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‘Struggling with the tempter’:
the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy

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Burdett Gardner was the first scholar to gain access to the personal correspondence of Vernon Lee (1856-1935) after its donation to Colby College, Maine, in 1951. Yet his resulting monograph, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of Vernon Lee*, was not published until 1987. This may have been due to the embargo Lee herself had placed upon the bequest, though her close friend and executor Irene Cooper Willis had published a collection of Lee’s private correspondence in 1937 and provided permission for the scholar Peter Gunn to write and publish a biography of Lee in 1964.¹ Gunn addresses the embargo in his preface by suggesting that adherence to Lee’s testamentary wishes would impoverish her ‘extraordinarily precocious talents’. Therefore, he notes, Cooper Willis waived the prohibition in this instance.² Why then was Gunn’s biography published with permission of the testamentary estate, and Gardner’s monograph subject to Lee’s proviso? I would argue that this was due to the ways in which each writer engaged with a particular aspect of interest in Lee’s archival remains: her sexuality.

Alongside attention to Lee’s correspondence at Colby, notable additions to Gardner’s study were the interviews he conducted with Lee’s close friends, acquaintances and neighbours, including Cooper Willis, whom Gardner quotes as saying:

Vernon was homosexual, but she never faced up to sexual facts. She was perfectly pure. I think it would have been better off if she had acknowledged it to herself. She had a whole series of passions for women, but they were all perfectly correct. Physical contact she shunned. She was absolutely frustrated.³

Perhaps Cooper Willis’ own anecdotes were partly the reason she refused the book’s publication, but this statement — along with many others in Gardner’s work — cemented Gardner’s position that Lee was a spokesperson for the ‘cramped and cabined ego’.⁴ Gardner’s psychosexual analysis of Lee’s biography engaged with perceived Oedipal desires between Lee’s brother, Eugene Lee-

Hamilton, and mother, Matilda Paget (née Adams), and Lee's repressed same-sex sexual expression. Despite this, Gunn and Gardner's work paved the way for an influx of interest in Lee, particularly by second-wave feminist critics keen to reclaim marginalized homosexual women writers. Cooper Willis' admission that Lee *refused* to admit her own frustrated sexual appetites has suggested to certain scholars that Lee was unable to express her sexual identity either publicly or privately. It is this aspect of Lee's identity I wish to consider in this article: the ways in which Lee sustained a 'pure', 'perfectly correct', and asexual self-presentation (even around her closest friends), which was counterposed with the women in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), whom she frees from her own (self-imposed) moral constraints.

In doing this, I engage critically with Lee's personal and public life, using a methodology most significantly encountered in the study of ancient democracy and politics: prosopography. Prosopography is, as Dion Smythe notes, derived from the Greek *prosopon* — a mask, or person — and *grapho*, 'I write'.⁵ As a scholarly discipline, it is used to narrativize and analyse collated biographical data from a specific, often narrow, historical period.⁶ Yet prosopography is not merely collective biography. It highlights change, be it political, economic, social, cultural, or ideological. It is also heavily reliant upon archival sources and their interrelations.⁷ This article will utilize this methodology to provide a prosopographical study of late-nineteenth century decadent discourse between three queer women writers: Vernon Lee, Agnes Mary Frances Robinson (known as Mary Robinson, 1857-1944), and Amy Levy (1861-1889).

As Matthew Potolsky suggests in *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, decadence is in fact 'preoccupied with communities',⁸ with each text borrowing from and expanding its network, 'locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.'⁹ It is these decadent communities that reframe or perhaps, conversely, make indistinct, the boundaries of the archive that I wish to engage with in this article. Literary texts by Lee, Robinson, and Levy are sites of storage for autobiographical and biographical material, each text a micro-archive. Drawing out these biographical details, especially those which are in dialogue with

the work of other writers, provides a unique and personal approach to the more traditional concept of the archive. Furthermore, the locus of this reframing or blurring of boundaries through intertextual presences and prosopographical analysis will expand the definition of the archive, taking it beyond a singular cohesive entity, and enabling a decryption of the community of coded references to queer decadence that exist within these works.

Whilst Lee's attraction to women is acknowledged within the public domain, there is a difficulty for some critics in placing her relationships: Sally Newman asks were they 'lesbianism or romantic friendships?'¹⁰ Newman's question is one that can only be answered, it seems, with evidence of the sex-act itself, which has yet to be evidenced by Lee's correspondence or manuscripts. Many Lee scholars, including Martha Vicinus and Vineta Colby, believe Lee engaged in same-sex partnerships, albeit none of them were consummated. Invoking phrasing from Lee's own *Euphorion*, Colby writes that '[h]er feelings for Mary Robinson were to remain "a kind of love which is mainly aesthetic"' and that 'their relationship was and remained nonsexual in the physical sense'.¹¹ Patricia Pulham, using D. W. Winnicott's transitional object theory, suggests Lee only finds freedom to express transgressive sexualities through the art object. Yet, in doing so, Pulham draws attention to the problems of labelling Lee's sexuality.¹² In this way, much scholarship avoids embodying Lee's desire. Vicinus instead argues that Lee's relationships 'advocated a feminine purity that arose from a disciplined desire, rather than from either a denial or ignorance of passion'.¹³ Sensuality and passion were felt, Vicinus suggests, but were dealt with rationally, and with self-control. It is this 'disciplined desire' I would like to focus on and adapt. I want to suggest that Lee's sexuality is neither stifled nor 'cramped', neither lesbian nor asexual but, rather, *sophrosyne* in nature. The *sophrosyne*, argues Helen North, is 'the harmonious product of intense passion under perfect *control*'.¹⁴ It is the effect of this wilful suppression of emotional extremes that I hope to highlight in Lee's relationships with Robinson and Levy.

Rather than fixing Lee with the term 'lesbian' and the sexual connotations of this descriptor as is done by Newman and many other Lee scholars, I instead utilize the term *queer*. In defining

queerness with respect to Lee, I follow José Esteban Muñoz and Judith [Jack] Halberstam. Muñoz points to the German origins of the word *quer* as a presentation of the transverse: ‘situated or extending across something’.¹⁵ This conception of the term corresponds to the particularities of both Lee’s life and works. Whilst Lee’s relationships were inherently same-sex, they appear to be simultaneously asexual. Her textual expressions of sexual desire are also inherently non-normative. In this way, Lee’s sexuality and gender identity extends across the spectrum of sexual and gender expression; similarly, her work transverses genres and literary periods. Halberstam’s notion of ‘queer’, meanwhile, is constructive for thinking about sexuality in structural, organizational, spatial, and temporal terms insofar as it ‘refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.’¹⁶ Halberstam’s queer archive is a site of collected memory, a complex record of political and ideological activity that functions rhetorically. Therefore, a queer archive — the storage of materials that relate to gender or sexual identity and nonnormative expression — is a space in which queer individuals engage with one another, and, I would argue, this queer archival space can exist within a single text. For example, an archive can exist within the texts that are subject to archiving; the intertextual text is simultaneously text and archive. In this way, many of Lee’s works are complete entities, yet also contain a community of queer influence, expression and activity. It is from these queer archives — the intertextual sites of queer expression — that I build my prosopography of Lee.

Contemporary letters between poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds and sexologist Havelock Ellis suggest the same-sex attraction between Lee and Robinson was not only publicly recognized, but was also an ideal case study for Ellis’ studies of female same-sex relationships. Ellis wrote to Symonds that he was ‘given to understand — and can well believe — that Vernon Lee is very homosexual’, but believes it ‘doubtful’ she would be ‘willing to take any scientific interest in the matter’.¹⁷ He continues to taxonomize Lee and Robinson within a binarized framework of inversion, presenting their gender signifiers as a ‘heterosexual polarisation within the homosexual circle’.¹⁸ Robinson is the *femme fatale*: ‘ultra-feminine’, ‘little’, and ‘kittenish’

whilst ‘the straightforward “Vernon Lee” — addressing a meeting’ is androgyne.¹⁹ Ellis’ use of inverted commas to enclose Lee’s adopted nomenclature draws attention to Ellis’ recognition of this being a pseudonym, and a pseudo-performance of masculinity. He creates boundaries around the name, exposing its falsity, whilst juxtaposing it with the confirmed masculinity and straightforwardness of her true character. Despite her resistance to an analysis of her romantic relationship with Robinson, Lee was not opposed to, or uninterested in, the work of sexologists such as Ellis. Indeed, Lee’s personal collection of books, now held at the British Institute of Florence, contains the work of Patrick Geddes, whose *Sex* (1898) focuses on the biological evolution of the sexes, reproduction, sexual selection and degenerate sexual reproduction, and August Forel, whose *Die Sexuelle Frage* (1906) uses Krafft-Ebing’s classificatory terms to explore sexual pathology, the influence of environment on sexuality, as well as sexual hygiene and morality. More significantly, her collection includes Charles Féré’s *L’instinct sexuel: évolution et dissolution* (1899). Féré’s book begins with the statement that its aim is to demonstrate the necessity of control and responsibility in sexual acts, from both the hygienic and ethical point of view, something Lee evidently ascribed to, confirmed by Cooper Willis’ interview with Gardner.²⁰ There is much evidence of Lee’s reading in her copy of *L’instinct sexuel*, but what is particularly noticeable is that the chapter ‘Les Perversions sexuelles symptomatiques’ remains uncut. Perhaps the first page of the chapter’s discussion of a congenital predisposition to homosexuality went beyond the boundaries of Lee’s interest in this subject, and it remains, unlike the chapters following, virginal and unread. The uncut pages of this chapter stand as a metaphor for Lee’s own same-sex desire: the chapter has not been penetrated by her intellectually curious mind, the pages remain un-parted to this day. It is, to the Lee scholar, a marker, both textual and moral, of her self-imposed sexual continence; evidence of what Cooper Willis calls her perfect purity and correctness, an intellectual passion under perfect moral control. It is perhaps this form of silencing certain subjects and subjectivities within Lee’s archive that frustrates scholarship. I suggest that by being cognizant of the sprawling and intertextual boundaries of Lee’s queer archive, we open up its potential as a

repository for community biography: in this case, the relationship between Lee, Robinson, and Levy. Through the collaborative archival traces extant within the network of queer archives, we can decode textual sources, silences, and moments of self-restraint.

The Sophrosyne

‘Dionea’, a fantastic tale from the collection *Hauntings*, is framed by Lee as the letters of Doctor Alessandro De Rossi to the Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina. De Rossi, writing from his coastal exile, alludes to his younger years spent in political and social intrigue, but it is clear he is now seeking penance. The correspondence is one-way — a device that presents De Rossi as an unreliable narrator and focuses the reader’s attention on any narratorial omissions. The plot centres on De Rossi’s discovery of a shipwrecked four- or five-year-old child, Dionea, whom he finds eminently fascinating. He takes it upon himself, with Lady Evelyn’s financial support, to ensure the waif is cared for and educated. He notes she is ‘decidedly pretty, and brown as a berry, [...] she understood no kind of Italian, and jabbered some half-intelligible Eastern jabber, a few Greek words embedded in I know not what.’²¹ This linguistic hybridity and exoticism intoxicates De Rossi. Leaving Dionea with a convent of nuns, he is amused to hear of her continued ‘un-Christian’ behaviours. De Rossi writes to Lady Evelyn that Dionea’s ‘companions detest her, and the nuns, although they admit that she is not exactly naughty, seem to feel her as a dreadful thorn in the flesh.’²² His comment contains, of course, the suggestion of the puritanical Reformers’ ‘thorn in the flesh’ which represented a shift away from the Catholic interpretation of the thorn as a physical impediment towards a metaphysical loss of faith.²³ Dionea is tempting the coastal community, including the nuns, to unbelief.

By the age of seventeen, Dionea has thoroughly bewitched the inhabitants of the coastal village, with its people either falling indescribably and unsuitably in love with one another or fearing the young woman whom they claim is a witch. De Rossi is so enchanted by the beauty and Greekness of his ‘brown-berry’ Dionea that he returns to his scholarly interest in the Pagan gods

and goddesses. He reads Heinrich Heine's 'Die Götter im Exil' ['Gods in Exile'] (in *Vermischte Schriften* [Miscellany], 1854) in which the Pagan gods are assimilated into Christian society:

Yes dear Lady Evelyn, you have guessed aright. Your old friend has returned to his sins, and is scribbling once more. But no longer at verses or political pamphlets. I am enthralled by tragic history, the history of the fall of the Pagan Gods.... Have you ever read of their wanderings and disguises, in my friend Heine's little book?²⁴

Heine's essay confirms De Rossi's suspicions that the gods and goddesses still wander the earth, most notably in the case of Dionea. He writes to Lady Evelyn that 'the Pagan divinities lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes into their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints.' This comment is particularly resonant as, he notes, Dionea has recently been discovered trying on the garments of the Virgin Mary at the convent.²⁵ He also reveals that Dionea's skills echo those of her namesake, Dionysus: she has the ability to make people fall in love, but 'it is not with her they are in love [...] the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable.'²⁶ De Rossi's description of Dionea draws on Heine, who, in turn, recycles stories from the canon of classical works.

Lee's (and by extension De Rossi's) fixation upon Pagan divinities is not peculiar to them. Indeed, it is an interest shared by Robinson. Robinson was a scholar of the Greek language, receiving tuition from Symonds, and her poetry engages with themes and motifs from Greek mythology. Robinson's collection *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881) was published a year after meeting Lee in Italy. Indeed, Robinson presented a copy of *The Crowned Hippolytus* to Lee, and penned a dedicatory poem in the inside cover of the text:

To Violet, with Mary's love.

Violets are for Sappho's wear
In her laurel-shadowed-hair;
But upon my head is set
No immortal bay, nor yet
Royal-hearted violet.
Flowers, that crowned her sacred head,
You shall crown my heart instead.

April 15th 81.²⁷

Lee is not the ‘straightforward’ Vernon to the ‘kittenish’ Robinson, but Violet to Mary. There is gender parity and affection, and more than a suggestion of Newman’s ‘romantic friendship’. But this friendliness is disrupted by the mention of Lesbian poet Sappho, who is crowned with violet flowers. Sappho is ‘sacred’ to Robinson, and as readers we question whether this is as a poet, as an icon of same-sex love, or both. The violet flowers that crown Sappho replace the bay, a suggestion that Sappho’s poetry has been replaced in public perception by her sexuality. But this is not the case for Robinson. Modestly, she notes her literary skills have not yet been recognized, and the violet, the symbol of homosexuality, is around her heart, not her head.

Robinson’s dedication expresses a familiarity with Sappho’s fragments, one that becomes part of a shared discourse between herself and Lee. The crowning with flowers is a motif often repeated in the poetic fragments of Sappho; in ‘Now Dika, weave the aniseed together, flower and stem’ the garland becomes a diadem and gift to the Graces.²⁸ The connection between Robinson’s dedication and Sappho’s poetry becomes more explicitly connected with same-sex love when we consider the use of violets. Sappho writes:

You culled violets and roses, bloom and stem,
Often in spring and I looked on as you
Wove a bouquet into a diadem.
Time and again we picked lush flowers, wed
Spray after spray in strands and fashioned them
Around your soft neck; you perfumed your head
Of glossy curls with myrrh — lavish infusions
In queenly quantities — then on a bed
Prepared in fleecy sheets and yielding cushions,
Sated your craving ...²⁹

The plucking of flowers and the creation of wreaths and diadems are pastimes that bind women together, and act as precursors to sensual and sexual fulfilment. The erotic tones of Sappho’s fragment are absent from Robinson’s dedication, yet the language of flowers uniting women is present. Aaron Poochigan notes that ‘thoughts of flowers bind females together once they have been separated’.³⁰ In the fragment ‘I have had not one word from her’ the violet tiara becomes a symbol of sated, but now separated, love:

I have had not one word from her
Frankly I wish I were dead.
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to
me, 'This parting must be
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly.'

I said, 'Go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love

'If you forget me, think
of our gifts to Aphrodite
and all the loveliness that we shared

'all the violet tiaras,
braided rosebuds, dill and
crocus twined around your young neck

'myrrh poured on your head
and on soft mats girls with
all they most wished for beside them

'while no voices chanted
choruses without ours,
no woodlot bloomed in spring without song ...³¹

That Robinson's and Lee's violets remain around the heart, rather than crowning the head suggests same-sex love, and a binding together, but also a wholesome purity.

This purity is referenced in the collection's title, *The Crowned Hippolytus*. Hippolytus was the son of Theseus and the subject of a play produced by Euripides for the City of Dionysia of Athens in 428 BC. At the opening of the play Hippolytus has sworn chastity and refuses to revere Aphrodite, instead honouring the goddess of the hunt, chaste Artemis. Hippolytus was crowned with laurel because he was a worshipper of Artemis (the twin sister of Apollo), and cypress trees were sacred to her. All of Artemis' companions remained virgins: indeed, it is Artemis' virginity — or her asexuality — that provides her power and independence. She is her own master. This is exemplified by the Ancient Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*; an ideal excellence of character and soundness of mind, which when combined in one well-balanced individual leads to other qualities, such as temperance, moderation, prudence, purity, decorum, and self-control.

It is the virtue of the sophrosyne, and the parallels between the chaste morality of Lee and Hippolytus, that feed into both Robinson's collection and Lee's 'Dionea'. 'The Lover's Silence', a sonnet from Robinson's collection, explores the purity and self-control that she experiences in her relationship with Lee.

When she whose love is even my air of life
Enters, delay being past, to bless my home,
And ousts her phantom from its place, being come
Herself to fill it; when the importunate strife
Of absence with desire is stilled, and rife
With heaven is earth; why am I stricken dumb
Abashed, confounded, awed of heart and numb,
Waking no triumph of song, no welcoming of life?
Be thine own answer, soul, who long ago
Didst see the awful light of Beauty shine,
Silent; and silently rememberest yet
That glory which no spirit may forget,
Nor utter save in love a thought too fine
For souls to ignore, or mortal sense to know.³²

The poem concerns the 'she' who is the love of the poet's life, the gender of the lover is reiterated three times in four lines, with the fourth line stressing the opening 'Herself'. It is a queer opening, one that burns with desire for the she/Lee that haunts Robinson. The lover's space has been inhabited by a phantom which represents both a physical absence of one lover, and the desire for the absent body of that lover. Yet once the phantom lover is ousted by the embodied lover 'the importunate strife | Of absence with desire is stilled' and there is silence. The first section, the octet, is filled with desire for 'she' and her physical arrival. The volta and the sestet that follows is concerned with the present moment: the material, beauty, thought, and sense. The lovers' love is 'too fine | For souls to ignore', yet unknown by mortal sensuality. Hippolytus the sophrosyne, lover of aesthetic beauty but chaste, temperate, and self-controlled, triumphs over the Dionysiac desires that are an expectation, but never sated, of the poet Robinson.

In the early stages of their relationship, Robinson's phantom is synonymous with excitement and desire, but it is replaced by the reality of an embodied Lover who is ascetic and chaste. By 1884 the desire for a disembodied lover became the central focus for Lee's fantastic tale

A Phantom Lover (1886) which was later published as ‘Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover’ in *Hauntings*. The change of title for the short story is fascinating. The phantom becomes a definite article; the new title sets up a dichotomy between the embodied William Oke — the ‘Oke of Okehurst’ — and the spectral Lovelock. Alice Oke desires communion with Lovelock; it is the absence of the poet that make him all the more fascinating and attractive to Alice, whereas the apparently steadfast (and living) Oke is a nuisance. The passion Alice has for Lovelock is reckless and Dionysian, at odds with her author’s own sophrosyne morality. Lee’s dedication of ‘Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover’ to Count Peter Boutourline states:

Do you remember my telling you, one afternoon that you sat upon the hearthstool [...] the story of Mrs Oke of Okehurst? You thought it a fantastic tale [...] and urged me to write it out at once, although I protested that, in such matters, to write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm.

In fixing or making a physical representation of the phantom, it loses its charm. The physical is a poor substitute for the ethereal, and in her protests to Boutourline Lee attempts to show authorial self-control and allow ‘Oke of Okehurst’ to maintain its charm. This opposition between physical and absent (spectral or ethereal) desire permeates Lee’s and Robinson’s letters and writings.

On 8 February 1886, Lee writes to Robinson: ‘You are a strange creature, Mary; & I feel that were I to clutch you [ever] so close, I should clutch but a phantom, or rather the real thing would elude me, volatile, distant.’³³³ The phantom figure that haunted the lover in Robinson’s sonnet, that became the lover in Lee’s *A Phantom Lover*, has become transposed by Lee, who subsumes Robinson’s metaphor. The fear for Lee is the reality of contact, and the idea that should this occur she would in fact, feel nothing. It is a reversal of Robinson’s phantom who excites desire only for the embodied Lee to silence and calm this desire. Lee enters, fills, and blesses Robinson’s home. The home is a sacred space, a heaven upon earth, when they are both within it. In an undated letter to ‘Vernie’, although certainly after their separation in 1887, ‘Molly’ (Robinson) writes again about the notion of shared space:

Vernie dear, I have vanished like a ghost from your life — and soon you will feel less rancour towards that poor little phantom because she will begin to grow indistinct —

blurred forgotten, therefore forgiven for all real or imaginary faults & failures. Perhaps best it is so. [...] Ah if you could have only come to be the queen and pearl of the house how much more it would have seemed like home! Molly.³⁴

Robinson's regret that Lee did not become 'queen and pearl' of the house means that the house is unable to become a home. Furthermore, the use of 'queen' evokes the crowning of Hippolytus once more, as well as the sensual poems of Sappho. It also emphasizes Lee's femininity, rather than the masculine 'king'. The pearl, once a piece of grit, has now been polished and irritates the flesh no more, and there are obvious connotations between female genitalia and the mantle of the oyster. The letter again picks up on the trope of haunting. Robinson's phantom now further dissipates, she becomes almost fluid, and hopes to be forgotten by Lee. Like Alice Oke, Robinson refuses what Pulham insightfully calls 'the restraint of the Apollonian form'.³⁵ Brandon Chao-Chi Yen utilizes Pulham's original approach, noting that the essential fluidity of the Dionysiac in Dionea is the woman 'born' of a storm, who returned to the waves. This appears to be the case with Robinson, a woman of desire, who becomes indistinct. Chao-Chi Yen recognizes that the intermingling of these Apollonian and Dionysian elements of human nature 'undermine[s] the concrete fabric of art' and casts 'an ambiguous light on morality'.³⁶ The Dionysiac allows the self to succumb, to reach pleasurable satisfaction, whereas the sophrosyne Apollo turns away from the sensual towards a moral assuredness.

The Flesh is Weak

Dionea is the embodiment of potential chaos and pleasure, yet any desire for Dionea remains unfulfilled. Whilst the villagers fear the primal emotions she arouses, the sophrosyne De Rossi, and the Apollonian sculptor Waldemar are, at least initially, rational, and morally upright. Lee the sophrosyne (and by extension De Rossi) is able to immediately 'understand the place of the irrational in the human soul and somehow come to terms with it', and is at once able to 'honour Dionysus without shaming Apollo', something which the sculptor Waldemar is unable to achieve.³⁷ Waldemar's aesthetic ideal is an echo of Winckelmann and Pater: he favours sculpting the male

physique — until he meets Dionea. Yet, as Pulham argues, Waldemar’s underlying homosexuality is not negated by his fascination with Dionea. Rather, the sacrificial scene at the end of the narrative encodes *poikilos*, the Greek phenomenon of homoerotic love.³⁸ Waldemar’s Apollonian nature is kept in check by his wife, Gertrude, and when it is given free expression, Waldemar and Gertrude are killed in the Dionysian ritual. This presentation of the destructive Dionysian expression of homosexuality is not the only one evident in ‘Dionea’. De Rossi’s relationship with the young Father Domenico is fundamentally important in understanding Lee’s sexual dissonance: how desire is presented and recognized, and the choice to fulfil it, or negate it. De Rossi’s letters note that Domenico is:

A young man, tall, emaciated with fasts and vigils, but handsome [...]. One has heard of men struggling with the tempter. Well, well, Father Domenico had struggled as hard as any of the Anchorites recorded by St. Jerome, and he had conquered. I never knew anything comparable to the angelic serenity of gentleness of this victorious soul. I don’t like monks, but I loved Father Domenico.³⁹

De Rossi admits to admiring the monk, certainly, but what is significant is the way in which these two men mirror one another. Both have chosen a form of exile: De Rossi in the court of Lady Evelyn’s father, Domenico cloistered in the monastery. While De Rossi studies the Pagan gods and rituals, Domenico is devoted to his Roman Catholic faith. Their friendship involves the sharing of struggles and victories:

Of late, Father Domenico had seemed to me less calm than usual: his eyes had grown strangely bright, and red spots had formed on his salient cheekbones. One day last week, taking his hand, I felt his pulse flutter, and all his strength as it were, liquefy under my touch. ‘You are ill,’ I said. ‘You have fever, Father Domenico. You have been overdoing yourself — some new privation, some new penance. Take care and do not tempt Heaven; remember the flesh is weak.’ Father Domenico withdrew his hand quickly. ‘Do not say that,’ he cried; ‘the flesh is strong!’ and turned away his face.⁴⁰

When De Rossi is called back to the monastery one evening, he is overcome by a feeling of dread. He writes ‘Something told me my monk was dead.’⁴¹ De Rossi’s instincts, rather than his rationality, take over. At the behest of the Superior, he writes the death certificate out as ‘a case of apoplexy’,⁴² noting, ‘It was weak of me. But after all, why make a scandal? He certainly had no wish to injure the poor monks.’⁴³ The Doctor recognizes the truth of Domenico’s demise, and believes Dionea

to have been the cause, particularly when she states, ‘so, he has killed himself with charcoal, poor Padre Domenico!’⁴⁴ This small scene is hugely significant. I would argue that this is perhaps the first *embodied* same-sex/queer desire scene in Lee’s work, albeit a coded one, rather than a supernatural or aesthetic representation. That the young Domenico is attracted to De Rossi, an educated, single, older man, who lives in self-imposed exile, and a confidant of the Princess of Sabina, is not extraordinary. The signs De Rossi reads as sickness are also signifiers of attraction and desire: the red spots are perhaps blushes not fever, the pulse a flutter of excitement. He takes the young man’s hand (in what way we are not told), but the way in which Domenico liquefies under De Rossi’s touch is reminiscent of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Bernini’s sculpture is composed of nun Teresa and an angel. The former’s face is contorted with religious ecstasy as the angel prepares to pierce the body of the nun with his phallic golden spear. Yet Domenico’s Catholicism will not allow him to succumb to the temptations of queer desire, and his final attempt to show the strength of the flesh is to end his life by inhaling the fumes of charcoal.⁴⁵ Camille Paglia suggests that ‘Both the Apollonian [and by extension sophrosyne] and Judeo-Christian traditions are transcendental. That is, they seek to surmount or transcend nature’.⁴⁶ Domenico could not transcend his own nature — he was not able to maintain sophrosyne virtue — and chose to take his own life, despite this being an ecclesiastical crime. Domenico’s death is included in a letter to Lady Evelyn dated 20 October 1885.

I have focused on this section not only because it engages with a coded representation of queer desire in Lee’s archive, but because it exhibits parallels with her relationship with the poet and novelist Amy Levy. Levy met Lee in 1886 in Italy, where she was spending time recovering from a deep depression. Levy immediately fell for Lee, but Lee was still in a relationship with Robinson, and appears not to have noticed Levy’s attraction to her. On 26 November 1886, Levy sent Lee five poems, one being ‘To Vernon Lee’.

On Bellosguardo, when the year was young,
We wandered, seeking for the daffodil
And dark anemone, whose purples fill

The peasant's plot, between the corn-shoots sprung.

Over the grey, low wall the olive flung
Her deeper greyness; far off, hill on hill
Sloped to the sky, which, pearly-pale and still,
Above the large and luminous landscape hung.

A snowy blackthorn flowered beyond my reach;
You broke a branch and gave it to me there;
I found for you a scarlet blossom rare
Thereby ran on of Art and Life our speech;
And of the gifts the gods had given to each
Hope unto you, and unto me Despair.⁴⁷

Levy's sonnet, like Robinson's, narrates a memory of Lee. Levy recalls a walk along Bellosguardo, Florence, in early spring. The year is young, and so too is the relationship between Lee and Levy. The poem is abundant in its use of opulent colours; the decadent yellow, gold, purple, and scarlet appear to draw Levy's eye but these are offset by Lee's austere greys, pearls, and whites. Lee and Levy search for early blooming flowers, daffodils, and anemones, and see the bountiful fields of the peasants sprouting not only crops but blooms. There is utility and beauty. The list of flowers, and the luminous landscape, the undulating hill on hill, is reminiscent of Romantic poetry, particularly the line that reverberates with a Wordsworthian subjectivity '[w]e wandered, seeking for the daffodil'. Levy finds for Lee 'a scarlet blossom rare': the blossom is unnamed, unspoken, but scarlet is a symbol of the desire and passion she has for the older writer. Lee reciprocates, in an act heavy with sophrosyne virtue: she breaks a branch (there is a sense of violence) from 'a snowy blackthorn'. Purity is symbolized by the whiteness of the blackthorn's flowers, and this, as well as the blossom, is beyond Levy's reach, but not Lee's. The blackthorn is flowering, but the fruits — the part of the tree most prized — have not yet formed. Lee's gift to Levy, though beautiful and desired, is torturous and not what it appears to be, nor is it equal to that of Levy's gift to Lee. The blackthorn, whilst beautiful in bloom, is also savagely protected by its thorns, an image Lee utilizes when describing Dionea as a 'thorn in the flesh'. Is Levy a thorn in Lee's flesh, and is her desire testing Lee's strident moral standards?

Whilst the poem is strewn with flowers and the hope of springtime, there is also a poignancy, a disappointed desire. Levy's scarlet blossom is found, but is not taken by Lee, and nature is presented as being beyond Levy's reach. It is 'far-off', and she remains in a state of frustrated desire, 'seeking'. Levy notes that the conversation ran on 'Art and Life', with art paired with 'hope', life paired with 'despair', an implicit return to the gods that illustrate these Apollonian and Dionysian ideals and the virtue that binds control and passion, the *sophrosyne*. The Lee that exists within Levy's 'To Vernon Lee' appears to quash the desire that she excites in the poet. Not only is Lee's purity (the blackthorn) beyond Levy's reach, but it is harsh.⁴⁸

Despite this unrequited passion, Lee and Levy remained in correspondence until Levy's death on 10 September 1889. Shortly before her death, Lee had asked Levy to come to Florence once more, but Levy's reply which arrived on 8 September (and was quoted in Lee's own letter to Paget) stated she was '*too ill in body & soul*'.⁴⁹ On 18 September 1889, Lee writes to her mother from Ilkley near Leeds in the North West of England:

Dearest Mamma

You will be sorry to hear that poor little Miss Levy died last week. Poor little girl, she was only 27, and had her novel cremated with her — a sad little life. I should be very grateful if you w^d have a few laurel sprigs cut & put in a *campione senza valore* box (if there are none in the drawing room *cassapanca* they can be got at the Post Office) 25 cent. stamp and address to Mrs Levy 7 Endsleigh Gardens Easton Square N. W. and will you put our name merely & 'For Amy'? It is very sad.⁵⁰

Lee's gift of laurel sprigs from Florence, a place that meant so much to their friendship, is a recognition of Levy's life as a writer and poet, a crowning from the Hippolytus. Unlike Robinson's and Lee's diadems and wreaths, it is not a same-sex bond, but a recognition of Levy's art. Despite Lee's matter-of-factness, and the business-like way in which she conducts her mother to send the laurel in a *campione senza valore* — a box sample without value — there is also a deep sadness. Significantly, the *campione* was often used to send manuscripts between correspondents, or items without commercial value, yet to both sender and receiver the object's literary resonances would have been understood.⁵¹ By 14 October 1889, society had discovered that the death of Levy was by her own hand.

Poor Miss Levy! The truth has little by little dribbled out. She killed herself with charcoal, probably while the family was away. I suppose she could not obtain poison, else she would scarcely have inflicted on her family the horror & disgrace of undoubted suicide. But she had every right: she learned in the last 6 weeks that she was on the verge of a terrible & loathsome form of madness apparently running in the family, & of which she had seen a brother of hers die. I did not know this till today. What a life for a poor little sensitive girl!⁵²

The seriousness of Levy's decision and the infliction of this decision upon her family can scarcely be believed by Lee, especially the notion of societal disgrace Levy's act would have brought upon them. Yet Lee feels that despite Levy's method, she was right, due to a hereditary illness that ran in the family. Scholars now know that Levy's brother did not in fact die from an inherited madness, but from contracting syphilis.

Lee's inclusion of suicide by the inhalation of charcoal fumes in a published work so soon after the death of Levy, especially as both women moved within the same literary circles, is perhaps of questionable taste. The suicide of Father Domenico, a death that I have argued is due to unreciprocated love or the shame of same-sex desire, is dated by De Rossi specifically as 20 October 1885, almost six months before Lee met Levy for the first time in Florence, and almost a year before she received Levy's sonnets and poems. In separating these events historically and by gender, Lee is distancing herself from Levy's tragic ending, or suggesting that these events are in no way connected. But perhaps by instilling De Rossi with the *sophrosyne* virtue that she herself exhibits, she is suggesting that, like De Rossi, she too was unaware of Levy's admiration, or wilfully suppressed any feelings for her.

In conclusion, by broadening Lee's archive of influence beyond its material and topographical boundaries, and by allowing it to become enmeshed with the archival sources — to write a queer prosopography of Lee's friends and lovers — we are able to synthesize a three-dimensional picture of Lee's life. The literary co-presence of Lee within Robinson's and Levy's work, and of her within theirs, suggests that the edges of personal archives are not so clearly defined. By imbuing the unreliable narrator De Rossi with her own virtues, Lee invites the reader

to go beyond the framed narrative of the text, unravel the intertext, and extend the boundaries of the archive.

¹ Elizabeth F. Libbey, 'The Vernon Lee Papers', *Colby Quarterly*, 3.8 (November 1952), 1-3 (p. 1). Elizabeth Libbey discusses this embargo: 'the original packets of Letters Home [...] shall not be read except privately until 1980, and that all examination of them shall be under this restriction.' Vernon Lee, *Vernon Lee's Letters with a Preface by her Executor I. C. Willis*, ed. by Irene Cooper Willis (London: Privately Printed, 1937); Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

² Gunn, pp. ix-x.

³ Sally Newman, 'The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14.1/2 (2005), 51-75 (pp. 55-56).

⁴ Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of Vernon Lee* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), p. 69.

⁵ Werner Eck, 'Prosopography', in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. by Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1.

⁶ Dion Smythe, 'Prosopography', in *The Oxford Book of Byzantine Studies*, ed. by Robin Cormack, John F. Haldon and Elizabeth Jeffreys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1.

⁷ Lawrence Stone, 'Prosopography', *Daedalus*, 100.1 (Winter 1971), 46-79 (p. 46).

⁸ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰ Newman, p. 52.

¹¹ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville, MA, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 59, 58.

¹² Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. xiv.

¹³ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 144.

¹⁴ Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self Knowledge and Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. x.

¹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 31.

¹⁶ Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁷ Sean Brady, *John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 239.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 245-46.

²⁰ 'Ce livre a pour but de mettre en lumière la nécessité sexuelle tant au point de vue de l'hygiène qu'au point de vue de la morale. Il ne compte pas sur toutes les sympathies.' [This book aims to highlight the sexual need, both from the point of view of hygiene, and from the point of view of morality. The author does not count on sympathy.] Charles Féré, *L'instinct sexuel: évolution et dissolution* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1899), p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³ Matthew George Easton, 'Thorn in the Flesh', in *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (London, Edinburgh, and New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1897), p. 958.

²⁴ Vernon Lee, 'Dionea', in *Haunting and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Mississauga: Broadview Editions, 2006), pp. 77-104 (p. 83).

²⁵ Dionea was discovered 'handling in a suspicious manner the Madonna's gala frock and her best veil of *πίρρο di Cantù*'. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷ A. Mary F. Robinson, 'Dedicatory Poem', in *The Crowned Hippolytus Translated from Euripides with New Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), inside cover. Vancouver, BC, Norman Colbeck Collection, UBC Library: Rare Books and Special Collections.

²⁸ Sappho, 'Now Dika, weave the aniseed together, flower and stem', in *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Aaron Poochigan (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 13.

²⁹ Sappho, 'In all honesty, I want to die', in *Stung with Love*, p. 25.

³⁰ Poochigan, 'Notes', in *Stung with Love*, p. 24.

- ³¹ Sappho, 'I have not had one word from her', in *Sappho*, trans. by Mary Bernard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 42.
- ³² Mary Robinson, *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), p. 194.
- ³³ Vernon Lee, letter to Mary Robinson, 8 February 1886, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935: Volume II, 1885-1889*, ed. by Sophie Geoffroy and Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 144.
- ³⁴ Mary Robinson, letter to Vernon Lee, 4 August 1888, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 370.
- ³⁵ Pulham, p. 135.
- ³⁶ Brandon Chao Chi Yen, 'Art, Psychology and Morality: The Dionysiac and the Apollonian in Vernon Lee's Hauntings', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 62 (Spring 2014), 1-11 (p. 8).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ³⁸ Pulham, p. 142.
- ³⁹ 'Dionaea', pp. 87-88.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 8.
- ⁴⁷ Amy Levy, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1889), p. 74.
- ⁴⁸ 'Reason and logic are the anxiety-inspired domain of Apollo, premiere god of sky-cult. The Apollonian is harsh and phobic, coldly cutting itself off from nature by its superhuman purity [...]. Apollo's great opponent Dionysus is ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness. As we shall see, the Dionysian is liquid nature, a miasmatic swamp whose prototype is the still pond of the womb'. Paglia, p. 12.
- ⁴⁹ Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget, 8 September 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 436. [Italics in original.]
- ⁵⁰ Vernon Lee, letter Matilda Paget, 18 September 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 440.
- ⁵¹ Anon. 'Tariffe e servizio postale dei campioni senza valore', *Posta e società*, http://www.postaesocieta.it/magazzino_totale/pagine_htm/campioni_senza_valore.htm [accessed 28 April 2019]
- ⁵² Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget, 14 October 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 447.