



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.2. 2023 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE FEMME FATALE IN VERNON LEE'S *HAUNTINGS*

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Article information

Received:19/3/2023  
Accepted:21/4/2023  
Published online:29/4/2023  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.2.59](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.2.59)

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how the author Vernon Lee incorporates and reinterprets the figure of the “femme fatale” in her collection of supernatural stories, *Hauntings*. The “femme fatale” was a popular trope in Aestheticist literature, and is widely regarded as misogynistic. Lee writes both within and against the models constructed by male Aesthetic writers such as Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds. This paper investigates how Vernon Lee as a female aesthete, reworks and critiques the relationship between the male artist and female subject in Aestheticism. It argues that through the image of the femme fatale, Lee critiques the masculine desire to possess or appropriate the woman, whether it is as an object of desire, art object, or object of study. In doing so, she defines her unique position as a woman writer within the field of Aestheticism.

**Keywords:** Aestheticism, Decadence, Woman Writer, Fin-de-Siècle, Femme Fatale, Victorian studies

Introduction

Vernon Lee (1856-1935) was the pseudonym of Violet Paget, a prolific British author who wrote across a variety of genres, including fiction, history, travel writing, and criticism. Although she is largely overlooked today, Lee was a prominent Victorian intellectual and a leading theorist of the late nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement. As a woman writer, Lee was fully aware that she occupied a marginalised position within Aestheticism. Regarding the motivations that led her to adopt a male pseudonym, Lee writes, “I am sure that nobody reads a woman’s writing on art, history, or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt” (qtd. in Evangelista 91-92).

Angela Leighton notes how women and aestheticism are largely seen as oppositional to each other (2). This is because “aestheticism was essentially a male idealism, predicated on the unregenerate physicality of the woman” (Leighton 2). While Aestheticism was largely the province of elite male intellectuals, Aestheticist literature is densely populated with archetypal feminine figures such as Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott”, Oscar Wilde’s “Salome”, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny”. Kathy Psomiades observes that such “iconic images of femininity” are central to Aestheticism, and deeply influence how it defines itself (31). As John Dixon Hunt describes it, Aestheticist works are characterised by the “use of a beautiful woman as an image for the poet’s introspection” (177). Thus, women in aestheticist literature tend to be presented as symbols or images rather than as fully realised individuals. One of the “iconic images” of femininity ubiquitous in the male-dominated Aesthetic and Decadent tradition was that of the “femme fatale”.

The trope of the femme fatale is primarily viewed as misogynistic. Rita Felski argues that the femme fatale was primarily a “projection of male fantasy” (1104). Although she appears to be in a position of power in relation to the passive male subject, this fantasy of domination is usually generated out of male desire (Felski 1104). Similarly, George Ross Ridge connects the image of the femme fatale with the emergence of the notion of the “modern woman” (353). Ridge notes that with the rise of economic society, traditional gender roles were challenged (353). To some decadent writers, this signalled a departure from how women were “naturally” meant to be (Ridge 353). According to them, the new woman “incarnates destruction rather than creativity,” and can no longer fulfil her roles as wife or mother (Ridge 353). When women become corrupt, the family is adversely affected, and thus, eventually the whole social structure disintegrates (Ridge 359). Thus, the modern woman is depicted as “a vampire, a succubus, a femme fatale,” who is responsible for draining life force not only from the male decadent but from the society at large (Ridge 359). Ridge also notes, however, that femme fatales are characterized by their vitality, and it is this excess of power which overwhelms the male decadent subject (354).

In this vein, Catherine Maxwell argues that while the image of the fatal woman was often constructed as a misogynistic fantasy, this was not always the case. In the work of Decadent writers such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, the trope could also be seen as a celebration of female strength, passion, and vitality (Maxwell 256). According to Maxwell, the femme fatale posed a challenge to the Victorian ideal of the woman as a domestic angel (256). Maxwell links the femme fatale to her idea of the female Sublime. In her book, *The Female Sublime*, Maxwell argues that those traits which are associated with the notion of the sublime are not inherently masculine (8). Traditionally, the sublime has been gendered as masculine, primarily because it is characterized by its tendency to dominate and overwhelm the experiencing subject (Maxwell 7). However, Maxwell notes that in many texts, the sublime is depicted as a female power which demands submission from the male subject (9). Thus, the femme fatale, according to Maxwell, can be reinterpreted as empowering.

The stories included in Lee’s collection, *Hauntings*, feature beautiful and dangerous women who seem to fall into the femme fatale archetype. Here, this ambivalent figure ceases to be an embodiment of male anxieties regarding changing gender roles. Instead, the women in *Hauntings* are representative of an “uncontainable female energy”, as Maxwell phrases it (265). They resist the male narrators’ attempts to appropriate them through works of art, or through the written narrative itself. While the male narrators are driven by their desire to define them, till the end, the women remain elusive. This is because they are characterized by “a power that is in excess of what can be actually portrayed or delineated”, as Maxwell suggests (255). She goes on to say, “This sense of energy, which cannot be fully represented, but which is experienced as an effect, an energy which transgresses borders and boundaries recalls definitions of the supposedly masculine sublime” (Maxwell 255-256).

### Discussion - The Trope of the Femme Fatale in *Hauntings*

I will now be investigating the individual stories that make up *Hauntings*. Firstly, I will be looking at the story, “Amour Dure”. Here, the male protagonist is Spiridion Trepka, whose ostensible motive behind visiting Italy is in order to write a history of Urbania. He is, in fact, possessed by a deep nostalgic yearning to “come face to face with the Past” (Lee 3). Soon enough, Trepka comes across the rather interesting historical figure of the former Duchess of Urbania, Medea di Carpi. Medea Di Carpi is the quintessential femme fatale; in her short life of twenty-seven years, she has brought to death five of her lovers. Trepka soon realizes that like those before him, he is becoming increasingly obsessed with Medea. Ultimately, in his quest to attain Medea’s love, he too meets the fate of most of her lovers, that is, death.

Medea is a woman who died almost three hundred years ago, and as Maxwell has noted, death and femininity have often gone hand in hand in cultural representations (254). Death turns the beautiful woman into a passive art object, who can be “lovingly exposed, perused and dissected by the connoisseur” (Maxwell 254). Medea however, true to the image of the femme fatale, is active, and returns from the dead with an uncanny vitality. Initially, she can exercise her influence only through artefacts, such as her portrait. However, through the course of the narrative, she becomes an increasingly powerful presence. Medea haunts Trepka, gaining dominion over his mind and his imagination, to the point where he ultimately loses his sanity. Trepka suggests

that it is his desire which will reanimate Medea, and will cause her to return to Earth. However, we are led to believe that it is Medea who was in control all along. It is not Trepka's desire which has resurrected Medea, on the contrary, it is Medea's own desire for revenge.

Initially, it seems as though Trepka is highly critical of attempts to appropriate the figure of Medea. In fact, he even attempts to reconstruct Medea's history along feminist lines, exposing how conventional male historiography has been largely responsible for constructing Medea as a ruthless femme fatale. According to him, Medea was a brilliant and ambitious woman, but she was restricted due to the lack of opportunities available to women at the time. Since she was defined only by her sexual relationships with men, these were the only means through which she could exercise any power. Her ambitions for "conquest and empire" were no different from those of her male contemporaries, yet her pursuit of these goals was condemned due to her gender (Lee 23). While there is certainly an underlying feminist basis to such a reconstruction, Trepka's words cannot be taken too seriously. In Trepka's eyes, Medea is no ordinary woman, she is a force of nature who is capable of doing no wrong. Trepka exclaims, "Go preach right and wrong to a tigress, my dear sir!" (Lee 23). Thus, Trepka's justification of Medea's actions seems questionable.

Christa Zorn notes that while Trepka uncovers the cultural constructions which are responsible for the formation of this image of Medea as an evil seductress, he does not realize that his own image of her is just as dependent on such constructions. Ultimately, Trepka simply reinforces Medea's position as an object of male desire; he too fails to see beyond Medea's sexual identity. As Zorn notes, Trepka, as a modern historian, only reproduces the traditional relationship between masculine and feminine, and subject and object (163).

Trepka seems to realize early on that the possession of a woman such as Medea is impossible, stating, "The possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man; it would turn his head, make him forget even what he owed her; no man must survive long enough who conceives himself to have a right over her, it is a kind of sacrilege" (Lee 25). Nevertheless, he makes the mistake of attempting the impossible. Although his actions mirror those of Medea's previous lovers, Trepka considers himself to be superior. Trepka assumes that Medea will love him best, because he has loved her three hundred years after her death. Through his quest for Medea's love, he is able to envision himself as "reserved for something wonderful in this world" (Lee 50). As Zorn notes, it is his pursuit to possess the female object of desire, Medea, which gives Trepka, the male subject, a sense of purpose and self-importance (163). Trepka's romantic longing for the Past merges with his desire for Medea, it is through her image that his nostalgic yearning for an authentic interaction with the Past is satisfied. Zorn argues that Trepka finds in Medea, "the embodiment of all his unfulfilled desires" (159). However, Trepka cannot comfortably project his desires onto Medea, for she has a distinct life of her own. In fact, as Zorn notes, it is Medea's own desire for power and revenge to which Trepka ultimately succumbs (165).

Trepka attempts to appropriate Medea as an object of desire, and, as a result, he must pay the ultimate price. It could be argued that through this story, as in the others in *Hauntings*, the traditional relationship between subject and object, is challenged. Conventionally, in such a relationship, the subject (predominantly male) asserts domination over the object (predominantly female) and projects his own desires onto it.

As stated previously, it is such a traditional relationship between the subject and the object which Trepka attempts to reproduce. Kristin Mahoney notes that "Lee frequently uses objectified femininity to signify wrong ways of looking, to critique aggressive or unethical modes of consumption that privilege the desiring subject" (53). While consumerism is being discussed here, Mahoney notes how this can be linked with gender. The desiring subject is often constructed as male, as in Lee's stories, but here, the feminized art object does not fulfil or embody the desires of the male subject. The art object does not provide the male subject with, "security, knowledge, or increased self-understanding" (Mahoney 50).

Instead, as Mahoney argues, the art object exceeds these desires, involving the subject in troubling and transformative encounters which problematize rather than secure male identity (54). Medea is initially present in the story only as an art object, and even when she appears to have returned to Earth as a ghost, risks appropriation as an object of desire. However, despite occupying the object position in this scenario, Medea is the one who actually exerts power and influence on the male subject, Trepka, as we have seen.

The next story I will be looking at is "Dionea". Dionea is a shipwrecked young girl who is found on the shore of an Italian village. The locals are unwilling to take the child in, thus, she is deposited in a convent. The story is narrated through a series of letters which the communal physician, Doctor Alessandro de Rosis, sends to his benefactress, Lady Evelyn Savelli. In his first letter, De Rosis informs her about the girl's arrival. The Lady had earlier expressed her desire to help the local poor, thus De Rosis asks her to take up the responsibility of providing for the girl's maintenance. Through the letters that follow, De Rosis informs the Lady about the progress of her ward.

The name Dionea is, as the narrator notes, derived from Dione, "one of the loves of Father Zeus, and mother of no less a lady than the Goddess Venus" (Lee 65). Although De Rosis presents himself merely as a sceptical observer, through his narrative, he implicitly connects Dionea to the goddess Venus.

De Rosis invokes the goddess Venus at the very beginning of the narrative. Describing the "wicked loveliness" of the sea, he imagines that in ancient times, it must have given rise to "a baleful Goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men's lives in darkness like that squall of last week" (Lee 62). This is immediately followed by De Rosis' introduction of Dionea, "a young stranger whom the sea has laid upon our shore" (Lee 62). While the connection is not explicitly made, it is implied that there is an intimate relation between this "young stranger" and the "baleful Goddess of beauty", both seemingly birthed by the sea. Even when Dionea is merely a child, De Rosis notes how her extraordinary beauty and good health, set her apart from her peers in the convent. Expressing a marked dislike for activities such as learning and sewing, she spends her time gazing out at the sea or lying in the garden instead. De Rosis observes how the rose and myrtle bushes she lies under grow mysteriously large, seemingly due to her presence. Further, strangely enough, Dionea seems to attract towards herself a large number of pigeons, which follow her around wherever she goes. These associations all point towards a connection with the goddess Venus.

As Dionea grows older, she begins to embody the more dangerous aspects of the goddess of love. The superstitious villagers suspect that she has the power to bring about "love misery" (Lee 74). They observe that "wherever she (Dionea) goes the young people must need fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable" (Lee 74). Eventually, Dionea's powers seem to be asserting their influence within the convent as well, leading to what De Rosis terms as an "extraordinary love epidemic" (Lee 76). This love epidemic ultimately culminates in the death of a devout monk, Father Domenico. Supposedly unable to suppress the illicit passion which Dionea's strange powers aroused in him, the monk commits suicide.

Again, as in "Amour Dure", there is the sense that De Rosis is projecting his own desires onto the female object, whose story he delineates through the medium of letters. Despite his seemingly prosaic nature, De Rosis, like Spiridion Trepka, is consumed by a romantic longing for the Past. Specifically, he is fascinated by the history of the Pagan gods and is working on a book regarding their return in the modern world. It could be argued that through constructing Dionea as an ancient pagan goddess, De Rosis is able to fulfil his romantic fantasy, that of the return of the pagan Gods. After all, De Rosis is the only one who emphasises Dionea's connection with Venus. The villagers, though wary of her powers, do not seem to spot this connection, despite their pagan heritage. Also, Zorn notes that Dionea can in fact be associated with an important Christian figure, St. Francis, due to her affinity to nature (151). However, despite various references in the text to St. Francis, which suggest that he is well honoured in the village, this is a connection that is never made.

In his letters, De Rosis frequently employs aestheticized language to describe Dionea's extraordinary beauty. Portraying the sensuous sight of Dionea playing with pigeons, De Rosis writes, "...Dionea lies stretched out full length in the sun, putting out her lips, which they come to kiss, and uttering strange cooing sounds...tis' a lovely sight, a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne Jones or Tadema..." (Lee 68). Further, De Rosis describes her as an "amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, torturous and serpentine, like those of Leonardo da Vinci's women" (Lee 72). These two instances might be seen, as Brandon Yen argues, as another mode of defining the female subject through cultural and artistic models. Through such aesthetic descriptions, Yen notes, Rosis attempts to represent Dionea as a "definite artefact" (5). However, the powerful and enigmatic women represented in the art of Leonardo da Vinci, Edward Burne-Jones,

and Lawrence Alba Tadema seem to elude attempts at fixed representation. Thus, it could also be argued that through these allusions, Lee connects Dionea to a long tradition of femme fatales, who, as Maxwell argues, embody the female sublime.

De Rosis is not the only male who attempts to appropriate Dionea for his own purposes. Towards the end of the story, Lady Evelyn's acquaintances, the sculptor Waldemar and his wife, Gertrude, visit the village along with their family. Waldemar has previously only crafted statues of men, for he considers women to be aesthetically inferior. Since he has been mocked for never having produced a female statue, Gertrude looks for a suitable model and settles on Dionea. De Rosis contemplates the morality of allowing Dionea to model for Waldemar, a job which would inevitably strip her of her modesty and thus cause significant damage to her reputation. He concludes however, with the sentiment that the concerns of a village girl, an "obscure, useless life within the bounds of what we choose to call right and wrong" are trivial in comparison to the "possession by mankind of a great work of Art, a Venus immortally beautiful" (Lee 93). Thus, strangely enough, the woman appropriated as an art object is given more significance than the woman as a real, living individual.

Much to Waldemar's disappointment, however, he finds himself unable to capture Dionea's elusive beauty. Under the aesthetic gaze of Waldemar, who sees her purely as a body, "a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower", Dionea refuses to be a passive object (Lee 93). Instead, she resists all attempts at appropriation, growing "strangely more beautiful" than before (Lee 95). The statue is, in fact, of the goddess Venus, whom Dionea has been implicitly connected to throughout the narrative. This could mean that Dionea is a living reincarnation of the goddess, and thus surpasses the statue in beauty. However, I would argue that it could also imply that Dionea's elusive charm cannot be defined by this mythological construction.

Waldemar becomes increasingly obsessed with Dionea's beauty, and this obsession ultimately culminates in madness. At the end of the story, Waldemar burns his studio down, and commits suicide himself, apparently as a part of a ritual sacrifice to the goddess Venus. Gertrude too is discovered dead, but Dionea is nowhere to be found. The tragic ending of the narrative implies that attempts to relegate the femme fatale to an object position can have disastrous consequences. Instead of being a passive muse, Dionea exerts a powerful influence over Waldemar, driving him to madness, and ultimately leading to his death.

Dionea is a living woman, thus, while it could be argued that Medea was merely a figment of Trepka's imagination, the same argument cannot be stated in Dionea's case. However, it could be argued that the seemingly supernatural aspects of the story are due to psychological projection on the narrator's part. While I did argue that Dionea's construction as the goddess Venus probably results from such projection, I do not think the supernatural powers attributed to Dionea can be reduced to this. Dionea's strange influence cannot be explained merely in psychological terms, because the villagers, like De Rosis, regard Dionea with a sense of awe. They define Dionea as a witch, rather than as a goddess, but underlying their fear of her is a recognition of her inexplicable power.

Maxwell argues that in Lee's stories, the supernatural "exceeds" the psychological, and cannot be reduced to it (268). Lee utilises the supernatural in order to acknowledge female power in "representational fields which conventionally deny their (its) existence. Due to this, "these female energies appear as revolutionary, as elusive disruptive forces breaking through the established order" (Maxwell 268).

The third story in the collection is "Oke of Okehurst". Here, the narrator is an artist who has been invited to Okehurst to paint the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Oke, that is William and Alice Oke. He accepts the offer, but soon regrets his decision, as he believes that the Okes are likely to be an uninteresting couple. Like all the narrators in *Hauntings*, the anonymous portraitist also craves romance and excitement. His hostess, Alice Oke becomes the means by which he seeks to fulfil this desire. The narrator describes Alice as "the most graceful and exquisite woman he has ever seen" (Lee 122). Moreover, in addition to her singular beauty, the narrator is fascinated by Alice's eccentric personality. Alice Oke is characterized by an all-consuming interest in the past, which leads her to be indifferent to her present-day reality. In particular, she is fascinated by the history of her ancestress, also named Alice Oke, and her lover, a poet named Christopher Lovelock.

The narrator's primary motive behind staying at Okehurst becomes his need to capture Alice's elusive beauty in a portrait, and to unravel the mysteries of her character. As he states, he has "the interest of a strange psychological riddle to solve, and of a great portrait to paint" (Lee 128). He considers Alice Oke his muse, by capturing her enigmatic personality on the canvas, he believes that he will be able to create a masterpiece. She is perfectly indifferent to him, but the fact that this artist-muse relationship will inevitably be one-sided does not appear to matter very much to the narrator. In spite of his fascination with her, it is apparent that the narrator views Alice as merely an object for study. He has no human interest in her, which is something that is made obvious at several points in the text. Before commencing the narrative, the portraitist states, "She (Alice) was a marvellous, weird, exquisite creature, but one couldn't feel sorry for her... Ah! I shall never have another chance of painting a portrait such as I wanted. She seemed sent me from heaven or the other place" (Lee 111). Considering that the narrator is speaking of a woman who has been killed, the lack of sympathy is alarming. It is evident here that the portraitist regards Alice simply as a passive object who existed to provide him inspiration, rather than as an individual. As in "Dionea", it seems here that the narrator values the woman appropriated as an art object more than the living woman herself.

However, like Trepka, the portraitist seems to recognize that all attempts to appropriate Alice Oke would ultimately be futile. He emphasises the impossibility of describing, either in words or through art, the strange, unconventional beauty of a woman like Alice Oke. He states, "...if the pencil and the brush, imitating each line and tint, can't succeed, how is it possible to give even the vaguest notion with mere wretched words-words possessing only a wretched abstract meaning, an impotent conventional association?" (Lee 124). Moreover, with regards to her character, he states, "There was a waywardness, a strangeness that I felt I could not explain- a something that was as difficult to define as the peculiarity of her outward appearance, and perhaps very closely connected therewith" (Lee 127).

Nevertheless, the narrator simultaneously claims monopoly over Alice Oke, stating that he was the only one who was ever able to understand her. The narrator's belief that he, to a certain degree, understands this exceedingly complicated woman, adds to his sense of self-importance, and gives him a sense of authority over Alice Oke. In this regard, he is similar to De Rosis and Trepka, for both of these narrators attempt to understand and define the unconventional women they are confronted with. This is significant, and as Zorn states, implies the desire to "possess a woman by possessing her text" (163).

The story "Oke of Okehurst", like all the others in *Hauntings*, ends tragically. Alice Oke is killed by her husband, supposedly in a fit of madness. He also dies a few days later. The narrator clearly positions Alice Oke as the perpetrator here, whose strange behaviour ultimately instigates her husband to madness. We, as readers, however, are led to question if this is in fact the truth.

William Oke is presented as conventional, in both his appearance as well as his character, and thus to the narrator, he is exceedingly uninteresting. Although assigned with the task of painting both their portraits, he is satisfied with painting William Oke anyhow. On the other hand, he devotes weeks to Alice Oke's portrait. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes increasingly evident that in neglecting William Oke, the narrator makes a grave mistake. In spite of William Oke's apparent conventionality, there is an underlying sense of restlessness which characterises him throughout the story. While the portraitist notices William Oke's worsening condition, he does not really act on this. Instead, the narrator appears to share Alice's perverse delight in provoking him, in spite of his claims to the contrary. It could be argued that if the narrator had been more sensitive to William Oke's "psychological explanation", instead of attempting to delineate Alice's character, a great tragedy could have been prevented.

The narrator, in this scenario, is clearly unable to fully confront the possibility that Alice Oke's psyche might be beyond his grasp. It could be argued that it is his inability to accept the autonomy of the female subject which leads to his obsessive fascination with Alice Oke, one that is, as previously noted, marked by the desire to define and delineate her. This leads him to neglect William Oke, who seems to be the one truly in need of attention, ultimately resulting in the story's tragic denouement.

Unlike Medea and Dionea, who supposedly triumph at the end of their respective narratives, Alice Oke meets a tragic fate. However, as in the other stories in *Hauntings*, she evades possession till the very end. The portraitist is never able to finish his portrait of her, and as readers, we are given the impression that he has not yet been able to “penetrate into the something mysterious about Mrs Oke” (Lee 127).

The fourth story I will be looking at is “A Wicked Voice”. The narrator of the story is Magnus, a composer who detests all older music, especially eighteenth-century opera, due to its emphasis on the art of singing. The voice, Magnus seems to imply, is too sensual, “it is a violin of flesh and blood” and thus, it is a corrupting influence (Lee 195). Magnus visits Venice, hoping to gain inspiration for the modern Wagnerian opera he is working on.

Magnus is staying at a boarding house when the portrait of an eighteenth-century Italian opera singer, Zaffirino, is brought to him. It was said that Zaffirino’s “vocal gifts” were greater than any singer, “ancient or modern” (Lee 201). One of the guests at the boarding house, Count Alvise, recounts a story regarding Zaffirino. Supposedly, the Count’s grand aunt, the Procuratessa Vendramin had once mocked and insulted Zaffirino, refusing to believe in the irresistible power of his singing. In doing so, she had attracted his vengeance. Through the bewitching quality of his voice, Zaffirino had enchanted the Procuratessa, making her fall ill, and eventually, killing her (Lee 203). Like the Procuratessa, Magnus too appears to have attracted Zaffirino’s vengeance, due to his hatred and contempt for the kind of music which Zaffirino epitomises (that is, eighteenth-century Italian opera). Zaffirino’s revenge ultimately culminates with the enslavement of Magnus’ creative inspiration, such that he is forced to only compose the eighteenth-century music he claims to despise.

Magnus overtly expresses his contempt towards Zaffirino, calling him a “ridiculous ass, this singer, once so renowned, now so forgotten...how flat and vapid and vulgar it all is to be sure, all this odious eighteenth century” (Lee 206). However, it is obvious that both the portrait and the story affect him deeply. They instigate an obsession with Zaffirino’s beautiful voice, which possesses his imagination to the extent that he can no longer compose his own music. While Magnus expresses his determination to complete the opera he is working on, underlying this is a repressed longing to hear the voice again.

Unlike the previous stories in *Hauntings*, which all feature women, Zaffirino is a castrato. But Zaffirino is aligned explicitly with the tradition of femme fatales. His “cruel beauty” reminds Magnus of the “wicked and vindictive women” represented in the writings of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Charles Baudelaire (Lee 206). Zaffirino’s voice, which haunts Magnus constantly, is also “wicked”, yet exquisitely beautiful. The ambiguous sexuality which characterises the castrato only serves to heighten the strangely beautiful quality of his voice. Patricia Pulham argues that “Zaffirino symbolises a menacing femininity that remains tinged with ambivalent sexuality” (432).

Magnus subconsciously craves to hear Zaffirino’s voice, yet at the same time, he also dreads the affective and physical sensations it arouses in him. Zaffirino’s voice, although distinctly feminine, with its “voluptuous phrases and florid cadences” is characterized by an irresistible power which overwhelms Magnus, rendering him passive and immobile (Lee 216). As Caballero notes, surrendering to the voice of the castrato endangers the integrity of the male subject, for here, the male subject is rendered passive, whereas the castrato is the “active source of lubricating pleasure” (392). Similarly, Pulham argues that Magnus’ experience of Zaffirino’s voice is “clearly marked by a form of feminine dissolution” (431). For example, when the voice is exacting its fatal revenge on Magnus, he feels his “body melt even as wax in the sunshine” (Lee 234). Magnus feels that “he too was turning fluid and vaporous” in order to merge and become one with the voice (Lee 234). Thus, Pulham argues, Magnus is feminized by the “fluidity of his orgasmic sensations” (431).

Towards the end of the narrative, Magnus visits Count Alvise’s villa in Mistra, where he hopes to recover from the strange malady which has afflicted him. While at first, the villa appears to be quite unextraordinary, Magnus soon realizes that it is the very place where Zaffirino killed the Procuratessa Vendramin with his bewitching voice. In fact, it was his subconscious desire to hear Zaffirino’s voice again which drew him to Mistra. Here, in the middle of the night, Magnus hears the voice again. He wanders through the villa seeking the voice, until he finds himself in the same room where the Procuratessa was killed. While Magnus has previously

witnessed the Procuratessa's death in a dream, it is now enacted before his very eyes. This time, however, Zaffirino's voice does not solely inflict violence on the Procuratessa. Here, Zaffirino takes his final revenge on Magnus, he hears Zaffirino's voice "swelling, swelling, rending asunder that downy veil which wrapped it, leaping forth, clear, resplendent, like the sharp and glittering blade of a knife that seemed to enter deep into my breast" (Lee 235). Caballero notes that this scene resembles a metaphorical castration (391).

Magnus is not killed, but he can "no longer lay hold of his own inspiration" (Lee 237). Castration, Caballero states, is "a powerful metaphor for such (creative) sterility" (391). Similarly, Maxwell argues that "the punishing knife can also be imaged as a ritual castration in which the feminized singer turns the composer into his own likeness, and thereby secures the triumph of the 'effete' feminine music of the eighteenth century over the 'masculine' epic of Wagner" (262). Magnus, who prided himself upon the "heroic harmonies" he composed, can now only make music characterized by "little, tripping flourishes and languishing phrases, and long- drawn, echoing cadences" (Lee 237). Additionally, Magnus is consumed by the desire to hear Zaffirino's voice again. The last "unfinished cadence" of Zaffirino's song haunts him, and when he vainly attempts to reproduce this note on the harpsichord, he is answered by a "jingle-jangle of broken strings, laughable and dreadful" (Lee 236). Thus, not only is Magnus deprived of his individual genius, he is condemned to be forever haunted by the memory of Zaffirino's "wicked" voice. Thus, the feminine voice of the castrato ultimately evades possession. Moreover, it exceeds the masculine desire for it, by involving the male subject in an unsettling encounter which problematises and destabilises his masculine identity.

### Conclusion

As Maxwell notes, the trope of the femme fatale could provide a space for the expression of transgressive modes of femininity (256). Thus, Vernon Lee, as a female writer, uses the potentialities afforded by the image of the femme fatale to her advantage. In her stories, the female subject is endowed with autonomy and the power to return the gaze. Lee's female characters have a distinct identity of their own and do not serve as passive receptacles for the projection of male desires and fears. Ultimately, through utilising the trope of the femme fatale, Lee is able to critique and subvert the traditional relationship between the male aesthete and the female subject.

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