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Manlier than Mozart: The Anti-Wagnerian Stance of “A Wicked Voice”

On September 16, 1886, eleven months prior to the initial French publication of “Voix maudite,”ⁱ Vernon Lee heard her friend Mary Wakefield sing in the Palazzo Barbaro on the Rio dell’Orso in Venice.^{ii,iii} Lee later dedicated “A Wicked Voice” to “M.W.” and in the dedication states that the story is written “in remembrance of the last song at Palazzo Barbaro...”^{iv} At the conclusion of the story itself, the narrator attempts to prevent the “wicked voice” of Zaffirino from concluding its own “last song” because extended exposure to it threatens the narrator’s aesthetic sensibilities as well as his stalwart heterosexuality. The narrator’s abortive attempts to emulate the heterosexual heroics of Wagnerian operatic epics stand in stark contrast with his uncontrollable appetite for the ghost of an eighteenth century castrato. Given the biographical information recently compiled in Catherine Maxwell’s article about Lee’s friendship with Wakefield,^v and given the connection of the operatic voice with homoerotic attraction in this story, there remains little doubt that “A Wicked Voice” promotes an affinity between naturally-arising aesthetic sensibilities and homoerotic desire.

Magnus, the narrator of Vernon Lee’s story “A Wicked Voice,”^{vi} is an unsuccessful composer who sets forth to write a very manly opera in the style of his hero, Wagner. He emphatically claims to loathe the music of the previous generations of composers and, in particular, the be-wigged castrati who so elegantly sung their music. But Magnus doth protest too much: in his slavish attempts to avoid the effeminizing style of his predecessors, he betrays his actual attraction to their music. The ghost of a famous castrato named “Zaffarino” haunts him into madness. Vernon Lee shows the haunting consequences of sexual repression by encoding

eighteenth and nineteenth century music as representing femininity and masculinity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, sanity and insanity. The story ends with a half-cadence, an unresolved chord that implies that the piece of music is not over, the listener cannot rest, and that there are dire consequences for those who try to disguise their true feelings.

Over the course of a prolific half-century, Lee became increasingly interested in musical aesthetics. Her final book, published three years before her death in 1935, was a lengthy musicological study entitled *Music and its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotional and Imaginative Responses to Music* that seeks to account for the emotional effects of music upon listeners. One of the most important ideas Lee establishes in this book is the primacy of music in her perceived hierarchy of the arts. In her first chapter, she explains that, “musical aesthetics ought to be the clue to the study of all other branches of art” because what she calls music’s “evanescence” “makes it more evident that the work of art really is the special group of responses which it is susceptible of awakening in the mind of the hearer.”^{vii} In other words, music, beyond any other form of art, creates an individualized, or “special” response in the “hearer” and “awakens” aspects of the listener’s mind in ways presumably irreproducible by other arts. She indicates that the diverse reactions a group of listeners can have to the same piece of music demonstrates that the universal “desire for music” reflects the individual “primitive need for music as something to stir inert, or release pent-up emotions and to induce such day-dreams as restore and quicken the soul.”^{viii} Thus music responds to a “primitive” force within us that cannot be necessarily controlled by societal constraint; this makes music the perfect medium through which Magnus’ latent homosexuality can be triggered.

Lee’s musical philosophy also helps us understand why she found Wagner’s music so distasteful. Because music has the power to “stir” that which lies inert within us, Wagner abused

his role as a composer, crossing into what Lee considered to be the proper territory of literature. According to Lee's early biographer, Peter Gunn, she believed that "formal arrangement" belonged to the realm of visual arts and music, while literature was reserved for lowered formality.^{ix} According to Gunn, she found *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, "deleterious" to the listener's "spiritual welfare."^x The opening chord of that opera's prelude, for instance, famous for its harmonically revolutionary quality, embodies her objection in its aggressive uncertainty and inability to be properly classified by the established harmonic system. Magnus' opera, *Ogier, the Dane*, is stereotypically Wagnerian with its Nordic settings, war imagery, Greek references, and under-appreciated heroes. Additionally, the work showcases the tenor, whereas operas of the previous generation of composers had made the higher-pitched voices of sopranos and altos the central concern of their works. Magnus hopes that his opera will prove him to be "a follower of the great master of the Future [Wagner]" and not the "miserable singing-masters of the Past."^{xi} In writing this opera in the first place, he seeks to prove to those who "laugh" at him that he is indeed a "follower of Wagner."^{xii} It is my contention that Magnus' interest in the Germanic operatic tradition was born from the fact that this type of music most conveniently masks his attraction to effeminate men and the florid music of the past. At the beginning of the story, Magnus recalls how his Norwegian nurse told him stories about how "were-wolves are ordinary men and women half their days," but when they were aware of their of their transformation, they could "forestall" it from happening.^{xiii} This embedded tale of the supernatural, one that Magnus recalls at the beginning of the very narrative in which he will recall his descent into madness, reminds us Magnus seeks to prevent his own transformation. His hope is that in retelling the story, he will "exorcize," or at least "forestall" that which plagues him: his attraction to a dead castrato.^{xiv} Zaffirino's unfinished song, however, whose cadence Magnus fails to complete on the

broken harpsichord of the Alvise's Villa of Mistrà, has wrought permanent damage on our narrator. Far from forestalling his "lapse" into homosexuality, his narration actually pushes him beyond caring and into madness. In the last lines of the story, Magnus loses track of his reader altogether. Instead, he apostrophizes three entities: first, the castrato's voice—which he calls the "violin of flesh and blood" (for the second time in the story), then he asks the devil who created that voice to take pity on him, and finally he asks Zaffirino himself to sing him that one final note.^{xv} The last musical idea of this text is the request for the completion of the final cadence in Zaffirino's death song, the *Aria dei Maitri*. Essentially, Magnus prefers death, a musically satisfying chord, and a response from the man he loves, to the life he currently leads. Our narrator has already discarded his opera, and now he discards his audience, his exorcism, and his sanity in pleading with that which cannot respond.

The figure of the eighteenth-century castrato certainly complicates the sexual politics of "A Wicked Voice." In the imagination of the nineteenth-century Wagnerian, the castrato emblemized all that was wrong with the previous century's music. Magnus asks his reader, "How could the creature attached to this voice, its owner and its victim, the singer, the great, the real singer who once ruled over every heart, be otherwise than wicked and contemptible?"^{xvi} For Magnus, the voice itself is an entity so evil that it existed separately from the body of its singer. The allure of the castrato is characterized by attraction and repulsion—qualities that I also ascribe to Magnus' relationship to musical styles and homosexuality. In Lee's story the portrait of Zaffirino,^{xvii} descriptions of the effect of his voice upon his listeners, and the connection of his singing to his listeners' health, link him indubitably to the renowned eighteenth-century castrato and celebrity, Farinelli Carlo Broschi. The alleged effects of Farinelli's voice upon his listeners are legendary. In "A Wicked Voice," Count Alvise describes the effects of Zaffirino's voice

upon listeners, stating that, “his first song could make any woman turn pale and lower her eyes, the second make her madly in love, while the third song could kill her off on the spot...”^{xviii}

George Grove describes the similar effects of Farinelli’s voice on King Phillip of Spain, who was “first struck, then moved, and finally overcome with pleasure” while listening to the castrato sing.^{xix} In each case, one fictional and one historical, the castrato’s voice has a progressively transformative effect on his listener: the first effect is one of shock (“make any woman turn pale” and “first struck”), the second is emotional, and the third is deadly (“kill her off” and “overcome”). Evidently, a century after the end of the castrato’s operatic domination, the legend of Farinelli’s voice had grown to supernatural proportions in the imaginations of writers.

The source of the castrato’s seemingly supernatural power, it appears, was his gender, characterized in writers’ imaginations by a combination of male and female traits. In an introduction to “A Wicked Voice” in a 1927 edition entitled *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*, Lee describes the “quite genuine, childish desire to hear, or rather *to have heard*, one of those eighteenth century singers.”^{xx} Lee’s reconsideration of her statement of the desire “to hear” as “*to have heard*”—in italics, no less—reflects a “childish” fear of the titillating quality of what she imagines that experience to be. She would rather have a memory of the event than to actually live through it, her fear is so great. Magnus’ own fear of his attraction compels him to separate the singer the voice, seemingly as a way to avoid admitting to lusting for the male-body of its possessor, and demonstrating a similar childish fear: He states, “How could the creature attached to this voice, its owner and its victim, the singer, the great, the real singer who once ruled over every heart, be otherwise than wicked and contemptible?”^{xxi} Indeed, in the aforementioned introduction to the story, Lee describes the plight of that voice as one worth fearing: it is a “voice seeking fresh victims even in its posthumous existence,” desiring “vengeance” against the

“Wagnerian...modern composer” who had gone “so far as to caricature [the castrati] before the portrait of the wicked voice’s owner.”^{xxii} Her own summary of her story shows us that the voice of the fictional Zaffirino was even evil when it was alive; its power turned listeners into victims. These descriptions show the dis-embodiment of the voice—it is an entity separated from the mutilated body of the singer himself. In cases both fictional and non-fictional, this strangeness of an unnaturally-altered body and supernatural voice combined into one entity leads those who encounter it to necessarily separate the physical from the auditory. This convergence of bodily and aesthetic strangeness serves readily as a symbol for homosexual repression.

In 1885, two years before the initial publication of “Voix maudite,” Henry Wharton published a translation of Sappho. This publication was significant because it “revealed for the first time that some of her poems were explicitly addressed to young women lovers.”^{xxiii} There is no explicitly lesbian imagery in the story. Greek allusions, however, and Catherine Maxwell’s suggestion that, “as Lee herself was attracted to her own sex, it seems likely that this male homoerotic allure may also stand in for disguised lesbianism,”^{xxiv} lead me to conclude that “A Wicked Voice” is actually a story about lesbian attraction inspired by music. Using a castrato to represent lesbian courtship does not seem so bizarre when considered within the context of late nineteenth-century gender politics. Martha Vicinus’ article entitled “The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siecle Femme Fatale?” seems relevant here: Vicinus notes that previous scholarship has said very little about lesbians’ use of the boy, but that in “the shift from the desire for the boy to being the boy himself” he could “visually represent their difference from other women.”^{xxv} The lesbian feels so abnormal in society, according to this reading, that she “can only be portrayed in an unnatural context.”^{xxvi} This “unnatural context” and the “difference from other women” could

easily be used as descriptors of the physiologically altered castrato. The strangeness of the castrato, therefore, is also the strangeness of being a lesbian for Lee.

So why would Lee go to such lengths to create such a complicated narrative barrier between this truth and the plot? Yopie Prins, in a chapter describing the 1889 volume of Sapphic lyrics by Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1864-1913) (aunt and niece, who lived as a married couple and wrote together as “Michael Field”)^{xxvii} states that “Vernon Lee...also lived with a woman companion, [and] might understand the need to preserve a secret, even when it was already known.”^{xxviii} Beyond the more obvious societal constraints placed upon homosexuality, Lee also operated within the stylistic conventions of homosexual writers. Her male *nom de plume* and her unconventionally-gendered characters create a gender orientation of *otherness*, and that very otherness mimics the otherness of being a lesbian in her society. Christina White notes in her essay on “Michael Field” that these layers of narrative disguise are not hiding anything we don’t already know; in fact these layers are precisely the point: “The name [Michael Field] contains a compelling contradiction... Michael Field is not a disguise. Nor is it a pretense at being a man.”^{xxix} Lee is not masking lesbianism behind male attraction: she is creating precise conditions to reflect the otherness of her sexuality in her society.

Magnus’ homoerotic desire, born from a supernatural musical relationship, reflects that which Lee felt towards the dedicatee of her story, “M.F.” Vicinus writes that, “Men and women whose sexual lives were in opposition to biological reproduction did not defy its hegemony but, rather, insisted upon a superior option—art.”^{xxx} The marriage plot does not apply, consequently, to those living beyond the strictures of “biological reproduction” and societal conventions. Thus Lee foregrounds the “sensual moment” as the principle concern of the story. Poor Magnus, tortured by oscillations of madness and sanity, concludes his tale with a plea for that very

satisfaction, the “superior option,” the “sensual moment.” His torture is musical in nature: he cannot complete the cadence of the last note he heard his beloved sing.

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ⁱ Catherine Maxwell, "Sappho, Mary Wakefield, and Vernon Lee's 'A Wicked Voice.'" *The Modern Language Review* 102 (2007): 960.

ⁱⁱ Maxwell 969.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnathan Buckley, *Venice DIRECTIONS* (Rough Guides, 2004) 136.

^{iv} Vernon Lee, "A Wicked Voice." Ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham. *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006) 154.

^v Maxwell 960-974.

^{vi} Vernon Lee, "A Wicked Voice." Ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham. *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006) 154-181.

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- vii Lee, *Music and its Lovers* 23.
- viii Ibid. 34.
- ix Peter Gunn *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget* (New York: Arno Press, 1975) 115.
- x Ibid. 121.
- xi Lee, "Wicked Voice" 155.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Lee, "Wicked Voice" 155.
- xiv For an indication of Lee's thoughts about the exorcizing power of narrating, see her preface to "Oke of Okehurst." There, she writes that, "To write is to exorcize, to dispel the charm" (Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* 105)
- xv Lee, "Wicked Voice" 181.
- xvi Lee, "Wicked Voice" 156.
- xvii See Figures 1 and 2. The former is the Corrado Giaquinto (1703-1766) portrait of Farinelli that editors Maxwell and Pulham posit inspired Lee to write her story. (157) The second is supposedly an etching of Farinelli, though its origins are uncertain. The resemblance between the two images seems close, and certainly the *ailles de pigeon*-hairstyle seems consistent with Lee's description of Zaffirino.
- xviii Lee, "Wicked Voice" 159.
- xix Grove 505.
- xx Vernon Lee *For Maurice* (London: J. Lane, 1927) xl.
- xxi Lee, "Wicked Voice" 162.
- xxii Lee, *For Maurice* xl.
- xxiii Marth Vicinus "The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siecle Femme Fatale?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5:1 (1994) 94.
- xxiv Maxwell 906.
- xxv Vicinus 93.
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii Yopie Prins *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 74.
- xxviii Ibid. 84.
- xxix Christine White. "'Poets and Lovers Evermore': Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field." *Textual Practice* 4.2 (1990): 197.
- xxx Vicinus 64.