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Aesthetic Revenants and the Neo-Decadent Afterlife of Vernon Lee

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Anglo-Italian author Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) shared a style of writing which has been described by Emily Anne Rabiner in *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon Lee* as 'Decadent Renaissance: a revival of, or a neo-Renaissance approach to aesthetics and sexuality'. It suggests 'a version of Renaissance Revivalism that privileges fantastical transformation' and is 'concerned with the possibility of embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounters with the past'.[1] In collections such as *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890) and *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (1907), Lee creates a fantasy in which individuals permeate the boundaries between the historic Renaissance and fin-de-siècle present, allowing for what Rabiner rather sensuously describes as 'lingering in and lingering of the past'.[2] This concept of 'lingering in' the past is a frequent touchpoint for Lee scholars. Stefano Evangelista's 'The Remaking of Rome: Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Child of Pleasure*' describes both Lee's and D'Annunzio's use of layering of the past and present in the historic Italian city.[3] Alice Oke is a malingering presence in the lives of her ancestors in Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover'.[4] The slippage between Victorian Alice and seventeenth-century Alice is the focus of Athena Vrettos' '"In the Clothes of Dead People": Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory', while Sophie Geoffroy and Sally Blackburn-Daniels's '"Traces of the exotic" in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover"' also explores the permeation of colonial narratives into Lee's text.[5] Patricia Pulham considers the transformative effects of the pagan past on the physical body in Lee's supernatural tales in *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2008).[6]

This article will briefly consider the neo-Renaissance narratives which are present in Lee's fantastic fictions and examine the ways in which they have permeated or transcended the spatial and temporal boundaries of the decadent text. It will proceed to explore the afterlife of one of

Lee's short stories, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', and consider the ways in which the text has been collected, curated, and adapted.[7] Furthermore, by using Rabiner's thesis as a point of scholarly departure, I will extend its premise and investigate how the Renaissance revival style continues to connote in a decadent text and survive when transposed into a twenty-first century neo-decadent mystery novel? And how does Lee herself fare when she is transposed from writer to protagonist, Vernon Lee to Violet Paget, in Mary F. Burns's mystery novel *The Unicorn in the Mirror* (2020)? In order to assess this, this article will consider decadent symbolism as it appears within Lee's and Burns's texts, and how Burns's mystery novel adapts the transformative revelry and dissolution of sexual boundaries of the Renaissance revival. These are potentially subverted by its transposition into a neo-decadent piece of detective fiction: a modern, yet formally conservative genre.

Decadent Renaissance

Lee's reputation in the late nineteenth century was shaped by her textual output and social circle: she was understood to be a writer of fantastical tales, a non-professional historian of art and a friend and correspondent of Walter Pater. Two of Lee's works, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (1884) and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), include dedications to Pater. Through Pater's teachings and her own extensive research on the Renaissance, Lee understood it to be a mode, rather than a temporal absolute. Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* described the period as a 'many-sided but yet united movement' during which

> the desire[s] for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, [made] themselves felt, prompting those who experience this desire to seek first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment [and] directing them not merely to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to divine new sources of it, new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.[8]

Hilary Fraser states that Pater and his followers were 'captivated' by Renaissance Italy's 'paradoxical mix of purity and corruption, pleasure and pain; by its embrace equally of the spiritual and the carnal, the exquisite and the grotesque' that provided a vocabulary for 'experience adequate to the

complexity, perversity even, of their own tastes and desires'.[9] Combining her own research with the shape of Pater's imaginary portraits (the downfall of men born out of their time), Lee developed a style of fantastic narrative that allowed for the historic imaginary (frequently Renaissance) to bleed into the present reality, creating an encounter between the past – now an embodied revenant – and the present, and thus leading to a narrative conflict and/or liberation. Lee's fantastic draws upon the desire for 'old and forgotten sources of enjoyment' whilst simultaneously divining a new form of art. This is certainly true of Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', first published in *The Yellow Book* in 1896. The story is a fantastical fairy tale, and its notion of the Renaissance is an adaptation of Pater's Renaissance sensibility rather than a consideration of the period's history.

As Alex Murray argues in *Decadence: A Literary History,* the publication of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' provides a case for its inclusion in the decadent œuvre, stating that a 'means of identification by association was to look to those who published in the two most notorious periodicals of British decadence – *The Yellow Book* (1894-97) and *The Savoy* (1896)'.[10] Margaret Stetz warns against decontextualized readings of the story, suggesting that it is an 'elaborate bind, concealing a narrative that refers to late nineteenth-century British matters'– a political allegory or a young man confined for his unusual focus of love. Lee's folk/fairy-tale, Stetz continues, is in dialogue with Oscar Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), with both narratives set in European courts and sharing decadent 'themes, images, and devices', including highly elaborate drapery[11] – in Wilde, 'rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty',[12] and in Lee a tapestry of 'old and Gothic taste, extremely worn', representing 'Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady Oriana'.[13]

Prince Alberic, an orphan, is kept in the Red Palace of Luna by his grandfather, the Duke. The room is resplendent with antiques including an uncared-for Renaissance tapestry. The young Alberic loves this dearly and is enchanted by the tapestry's depictions of flowers, fruits, rabbits – all symbols of fertility and fecundity – and the partial image of a woman with golden hair. When an ebony crucifix is shifted during a reorganization of the room revealing her fully embroidered form, he is struck by the fact that the woman he adores is a serpent from the waist down. Furious

at the young Alberic's obsession with the Snake Lady in the tapestry, the Duke has it removed and replaced, but Alberic destroys its dupe. Angered, the Duke sends his charge to the ruined Castle of Sparkling Waters. The Castle reminds Alberic of the map woven into the embroidered art – he has stepped into the tapestry itself, Sparkling Waters representing both the spatial (reality and art) and temporal (historic and present-day) fluidity.

While walking through his new kingdom, Alberic drinks from a well, quenching his thirst from a bucket carved with roses and snakes. As he sits sated, a serpent approaches him, and Alberic desires the snake as a pet. He attempts to capture the animal, but his clumsy approaches allow it to escape. The reader is then faced with a gap in the plot, and we return to the Castle several years later when Alberic reaches the age of sixteen. Then we see Alberic as a well-provided for young man, although this is not due to the generosity of his grandfather. The Duke sends spies to the Castle, yet Alberic appears to be living a quiet life, just him, his pet snake, and occasional visits from his 'godmother', whom the reader knows nothing of. All the same, Alberic's curiosity about the tapestry is unquenchable. His grandmother refuses his requests for information, but one day Alberic convinces an old teller of fairy-tales who – rather conveniently – wanders into the grounds to tell him the story. The teller explains that Alberic's ancestor had sworn to kiss the fairy Oriana three times to deliver her from her fate, but he recoils when he realizes that she is a snake. After pulling himself together he kisses her and she takes her human form, but due to the ancestor's lack of fidelity, Oriana reverts to her serpentine form. This ancestral shock makes Alberic unwell. Furthermore, the generosity of his godmother arouses the suspicions of his grandfather who attempts to find Alberic a bride. He refuses and the grandfather, in a fit of anger, orders the court jester to kill Alberic's snake in retaliation, which he does in a most brutal way, slashing the creature with a sword. Later, it is noted that where the corpse of the snake should have been lies the body of a beautiful woman, beaten and bruised, but easily identifiable as the woman from the tapestry: the snake has transformed back into the body of Alberic's godmother, Oriana. While the love Alberic has for Oriana is on the surface normative and heterosexual, Oriana's enchanted body

defies expectations: she has lived for hundreds of years, while Alberic is only sixteen, and she shifts between snake and human forms – the human form arousing desire, and the snake arousing repulsion from all but Alberic. The murder of the snake reveals Oriana's true form, 'the body of a woman, naked, and miserably disfigured with blows and sabre cuts',[14] an attempt by Alberic's uncle to eliminate, as Sonja Pinto argues, 'the object of Alberic's desire'.[15]

Oriana's fairy-tale woven through the tapestry allows for a Renaissance past to linger in the narrative past, opening up a space for non-normative relationships. Yet, whilst this aesthetic object might enable transcendence, it is, as Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood suggest, a 'transhistorical realm that it constructs is always fragile. To be outside of the stream of linear time, it seems, is at once liberating and melancholy'.[16] Stetz's reading returns Lee's transcendent object back to its decadent origins stating that when restored to its 'place in the *Yellow Book* milieu' the tale becomes 'a passionate defence of over-the-top Wildean aesthetic writing' as well as an 'equally passionate declaration of the importance of Wilde himself and of the right of artists to choose their own love objects, however unconventional'. Lee's text, Stetz concludes, stands as a work of 'great immediacy', one which attempted to influence the literary and social worlds of the 1890s' despite its seventeenth-century framing.[17]

Lee's 'lingering in and lingering of the past' in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' shows her contradictory side, she is 'a conjurer of pictures of the far-away whose deepest interest was in the near-at-hand'.[18] Both Alberic and Lee look back to understand their own presence in the future, a contradiction Murray notes was not unheard of in the period: 'a large number of Decadent writers looked backward in their attempt to come to terms with modernity'. Literary decadence provided a way to articulate 'at moments of crisis' a way to live – 'beautifully, queerly, excessively'. 'Writers and artists continue to draw on the literary styles and transgressive lives of Decadent writers in the twenty-first century', Murray observes, suggesting that in this 'rancorous age of populism in politics and linguistic impoverishment in public discourse it is hardly surprising that Decadence should

offer resources to those wishing not to revel in decline, but to foment elegantly insouciant revolutions'.[19]

Mary F. Burns's literary (neo-)decadence in *The Unicorn in the Mirror* allows for the lingering of the past in the present. The novel is one of five 'John Singer Sargent – Violet Paget murder mysteries' penned by Burns. It is part historical fiction, fecund with the fruits of research of the early lives of the American painter and British writer, part neo-decadent detective story. *The Unicorn* extends or further allows the temporalities of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' to merge, intertwining a 'present day' mystery solving a plot set in 1881 Paris, with a narrative set in 1738 Boussac, threaded together by the tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

The Unicorn in the Mirror

Burns's books in this series reimagine biographical material from the lives of her protagonists as a fiction, transposing Lee's natural sharpness and analytical nature into the character of mystery-solver extraordinaire. To avoid confusion, this article addresses the published writer Vernon Lee as *Lee*, and the character in Burns's novel as *Paget* (as Burns chooses to do). *The Unicorn* is narrated by Paget during 1928, 47 years after the action takes place, when Paget/Lee is 72. Burns's neo-decadent rendering of Paget in 1881 is not the decadent Lee contemporary readers have come to recognize – the short-haired, wire-rim bespectacled, rigid white collared, black masculine-tailored woman of Sargent's portrait. Burns's rendering is of Violet Paget, an intelligent, if naïve, woman of 25.

The 1881 thread is focused on uncovering an art thief named 'The Revenant' who steals a contested Titian painting of Saint Sebastian from the Musée de Cluny. During the theft, the Revenant murders the museum's young art historian, Sébastien, and stages a scene in which the body of the historian is laid upon a table and apparently pierced through with arrows like his saintly namesake. The attractive young historian had travelled from Boussac with his sister and another artwork recently acquired by the Cluny collection – *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry. Violet and

John meet Sébastien on Friday 6 May 1881, when he opens the faded red wooden door and welcomes Violet, John, and John's younger sister to the Musée de Cluny:

> '*Bienvenue, mademoiselle* Sargent', said he, and I noted with approval that he was indeed handsome, though slightly built – fair-haired, smooth-faced with no hint of beard or moustache, with animated features and bewitching blue eyes, almost turquoise in their intensity.
>
> '*Monsieur* Sargent!' he exclaimed, reaching out a hand to shake John's – very unlike a Frenchman, I thought, but perhaps he knew that John was American? Even so, he clicked his heels together and bowed slightly, after the handshake. 'Sébastien Bayard, *à votre service*'.[20]

Violet is observant from the first, noting both the youthfully attractive visage of Sébastien and the offering of his hand to John. She keenly lists the

> scattered implements, paintbrushes, pots of congealing liquid, and piled in one corner, strange artefacts I took to be items of mediaeval armoury and weapons – a large wooden crossbow, an ancient leather quiver filled with arrows […] Slightly behind the small paintings was what appeared to be a much larger one, some five feet or so high and three feet across, but it was covered with a white sheet.[21]

The sheet obscures a painting which John uncovers. It shows a young man, the only covering on his body a draped cloth around his middle, who is 'loosely tied to a tree and pierced by arrows – two in his left arm, and two more in his abdomen' with 'the fifth arrow, as if shot from the right, embedded in his chest'.[22] John excitedly recognizes Titian's style, but his sister Emily is focused upon the distressing content. The group in the Musée try to make her feel better by explaining that the Saint did not die from his wounds – he was nursed by Saint Irene, but then unluckily, beaten to death with cudgels.[23]

The figure of Saint Sebastian was a popular symbol in Renaissance art. The Renaissance embodied ideals of ephebic beauty, whilst the decadent and contemporary fascination with Saint Sebastian has often focused upon what Flora Doble explains as the 'pleasure and pain dichotomy within Christian martyrdom' – that is, that one must endure pain on earth to receive the 'pleasure of eternal salvation'. This echoes Fraser's comments on Pater's captivation by Renaissance art and history as a 'paradoxical mix of purity and corruption, pleasure and pain', providing a vocabulary for 'the complexity, perversity even, of their own tastes and desires'.[24] Burns's Saint is literally uncovered, revealing both the Renaissance martyr, and the decadent fascination in the pierced

figure embodied by John. Doble's 'Saint Sebastian as a Gay Icon' explains the ways in which the 'Christian fixation with the desirable bodies of its saints and the permeable boundaries between the bodily flesh and the divine have been seen as homoerotic or queer' with the barely dressed paintings of the Saint Sebastian to be 'understood as inviting voyeurism'.[25]

Lee's companion in the decadent Renaissance style, Gabriele d'Annunzio, was fixated on the figure of Saint Sebastian, penning a mystery play set to music about the life of the Saint. The role of the Christian Martyr in D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911) was written for the author's lover, Ida Rubinstein, a young attractive woman and a Jew, and the role, the actor, and the performance caused a scandal. It is only appropriate then, that Burns's Sebastian/Sébastien should bridge the gap between the decadent Renaissance and neo-decadence.

Burns's neo-decadent rendering of a work of decadent Renaissance into a mystery novel is particularly interesting (and counterintuitive) when we consider its 'possibility of embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounters with the past'.[26] In 'Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction', William W. Stowe suggests that the mystery/detective fiction genres' perceived conservatism stems from its tendency to 'politically, morally and epistemologically affirm rather than question, and takes social structures, moral codes, and ways of knowing as givens rather than subjecting them to criticism'.[27] Indeed, the works published by *The Yellow Book* and the *Savoy* were a world away from the middle-class mysteries that 'drew a large and loyal readership' for journals such as *The Strand Magazine*.[28] Yet, despite its being identifiable through its strict adherence to ethical codes and justice, the genre should no longer be seen as a monolith: crime fiction and its typologies such as mystery and detective fiction are seen by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King and Andrew Pepper to 'appropriate pre-existing generic tropes, features, forms and characteristics' becoming 'distinctive and even unique, so that genre itself is something we need to understand not in fixed, static terms (e.g., as a container) but as mutable, fluid and transgressive'.[29] This hybridity and mutability of form allows for Burns to pull together the various timeframes – timeframes that are themselves multitemporal hybrids – and symbols into the plot and to realign

the temporal realities within the text. But the murder of the young art historian is not the only mystery Violet and John have to contend with: the painting of Saint Sebastian has been apparently stolen.

> 'The Titian! It's gone!' Indeed, the easel on which it had been placed was not only empty, it was broken in pieces and lay on the floor.
>
> 'Sébastien!' cried Geneviève, running now to the far end of the workshop, to the door that led to the room with the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry. I called to her, running to catch up.
>
> 'Wait! Geneviève, wait!'
>
> But she had reached the door, and flinging it open, almost tumbled inside. I was right behind her with a lantern, which I had grasped on my way. I held it high, and turned to hand it to John, who was fast behind me. He held it higher, and as we stepped into the room, we saw revealed to us, in the wavering light, the figure of Sébastien, laid out upon the large wooden worktable, tied with ropes, and with arrows piercing his body through his clothing at several points.[30]

Violet announces that she was 'shocked by the grisly sight of Sébastien […] carefully laid out in the imitation of the saint whose name he bore', exclaiming 'the arrows – those horrid arrows!'[31] Thomas Heise suggests that the function of a corpse in the detective or mystery genre is to provide a 'shocking presence' which 'breaks the seamless flow of time and throws into relief the world around it'. It is a 'past that has to be recovered and reconstructed and a spatial disruption that has to be contextualised and explained'.[32] The theft of a potentially valuable work of art is perhaps less of a mystery than the question of why Sébastien would be murdered, and the body staged in such a tableau.

As Violet and John (in communication with both international detectives and French police) begin to investigate the murder, and support Sébastien's twin sister Geneviève, we begin, as readers, to gain some insight into the fictionalized lives of our real-life protagonists. John's prior acquaintance with the victim is brought to light: the artist and Sébastien had met previously at a Parisian society of gentlemen, whose 'approach to life', John notes, is 'off the beaten track, what might be seen as *bohemian*, and yet, which is a path of beauty, and love, and a deep connection to the Ideal, the Unique'.[33] This closeted admission of a Bohemian scandal raises questions for Violet, not only regarding the murder of the art historian, but also regarding the tastes of her closest friend John.

> As the carriage crawled through the busy streets, I [Violet] thought intently about what John had said—and what he had not said. What was one to make of this bohemian order of which he had spoken? […] I had a rather imperfect understanding of the variety of relationships in which men and women would entangle themselves—but one hears things, you know—and I was not unacquainted with the concept of the 'Greek friendship' as it pertained to men.[34]

The autopsy of Sébastien is requested and the report sent to Charles, Violet, and John. As an official investigator on the case, Charles is the first to read the report and Violet notes his palpable shock:

> 'What?' I said, clutching his arm. 'What is it?'
> 'Three things', he said, looking grim but stunned. 'First the arrows did not even pierce the flesh, and drew no blood, therefore – applied lightly through the garments, *post-mortem* as you thought, Violet', he said, nodding in my direction. 'Second, the time of death was between seven and ten o'clock […]'. He inclined his head toward John, then took a steadying breath.
> 'And third, Sébastien Bayard was, however unaccountably, a woman.'[35]

The death Sébastien and the birth of Aurore

The death of Sébastien, like that of the snake in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' is a transformative act. Through the brutal act of murder both bodies return to their previous female form. It is heart-rending that Oriana only achieves a stable, female form, through her murder which facilitates the end of the enchantment that has bound her to the Castle of Sparkling Waters and the men of the dukedom of Luna. It is equally agonizing to see Sébastien's gender revealed via an autopsy report. It is, of course, no surprise to those close to both Oriana and Sébastien, who understood the nature and external presentation of each. Sébastien's twin sister Geneviève does not show any sign of uncomfortableness (nor should she) when gently asked by Violet and John her 'sister's' name: Geneviève simply replies 'Aurore'.[36]

While I have shown that there are obvious narratological synergies between 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' and *The Unicorn*, I also want to show that Burns's novel develops a 'sisterhood' between the figures of Oriana and Aurore, connecting them through the parallels of nominative meaning: Oriana deriving from the Latin for 'rising' or sunrise, Aurore from the Roman goddess of the dawn. As Oriana's form is fixed by death, Sébastien's/Aurore's takes on one of flux: at the vigil Violet narrates:

> The vigil for Aurore, as I was beginning to think of her, was in the Roman Catholic style, with an open casket past which people could walk and gaze upon the poor face, her hair beautifully arranged, her fingers entwined with a rosary of pearls. I smiled, a sad smile, when I saw that her sister and her aunt had dressed her in a man's shirt and bowtie, with a dark jacket, and I glanced at John who was standing next to me, sorrow suffusing his brown eyes. I think he was particularly affected by the way that Aurore looked once more so like Sébastien, that he felt a double sorrow.[37]

Violet's phrasing referring to Sébastien as 'her', seems odd in context. There is no shame or anxiety from Sébastien's family, no hiding away the masculine presentation preferred by Sébastien in life: the open casket does not conceal from those who knew the art historian their choice to live in this way. Violet's comment that the family 'had dressed her [Sébastien/Aurore] in a man's shirt and bowtie' seems unusual – was this not Sébastien's own clothing or was it loaned from a male friend for the vigil and funeral? If, as Heise suggests, the corpse signifies for the detective(s) a past that must be recovered and reconstructed, what is being recovered and reconstructed in the case of *The Unicorn and the Mirror*?

Violet and John's enquiry into the death of Sébastien and the theft of Titian's *Saint Sebastian* reveals the art historian's connections to Aurore Dupin, Baroness Dudevant – or George Sand, the author, as she was better known. Geneviève explains that Sand was a family friend who 'would write little plays for us all to perform […] and we would be allowed to dress up in all manner of beautiful dresses and suits, coats, and hats […] I was often a fairy-tale princess and […] Sébastien! Loved playing the *chevalier* on a gallant steed'.[38] Violet asks, 'who knew about this… *charade*?', 'did it not cause a scandal?',[39] to which Geneviève states: 'I believe she [Aurore] found her true spirit in being Sébastien. Her intent was not to deceive for any bad reason – she just became more – *herself* – when she was him.'[40]

Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin de Francueil, most often known by her pseudonym, George Sand (1804-1876), published over seventy novels, plays, and political works in her lifetime. To better understand Sand's influence upon Sébastien, Violet reads a copy of Sand's memoir, *Story of my Life* in which Sand discusses wearing masculine tailoring. Violet reads with 'great interest, not the least because', she admits, she is 'drawn to attempt the practice' herself. Sand's memoir explains:

> At first this idea [dressing in male clothing] seemed amusing to me, and then very ingenious […]. My clothing made me fearless. I was on the go in all kinds of weather, I came in at all hours, I sat in the pit at every theatre. No one paid attention to me, no one suspected my disguise. Aside from the fact I wore it with ease, the absence of coquettishness in costume and facial expression warded off any suspicion. […] Women understand very little about wearing a disguise, even on the stage. They do not want to give up the slenderness of their figure, the smallness of their feet, the gracefulness of their movements, the sparkle in their eyes; and yet all these things – especially their way of glancing – make it easy to guess who they are […]. Further to avoid being noticed as a man, you must already have not been noticed as a woman.[41]

Sand's masculine presentation made her 'fearless'; her masculine presentation afforded her freedom and the ability to appear unexceptional and blend into the crowd, her behaviour, her use of cross-dressing to appear unexceptional, was itself exceptional.

> 'You must already not have been noticed as a woman' I repeated softly. This sentence, this *truth* resonated to a very deep ache inside my heart. I have never been thought pretty, or even minimally attractive, in the conventional sense. The attentive male gaze rarely shone upon me, and when it did, I was realistic enough to know it was the strength of my mind and not the beauty of my face that drew that gaze – a much more satisfying principle to be sure, but not one given to romanticizing about. It had been some time now since the attentive *female* gaze had struck a more receptive chord – and I thought again of dear Mary, waiting for me in London.[42]

Whilst rather anachronistically discussing the male gaze, Violet's point stands: she was rarely (if at all) mentioned by anyone as physically attractive, but her mind was fiercely admired and occasionally feared. Therefore, Violet sees a potential opportunity to move through the world clothed a man, with the freedom that it affords a young, curious, and intellectual woman. In this novel, Violet is given the inspiration for Lee's adoption of dress *à la garçon*. This choice –which Sargent captured in his iconic 1881 portrait of Lee – is the image of the author that contemporary audiences associate with Lee. Could we then suppose that Burns's mystery does not so much pivot on the unravelling of a murder plot, as on an attempt to fictionalize a reason for Lee's clothing choices outside of Lee's gender or sexuality? Burns's Violet, like Sébastien (and Sand) chooses to wear masculine clothing, in an action that confirms their identity as an intellectual who wants to move with freedom through the world, taking up a masculine pseudonym to further enable their pursuits as writers and art historians.

Conservatism, genre, and recovery

If we return to Murray's quote that 'Decadence is then fundamentally a response to the conditions of modernity, a means of articulating at moments of crisis and change the need to live, beautifully, queerly, excessively', then we have to consider what this neo-decadent text is responding to, and the ways in which it does this, and how this interplays with the conservative origins of the mystery or detective genre. If the function of a corpse in the novel is to signify a 'past that has to be recovered and reconstructed and a spatial disruption that has to be contextualised and explained' then this appears at first glance to be counter to Murray's decadence.[43] Yet I would like to argue that the crisis and change that Burns's decadent mystery novel is responding to is the act of recovery itself, and the need to reconstruct, contextualize and explain, particularly in relation to historical figures. Burns's characters are essentially accepting of Sand's and Sébastien's choices, and when Violet and John attempt to explain the revelation to John's younger sister Emily (who was an admirer of the young art historian), they are surprised by Emily's reaction:

> You could have knocked us both over with a feather, when we heard Emily's response to our revelation.
>
> 'Yes, I know', she said, looking down at her hands in her lap, then looking up at us, sad but just a little bit mischievous.
>
> 'But I promised not to tell! And even though I imagined the truth would come out, with the… autopsy, and all that… well, then you both went away and there was not time to talk about it […] should I have said? I did so enjoy her company'.[44]

Emily's attraction to and enjoyment of Sébastien's/Aurore's company was not dependent upon the way in which they presented themselves: Emily takes them as they are. So, what is Burns's narrative doing? Is the body of Sébastien/Aurore an act of recovery? And is it problematic? How does this work of neo-decadent, historic fiction, woven together using a mystery plot, stay true to conventions and to Lee?

Lee's gender and sexuality has been a source of speculation throughout her life, and beyond. Her use of a pseudonym, choice of dress, and Lee's close relationships with women have led to discussion and the attempt to classify the identity of the women. Much of the discussion of Lee's identity has been brought about by early biographies of Lee, for example Burdett Gardner's *The*

Lesbian Imagination, Victorian Style (1987) and the important archival recovery work undertaken by second-wave feminists in the 1970-1980s. In more recent history, Lee's work was published under the author's *real* name in honour of the Women's Prize for Fiction's 25th anniversary in 2020, a collection of books was re-released with what the publisher called the author's *real* name. The publication of Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst, or, The Phantom Lover' as 'A Phantom Lover' by Violet Paget under the 'Reclaim Her Name' collection aimed to have 'the real, female author's names finally printed on the covers, to honour their achievements and give them the credit they deserve'.[45]

This reclamation of Lee's work, and the recovery of this narrative is, I would argue, counter to what we know of Lee from the correspondence and texts she left behind, the archives of Lee's curated letters, manuscripts, photographs, and published works that exist in special collections in the US, Italy, France, and the UK. Despite some of the contents being embargoed according to Lee's wishes until 1980, some research from the 'Reclaim Her Name' team would have found Lee happily using Vernon in both personal and commercial correspondence. I would also argue that the recovery of 'A Phantom Lover' was hardly needed. Lee's fantastic fiction was republished twenty-eight times during her lifetime, under the name of Vernon Lee, including in magazines, novellas, and collected stories. Since Lee's death in 1935 there have been eighty-four publications containing one or more of Lee's fantastic fictions, and fifty-six published collected works under the name of Lee prior to 'recovery'. Translations of Lee span the globe, with works in press in Argentina, Denmark, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, as well as in the four languages Lee was fluent in: English, German, French, and Italian.

Did Lee's work require this recovery, and its identification as being the product of a repressed 'lesbian imagination'? Do we need to recover and honour poor Violet, a woman forced into using a pseudonym to collect her laurels? Several contemporary literary critics, such as Talia Schaffer, are now reflecting on the work of literary recovery. Schaffer writes that '[r]ecovery feminism was […] appealing because it fostered a powerful personal connection between the researcher and the subject', and perceived commonalities between authors and the feminist

archivists were seen as constructive and important in terms of representation.[46] It can also, Schaffer notes, 'tacitly imagine a woman writer who was suppressed, and who is rescued by an ardent, energetic researcher bravely surmounting all obstacles', a woman who has been '*lost*, silenced, or made mad or demonic by a world that refused to accommodate her', a woman who was 'victimized, yearned for freedom, covertly rebelled', whose writing 'reveals this historical trauma'.[47] Burns's recovery of Violet and Aurore overtly creates a fiction of the reasons that lie behind their choice of masculine clothing and name. But by ultimately not claiming these characters' choices being underpinned by the trauma of repression and oppression, or by aligning the character's identities with contemporary understandings of non-binary and trans-gendered people, and with homo- and bi- sexualities, Burns's act of recovery is one of temporal accuracy not anachronistic attempts to pathologize and label. It is, unlike Burns's use of Renaissance revivalism, neo-decadent murder mystery, of its time. It allows the aspects of Violet/Vernon that Violet/Vernon does not explicitly explain – perhaps because she does not yet have the vocabulary or feel the need to do so – to remain unfixed, in flux, and uncategorized.

Lee's works, particularly those that draw upon stylistic or thematic motifs from the Renaissance, have been available to the reading public across the boundaries of Europe and beyond, travelling further than the cosmopolitan Lee did in her own lifetime. This mode of narrative, which enabled a lingering of the historic past into the narratological present, allowed for exploration of non-normative sexualities mediated by a historic, aesthetic object, such as the tapestry of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'. Burns's 'John Singer Sargent – Violet Paget murder mysteries' extend or further allow these temporalities to merge, intertwining Renaissance tapestries, eighteenth-century action, and nineteenth-century mysteries with a neo-decadent framing text such as *The Unicorn in the Mirror*. Unlike the decadent Renaissance revivalism of Lee where the art object is a clue to be deciphered, Burns turns her attention to her characters' (Violet and Sébastien) visual presentation. But unlike traditional mysteries and detective fiction, Burns refuses the moral conservatism of the genre, the categorisation tied-up with the recovery of *lost* women authors, and

the contemporary cultural flashpoint of trans and non-binary-ness, allowing both Sébastien and Lee to exist as Murray suggests at a 'time of crisis', 'beautifully, queerly, excessively'.[48]

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[1] Emily Anne Rabiner, *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon* Lee, unpublished doctoral thesis, UC Berkley, 2017, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gm8r02t [accessed 24 February 2024], p. 5.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Stefano Evangelista, 'The Remaking of Rome: Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Child of Pleasure*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 53.3 (2017), 314-24.
[4] Vernon Lee, 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006).
[5] Athena Vrettos, '"In the Clothes of Dead People": Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory', *Victorian Studies*, 55.2 (2013), pp. 202-11, and Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Sophie Geoffroy, '"Traces of the exotic" in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover"', *Women's Writing*, 28.4 (2021), 569-88.
[6] In particular, the chapter 'A White and Ice-cold World', in Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[7] 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' was first published in *The Yellow Book*, 10 (July 1896).
[8] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.
[9] Hilary Fraser, 'British Decadence and Renaissance Italy', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 48.
[10] Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Histories', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, p. 6.
[11] Margaret Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*', in *Vernon Lee Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 113, 116.
[12] Wilde, quoted by Stetz, p. 115.
[13] Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. 183.
[14] Ibid., p. 48.
[15] Sonja Pinto's wonderful online exhibition, *Decadent Desire and Queer Victorians: A Digital Exhibit*, has some illustrative digitised artefacts and clear synopses of 'Prince Alberic'. See https://omekas.library.uvic.ca/s/decadentdesire/page/intro [accessed 24 February 2024].
[16] Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 53.
[17] Stetz, p. 122.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Murray, pp. 7, 15.
[20] Burns, pp. 10-11.
[21] Ibid., p. 13.
[22] Ibid., pp. 13-14.
[23] John suggests the painting is 'very much in the style of Titian' (Burns, p. 14), yet Titian's known painting of the Saint was acquired by the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in 1850, after being sold by the Barbarigo Gallery, Venice.
[24] Fraser, p. 48.
[25] Flora Doble, 'Saint Sebastian as a Gay Icon', *Art UK*, 20 Jan 2020, https://artuk.org/discover/stories/saint-sebastian-as-a-gay-icon [accessed 24 February 2024].
[26] Rabiner, p. 5.
[27] William W. Stowe, 'Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 31.4 (1989), 570-91 (p. 570).
[28] Reginald Pound, *The Strand Magazine 1891-1950* (London: Heinemann 1966).
[29] Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper, 'Introduction: New Directions in Crime Fiction Scholarship', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 4.
[30] Burns, p. 47.
[31] Ibid., p. 61.
[32] Thomas Heise, 'Time and Space', in *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 219.
[33] Burns, p. 111. Emphasis Burns's own.
[34] Ibid., p. 125.
[35] Ibid., pp. 161-62.
[36] Ibid., p. 174.

[37] Ibid., p. 266.
[38] Ibid., p. 128.
[39] Ibid., p. 175.
[40] Ibid., p. 176.
[41] Ibid., p. 272.
[42] Ibid., pp. 272-73.
[43] Heise, p. 219.
[44] Burns, p. 334.
[45] *Women's Prize for Fiction*, https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/features/features/reclaim-her-name [accessed 25 February 2024].
[46] Talia Schaffer, 'Victorian Feminist Criticism: Recovery Work and the Care Community', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47.1 (2018), 63-91 (p. 66).
[47] Ibid., p. 68.
[48] Murray, p. 15.