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Decadent Historicism¹

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In what respects might we consider decadence as a historical concept? And in what ways do literary writings associated with the fin-de-siècle decadent tradition approach the question of history? These two interrelated questions need addressing because they converge upon a significant point. Many of the works of fiction, poetry, and drama that critics have identified with decadence demonstrate a concerted interest in the qualities that Classical commentators famously linked with the dissolution of the Roman Empire. As David Weir has shown, the European thinkers who most powerfully conjured the idea of Roman decadence were the French philosopher Montesquieu (1689-1755) and the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794).² In several parts of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), he refers in his notes to Montesquieu's influential *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734). Still, it is worth observing that at no point in the *Decline and Fall* does the term decadence become integral to Gibbon's own discourse. It took until the middle of the nineteenth century before British commentators began to use the phrase 'Roman decadence' to refer to a historical concept. Once criticism took this turn, columnists often kept in mind the wealth of startling evidence that Gibbon had compiled in his mammoth study. Especially significant, as Weir also reveals, were Gibbon's references to the young Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, who reigned from 218 to 222. After his death, this legendary monarch was memorialized as Elagabalus (or, sometimes, Heliogabalus) because the emperor infamously deposed Jupiter in favour of the sun as Rome's crowning godhead.

It is worth pausing for a moment with the fin-de-siècle fascination with this unsparing despot. Not only a tyrant, Elagabalus was also a corrupt voluptuary and a sexual insubordinate. Even though Gibbon admits that '[i]t may seem probable [that] the vices and follies of Elagabalus

have been adorned by fancy, and blackened by prejudice', it remains the case that the emperor never ceased 'to subvert every law of nature and decency'.³ Not even '[a] long train of concubines, and a rapid succession of wives', including a vestal virgin 'ravished by force from her sacred asylum', could 'satisfy the impotence of his passions' (I, 155). Even more perverse was the emperor's gender presentation. 'The master of the Roman world', Gibbon writes,

affected to copy the dress and manners of the female sex, preferred the distaff to the sceptre, and dishonoured the principal dignities of the empire by distributing them among his numerous lovers; one of whom was publicly invested with the title and authority of the emperor's, or as he more properly styled himself, of the empress's husband (I, 155).

Gibbon would have known that Cassius Dio, in the second-century *Roman History*, recorded that Elagabalus 'had planned [...] to cut off his genitals altogether', though the emperor settled on the ritual of circumcision: a practice that Elagabalus imposed on many companions.⁴

It is fair to say that the transfeminine Elagabalus, whose erotic practices redefined imperial marriage, became a decadent icon. One of the best-known references to the emperor occurs in the fiction of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who knew of the emperor's career from the anonymous late-Roman *Historia Augusta*. In his decidedly anti-realist novel *À rebours* (1884), the French author depicts Elagabalus' 'feet treading on powdered silver and gold, his head encircled by a tiara, his garments studded with precious stones', where he worked by day 'at women's work, giving himself the title Empress, and every night bedding a different Emperor, preferably chosen from among his barbers, kitchen boys, and charioteers'.⁵ Having noted this passage, Weir directs our attention to Lawrence Alma-Tadema's sumptuous painting, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, which appeared at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in 1888.⁶ This remarkable work, which displays Alma-Tadema's technical skills at their finest, adapts the episode in the *Historia Augusta* where Elagabalus 'once overwhelmed his parasites with violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death'.⁷ This late nineteenth-century engagement with the Roman decadence drove against earlier approaches to the end of the Classical empire that had little time for the wealth of

details that Gibbon had garnered in the *Decline and Fall*. In a finely researched essay that examines the presence of Classical Rome in Victorian historiography, Linda Dowling observes:

With the shift from the literary, text-centered, providentialist historiography of Thomas Arnold and Charles Merivale to the inscription-based researches of [Theodor] Mommsen and his Victorian inheritor J. B. Bury, Roman decadence disappeared from historical works as a cautionary passage for contemporary moral and political lessons. Indeed, Roman decadence virtually disappeared as a distinct historical episode altogether.⁸

A significant part of the decadent tradition, which respected decadence as a historical category, involved recovering Gibbon's unflinching interest in Classical reprobates such as Elagabalus: an outrageous imperial figure whose breathtaking indulgences and acts of cruelty overwhelmed the imagination.

The appearance of *The Roses of Heliogabalus* at the Royal Academy was not the first occasion when visitors to London exhibitions had witnessed the transgressive emperor in the most exquisitely costumed glory. Earlier artworks returned the public's mind to Gibbon's findings. In 1870, Sidney Colvin in the *Portfolio* magazine made special note of the stunning watercolours that the artist Simeon Solomon had recently presented at the Dudley Gallery, Piccadilly [fig. 1]. Uniquely impressive, Colvin remarked, was Solomon's 'richness and splendour of effect in the imitating of lustrous and metallic surfaces, cloths of gold or silver, or gold and silver ornaments, crowns, chains, caskets or chased work, that no other painter has rivalled'.⁹ 'The Roman decadence', Colvin proceeds to observe, 'with its emperor Heliogabalus, high-priest of the sun, supplied another occasion for such an achievement' (p. 34). Solomon's painting, which dates from 1866, features a sexually ambiguous and magnificently haloed figure, who is swathed in a golden under-dress beneath a loose-fitting deep-red robe.¹⁰ As if lost in reverie, Elagabalus' somnolent head is gently propped by the right arm, while a censer exuding shimmering scent dangles from the left hand. The image summons many qualities linked with fin-de-siècle decadence: opulent textures; exquisite ornamentation; languid demeanour; and ceremonial embellishment. Yet the quality that arguably emerges with greatest force is the Roman emperor's queerness.



Fig. 1: Simeon Solomon, *Heliogabalus, High Priest of the Sun*, 1866, pencil and watercolour, 47.6 x 28.9 cm, private collection. Courtesy of akg-images.

It is this attribute, as I explain in this discussion, that stands at the heart of what I call decadent historicism: an interest among several 1880s and 1890s writers in the enduring authority of perverse personas from the past. The three authors whose works I discuss in some detail here – Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field – share the assumption that queer and transgender historical figures, whether real or imaginary, deserve respectful attention. The reason is that the careful study of these personages, a study that often involves detailed archival research, inspired late-Victorian writers to consider how they might modify, rework, and even imagine anew sexual modernity. In each case, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field engage in richly textured scholarly inquiries in order to create their own sexually ambiguous types, all of which have close

connections with artistic performance, whether in the theatre, opera, or dance. Their writings, which rove across not only Roman decadence but also the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, conjure genderqueer icons that – even if they are not as luxuriantly debauched as Elagabalus – possess irrepressible beauty. At the same time, these figures also share a troubling proximity to pain, punishment, and death, in narratives that remind us that these gender-transitive types, both in their time then and in the present of their decadent reimagining, remain imperilled. Furthermore, these exquisite icons of perversity, which are so carefully adapted for late nineteenth-century aesthetic purposes, remain intriguing in our own time, a time that is paying renewed attention to the erotically noncompliant legacy of decadence. Such defiance of sexual orthodoxy, as scholars have begun to explore in increasing amounts of detail, speaks to a current cultural moment that strives to recognize (not always without difficulty) trans identities, queer intimacies, and nonbinary genders.

This decadent approach to history marks an emphatic contrast with the headstrong Whig understanding of cultural and political progress that abounds in the works of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who observed in 1835:

From the great advances which European society has made, during the last four centuries, in every species of knowledge, we infer, not that there is no more room for improvement, but that, in every science which deserves the name, immense improvements may be confidently expected.¹¹

By the 1880s and 1890s, when British imperialism arguably reached its zenith, the potential collapse of empire, in line with the fate of Classical Rome, weighed on the minds of artists and intellectuals. Gibbon's centenary in 1894, which involved an exhibition at the British Museum and a lecture organized by the Royal Historical Society, served as a reminder that his 'attitude toward Christianity was lamented by earlier critics' because he viewed the emergence of the new religion as integral to the empire's fall.¹² About the progress of civilisation, Gibbon held no illusions.

I need to return for an additional moment on Elagabalus, since this transfeminine phenomenon, whose presence in Classical Rome could not be ignored even in Victorian history

textbooks, throws additional light on the manner in which we think about Roman decadence, on the one hand, and the growing nineteenth-century identification with its perverse heritage, on the other. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the English use of the word decadence acknowledged its association with the movement of French writers that Anatole Baju had labelled as such, the term carried, more often than not, a pejorative meaning. One of the handful of writers in Britain who ran against the grain was Wilde, whose *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891) in part models several of its central passages on Huysmans's *À rebours*. Among the many historical figures whose excesses fascinate Wilde's protagonist is Elagabalus, who (in phrasing that echoes Gibbon's) 'had painted his face with colours, and plied the distaff among women'.¹³ Such allusions to this and countless other miscreants from Classical and more recent times prompted the *Daily Chronicle* to characterize *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a 'tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*'.¹⁴ Wilde himself, as I observe below, most probably viewed this indictment as an unintentional compliment. In his rebuttal to the newspaper, he took great pride in his affiliation with literary works stemming from an 'aesthetic movement' that 'produced certain colours, subtle in their loveliness', works that reacted against the 'crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age'.¹⁵ Although he does not say it, Wilde is implicitly speaking of decadence as a modern literary concept. Moreover, it is a tradition implicitly suffused with contemporary aniline dyes – those 'strange dyes', as Charlotte Ribeyrol has noted, whose alluring artificiality captured Walter Pater's attention in 'Poems by William Morris' (1868), the essay that formed the core of the 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).¹⁶

Oscar Wilde, the Memory of Shakespeare, and the 'Boy-Actor of Great Beauty'

There were, however, times when Wilde explicitly declared his passion for decadence. If we are to believe the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, during his first meeting with his compatriot at the London home of the poet and editor W. E. Henley in 1886 it became clear that Wilde had already found much to admire in the term. 'That first night', Yeats recalls, 'he praised Walter Pater's *Studies in the*

History of the Renaissance.¹⁷ Yeats goes on to reproduce the acclaim that Wilde bestowed upon this remarkable work of aesthetic criticism, which first appeared – to some controversy – in 1873. Expressly appealing for Wilde was Pater’s proposal that the Renaissance inaugurated a movement that marked ‘the care for physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination’ (pp. xi-xii). (It was this crucial emphasis on bodily beauty that made Pater prey to allegations of reckless hedonism.) As Wilde frequently acknowledges in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Pater’s examples of this post-medieval delight in the body’s aesthetic grandeur included artists and writers such as Leonardo da Vinci and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose sexual interests were frequently, if not predominantly, homoerotic. Pater claims that this artistic efflorescence, which he witnesses emerging in the sixteenth-century vernacular poetry of the French writer Joachim du Bellay, possessed to ‘the full the subtle and delicate sweetness of which belong to a refined and comely decadence’ (p. xii). (Pater, it is worth noting, qualified his invocation of decadence by quickly asserting that this Renaissance also involved an *ascesis*: a disciplined ‘girding of the loins in youth’, such as we might associate with the exercise of athletic prizemen in ancient Greece [p. xii].) In Wilde’s eyes, the splendid qualities that Pater found in Bellay’s poetry were also those that Pater’s own *Renaissance* embodied. Wilde told the party assembled at Henley’s residence that Pater’s volume was his ‘golden book’ (p. 124). ‘I never’, Wilde said, ‘travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written’ (p. 124). Such words, which evoke Revelations 10, suggest that Pater’s 1873 volume had a prophetic quality. It was the kind of book, in the words that follow the seventh and final trumpet in the New Testament, that will ‘make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth as sweet as honey’.

Wilde’s remarks, even if wryly cryptic in their biblical allusiveness, hint that Pater’s work created such a break with conventional criticism that its decisive impact on modern consciousness was nothing less than apocalyptic. In his own career, Wilde took many initiatives from Pater to

develop, as he did in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a defiant homoerotic aesthetic at a time when the legal proscription of such desires between males was entrenched. (The eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 prohibited acts of ‘gross indecency’ between males, even in private. The law made a striking contrast with the Code Napoléon in France.) Wilde did the same, as is well known, in his personal life, in which he pursued affairs outside his marriage with several young men, including Lord Alfred Douglas, who introduced him to an underworld of homosexual intimacy, male prostitution, and widespread extortion. Douglas’ father, the belligerent 9th Marquess of Queensberry, who could not abide his son’s attachment to Wilde, libelled the Irishman as a sodomite. Wilde sued, only to be faced with a barrage of incriminating evidence that revealed his immersion in the city’s queer networks. After these sexual contacts were exposed through a series of humiliating trials that occupied most of April and May 1895, Wilde was stigmatized as the worst face of what had become a much-discredited decadence. Once Queensberry’s defence had demonstrated that the libel was justified, Henley (or a member of his team) editorialized in the imperialist *National Observer* that the country had ‘a deep debt of gratitude toward the Marquess of Queensberry for destroying the High Priest of the Decadents’.¹⁸ The pointed phrasing makes it sound as if Wilde had paid the price of becoming the Elagabalus of his own time. Several weeks later, as is well known, Wilde was committed to prison for two years in solitary confinement with hard labour.

Queensberry’s leading counsel, the Irish MP Edward Carson, spent many hours at the Old Bailey focusing on the ways in which several of Wilde’s writings offered evidence that they expressed – as Carson put it – the author’s ‘sodomitical’ proclivities. Besides subjecting tell-tale passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to scrutiny, Carson turned his attention to Wilde’s ‘Portrait of Mr. W. H.’: a short fiction about the mysterious dedicatee in William Shakespeare’s 1609 volume of *Sonnets*. Wilde’s story, which also focuses on a sexually ambiguous performer, weaves an ingenious tale about three male literary enthusiasts who try to revive Edmond Malone and Thomas

Tyrwhitt's long-dismissed theory about the probable identity of 'Mr. W. H.'. In 1789, Malone had written:

Mr. Tyrwhitt has pointed out to me a line in the twentieth Sonnet, which inclines me to think that the initials W.H. stand for W. Hughes. Speaking of this person, the poet says he is –

‘A man in *hew* all *Hews* in his controlling –’
so the line is exhibited in the old copy. The name *Hughes* was formerly written *Hews*.¹⁹

In the story, which appeared in the 1889 volume of the conservative *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the unnamed middle-aged narrator recounts a conversation with his older friend Erskine. The topic is the legacy that a youth named Cyril Graham left to Erskine in the form of a 'small panel picture set in an old and somewhat tarnished Elizabethan frame'.²⁰ The tale that subsequently unfolds addresses the theory that Cyril, Erskine, and the narrator – at different moments in the story – strive and fail to pitch their belief. The hypothesis they variously uphold, only to lose faith in it, is that 'Mr. W. H.' – in line with Malone's recapitulation of Tyrwhitt's contention – 'must have been in Shakespeare's company some boy-actor of great beauty, to whom he intrusted the presentation of his noble heroines' (8: 265), since the female parts were performed by an all-male company. The panel that Erskine owns is supposed to serve, at least initially, as incontrovertible proof that it depicts this supposedly historical personage:

It was a full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy wistful eyes, and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of the girl. (VIII, pp. 259-60)

To be sure, this figure is not as luxuriant as that of Elagabalus in Alma-Tadema's and Solomon's respective paintings. The portrait nonetheless has a transfeminine quality that is central to its allure. Once Erskine encourages the narrator to take a magnifying-glass in order 'to spell out the crabbed sixteenth-century handwriting' in the book on which the figure rests his right hand, he discovers that the script reads: 'TO THE ONLIE BEGETTER OF THESE INSUING SONNETS' (see VIII, p. 272). These are, of course, the words in the dedication to 'Mr. W. H.' in the 1609 edition.

What follows in Wilde's fiction is an intricate sequence of events that reveals how Cyril and Erskine pursued a fervid chase through the archives in order to substantiate the theory: 'for weeks and weeks we searched the registers of City churches, the Alley MSS. at Dulwich, the Record Office, the papers of the Lord Chamberlain – everything, in fact, that we thought might contain some allusion to Willie Hughes' (VIII, p. 266). Their inquiries, however, proved fruitless. Before long, it seems, Erskine discovered that the fine Elizabethan portrait of the feminine boy was a forgery that Cyril had commissioned. Once the fake was exposed, Cyril took his life: a high price for not having sufficient skill to substantiate, once and for all, that the Bard's object of adoration was a gorgeous adolescent male.

Be that as it may, this drastic act of self-murder, which prompts the thought that Cyril could never actualize his own sexual desires, scarcely deters the narrator. Immediately, he embarks on his own ventures into the archive so that he, too, can at last prove Malone and Tyrwhitt's theory to be true. At one point, his impassioned efforts lead him to conclude:

it was not improbable that William Hughes was one of those English comedians (*mimæ quidam ex Britannia*, as the old chronicle calls them), who were slain at Nuremberg in a sudden uprising of the people, and were secretly buried in a little vineyard outside the city by some young men 'who had taken pleasure in their performances, and of whom some had sought to be instructed in the mysteries of the new art.' (VIII, pp. 277-78)²¹

Most plainly, the narrator's scholarly impulses have reached a point of absurdity. What matters, however, is the defiant longing that impels him to verify that Shakespeare and 'Mr. W. H.' were lovers.

This historicist impulse to recover the queer past, even though it may well involve acts of preposterous distortion, defines one of most potent aspects of literary decadence. Although it entails faking and appropriating history in the face of contravening empirical facts, Wilde's narrative intimates that there is much to be learned from the extraordinary feats of imagination that Cyril, Erskine, and the narrator, one after another, direct towards the sexual dissidence that they wish to see embodied in both the Bard and the boy. Wilde himself was so charmed by this ruse that he followed Cyril by commissioning his own portrait of Mr. W. H. from Charles Ricketts.

The young gay artist completed the work on a ‘decaying piece of oak and framed it in a fragment of worm-eaten moulding’.²² Ricketts’s portrait of Mr. W. H., which sold for a guinea along with Wilde’s pieces by Solomon and other artists at his bankruptcy sale on 24 April 1895, has not survived [fig. 2]. Even if there is little that elucidates the precise nature of Ricketts’s portrait, its former existence speaks to Wilde’s fascination with developing a decadent historicism that places greater faith in the power of fiction-making than hardnosed evidence. It is therefore troubling to discover what happened during the unsuccessful libel case that Wilde pursued against Queensberry several weeks before an auctioneer sold off his artworks, books, and furniture at rock-bottom prices. ‘I believe’, Carson remarked, ‘you have written an article pointing out that Shakespeare’s sonnets were practically sodomitical’.²³ ‘On the contrary, Mr. Carson’, Wilde replied, ‘I wrote an article to prove that they were not so’ (p. 93). One can understand why Wilde made such a defensive retort. He had to protect himself from the implicit charge that his work celebrated a tabooed male homosexuality. But his denial of Carson’s allegation was also justified in so far as ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ reveals that such desires endure incredible strain when trying to realize their possibility, especially when such yearnings existed beneath the shadow of the 1885 law.

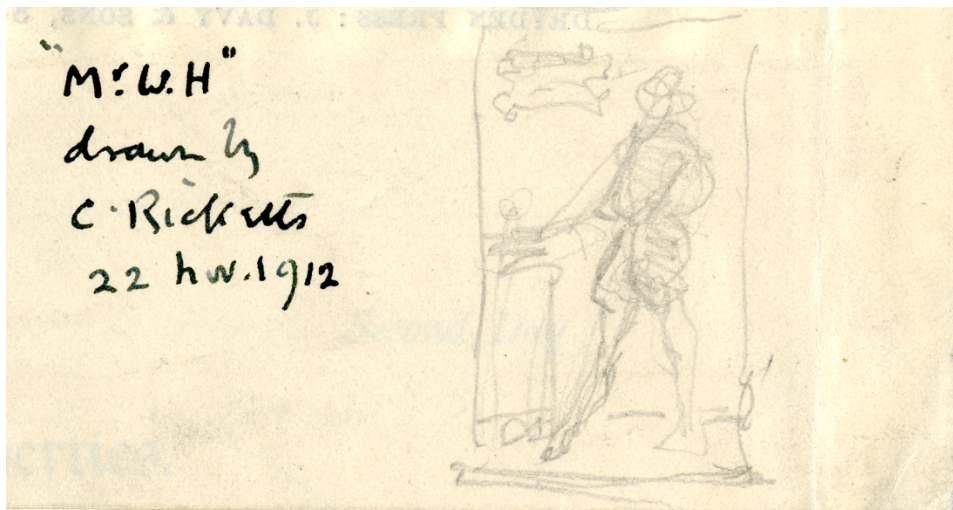


Fig. 2: Charles Ricketts, *Mr. W. H.*, 22 November 1912, pencil on slip of paper given to Christopher Selater Millard, Oscar Wilde and His Literary Circle Collection, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 54, Folder 3. Courtesy of Scott Jacobs (Clark Library).

Vernon Lee, the Eighteenth Century, and the Castrato's *'voix maudite'*

Vernon Lee (the professional name of Violet Paget), who was almost to the day two years younger than Wilde, began to devise her own distinctive decadent historicism in the 1870s, though she did so with greater precocity than her Irish contemporary. Moreover, her writings, from their very beginnings, seldom advert to the term decadence. Even so, her unwavering preoccupation with the artistic cultures of the 1600s and 1700s shares Wilde's interest in sexually unique figures who have close ties to specific types of supreme artistry. This is especially true of Vernon Lee's supernatural fictions, which began with 'A Culture-Ghost; or, Winthrop's Adventure' in 1881, a year after her well-researched critical history, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, had appeared. (This substantial study from 1880, in several ways, follows Pater's lead by uncovering 'a spontaneous efflorescence of national art in Italy', though not in the Renaissance but the neglected later period.)²⁴ She originally placed her story in *Fraser's Magazine* in Britain and *Appleton's Magazine* in America, though forty-six years later she chose to reprint it, with an instructive preface, for reasons that I expound on later. Set in Florence close to the time of its publication, the tale concentrates on a young man, Julian Winthrop, who has a talent for painting, though it is one, we learn, in which he could never succeed because his 'was too ungovernable a fancy'.²⁵ He spends much of his time at the villa of Countess S – (her family name remains discreetly occluded), who is, we are told, 'a great musician' (p. 144). Once she has finished playing a violin sonata, the countess presses Winthrop to stay so that he can hear 'an old air' that she has recently discovered 'among a heap of rubbish in my father-in-law's lumber room' (p. 145). The first-person narrator, who is privy to this scene, remarks that no sooner had the countess ('an uncommonly fine singer') begun to perform the air than it sounded 'so different from all we moderns are accustomed to' (p. 145). The 'exquisitely-finished phrases, its delicate vocal twirls and spirals, its symmetrically ordered ornaments' were such, the narrator observes, that they could move us 'into quite another world of musical feeling' (p. 146). It is this 'other world', which is decidedly different from modern

times, that has a disturbing impact on Julian Winthrop: 'his face was flushed, and he leaned against his chair as if oppressed by emotion' (p. 147).

Vernon Lee's story proceeds to disclose the reasons that prompt this otherwise inexplicable reaction. To begin with, Winthrop urges the countess to reveal what she knows about the history of the air. 'Oh! it is', she exclaims, 'by a very forgotten composer of the name Barbella, who lived somewhere about the year 1780' (p. 148). Once he has apologized for his strange response, he tells her that the music has come as a 'great shock' to him (p. 152). Very quickly, Winthrop shares with the countess one of his sketchbooks, in which she discerns 'some roughly ruled lines, with some notes scrawled in pencil, and the words "Sei Regina, io Pastor sono"' (p. 153). The opening phrases, together with the Italian dedication ('You are the queen, I am the shepherd'), are exactly the same as those in the 'old yellow, blurred manuscript' in her possession (p. 148). The question that naturally arises is how Winthrop had come to inscribe the same text and notes from the ancient document, even though the score appears 'in another clef and tone' (p. 153). 'I either composed it myself or heard it', he says, 'but which of the two was it?' (p. 153). At this juncture, he proceeds to elaborate a highly detailed narrative about an adventure he had, some eighteen months ago, in an archive located in Lombardy.

The dilapidated archive belongs to a collector nicknamed Maestro Fa Diesis (Master F-Sharp), who has sold off property in order to preserve his 'old MSS., his precious missals, his papyri, his autographs, his black-letter books, his prints and pictures, his innumerable ivory inlaid harpsichords' (p. 155), and countless other unkempt items, in a jumbled arrangement that 'formed a grotesque whole' (p. 157). On a tour of his palace, the maestro proudly draws Winthrop's attention to an old picture 'from whose cracked surface he deliberately swept away the dust with the rusty sleeve of his fur-lined coat' (p. 159). The artwork is a portrait that Winthrop, when asked if it has much value, states 'is not a Raphael' but is nonetheless 'quite creditable'. Still, even though he believes it to be a work of only modest worth, the painting leaves a deep impression upon the young artist:

It was a half-length, life-size portrait of a man in the costume of the latter part of the last century – a pale lilac silk cloak, a pale pea-green satin waistcoat, both extremely delicate in tint, and a deep warm-tinted amber cloak; the voluminous cravat was loosened, the large collar flapped back, the body slightly turned, and the head somewhat looking over the shoulder, Cenci fashion. (pp. 159-60)²⁶

As the description unravels, the allusion to the well-known portrait of Beatrice Cenci, who was beheaded for her parricide, hints that there is plenty of intrigue attached to this figure. Winthrop soon understands that the man, if not conventionally eye-catching, is nevertheless enthralling. ‘The face’, he remarks,

was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention with its dark, warm colour, rendered all the more striking for the light, pearly, powdered locks, and the general lightness and haziness of touch. (p. 160)

On this basis, Winthrop is drawn towards the captivating oddness of the artwork. Although Maestro Fa Diesis cannot attribute the portrait to any painter, he knows whom it depicts: ‘A certain Rinaldi, who lived about a hundred years ago’ (p. 161). With this information in hand, Winthrop remains haunted by the painting. ‘[F]or me’, he recalls, ‘it had a queer sort of interest’ (p. 161). ‘Those strange red lips and wistful eyes’, he adds, ‘rose up in my mind’ (p. 162). So resonant was this encounter with the artwork that Winthrop took further opportunities to scrutinize it. On closer observation, he could tell that the figure was signing from ‘the mere unintelligible blotches’ on the score, though the phrase ‘Sei Regina, io pastor sono’ was legible (p. 163).

At this juncture, we might well anticipate what happens next in Winthrop’s adventure with this ‘culture-ghost’: the awkward hyphenated term that Vernon Lee devised to summon the spectral pressure that the past can exert upon the present. Before he leaves the palace, the young artist learns that Ferdinando Rinaldi suffered bitterly for his sexual impropriety at the Court of Parma. ‘There, it is said’, the maestro remarks, the singer ‘obtained too great notice from a lady in high favour at Court, and was consequently dismissed’ (p. 166). But instead of leaving the city, Rinaldi lingered, only to be found one day ‘lying on the staircase landing of our Senator Negri’s house, stabbed’ (p. 166). No one, Maestro Fa Diesis comments, knew who had killed him. The

singer's object of affection, he goes on, was the maestro's great-aunt, who owned the portrait. Eager to know more, Winthrop seeks Negri's residence where Rinaldi perished. Once he has identified the presently unoccupied villa, he resolves to spend the night there on a horse-cloth. In this ramshackle setting, with rats scurrying on the floor as a rainstorm rages outside, Winthrop tries to separate certain 'faint and confused sounds' from those of the rain outside (p. 195). Predictably enough, amid these Gothic trappings Winthrop ascends a spiral staircase, climbs on top of an unsteady table, and peers into a capacious room. The tableau he sees is as one might expect:

At the harpsichord, turned slightly away from me, sat the figure in the dress of the end of the last century – a long, pale lilac coat, and pale green waistcoat, and lightly-powdered hair gathered into a black silk bag; a deep amber-coloured silk cloak was thrown over the chairback. He was singing intently, and accompanying himself on the harpsichord, his back turned toward the window at which I was. I stood spellbound. (pp. 197-98)

Yet there is a sexual history behind this culminating scene than Vernon Lee was not entirely ready to disclose in 1881. It took until 1927, when she reprinted the story, before she divulged some additional details about the composition of 'Winthrop's Adventure', which she first drafted in 1872 at the age of eighteen. As she explains in her 'Introduction', the story originated in an experience she had shared with her childhood friend John Singer Sargent, who was about to rise to eminence as a star pupil in the atelier of the French painter Carolus-Duran. When the two pals were fifteen-year-old 'romantic hobbledehoy's' (p. xxix), they found themselves, like Winthrop, 'spellbound' in front of a portrait (p. xxix), although on this occasion it depicted a historical personage, the revered Italian castrato Carol Boschi (1705-1782), who was known as Farinelli (*For Maurice*, p. xxix). (Castrati, like the boy-players of Shakespeare's time, traditionally played female parts. They were also trained to play the harpsichord.) The two friends discovered the striking full-length portrait of Farinelli by Corrado Giaquinto, which dates from the mid-1750s, in the Bologna music school, which acquired it in 1850 [fig. 3]. In the painting, Farinelli wears the mantle that shows he is a Knight of Calatrava. With his left foot pointing forward and his left hand resting upon a score, he is poised to break into song. Meanwhile, cupids and nymphs cavort in the

background, which also features portraits of his patrons, King Ferdinand VI and Queen Barbara of Spain, as well as one of Giaquinto, which Farinelli owned. As the two teenagers studied the artwork, they competed in finding the right words to describe it: ‘mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, *curious*’ (p. xxx). The last epithet, which was ‘the dominant adjective in John’s appreciations’, summed up ‘that instinct for the esoteric, the more-than-meets-the-eye’ (p. xxxi). Some years later, Sargent expressed the hope that his friend Violet had ‘not entirely put aside the thought of writing on such a curious subject’ (p. xxxi). Still, as Sargent could tell, the resulting story did not permit the protagonist ‘to indulge in an analysing and labelling all his thrills in rather a vainglorious way, probably, when we used to walk with the cold shivers under the Arcade of Bologna’ (p. xxxviii). On this view, Sargent concluded that such restraint made the story admirable. Vernon Lee, however, had second thoughts.



Fig. 3: Corrado Domenico Nicolò Antonio Giaquinto, *Portrait of Carlo Broschi called Farinelli*, c. 1755, oil on canvas, 275.5 x 185.5 cm, Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica. Courtesy of akg-images.

In 1927, when she was in her seventies, Vernon Lee looked back upon the forty-six-year-old ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’ as a failure, though not – as far her evolving career was concerned – an insignificant one. She explains that her first attempt at representing this ‘culture-ghost’ (a term that strikes her, all these years later, as a ‘preposterous name’) proved unsatisfactory. ‘I recast it’, she says, ‘some fifteen years afterwards with a full-fledged technique and self-criticism’ (p. xxxix). She realized that the figure modelled on Farinelli had to do more than ‘haunt in pointless solitude merely to sing a posthumous song’ (p. xxxix). The resulting revision appeared initially in French as ‘Voix Maudite’ in *Les lettres and les arts* in 1887. Three years later, it re-emerged as ‘A Wicked Voice’ in *Hauntings* (1890), her first collection of what she called ‘fantastic stories’.

In its renewed framework, ‘A Wicked Voice’ transfers the setting from Lombardy to Venice, and renames Rinaldi as Zaffirino. On this occasion, the English-speaking painter Winthrop has mutated into the Norwegian artist Magnus, an agonized composer who – even though he tells us through his first-person narration that he deplores the ‘execrable art of singing’ – remains intent on completing his opera, *Ogier the Dane*.²⁷ No matter how much he seeks to defy the ‘moral malaria’ that he associates with the ‘cooing vocalisations’ he has found in ‘musty music-books of a century ago’ (p. 157), Magnus cannot shake off a haunting portrait of a singer that he finds in one of these ancient volumes. The engraving features ‘an effeminate beau, his hair curled into *ailes de pigeon*’ (p. 157). Soon, Magnus learns of Zaffirino’s history through the Count Alvisé. The count declares that his great-grand-aunt, the Procuratessa Vendramin, at first dismissed the pride that the castrato took in ‘boasting that no woman had ever been able to resist his singing’ (p. 159). Once he learned of her refutation of his musical skill, Zaffirino rose to the challenge: ‘He sang and sang until the poor grand-aunt Pisana fell ill for love’ (p. 160). Even more troubling was her inability to cure her lovesickness. In the end, her relatives concluded that the only way to revive her was through further exposure to his singing. As it turns out, the moment she heard Zaffirino’s voice at the Villa of Mistrà ‘she began to change frightfully; she gave a dreadful cry, and fell into the convulsion of death’ (p. 161). The exquisite voice, as we can tell, is mortifying. Moreover, Zaffirino’s voice is

trans-historical: it cannot be confined to the anecdotage of the past. No sooner has Magnus learned the terrible fate of the great-grand-aunt than he, too, succumbs to it, except on this occasion it comes from his own act of singing. As he performs an eighteenth-century air before a small audience of friends, he cannot escape ‘the portrait of Zaffirino’, which is perched on the edge of the piano – ‘the sensual, effeminate face, with its wicked, cynical smile’ (p. 162). It is as if Magnus has become possessed.

The remainder of ‘A Wicked Voice’ amplifies this hauntology, in which the ghostly presence of Zaffirino gradually comes to dominate Magnus’ awareness. At first, the spectral voice enters Magnus’ subconscious. The composer, who has been struggling with the score for *Ogier the Dane*, recalls falling asleep; in his dreams, he heard ‘a voice, very low and sweet, almost a whisper, [which] grew and grew, until the whole place was filled with that exquisite vibrating note’ (pp. 164-65). Once it reaches a crescendo, there is a sudden ‘thud of a body on the floor’ (p. 165). The scene that unfolds around ‘a woman lying on the floor’ is one of extreme violence. ‘Her blond hair, tangled, full of diamond-sparkles which cut through the darkness, was hanging dishevelled; the laces of her bodice had been cut, and her white breast shone among the sheen of jewelled brocade’ (p. 165). This is, as Magnus recognizes, his reanimation of the scene that sent Pisana Vendramin to her death. The more he tries to complete his opera, the more the sounds of Zaffirino’s voice float through the Venetian air. No one who hears it, however, can pin it down. ‘[E]ven among those learned in music there was no agreement on the subject of this voice [...] people went so far as to dispute whether the voice belonged to a man or a woman’ (p. 170).

Part of the point of ‘A Wicked Voice’ is to remind us that by the 1880s the castrato’s voice no longer existed in living memory; the last operatic castrato role was performed by Giovanni Battista Velluti in 1824, although Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1921) – often known as the ‘last of the castrati’ – performed in the Sistine choir from 1883 to 1913.²⁸ Still, the larger question that arises here stems from the refusal of this transgender voice to be consigned to a history that has long disappeared from the operatic stage. What occurs next in Magnus’ story to some degree

replicates what we find in ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’. He travels to Mistrà, makes his way ‘through a series of long passages and of big, empty rooms’, and then opens a door, which leads into an opera theatre (p. 178). As he leans over a balustrade, Magnus witnesses the scene of Zaffirino singing to the dying procuratessa. ‘I recognised at once’, Magnus says, ‘that delicate, voluptuous quality, strange, exquisite, sweet beyond words, but lacking all youth and clearness’ (p. 179). But instead of convulsions, the ‘rich, voluptuous *rifiorituras*’ induce in him an upliftingly aesthetic, if not wholly eroticized, bliss: ‘I recognised now what seemed to have been hidden from me till then, that this voice was what I cared for most in all the world’ (p. 179). Magnus has, in a word, been seduced by the sexually ambiguous castrato. This moment of delight, however, soon turns to fear once he realizes that Zaffirino’s voice is murderous. For this reason, he tries to burst in upon the scene. The space, though, turns out to be empty, and – as his hand crashes down upon the keys of the harpsichord – there is only a discordant ‘jingle-jangle of broken strings’ (p. 180). Ever since this episode, Magnus reveals, he has been ‘wasted by a strange and deadly disease’, in which his head is full of music that he has composed but which is still not his own (p. 181). In the end, ‘A Wicked Voice’ inspires thoughts about the terrifying sacrifices that come from battling noncompliant desires, an idea that becomes most palpable when Magnus grapples with an otherwise vanished sexual past. To resist the historical significance of the castrato, the story intimates, is to deny the future of artistic curiosity.

This point of course asks to be elaborated in relation to several of Vernon Lee’s other compelling writings on the history of music. Especially significant here is her lengthy fictionalized narrative that unfolds the career of the acclaimed castrato Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740-1821). In ‘An Eighteenth-Century Singer’ (1891) – subtitled, after Walter Pater’s short fictions, an ‘imaginary portrait’ – Pacchierotti emerges in the thinly veiled guise of Antonio Vivarelli. The focus of the story, however, rests on Vivarelli’s inspirational discovery of Pietro Metastasio’s drama *Didone abbandonata* (*Dido Forsaken*) (1724) set to music (in one of many adaptations) by Tommaso Traetta in 1757. Particularly enthralling for the twelve-year-old Vivarelli is the splendid recitative of the

great soprano Regina Mingotti, who had earned a legendary reputation when she sang at Madrid under Farinelli's direction in the early 1750s. At this early stage of his development, Vivarelli finds that the diva's tragic voice penetrates him so deeply that he surrenders completely to his emotions:

For when, at the end of play, Dido came forth with her great recitative, accompanied by hurrying violins and double-basses, and interrupted by shrieking trumpets and sighing horns, and flung herself with a great imprecation on the high *la* into the ruins of her burning palace, poor little Vivarelli fairly burst into hysterics, and had to be carried to the neighbouring apothecary's.²⁹

Later, we learn that when Vivarelli enjoyed celebrity for his own performances as a supreme male soprano he remained 'haunted' by 'that wonderful Dido, of that wonderful recitative, of that gesture, and that high *la*' (pp. 849-50). His fame soared in an era when the singer, whose voice was a perfected instrument, 'became the chief artist' (p. 845). Still, the pathos of this story lies in the troubled thought that 'the way in which Vivarelli sang, and the very fact of his existence are long since and entirely forgotten' (p. 846). Lee's yearning to recover this lost moment of the castrato's aesthetic ascendancy certainly contrasts with the dismissive accounts one finds in histories of operas by some of her contemporaries. As he looked back at the eighteenth century, Edward Dannreuther (the German pianist who taught Hubert Parry), for example, remarks scornfully in *Macmillan's Magazine*: 'the heroes of antiquity were presented by *castrati*?'³⁰ 'You might hear', he adds, as if to heighten the sexual absurdity of such art, 'an Achilles or an Alexander with a bushy beard and a high soprano voice, giving vent to his heroic courage in the tenderest shakes and sweetest *fioritura*' (p. 66). Such chauvinism points to the ways in which Lee's finely researched account of the irrecoverable but always-to-be-imagined 'wicked voice' involved her own writing embracing a genderqueer aesthetic that needed – in such an intolerant present – to be creatively re-embodied.

Michael Field, Imperial Rome, and the Pantomime 'Girl-Boy'

By comparison, the co-authors Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote together under the name of Michael Field, turned not to the eighteenth century but the Roman decadence in order

to explore the fragile historical power of gender-transitive performance. In their Roman Trilogy, a series of verse plays that includes *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901), and *Julia Domna* (1903), Michael Field does not address such a likely candidate as Elagabalus as an icon of sexual dissidence. Instead, the poetic partners look to an altogether different queer figure. In these dramas, they draw attention to the ways in which the male pantomime dancer, whose masked solo performances involved enacting mythological characters through movement and gesture, exerted controversial influence over the populace. In the Trilogy, which (as Ana Parejo Vadillo has shown)³¹ synthesizes an immense range of Classical sources, Michael Field remind readers of Pylades of Cicilia who – together with Bathyllus, who excelled in tragedy – headed the tradition of pantomimic art. As we can see in the contemporaneous drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, these two Roman pantomimes (the name given to their roles as performers rather than the performance itself) captivated the decadent imagination. But where Beardsley drew upon Juvenal’s sixth satire to visualize the androgynous vulgarity of Bathyllus, Michael Field sought advice from Richard Garnett – Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum – for diverse materials that threw light on Pylades’ legendary capacity to inspire his audiences to political insurrection.

As Bradley and Cooper recorded in their journals on 30 October 1895, Garnett (‘the “Old Silenus” of bibliophilism’) offered them several leads after they had sought his counsel on suitable sources. Once they began ‘to gyrate round the catalogues’ in the circular reading room, several of the volumes that they located proved intensely satisfying: ‘I find Herodian delightful’, Cooper observes, ‘& Friedländer a book for the hearth’.³² From Herodian’s *Roman History* they gleaned information about the Praetorian Guard’s sale of the empire to Didius Julianus, while from Ludwig Friedländer’s *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire* – which ran into six editions by 1890 – they learned that ‘Pylades, the Cicilian, founded this branch of the ballet, and credited himself with Augustus’s gratitude for diverting the popular mind to the stage’.³³ There were as well late nineteenth-century commentaries on the place the pantomime dancer maintained in the history of players who performed without words, especially in relation to the Pierrot figure from *commedia*

dell'arte. Moreover, these historians acknowledge that in its earliest stages pantomime enjoyed a fierce political impact on the empire. In the *Theatre*, for instance, Joseph Knight recalled that '[s]o great [...] was the licence the actors permitted themselves, that several Roman Emperors, not ordinarily squeamish on points of morality, banished them from Rome, and even from Italy'.³⁴ Knight notes that Pylades suffered Augustus Caesar's wrath, only to be permitted – 'to the great delight of the Romans' (p. 71) – to return to the imperial household. Similarly, in *A History of Dancing* Gaston Vuillier refers readers to François Henri Stanislas de l'Aulnaye's *De le Saltation théâtrale* (1790), where we learn that 'the rivalries of Pylades and Bathyllus occupied the Romans as much as the gravest affairs of state'.³⁵ 'Their theatrical supporters, clad in different liveries', l'Aulnaye remarks, 'used to fight in the streets, and bloody brawls were frequent throughout the city' (p. 40). Such information, which depends on works such as Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, places Pylades – together with the fandom that yielded to such violence – firmly within that reign of the first Roman emperor (27 BC – 14 CE).

Still, there was at least one dancer named Pylades who hailed from a later time, as l'Aulnaye acknowledged: 'Il y eut sous Trajan un autre Pantomime nommé Pylade, qui mérita les bonnes grâces de cet Empereur. Didius Julianus en fit danser un de même où Pertinax venoit d'être massacré' [There was a mad Trajan, another pantomime dancer named Pylades, who earned the good graces of the emperor. Didius had one of these dancers perform where Pertinax had been assassinated].³⁶ Similarly, Gibbon – whose work had proved such a resource for Michael Field's earlier play *Attila, My Attila!* (1895) – situates Pylades during the time commonly known as The Year of the Five Emperors: the period when Didius Julianus made the highest bid to purchase the Roman Empire. The Praetorian Guard, once they had assassinated Pertinax, put the empire up for sale. (Pertinax himself had been installed after the reckless emperor Commodus was murdered.) 'The first objects that struck [Didius Julianus'] eyes', Gibbon observes,

were the abandoned trunk of Pertinax, and the frugal entertainment prepared for his supper. The one he viewed with indifference; the other with contempt. A magnificent feast

was prepared by his order, and he mused himself, till a very late hour, with dice, and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer (*Decline and Fall*, I, p. 115).

Soon after these festivities, however, the newly installed emperor felt besieged by ‘the doubtful and dangerous tenure of an empire, which had not been acquired by merit, but purchased by money’ (I, p. 115).

Even if these studies point to similarly named dancers across the span of two centuries, they draw equal attention to the intensely political impact that pantomime performers enjoyed among the populace. Michael Field appears to have taken the historical elasticity attached to the name of Pylades and applied it in such a way that their trilogy moves back and forth across several of the most violent reigns involving the murder of Commodus (31 December 192 CE), the assassination of Pertinax (28 March 193 CE), and the merciless reign of Caracalla (198-217 CE). Each play, which offers insights into different moments in Pylades’ career, reveals that he occupies a precarious position in relation to the desperate attempts among a succession of brutal emperors who wish to maintain murderous authority over a political universe that is in ruins. Pylades exists in jeopardy because he, more than any of these tyrants, most persuasively embodies cultural history. In *The World at Auction*, which opens the Roman Trilogy, we quickly learn about the hazards facing Pylades’ success at captivating the people’s attention. In the opening dialogue, Didius Julianus and Eclectus (a chamberlain who had conspired in the killing of Commodus) exchange thoughts on the ways that Pylades’ performance of Leda had infuriated Pertinax. The freshly installed emperor – who was to die only nine weeks after seizing power through his purse – remains unsettled by the unmatched influence that the pantomime dancer exerts upon the imperial world:

[...] One day
While dancing Leda with soft witchery,
Beyond all praise, and sure that anything
Would be permitted to his impudence,
When Marcus Curius the Praetor hissed,
Our fair girl-boy with jeering finger showed
His enemy to all.³⁷

Pylades' defiance, we learn, resulted in a scourging. Such punishment, however, did not break the sexually nonconforming performer's mettle: 'He stood', the emperor continues, 'against the rods unflinchingly, | His hum of pain was scarcely audible, | And soon as he was loosed with mocking gesture | He gave salute as if he took applause' (p. xiii). No one, it seems, can succeed, at this stage in history, by disciplining this 'girl-boy'. To Eclectus, such insubordination, which enthral the people, is politically repugnant: 'to think he sways | The blood of thousands, drawing to his side | Our men and women of supremest rank' (p. xxxvi).

Even so, Michael Field is not prepared to idealize this figure. *The Race of Leaves* (1901) moves back in time to the ferocious reign of Commodus, where we see how Pylades obtained his freedom from slavery by conniving with the emperor's Christian mistress, Marcia. In order to appease Commodus, Pylades devised a dance that celebrated Apollo and the folding of the flocks in honour of his patron's chosen deity. For a while, Pylades earns the title Philocommodus. Still, the main purpose of showing this pantomime's precarity within a disorderly universe of murders and betrayals is that his art remains superior to Commodus' implausible attempts at presenting himself in the guise of Hercules before his people. Gibbon, who builds on the records of Cassius Dio and Herodian, recalls the preposterousness of Commodus' lavish efforts in spectacularizing his heroism: 'The dens of the amphitheatre disgorged at once a hundred lions: a hundred darts from the unerring hand of Commodus laid them dead as they raged around the *Arena*' (*Decline and Fall*, I, p. 102). 'In all these exhibitions', Gibbon adds, 'the securest precautions were used to protect the person of the Roman Hercules from the desperate spring of any savage, who might possibly disregard the dignity of the emperor, and the sanctity of the god' (p. 102). As we discover in *The Race of Leaves*, Pylades is at the mercy of Commodus' delusions, which include the megalomaniac emperor hallucinating himself as his father Marcus Aurelius, in a mirror that deceptively reflects an image of his parent's face. By the time we reach the third play *Julia Domna*, which is set seventeen years later, Pylades dies at the hands of the brutal emperor Caracalla's henchmen. Pylades perishes while bending over the corpse of Geta, the younger brother and co-

emperor of the bloodthirsty Caracalla. The indignant young emperor, whose incestuous desire for his mother preoccupies much of the play, believed that his sibling threatened his authority in ruling Rome. As he stares at Pylades expressing his grief over Geta's body, Caracalla states contemptuously: 'His Leda | By the dead swan'.³⁸ In turn, Caracalla champions his murderous victory. 'A Titan has prevailed' (p. xlii), he says triumphantly. The fact that Pylades, at the end of this convulsive period of history, can barely speak, let alone perform, says much about the tenuousness of great art during the Roman decadence. But the fate of Pylades also reminds us that those artists who can arouse dangerous passions and desires through their queer performances might hold some clues about a much more liberating sexual future.

As we turn to these works by Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field, we see that their 1880s and 1890s fascination with the Elizabethan boy-actor, the eighteenth-century castrato, and the Roman pantomime dancer summons a powerful thought. Their works suggest that there is great beauty in broadening our awareness of gender-transitive possibilities, particularly at a time when there was much social and legal antipathy against noncompliant sexualities. This is their historicism, just as it is – once we look back at these authors' compelling decadent writings – a historicism that remains very much our own.

¹ In preparing this essay, several colleagues shared their expertise: Ana Parejo Vadillo; Kristin Mahoney; and Alex Murray. Part of my comments on Wilde's 'Portrait of Mr. W. H.' relates to the study I completed with Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 245-92. My thanks to Jane Desmarais and Kirsten MacLeod for their patience.

² See David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 22-23.

³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, second edition, ed. by H. H. Milman, 6 vols (London: John Murray), I, p. 155; further volume and page references appear in parentheses.

⁴ Dio Cassius, *Roman History: Volume 1*, trans. by Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 32 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 457. This edition publishes Cassius Dio's name as Dio Cassius.

⁵ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28. The original French in *À rebours* reads: '[Elagabal] [. . .] marchant dans de la poudre d'argent et du sable d'or, la tête ceinte d'une tiare, les vêtements brochés de pierreries, Elagabal travaillait, au milieu de ses eunuques, à des ouvrages de femmes, se faisait appeler Impératrice et changeait, toutes les nuits, d'Empereur, l'élisant de préférence parmi les barbiers, les gâte-sauce, et les cochers de cirque' (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1884, p. 44). On the enduring interest among Classical historians and modern writers in the emperor, see Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

- ⁶ See Weir, *Decadence*, pp. 28-29, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Roses_of_Heliogabalus [accessed 14 June 2020].
- ⁷ *Historia Augusta, Volume II: Caracalla. Geta. Opellius Macrinus. Diadumenianus. Elagabalus. Severus Alexander. The Two Maximini. The Three Gordians. Maximus and Balbinus*, trans. by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 140 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), pp. 147-49.
- ⁸ Linda Dowling, 'Decadence and Victorian Historiography', *Victorian Studies*, 28.4 (1985), 578-607 (p. 581).
- ⁹ Sidney Colvin, 'English Painters of the Present Day: IV. – Simeon Solomon', *The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical*, ed. by Philip Gilbert Hamerton (London: Seeley Jackson and Halliday, 1870), pp. 33-35 (p. 34); further page reference appears in parentheses.
- ¹⁰ See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heliogabalus_High_Priest_of_the_Sun.jpg [accessed 14 June 2020].
- ¹¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Sir James Mackintosh', in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1843), II, p. 219. Macaulay's essay, which discusses Mackintosh's *History of the Revolution in England in 1688* (1834), first appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, 61 (1835), 265-322.
- ¹² [Anon.], Editorial, *Morning Post*, 16 November 1894, p. 4. The exhibition and lecture (given by Frederic Harrison) were widely reported in the press.
- ¹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 10 vols to date (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-continuing), III, pp. 123; 289.
- ¹⁴ [Anon.], Review of Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Daily Chronicle*, 20 June 1890, p. 7, reprinted in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 72.
- ¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*', 30 June 1890, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 436.
- ¹⁶ Charlotte Ribeyrol, 'From Via Magenta to Via Solferino: A Chromatic Itinerary through John Singer Sargent's and Vernon Lee's Early Aesthetic Works', *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism*, 3 (2018), 59-75 (p. 61). Pater's comment on 'strange dyes' first appeared in 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, 34.2 (1868), 300-12 (p. 311), and was reiterated in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 211; further page references appear in parentheses.
- ¹⁷ W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), in *Autobiographies*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 124; further page references appear in parentheses.
- ¹⁸ [Anon.], 'Notes', *National Observer*, 6 April 1895, p. 547.
- ¹⁹ [Edmond Malone], *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays Published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens: Containing Additional Observations, to which Are Subjoined the Genuine Poems of the Same Author, and Seven Plays that Have Been Ascribed to Him; with Notes by the Editor and Others*, 2 vols (London: C. Bathurst, and Others, 1780), I, p. 579.
- ²⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 146 (July 1889), 1-21 (p. 2), reprinted in Wilde, *The Short Fiction, Complete Works*, VIII, p. 259; further volume and page references to the *Complete Works* appear in parentheses. Wilde developed a much longer version of the 'Portrait', most probably after the summer of 1891, which he entrusted to John Lane and Elkin Mathews's publishing partnership, The Bodley Head. By the time of Wilde's conviction, it remained unpublished. A staff member at the publisher, Mitchell Kennerley, had possession of it, and he published it in the United States in 1921. On the complicated textual history of Wilde's 'Portrait', see Small, 'Introduction', *Complete Works*, VIII, pp. liv-lxxxiii.
- ²¹ Small, in acknowledging the work of John Sloan, notes that the Latin phrase means 'actresses from Britain', which Wilde corrected to the masculine form in the longer version; he adds that the old chronicle did not exist (*Complete Works*, VIII, p. 487).
- ²² Charles Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections by Jean Paul Raymond and Charles Ricketts* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1932), p. 35. In the volume, the persona John Paul Raymond serves as an imaginary collaborator.
- ²³ Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 93; further page reference appears in parentheses.
- ²⁴ Vernon Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: W. Satchell, 1880), p. 2.
- ²⁵ Vernon Lee, 'Winthrop's Adventure', in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, 1927), p. 143; subsequent page references to this edition appear in parentheses.
- ²⁶ Vernon Lee has in mind the c. 1600 portrait of Beatrice Cenci attributed to Guido Reni in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Beatrice_Cenci_\(Guido_Reni\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Beatrice_Cenci_(Guido_Reni)) [accessed 14 June 2020].
- ²⁷ Vernon Lee, 'A Wicked Voice', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2006), pp. 154-55; further page references appear in parentheses. 'A Wicked Voice' has garnered several critical noteworthy studies. Patricia Pulham contends that Zaffirino's is a 'maternal voice' (*Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], p. 25). By comparison, Carol Caballero interprets the narrative in the context of Vernon Lee's conflicted engagement with Richard Wagner's music ("A Wicked Voice?": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music', *Victorian Studies*, 35 [1992], 385-408).

- ²⁸ John Rosselli notes that ‘six doubtfully made recordings in 1902-03’ of Moreschi’s performances ensured that he became known as ‘the last of the castrati’. After Pope Pius X formally banned castrati from his chapel in 1902, Moreschi continued to sing at San Pietro. See <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19126> [accessed 31 August 2020].
- ²⁹ Vernon Lee, ‘An Eighteenth-Century Singer: An Imaginary Portrait’, *Fortnightly Review*, 50 (1891), 842-80 (p. 848); further page references appear in parentheses.
- ³⁰ E[dward] Dannreuther, ‘The Opera: Its Growth and Decay’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 32 (1875), 64-72 (p. 66); further page reference appears in parentheses.
- ³¹ Ana Parejo Vadillo has explored the wide range of historical sources that Michael Field consulted in their preparation of the three verse plays; see “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama”, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26.3 (2015), 195-220.
- ³² Michael Field, 30 October 1895, *Works and Days*, BL Add. MS 46784 f.11^v-f.12^r.
- ³³ Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*, trans. by Leonard A. Magnus et al., 4 vols (London: Routledge, 1908-13), I, p. 59.
- ³⁴ Joseph Knight, ‘Plays without Words’, *Theatre*, 29 (1897), 70-74 (p. 71); further page reference appears in parentheses.
- ³⁵ François Henri Stanislas de l’Aulnaye, *De la Saltation théâtrale, ou Recherches sur l’origine, les progrès, et les effets de la pantomime chez les anciens* (Paris: Barrois l’aîné, 1790), quoted in Gaston Vuillier, *A History of Dancing: From the Earliest Ages to Our Own Times*, trans. by anon. (London: William Heinemann, 1898), p. 40; further page reference appears in parentheses. The French edition of Vuillier’s history was published as *La Danse* (Paris: Hachette, 1898).
- ³⁶ L’Aulnaye, *De la Saltation théâtrale*, p. 70.
- ³⁷ Michael Field, *The World at Auction* (London: Hacon and Ricketts, 1898), pp. xi-xii; further page references appear in parentheses. (The pagination in the Roman Trilogy is in roman numerals.) On the emergence and ensuing influence of the pantomime dancer, see Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). It is important to note that Ricketts’s designs for all three volumes in the Roman Trilogy count among the most dazzling to be found in the finely illustrated and typeset aesthetic books of the time. On Ricketts’s achievements in this area of book production, see Maureen Watry, *The Vale Press: Charles Ricketts, a Publisher in Earnest* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll; London: British Library, 2004).
- ³⁸ Michael Field, *Julia Domna* (London: Hacon and Ricketts, 1903), p. xlii; further page reference appears in parentheses.