Queer Heroines. On the Construction of Gender in Vernon Lee's Renaissance Essays

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Abstract
Scholars have often identified the connections between Vernon Lee's works and her complex sexuality. The protagonists of her supernatural tales have been the object of extensive study in that they eschew neat gender categorisation and repeatedly sublimate sexual drive into subjugation and murder. Lee's writings as an aesthetic critic, by comparison, have mostly been explored in connection with Water Pater's work. In this article I argue that in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* Lee's allusions to Pater's thought shape not only her construction of gendered authorship, but also the textual representation of gender and sexuality. Characters like Héloïse and Nicolette endorse transgression and prove able to master stereotypical masculine functions, showing how gender roles are independent of sex. In addition, Lee's interest in Franciscanism and the Renaissance iconography of the Madonna provide a historical legitimisation of non-normativised forms of sexual desire, which should be viewed from a queer perspective.

Key-words: Vernon Lee, gender representation, sexual dissidence.

1. The long-forgotten queer aesthete

Née Violet Paget, Vernon Lee (1856-1935) was an *enfant prodige* and an extremely prolific writer. Although her cosmopolitan background endowed her with shrewd artistic and aesthetic sensitivity, her strong personality and highly opinionated character prevented her from developing peaceful – if not strategic – relationships with the British intellectual milieu. By the beginning of the twentieth century Lee had in fact "aroused the hostility of a number of male writers and thinkers", from John Addington Symonds to Henry James, Max Beerbohm, Bertrand Russell and Bernard Berenson (Maxwell and Pulham 2006: 10).

Because of her marginal position as a woman writer, an expatriate, and a lesbian[1], Lee's works have raised the interest of much feminist and queer scholarship over the past three decades, and she is now an established figure in *fin-de-siècle* studies. In particular, her fantastic stories have been the object of extensive critical debate insofar as they eschew neat gender categorisation and repeatedly sublimate sexual drive into subjugation and murder (Basham 1992: 173ff; Smith 2010: 76ff; Pulham 2008). Lee's work as an aesthetic critic, by comparison, has mostly been explored in connection with that of Walter Pater. Zorn (2003) and Evangelista (2006), for instance, focus on Lee's problematic relationship with aestheticism, exploring the gender politics encapsulated in her writings on Renaissance art and culture, as well as the complex intertextual palimpsest she draws on in an attempt to construct a narrative space in which to articulate gender difference.

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, I claim that Lee's complex interest in the Italian Renaissance fulfils a much subtler gender function, which is evident not only in her construction of androgynous female authorship, but also in her subversive, queer representation of gender identity at a textual level. From such a perspective, the essays collected in *Euphorion* (1884) and

[1] Lee's mannish looks, and her romantic affections for women – namely A. Mary F. Robinson and Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson – were known to her contemporaries. The sexologist Havelock Ellis, for instance, suggested to Symonds that Lee and Robinson "might serve as a possible case-history for the section on Lesbianism in *Sexual Inversion*" (qtd. in Colby 2003: 51). Many of her acquaintances, however, thought that Lee was unable to come to terms with her sexual orientation. In *What Happened Next* (1940), Ethel Smyth claimed that Lee never came out to herself, arguing that her emotional and relational issues might have resulted from her being 'closeted'. Similarly, Irene Cooper Willis noted that "Vernon was homosexual, but she never faced up to sexual facts. She was perfectly pure. I think it would have been better if she had acknowledged it to herself. She had a whole series of passions for women, but they were all perfectly correct. Physical contact she shunned. She was absolutely frustrated. Kit [Thomson] used to say in her letters, 'I blow you a kiss', but there was nothing the least sensual about her relationship with Kit" (qtd. in Gardner 1987: 85). Thus, Gardner (1987) was the first to suggest a strict psychoanalytical reading of Lee's writings in the light of her allegedly 'frustrated' lesbian desire. Whilst rejecting Gardner's overemphasis on neurosis, even Colby defines Lee's lesbianism as "failed", arguing that such sublimation of homoerotic desire lies at the basis of much of her writing (Colby 2003: 2).

Renaissance Fancies and Studies (1895) reveal both Lee's problematic engagement with aestheticism as well as a discursive conception of gender which mocks – and eventually subverts – embodied gender ideologies.

2. Lee's construction of female authorship in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*

Published in 1884, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance* collects seven essays on the history, literature, and art of the Italian Renaissance which had already appeared in journals such as *Contemporary Review* and *Cornhill Magazine* between 1879 and 1884. Lee dedicated the volume to "Walter Pater, in appreciation of that which, in expounding the beautiful things of the past, he has added to the beautiful things of the present". A decade later, she expanded her argument in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, concluding with an *in memoriam* to Pater as "the master we have recently lost, […] who, in the midst of aesthetical anarchy, taught us once more, and with subtle and solemn efficacy, the old Platonic and Goethian doctrine of the affinity between artistic beauty and human worthiness" (Lee 1895: 255).

The structure and editorial genesis of *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* already bear a debt to Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Lee's engagement with aestheticism, however, is certainly not unproblematic. Her rejection of John Ruskin's binary system of good and evil as categories fit for aesthetic appreciation in *Belcaro* in 1883 clearly testifies to Lee's aesthetic ideas at the time she was writing her Renaissance essays[2]. The following year, she would mock the affectations and loose morality of aestheticism in *Miss Brown* (1884), concocting a *roman*

[2] Lee's criticism is especially directed against *Modern Painters* (1843-60) – which she explicitly mentions in *Belcaro* – and Ruskin's idea that imaginative art should "enable us to bring sensibly to our sight the things which are recorded as belonging to our future state, or as invisibly surrounding us in this" (Ruskin 1904: 72). Although Lee reconsidered some of her ideas in her 1903 "Postscript on Ruskin", in *Belcaro* she maintained that "there is no unvarying correspondence between things, no necessary genesis of good from good, and evil from evil" (Lee 1883: 207).

à clef in which the caricatures of leading members of the set of aesthetes – like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde – were all the more recognisable.

Although it would be tempting to discuss Lee's divergent attitudes by drawing a distinction between her critical and fictional work, the constant overlap of fiction and facts that characterises her writings disqualifies such an endeavour. Significantly, Walter Pater was among the first to grasp the contradictory aspects of Lee's work. Reviewing Lee's collection *Juvenilia* in 1887, he stressed her habit of "bringing now and again into her exposition of what is sometimes perhaps decadent art a touch of something like Puritanism" (qtd. in Colby 1972: 294). In contrast, Kandola argues that both *Miss Brown* and *Euphorion* bear evidence of her distaste for aestheticism and its homoerotic element. She suggests that Lee's decision to relocate the Greek myth of Euphorion – which Goethe had elevated as a symbol of the Romantic age – to fifteenth-century Italy reveals her desire to confine homosociality far off in time and space (Kandola 2005: 473-76). However, I would suggest that Lee's seeming departure from aestheticism should not be read as an attempt to disavow its endorsement of same-sex desire. As Evangelista notes, Lee's engagement with aestheticism and her fascination with the Italian Renaissance provided her with "a language to explore gender difference and play with ideas of androgyny and sexual perversion" (Evangelista 2006: 92).

Following its extensive codification by nineteenth-century historiography, the Renaissance was the subject of a narrative that held particular appeal for *fin-de-siècle* homosexual intellectuals. The reason for this interest lies in the variety of elements that the Renaissance supplied them, such as its focus on individualism, the aestheticisation of life, the celebration of the body, and the tolerance of vice, excess, and violence – a wide rubric which includes allegedly illicit sexual practices. With their emphasis on sensuous pleasure, the cult for beauty and the worship of the body, the Renaissance works as a cultural category which provided homosexual writers like Pater, Symonds, and Lee with a historical space in which they could locate sexual dissidence, and in which they found an authoritative historical precedent (Evangelista 2006: 96; Ivory 2009: 17ff). Lee did not endorse the Gautieresque principle of art for art's sake, but her choice to write about the art and culture of Renaissance Italy in 1884

gives proof of her construction of a counter discourse, or at least a cultural space which could host and historically legitimise same-sex desire. Thus, I suggest that *Euphorion* should not be viewed as an attempt to purify a morbid culture. Instead, I argue that Lee contributed to the *fin-de-siècle* development of discourses on gender and sexuality, and such an effort can be perceived at a textual level.

Beginning from her appropriation of Jules Michelet's work, Lee's dialogic relationship with established male scholars enables her to construct a sexualised and subtly gendered narrative. In the volume of *The History of France* he had dedicated to the Renaissance in 1851, Michelet had depicted Charles VIII's 1494 expedition as a sexual encounter. In his account, France is represented as a man exploring the body of a *femme fatale*, Italy, whose black eyes, "généralement plus forts que doux, tragiques et sans enfance [...] exercèrent sur les hommes du Nord une fascination invincible" (Michelet 1855: 27). It is only by penetrating Tuscany that the French realised the moral decay and the corruption of Italy in spite of her "contrées si fertiles" (p. 31). In *Euphorion*, Lee interestingly unhinges the heteronormative foundations of Michelet's *récit*. In "The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists", she similarly describes the encounter between Italy and England as a heterosexual intercourse. However, she turns Michelet's gendered narrative upside down. As Wiley remarks, it is Italy that ejaculates and spreads its semen on the English mind, which is ready to be impregnated (Wiley 2006: 69).

Lee's portrait of such cross-contamination is less mystical than queer. She certainly praises "[Michelet's] imaginative mind" (Lee 1884: I, 45) and, like him, she depicts Italy as a female body that had to be assaulted and abused for the sake of civilisation. The gates of Italy, as one reads in "The Sacrifice", "had to be torn open and its riches plundered and disseminated by the intellectual starvelings of the North; thus only could the rest of mankind feed on these riches, regain and develope [*sic*] their mental life" (p. 46). However, her argument is also marked by an element of transgression that discards the heteronormative quality embedded in Michelet's metaphorical *récit*. Lee evidently acknowledges Italy's active role in spreading the semen of modernity across Europe. Although it was explored and penetrated as a female body, it was Italy that pollinated the European nations it came into

contact with. In particular, the country exerted its unsettling but irresistible fascination on the English mind, which was "greedy for life and knowledge" (p. 68). The moral decay of Renaissance Italy mesmerised English travellers and aroused their "avid curiosity" until, "impatient of their intoxicating and tantalising search, suddenly grown desperate, they […] returned home tattered, soiled, bedecked of gold and with tinsel" (p. 63).

This reversal of normativised gender attributes can also be seen in Lee's depiction of specific female characters that she considers as highly representative of the Renaissance spirit. It should be noted that Lee does not condemn widespread criminal or so-called immoral acts; instead, she exposes their discursive origin. While individualism and the drive to succeed were thriving, the Italians "neither resisted evil nor rebelled against virtue; they were indifferent to both" (p. 89). Crime, violence and transgressive behaviour were socially acceptable insofar as the boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate – and hence the moral and the immoral – were blurred:

> [t]he princelets and prelates and mercenery [*sic*] generals indulged in every sensuality, turned treachery into a science and violence into an instrument; and sometimes let themselves be intoxicated into mad lust and ferocity, as their subjects were occasionally intoxicated with mad austerity and mysticism […]. The prudery of righteousness was as unknown as the cynicism of evil [...]. (pp. 89-90)

Because Renaissance Italy fostered crime and violence, transgression was able to trickle down through the social strata, and so were illicit and sinful sexual practices. In her essay on "Mediæval Love", Lee maintains that adultery turned from a deadly sin into a proof of pure love:

> the young man in the service of a great feudal lady is gradually taught dissimulation, lying, intrigue; is initiated by the woman who looms above him like a saint into all the foulness of adultery. Adultery; a very ugly word, which must strike almost like a handful of mud in the face whosoever has approached this subject of mediaeval love in admiration of its strange delicacy and enthusiasm. Yet it is a word which must be spoken, for in it is the explanation of the whole origin and character of this passion which burst into song in the early Middle Ages. This almost religious love, this

love which conceives no higher honour than the service of the beloved, no higher virtue than eternal fidelity – this love is the love for another man's wife. (Lee 1884: II, 139)

Thus, I would suggest that Lee actually contributed to – rather than rejected – the sexual politics of aestheticism and its construction of a cultural site in which to "locate the value of the sexually perverse" (Evangelista 2006: 96).

In *The Renaissance*, Pater had resorted to the "Two Early French Stories" in the opening essay in order to illustrate the antinomianism of the Renaissance. For Pater, the period had been significantly marked by a "spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time", which guided the widespread "search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination", the "care for beauty", and the "worship of the body" (Pater 1980: 18-19). Pater, however, does not celebrate the overtly perverse, subversive and lascivious aspects of the Renaissance that Lee repeatedly dwells on. While he praises "a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment" (p. xxiv), Lee's focus on the duality of the Renaissance, and her appropriation of Pater's text result in a textual construction of androgynous gender identity and sexual dissidence.

Pater had celebrated Aucassin and Abélard as the early embodiments of the new Renaissance spirit, making only a few marginal references to their female companions, Nicolette and Héloïse. Such female prototypes, however, are given ample space in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. By endorsing transgression – as in the case of Héloïse, who does not sacrifice her passion to conform to discursively constructed norms, or perform stereotypically male functions as Nicolette does in her quest – these characters deploy a complex representation of femininity and, by contrast, of masculinity. The queer representation of gender encoded in her essays suggests Lee's participation in the refashioning of "common images and character stereotypes" embraced by *fin-de-siècle* homosexual writers in an attempt to conform such signifiers "to their own culture" (Vicinus 1999: 84).

3. The adolescent boy and the androgynous *picara*

In "Two Early French Stories", Pater praises the story of Aucassin and Nicolette as the dawning of a new artistic feeling, a sensuous

spirit whose "faint air of overwrought delicacy, almost of wantonness" reminds him of the "languid Eastern deliciousness" of the *Arabian Nights* (Pater 1980: 15-16). Dating back to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, this anonymous *chantefable* narrates the adventures of the noble Aucassin and his love for Nicolette, a beautiful girl raised by the Saracens. Pater acknowledges that Nicolette wields a certain element of uncanny sexual power, qualifying her beauty as "weird" and "foreign" (p. 16). Like the Keatsian "Belle Dame Sans Merci", Nicolette is responsible for the boy's disobedience of chivalric duties, having caused "the malady of his love" (p. 18). Pater, however, does not depict Nicolette as a deadly *femme fatale*, but as a candid type of beauty. She is the young maid,

> whom the shepherds take for a fay, who has the knowledge of simples, the healing and beautifying qualities of leaves and flowers, whose skilful touch heals Aucassin's spread shoulder, so that he suddenly leaps from the ground; the mere sight of whose flesh, as she passed the place where he lay, healed a pilgrim stricken with sore disease. (p. 16)

In spite of her candour, Nicolette possesses mysterious healing powers which endow the girl with certain unsettling aspects that are consistent with her mysterious origin. By quoting a long passage which he translates from the original text, Pater draws the portrait of a female figure who embodies the Renaissance reconciliation of Pagan and Christian elements, bringing to mind many of Botticelli's goddesses, such as his *Primavera* (ca. 1482) and *Birth of Venus* (1486):

> [Nicolette's] hair was yellow in small curls, her smiling eyes blue-green, her face clear and feat, the little lips very red, the teeth small and white; and the daisies which she crushed in passing, holding her skirt high behind and before, looked dark against her feet; the girl was so white! (p. 17)

Like Pater, Lee draws on this Provençal *chantefable* in order to discuss recurrent themes and settings in medieval poetry. Unlike him, her joint focus on both characters results in the parody of normativised forms of masculinity and femininity, pointing to a conception of gender as independent of sex. Significantly, Lee extends Nicolette's

beauty type to Aucassin. Both lovers seem to embody a candid and innocent beauty, and Lee presents us with a description of a couple that does not conform to norms and traditional markers of gender. As Aucassin and Nicolette wander around the forest, we can see them

> tear their delicate skin, and catch their hair in brambles and briars, we have the sense of the daisies bending beneath their tread, of the green leaves rustling aside from their heads covered with hair – blond et menu crespelé. (Lee 1884: I, 133-34)

According to Zorn, *Euphorion* draws on a "citational strategy" which allows Lee to negotiate her own position amid male aesthetic writers and historians, thus complementing – rather than opposing – dominant views. From this point of view, her rhetorical strategy works "as a kind of feminist doubling" that creates narrative spaces of gender difference (Zorn 2003: 57-58). In other words, Lee's brief inclusion of the story of Aucassin and Nicolette in her essay on "The Outdoor Poetry" enables her to assert her own, female voice, but also to challenge conventional assumptions concerning gender roles. Aucassin is imprisoned for disregarding his knightly duties, but also because of his father's disapproval of his love for the young girl. It is Nicolette who eventually saves her beloved, releasing him from prison. Pater had already included this incident in "Two Early French Stories", giving full emphasis to Nicolette's act of bravery. Evading surveillance, Nicolette escapes from the chamber in which she is held prisoner and rescues Aucassin:

> she rose and put on the fairest gown she had; she took the bed-clothes and the towels, and knotted them together like a cord, as far as they would go. Then she tied the end to a pillar of the window, and let herself slip down quite softly into the garden, and passed straight across it, to reach the town. […] [S]he walked as fast as she could, until she came to the tower where Aucassin was. The tower was set about with pillars, here and there. She pressed herself against one of the pillars, wrapped herself closely in her mantle, and putting her face to a chink of the tower, which was old and ruined, she heard Aucassin crying bitterly within, and when she had listened awhile she began to speak. (Pater 1980: 17)

When the girl reaches Aucassin, she declares her love for him and as a token of love gives him a lock of hair, which he keeps as a

treasured possession in his bosom. This medieval *chantefable* stands out amongst romance texts in that it discards the traditional male-gaze perspective of the *chansons de geste* and reverses normativised gender patterns. When Aucassin and Nicolette reach Torelore, for instance, embodied gender ideologies are mocked along with patriarchal authority as the boy learns that the Queen of Torelore is fighting a war while the King is resting in bed, waiting to give birth to his heir.

Nicolette eschews the passivity and ineffectuality traditionally associated with the female sex, and in Lee's essay the young Saracen emerges as an androgynous *picara* who transgresses social and gender boundaries. Presented in masculine guise, she proves able to master normatively masculine functions, as for instance when she breaks out of the tower to rescue Aucassin. While seemingly discussing the role of landscape in medieval poetry, Lee depicts Nicolette as "the king" of the forest, pointing out that it is the young foreign maid of uncertain origins – and not the noble-born Aucassin – who has to endure several tests. When she needs to find a shelter at the end of her peregrination, she "makes herself a hut of branches, bracken, and flowers", while "the stars peep down on her whiteness as she dreams of her Lord Aucassin" (Lee 1884: I, 123) as Lancelot might have dreamt of Guinevere. Significantly, this is a point that Lee stresses twice in *Euphorion*. Only a few pages later, she remarks again that "Nicolette builds for herself" a "hut of flowering branches and grapes" (Lee 1884: I, 134).

Developing her argument well beyond the boundaries of literature, in the essay on "Mediæval Love" Lee locates the first instances of "a new manner of loving" in the late medieval tradition of courtly poetry (Lee 1884: II, 126). She argues that the new poetic conventions point to a "moral, æsthetical, and social superiority on the part of [women]", suggesting a changing "attitude in the relations of the sexes" (Lee 1884: II, 128). Whereas classical literature had embraced a clear-cut dichotomy – conceiving of women as a mere instrument of pleasure for men, and thus represented them as either wives or mistresses – courtly poetry reveals a change in the way in which gender identity and relations are constructed. The late Middle Ages, Lee remarks, welcomed a new kind of woman, one who dominates over a swarm of men, "highborn proud, having brought her husband a dower of fiefs

equal to his own, and of vassals devoted to her race. About her she has no equals" (Lee 1884: II, 137).

Placed in the concluding essay of *Euphorion*, Lee's discussion of changing notions of gender seems to provide another response – and another amendment to – Pater's "Two Early French Stories". Pater's praise of the love, loyalty and sense of duty that is celebrated in Provençal poetry is in fact explored from the exclusively male perspective of Aucassin, Abélard, and Amis and Amile. In addition, Lee's discussion of Nicolette emphasises a number of elements which forestall her characterisation of Dionea in *Hauntings* (1890). Like Nicolette, Dionea is a foreigner of uncertain parentage whose presence is perceived as unsettling by the community that hosts her. The girl's refusal of the education she is given suggests her rejection of embodied gendered ideology. Dionea's guardian, the physician Alessandro De Rosis, complains that the girl's "character is not so satisfactory", and this is because "she hates learning, sewing, washing up the dishes, all equally" (Lee 1906: 67). By the time the teenage girl leaves the convent where she is studying, she has become a breadwinner who performs physically tiring – and usually male – jobs. As in Nicolette's case, however, these tasks are not at odds with the full sensuality of her body:

> [Dionea] is at present gaining her bread working with the masons at our notary's new house at Lerici: the work is hard, but our women often do it, and it is magnificent to see Dionea, in her short white skirt and tight white bodice, mixing the smoking lime with her beautiful strong arms; or, an empty sack drawn over her head and shoulders, walking majestically up the cliff, up the scaffoldings with her load of bricks. (pp. 79-80)

As Maxwell notes, several elements of "Dionea" reveal the influence of Pater (Maxwell 1997: 258-59)[3]. Lee's citational strategy is especially evident as she makes an addendum to Pater's argument in *The Renaissance*. In discussing the adventures of Aucassin and Nicolette, Pater had pointed out that "[a]ll the charm of the piece is in its details" (Pater 1980: 15). In "The Outdoor Poetry", Lee argues

[3] The most significant evidence is De Rosis's interest in the idea that ancient pagan gods might be still living in exile, a theory which shapes Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) as well as Lee's story of Domenico Neroni in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*.

that this *chantefable* stands out in that it includes an instance of crude realism that is unique in portraying the life of the serfs during the Middle Ages. Lee amends "Mr. Pater['s]" text, arguing that he had "deliberately omitted" this insight into the reality of daily life in the Middle Ages (Lee 1884: I, 133). She notes that while Aucassin is wandering through the forest, crying over losing his leveret, he encounters an unnamed peasant who has accidentally lost one of his landowner's bullocks. The man, who is unable to pay compensation and worried about his old mother, curses Aucassin for despairing over trifles.

Whereas Nicolette is portrayed as a knight-at-arms who risks her life to save her beloved, Aucassin is depicted as a "damsel in distress" who passively accepts "protection and deference as his prerogatives" (Singer 2011: 47). Insofar as he embodies action disjointed from responsibility, Aucassin represents the male homosexual counterpart of the lesbian boyish androgyne. If Nicolette is disguised as a male *jongleur* at the end of the story, Aucassin works as a "transvestic guise", the ineffectuality of which enables Lee to textually construct the "lesbian sense of difference" that Vicinus sees as a common element of much of women's writings at the *fin-de-siècle* (Vicinus 1999: 85). Apart from its formal realism, Lee seems to have been attracted to the *chantefable* of "Aucassin and Nicolette" because of its parody of gender identity and roles. The recurring references to Nicolette's androgynous actions and disguise in *Euphorion* – along with Lee's own choice of a male pen name – suggest that Lee was exploring the idea that gender is discursively constructed, rather than simply confining sexual dissidence to the past.

As Gilbert notes, in exploring the gender ideology and relations inscribed within the text of *Aucassin and Nicolette* critics need to address a wider set of issues than have been analysed to date. These include ethnicity and race, as well as Aucassin's refusal to accept patriarchal – rather than merely masculine – values. Moreover, Nicolette's queer traits yield to a stereotypically female passivity when she is reunited with Aucassin (Gilbert 1997: 223-24). However, such instability confirms the idea that gender is not fixed but enacted. This issue is all the more pertinent if one shifts focus from Lee's writings to her writing persona. Lee had adopted a male pseudonym for her writing, although her identity was publicly known. As she confessed in a letter she addressed to Henrietta Jenkin in 1878, "I

don't care that Vernon Lee should be known to myself or any other young woman, as I am sure no one reads a woman's writings on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt" (qtd. in Gunn 1964: 66). Consistently with Butler's argument that gender is produced and enacted through imitation of rituals and is expressed through the "repeated stylisation of the body" (Butler 1990: 32), Lee's depiction of Aucassin and Nicolette points toward a queer representation of gender. By refusing monolithic and clear-cut distinctions between the male and female sexes, she unsettles the balance of normativised gender and sexual categories. In so doing, she inscribes in her writings the same challenge to embodied gender ideology which she had endorsed in choosing to base her literary identity on a male pseudonym.

4. Héloïse, the dissident heroine

In "Two Early French Stories", Pater also praises Piérre Abélard as one of the forefathers of the Renaissance, that "movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised" (Pater 1980: 5). Pater sees in the French theologian – whom he defines as "the great scholar and the great lover" (p. 3) – the embodiment of this new spirit, which he represents in fully sensuous terms by stressing

> its intimacy, its languid sweetness, its rebellion, its subtle skill in dividing the elements of human passion, its care for physical beauty, its worship of the body, which penetrated the early literature of Italy, and finds an echo even in Dante. (p. 4)

It is Dante that Pater must have in mind when he points out that, while Abélard was helping Héloïse "to refine a little further on the nature of abstract ideas, 'Love made himself of the party with them'" (p. 3). This incident bears an interesting resemblance to the story of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, whom Dante places among those who are guilty for yielding to lust in his *Commedia*. Abélard and Héloïse's sin – like Paolo and Francesca's – is sparked by the act of reading, which becomes an act of transgression.

This bond between religious ethics, humanism, and the sensuous awakening of the human soul is also central to the opening essay of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, titled "The Love of the Saints". Significantly, Lee's appropriation of Pater's aesthetic ideal can be found both at the beginning and at the end of the collection. Whereas in her "Valedictory" Lee concludes by suggesting that Pater's aestheticism had developed into a moralist tract, departing from "the school of Mr Swinburne" (Lee 1895: 255), in "The Love of the Saints" she makes a further amendment to Pater's argument, reassessing Héloïse's moral stance.

As Lee notes at the beginning of her essay, until the advent of Franciscanism the human heart had been thought to be jeopardised in an atmosphere of general anarchy and promiscuity. Well aware – as Pater had been before her – of the antinomies, or dualistic aspect of the Renaissance, Lee's portrait of Pre-Franciscan culture relies on a series of oxymora, suggesting that such opposite values were not at odds. Because of widespread Manichaeism, "on all sides everywhere, heresies were teeming", but – as she had already pointed out in *Euphorion* – these were at once "austere and equivocal, pure and unclean" (p. 6). Far from relegating the moral crimes of the Renaissance to its historical setting, Lee suggests that reading Abélard and Heloïse's letters is still relevant to the Victorian audience in that they contain a quasi-Nietzschean warning against the humiliation of the human soul:

> This is a book which each of us should read, in order to learn, with terror and self-gratulation [*sic*], how the aridity of the world's soul may neutralise the greatest individual powers for happiness and good. These letters are as chains which we should keep in our dwelling-place, to remind us of past servitude, perhaps to warn us against future. (pp. 11-12)

Lee draws on the story of Abélard and Héloïse as a means to illustrate, "by the force of contrast, the intellectual and moral aridity of the eleventh century" (p. 12). Whereas Pater had focused on Abélard as the embodiment of the modern spirit, Lee stresses the rebellious and dissident nature of the nun, arguing that her carnal instincts make her no sinner. From Lee's standpoint, the way in which Heloïse questions the ideas and institutions of her time looks back to Enlightenment female thinkers such as Madame Roland and Mary Wollstonecraft:

> No woman has ever been more rich and bold and warm of mind and heart than Héloïse; nor has any woman ever questioned the unquestioned ideas and institutions of her age, of any age, with such vehemence and certainty of intuition. She judges questions which are barely asked and judged of now-a-days, applying to consecrated sentimentality the long-lost instinctive human rationalism of the ancient philosophers. […] She is, this learned theologian of the eleventh century, as passionately human in thought as any Mme. Roland or Mary Wolstonecraft [*sic*] of a hundred years ago. (p. 12)

While Héloïse rebels against the "supposed purity and piety" of her times, "[blazoning] out her wickedness and hypocrisy" (pp. 18, 20), Abélard conforms to the medieval ethics of individual humiliation. He is "well suited to his times, and spiritually thrives in their exhausted, chill atmosphere" (p. 19).

For Pater, Abélard stands out as a conflation of pagan eros and Christian love. Lee, on her part, describes his nature as the product of unwholesome theology. She might agree with Pater that the man is "one of the most subtle and solvent thinkers of the Middle Ages" (p. 13), yet his fault is both moral and intellectual:

> [a]s with the intellectual, so also, in large degree, with the moral: a splendid will to do right is applied, in its turn, to phantoms. Here again the letters of Abélard and Héloïse are extraordinarily instructive. The highest virtue […] is obedience. Thus Abélard, having quoted from St. Augustine that all which is done for obedience's sake is well done, proceeds very logically: 'It is more advantageous for us to act rightly than to do good […] We should think not so much of the action itself, as of the manner in which it is performed'. (pp. 14-15)

In Lee's view, Abélard does not forestall the modern spirit. He embodies the moral sterility of the early Middle Ages, the monasticism that mistakes ascetic renunciation for the repression of individual and earthly feelings in order to appease a whimsical divinity. By misreading Augustine's philosophy, Abélard opposes right and good as moral categories, confusing the worship of God with the obedience to ecclesiastical dogmas. His fault consists in emptying "right-doing […] of all rational significance" (p. 15), conforming to discursively established moral precepts. A significant example of this wrongly constructed ethical system is chastity, a value that is reduced to the mere "guarding of virginity

which, for some occult reasons, is highly praised in Heaven" (p. 15).

Abélard does not regret committing a sin against the will of God; he feels guilty for having disobeyed moral precepts that he does not want to challenge. Héloïse, instead, disobeys the rules that her vows impose on her, claiming her right to embrace fleshly passion. Barely mentioned by Pater, the nun stands out in Lee's argument as a "strong warm-hearted modern woman, fit for Browning" (p. 18). Not unlike Aurora Leigh[4], Héloïse is an independent woman who does not confuse morality with the repression of human instincts. In this regard, Héloïse's resoluteness, but also Nicolette's independence, show Lee's still unresolved attitude towards the "Woman Question", which had powerfully emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, challenging the Victorian system of patriarchal values.

Thus, I argue that the textual representation of femininity and gender relations that one finds in her Renaissance essays suggests that Lee had been reflecting upon such issues more than a decade before she openly discussed them in her article on "The Economic Dependence on Women" (1902)[5]. In this essay, Lee confesses not only that she had hitherto avoided engaging with the "Woman Question", but she also explains her refusal in terms of a rejection of a binary system of sex classification, confirming her queer conception of gender. Notwithstanding the undeniable urge to act for women's enfranchisement, Lee explains,

> the inevitable pitting of one of these sexes against the other, the inevitable harping on what can or cannot, or must or must not be done, said or thought by women, because they are not men (women! women! everlastingly women!), produced a special feeling, pervading, overpowering, unendurable (like that of visiting a harem or a nunnery), due to that perpetual obtrusion of the one fact of sex, while the other fact

[4] Although there is no reference to *Aurora Leigh* in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee had presumably read it. As Bizzotto notes (2000), Waldemar, the sculptor who dies in mysterious circumstances at the end of "Dionea", might have been named after Lady Waldemar in Barrett Browning's poem.

[5] Having first appeared in the *North American Review* in 1902, the article was later republished in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908) with the more provocative title "On the Economic Parasitism of Women".

of human nature, the universal, chaste fact represented by the word *Homo* as distinguished from mere *Vir* and *Femina*, seemed for the moment lost sight of. (Lee 1908: 265-66)

In Lee's view, Héloise's passionate love and resoluteness embody what she had defined in *Euphorion* as "the heroism of unlawful love" (Lee 1884: II, 173). In addition, her argument that "love has in itself no moral value" (p. 173) suggests her adherence to aestheticism and her attempt at providing a historical legitimisation of queer sexuality. From this perspective, Héloïse's attitude is consistent with much of the homosexual discourse of the time, which, as Ivory notes, celebrated the cult of individualism as a means to challenge "the authority of man-made laws (including laws made by man-made gods)" (Ivory 2009: 79).

In reading Lee's argument on self-cultivation and individual expression, one wonders to what extent her essays might hint at non-normativised forms of love. Lee's praise of Franciscanism as "the introduction into religious matters of passionate human emotion[s]", and "the return from exile of the long-persecuted instincts of mankind" (Lee 1895: 5, 8) suggests interesting considerations. Whereas in *Euphorion* she had legitimised unwholesome, only allegedly immoral behaviours by explaining that the Renaissance civilisation had developed a certain tolerance to evil, in "The Love of the Saints" she argues that transgression and rebellion are necessary to the moral development of man. Following the advent of Franciscanism,

this enthroning of human love in matters spiritual was an enormous, indispensable improvement, which, whatever detriment it may have brought in individual and, so to say, professionally religious cases, nay, perhaps to all religion as a whole, became perfectly wholesome and incalculably beneficent in the enormous mass of right-minded laity. (p. 12)

Discussing Post-Franciscan painting, Lee finds in the representations of the Virgin Mary an unparalleled ideal of loving womanhood. The late medieval iconography of the Madonna – "the Mother in adoration, the crowned, enthroned Virgin, the Mater Gloriosa; the broken-hearted Mother, Mater Dolorosa" – is based on a type of female beauty that she defines as "more complete and more

immortal than that of any Greek divinity" (Lee 1895: 53)[6]. Such a comparison is rather telling from the point of view of homosexual discourse, especially if one considers that both Pater and Symonds had presented Hellenism as a cultural category with epistemic significance as well as the bedrock of homoerotic desire (Dowling 1994; Evangelista 2009).

The aesthetic ideal of Hellenism had provided *fin-de-siècle* homosocial culture with a historical legitimisation of same-sex desire, intellectually based on Plato's argument on the dual myth of Aphrodite. Each version of Aphrodite, Pausanias maintains in the *Symposium*, inspires a different form of love, and those whose love is inspired by Aphrodite the Heavenly are subject to *paideros* and homoerotic desire[7]. Having read both Pater's and Symonds's work, Lee's association of the womanly type conveyed by the post-Franciscan representations of the Madonna with that of a Greek goddess seems not to be a coincidence. As Vanita notes, the Virgin Mary had become a nineteenth-century homoerotic icon that appealed in particular to women who did not identify themselves as heterosexual (Vanita 1996: 27).

It is significant that in *What Happened Next* Ethel Smyth would recall that Lee had drawn a distinction between woman's and man's love, stressing the gentle and maternal qualities of the former:

> woman's love is so essentially maternal, that it were tedious to enumerate possible deviations from this basic character; whereas man's love, as obviously and invariably, is triune; that is, acquisitive, possessive and BESTIAL. (qtd. in Kandola 2005: 472)

Greek youth had provided Victorian male homosexual intellectuals with an ideal prototype of beauty, and the type of womanhood that Lee exalts in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* might be seen to fulfil a similar function. The kind of femininity

[6] Again, Lee's comment reminds one of Pater's praise of Botticelli's classical subjects, which he claims provide "a more direct inlet into the Greek temper than the works of the Greek themselves" (Pater 1980: 45-46).

[7] According to Hesiod, Aphrodite was born from Uranus after he had been emasculated by Cronus, whereas in Homer's *Iliad* the goddess of love is said to be the child of Zeus and Dione. On the myths of Aphrodite and homosexual desire, see Plato (2007: 148-49).

that these women express might not be considered sexually charged from a male or heterosexual standpoint, but one should be careful in applying to the nineteenth century sexual labels that are culturally rooted in our century. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Faderman remarks that romantic attachment between women was not considered as sexually deviant before the advent of modern sexology, nor could the Victorian patriarchal system conceive of women as having sexual appetite. Romantic bonds, however, had existed between women well before the twentieth-century notion of lesbianism. Because women were perceived as lacking in "venereal appetite" (Faderman 1985: 152), these relationships were thought to be void of genital intercourse and, as such, they were socially accepted until the advent of sexology. Thus, I suggest that Lee's praise of the wholesome influence of Francis's religion of love finds a queer counterpart in her celebration of the unconditioned love and resoluteness of Héloïse as well as in her response to iconographical representations of the Virgin Mary. In this regard, Vanita argues that the Marian cult had attracted the sympathy of Victorian sexual dissidents. As a woman who had given birth without conceiving, and hence without engaging in heterosexual intercourse, the Virgin Mary occupies a place that is significantly "outside and above patriarchal family laws" (Vanita 1996: 35).

Lee's fascination with women whose androgyny and sexual dissidence forestall the modern spirit, and her praise of the tender femininity of the Virgin Mary in the post-Franciscan iconography are only seemingly opposed. The dissident nature of queer heroines like Nicolette and Héloïse – who implicitly anticipate Lee's not unproblematic reflections on the "Woman Question" – and the motherly love of both Mary and Magdalen should in fact be read as complementary aspects of the same type of womanhood. From this perspective, one can arguably extend to Lee's non-fictional works Vicinus's idea that her writings reveal a struggle "to express in accessible language an ideal of spiritualised homoerotic love" (Vicinus 2004: 602).

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