magnifica e tremenda che s'esaltava nel cielo, i miei occhi incontrarono il volto della vergine così violentemente irradiato dal riverbero che n'ebbero una gioia quasi dolorosa. E io provai un desiderio folle di stringere quella testa fra le mie mani, di rovesciarla indietro, di accostarla al mio respiro, di investigarla sempre più da presso, d'imprimerne ogni linea nel mio pensiero, — non dissimile a colui il quale abbia rinvenuto sotto le glebe sterili il frammento sublime da cui il mondo riavrà la gloria di un'idea che pareva estinta.<sup>46</sup>

[Full of the magnificent and tremendous desolation that inflamed the sky, my eyes found the face of the virgin so violently shining from the reflection and experienced an almost painful joy. And I felt a deranged desire to squeeze that head in my hands, to turn it back, to pull it near with my breath, to investigate it always closer, to impress every line in my mind, — not unlike he who had rediscovered under the lifeless soil the sublime fragment from which the world will regain the glory of an idea that seemed extinct.]

This passage insists upon Claudio's aesthetic response to "il volto della vergine." It begins by identifying his eyes as the subject, and their encounter with Violante's face leads directly to his "desiderio folle," at once artistic and destructive. His need to squeeze and twist her head subtly shifts to the wish to bring it close enough to study and to imprint her image in his memory; the initial demented desire becomes refined in this investigating mode, as he must strangle Violante in order to internalize her beauty. When Claudio ultimately compares his own impulses to those of "colui il quale abbia rinvenuto sotto le glebe sterili il frammento sublime da cui il mondo riavrà la gloria di un'idea che pareva estinta," he furthermore lays bare his conception of himself as a savior and also as possessing unique access to the past, a crucial theme in both the political and fairy-tale narratives.<sup>47</sup> Violante herself is of course established as a figure of eternal and threatening beauty in her opening monologue in the *Prologo*, and Claudio's desire to "imprimerne ogni linea nel mio pensiero" echoes her self-description: "I poeti vedevano in me la creatura speciosa, nelle cui linee visibili era incluso il più alto mistero della Vita, il mistero della Bellezza rivelata in carne mortale dopo intervalli secolari, a traverso l'imperfezione di discendenze innumerevoli" ["The poets saw in me the striking creature, in whose visible lines were included the highest

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>47</sup> This self-mythologizing also relates to the necrophilic act through its exceptional status. As Downing argues, "[t]he alliance of the poetic persona with death—the adoption of a necrophilic position—is a way of demarcating, in the most extreme way, the marginal emotional and political territory which the artist maps out for her/himself in the nineteenth century." Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 41. This notion of extremity and excess also recalls Bárberi Squarotti's discussion of Claudio's preference for horrid excess over bourgeois mediocrity. Bárberi Squarotti, *La sabbia del tempo*, 218-19.

mystery of Life, the mystery of Beauty revealed in mortal flesh after centuries-old pauses, across the imperfection of innumerable descendants”].<sup>48</sup>

This aestheticizing, and Thanatos-worshipping, impulse does not only appear in relation to Violante. It finds a parallel in his reaction to Massimilla and his desire to preserve her perfection in a funereal form. The perfection of death appears often in relation to Massimilla, perhaps unsurprisingly, given her connection to mysticism, masochism, and self-renunciation, and she is the most explicitly Pre-Raphaelite-tinged of the three virgins:

Se io possedessi la potenza di foggarti un bel fato in quella guisa che l'artefice forma la cera obbediente, o tu che mi venisti incontro uscendo da un orto arido ove un vóto funebre ti aveva chiusa, Massimilla, io così compirei con la morte la tua figura ideale, con l'opportuna morte io compirei la tua perfezione [...] Io farei che, guidata dal divino ricordo, tu ritornassi al luogo ove in sogno io colsi i coronali anemoni per versarli sul tuo capo, e quivi tu ritrovassi presso il marmo orario l'attitudine armoniosa in che prima io ti lodai. E l'attimo in cui il punto d'ombra attingesse l'estremità dell'anulare, quello sarebbe della tua morte. Allora io medesimo, sotto l'immobile sguardo della cariatide prostrata, vorrei cavar la fossa per il tuo frale; e ti vorrei comporre come le gentili donne composero Beatrice nella visione di Dante, e copirti anche la testa di quel loro velo.<sup>49</sup>

[If I had the power to mold for you a beautiful fate in the way that a creator forms the obedient wax, oh you who came towards me from an arid garden where a funereal vow had enclosed you, Massimilla, I would achieve with your death your ideal figure, with your opportune death I would achieve your perfection [...] I would make it so that, guided by divine memory, you returned to the place where in dreams I gathered the coronal anemones to pour them over your head, and there you would find once more, near the marble sundial, the harmonious mood that I had lauded in you before. And the moment in which the point of shadow reached farthest on the ring – that would be the moment of your death.

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<sup>48</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 10. Violante's description of herself quite clearly recalls Pater's famous description of the *Gioconda* who has traversed centuries and seen the secrets of the grave. Carol Christ argues that Pater's *Gioconda* serves as a self-image for her creator (a fitting idea for Claudio's ventriloquized Violante, as we shall soon see): "Pater here, like Rossetti, figures his ideal of aesthetic identity in a woman who contains within herself the capacity for a perpetual reincarnation that sums up all thoughts and modes of life in a continually delicate and various aesthetic experience. To claim a more limited lineage for Pater's Lady Lisa than he does himself, she is the fullest incarnation of the nineteenth-century portrait of a woman who subsumes and expresses the artist's identity." Carol Christ, "Painting the Dead: Portraiture and Necrophilia in Victorian Art and Poetry," in *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 147.

<sup>49</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 167-168. That D'Annunzio here links necrophilic desire to a Pre-Raphaelite-infused vision of Dante is hardly surprising. For a reading of the sex-death connection as it relates to Dante reception in this period, please see Robert Zweig, "Death-in-Love": Rossetti and the Victorian Journey Back to Dante," in *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. Regina Barreca, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 178-193.

Then I myself, under the immobile gaze of the prostrated caryatid, would like to dig the grave for your body; and I would like to lay you out like the gentle women laid out Beatrice in Dante's vision, and also to cover your head with their veil.]

Here, multiple discourses relating to death, the woman, and her image, are in play, but throughout the entire passage, Claudio is at pains to note how his desire to turn the alive Massimilla into an unalive body is related to an aesthetic project. At first, he compares his work to that of the artisan, and identifies death as a necessary accomplice in his goal of creating her "figura ideale" and "perfezione." The artisan of the first sentence later transforms into the women who announce Beatrice in Dante's deathly vision in the *Vita nuova*, yet the literary and artistic theme remains the same, even if transposed to the level of high art. With Dante in mind, though, we may say that the woman's death becomes necessary for the lover's artistic creation.

Following the theme of famous dead women in literary creations, and expanding the motif of water, Claudio subsequently indulges in a fantasy that evokes Ophelia, as he imagines Massimilla dead along the river:

Il naviglio scorreva su la nivea greggia lievemente: pel solco i calici e le foglie ondeggiavano lasciando scorgere nella limpida cristallina la pallida selva degli steli, pallida e pigra come se la nutrisse il limo letèo. La ruina di Linturno, tutta abbracciata dalle acque e dai fiori, aveva nella sua secolare inerzia lapidea l'apparenza d'una congerie di grandi scheletri infranti. Non è nelle orbite dei teschi umani tanta vacuità esanime quanta era nei cavi di quelle pietre consunte, imbianchite come ossa dalle brume e dalle canicole. E io pensai che traghettavo una vergine morta.<sup>50</sup>

[The ship skimmed smoothly over the snow-white flock: in its wake, the stalks and the leaves swayed, revealing in the crystalline clearness the pallid forest of stems, pallid and listless as if nourished by the loam of the river Lethe. The ruin of Linturno, completely nestled in the waters and the flowers, had in its age-old, stony inertia the appearance of a heap of grand shattered skeletons. There is not as much bloodless emptiness in the eye-sockets of human skulls as there was in the recesses of those worn stones, whitened like bone from the mists and the heat. And I thought that I was ferrying a dead virgin.]

Not only does this morbid passage reveal an intertextual interest in Ophelia, it also contains intra-textual references to the story of Umbelino and Pantea. The "pallida selva

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<sup>50</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 170-171. Lisa Downing comments on the role of Ophelia in the Victorian aesthetic/necrophilic imagination: "The Victorian fashion for mourning and Pre-Raphaelite images of beautiful dead women create idealized representations removed from the frightening abyssal reality of decay and decomposition. John Everett Millais's representation of the dead Ophelia (1852) as a waxy, ethereal, doll-like figure is a perfect example of this highly aestheticized fetishization." Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 7.



degli steli” recalls the brother’s crime in which he drowns his sister “con la stessa facilità con cui avrebber vinto lo stelo di un giglio.”<sup>51</sup> The “secolare inerzia lapidea” furthermore transplants the “chiostra lapidea” to the new setting.

The obsession with the image of the dead woman and the connection between necrophilia and aesthetics in *Le vergini delle rocce* become even more pronounced when reading the novel’s prologue in relation to the interlude of Umbelino and Pantea. On the novel’s first page, Claudio reminisces on his experience with the three virgins and at first calls into question the relationship between reality and fantasy, before ultimately uniting them and indicating that his story will not aim towards the mimetic reproduction of reality:

Tali io le conobbi nel tedio dei giorni comuni o sono esse le creature del mio desiderio e della mia perplessità?  
Tali io le conobbi nel tedio dei giorni comuni ed esse sono le creature del mio desiderio e della mia perplessità.<sup>52</sup>

[Did I know them in the tedium of common days or are they the creatures of my desire and my bewilderment?  
I knew them in the tedium of common days and they are the creatures of my desire and my bewilderment.]

The delicate shift from “o” [“or”] to “ed” [“and”] and from a question to an assertion comprises a guide for how to read the text, as Claudio deliberately plays upon his ability to transform the women he once knew into creatures of his art. As we have seen, it is this impulse to rewrite, to “ricomporre interiormente,” that characterizes his reading and re-telling of the Umbelino and Pantea interlude. Here, it finds expression in the desire to assert mimetic truth alongside its creative improvement. Like an image of reality seen in a great mirror, to echo the quote from Leonardo da Vinci that opens the novel, Claudio’s descriptions of the virgins improve upon reality and concentrate its beauty.

After answering his own question about the virgins and asserting his desire to transform them through the power of his desire and his art, Claudio comments on their role in his narrative: “Quel brano della trama di mia vita, che fu da loro medesime operato inconsapevolmente, ha per me tal pregio inestimabile ch’io voglio impregnarlo del più acuto aroma conservatore per impedire che il tempo in me lo impallidisca o lo distrugga. Per ciò oggi io tento l’arte” [“That piece of the plot of my life, which was worked unconsciously by them, has for me such inestimable distinction that I want to drench it in the most acute preserving aroma to prevent time from paling it or destroying it in me. For that reason today I try art”].<sup>53</sup> While discussing “quel brano della trama di mia vita”—an hendecasyllabic play on Dante’s “nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” [“in the middle of our life’s journey”] that pointedly individualizes the experience and aestheticizes the “cammino” into a “trama”—Claudio first identifies the three virgins as having shaped his life (“da loro medesime operato

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<sup>51</sup> D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. The reference to the “più acuto aroma conservatore” recalls, in part, the embalming passage with Massimilla, but it also is reminiscent of Violante’s obsession with perfumes.

inconsapevolmente”). The simultaneous presence of the textual and the textile in the hendecasyllable (“trama” as “plot” and “trama” as “weft”) invites a reading of Anatolia, Massimilla, and Violante as the Parcae, the Greek Fates who spin, measure, and cut the thread of a man’s life.<sup>54</sup> Re notes the paradoxical independence of Claudio’s “plot agents”: “As re-embodiments of the Fates, or the Parcae, they seem to represent a revolt of the symbolic: they determine the fate of their own creator.”<sup>55</sup> This ambiguity serves to highlight how Claudio’s narrative in the prologue depends upon his ability to identify these virgins as both his own creations and as goddesses possessing and speaking through him.

If the virgins started out as the weavers of Claudio’s life, they finish the passage in a completely different position, as they await the protagonist’s artistic memorialization of their stories. The following sentence completes the shift in agency, as Claudio becomes the novelist whose work will protect the virgins from the passage of time: “Per ciò oggi io tento l’arte.” Perhaps that “brano” di “trama” was (*fu*, in the *passato remoto*) woven by them, but now the present-tense narrator operates on their story, mixing it with his own fantasies and speaking through the voices of the Fates, breathing life into them. While it seemed at first that Claudio was an object, we now discover that he is the only real subject in the novel.

This notion of the play between subject and object may at first seem disconnected from the necrophilic impulses explored in the story of Umbelino and Pantea, yet as we saw with the ancestral *demónico*, Claudio insists on identifying with all that exists around him. In her analysis of poems by Baudelaire and Browning, Downing proposes that identification becomes a key element in their construction of necrophilic desire, suggesting that:

[t]he real subject and object of the deathly drama is the subject (poet) himself, and [...] the beloved is an internalized, highly idealized object that forms part of the poet’s psyche and with which there is strong identification. Thus, the woman’s identity is borrowed to allow the game to be played: the poet is doing to her (the part of him that is split off as an other) what he cannot do to himself.<sup>56</sup>

In this account, wishful identification allows the necrophile to have it both ways, so to speak, by vicariously enjoying the oblivion of death visited upon the beloved’s body. In D’Annunzio’s novel a similar process occurs, though here the focus seems to be more on Claudio’s ability to give voice to the virgins once they have been established as silent figures. In other words, the only way to fully idealize them and transform them into creatures of his art is to kill them. Through this implicit murder and subsequent ventriloquism, Claudio has absorbed them into his own identity, and his necrophilic desire, therefore, involves an internalization that allows for total control over his “ricomponimento interiore.” He enjoys their death precisely because it makes possible an endless game of de- and re-animation.

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<sup>54</sup> On the following page, Claudio refers even more explicitly to the Parcae, and establishes the virgins as victims of their mother, Necessity. D’Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Re, “D’Annunzio’s Novel *Le vergini delle rocce*,” 247.

<sup>56</sup> Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 85.

The connection between the necrophilia of the Umbelino and Pantea story and its echoes in Claudio's response to Massimilla and Violante thus links to the monologues in the prologue through this game of identification that relies upon making the women unalive. By setting up the entire novel as an exploration of art's potential to transform experience, Claudio undergoes the irresistible desire to ventriloquize these women who are both real and creatures of his bewildered desire. As he clearly states, he voices their interior monologues, as he questions their own ability to speak: "Ma forse quel ritmo in loro non aveva parole" ["But perhaps that rhythm in them did not have words"].<sup>57</sup> After speaking through each of them, he comments upon this very practice in the last passage of the prologue:

Così parlano in me le tre principesse mentre le evoco aspettanti nell'ora irrevocabile. Forse così, credendo che un messaggiere della Vita s'affacciasse ai cancelli del chiuso giardino, ciascuna riconosceva la sua virtù, emanava la sua seduzione, ravvivava la sua speranza, esagitava il sogno ch'era per congelarsi. – Ora illuminata da una grande e solenne poesia, lucentissima ora in cui emergevano e splendevano dall'interno cielo dell'anima tutte le possibilità.<sup>58</sup>

[So speak in me the three princesses while I conjure them waiting in the irrevocable hour. Perhaps in this way, believing that a messenger of Life would show himself at the gates of the enclosed garden, each recognized her virtue, emanated her seduction, rekindled her hope, excited the dream that was about to be suspended. – Hour illuminated by a grand and solemn poetry, shining hour in which all possibilities emerged from and gleamed in the internal heavens of the soul.]

Yet again, Claudio establishes his dual position as object and subject, casting the princesses as speaking through him even as he evokes them; the "mentre" that links both phrases is particularly telling, as it allows for the simultaneous subjectivity of both participants. The ambiguity as to the act of ventriloquism — who is speaking through whom? — underscores Claudio's preoccupation with the place of the female characters in his artistic endeavor. While the reader understands that Claudio's pretense to objecthood is ultimately hollow, given his status as all-powerful "io-narratore," this hint of equal subjectivity and ventriloquism is central for his game of internalization.

This passage also provides yet another play on presence and absence, life and death, as Claudio begins in the present tense ("Così parlano in me le tre principesse mentre le evoco") before shifting to the *imperfetto* of the next lines ("Forse così [...] ciascuna riconosceva la sua virtù, emanava la sua seduzione, ravvivava la sua speranza, esagitava il sogno ch'era per congelarsi"). Past and present are simultaneous, as the distinctions between them are rendered meaningless through Claudio's "arte." Finally, the last line of the prologue, which exalts the *ora illuminata e lucentissima*, anticipates the "ora di vita essenziale" and "ora di morte" of Pantea. Is not this moment of

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<sup>57</sup> D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

ventriloquism, bright and illuminated by poetry, what occurs in the ellipses after Pantea becomes the “candido cadavere” of Claudio’s imagination?

Ultimately, our narrator provides us with the tools to read his own story both through the stylistic techniques of the prologue and through his interpretation and rewriting of the “episodio tragico” of Umbelino and Pantea, and both moments in the text revolve around the role of necrophilic desire in artistic production and its capacity to simultaneously arrest and animate the woman’s image. In order to cross the threshold between living subject and dead object through creative fantasy, Claudio and Umbelino must first render their beloveds unalive. To repurpose a line from William Morris, much appreciated by D’Annunzio, to “smite this sleeping world awake” initially requires putting it to sleep.<sup>59</sup>



*Le vergini delle rocce* and “Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka” may seem strange bedfellows at first: D’Annunzio’s novel, after all, presents itself as a highbrow “poema-romanzo,” while Vernon Lee’s short story belongs, for all of its idiosyncrasies, to the more popular tradition of the Victorian supernatural. Yet despite the differences of genre and language, they are tied together through shared Aestheticist concerns and their depiction of perverse desire and its relation to larger aesthetic and critical questions. Relatedly, they are also linked through their firm grounding in the perspectives of their protagonists – one could perhaps say that both the novel and the story take the form of the diary – and they combine this investment in solipsism with an obsession with the figure of the dead woman.

As in *Le vergini delle rocce*, the theme of desirous identification coexists here alongside the depiction of necrophilic perversion. “Amour Dure” is quite explicitly concerned with the interpenetration of past and present and how this is negotiated through the female body. As many critics have already noted, boundaries – self and other, past and present, objectivity and subjectivity – seem to be constantly blurred in the story, but it is the boundary between life and death that sets up the main conflict in the tale. The late-nineteenth-century protagonist’s obsession with Medea da Carpi, the story’s requisite Renaissance *femme fatale*, is portrayed as a necrophilic fixation, one that is irrevocably linked to his attraction to historiography. By focusing on eroticism and sexual desire, Lee casts doubt on notions of objectivity in historical inquiry and dramatizes the imaginative leap required in the interaction between the present and the past, the living and the dead. Ultimately, “Amour Dure” demonstrates how Spiridion’s necrophilia opens up a space of possibility – the past, here embodied in the dead woman, becomes fertile ground for his modern imagination.

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<sup>59</sup> This is the last verse from William Morris’s poem for *The Rose Bower* (the fourth of Burne-Jones’s *Briar Rose* series): “Here lies the hoarded love, the key / To all the treasure that shall be; / Come fated hand the gift to take, / And smite this sleeping world awake.” William Morris, “For the Briar Rose,” in *Poems by the Way* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1891), 125.

## Necrophilic histories

While history, as we have seen, plays an integral role in *Le vergini delle rocce* – as Re remarks, it provides “specular images for Claudio’s self” – Lee’s story moves historiography into the center of the frame and, in a way, collapses Claudio’s relationship with his ancestor and with the virgins into one plotline.<sup>60</sup> This is achieved in large part through her choice of protagonist: the young historian Spiridion Trepka, born in Poland but trained and based in Germany. Upon his arrival in the fictional town of Urbana, Spiridion muses on his desire for an authentic encounter with the Italian past, one that allows him to escape the staid and dusty tradition of supposedly civilized, Northern European scholarship. Longing for a real and therefore uncivilized, or primitive, encounter, he lambasts the practices of his scholarly colleagues:

I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past; and was this Italy, was this the Past? [...] Is this folly? Is it falsehood? Am I not myself a product of modern, northern civilization; is not my coming to Italy due to this very modern scientific vandalism, which has given me a travelling scholarship because I have written a book like all those other atrocious books of erudition and art-criticism?<sup>61</sup>

Here, in the opening lines of his diary, Spiridion presents us with a number of binary oppositions: past and present, south and north, truth and falsehood, and, finally, a notion of scientific vandalism as opposed to some vaguely purer relationship with history that, for him, involves a bodily encounter (“face to face”) with an imperious Past. Through this series of tortured questions, he also reveals his uncertainty about both his own place in the extant scholarship and the possibility of uniting his more fanciful yearnings with his identity as a historian. Is he just another vandal, coming to Italy for scholarly pillaging? Or can his passionate longing transcend his northern training?

Spiridion’s anxieties about the proper way to view, interpret, and experience the past resonate with Vernon Lee’s own musings in her historiographical works of the 1880s and 1890s. Like Spiridion, Lee herself opposes the dry strains of northern scholarship and explores alternative approaches to history.<sup>62</sup> “Amour Dure” seems particularly indebted to Lee’s early series of essays on the Renaissance, *Euphorion*:

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<sup>60</sup> Re, “Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Vergini delle rocce*,” 261.

<sup>61</sup> Vernon Lee, “Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 41.

<sup>62</sup> Later in the story, we learn that Spiridion is twenty-four years old, the same age as Vernon Lee when she published her first work, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880). Spiridion’s distaste for pedantic northern scholarship also finds echoes in Lee’s oeuvre. As Christa Zorn has pointed out, Lee’s historical works have often been seen in contrast to German historicism: “Lee’s first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, established her as an expert in Italian history and culture, which she considered her intellectual home from which she challenged especially pedantic German Historicism. She tried to shake off the universal (male) voice of historical scholarship by approaching history through biography, impression, and experience.” Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), xxviii-xxix.

*Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* (1884).<sup>63</sup> In the introduction to this collection, Lee criticizes the notion of a scientific approach to the past in a manner that is strikingly reminiscent of the opening lines of Spiridion Trepka's diary: "[I]s the past to be treated only scientifically? and can it not give us, and do we not owe it, something more than a mere understanding of why and how? Is it a thing so utterly dead as to be fit only for the scalpel and the microscope?"<sup>64</sup> Leave the autopsies to the Dryadusts, Lee seems to say, and let the true historian turn to the past with a willingness to feel and a longing for beauty. The question remains, though, of how to avoid treating the past in a scientific matter, of how to transform the autopsy into a "face to face" encounter.

In *Euphorion*, Lee's preferred method is to structure her analysis around fragments, essays that record her own personal impressions and fancies, instead of attempting to write yet another "encyclopaedic atlas" that relies on the scientific position of the "objective" historian.<sup>65</sup> In presenting a series of vignettes constructed around her experiences in Italy, she reflects the clear influence of Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). As noted earlier in this study, Pater argues that criticism necessitates an inward gaze, a focus on the critic's *subjective* impression. The first step is not to situate the art object in a historical or socio-cultural context, but rather to ask a series of personal questions: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence?"<sup>66</sup> This repositioning, or subjectivizing, of the critical gaze forms the foundation of Pater's *Renaissance* and Lee's *Euphorion*, and, as we have begun to understand, it also underpins the perspectives of Claudio Cantelmo and Spiridion Trepka.

Instead of the scientific method, then, we are treated to a more personal approach. Unsurprisingly, given the general tenor of the tales in *Hauntings*, Spiridion's historiographical aspirations intersect with his yearning for erotic pleasure.<sup>67</sup> Like

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<sup>63</sup> The critic Enrico Nencioni, one of Lee's closest Italian friends, considered *Euphorion* to be a foundational text for students of the Renaissance, as well as a text that reinforced the bonds of gratitude between Italy and England. Please see Enrico Nencioni, *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Firenze: Successori le Monnier, 1897), 97-98.

<sup>64</sup> Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, vol. I (London: T. F. Unwin, 1884), 12.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>67</sup> In her analysis of Lee's fantastic stories, Christa Zorn makes an excellent point about their conflation of the past and the feminine and the subsequent sexualization of historical knowledge: "In a slightly mocking tone, Lee exposes her narrators' possessive yearnings for the women who promise pagan pleasures — but at a price. We are never quite sure if the protagonists desire a more glamorous past or an exquisite sexual experience, since both become interchangeable in their self-conscious rhetoric." Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 140. On a more general, less gendered, level, Nicole Fluhr similarly argues that the ghosts in *Hauntings* are individual embodiments of the historical past: "The imaginative collaborations between the living and the dead in Lee's stories are specific relations between people that simultaneously stand for generalized relations between the past and the present; the collection's notion of haunting thus operates at the level of psychology and at the level of history concurrently. The individual ghosts in *Hauntings* function as metonyms for history; they haunt men and women of the 1890s as the historical haunts modern life. Personifying the past, the charismatic figures with whom the narrators are obsessed make

Claudio Cantelmo in his portrait gallery in *Le vergini delle rocce*, he will tether himself to one historical figure – his own kind of *demònico*, who both commands him and is commanded by him – one who seems to embody not the virtues of Renaissance Italy but rather its vices. Unlike Claudio, though, Spiridion seeks a beloved rather than an ancestor. Early in the tale, we learn that his research of Urbania’s history is intimately connected to his fascination with a Renaissance woman: “This history of Urbania is not without its romance, although that romance (as usual) has been overlooked by our Dryadusts. Even before coming here I felt attracted by the strange figure of a woman, which appeared from out of the dry pages of Gualtiero’s and Padre de Sanctis’ histories of this place. This woman is Medea...”<sup>68</sup> While dry histories ignore the crucial romance and erotic intrigue of Urbania, Spiridion has arrived to the town armed with his own imaginative faculties, which are predisposed toward the Cinquecento *femme fatale*, Medea da Carpi, a Lucrezia Borgia-like figure who seduces and kills in equal measure and comes to stand in for his romantic conception of the Past.

The specter of Lucrezia Borgia clearly alerts the reader that we are faced with a violent Renaissance past, one that embodies the supposed decadence, licentiousness, and luxury of the Cinquecento in the nineteenth-century imagination. This is “the decaying Italy of the Renaissance” that Lee discusses in “The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists” – a “decaying” which, in its exoticism, brilliance, and wickedness, proved indelibly alluring.<sup>69</sup> Medea’s life – and afterlife – of crime is Burckhardt and Symonds’s *Phantasie* in action. As Spiridion notes, “[r]ight and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist, least of all for creatures like Medea”<sup>70</sup>; “[t]o suppose Medea a cruel woman is as grotesque as to call her an immoral woman.”<sup>71</sup> Categories of morality cease to exist in her realm of unbridled individualism and illicit sexuality.

Medea soon haunts Spiridion’s dreams, waking and sleeping, prompting him to question his current profession: “I can’t free myself from the thought of this Medea da Carpi. In my walks, my mornings in the Archives, my solitary evenings, I catch myself thinking over the woman. Am I turning novelist instead of historian? And still it seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant.”<sup>72</sup> This type of knowledge without (or beyond) facts haunts much of Lee’s work, particularly her fiction. Nicole Fluhr, for example, has analyzed Lee’s fantastical stories as fictional precursors to Lee’s “Empathy (*Einfühlung*)” in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Physiological Aesthetics* (1913).<sup>73</sup> Fluhr argues that “Lee’s view of history here blurs

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history personal; they concentrate its fascination in an individual who effectively stands for a historical epoch. The stories represent an ongoing traffic between present and past life that ghosts both represent and enact.” Nicole Fluhr, “Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee’s *Hauntings*,” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 289.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, “Amour Dure,” 45.

<sup>69</sup> Vernon Lee, “The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists,” in *Euphorion*, vol. I, 60. Sandro Melani notes that Medea possesses a “tipica bellezza tardo-rinascimentale, imperfetta ma dotata di un fascino sinistro di seduzione” [“typical late-Renaissance beauty, imperfect but endowed with a sinister fascination of seduction”]. Sandro Melani, “I ritratti fatali di Vernon Lee,” *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jul. 1996): 132.

<sup>70</sup> Lee, “Amour Dure,” 56.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>73</sup> Lee is commonly credited as the first scholar to use the term “empathy” in English, and her concept was adapted from late-nineteenth-century German theorists, particularly Theodor Lipps. In her work on

the boundaries between past and present in much the same way that her notion of empathy confounds distinctions between individual subjects. It invites us to ask whether Spiridion Trepka is able, by virtue of his empathy for Medea da Carpi, to know her, or whether what he learns is in fact his own desire, which he has projected onto the past. That is, does he learn to know Medea, or does he effectively create her?"<sup>74</sup> Thus breaking down the barriers between empathy and solipsism, history and fiction, Fluhr continues, Vernon Lee presents a radical vision of the relationship between self and other, present and past.

As we shall see throughout "Amour Dure" – and as we saw in *Le vergini delle rocce* – this indecision between fact and fiction, between reality and fantasy, and between objective and subjective knowledge, lies at the very heart of necrophilic desire. Precisely through her status as a corpse, a silent figure from the past waiting for her potential reanimation, Medea offers Spiridion the possibility of a new kind of knowledge, one that transcends that of the Dryadusts, and yet the question remains of whether he can ever truly know her, of whether he can ever truly know the past.<sup>75</sup>

### **"Face to face with the Past"**

The question of whether Spiridion knows or creates Medea, whether he behaves as historian or novelist, becomes even more pronounced in a climactic scene of discovery, and, much like the scene of Umbelino and Pantea at the fountain in *Le*

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physiological aesthetics in the late 1890s and the early 1900s, Lee, along with her collaborator Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, focuses not only on emotional responses to works of art but also on the bodily reactions that tend to reproduce what the eye sees. Readings of their work have tended to focus not only on its theoretical implications but also on its potential displacement of lesbian sexuality. For more on Lee's understanding of empathy, please see Carolyn Burdett, "The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside: Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2 June 2011), <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>>; Susan Lanzoni, "Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics of Empathy," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2009): 330-54; Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Benjamin Morgan, "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 31-56; and Kathy Psomiades, "'Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace': Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora, 21-42 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> Fluhr, "Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee's *Hauntings*," 293. Fluhr's question, of course, draws us inexorably back to Claudio's opening query in his prologue: "Tali io le conobbi nel tedio dei giorni comuni o sono esse le creature del mio desiderio e della mia perplessità?" ["Did I know them in the tedium of common days or are they the creatures of my desire and my bewilderment?"] D'Annunzio, *Le vergini delle rocce*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> This worry about the inaccessibility of the feminine, the past, and the subjects of art as a whole is also a key feature of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work, as Carol Christ explains: "[Rossetti's] early work uses the portrait of the dead woman to explore the ultimate inaccessibility of the subjects that art strives to represent. Later in his career he seeks to endow portraits of women with a fetishistic power that absorbs the beholder within a mortifying female gaze." Christ, "Painting the dead," 141. Both stages of Rossetti's production find parallels in Lee's *Hauntings*, as she questions the possibility of knowing the other and characterizes her female figures as, in the words of Susan Navarette, "despotic femmes fatales and destroying bitch-goddesses." Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 155.



*vergini delle rocce*, this interlude illuminates what is truly at stake in Spiridion's desire and how such desire is constructed. While Spiridion is drawn to Medea even before his arrival, his obsession is solidified by the portraits of her that he discovers in Urbania. Though he first believes that only three portraits of her exist — a miniature, a bust, and a large painting with Duke Robert portrayed as Augustine and Medea as Cleopatra — one day he has an uncanny experience in the archives. Another portrait of Medea exists, this one miraculously more powerful than those he has seen before:

And such a portrait — Bronzino never painted a grander one. Against a background of harsh, dark blue, there stands out the figure of the Duchess (for it is Medea, the real Medea, a thousand times more real, individual, and powerful than in the other portraits), seated stiffly in a high-backed chair, sustained, as it were, almost rigid, by the stiff brocade of skirts and stomacher, stiffer for plaques of embroidered silver flowers and rows of seed pearl. The dress is, with its mixture of silver and pearl, of a strange dull red, a wicked poppy-juice colour, against which the flesh of the long, narrow hands with fringe-like fingers; of the long slender neck, and the face with bare forehead, looks white and hard, like alabaster. The face is the same as in the other portraits: the same rounded forehead, with the short fleece-like, yellowish-red curls; the same beautifully curved eyebrows, just barely marked; the same eyelids, a little tight across the eyes; the same lips, a little tight across the mouth; but with a purity of line, a dazzling splendour of skin, and intensity of look immeasurably superior to all the other portraits.<sup>76</sup>

This regal and refined painting is modeled after Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi, and the reference is reinforced by the tale's adoption of its title from the inscription on Lucrezia's necklace: "Amour dure sans fin." Indeed, around Medea's "throat, white as marble [...] hangs a gold collar, with the device on alternate enamelled medallions, 'AMOUR DURE – DURE AMOUR.'"<sup>77</sup> Medea's adoption and adaptation of the maxim, though, tellingly emphasizes not only the duration of love but also its cruelty.

The Bronzino-style portrait of Medea da Carpi serves as the centerpiece of "Amour Dure," and it focalizes Spiridion's imagination of his Renaissance love. Patricia Pulham has discussed Medea's image here in relation to her status as phallic mother, whose red dress and stiffness evoke castration.<sup>78</sup> Mary Patricia Kane,

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<sup>76</sup> Lee, "Amour Dure," 61-62.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>78</sup> See Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 123-125. Medea, of course, is named for a terrifying mother *par excellence*, though in this portrait, against the "harsh, dark blue" background with her "rows of seed pearl," she also emerges as a perversion of the Madonna enthroned. Christa Zorn argues, indeed, that the narrative of the tale as a whole presents a topsy-turvy Christian resurrection: "Spiridion's awaiting of the Christ Child as a little boy parallels his eager anticipation of Medea's revelation to him; and the Christian myth, which speaks of annunciation and the birth of Christ, unfolds for the reader in the substratum of the text. Medea, however, plots her own rebirth, vampire-like, because her return requires Trepka's death." Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 161. That Spiridion's death occurs at midnight Christmas Eve further underscores the subversion of Christian elements in the tale. As for Medea's vampire-like rebirth, Downing notes that "vampirism is perhaps as close as one can get to representing this shadowy idea of a death-driven passion which allows for both the

meanwhile, argues that the portrait reveals “a *femme fatale* who seems to be uncomfortably straining to keep her composure, as if she were wearing a tight mask of social propriety over a real self that might burst out of its confining disguise at any moment.”<sup>79</sup> Neither Kane nor Pulham, though, remark on the description’s repeated insistence on Medea’s deathly demeanor. Here we see a kind of rigor mortis, as her own stiff and rigid posture is echoed by the brocade of her skirt and stomacher, and her skin tightens across the eyes and lips. Her “bare forehead... white and hard, like alabaster” and her “throat, white as marble” further underline this aspect of her characterization and lend her a whiff of the tomb.<sup>80</sup>

Spiridion’s encounter with Medea’s portrait is his longed-for moment of coming “face to face with the Past,” a moment of what Herbert Tucker has termed, within the context of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, “the communicable thrill of historical contact, the rapture that annuls the death that poisons time.”<sup>81</sup> Yet, it is rendered hallucinatory by the moment that directly precedes his description of the painting, the moment in which he glimpses himself in an old mirror:

I approached, and looking at the frame, looked also, mechanically, into the glass. I gave a great start, and almost shrieked, I do believe — (it’s lucky the Munich professor is safe out of Urbania!). Behind my own image stood another, a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to mine; and that figure, that face, hers! Medea da Carpi’s! I turned sharp round, as white, I think, as the ghost I expected to see. On the wall opposite the

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passage into death and the survival of the victim, so that the death can be acted out again and again on the other.” Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, 114.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts. The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), 30.

<sup>80</sup> Such description renders explicit what numerous scholars of late-nineteenth-century literature have noted about the general discourse surrounding the portrait, namely, the extent to which it is associated with death, particularly with the death of beautiful women. In her article on Lee’s treatment of portraits in her essays and fictions, Catherine Maxwell suggests that stillness links the female corpse and the art object: “Apparently fixed or frozen, the female corpse and the art object are a sum of parts which can be lovingly exposed, perused and dissected, one by one, by the connoisseur.” Catherine Maxwell, “From Dionysus to ‘Dionea’: Vernon Lee’s Portraits,” *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1997): 254. Bronzino’s portrait, specifically, would be linked to this trope in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*. In that novel, the deathly ill American heiress Milly Theale gazes upon the portrait through tears after a lord notes her resemblance to the sitter: “Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair – as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands, and magnificently dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michaelangellesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage – only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.” Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1902), vol. 1, 246.

<sup>81</sup> Herbert, Tucker, “Wanted Dead or Alive: Browning’s Historicism,” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 34. For further explorations of such themes in Browning’s dramatic monologues, please see Renee Allyson Fox, “Robert Browning’s Necropoetics,” *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2011): 463-483; and Adam Roberts, “Browning, the Dramatic Monologue, and the Resuscitation of the Dead,” in *The Victorian Supernatural*, eds. Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 109-127.

mirror, just a pace or two behind where I had been standing, hung a portrait.<sup>82</sup>

In halting speech, Spiridion here recounts a gradual process of recognition through which the image of Medea slowly solidifies, emerging unexpectedly next to his own face, which has itself already been rendered uncanny by his disorientation in what should be the familiar space of the archives.<sup>83</sup> The presence of the mirror complicates any straightforward reading of his discovery of the portrait – crucially, it is only when looking at himself that Spiridion finds Medea.<sup>84</sup>

This narcissistic reverie proves suggestive, though Catherine Maxwell argues against a psychological understanding of Medea as Spiridion’s double, proposing that Medea is instead a dominating force, whose “uncanny vitality” radiates from the portrait.<sup>85</sup>

Trepka looks into the mirror and sees what a psychological reading might propose as his epipsychic other, Medea, the woman he has created out of his own fantasy. And yet this story, like Lee’s other tales, seems to move beyond psychological narratives of identification and projection. Medea, whom Trepka hymns as ‘mia dea’ — my goddess — (p. 35), does not simply replace his mirror-image, she appears behind it demanding his attention. She then makes him turn away from the mirror to her own portrait hanging on the wall opposite.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Lee, “Amour Dure,” 61.

<sup>83</sup> As Kane notes of this scene, “[t]he concept of the archive as a repository and display room of a complete historical knowledge is undermined in this passage where not even the window onto the outside world, with its snow covered mountain as geographic evidence of location, can help us get our bearings. This is a space where topographic features are of no help in recovering a sense of orientation.” Kane, *Spurious Ghosts*, 29. Her analysis here is partly inspired by Michel Foucault’s understanding of how the fantastic operates in the works of Gustave Flaubert: “Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasure lies dormant in documents.” Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, translated by D. F. in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 90. The notion of a fantasy “carefully deployed in the hushed library” seems especially suited to Lee’s essays and stories, which repeatedly dramatize the theme of knowledge lost and found, of histories buried and disinterred.

<sup>84</sup> Patricia Pulham applies a psychoanalytic reading of the scene, drawing on Donald Winnicott’s theories of child development: “For Winnicott, then, the portrait is crucially linked to the mother’s face and to one’s perception of one’s own identity in that face. Given this model, the prevalence of the portrait in Lee’s tales takes on an added significance. Not only does it indicate an exploration of the self, it also suggests that this journey is undertaken within the safe ‘holding environment’ provided by the maternal gaze, and by her simultaneous absence and presence within those portraits which are, according to Winnicott, primary features of the maternal role in the transitional object phase.” Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, 121.

<sup>85</sup> Maxwell, “From Dionysus to ‘Dionea,’” 267.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

While Maxwell's turn away from simplistic psychological readings of doubling is compelling, I would argue that the presence of both the mirror and the portrait (each with their own frames) allows for the kind of complex suspension of identity, desire, and projection that we saw in the prologue of *Le vergini delle rocce*. The centrality of the gaze and the proliferation of reflections further recall the scene of Umbelino and Pantea by the fountain in the *giardino chiuso*; as in that moment, the uncertainty surrounding identification, put in relief by the play on the Narcissus myth, allows for multiple interpretative possibilities. Finally, it seems that the vitality Maxwell mentions, the sense of Medea as a living goddess, is crucial for Spiridion's necrophilic imagination. And it is in this sense that Lisa Downing's account of the necrophile's desire to "have it both ways" can further be adopted and adapted: the woman is both a living goddess and a still image, both full of vitality and devoid of life. Her suspended animation is what accounts for her attraction.

The portrait scene thus reminds us that the violent and passionate encounters that Spiridion experiences mark him as both *subject* and as *a subject* — subject to forces that seem at once external and projected by his own consciousness. Like Anatolia, Massimilla, and Violante figured as the Parcae, Medea seems to dominate her lover, yet the *femme fatale*'s power over the male protagonist is located within his bewildered desire. Just as Claudio's identity was constructed through his elaborate game of positioning himself as both object and subject in his own story, so too is Spiridion's life given its meaning (in his mind) through his complex depiction of and subjection to Medea. These men become subjects through their supposed subjection.<sup>87</sup> As Sandro Melani notes, Spiridion's necrophilic desire, connected as it is to a desire for oblivion, becomes his primary motivating force: "Importa solo che il sogno di Spiridion, quel suo desiderio necrofilo, *à la Gautier*, di amare una defunta e di esserne vittima consenziente venga esaudito, nella realtà dei fatti o in quella della sua immaginazione." ["All that matters is that Spiridion's dream, his necrophilic desire, *à la Gautier*, to love a dead woman and to be her conscious victim may be satisfied, whether in reality or in his imagination."] <sup>88</sup>

The remainder of "Amour Dure" charts Spiridion's obedience and his attempt to help Medea's ghost wreak vengeance on Duke Robert through the destruction of his statue. Kane and Zorn have interpreted this act as an attempt to overthrow patriarchal history. For Kane, "the bronze statue of the Duke on horseback functions as a trope for the authoritative or official version of history — it exercises dominion over the square in the same way that Duke Robert's version of facts has the predominant position in history."<sup>89</sup> Zorn similarly argues that Lee presents an alternate notion of authorized history, one that hopes to break the bonds of gendered silencing: "Lee's story designs a possible female position in history while revealing the (male) discourses that have kept her outside."<sup>90</sup> While both Kane and Zorn rightly emphasize this notion of female

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<sup>87</sup> In this link between subjectivity/subjecthood and subjection we hear echoes of Louis Althusser and Judith Butler. See Butler, "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All": Althusser's Subjection," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106-31.

<sup>88</sup> Melani, "I ritratti fatali di Vernon Lee," 134.

<sup>89</sup> Kane, *Spurious Ghosts*, 29.

<sup>90</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 165. Zorn further argues that in "Amour Dure," we are treated to Lady Lisa's revenge on her creator. See Christa Zorn, "Aesthetic Intertextuality as Cultural Critique: Vernon Lee Rewrites History through Walter Pater's 'La Gioconda,'" *Victorian Newsletter*, 91 (1997): 4-11.

revenge against the oppressive bounds of patriarchal historiography – and are careful not to acquit Spiridion of this enterprise – they do not fully emphasize how much the second half of the story charts the young historian’s trajectory towards an inevitable death and how that very death links to and validates his obsession with Medea. Since Spiridion knows that the “possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man... it is a kind of sacrilege,” the only answer is for him to become possessed by her.<sup>91</sup> Rather than possessing the mythopoetic past, he will die, content in the hour of his erotic – explicitly necrophilic – encounter.

Spiridion twice goes to an old, seemingly abandoned church where he encounters Medea’s ghost. Though he initially doubts the reality of this experience, he eventually justifies it as the natural result of his dedication and sensitivity to Medea and to the Past:

I have been again; I have heard the music; I have been inside the church; I have seen Her! I can no longer doubt my senses. Why should I? Those pedants say that the dead are dead, the past is past. For them, yes; but why for me? – why for a man who loves, who is consumed with the love of a woman? – a woman who, indeed – yes, let me finish the sentence. Why should there not be ghosts to such as can see them? Why should she not return to the earth, if she knows that it contains a man who thinks of, desires, only her?<sup>92</sup>

Again, the historian’s syntax becomes broken and scattered as he faces the fantastical and supernatural possibility of communion with his beloved *femme fatale*. In this moment, Spiridion imagines Medea returning to life, joining him in the present, finally awakened from her years of slumber. This notion of her return, of the Past’s return, hinges on Spiridion’s faith that he has bridged the gap between present and past, that his finely tuned sensibilities have not only understood the Italian Cinquecento but also resurrected it in the figure of Medea.<sup>93</sup> Here, Spiridion’s notion of Medea’s resurrection seems to fit well with Angela Leighton’s description of the tales in Vernon Lee’s *Hauntings* as “in a sense, Renaissance texts because they involve an exhumation of the past which brings it back to a sort of life. The ghost is less a dead person come to haunt the present, than a still-living past haunted and reawakened by the historian.”<sup>94</sup> But the question remains of whether Medea actually stands for a living past to which Spiridion

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<sup>91</sup> Lee, “Amour Dure,” 57.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Spiridion demonstrates, at this point in the story, a clear faith in his heightened sensibility, a trait that Catherine Maxwell argues is crucial to the role of the supernatural in “Amour Dure”: “Although Lee cleverly preserves the ambiguity as to whether Trepka’s spectre is authentic or the product of monomania, the story makes it apparent that he is susceptible to this haunting because his powers of suggestion and association are so finely tuned. And here, as in other of her stories, it is a painting, seen through the lenses of a heightened sensibility, which acts as a trigger to the supernatural.” Catherine Maxwell, “Vernon Lee and the Ghosts of Italy,” in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, eds. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 218.

<sup>94</sup> Angela Leighton, “Resurrections of the Body: Women Writers and the Idea of the Renaissance,” in *Unfolding the South*, 235.

has gained access or whether this is illusory. Will Medea be reawakened, or will Spiridion be put to sleep?

In the church scene, Spiridion imagines Medea joining him on earth, drawn by his passion and devotion, but his thoughts soon shift from resurrection to death. The day before he dies – lured by Medea and cognizant that to love her means to die – Spiridion experiences an ecstatic realization, the culmination of all his ambitions and loves:

So it is true! I was reserved for something wonderful in this world. I have at last found that after which my soul has been straining. Ambition, love of art, love of Italy, these things which have occupied my spirit, and have yet left me continually unsatisfied, these were none of them my real destiny. I have sought for life, thirsting for it as a man in the desert thirsts for a well; but the life of the senses of other youths, the life of the intellect of other men, have never slaked that thirst. Shall life for me mean the love of a dead woman?<sup>95</sup>

The answer to that final question is, of course, yes. In this topsy-turvy universe, he finds his own self in her and his present in the past. Paradoxically, the only thing that can slake Spiridion's thirst for life is death — both Medea's and his own. The final words of his diary recount his euphoric last moment: "A step on the staircase! It is she! it is she! At last, Medea, Medea! Ah! AMOUR DURE—DURE AMOUR!"<sup>96</sup> Here is his final encounter with the feminine Past, his last opportunity to meet it "face to face," and just as it brings his death, so too does it joyously fulfill his sense of destiny.

By the end of the story, our young historian's desire for an authentic encounter with the past has seemingly been fulfilled, but it brings him death and leaves open the question of whether he has truly known Medea or just created her. The image that lingers in the mind is that of her corpse-like portrait, gesturing toward the possibility of privileged knowledge yet disclosing nothing other than her terrifying splendor, and perhaps the desire that has been fulfilled has little to do with knowing the actuality of Medea's life and more to do with using the trope of the dead woman and dead past as a marker of Spiridion's radical undermining of normative historiography and of his desire to become one with her.<sup>97</sup>

Later in her introduction to *Euphorion*, after the passage on the past and the scalpel, Lee muses on alternate approaches to that past that are based on personal, embodied experience. At first, constant contact with relics of the Renaissance past in contemporary Italy seems to enable this experience. Lee comments on her impressions of the past while living in Siena and contemplates the curious short-circuiting of historical time that she regularly witnesses:

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<sup>95</sup> Lee, "Amour Dure," 71.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>97</sup> Spiridion's relationship to Medea here echoes that of Rossetti to his fetishistic females, as characterized by Carol Christ: "Whatever success we attribute to these paintings, Rossetti imagined them, as the sonnets he composed for them testify, to have a fetishistic power to absorb the beholder's life. This power, I think, is not merely a fearful image of female sexuality but a feminine projection of the artist's sexuality, thus rendered appropriate for the narcissistic reverie in which the subjects of the paintings are so frequently rapt [...] But what earlier writers had represented as art's appropriation of female life becomes in Pre-Raphaelitism an absorption within the female." Christ, "Painting the dead," 146.

[In Siena] we are subjected to receive impressions of the past so startlingly lifelike as to get quite interwoven with our impressions of the present; and from that moment the past must share, in a measure, some of the everyday thoughts which we give to the present. [...] it is the sudden bringing us face to face with the real life of the Renaissance. [...] It seems as if all were astoundingly real, as if, by some magic, we were actually going to mix in the life of the past. But it is in reality but a mere delusion.<sup>98</sup>

Here, Lee reveals that the much desired “face to face” encounter with the past is ultimately hollow. No matter how palpable the past seems, it keeps its distance and its unknowable otherness. Lee further emphasizes the inaccessibility of the past through the language of penetration: “[B]ut when we try to *penetrate* into it, we shall find that there is but a slip of solid ground beneath us, that all around us is but canvas and painted wall, perspectived and lit up by our fancy; and that when we try to approach to touch one of those seemingly so real men and women, our eyes find only daubs of paint, our hands meet only flat and chilly stucco.”<sup>99</sup> This notion of penetration — a sexually charged encounter — raises an epistemological critique of historical inquiry. What does it mean for Spiridion to penetrate into the past, for him to have his final, ecstatic moment of oneness with Medea? Is that absorption a mutual moment of encounter with the other, or is it a solipsistic, onanistic consummation? When dealing with the dead things of the past, is it ever possible to know the difference? And, for the necrophile, isn’t it precisely this indecision, this suspension, that proves crucial for the fulfillment of his desire? In the end, Spiridion’s necrophilic desire for Medea paradoxically seems to be both a dead end and the best viable option for gazing into the past.

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<sup>98</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, 20-21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Emphasis mine.

## Conclusion

In realtà la natura non distrugge né i fiori o le selve della terra né le opere del genio: la Minerva criselefantina di Fidia è passata dall'avorio e dall'oro nelle pagine immortali dei poeti e nella eterna memoria degli uomini.

Angelo Conti  
*Leonardo pittore*

This dissertation opens and closes with the corpse of the Past. In a sense, its chapters have charted how the Decadent obsession with the Renaissance transforms the “osservazione fredda e severa” [“cold and severe observation”], which, according to Angelo Conti, the positivists practice in their “dissection rooms,” into an erotic entanglement that is self-consciously and, at times, even proudly necrophilic.<sup>1</sup> Their treatments of this dead body may be wildly divergent, but its centrality is nonetheless a common denominator.

The presence of a corpse is itself a conceptual precondition for rebirth and, indeed, for nineteenth-century Renaissance historiography. Thus Jules Michelet, in *The People*, turns to metaphors of resurrection and necromancy in order to describe his scholarly method: “Let that be my contribution for the future: not to have attained but to have marked the aim of history, to have given it a name that no one had conceived. Thierry called it *narration*, and Guizot *analysis*. I have named it *resurrection*, and this name will last.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Michelet affirms that the aim of history as a discipline is resurrection, a loaded term that combines religious overtones with the promise not of mere narration or analysis but of a true rebirth of the past in the historian’s work – the belief that the historian can both ascertain the objective truth of history and also make it come alive once more.<sup>3</sup> Turning to Renaissance Italy, Michelet, along with Jacob

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<sup>1</sup> Angelo Conti, *Giorgione*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Michelet, *The People*, trans. G. H. Smith (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1846), 25. As Thomas Greene explores, the Renaissance humanist tradition itself relied on a similar “archaeological, necromantic metaphor of *disinterment*, a digging up that was also a resuscitation or a reincarnation or a rebirth” and involved the “resurrection of literary texts [...] by the humanist necromancer-scholar.” Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 92.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Fraser contrasts Michelet’s faith in objective history with his awareness of textuality through a reading much indebted to Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault: “For at the same time as he was one of the most textually aware of the nineteenth-century historians, Michelet promoted the ultimate in ‘objective history’ by claiming that the historian’s role was to ‘resurrect’ the deceased inhabitants of the past, and to enable these ‘historical actors’ to speak for themselves. The metaphors of resurrection and theatre which dominate Michelet’s historical discourse, and which, as I argue, infiltrate many Victorian representations of the past, work together to reinforce the illusion of objectivity at the same time as insisting on its textuality.” Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5-6. For further analysis of Michelet’s historiographical methods, please see Hayden White,



Burckhardt and John Addington Symonds, among many others, would claim the ability to peer into the Italian tomb and to reanimate the corpses therein, allowing them to speak for themselves.

The works explored in this dissertation, from those written by Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon Lee to those of Conti and Walter Pater, may seem, at first, to make similar claims of resurrection to those of the historians, in the service of avoiding the “dissection room” of positivist criticism that Conti so disdains. As we have seen, these authors assert that their own status as elect spirits allows them to understand the spirit of the Renaissance, and the revenants and anachronisms scattered throughout their works attest to that spirit's rebirth. And yet, there is a crucial difference in their texts: namely, they display a marked awareness that the body that is resurrected may not be the same as the body that was originally buried. Their necromantic powers may resurrect a feeling, a Renaissance sensibility, in Paterian terms, but their transhistorical collaborations are always suffused with the knowledge that such imaginative communions risk, or maybe even court, creative misinterpretations. As for the Decadents' necrophilic imagination, unlike the resurrectionist historiography that it implicitly critiques, it acknowledges and revels in the epistemological uncertainties that it raises.

When, in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Conti remarks that no work of genius is ever destroyed or forgotten but is rather continually translated into new forms – here, he refers specifically to Phidias' lost chryselephantine sculpture, the *Athena Parthenos*, and its many afterlives in the cultural imagination – he expresses the conviction that such transformation is necessary, inevitable, and, perhaps most significantly, joyous.<sup>4</sup> There may be no *repristination*, to borrow Robert Browning's famous coinage in *The Ring and the Book*, but its impossibility need not be cause for alarm or dismay.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Conti and his fellow Aesthetes envision an alternative model of engagement with history and with the corpse of the past, one that is finely attuned to the permeability of the boundaries that seem to separate the objective from the subjective and the historical from the fictive.

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*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 135-162.

<sup>4</sup> Angelo Conti, *Leonardo pittore*, ed. Ricciarda Ricorda (Padova: Studio Editoriale Programma, 1990), 53.

<sup>5</sup> The opening allusion to a process of “repristination” asserts the poet's necromantic abilities: “That trick is, the artificer melts up wax / With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold / With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both, / Effects a manageable mass, then works. / But his work ended, once the thing a ring, / Oh, there's repristination!” Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), I.18-23.

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