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Orientalist Aestheticism: Vernon Lee, Carlo Gozzi, and the Venetian Fairy Comedy

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Vernon Lee's relationship with Venice might be described as troublesome yet productive. It informed a variety of her works including *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), her erudite history of Italian culture which includes chapters on Venetian theatre that focus on Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi;[1] 'A Wicked Voice', a disturbing story of musical possession that appears in her 1890 collection, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, in which a nineteenth-century composer becomes obsessed with the voice of an eighteenth-century singer; her novella *Lady Tal* (1892), a light-hearted satire in the realist mode; and *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* (1883), a children's story that uses stock characters from the commedia dell'arte to tell the tale of an opera singer, Signora Olimpia Fantastici, and her adventures in 'Bobbio', a watery city that can only be Venice.[2]

In her preface to *The Prince of the Hundred Soups*, Lee describes the tale as 'a slightly modified translation' of an unpublished German manuscript supposedly written in 1838, by the 'author', Theodor August Amadeus Wesendonck, a German actor, puppeteer, and avid advocate of the commedia dell'arte, whose story, with the aid of her publisher, T. Fisher Unwin, Lee claims to have translated and abridged for her readership.[3] Lee maintains that the tale constitutes Wesendonck's attempt to show what could be done with commedia dell'arte characters:

> It was an experiment to show how much more interest could be got out of the Harlequins, Pantaloons, Columbines, and so forth, of pantomimes and puppet-shows than out of the distressed men and women – who know that they ought not to do it, but insist upon doing it nevertheless – of modern fiction.[4]

'Discovered' while Lee's own mind was taken up by the 'Comedy of Masks, Goldoni, and Gozzi' about which she had so recently written in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, Lee feels obliged to warn her readers that the work she is about to present features Wesendonck's own preoccupations with these topics, and asks them to note that they are the product of a youth

influenced 'by the fantastic and humorous vagaries of certain eccentric romanticists' among whom Hoffmann is pre-eminent.[5]

This essay argues that the influences Lee apportions to Wesendonck are those that inform at least two of her own fantastic tales: 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. These stories, first published in 1896 and 1897 respectively, were inspired by Carlo Gozzi's fairy comedies: *La donna serpente* [*The Snake Lady*] and *Turandot* respectively, plays first performed in Venice in 1762 and influenced by eighteenth-century orientalism.[6] While Mary Patricia Kane has recognized the impact of Romantic writers such as Hoffmann and William Beckford on Lee's uncanny tales, she does not connect these with Gozzi's *fiabe teatrali*, even though Lee herself acknowledges Gozzi's own influence on Romantic literature.[7] Similarly, in his introductory essay to *The Snake Lady and Other Stories* (1954), an early collection of Lee's tales, Horace Gregory mentions Gozzi in relation to *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* yet fails to suggest further links between their writings, despite the fact that Gregory's chosen title resonates with the eponymous snake lady in one of Gozzi's plays. These critical connections, I suggest, offer new perspectives on how Lee's writings participate in the late-Victorian orientalist zeitgeist and the implications of this orientalism for Lee's own later thoughts on the 'nation' in works such as *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915) and *Satan the Waster* (1920). The reprinting of 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Tales* (1927), published the year after the premiere of Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, at La Scala, Milan on Saturday 25 April, 1926, which was itself prompted by Gozzi's work, also encourages a re-examination of this tale in the context of Italian politics and Lee's own post-World War I meditations on the permeability of national boundaries as well the fluidity of temporality that often characterizes her supernatural fiction.[8]

Orientalisms

In her introduction to *Late Victorian Orientalism* (2020), a volume of essays that explores the consumption and appropriation of the 'East' in nineteenth-century culture, Eleanor Sasso observes

that the Victorians 'envisioned the East in many different modes' which manifested themselves in a variety of 'Orientalisms'.[9] The latter half of the period saw the spread of what might be described as 'Oriental mania' that emerged in multiple ways: in home décor, costume, food, and entertainment. The broader impact of the Orient was evident everywhere, including in literature; for example, the years between 1850 and 1890 saw the publication of over 30 different English editions of *The Arabian Nights*.[10]

The popularity of this text resonates with the earlier orientalism of the eighteenth century. When Antoine Galland translated a collection of tales which became known in England as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (1704), he stimulated widespread interest in the oriental tale resulting in the publication of several editions, in both French and English, during the ten years that followed.[11] *The Arabian Nights* accelerated 'a taste for what would alternately be described as "oriental", "Arabian", "Persian", or "Moorish" fashions' which would inform British literature and the arts in this period.[12] Other translations from Eastern manuscripts such as François Petis de la Croix's Persian and Turkish tales soon appeared and were followed later in the century by home-grown oriental tales by writers such as William Beckford whose *Vathek* (1786) marked a transitional period in the development of the genre, balancing orientalist and gothic tropes, a combination that can also be found in Lee's late nineteenth-century fiction.[13]

The orientalism found in *Vathek* is similarly evident in Beckford's travel writing, especially in his descriptions of Venice. In a letter written from Padua, dated 14 June 1782, Beckford expresses his ambivalent feelings as he approaches the city; he finds that sadness engulfs him as he sees 'its world of domes rising out of the waters' and hears 'the toll of innumerable bells'.[14] The following day, refreshed after a dip in the ocean at the Lido, Beckford returns to Venice, searching its 'labyrinths of streets, canals and alleys' for 'amber and oriental curiosities' and finds that the variety 'of exotic merchandise, the perfume of coffee, the shade of awnings, and the sight of Greeks and Asiatics sitting cross-legged under them' makes him think himself 'in the bazaars of Constantinople'.[15] For Beckford, Venice is forever evocative of the East; it 'ever recalls a series of

eastern ideas and adventures' and he 'cannot help thinking St. Mark's a mosque' and the Palazzo Ducale 'some vast seraglio, full of arabesque saloons, embroidered sofas, and voluptuous Circassians'.[16]

While Lee does not mention Beckford directly in 'Out of Venice at Last!', an essay published in *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925), she here expresses similarly powerful responses to La Serenissima. For Lee, Venice is a kind of poisonous drug; its 'beauty and poetry [...] its shimmering colours and sliding forms' simultaneously stimulate and disturb her.[17] It is all 'too much', she writes, and each dip of the gondolier's oar evokes ghostly memories, bringing up the past, or rather 'the might-have-been'.[18] The exclamation that doubles as her title punctuates the essay with increasing force until, italicized in its final line, it graphically mirrors her physical flight from a city that overwhelms her both aesthetically and emotionally. However, Beckford does appear in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*. Musing on towns visited by eighteenth-century travellers in a chapter entitled 'The Arcadian Academy', Lee describes Venice as 'a place where Beckford could dream Oriental dreams of luxuriousness and hidden terrors, and compare the motley population, not less than the cupolas and minarets, to the strange world of Vathek which he carried in his mind'.[19]

Theorizing the Supernatural

By the time *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* appeared, Lee had published a number of critical articles on women novelists in *La rivista europea*, although she was still relatively unknown in Britain, especially by the critic who, unaware that 'Vernon Lee' was in fact Violet Paget, praised her book in the *Westminster Review*, telling his readers 'Mr Lee has written one of the most fascinating books that it has been our good fortune to meet with for a very long time'.[20] John Addington Symonds, an established scholar of the Italian Renaissance, was less effusive. 'I found it charming', he writes, but expresses doubt as to whether a readership unfamiliar with Italian culture would appreciate it.[21] Italian critics in full knowledge of their own culture had similar reservations. Reviewing the

book in 1881, Lee's friend, Enrico Nencioni, while praising its erudition and hailing her as 'il critico sagace e immaginoso' [the wise and imaginative critic], complained that 'she exaggerated the neglect of the eighteenth century by contemporary Italian scholars and critics'.[22]

More recently, Alessandra di Ricco has suggested that Lee's reading of the eighteenth century, and her identification of national character through the country's music and drama, are based in part on what she terms 'l'italomania degli inglesi' [English Italomania].[23] She also observes that Lee's representation of Gozzi, set against a 'picture-postcard' Venice, is affected by the way he had been received, championed and appropriated by European Romantic writers.[24] Nevertheless, she acknowledges that, as far as Gozzi is concerned, Lee's claim that the eighteenth century had been afforded little critical attention in Italy was justified. It is worth noting, she argues, that when Lee wrote *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, the country's own Gozzian critics 'were almost non-existent or rather in incubation' since they were officially born with the publication of Gozzi's *fiabe* in 1884-85, sponsored by Giosuè Carducci and edited by Ernesto Masi.[25] *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, the 2006 collection in which Di Ricco's essay appears, contains the facsimile of a playbill for the performance of Gozzi's *L'Augellino Belverde* [*The Little Green Bird*] which took place in 1900 at the 'Teatro Rustico del Palmerino', that is, in the gardens of Vernon Lee's villa in Maiano.[26] It seems that twenty years after her essay on his work, Lee was still firmly under Gozzi's spell which perhaps explains why his *fiabe* should have woven themselves into two of the works she produced only four years before staging his play at Il Palmerino. However, the imaginary Gozzi in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* additionally informed her fiction and her theory of the supernatural in other interesting ways.

In Lee's essay 'Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy', Gozzi is constructed in a manner reminiscent of the thwarted artists that feature in her fantastic tales. She imagines him alone in his ancestral home, the 'haunted palace' at S. Canziano in Venice, surrounded by 'his Spanish plays and his collections of Arabian and Neapolitan fairy tales'.[27] Gozzi, for Lee, is a sensitive artist 'full of aspiration and suggestion: wondrous dreams, beautiful and grotesque, flitted

before him without his being able to seize them, like that fiddler trying for a lifetime to reproduce the exquisite sonata heard in sleep from the fiend'.[28] To her mind:

> In his plays he seems forever pointing to some suggestion of poetry, of pathos, and of humour, calling upon us to understand what he would do but cannot; saying almost piteously, 'Do you not see, do you not feel? Does not that situation, that word, appeal to your fancy? Do you not see dimly those fairy princesses, too beautiful to be seized […]. There, do you not hear the music? Do you not feel that a world of wonder is half visible to you? – Always suggestive, and sometimes successful in working out the suggestion; such must be the final verdict on Gozzi's plays.[29]

Yet for Lee, the 'incompleteness' of Gozzi's 'fairy plays' is complemented and completed by 'the fancy of the reader'.[30] The fiddler to whom Lee refers is no doubt the composer Giuseppe Tartini whose 'Devil's Trill Sonata', a complicated piece for solo violin, was reputedly instigated by a dream in which the Devil appeared and gave a virtuoso performance of a wonderful sonata that Tartini, once awake, strove to capture, but could not ever quite reproduce.[31] The story resonates with Lee's 'A Wicked Voice', published seven years after her essay on Gozzi, in which the contemporary composer, Magnus, who wishes to write an opera in Wagnerian style, is seduced by the voice of an eighteenth-century castrato which he describes as a 'cursed human voice', a 'violin of flesh and blood, fashioned with the subtle tools, the cunning hands, of Satan'.[32] At the end of the tale, Magnus has abandoned all efforts to write Wagnerian music and instead finds his head filled with the music of eighteenth-century opera, yet no longer able to hear the 'wicked' voice that inspired it.

The 'incompleteness' of Magnus' endeavour is familiar to readers of Lee's fantastic tales. For Lee, the elicitation of the supernatural requires obscurity and ambiguity. According to Lee, it is 'the mystery that touches us'; and ghostly figures must be shrouded in moonbeams, 'scarcely outlined, scarcely separated from the surrounding trees; or walks, and sucked back, ever and anon, into the flickering shadows'.[33] Lee's imagined Gozzi is similarly shrouded in mystery; he himself is, in her imagination, a fairy-tale child endowed by a fairy godmother 'with the humour and fancy of Beckford […] and Hoffman' [sic]; and she tells us that we must not be surprised that, amidst

what she terms the 'humdrum Italy of the humdrum eighteenth century', he developed the '*fiabesque*', or 'fairy comic style'.[34] The reason, she argues, is this:

> [I]n the midst of this Italy of the eighteenth century, with its prim little ways […] in the very midst and heart of all this was one strange, weird, beautiful, half oriental, half medieval thing, one city of gorgeous colour and mysterious shadow, in which the creole wizard of Fonthill [Beckford] felt as if he were moving in his own magic world of Vathek and that city was Venice.[35]

Venice, it seems, embodies the indistinction and uncertainty she identifies as important to the supernatural. In describing Venice as a magical city of contrast and coalescence, where East meets West, and colour meets shadow, Lee gestures at the very nature of Gozzi's fairy comedies in which magic and masking play such a significant part, and two of such works that inspired Lee are discussed in more detail below.

Gozzi's *La donna serpente* and 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'

Gozzi's *La donna serpente* tells the story of a fairy princess, Cherestaní, who relinquishes her magical powers to marry a mortal, Farruscad. Cherestaní's father, the fairy king, Demogorgon, is against the match and warns Farruscad that he must not curse his wife, no matter her behaviour, telling him that if he does, the spell he has cast on his daughter will transform her into a snake for 200 years. In her review of Giulietta Bazoli's 2012 critical edition of *La donna serpente*, Tatiana Korneeva refers to Gozzi's sources. She comments on the influence of French and Italian romances such as tales of Melusine and Morgan le Fay and works by Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, and Pulci; Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy stories (*Les contes des fées* (1697)); and the sixteenth-century Spanish dramas that informed Gozzi's *teatro spagnolesco*.[36] However, she observes that the structure of *La donna serpente* was suggested by the French orientalist, François Pétis de la Croix's *Les Mille et un jours, contes persans* [*The Thousand and One Days, Persian Tales*], published in five volumes between 1710 and 1712.[37]

The story of the fairy Oriana in Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' draws similarly on the legacies of medieval romance narratives and plays with oriental imagery. Alberic, the grandson of Duke Balthasar Maria of the House of Luna, first falls in love with the image of

Oriana, represented in a tapestry depicting his ancestor, Alberic the Blond, in which her lower half remains obscured by a judiciously placed item of furniture. When this is moved, it reveals Oriana's snake tail but rather than being horrified by the discovery, Alberic finds that he 'loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended in the long twisting body of a snake'.[38] It is when exiled to the Castle of Sparkling Waters by his grandfather that Alberic first meets Oriana at sunset by the well in the castle gardens where she reveals herself to him as his 'Godmother'. In the same location, in the daytime, he finds the cold, green snake that he adopts as a friend. When he grows up he learns how Alberic the Blond released the Lady Oriana from the spell that trapped her in the form of a snake by responding to a mysterious request that appeared on the stone sepulchre in the castle gardens, asking him to thrice kiss the first creature to emerge from its marble recesses. Though repelled by the snake, Alberic the Blond nevertheless kisses it as instructed and is rewarded by the snake's transformation into the beautiful Oriana. The curse that binds her demands that to retain her human shape permanently, Oriana's rescuer must be faithful for a period of ten years. Prince Alberic discovers that his ancestor was unable to comply, and that Oriana was forced to return to her serpentine shape but permitted to take human form for an hour each day at sunset. While Lee's depiction of Oriana is sympathetic and she ironically offers Alberic – in both snake and human form – the warmth and love that his grandfather and his courtiers do not provide, her fate, unlike that of Gozzi's Cherestaní, is not a happy one. While Farruscad, Cherestaní's mortal husband, is asked like Alberic the Blond to swear that he will kiss on the mouth 'whatever horrible thing appears' when a sepulchre opens, and almost kills the snake that emerges from it before being told that it is in fact his wife, he kisses the serpent on the mouth and Gozzi's play ends happily with their reunion. By contrast, Prince Alberic's snake lady is killed while still in serpentine form, the creature's bloody, mangled remains being all that is left of the fairy Oriana.

The influence of Gozzi's orientalism on Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' is most evident in Alberic's disturbing encounter, at the age of eight, with his grandfather the duke on the day of the feast of St. Balthasar. Prince Alberic finds the duke, often referred to as the 'Ever Young

Prince in all Italy', at his toilet 'wrapped in a green Chinese wrapper, embroidered with gold pagodas', wearing 'an orange scarf of delicate fabric' about his head, while his face, is 'being plastered with a variety of brilliant colours'.[39] To 'the diseased fancy of his grandson', the duke appears as if 'made of precious metals', like the effigy 'he had erected of himself in the great burial chapel'.[40] But just as Alberic is mustering up the courage to approach his eminent grandparent, his eye falls on 'a sight so mysterious and terrible' that he flees: 'through an open door he could see in an adjacent closet a man dressed in white, combing the long flowing locks of what he recognised as his grandfather's head, stuck on a short pole in the light of a window'.[41] This strange encounter is followed by a recurrent dream in which Alberic sees the effigy of the duke come alive and step down from his niche in the burial chapel to take his place in the palace grotto, still dressed in 'the green bronze cloak embroidered with gold pagodas'.[42] Here, a range of marble animals pay homage to him and, as they do so, the duke's features become increasingly indistinct until all that is left 'beneath the great curly peruke' is 'a round blank thing – a barber's block'.[43]

Although in some ways quite different to Gozzi's *La donna serpente*, Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' shares key motifs, in particular the cursed fairy who must be released from her serpentine fate by a kiss; cruelty; untrustworthy servants; and most importantly a mutual source in the Chinese legend of 'Madame White Snake'. According to Whalen Lai, the 'chilling ghost story of "Madame White Snake"' is 'one of the best-known stories in China'.[44] Beginning 'as a tale of demonic seduction that occurred by a lake', chiming with 'myths of man-god romances in the *Songs of the South*' and with 'cults of yearly human sacrifice to He Bo, the river god', over time, she argues, these 'evolved into two distinct genres of "encounter with female immortals" and "run-in with demons"'.[45] Originally a she-demon, 'Madame White Snake' later took on 'the virtues of the female immortal – as a good wife and mother'.[46] The influence of this evolution is evident in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'; Alberic meets Oriana and her serpentine familiar by a well at the Castle of Sparkling Waters, but Oriana is not the dangerous she-demon one might expect of the phallic woman, but instead a benign, 'motherly' Godmother.

In both Gozzi's play and Lee's story, the snake's metamorphoses into a woman, and the duration of that transformation depends on a man's fidelity and kindness. However, Gozzi's play is riddled with a misogyny that is implicitly questioned by the benevolence of Lee's snake lady whose fate, at the hands of cruel men, seems inevitable and thus elicits the reader's sympathy. As John DiGaetani has argued, Gozzi's works often reflect the tensions he experienced in life, and it is no wonder, perhaps, that his plays feature bitter 'battles of the sexes', and that women in his plays, like Turandot and la donna serpente are both 'dangerous and domineering'.[47] Lee's tale, with its bloodied phallic woman and effete *homme fatal* (in the shape of the ever-young Duke Balthasar) offers a subtext that subdues female and reifies male power while also hinting at the instability of the latter and accompanying fears of castration heralded, in Freudian terms, by the symbolic 'decapitation' of the duke represented by the barber's block. Decapitation, as we shall see, is equally significant in both Gozzi's *Turandot* and Lee's 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' which resonates with Gozzi's play.

Turandot and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'

The name 'Turandot' is now perhaps best known to us as the title of the Puccini opera, but it was Gozzi who first brought the story to the Italian stage.[48] Although based on a Persian tale, Gozzi sets his play in China. While this might seem strange at first, Enrico Fulchignoni suggests that we must bear in mind the broader historical impact of intercultural influences on Venetian culture, the 'dense network of continuous exchange-movements of people', literature and performances that include the Jews who staged performances of 'Armenian and Albanian Turkish jugglers and acrobats […] not only in the public squares of Venice but also in the Venetian protectorates of Dalmatia' which survived until the eighteenth century.[49] While 'leaving few linguistic remains', Fulchignoni argues that such performances left 'indirect traces' that are expressed 'in masks and mime' using characters that overcome 'the obstacle of language […] by acrobatics and gesticulation, comic invention, mockery, buffoonery, and the lazzo'.[50] Additionally, Fulchignoni

points out that, alongside Persian fables, we must take into account 'the mysterious Chinese allegories' which informed Gozzi's comedies.[51]

The plot of Gozzi's *Turandot* is well known. Turandot, a cold and haughty princess, challenges her country's laws and refuses to marry any suitor unless he can answer three riddles correctly; failure means that he will not only lose her hand, but also his head, and the spiked heads of those who have failed line the city walls as Gozzi's play begins. An exiled prince, Calaf, arrives, and falling in love with Turandot's portrait, is compelled to try his luck. Although he succeeds in answering the riddles correctly, Turandot still refuses to marry him. Seemingly offering her a further chance at escape, but certain that she will not succeed, the prince asks that, on the following day, she should tell him his name. If she gets it right, she is free and he will die, but if she gets it wrong, she is bound to marry him. The intricacies of the plot: the lies, deceits and reversals are too complex to discuss in this brief synopsis, but key aspects of Gozzi's play are clearly appropriated by Lee and feature in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'.[52] The male protagonist in Lee's tale is Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, known, as his name implies, for his sexual exploits, but devoted to the holy Virgin whose protection he seeks as he ventures illegally into the Alhambra palace in Granada in search of a mysterious Moorish Infanta and her treasures. While at first glance the two stories seem dissimilar, there are crucial parallels that point to Gozzi's influence: the cruelty and beauty of the oriental princesses; the prospective lover's dependence on the correct answer to a question; and the beheading motifs that litter both texts.

In Gozzi's play, Turandot is so beautiful that 'no painter can capture her'.[53] According to Barach, the prince's servant, her 'inimitable beauty […] has attracted the greatest artists' but they cannot reproduce it.[54] However, he warns Calaf that 'beneath her beauty lies a fierce nature, and she is most ferocious to the male sex'.[55] He also cautions Calaf that 'Whoever looks at her portrait feels such a force in his heart that, they say, he seeks the original – and finds death instead'.[56] The sight of even the lesser beauty suggested by her image can enchant and bewitch and Barach likens Turandot to a gorgon; 'It would be safer', Barach claims, for Calaf 'to gaze upon the dreadful face

of the Medusa', thus suggesting that Turandot promises death, decapitation, and, in Freudian terms, signifies figurative castration.[57] When Calaf, surrounded by the palace eunuchs, is about to answer the final riddle, Turandot unveils and looks at him, confusing him with her loveliness in the hope of hastening his death. While Calaf succeeds in answering the riddle correctly and eventually wins Turandot's hand, Lee's Don Juan is less fortunate.

Don Juan's Infanta has comparable powers of enchantment and is 'most marvellously fair'.[58] Gaining access to inner depths of the Alhambra with the necromantic resources of his accomplice, Baruch, Don Juan finds himself similarly surrounded by the eunuchs that protect the Infanta, and is asked by her chief eunuch whether he 'does not consider her the most beautiful thing' he has ever beheld.[59] As Don Juan is asked the killer question – whether the Infanta is not more beautiful than the Virgin of the Seven Daggers to whom he has sworn his allegiance – she, like Turandot, unveils, raising 'her heavy eyelids' and fixing 'the cavalier a glance long, dark and deep'.[60] Unable to deny his allegiance to the Virgin, Don Juan is summarily decapitated. Despite the difference is setting and genre, the similarities between Gozzi's play and Lee's story are easy to see even, perhaps, in Lee's choice of the name 'Baruch' which is just one letter away from 'Barach', the name of the prince's servant in *Turandot*. Moreover, one of what might seem to be the crucial differences – the Spanish setting – is instead an indication that the commedia, and Gozzi's love of Spanish theatre, may have been on Lee's mind as she wrote this tale. As Franco Tonelli has observed, the Spanish legend of Don Juan had often been adapted and appropriated by the Italian commedia dell'arte and, as Tatiana Korneeva has argued, Turandot has her own Spanish counterpart in Gozzi's *La Principessa fiosofa*, *o sia Il controveleno* [*The Princess Philosopher, or the Antidote*] performed in Venice in 1772, based on the Spanish playwright Augustín Moreto y Cabaña's play *El Desdén con el Desdén* [*Disdain meets with Disdain*] (1654).[61] In this play the princess Teodora, like Turandot, challenges social conventions by rejecting marriage; as Korneeva notes, Gozzi's 'disdainful princess of Barcelona and her suitor represent another variant of the Chinese princess Turandot and her lover Calaf'.[62]

Writing Hybrid Identities

Yet, taking these affinities into account, what – beyond source material – might Gozzi's commedia, written and performed in the eighteenth century, offer Vernon Lee writing at the fin de siècle? One answer, perhaps, lies in the commedia dell'arte's use of masks and masking to create identities. Conscious of the fact that, at the end of the nineteenth century, 'a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics' was rarely read 'with anything but unmitigated contempt', in 1875, Violet Paget adopted the pseudonym 'Vernon Lee' which appeared on the articles she published for the Italian journal *La rivista europea*.[63] Yet when her 'true' identity was discovered, Lee refused to drop the mask. Examining the semiotics of commedia personalities in eighteenth-century Venice, Michael Quinn notes that many of the famous figures 'were developed as "signature" characters, as images identified with particularly skilled performers, invented to some extent by those performers and their masks'.[64] In the commedia, the mask, he argues, 'was not designed to hide an essential identity but to construct an artistic one' and was recognizable across genres and settings.[65] In *Turandot*, for example, Truffaldino is 'no longer a servant from Bergamo', but has been 'recast as the chief eunuch of the king's seraglio and dressed in "Chinese style"'.[66] In a similar way, the name 'Vernon Lee', though identified with Violet Paget, functions as a cultural marker in fin-de-siècle literature; a masked constant that was recognized across the literary genres of Lee's substantial production while simultaneously challenging simple definitions of gender.

And what, beyond appropriation, might we read in the borrowed orientalism that informs Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'? In some sense it is in keeping with the strategies of decadent writing. As Kristin Mahoney argues, the decadent movement 'is known as much for its cosmopolitanism as its Orientalism' and as she points out, critics have 'struggled with how to categorize its relationship to racialized difference'.[67] Using Oscar Wilde as an example, she demonstrates how such criticism has linked Wilde and his circle to both 'ethical engagement with alterity and troubling forms of exoticization', and highlights how 'the

decadent movement's love of the stranger was often bound up with its fetishization of anything deemed strange'.[68] Yet, as Mahoney asserts:

> At the same time, while decadence's appetitive ethos certainly tended to foster the objectification and appropriation of difference, many members of the movement worked to detach themselves from more bombastic forms of jingoism, nationalism, and ignorance, and, in their perpetual quest for new sensations, they often approached cultural difference with curiosity rather than disdain.[69]

Vernon Lee's engagement with Gozzi's orientalism certainly chimes with the decadent attraction to and fetishization of the Other that Mahoney discusses above. Clearly, Lee takes pleasure in the aesthetic visualization of Duke Balthasar Maria, wrapped in his 'green Chinese wrapper, embroidered with gold pagodas', his head bound, by 'an orange scarf of delicate fabric', his face masked 'with a variety of brilliant colours'.[70] This description combines a strange beauty and exoticism with the uncanniness of an animated effigy, an automaton, the chinoiserie of his attire functioning as a secondary form of alienation. There is a similarly mechanical quality to the non-speaking Moorish Infanta in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' whose gestures speak for her. Her beauty is masked beneath her veil and only revealed at the crucial moment when she awaits Don Juan's answer, using the power of her gaze to unsettle him. This 'mechanical' quality seems implicit in the conventional masks associated with the commedia dell'arte. The actors are recognized not by their own visages, but by the masks they adopt that signify their gender, type, and social standing.

However, such orientalist aesthetics are problematized when appropriated for nationalist ends. By the time 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' is reprinted in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Tales* (1927), Giacomo Puccini's operatic version of Gozzi's *Turandot* has premiered in Milan, and both Puccini and Lee live in an Italy affected by the tragedy of World War I, rising nationalist politics, and post-war gender dynamics. As Arman Schwartz puts it, at first Puccini's *Turandot* 'appears utterly remote from the world of power: based on a whimsical eighteenth-century play, steeped in extravagant chinoiserie [and] reliant on the conventions of fairy-tales'.[71] Yet, he suggests that it is easy to read Puccini's *Turandot* 'as a political allegory, one consistent with fascism's own narrative

of the degradation of post-World War I Italy and of Mussolini's heroic rise'.[72] Similarly, Gaoheng Zhang has argued that the gender relations in Puccini's opera may be read in the context of Italian nation building and colonialism. He points to the Italo-Turkish war' as 'the most significant colonial event that preceded the creation of Turandot' and suggests that the gender relations around which the opera centres offer 'an important angle from which to consider the opera in relation to empire and Orientalism'.[73] For Zhang,

> these gendered transactions not only represent the Orientalisms and imperialism that are intrinsic to the opera – i.e., Chinese Orientalism of Central Asians and historicized chinoiserie in Italian opera – but also provide artistic responses to the regeneration discourse in Italy during the first quarter of the twentieth century. This discourse was closely associated with Italy's empire-building, war experience, and the Northern European Orientalization of Italy.[74]

These political tensions, Zhang suggests, surface when one reads the relationship between 'Calaf's Central Asian identity and Turandot's Chinese identity as one of periphery and hegemony'.[75]

In her 1927 preface to 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' addressed to her dedicatee, Maurice Baring, Lee recalls the tale's origins in travels undertaken in late 1888, when she had visited Spain and glimpsed 'real Moors at Tangier', especially 'a little Moorish bride, with blue and red triangles painted on her cheeks like my Infanta's'.[76] Additionally, she remembers reading Lane's *Arabian Nights*, a book 'much-thumbed in childhood', as she developed her story.[77] Yet, by the time the story was reprinted in *For Maurice*, Lee had written *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915) fuelled by the advent of World War I, and *Satan the Waster* (1920) her post-war meditation on national boundaries informed by her understanding of empathy. To analyse 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' in the context of its post-war publication and in the light of Gozzi's and Puccini's own works is to ask how its fin-de-siècle orientalism might be re-read. Elsewhere, I have noted how Lee herself, like Gozzi, appropriates and repurposes dramas from Spain's Golden Age.[78] *The Ballet of the Nations*, subtitled 'A Present-Day Morality', resonates with the Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *autos sacramentales*, productions resembling medieval morality plays performed during Corpus Christi, and Calderón is referred to directly in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'.[79] This suggests

that, for Lee as for Gozzi, textual, temporal and national boundaries are there to be crossed, and in the years leading up to and following World War I, such questions become, for Lee, increasingly pressing.

Prior to the outbreak of World War I, Lee published an article entitled 'The Sense of Nationality' (1912) in which she takes issue with the French nationalist politician Maurice Barrès who is later mentioned in her 1927 preface to 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. Challenging Barrès' call for a 'sense of nationality', Lee argues that nationality is relational, that one can only understand one's own if one acknowledges that of others.[80] This empathetic approach to national identity is one that preoccupies Lee during and after the war and is born of the multiple national influences that informed her own childhood experience. In a short story, 'The Heart of a Neutral', published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in November 1915, she constructs herself as an infant on whom, in a manner reminiscent of the christening scene in *Sleeping Beauty*, a series of fairy godmothers bestow their gifts. Here, like Gozzi, Lee becomes a fairy-tale child. As Mandy Gagel explains:

> Each [fairy godmother] is the personification of a country from which Lee can trace her lineage and upbringing (England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Poland), and each gives her a gift from their culture. Although most are good fairies, one is evil (we are not told which country this fairy represents) and condemns Lee to a life in which she will never fully belong to one nation over another.[81]

However, one of the good fairies mitigates the curse by bestowing the following blessing on the child:

> When all the nations shall welter in the pollution of warfare, this child's eyes shall remain clear from its fratricide fumes; she shall drink deep of sorrow, but recognize and put away from her lips the sweetened and consecrated cup of hatred.[82]

The permeability of national boundaries is inculcated in Lee's intellectual development, and in her work this porousness extends to questions of genre and of temporality; Gozzi's *fiabe teatrali* prove fertile ground for Lee's fantastic tales, tales characterized by ghosts that fetch and carry between the past and the present, and protagonists who find themselves haunted by a past they cannot quite grasp. For Lee, ambiguity is at the heart of the supernatural and, it seems, at the centre of her orientalist aesthetics. Like many of her decadent contemporaries, she finds herself

on the boundary Mahoney identifies between 'cosmopolitanism and Orientalism' also embodied by Venice and the Venetian culture that sits uneasily, though often fruitfully, on the cusp between East and West.[83] In the propagandist context of World War I, for Lee national ambiguity becomes increasingly problematic, her pacifist stance resulting in the loss of friends and publishers. In the war's aftermath it is perhaps unsurprising that it is in Venice, in 1925, that she finds herself disturbed by a 'moody isolation' of self, a self 'fluctuating and shifting in stagnation like the shallow and stagnant Venetian waters', troubled by the city's liminality, its vulnerability, and its complex cultural history.[84]

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[1] Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), dramatist and librettist whose plays centred on the lives of the emergent middle classes; Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), Venetian aristocrat and playwright who popularized the commedia dell'arte in his *fiabe teatrali* or, as Lee terms them, Venetian fairy comedies.
[2] *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* was later published in Italy in 1881 under the title *Il Settecento in Italia*; 'A Wicked Voice' was first published in French as 'Voix maudite' in *Les lettres et les arts* (1887).
[3] Vernon Lee, preface to *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1883), pp. v-xxiv (p. vi).
[4] Lee, *Hundred Soups*, p. vi. The term 'modern fiction' used by Lee here most likely refers to the realistic plays of Gozzi's contemporaries Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) and Pietro Chiari (1712-1785) who conveyed Enlightenment ideas through their dramas. Goldoni was influenced by Molière's satirical theatre whereas Chiari responded to eighteenth-century ideas of sensibility. For more on the rivalry between Gozzi and Goldoni, see Tatiana Korneva, 'The Art of Adaptation and Self-Promotion: Carlo Gozzi's *La Principessa filosofa*', in *Theatre Cultures within Globalising Empires*, ed. by Joachim Küpper and Leonie Pawlita (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).
[5] Lee, *Hundred Soups*. p. xi. Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822), is best known as the author of fantastic tales, most notably 'Der Sandmann' ['The Sandman'], first published in *Die Nachtstücke* (1817), which features a life-like puppet. It is worth noting that Wesendonck shares two of his names with Hoffmann. Hoffmann had himself been introduced to the works of Carlo Gozzi while working in Warsaw between 1804-1806.
[6] 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' was originally published in French as 'La Madone aux sept glaives' in *Feuilleton du journal des débats de Samedi*, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 14 February 1896. It was first published in English in two parts in the *English Review*, January/February 1909, before being reprinted in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927). 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' appeared in Volume 10 of the quarterly aestheticist periodical, *The Yellow Book* (July 1896), and was later reprinted in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (1907).
[7] Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Urbino: Carocci, 2004), pp. 63 & 46. Kane also refers to Lee's early story 'Carpo Serpente', written when she was thirteen, which tells the story of a serpent man who lives near a tomb and which recalls aspects of both the plot of Gozzi's play *La donna serpente* (1762) and Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'.
[8] This fluid temporality also informs her travel writing where physical places are often described as spaces layered with historical and mythical resonances.
[9] Eleanor Sasso, *Late Victorian Orientalism* (New York: Anthem, 2020), p. 2.
[10] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[11] Antoine Galland (1646-1715), French orientalist and archaeologist. The tales were first published in English under the title *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* and are often referred to as the *Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights*.
[12] Robert L. Mack, *Oriental Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. ix. Other eighteenth-century examples include John Hawkesworth's *Almoran and Hamet* (1761) and Frances Sheridan's *The History of the Nourjahad* (1767). Beckford's *Vathek* was written in French in 1782, then translated and published anonymously in Britain as *An Arabian Tale: From an Unpublished Manuscript*.
[13] Pétis de la Croix, *Contes turcs* (1707) and *Les Mille et un jours, contes persans* (5 vols, 1710-12), the latter reputedly translated from a collection of Persian tales.

William Beckford (1760-1844), writer, patron of the arts and wealthy plantation owner, is now best known for *Vathek*, a Gothic novel centred on the excesses of the eponymous Caliph; for his travel writing, *Italy with sketches of Spain and Portugal* (2 vols, 1834); and for the extravagance and opulence of Fonthill Abbey, a Gothic Revival country house built at Fonthill Gifford, Wiltshire.
[14] William Beckford, *Italy with Sketches of Spain and Portugal*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), I, p. 291.
[15] Ibid., p. 292.
[16] Ibid., p. 293.
[17] Vernon Lee, 'Out of Venice at Last', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 339-41 (p. 340).
[18] Ibid.
[19] Lee, *Studies*, p. 32. 'Vathek' here is the eponymous Caliph in Beckford's novel.
[20] Quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 2.
[21] Quoted in Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 41.
John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), poet and critic whose works on Renaissance culture include a seven-volume collection, *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-1886).
[22] Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 41. Nencioni refers to the work of Luigi Settembrini (1813-1877), Francesco de Sanctis (1817-1883), and Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907).
[23] Alessandra di Ricco, 'Il Settecento di Vernon Lee', in *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Florence: Consiglio Regionale Toscana, 2006), pp. 142-53, p. 149.
[24] Ibid., p. 149; my own translation.
[25] Ibid., p. 149; my own translation.
Ernest Masi (1836-1908), Italian historian of the Risorgimento.
[26] L'Augellino Belverde is a sequel to Gozzi's earlier play, *The Love of the Three Oranges*, performed at the Teatro San Samuele, Venice, in 1761.
[27] Lee, *Studies*, p. 279.
[28] Ibid., p. 282.
Guiseppe Tartini (1692-1770). Italian composer and violinist born in Venice.
[29] Ibid., p. 282.
[30] Ibid., p. 283.
[31] See Leopold Auer, *Violin Master Works and Their Interpretation* (New York: Dover Publications, 2013), p. 2.
[32] Vernon Lee, 'A Wicked Voice', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 154-81 (p. 154).
[33] Vernon Lee, 'Preface', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 37-40 (p. 37).
[34] Lee, *Studies*, pp. 278-79.
[35] Ibid., p. 279.
[36] Tatiana Korneeva, 'Review of Carlo Gozzi, *La donna serpente,* edited by Giulietta Bazoli (Venice: Marsilio, 2012)', *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 28.1 (2014), 186-89.
[37] Ibid., p. 187.
[38] Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 182-228 (p. 188).
[39] Ibid., p. 190.
[40] Ibid., pp. 190-91.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., p. 191.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Whalen Lai, 'From Folklore to Literate Theatre: Unpacking *Madame White Snake*', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 51.1 (1992), 51-66 (p. 52).
[45] Ibid., p. 51. The earliest printed version of the story appears to be 'The White Maiden Locked for Eternity' in *Stories to Caution the World* written during the Ming dynasty by the historian and poet Feng Menglong (1574-1646). The story, which incorporates Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian influences, is a Chinese fairy tale about a snake spirit who falls in love with a human.
[46] Ibid.
[47] John Louis DiGaetani, *Carlo Gozzi: Translations of The Love of Three Oranges, Turandot, and The Snake Lady* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 2. One suspects that, for all their shared aesthetic concerns, in Lee Carlo Gozzi might have found a further example of his challenging *femmes fatales*. Barach tells his prince, 'Turandot is absolutely a tigress, my lord', words that foreshadow Henry James' well-known description of Vernon Lee in a letter to his brother William: 'She's a tiger-cat!' he warns, 'don't caress her […] she is as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent'; see Burdett Gardner, 'An Apology for Henry James' "Tiger-Cat"', *PMLA*, 68.4 (1953), 688-95 (p. 694).
[48] The story of Turandot was one of the stories in Pétis de la Croix's *The Thousand and One Days* which features the character of 'Turandokht', a cold princess whose suitors die if they do not answer three riddles correctly.

[49] Enrico Fulchignoni, 'Oriental Influences on the Commedia dell'Arte', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 7.1 (1990), 29-41 (p. 32).
[50] Ibid. The 'lazzo' is a stock comic routine associated with Commedia dell'Arte.
[51] Ibid., p. 33.
[52] The story of Turandot and her luckless suitors also resonates with Lee's 'Amour Dure: Dure Amour' in which the ghost of a *femme fatale* leads the male protagonist to figurative castration and literal death.
[53] Carlo Gozzi, *Turandot*, in *Carlo Gozzi: Translations of The Love of Three Oranges, Turandot, and The Snake Lady with a Bio-Critical introduction*, ed. by John Louis DiGaetani (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 43-106 (p. 52).
[54] Ibid., p. 49.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., p. 50.
[57] Ibid., p. 52.
[58] Vernon Lee, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 249-78 (p. 268).
[59] Ibid., p. 269.
[60] Ibid., p. 271.
[61] Franco Tonelli, 'Molière's "Don Juan" and the Space of the Commedia dell'Arte', *Theatre Journal*, 37.4 (1985), 440-64 (p. 451); Tatiana Korneeva, 'The Art of Adaptation and Self-Promotion: Carlo Gozzi's *La Principessa filosofa*', in *Theatre Cultures within Globalising Empires*, ed. by Joachim Küpper, Leonie Pawlita, and Madeline Rüegg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018) pp. 40-58 (p. 41).
[62] Tatiana Korneeva, 'Adaptation', p. 50. Korneeva also observes that the play includes a figure named 'Giannetto', 'if not exactly the *commedia dell'arte* mask of Pantalone, then a modernised version of him' (p. 50). *La Principessa filosofa*, as Korneeva explains, is one of approximately twenty Spanish Golden Age dramas that Gozzi adapted for Italian theatre; in such works, 'he found not only a new source of inspiration' but also 'a way to renew and revitalise Italian theatrical practices more generally' (p. 40).
[63] Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 2.
[64] Michael L. Quinn, 'The Comedy of Reference: The Semiotics of Commedia Figures in Eighteenth-Century Venice', *Theatre Journal*, 43.1 (1991), 70-92 (p. 74).
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., p. 85.
[67] Kristin Mahoney, 'Taking Wilde to Sri Lanka and Beardsley to Harlem: Decadent Practice, Race, and Orientalism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4, (2021), 583-606 (p. 583).
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 190.
[71] Arman Schwartz, 'Mechanism and Tradition in Puccini's *Turandot*', *The Opera Quarterly*, 25.1-2 (2009), 28-50 (p. 32).
[72] Ibid.
[73] Gaoheng Zhang, 'The Three Riddles in Puccini's *Turandot*: Masculinity, Empire, and Orientalism', in *Der musikalisch modellierte Mann: Interkulturelle und interdisziplinäre Männlichkeitsstudien zur Oper und Literatur des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Ester Saletta and Barbara Hindinger, pp. 397-416 (p. 402). The Italo-Turkish war was fought between the Kingdom of Italy and the Ottoman empire between 1911-1912, resulting in the colonization of sub-provinces that were known as 'Italian Libya' from 1911-1934.
[74] Ibid., pp. 403-04.
[75] Ibid., p. 404.
[76] Vernon Lee, preface to 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 243-48 (p. 248).
Maurice Baring (1874-1945), British diplomat, linguist, and author who was a member of the famous Baring Brothers banking family.
[77] Ibid. The edition of *Arabian Nights* Lee refers to here is likely to be the translation by Edward William Lane, published in serialized monthly form between 1838-1840, before being collected in three volumes in 1840, and subsequently published in a revised edition in 1859.
[78] See Patricia Pulham, 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-63.
[79] Ibid., p. 49.
[80] Vernon Lee, 'The Sense of Nationality', *The Nation*, XII, 12 October 1912, pp. 96-98.
[81] Vernon Lee, "The Heart of a Neutral', *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1915, p. 687.
[82] Ibid.
[83] See Mahoney, 'Taking Wilde to Sri Lanka'.
[84] Lee, 'Out of Venice at Last', p. 339.