DOUBLED AND DIVIDED: WOMEN AND ART IN VERNON LEE’S GHOST STORIES

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“I am sure that no one reads a woman’s writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt.”

~Vernon Lee in a letter to Henrietta Jenkin 18 December 1878 (qtd. in Colby, 2).

Vernon Lee’s occasion for writing to her mentor with the above-quoted declaration was both the publication of a series of articles in an Italian Journal as well her assumption of the pen name Vernon Lee. Eschewing her birth name, Violet Paget, Lee in this quote demonstrates her recognition of the world in which she wishes to circulate: a hyper-masculine, homosocial realm of art critics, aesthetes, and intellectuals. The name Vernon Lee, then, was a disguise at first, a way for her writings and ideas – if not her person – to gain some entry or foothold into the aestheticist circles. But Lee’s line to her mentor reveals much more: it either implies, in its phrase “no one,” that even Lee herself regards women’s writing with “unmitigated contempt” or that she does not include herself in the group of those whose opinions matter. Just as the assumption of a new name can be seen as a negation of the old self, so too Lee’s phrasing in this letter implies a tricky sort of connection to who she is (No self? Or a self opposed to her self?) versus who she wishes to be. What Vernon Lee writes of personally here, in the detail of adopting a pseudonym, stands as an apt metaphor for the struggles she encountered in both her personal life and in her writing: the struggle to create a space and articulate a stance in which women could be their own selves and their own subjects within the aestheticist circles of her day.

Over the course of her life and career, Vernon Lee would come to be not a disguise or pseudonym, but the true identity of this writer. Few of her intimates and contemporaries referred to her as Violet or Miss Paget: she had become Vernon Lee. Strangely though, given the quote above, Vernon Lee had also become a woman. That is, although the name was originally
intended to provide a masculine cover for a woman’s writing, it eventually became the name associated with a reasonably well-known female author. This assimilation did not occur because the “unmitigated contempt” Lee feared never materialized: quite the opposite, in fact. Scathing reviews and personal snubs, many of them misogynistic, dogged Vernon Lee throughout her literary career. Instead, the assumption of the pseudonym and her subsequent incorporation of that pseudonym into her identity can be read as a representation of Vernon Lee’s reaction to the aestheticist world of the late nineteenth century. In both her non-fiction and fiction, Vernon Lee moved from trying to write within the parameters of the current aestheticist thought, as was her aim in her early publications on art and art history, to establishing her own theories and understandings of aesthetics, ones that often ran counter to the predominant theories, all of which were articulated by men. So, too, in her fiction, Vernon Lee moved from writing overt commentaries on women’s roles in aesthetical circles, such as is found in her first novel, Miss Brown, to composing more veiled explorations of the relationships between women, art, and artists, which is best demonstrated in her ghost stories. Just as her pen name moved from being an attempt to mask a woman as a man to being an ambiguous but nonetheless provocative statement on identity (suggesting in a sense that she both was and was not a man), so too her fiction moved from thinly disguised critique of the aesthetical movement’s treatment of women to a more subtle and nuanced set of assertions about women’s position vis a vis art and artist, specifically women’s ability to use history and mythology in order to escape objectification.

Vernon Lee was thoroughly steeped in the aesthetics of Ruskin and Pater. She was, early in her career as a writer and a thinker, in line with Ruskin’s view that “beauty belonged not to the senses, nor to the intellect, but to morals” (Brosch 100). However, later in life, she would move away from championing the moral position of art and develop her own unique theory of
aesthetics, revolving around the notion of empathy, working in a field that was then referred to as psychological aesthetics. Lee was a disciple of Pater, a correspondent and devotee from her youth onwards, who closely followed Pater’s “conception of art as an experience [that] increased the importance of a mediating observer or spectator figure” and gave priority to “a relation between the art work and its viewer” (Brosch 103). Lee’s early writings on art history and aesthetic theory, particularly her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), brought her critical acclaim and attracted the attention of thinkers such as Pater, as she wrote within the tradition and confines of the aesthetic theory of the time.

Nonetheless, as a woman without formal training and education, and as a woman raised exclusively beyond the borders of England, living with her mother and older half-brother primarily in Italy, she was very much an outsider to the dominant intellectual circles of the time. British aestheticism in this period was “organize[d]…around a series of beautiful feminine visual objects whose femininity constitute[d] their meaning” (Psomiades *Beauty* 23). The aesthetic scene was very much a man’s scene, and the art – though featuring women – was very much generated out of men’s desire. The treatment of women was not limited to what might traditionally be considered art objects – paintings, sculptures, or poems – but also extended into commodity culture, affecting “the appearance of bourgeois women and the appearance of bourgeois households” such that in the artistic milieu in which Vernon Lee circulated (or in which her ideas did, when she herself could not get around), “the woman who look[ed] like a painting…[was] not a popular parody or a practical version of an inflated high art ideal” but rather represented “imaginary and ‘real’ femininity” (Psomiades *Beauty* 135, 136). Vernon Lee was thus very aware of what might be called aestheticist femininity: the woman as “both gazed-upon, desired object and gazing, desiring subject” (Psomiades *Beauty* 152). That is, Vernon Lee,
like the other aestheticist writers and artists, such as Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and Symonds, was steeped in the concept of the woman, whether in art or in real life, who has been constructed and created by the man and for the man – in his image and of his desire.

Gradually, over the course of her writings following the publication of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, Lee began to articulate a theory of aesthetics that moved her away from the masculine mainstream. Her theoretical positions moved incrementally and sometimes enigmatically towards a revision of the notion of the feminine and its position vis a vis the masculine (and particularly towards the masculine artist/creator). By the time she published *Laurus Nobilis* (1909), Lee was articulating a viewpoint quite at odds with Ruskin’s with respect to the relationship between the viewer and the object. She no longer adhered to his notion of the moral value of art, nor to his idea that art should give rise to certain noble feelings in the viewer. Instead, she wished to revise the understanding of what happens when one encounters art. Specifically, she wished to articulate a theory that claimed there was an ongoing psychological connection between a work of art and the person who views that work of art. Lee worked to dismantle the understanding of ownership and dominance that was generally held to characterize the connection. In *Laurus Nobilis*, she claims that “the notion of ordinary possession is a mere delusion…this constant keeping the consciousness aware by repeating ‘Mine – mine – mine and not theirs; not theirs, but mine.’ And this wearisome act of self-assertion leaves little power for appreciation, for the appreciation which others can have quite equally, and without which there is no reality at all in ownership” (italics original, 56). But her development towards the understanding of empathy – of an emotional, personal, psychological interaction between the viewer and art rather than a physical and moral possession and understanding – was gradual and subtle, written about in a dozen or more essays, which were variously reprinted and collected and
expanded over the intervening years. At the same time as Lee was doing this theoretical work, she wrote fiction robustly, and her fiction centered on tales of women and their relation to art and artists. In this sense, she pursued a theoretical exploration – one might even say program – in two modes: fiction and non-fiction.

It will be the work of this thesis to show how Vernon Lee’s early theoretical forays – those found in Belcaro (1881) and Euphorion (1884) – constitute hesitant (one might almost say, embryonic) beginnings to articulate a new stance for women in relation to art and artist. In particular, I will argue that Lee uses her non-fiction and fiction to assert that women can affect art, have a hand in its composition, and are as much the subject as the artist himself is. That is, Lee’s fiction and non-fiction articulates and describes a more active role for women in the creation of art and artistic appreciation without implying that women must be dominant in the same way as men. Lee’s stance is more fully, though indirectly, realized in her fiction, especially her short story collection Hauntings (1890). This thesis will consider Vernon Lee as a myth-maker, or, more accurately, a myth-remaker, who took the dominant aestheticist myth of the time – the story of Pygmalion and Galatea – and reworked it through the actions of her fiction and then refuted it in her theory, replacing Ovid’s classical tale of the male artist and his female creation with the legend of Faustus and Helena, in effect countering the trope of the constructed lifeless female as art with a vibrant feminine figure, rich with her own history.

Other critics have noted Vernon Lee’s strident rejection of the strongly masculine-gendered values and tendencies within the aestheticist movement. Kathy Psomiades articulates Lee’s position as follows: Vernon Lee claims “that aestheticism is based on erotic theft, a feeding off the bodies of women…for the sake of the textual body and for the satisfaction of what Lee sees as a rapacious masculinity” (Psomiades Strangling 23). Over the course of her
career, Lee would articulate her own version of aesthetic theory, one that asked the viewer (the possessor of the gaze) to “think into” rather than away from the object, a position that allows objects to “do more than what the subject desired” and helped Lee critique “the objectification of women in aestheticism” (Mahoney 57). Certainly, relatively early in her writing career, Lee had moved away from the “righteousness” of Ruskin, preferring to allow the “real setting of place and moment,” as well as the individual, create a sense of what is beautiful and true (Fraser 78).

It is the work of this thesis to argue how Lee’s aesthetic theory works with her short fiction (particularly her ghost stories) to assert a new position for women vis a vis art: a position not as object and yet also not as subject, but rather a position of co-creator, of working with and through the creative process to generate self and meaning.

Most critical readings of Lee’s battle with male aestheticism have primarily focused on her direct assaults, namely her first novel, *Miss Brown*, and her later theory of empathy and psychological aesthetics, which emerged in full fruition only very late in her career. In this thesis, I wish to explore the critique and commentary Lee makes about decadent and aestheticist treatment of gender roles not in light of the blunt attack made in *Miss Brown*. Instead, I will look at the defining metaphor of her early theoretical works – the figure of Helena in relation to the figure of Faustus – and how she uses this metaphor to articulate, or at least imply, a position opposed to the dominant aestheticist movement of her day, a movement that had its own power couple as a metaphor: Pygmalion and Galatea. From the implied and metaphorical work of her nonfiction, I will then take on her idea of the feminine position in art in the short stories contained in her collection *Hauntings*, particularly “Dionea,” “Oke of Okehurst” and “Amour Dure,” to show how this notion of Helena reconfigures the aesthetical ideal of the feminine (as represented by Galatea). In her short stories, Lee makes use of the symbols of the portrait and
the statue, and in doing so joins a long line of “nineteenth-century women novelists [who] utilized the idea of the portrait as a symbol of the conventional male vision on the human figure...[to] subvert its male meaning” (Onslow 450). I will first look at the curious rhetorical move Lee makes with her mythological metaphor, how she shifts the passive role of woman as empty art object (Galatea) to independent, self-actualizing co-creator (Helena), and then consider the ways in which genre conventions, specifically the gothic tropes of the ghost story, affect her ability to deliver a critique. Ultimately, I will argue that Vernon Lee was an inventor of new female forms in fiction and art theory, that she articulated a new subject position for women, showing how the presence of the past empowers women, endowing them with an intellectual and creative capacity that can stand against or even undo the male gaze and male creative impulse that objectifies women.

For male aesthetes of the late nineteenth century, the myth that best captured their understanding of the relationship between masculine creator/artist and feminine subject/art was that of Pygmalion and Galatea. As told by Ovid, and as retold by men throughout the nineteenth century, in works such as Arthur Hallam’s “Lines Spoken in the Character of Pygmalion (1832), Thomas Hardy’s The Well-Beloved and G.F. Watts Pygmalion’s Wife (1868), the myth gives voice to the aesthetic circle’s views of art, of women, of the relationship between artist and art, between men and women, between imagination and reality, as well as the nature of desire and control. The myth embodies the feeling of disgust towards the “masses” of women as well as the desire to create something better – more pure, more noble, more sensual – and to have ultimate control of the creation. Galatea, both in the original myth\(^1\) as well as in the Victorian retellings of it, is the embodiment of Pygmalion’s desire; she is desire that is contained (and restrained)

\(^1\) Though the name Galatea is not part of Ovid’s story, but rather a later creation, I will refer to the (unnamed) woman in his story as Galatea throughout, for clarity.
within a physical presence (Kandola 15, Marshall 18). Further, as Stephanie Eck captures the mid-nineteenth century critical consensus on this story, once Pygmalion brings his statue to life, “he must seem like a god to her…Pygmalion unites the role of creator, father and husband in himself” (4). Summarizing the scholarship of Susanne Frane, Eck continues that by this action, “woman is excluded from the act of creation which is established as male, and…woman is mortified as a passive and devoted substance to male dominion” (4). The Pygmalion myth casts woman as object, as passive, as a receptacle and as the model for art, while the man is the subject, is active, a creator and an artist. It is just these elements that Vernon Lee will seek to revise through her essays and fiction: she does not invert the male and female roles, but instead complicates the relationship between creation, agency, art, and self.

The fascination and theory that Eck articulates is made evident through the production of sculptures in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, which in turn stemmed from the interest in the displays of multiple antique statues of Venus (and the controversies surrounding these displays). The showings of these statues resulted in the articulation of new aesthetic theories and controversies, such as Ruskin’s comments after seeing, in 1840, the Venus de Medici. He thought “in her casts [she was] a foolish little schoolgirl” but in the original statue she “is one of the purest and most elevated incarnations of woman conceivable” (qtd in Marshall, 10). Ruskin’s commentary is consistent with others of the period: he looks at the statue and evaluates it in terms of women of his time (“foolish little schoolgirls”) as well as a concept of women (“elevated incarnations”) that is eternal and an object available for artistic exploitation or control.

From viewing the antique statues of Venus (and their casts), sculptors of the mid-to-late nineteenth century moved on to creating Venuses of their own. In particular, there was John Gibson’s 1850 Tinted Venus, a statue whose waxed flesh was colored to look real, and which
drew criticism from more traditional artistic circles for rendering lascivious the formerly chaste and pure white marble of the original. With an odd echo of Ruskin’s comments on the Venus De Milo, “Gibson claimed that he had endeavoured to give his Venus an expression that denoted ‘that spiritual elevation of character which results from purity and sweetness, combined with an air of unaffected dignity and grace.’ The Athenaeum, however, denounced the piece as ‘a naked, impudent English woman’” (Thomas, 254). This was the essential dichotomy of the time – the argument into which Vernon Lee’s fiction and essays would intrude – the present-day English woman was empty and vapid; the classical woman (who was not really a woman, but a goddess, and not really that, but a statue) was beautiful and spiritual; both were objects and both were passive.

In the same vein as Gibson’s sculpture, so-called anatomical Venuses were created throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. “Ostensibly for medical purposes” these wax statues were “displayed in anatomical museums [that] were visited like the great art museums” (Pulham 75) and featured not only flesh-colored wax but also strict anatomical correctness down to the inclusion of eyebrows, eyelashes, and pubic hair. Poseable, and used by artists in lieu of a model, these anatomical Venuses were often laid out on “silk or velvet cushions, in passive, yet sexually inviting poses” (Pulham 75). They had, then, the virtue of seeming both dead and alive – of being possible to animate yet not animated on their own, of clearly being objects yet being able to appear to be subjects, a duality that rests at the center of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth as well as at the center of the aestheticists’ notion of the feminine. Indeed, the very use of wax as the upper layer of these anatomical Venuses evokes lines from Ovid’s story, from the moment when Pygmalion’s statue is brought to life: “The ivory yielded to his touch, and lost its hardness, altering under his fingers, as the bees’ wax of
Hymettus softens in the sun, and is moulded, under the thumb, into many forms, made usable” (X.290-291). These statues and models of Venus are additionally evocative of the Pygmalion story because it is to the goddess Venus that Pygmalion prays in order to bring his statue to life. Thus there is a certain irony to the production of these statues of Venus which take the all-powerful, life-giving goddess of the Ovid legend and confine her in the statue-form.

In addition to the sculptures of Venus, references to Galatea abound in nineteenth century literature and art, and the ways in which this myth constructed and constrained feminine roles is nowhere made clearer than in Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris, or the New Pygmalion (1823) in which the protagonist describes the woman he is drawn to as follows: “Her words are few and simple; but you can have no idea of the […] graces with which she accompanies them, unless you can suppose a Greek statue to smile, move, and speak […] her face… looking so like some faultless marble statue, as cold, as fixed and graceful as ever statue did” (qtd in Marshall 13). For Hazlitt, the woman is desirable because she is like a statue – she is almost mute, she is quite nearly inanimate. Her mind, as indicated by the few words she does speak, is commonplace. She has no identity of her own and awaits a man to give her full, true life. Stephanie Eck notes that the interpretation of the Pygmalion and Galatea story as pertaining to class and education seems to have begun in 1490 with the writing of William Caxton, who produced a version of the story with his own commentary, in which “he compares Ovid’s sculptor to a nobleman who ‘might have a maid or servant in his house’ whom he ‘clothed nourished and taught’” and “after the transformation of the servant girl into a lady, ‘he loved her so much that it pleased him to espouse her and take her to his wife’” (6). So, though Hazlitt did not invent this interpretation of Ovid’s story, nonetheless, he updated it for his era, and the reading of the myth “as a fable about social class” in which Pygmalion is “an educator” became one of the most popular renderings
The development and deployment of this myth continued throughout the century, with explicit references in poetry, drama, fiction, sculpture and painting. Of Burne-Jones’s painting *Pygmalion and the Image* (1878), Gail Marshall notes that Pygmalion “may kneel in homage to his living ‘Image’ without any fear of subjugation, because he is worshipping his own inspiration and desire” (21), an analysis that captures the clear relationship of subject to object and artist to art. Again and again, the art produced within aestheticist circles focused on women who were statues or who were like statues. Even in describing living women, the best flesh is depicted as white like marble, the best forms are like Venus’s form, the most admirable women are silent and adoring. The rhetoric of the aestheticist circles resonates throughout the visual and literal depictions of this story: woman is object, woman lacks agency, woman requires a man to become alive or enlightened. It is men who create and control art and women who are the passive and static models for this art – disengaged from the creative process itself.

Vernon Lee was familiar with the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea as well as the ends to which it had been used in the aestheticist movement. In this thesis, I would like to argue that in her fiction, Lee deliberately interacts with this myth and tries to reconstruct it in a manner more empowering to females, and also more subtly attempts to discredit or disprove the myth in her theoretical writings in order to replace it with her own myth, that of Faustus and Helena. To start with, though, Vernon Lee did attempt to directly confront the aestheticist circle’s use of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth in her 1884 novel *Miss Brown*, which was published by Blackwood. This novel tells the story of Anne Brown, a young, uneducated English woman working as a nursemaid for an English couple in Italy, who is noticed by the aestheticist poet and painter Walter Hamlin. Hamlin “rescues” Anne, educating her and providing for her entrance into aesthetic society in England. Anne becomes a favorite in the aestheticist circles, but she also
resists their values. Instead of being the muse and object of desire that Hamlin longs for, she pursues her own education, which Hamlin funds, partaking in the study of political economy and getting involved in the working-class movement, thanks to her cousin, Richard Brown, who is also in love with Anne. Hamlin is distraught at Anne’s abandonment of the aesthetic lifestyle and, without her as his muse, he begins to spiral downwards into despair and debauchery. Anne, witnessing Hamlin’s depression, feels guilt over the generosity Hamlin has shown her, as well as both jealousy and suspicion towards Hamlin’s Russian cousin, Sacha Elaguine. Eventually, Anne comes to believe that only she can save Hamlin, and so she renounces her ambitions to attend Girton College and instead marries Hamlin. Even in this brief synopsis, the classic shape of the marriage plot as well as elements of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth can be perceived: Anne Brown is very much the deliberate creation of Walter Hamlin, the making of a “perfect” woman out of an “imperfect” or base substance. This quick sketch of the plot also bears close resemblance to the interpretations of Caxton and Hazlitt mentioned above.

Throughout the novel, Vernon Lee brings in Pygmalion and Galatea overtly, as when Hamlin contemplates how his life and Anne’s will intertwine: “[Anne] was the predestined instrument for the consummation of his life…Walter Hamlin [would] awaken[] the love of this beautiful Galatea whose soul he had moulded, even as Pygmalion had moulded the limbs of the image which he had made to live and to love” (1:121-2 qtd. in Kandola 15). In Lee’s interpretation of the myth, Anne is Walter’s “instrument” – she is formed by him to be of use to him. Though the novel ends with Anne’s capitulation to Walter’s desires as she marries him – a move that Vernon Lee likely felt compelled to make due to the genre conventions of the marriage plot or, as Zorn puts it “the protagonist eventually subjects her life to the laws of narrative convention rather than the logic of her reality” (118) – the bulk of the novel is Lee’s
blunt critique of the Pygmalion myth, where she “challenges the conventions of male mastery and female passivity” by creating scenes in which her “Galatea speaks and seeks to mould her Pygmalion” (Kandola 15-16). Anne’s ultimate failure (she does succeed in partial reform of Walter, only to see him backslide into decadence) is part of Vernon Lee’s critique of the male aesthetes: the novel illustrates how their treatment of women and attitudes towards art and femininity result in harm to women by constraining them with repressive expectations.

*Miss Brown* was a failure on many counts. Not only did it ruin Lee’s personal and professional relationships with many of the leading intellectuals of her day (who recognized themselves in her thinly-veiled fictional depictions), but its rather heavy-handed treatment of themes made it easy prey for the critics. In the years following its release, Lee retreated from the battlefield of novels and returned to writing essays on travel and art history, the material for which she had initially gained acclaim. With *Miss Brown*, Lee had tried to meet the aesthetes on their own turf and on their own terms. Though she may have made her political point – articulating and illustrating the negative effect of the Pygmalion myth upon women – she undermined the reception of this point both by her insensitive treatment of the leading figures of the movement as well as her blunt, long-winded, and decidedly unsubtle use of language. Many critics read the negative reception of *Miss Brown* as ushering Lee off-stage, of forcing her to bow out of the aesthetic discussions about femininity. Indeed, she does seem to withdraw in some senses: she was cut off by many of the artists with whom she used to socialize, and she also did not attempt to write another novel for many years.

However, I would like to argue that she did not completely evacuate her position, nor did she give up on critiquing the aestheticist view of women. She continued to attempt to undermine and contradict the use of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth. Instead of tackling it overtly, as she
did in *Miss Brown*, she began a more oblique assault, first through the use of another myth, that of Faustus and Helena, and then through the stories collected in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*. I would like to argue that by using the myth of Faustus and Helena and by demonstrating through fiction the theory she had developed, Vernon Lee rewrites the gender mythology of the aesthetic movement, shifting it from the relationship of Pygmalion and Galatea to that of Faustus and Helena. She posits this new myth as a way of understanding femininity vis a vis masculinity in her nonfiction. In her essays, she replaces the passive, unanimated Galatea with the lively Helena. She does not reverse the myth fully: she does not switch woman from object to subject. However, she certainly complicates the connection between the male artist and the woman he would like to have serve as his passive muse. The full articulation of her position is made clear – particularly in terms of its implications for women – only in her fiction, where she more fully asserts her idea that women can, through imagination and an understanding of history (ghosts), have an independent relationship with art and thus become creators in their own way.

This thesis will look to use Lee’s nonfiction to comment on her fiction and see the two as working together to create a coherent rearticulation of the feminine – a counterpoint to the dominant aesthetic view of women as art and object. Such a presentation might appear to blur important distinctions of genre, but, as Christina Zorn articulates, “To speak of nonfiction prose as a single category is something of a misnomer, in that the Victorians did not treat it as a distinct genre” (70). Indeed, Lee saw her own writing as an admixture of elements. In collections of her “nonfiction” she routinely paired essays with “fancies” or dialogues that were entirely imagined: Hilary Grimes notes that Lee’s essay “‘Ravenna and Her Ghosts’ is included in a collection of supernatural tales, *Pope Jacynth and More Supernatural Tales*” (118). “Ravenna and Her Ghosts” is certainly a “supernatural tale” insofar as it imagines the past of that city, but it is
ostensibly a travel and historical essay. All the other pieces in the volume are fictional stories, but Lee saw no problem with placing a nominally “factual” essay alongside these. This predilection to blur genre can also be read as commentary on gender; essay writing was largely held to be a male domain, too intellectually rigorous for a woman to seriously engage in. The struggle to belong to this world, as embodied by her adoption of a male pseudonym, and her simultaneous desire to enrich her writing with (feminine) imagination, is clear: “Lee was torn constantly between different modes of representing and organizing knowledge. The overlapping of styles and genres in Lee’s works often challenged contemporary assumptions about literary categories, so that she felt compelled to comment on her texts in extensive forewords and epilogues, thus drawing attention to her own literary discourse, if not discomfort” (Zorn 62).

The two volumes that engage the myth of Faustus and Helena certainly reveal Lee’s concern with categorization, particularly with regard to the interrelationship of women, art, and the past. Lee is keen to articulate a shift similar to the one she accomplished when she took on her pen name: she wishes to assert that women can and do have a vibrant, intellectual connection to art, that they are active participants in the work of creation and not merely models for men to draw inspiration from.

Lee directly employs and analyzes the story of Faustus and Helena in two separate essays, first in 1880 in “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art,” which was published in *The Cornhill* and then later reprinted in her 1881 collection *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, and second in 1884 in the introduction to her volume *Euphorion*. In her earlier essay, Lee introduces the story of Faustus in language that is very reminiscent of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth: she recounts that Faustus “employed [the fiend] to raise the ghost of Helen of Sparta, in order that she might become his paramour” (291). The
notions of bringing into being, of controlling the creation of, and of creating for selfish purposes, are all held in common between these two myths. What is different here – and what Lee leaves unarticulated – are Faustus’s corrupt nature (he has handed his soul over to “the fiend”) and the fact that the woman he calls up, unlike Galatea, is an entity unto herself: she has had her own life before, she is a ghost with a past, a “real” woman who lived (even as she is, in a sense, an “unreal” woman, a ghost). All of this is implicit commentary, readings suggested through the juxtaposition of this story with the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. The embedded commentary continues as Lee asks the question of why this myth should fascinate us, of why it is retold and remains enchanting. “If,” she says, “we are fascinated by the Lady Helen of Marlowe…if we are pleased by the stately pseudo-antique Helena of Goethe…if we find in these attempts… something which delights our fancy, it is because our thoughts wander off from them and evoke a Faustus and Helena of our own… it is because in these definite and imperfect artistic forms, there yet remains the suggestion of the subject” (292-293). In other words, the power of these images comes from the source, “the suggestion of the subject.” For Lee, it is past and history that possesses intellectual power and the ability to inspire. Lee shifts the nexus of power in her explanation of the Faustus and Helena myth: the story evokes a response in us because of its history, not because of its beauty on the page. In making this claim, Lee is stripping away the aestheticist ideology around the Pygmalion and Galatea myth and the ideology around artistic creation: art – whether statues or literature – has a limited power to evoke sensation. The past, the real past and not its simulacra, and our imagination of the past, is where genuine emotional encounter can occur. This is the beginning of what will be Lee’s theory of empathy and art, her belief that the viewer responds to the art and, through empathy, creates a personalized understanding of the art. The history – the story – of the art and the person’s feelings as the art is
viewed interact to create the empathic response. As Lee explains why the tale of Faustus and Helena remains fascinating to the reader, the blurring of the subject-object, the blurring of the notion of created-creator, is apparent.

In her essay, Lee continues at length to describe the experience of a reader who becomes absorbed in either Goethe’s or Marlowe’s text, imagining “the beer cellars and…cloisters of the old university town…processions of naked athletes on foaming short-maned horses” and so on, only to claim that “all this vanish[es] as soon as we once more fix our eyes upon the book” (294). She claims of both Marlowe and Goethe that they seek to describe Helen “as an artistic vision” but “fail to satisfy us” (294). Though she couches her critique in writers of the past, her words are an implicit criticism of her contemporaries, whose art presents a version of womanhood – namely the figure of Galatea, the “artistic vision” of Pygmalion – that they see as ideal but which Lee finds unsatisfactory. Helen, though conjured up by Faustus, is never a statue like Galatea. She is animated, she has lived and she does live, beyond the power of any man; she is subject, not object. As Christina Zorn understands Lee’s essay, “she devises a genealogy of Faustian ghosts based on the perceived (historical) reality of their appearance” (144) and presents this as a basis for Lee’s understanding of the supernatural in her ghost stories. While I agree with Zorn that much of what Lee articulates in this essay about the supernatural is applicable to understanding the stories in *Hauntings*, I read Lee’s fascination with the “(historical) reality” of the figure of Helen to have much larger implications for gauging Lee’s comprehension of the feminine and her desire to rewrite the aestheticist manner of treating women as art objects. I see the work of this essay to be focused on creating a subject position for women in relationship to art and to artist. Lee suggests that women have an active role in the creation of art. They are not merely the passive objects, the models from which men create greatness. Instead, women – here
represented in the figure of Helen – breathe life into art through their connection to the past, through their ability to be haunted and thus allow the viewer (or reader, in the case of literature) to make that connection to the past as well.

In granting “historical reality” to women, Lee was, in a sense, emulating Walter Pater, or at least making use of an idea of his, found most clearly in his famous description of the Mona Lisa, first published in 1869, and worth quoting at length:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. […] All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (125-126).

Pater’s version of the Mona Lisa is of a woman who crosses boundaries of time and place: the eternal beautiful. In having such a past and presence, she might appear to be like Vernon Lee’s Helen. But there is an important distinction. For Pater, the Mona Lisa is art – not a living woman. There is something dead about her, something less animated than Lee’s Helen, who is brought back from the grave not as a portrait or a statue but in a body. Pater captures the “Lady Lisa” as a “symbol” and as an “embodiment” – but not a physical embodiment. For Lee, the power of Helen is that in the Faust tales she has a body; she is alive (and she has lived).
revision of Pater’s idealization of the Mona Lisa will be especially important in Lee’s stories from *Hauntings* where the women of her fiction will not stay fixed as art, will not stay dead in the past, but will be alive and animated, with a will and a history – and a desire born of that history – of their own.

The bulk of Lee’s 1880 essay is concerned with articulating a theory of the relationship between the supernatural and art, a theory which I will return to later in this thesis when looking at her short fiction from *Hauntings*, especially the story “Oke of Okehurst.” For most of this 1880 essay, the story of Faustus and Helena is set aside, and her writing is crisp, critical, and couched in art appreciation (an early articulation of what will become her psychological aestheticism) theory. She leaves questions of gender aside, coolly appraising the thought process and emotional response of someone viewing or reading a work of art. It is only at the end of the essay that she returns once more to the story of Faustus and Helena, to compare how Marlowe’s Faustus and Goethe’s Faust respond to the women they have summoned forth. On the one hand, Lee presents the “semi-vivified statue of Goethe, the Helen with only the cold, bloodless, intellectual life which could be infused by enthusiastic studies of ancient literature and art, gleaming bright like marble or a spectre” (316). On the other hand, there is Marlowe’s Faustus who “forgets the scholarly interest in [Helen]...forgets that he had summoned her up to gratify his and his friends’ pedantry; he sees her, loves her” (316). The former is the reaction of the intellect, the latter the reaction of the imagination. In Goethe’s version, the man retains control of the object (and she remains a “statue”) while in Marlowe’s version, the man is passive before the woman, loving her in an uncontrolled manner. Marlowe summons up a “rarer and more dubious” being, a vestige of the ancient Greek woman, whereas Goethe’s is a figure “descended from a pedestal, white and marble-like in her unruffled drapery, walking with solid step and
unswerving” (319). Marlowe’s Helen might be imperfect, but as such she is more real than Goethe’s Helen. The less “artistic,” the less “sculpted” an image of woman that is produced, the better for Vernon Lee. Though she doesn’t directly attack the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, her commentary in the closing pages of this essay could apply just as well to that myth as to the story of Faustus and Helena. In her description of Goethe’s Helena, she directly echoes the language of the many contemporary poems and fictional works about Pygmalion and Galatea, but by reminding the reader of the dimensions of Helen – how she is not created by those who seek to control her, how she has her own past – Lee’s essay subtly undoes the position of the feminine demarcated by the aesthetic movement.

Her second piece of writing on this story comes in the introduction to *Euphorion*, which takes its name from the child that is born to Faust and Helena, according to Goethe’s story. In her opening summation of the legend, Lee can easily be read as making a direct attack on aestheticism and its decadent, “immoral” desires: Faust is a “mere man” of “lawless desires which he seeks to divert, but fails, from things of the flesh and of the world to the things of reason” (4). Faust wishes to sublimate, but cannot and instead settles for an almost-embodiment of his desires in the figure of Helena, “the spirit of antiquity. Personified, but we dare scarcely say, embodied…a simulacrum of a thing long dead” (4). This, Lee suggests, is what aestheticism does to women through its art: it creates simulacra born out of twisted male desires and doesn’t recognize that the women created through the art are not truly alive (or not the same as the living women around them). Her sentence evokes the picture of the anatomical Venuses popular at that time: painted and tinted to look alive, then posed to appear dead.

Much more than in her earlier *Belcaro* essay, Lee uses the legend of Faust and Helena to compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of men and women. Faust, she says, is alive and
real and knowledgeable: he “has plunged his thoughts like a scalpel into all the mysteries of life,” yet Helen “knows much more” because of her previously-lived existence, because of her survival and passage through “good and evil”(5). It is reason and received knowledge versus perceptive and lived knowledge. It is the false sense of mastery versus the accepted submission. Vernon Lee implicitly lays out these gender roles in her explanation of the legend.

Her interest in this introductory essay and, indeed, the purpose of the entire volume of *Euphorion*, is to explore the influences of the Antique and Middle Ages on the Renaissance, and as such she uses the legend of Faust and Helena to this end. Faust she labels “as representing the Middle Ages, Helena as Antiquity, and Euphorion as that child…to which…has [been] given the name of Renaissance” (7). In setting up the trio in such a manner, Lee is able to establish her theories on imagination and the past (the past here is parallel to the supernatural in the essay previously discussed) and claim that “the past can give us, and should give us, not merely ideas, but emotions” (12). This claim, and the theories that follow from it, will be examined later in this thesis in conjunction with three of the stories from her *Hauntings* collection. For now, though, it is important to note how she positions herself vis a vis the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, those ages which she has, through her use of Faustus and Euphorion, gendered male. While Antiquity, embodied in Helena and thus gendered female, is so remote as to impossible to understand, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are enchanting but dangerous: “the moral atmosphere of those days is impossible for us to breathe…could we, for a moment, penetrate into it, we should die of asphyxia” (22). Her introduction is a warning to those who would, like Faustus, try to summon up ghosts of the past. In her warning, we can read an implicit critique of the aestheticist movement, of the men who dressed up contemporary women in antique drapings, who painted women as ancient goddesses and sculpted them as figures from
Greek myth, and who, in their writings and art and life sought to re-embody the ideals of the Renaissance. Down that path lies danger, Lee suggests.

Much later in *Euphorion*, in the chapter labelled “Symmetria Prisca,” Lee returns briefly to touch on Faust and Helena once more. Here, commenting on the art that has emerged from Antiquity and from the Middle Ages, and its current reception – in moral terms – she first uses a literary allusion: “To some, mediæval art has appeared being led, Dante-like, by a magician Virgil through the mysteries of nature up to a Christian Beatrice, who alone can guide it to the kingdom of heaven; others have seen mediæval art, like some strong, chaste Sir Guyon turning away resolutely from the treacherous sorceress of Antiquity, and pursuing solitarily the road to the true and the good” (171). In this first iteration, the reception is clearly gendered with the reference to Beatrice and the sorceress. Lee here is trying to explain the dominant aesthetic attitude towards art: women are either dangerous artistic influences and to be turned away from, (a version of the *femme fatale*) or are pure, chaste conduits for art (the Galatea mode). Following up on this literary explanation, Lee once again evokes her initial metaphor of Faustus and Helen: “for some the antique has been an impure goddess Venus, seducing and corrupting the Christian artist; the antique has been for others a glorious Helen, an unattainable perfection, ever pursued by the mediæval craftsman, but seized by him only as a phantom” (172). In this final phrase, Lee begins to meld the theories of her two essays: Helen is “a phantom,” a supernatural appearance. She cannot be grasped like Galatea because she is not an object; she is not a statue. Part of her allure comes from her being “antique” – from being associated with the past and having a story of her own: this past is the basis for what makes something “haunted,” a position Lee will articulate more in the preface to her short story collection. It is in her short fiction that Vernon Lee brings to life and demonstrates the implications of the theory articulated in her
essays. In the wake of the disastrous *Miss Brown*, she is cautious with her fiction, and does not make another transparent commentary. Nonetheless, she explores the limits of genre and narration and uses the tropes of the “Gothic Tale” to enact the warnings and commentary on gender roles that her essays sketch out.

Just as with the form of the essay, it is important to consider genre when approaching Lee’s collection *Hauntings*. Without question, Lee was writing within the familiar limits of the Gothic ghost story; she adopts such well-known motifs as the magic portrait and the femme fatale, but imbues these with her own particular take, a take that consistently rewrites the genre’s conventions of femininity and gender dynamics, particularly in the way that the women of her tales engage with pursuits that – while not conventionally intellectual or artistic – mark them as connected to a world outside themselves, as having agency and interest of their own. Lee is also using her fictional writings to make an aesthetic statement: “Lee’s fantastic stories strike us as extensions of her historical project, a visual display of the way she perceived history: subjective, incidental, and full of surprises. The stories become fictional endorsements of a historical model bent on rupture and coincidence” (Zorn 141). It is almost as if the essays Lee wrote in *Belcaro* and *Euphorion* serve as a preface to her collection of short stories. The stories are, as Zorn says, “an extension” of her non-fiction projects: not just her work in history but also her work on aestheticism.

Many critics have noted that her fiction often reads like an application of her aesthetical theory to a specific situation, almost a case-study. Kristin Mahoney, who analyzes Lee’s work and its connection to consumerism, sees that “*Hauntings* expresses her distress about the effects of modern modes of consumption on the art object. In her ghost stories, she articulates a critique of subjectivist forms of aesthetic interaction while at the same time modeling a method of proper
appreciation that might serve as a corrective to the tendency toward aggressive subjectivism” (50). That is, Lee’s stories value objects for reasons that have nothing to do with “consumer value” – indeed, her objects resist consumption (or consummation) of any kind. In presenting this sort of interaction with objects, Mahoney sees Lee as rewriting “Paterian spectatorship [which] first and foremost serves the desires of the perceiving subject, bringing security, knowledge or increased self-understanding” (50). Although gender is not explicitly referenced in this formulation, the notion of the “desires of the perceiving subject” clearly relates to the Pygmalion and Galatea myth: in Lee’s fiction, the desires inherent in the male gaze are not realized or embodied by the female (art) object. Indeed, by providing her objects (and her women) with a history, the objects are endowed with “the capacity to instill destabilizing effects and the ability to return the gaze” (Mahoney 51). Though Mahoney’s project is focused on consumerism and not on gender, other critics have tackled the question of gender in Lee’s short stories. Catherine Maxwell opines that “Lee accents the supernatural because she uses it to accredit female creativity and power…these female energies appear as…elusive disruptive forces breaking through the established order” (268). The question that I would like to explore is how Lee uses the depiction of female creative power to comment on the aesthetic conventions of femininity. I agree with Maxwell’s understanding of female energies in these stories as being disruptive, but I would like to look closer both at the source of that female energy (which I regard as being based in history) and at the nature of established order (which I view as the Pygmalion and Galatea myth) that is being disrupted.

It is in her understanding of and presentation of ghosts that Vernon Lee most significantly veers from the Gothic conventions of the ghost story. As Angela Leighton explains, for Lee, ghosts are “not the terror of the unknown, but the seductive, fascinating difference of the past.
They are located in history, not…out of it” (italics original, 1). In part, Lee creates this sense of history through her deployment of objects. Stefano Evangelista notes that all the stories in *Hauntings* “play on instances of abnormal interaction between artefacts and human consciousness” and that because of this interaction, “Lee’s tales fall across the boundary that divides criticism from fiction and therefore build an element of indeterminacy into their very own form” (106). The history – the very “real” nature of the artefacts that Lee creates – grounds her fiction in reality, even as she engages the supernatural. For Lee, the process of writing historical essays was one of imagining the past, and the process of writing ghost stories was one of depicting real history. Her works bend genre in more than one direction. The similarities between the stories in *Hauntings* are many: they feature male narrators, they are told in forms that are partial and interior (letters, diaries), they all employ an artist of some sort who fails in his artistic endeavor, and they all feature women (or, in one case, a castrato who is highly effeminized) identified with art as the primary site of desire in the text, a desire that leads, as Renate Brosch says, to “climactic scenes of confrontation with artistic representations” – the male artist standing or kneeling in awe before the sculpture or voice or painting, the feminized presence (114). Further, Brosch sees that “the protagonists abandon themselves to their sense of the past, giving up their ordinary life for an imaginary existence in history” (114). It is at this juncture that Vernon Lee’s depiction of Faustus and Helena come into play: if Helen is the “sense of the past,” the “imaginary existence of history,” then the interaction of the male artist with his “artistic representation” is being essentially rewritten in these stories. No longer passive, unanimated, and incomplete like Galatea, the women of *Hauntings*, I will show, represent the lived history of women, and the presence of the past empowers these women,
negating the desires of their would-be creators, the failed artists who narrate (or try to narrate) these stories.

Of the stories included in *Hauntings*, one makes use of the tropes of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth more overtly than the others, the story “Dionea.” Critics have noticed this relationship, most notably Jane Thomas, who characterizes this story as following a “model [that] also structures her first novel Miss Brown,” namely a “two-stage Pygmalionesque model of animism to anthropomorphism” that Lee expands “to a three-stage model of animism, anthropomorphism, and petrifaction” (263). I will argue that in “Dionea,” Lee directly challenges the trope of Pygmalion and the ability of a male artist to define, control, and (re)create a feminine image. Further, I will argue that, in countering the Pygmalion myth in the story “Dionea,” Lee demonstrates her own myth or theory of the feminine: she asserts that the animating feature for women is not masculine desire. Instead, she develops the idea that what allows women to escape (and even overturn) the objectification of the male gaze is a woman’s awareness of and attunement to the past.

Before entering into an analysis of “Dionea,” a short synopsis of the plot is necessary. The story is told through a one-sided epistolary form: the narrator is Dr. Alessandro De Rosis, who is writing to the Lady Evelyn Savelli. The story begins when a young girl is washed ashore in an Italian village along the Gulf of La Spezia. The girl, who does not speak any recognizable language, is called Dionea because she has a piece of paper with that word pinned to her clothing. De Rosis appeals to the Lady Savelli to become a patron of the girl, sponsoring her education as well as providing her with clothing and other staples. Lady Savelli agrees and the Doctor writes regular updates about her ward. Dionea grows up and, though educated by nuns, is never fully integrated into village life. She will not conform to the social expectations of the
nuns and the townspeople and as she matures, strange events occur when she is nearby; the town comes to regard her as some sort of witch. Eventually, Lady Savelli sends a friend of hers, a sculptor, down to the village, and the sculptor, Waldemar, becomes enchanted with Dionea as a model for his art, an enchantment that eventually leads to his downfall.

In “Dionea,” the male gaze is presented in two forms. On the one hand, there is the narrator, Dr. Alessandro De Rosis, and on the other hand, there is the sculptor Waldemar. De Rosis’s gaze dominates the narration as he tells of the events occurring in his village through his letters to Lady Evelyn Savelli; the doctor’s gaze is also represented through his reference to his great creative work, a volume on the fall of the pagan gods. With both of these gazes – as narrator and as artist – De Rosis tries to explain, categorize, and objectify Dionea. At the same time, Waldemar is making a similar attempt on Dionea as he labors to sculpt her.

In writing letters to Lady Evelyn Savelli, De Rosis attempts to circumscribe Dionea’s character – trying to contain her within his own expectations. De Rosis describes that Dionea is lazy and not a good student; he also notes that she has a peculiar power over animals (especially pigeons), plants (especially myrtle) and people. As she grows up, he explains how the village shuns her, regarding her as a witch, and ascribing to her many strange events, such as spontaneous elopements and the death by lightning of a man who was pursuing Dionea against her wishes. Through these details, Lee is establishing a connection between Dionea and the goddess Venus, for whom the myrtle and the pigeon were common associations, as was the tendency to make others fall in love, especially disruptive and disordered love (it is nuns who

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2 Having her narrator pursue this topic not only allows him to help the reader understand Dionea’s true connection to Venus but also is a clear nod to Lee’s mentor Pater, who, as Catherine Maxwell notes “was fascinated by an essay entitled ‘The Gods in Exile’ by the German Writer Heinrich Heine” and who, himself, undertook the theme of pagan gods in disguise or returning to the modern world in two of his short stories (258). As was previously described with the passage on the Mona Lisa, Pater had a fascination similar to Lee’s with the idea of how the past lives on in the present. His stories of pagan gods feature Apollo and Dionysus, just as much of his art criticism focuses on the male or androgynous form.
elope, for instance). De Rosis, however, never seems to make the connection between the girl who has washed ashore in his village and the pagan goddess of love – a connection he should have made given his intellectual and artistic pursuit of the stories of the lost pagan gods. Lee demonstrates this failure of the male gaze, the failure of male intellectual and creative faculty, and particularly the failure of the male gaze to make a connection in the present day to a historical reality, when, on the very first page of the story, De Rosis is describing the sea near his house, which he depicts as “a wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness…and from which must have arisen in times gone by…a baleful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia…overwhelming men’s lives in sudden darkness” (78). The key phrase in this passage for Lee’s theory is “in times gone by.” For De Rosis, the past is gone and cannot return; the pagan gods have fallen and are lost. He is not susceptible to the power of the past; he is not capable of being haunted. And thus, he does not recognize the goddess Venus that has returned to his village, even as he can describe her so clearly as she “lies stretched out full length in the sun, putting out her lips,” which the pigeons “come to kiss” (82). For De Rosis, Dionea is innocent and unformed. In a move that belies his own Pygmalion tendencies, he even writes that Dionea would be “a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne Jones or Tadema” (82, 83). To the doctor, Dionea is an object; he does not view her as having creative power of her own.

De Rosis’s narration represents one aspect of the male gaze in this story, an aspect that is mostly descriptive: the doctor does not act upon Dionea, but instead merely observes. The more active male gaze – and to Lee the more dangerous male gaze – is shown through the character of Waldemar the sculptor. Waldemar, a friend of the Lady Savelli, has sculpted “statues only [of] men and boys, athletes and fauns” but never, as De Rosis complains, a “wide-shouldered Amazon or broad-flanked Aphrodite” (93). This description categorizes him as an aesthete
intent on masculine beauty, as does the description of his wife, Gertrude, who is a “thin, delicate-lipped Madonna” and a “Memling Madonna finished by some Tuscan sculptor [with] her long, delicate white hands” (93, 95). Gertrude is repeatedly compared to sculpture and art; she is often called delicate, thin, and pale. And though she is herself like a sculpture, she is married to a man who only sculpts men; in this relationship, Vernon Lee is parodying the dominant strains of aesthetic circles: the strong homosocial bonds, the artistic fetishization of women. Gertrude, who is already statue-like in her appearance, represents the woman who has been objectified by the male gaze; she has been created in the image of the aesthetic ideal. And yet, she has still fallen short of what Waldemar desires: he pursues male forms in his sculpture. Dionea, who has both feminine traits – “her lips like a Cupid’s bow or a tiny snake’s curves” – as well as masculine traits – she works with the masons “in her short white skirt and tight white bodice, mixing the smoking lime with her beautiful strong arms” – presents a perfect challenge for Waldemar (87, 89). Can he, with his male gaze and aesthetic sensibilities, capture the beauty of Dionea: can he turn her living self into a perfect form?

The failure of the artistic male gaze because of the overpowering strength of a woman in touch with the past, occurs in Waldemar’s first encounter with Dionea, when she turns to him with “that serpentine smile” and agrees to come with him, a gesture that strikes him silent, as if he were the one petrified (97). Waldemar’s attempt to sculpt Dionea represents, as Grimes says, “an inversion of the Pygmalion myth. While Aphrodite eventually transforms the statue of Galatea into a real woman and lover, in Lee’s work Dionea is herself becoming increasingly more like a statue…the real Dionea, at least for the male gazes of the narrator and Waldemar, is a work of art, a thing to be admired and copied” (114). Indeed, De Rosis is quite struck by the process of Waldemar “gradually building up his statue…the goddess gradually emerging from
the clay heap” (98). Though the doctor at first disparaged the sculptor, and didn’t entirely approve of Dionea being his model, De Rosis now struggles with the scene, trying to weigh “a village girl, an obscure, useless life…against the possession by mankind of a great work of art, a Venus immortally beautiful” (97). In short, he values the art – the man-created version of Dionea – far more than he values the living woman. De Rosis has fallen victim to the aesthetic philosophy, and in doing so has advanced his own artistic failure: he has moved farther away from exploration of how the past might still be present, how the fall of the pagan gods might not have meant their absolute end, and is instead intent to see a goddess not as real but as represented.

Lee uses this relationship to rewrite the positions of power: as the men’s artistic power fails, Dionea’s creative power increases. Instead of following the tropes of the typical Pygmalion tale, in which Waldemar the sculptor – worldly, experienced, intellectual – would begin to tutor and instruct his model, who is (though of a certain native beauty) naïve, rustic, and nearly feral, the story tells of the artist’s downfall, of the failure of male creativity to contain a feminine subject. As Waldemar carves the stone, it is Dionea who has “really grown more strangely beautiful than before” (100). De Rosis, despite his growing enchantment with Waldemar’s project, eventually admits the failure, proclaiming “the superiority of the model over the statue” (100). The living woman has, through her connection with the past, overcome the attempt to objectify her. Catherine Maxwell captures the inversion of the Pygmalion motif well: “as Waldemar sculpts her as an immortally beautiful Venus, Dionea’s beauty seems to grow and make the statue only a pale echo” (264). The statue that Waldemar strives to carve cannot capture Dionea’s essence: she is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled by an aesthetic education (such as Anne Brown was for Walter Hamlin in Miss Brown). Instead, she is a living
version of the past. She is a woman in touch with a source of power—history—that enables her to overcome the men’s desire to contain and objectify her. She cannot be turned into a statue; she resists Waldemar’s attempts to mold her, instead creating her own form. This independent form is available to her because of her connection to the past.

In fact, Lee not only has Dionea escaping objectification under the male gaze but also asserting power over Waldemar himself. Waldemar has set up his sculpting studio in “the long-desecrated chapel of the old Genoese fort, itself, they say, occupying the site of the temple of Venus” (100). Dionea has, effectively, been reinstalled as a pagan goddess, as Venus, and is receiving homage and worship from Waldemar. By situating his artistry in a chapel that was once a temple, Zorn sees that “Lee inserts a woman’s body as a connecting point between pagan and Christian symbolic systems to unsettle, but also to obscure historical memory” (151). I would argue that this plot move not only serves to bring Dionea’s past into her present, but also is meant to show that Dionea is fully aware of herself as an independent subject. She is shown to exert control over the artist by exercising the power she derives from history. The fact that Waldemar begins to visit his statue covertly, worshipping it, shows the extent of his failure: he approaches his statue with the reverse intention of Pygmalion—he has the living model and wishes to make the stone more captivating. Thomas captures the sculptor’s plight as follows: “he abandons the mediatory sculpture and instead physically worships the principle” (268). Taking the idea of physical worship even farther, the sculptor borrows an altar to Venus from De Rosis (for whom it is only a quaint artifact), and places it in his studio, noting how it has a declivity to hold incense and two gutters for blood to run off from; when he takes possession of the altar, he pours out a glass of wine and after “he had drunk a mouthful, and thrown the rest over the altar, [he said] some unknown words” (101). These gestures, the offering of a libation,
the desire to understand the mode of worship, make it clear that Waldemar has gone from being an artist – an aesthetic appreciator, the controller of beauty – to a devotee, a worshipper of the beautiful.

Dionea’s full recognition of self-hood, the moment in which her past existence as Venus is wedded to her present embodiment as the girl Dionea, comes in a scene of pagan worship: late one night, after his wife has gone to bed, Waldemar asks Dionea to sit for him. He lights his study “by an artificial light…the way in which the ancients lit up the statues in their temples” (103). Then, he “placed Dionea on the big marble block behind the altar…the altar of Venus which he had borrowed from” De Rosis (104). Waldemar had “collected all the roses about it, and thrown the incense upon the embers” (104). He had set up the perfect moment of worship: with what intention? To sculpt his statue, to make the object that would be the veneration of worship? Or to have sex with Dionea? Lee never makes his intentions clear, but instead has De Rosis narrate what was found there the following day: Gertrude’s body “lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes…the body of Waldemar…at the foot of the castle cliff” and the entire structure burned down (104). Dionea herself disappears, though rumors return through sailors, of her being seen aboard a boat, “against the mast, a robe of purple and gold about her, and a myrtle wreath on her head, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling about her” (104). The sculptor, the male artist who wants to create, and his pale, thin aestheticized wife have become the victims of Venus. Dionea has destroyed the art and has disabled the masculine gaze. She dismisses the attempt to turn her into a form, a statue, an object, and instead uses the power of the past – Waldemar’s willingness to worship her as a goddess – to break free. This is the theoretical shift that Vernon Lee wants to make in reimagining the relationship between women and art: she no longer wants Pygmalion to create
Galatea and pray to Venus to bring her to life. Instead, she wants Venus herself to enter the story, to show that it is not masculine desire that creates an ideal woman, but a woman’s attunement to the past that empowers her to be herself.

Maxwell sees “Dionea” in a similar light; she explains that the story, like the others in _Hauntings_, depicts “uncontainable female energy” (265). And while Maxwell notes that all the women in these stories “insist on crossing the boundaries of historical time,” she does not recognize that it is this very trait that Lee uses as the source of their power (265). Instead of focusing on the historical, Maxwell points to the fact that “Lee accents the supernatural because she uses it to accredit female creativity and power” (268). While this is absolutely true, the work of this thesis is to argue that, to Lee, the supernatural was nothing more than history making itself felt in the present. Therefore, the power of these women comes not from their being “ghosts” or “unreal” but from their having been women – or having a connection to women – who lived in the past, Helens instead of Galateas.

If “Dionea” can be seen as Lee’s attempt to counter or reverse the Pygmalion legend, it should also be seen as not just a reaction to the dominant mode of aestheticization of women (as one might read _Miss Brown_) but also as an articulation of Lee’s own mythology of feminine power. This power is centered in the past, in historical reality, the lived experience, and Vernon Lee explores this past not through academic studies of art or place or person, but through fictional stories where the past cannot be repressed. In a sense, the project that Lee is pursuing is the one expressed in the quotation that begins this thesis. Lee entered into life as a writer through publication of essays on art history and art appreciation. She feared the “unmitigated contempt” that male readers would have for a female writer. Indeed, she met with such contempt quite frequently. I would like to argue that Lee wanted to articulate a new position for the
empowerment of women, to enable them to escape the definition of femininity found in aesthetical circles. Lee had attempted to circumvent this objectification by assuming a masculine pen-name and, arguably, a masculine identity: she presented herself very much in the mode of the Victorian man of letters. But her writing puts forward a different path. Lee is arguing for an intellectual transformation of women. Her fiction shows that woman can empower themselves and can overcome the objectifying male gaze by being aware of the past, by knowing history, and by finding in the past a form of their own.

To this end, Lee opens her collection, *Hauntings*, with a foreword that develops her theory of the relationship between the supernatural and history, a theory that complements and deepens her use of the legend of Faustus and Helena discussed earlier. In examining this foreword to *Hauntings*, I would like to make the argument that Vernon Lee sees her ghost stories as works that enact her aesthetic theories and her theories on gender as well. These are not mere entertainments but are, rather, explorations of ideas that she has developed in her theoretical writings. If “Dionea” can be seen as in conversation with Pater and his circle – both through its employment of his favored theme of “Gods in Exile” as well as the trope of Pygmalion – then *Hauntings* as a whole might be viewed as Vernon Lee’s attempt to shift further: not just to be a dissenting voice in their discussion, but to model a positive theory of her own. To make this argument, I will first examine the foreword to *Hauntings* and place it in the context of her other nonfiction to explain how her concept of ghosts deepens her understanding of the feminine as articulated by the figure of Helena and then turn to look at the story “Oke of Okehurst,” as a text that best displays the sort of power and role-shift Lee wanted to evoke.

To begin with, then, it is necessary to return to Lee’s 1880 essay “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art.” Earlier in this thesis, I explained how this essay puts forward
a new concept of woman – a “living” Helen to counter the “statue” Galatea. The essay, as the title suggests, also showcases Vernon Lee’s argument concerning the limitations of art to capture the supernatural. Throughout the essay, she privileges the obscure over the precise, the impression over the reality. She dismisses the notion that “beauty” is the ultimate goal or that “truth” can ever be depicted. In making this argument, she is undoing or at least critiquing some of aestheticism’s most central and contested tenets; therefore, the essay comments not only on gender but also on art, and particularly on the junction between the two.

As Lee states near the start of the essay, “true artistic work” is “stuff rendered valuable solely by the hand of the artist…figures well defined and finite” (292). Art is constructed – it is “stuff” and real and as such can be a commodity and have value. But, part of the nature of being a commodity is also being “finite” and therefore limited. We might be able to say art is worth something but the worth can be translated to monetary value; by becoming a commodity it gives up its chance to have worth in a “spiritual” or higher sense. The heart of her argument is as follows: as readers, “our fancy show[s] us more than can…artistic genius” (294). Her claim is therefore personalized and individual. “Our fancy” is only ever within our heads and when we try to externalize it – to represent what has been imagined – Lee argues that we fail or at least greatly lessen the power of the idea. In taking this stance, she is arguing against authority. She is giving priority and preference for a power – imagination, or more specifically, the supernatural – that is equally available to all and not commoditized and controlled. Kristin Mahoney, though not drawing from this Belcaro essay, sees a similar force at work: “In Lee’s ghost fiction, historicized consumption retrieves the art object from degradation, from the elision of historical otherness that has rendered the object an innocuous and ‘pleasant plaything’ and reendows it with aura” (52). Mahoney’s phrase “historicized consumption” is, I think, capturing the notion
that Lee presents in her *Belcaro* essay. What Mahoney terms “aura,” Lee sees as “fancy” or imagination, particularly of the history behind (or within) an object. “Aura” and “fancy” are both words that skirt around the notion of the supernatural, of what it means for someone or something to be haunted.

Lee carefully stakes out the boundaries of her domain, beginning by establishing the common ground: “like the supernatural, art is born of imagination; the supernatural, like art, conjures up unreal visions” (294-5). She soon progresses to distinguish them: “the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist” (295). Her diction shows that she is playing a subtle game. She ascribes a more negatively valenced word to the supernatural—vague—and a more positively valenced word to art—distinct. If judged in terms of vision or perception—the gaze—it is better to be more distinct than to be vague. Yet, by making the vague distinct, she says, the truth (the vague sense of the supernatural) is erased and the experience or sensation is lessened. What some might see as art “bringing in to focus” the vague notions of the supernatural, Lee sees as a complete revision and negation. There is no way to represent the supernatural without destroying it. By establishing this formula, Lee is effectively undermining the notion that art is creative—that art bodies forth and brings into being mere phantom ideas. Instead, she argues, art takes “real” phantom ideas and destroys them in its attempt to represent them. As the artists “paint, or model, or narrate…the supernatural bec[omes] the natural” (296) and the natural is lesser and inferior: it is prosaic rather than fantastic, limited rather than infinite.

As an example to discuss and display her point, Lee considers the representation of religious figures in art, delivering the dictum that “the gods ceased to be gods not merely because they became too like men, but because they became too like anything definite” (300). Artistic
representation, she says, became too fixated on portraying the gods realistically rather than symbolically and whereas a symbol might be a “recaller of an idea” of a god, the human shape gave an idea of distinctness and correctness – of being this and only this (300). Ultimately, then, “as the gods were subjected to artistic manipulation, whether by sculptor or poet, they lost their supernatural powers” (301). The application of this theory is entirely evident in “Dionea,” where the incarnation of the goddess resists all attempts to represent her through sculpture, and, in doing so, both weakens the artist and empowers herself. Lee admits that the supernatural is unclear and “vague” – a “chaos of impressions” (301). And yet impression – and only impression – is what she believes allows for power, for true imagination and free creativity. Art imprisons, art represses, art limits: “art is proportion and proportion is restriction” (304). Having already examined her short story “Dionea,” we can see how Lee moves from this sort of theory into its fictional and fleshed out expression – what Mahoney would call “historicized consumption” – through her use of a ghost story, a genre that, in part because of its use of the 

femme fatale, permits Lee to make incisive gender commentary.

Lee’s solution to the limitation explained above is to turn to the supernatural in the form of the ghostly. She dismisses the spiritualist, pseudo-scientific “ghosts as logical possibilities,” and places them firmly in the realm of the imaginative supernatural (309). For her, “a ghost is the only thing which can in any respect replace for us the divinities of old, and enable us to understand, if only for a minute, the imaginative power which they possessed, and of which they were despoiled not only by logic but by art” (309). Ghosts are freeing; ghosts grant communion, a sort of reverse transubstantiation, by which the living, physical person is put in contact with the spirit or supernatural imaginary being, which nonetheless has true power. Angela Leighton defines Vernon Lee’s ghosts as follows: they are “not the terror of the unknown, but the
seductive, fascinating difference of the past. They are located *in* history, not…out of it” (1, italics original). Truly, as Leighton captures in the phrase quoted above, it is the history itself that haunts. And the haunting is “seductive” and alluring; Lee’s ghosts are “objects of desire rather than fear” (Leighton 2). Lee uses this idea of the ghost to demonstrate and play out her theories of aestheticism. In particular, she explores the relationship between ghosts (the supernatural) and women and the effect of this relationship on art (and male artists).

Vernon Lee’s preface to *Hauntings* immediately invokes the same ideas as her *Belcaro* essay. Written as an address to Flora Priestly and Arthur Lemon, to whom the volume is dedicated, Lee begins her preface by asserting that “the supernatural...must necessarily...remain enwrapped in mystery” (37). Many critics have noted Lee’s tendency to open stories with a frame and then never close this frame; in this preface Lee seems to be claiming this as a deliberate technique. Her ghosts, as we have seen in “Dionea,” are not easily vanquished or contained: nor should they be. Stefano Evangelista explains that “Lee’s tales fall across the boundary that divides criticism from fiction and therefore build an element of indeterminacy into their very form” (106). The preface is the very sort of bridge that Evangelista is identifying: its text is meant to carry us from reality into the supernatural, without entirely leaving the former behind. For Lee, ghosts exist in our minds; we conjure them into being: “they are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy” (39). We make these ghosts real through the process of imagining them and thinking about them. Furthermore, Lee asserts that it isn’t utter fancy that creates these ghosts, but “the Past, the more or less remote Past...that is the place to get our ghosts from” (39). In these lines, we can begin to see the confluence of Lee’s theories. Ghosts are specters of our imagination, but that doesn’t make them unreal. What makes ghost real is the
fact that we create them out of our recollections of or imaginings of the past (a noun which she notably capitalizes). Just as Helen, summoned by Faust, brings with her a personal history (whereas Galatea has no past and is empty), so too the ghosts of Lee’s stories emerge from the mixture of history and desire. In the stories, there is an interaction between the central (male) character(s) and the ghost. Renate Brosch describes that in Hauntings “all central characters fall victim to their obsessions with creatures from another world” (114). But it would be wrong to think this “another world” was something external to reality or even to the character; Lee’s preface makes it clear that the ghosts come from within. Indeed, Brosch’s note of the characters’ “obsessions” is the point of origin for the hauntings. It is the characters’ own desires that haunt them.

All of the stories in Hauntings, as the preceding examination of “Dionea” indicates, share the themes of art, the thwarted attempt to create, the past, and failed relationships between men and women. Catherine Maxwell understands Lee’s use of ghost stories as a means of making gender commentary: “Lee accents the supernatural because she uses it to accredit female creativity and power – unacknowledged energies which demand their registration in representational fields which conventionally deny their existence” (268). Indeed, “Dionea” displayed the ways in which female power could be exerted to undo a masculine artistic and aesthetic impulse (although “Dionea” is a story that plays with the supernatural, it is not a ghost story, per se.). Stefano Evangelista takes this idea even further to claim that “the revenges of the past narrated in Hauntings are Lee’s revenges on the male aesthete’s treatment of gender in their writings” (107). It seems to me a reach to claim to understand Lee’s psychological motives vis a vis her fiction, but Evangelista’s point is nonetheless useful in framing the case I would like to

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3 In “A Wicked Voice” the failed relationship is between not a man and a woman, but a man and a castrato singer. The singer, Zaffirino, is, however, repeatedly described as effeminate and largely serves the same function in that story as women serve in the others.
make: that Lee advances her own aesthetical theory through her stories in *Hauntings*, and her theory is one that runs counter to the dominant male aesthetic theory. More specifically, that Lee’s stories in *Hauntings* articulate a way for women to escape from their position as objects and, through understanding history, to claim a more powerful position in relationship to art and artistic creation. If “Dionea” was a story that showed how a woman could use the past to counteract the central myth of male aestheticism, then “Oke of Okehurst” is a story that employs and explores the potency of Lee’s “replacement myth” of Faustus and Helena. What happens when the artist, unlike Pygmalion, must try to capture a woman who knows her own past, who has no need for the artist to bring her to life because she has an inner life of her own? What does this imply for the woman and for the man? And what does it imply for the relationship between art and creator, art and viewer?

To begin our examination of “Oke of Okehurst,” it is important to locate ourselves in Lee’s definition of a ghost, taken from her *Belcaro* essay on Faustus and Helena: “a ghost is the long-closed room of one long dead, the faint smell of withered flowers, the rustle of long-unmoved curtains, the yellow paper and faded ribbons of long-unread letters” (310). Each of these things, she says, “is a ghost, a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness” (310). This definition is the best entry-point to the story of “Oke of Okehurst,” a story that centers on a portrait painter’s visit to an English country manor, Okehurst. As with “Dionea,” “Oke of Okehurst” features two Vernon Lee trademarks of fiction. First, it is narrated by a man who is a failed artist, in this case a portrait painter who has been unable to complete his portrait of Mrs. Alice Oke. Second, the

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4 The narrator of “Oke of Okehurst” is in some ways an amalgam of De Rosis and Waldemar of the previous story: He is more intimately and artistically connected to the female subject of the story than De Rosis is, but unlike Waldemar and Mr. Oke, the painter survives the story, making him more like De Rosis. He is a character both inside and outside the action of the story.
story is related in a distant manner, not through letters, but through an “as-told-to” structure, with Lee using a framing device to open the story. We begin in the painter’s studio, with the painter speaking to someone who remains unknown (just as the painter remains unnamed) and the story starts quite in the middle of a conversation, with the line, “That sketch up there in the boy’s cap?” (105). The events that “Oke of Okehurst” is primarily concerned with transpired some three years prior to the interrupted conversation that begins the story, and are related by the narrator to the unknown interlocutor, seemingly for no other reason than for entertainment; indeed, the narrator seems almost salacious in his bringing the matter up: “I suppose the newspapers were full of it at the time. You didn’t know that it all took place under my eyes?” (106-107). There is an almost paradoxical sense of intimacy and distance created by this framing device and, in another hallmark Vernon Lee move, the frame is never closed on the story.

To give a brief synopsis of the plot: the portrait painter who narrates the story is hired by Mr. Oke to paint portraits of himself and his wife. Though reluctant, the painter takes the commission and travels to Okehurst. Once there, he finds Mr. Oke to be a rather dull and ordinary country gentleman but is delighted and enchanted by Mrs. Oke. He slowly begins to paint each of them, finding Mr. Oke an easy subject and Mrs. Oke impossible. He believes that the difficulty in his painting Mrs. Oke comes from not understanding her and so he sets out to know her in greater depth. What he uncovers, he believes, is Mrs. Oke’s unhealthy obsession with her ancestress, whose portrait hangs in Okehurst. This ancestress (both she and Mrs. Oke are named Alice Oke) had, if not an affair, then a very close relationship with a poet, Lovelock, in the seventeenth century. When Alice Oke’s husband discovered this affair, or perhaps when Alice Oke felt the poet pressed his suit too hard, the husband and Alice Oke (dressed as groom) conspired to murder the poet. The portrait painter gets the story out of Mr. and Mrs. Oke in
pieces and gradually comes to see Mrs. Oke as a woman suffering from an unhealthy obsession, even a delusion. Mrs. Oke believes herself to be the Alice Oke of the past: she wears the clothing of her ancestress, reads the poetry of the murdered Lovelock, and believes that she is visited by the poet’s ghost. All of this baffles the painter, who, despite his best efforts, cannot paint Mrs. Oke’s portrait, and angers Mr. Oke, who finds the whole historical episode disgraceful to the family. In the end, Mrs. Oke’s delusions seem to have infected her husband and he – believing that he has caught his wife with the poet – shoots her and then turns the gun on himself. The painter witnesses the episode and is left with the unfinished portrait of Mrs. Oke as a memento.

In structuring this story, as in “Dionea,” Lee implicitly evokes the Pygmalion and Galatea myth. The portrait painter is set up to play the role of artist as creator. Though he is initially unexcited by the prospect of painting these portraits, when he first sees Mrs. Oke, his interest is piqued. She serves, like Anne Brown in Miss Brown, and like so many Victorian versions of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth, as a muse and inspiration for the male artist. Immediately, the painter begins to aestheticize, dehumanize, and disempower Mrs. Oke. He recounts that “I never thought about her as a body – bones, flesh, that sort of thing; but merely as a wonderful series of lines” (114). He is repositioning a living woman into piece of art, a sort of Pygmalion in reverse. The artist comes to believe that in order to paint Mrs. Oke’s portrait he must understand her personality, which he describes as “exquisite and baffling” as well as “peculiar and enigmatic” (116). Yet, he “pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation” (117). Because the painter is not creating a woman from a statue but rather a portrait from a woman, he must understand or, put more bluntly, control the personality of the woman that he wishes to depict. But Mrs. Oke resists his reading of her. He sees her as an imitation of her ancestress, failing to
understand the reality of the past, in particular the lived experience of a woman. He wishes Mrs. Oke to be “merely…a wonderful series of lines,” but she is dimensional. She, like Helena, has a connection to the past. The narrator is unable to accept his misreading of Mrs. Oke. As Sondeep Kandola states it in her reading of the tale: “The painter’s absolute faith in his reading of Alice Oke makes him doubt ‘whether anyone every understood Alice Oke,’ the subject of his aesthetic vision, ‘besides myself’” (25). Nevertheless, as his attempts to paint her continue to fail, rather than admit that he doesn’t understand his subject – that she has a psychology and life beyond his ability to grasp – he sees her as “bizarre” and “far-fetched” (122). He rejects Vernon Lee’s theory on the power of the past in his dismissal of Mrs. Oke as someone who has “no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past” (122), a dismissal that serves to show how shallow he is. Denisoff describes the vexed relationship between painter and subject as follows: the painter “cannot capture Alice’s essence without understanding her desires, an experience that he claims is impeded by her mental instability but that comes across as being curtailed by his dependence on generic formulas” (255). Mrs. Oke will not “pose” to suit him; she will not be flattened to a portrait.

Indeed, part of the painter’s problem rests in the fact that there is another portrait in the story – and another Alice Oke. The central woman character is doubled and divided in a move that Psomiades has observed in other literature by aesthetic women of the period. In particular, Psomiades looks at Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and how the two sisters in the poem create an idea of doubleness that allows for possible escape from masculine control: “if there is more than one body, you can escape objectification,” Psomiades says, a meaning that the poem can only hint or “gesture” at (Beauty 53). What Rossetti intimated, Vernon Lee makes explicit. There is the living Alice Oke and there is the dead Alice Oke; there is the portrait of Alice Oke that the
narrator wishes to create, and there is the portrait of Alice Oke on the wall of Okehurst, a portrait that the narrator describes in great detail: “full length, neither very good nor very bad, probably done by some stray Italian of the early seventeenth century…in the corner of the woman’s portrait were the words, ‘Alice Oke…’ and the date 1626…the lady was really wonderfully like the present Mrs. Oke, at least so far as an indifferently painted portrait of the early days of Charles I can be like a living woman of the nineteenth century” (118). It is the last line that describes the doubleness and the aesthetic Pygmalion conceit that Vernon Lee’s story works to undo. The painter sees the portrait as resembling the living woman. In fact, it is the living woman who deliberately resembles the portrait. Who is in control? Not the artist, present or past, but rather the woman, who views an image of herself – her double – and imagines the past and, according to Lee’s theory of the supernatural, embodies that past. The narrator in his attempt to create a portrait can do nothing but imitate. Denisoff describes that “the portraitist ultimately decides that, regardless of the ramifications, he must paint the woman in the exact same clothes, stance, and setting as those in which the dead Alice appears in her portrait” (255 italics original). He refuses, or is unable, to accept her on his own terms, seeing her as an imitation, that is, through an aesthetic lens. Thus, his painting fails, which Kandola reads as representing “the construct of the frustrated male gaze” (26) and which I read as Lee’s overturning of the Pygmalion myth: the artist cannot construct the woman in his image. What the portraitist regards as an object is, in actuality, really a subject.

The narrative structure of the story makes it difficult to truly perceive Mrs. Oke’s character, constrained as it is by the portraitist’s misunderstandings and misreadings. In my analysis, it is essential to understand that Mrs. Oke is not merely putting on her ancestress’s dress in a manner that makes her like aesthetic women of time, who wore pseudo-classical drapery.
For Mrs. Oke, this is no mere costume, a fact that is brought home by the scene in the story when some younger cousins come to visit Okehurst and raid the family wardrobe for garments to wear during an impromptu masque. The painter watches the spectacle with some horror, thinking that to Mrs. Oke, “this eccentric being, with her fantastic, imaginative, morbid passion for the past, such a carnival as this must be positively revolting” (137). In a moment that reveals how deeply he fails to understand Mrs. Oke, she instead appears in the scene dressed as a “boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leathern belt, and big buff boots, a little grey cloak over one shoulder, a large grey hat slouched over the eyes, a dagger and pistol at the waist” (138). When asked by the others what manner of costume she is wearing, she replies that “‘it is the dress in which an ancestress of ours… used to go out riding with her husband…’ and [she] took her seat at the head of the table” (138). Her marked difference from the others at the party, as well as her reply – not to mention her assumption of her regular seat – all make it clear that she is not “playing” at anything. So, too, when she takes the narrator out for a ride in a cart to the place where the ancestral murder took place, he notes that “her eyes no longer had that distant look; they were strangely eager and fixed…this woman positively frightened me” (135). She is frightening because she engages imaginative powers that he does not possess. He cannot depict her, he cannot understand her, because she, like Helena, has access to a reality beyond him – a historical reality that empowers the present woman. Referring to the same scene of the cart ride, Kandola argues that “we see Alice Oke achieve temporary autonomy from both the clinical and aesthetic male gaze when she performs her version of Lovelock’s murder” (27-28). I would argue that her autonomy is much more extensive – it is simply that the narrator doesn’t depict his defeat and loss of control – his fright – as clearly in other scenes. Mrs. Oke has, throughout the story, completely eluded his gaze. The portraitist, accustomed as he is to imposing his vision on
a scene, on letting his artistic sight create lines and order, is undone by his inability to impose this visual control on Mrs. Oke. Lee uses the story to show how sight—the gaze of the aesthetic artist—can be moved from the active to the passive; instead of imposing control on his object, the male artist finds himself a helpless spectator to a woman who is her own subject.

What gives Mrs. Oke the power to escape? For Bann, it is the fact that “the real ghost is Mrs. Oke…the force of her character shapes not only the objective world around her but also the narrative itself” (680-681). Mrs. Oke acts out the theory that Vernon Lee develops in her essays on art and the supernatural. In *Belcaro* (1881), Lee described that “a ghost is the long-closed room of one long dead, the faint smell of withered flowers, the rustle of long-unmoved curtains, the yellow paper and faded ribbons of long-unread letters” (310). These very items and depictions appear again in “Oke of Okehurst,” in Mrs. Oke’s “yellow drawing-room” which her husband can’t bear to enter. In this room, she shows the narrator “a large bundle of papers…all of them brown with age” and the air is “heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume…like that of old stuff that should have lain for years among spices” (126). The essay sets up an expectation that the story then carries out. Ghost is place, ghost is past, ghost becomes person when, as Lee states in *Belcaro*, it “invades our whole consciousness” (310). That is indeed what happens to Mrs. Oke and the haunting empowers her while disempowering the men in the story.

Although “Oke of Okehurst” lacks the ultimate triumph of female power that “Dionea” conveys—the return of the goddess to her realm—nonetheless, the ending does not have to be read as “pessimistic,” as Kandola describes it (28). Though Mr. Oke, after being thoroughly enervated and then deranged by his wife’s behavior, kills both her and himself, a plot move perhaps required by the genre expectations of a ghost story, there is still a triumph. The triumph comes in the form of Mrs. Oke’s continued resistance to the male aestheticizing gaze, her
ultimate refusal to be depicted as a portrait. In a sense, the story ends in its beginning, in the painter’s studio, where the narrator is surrounded by his dozens of pencil sketches and his “huge wreck” of her portrait, never to be finished. Before he begins his tale, he “must turn her face to the wall” (107). He cannot bear to confront his failure as an artist, nor can he meet her gaze, which, though coming from a piece of art and from “the beyond,” nonetheless serves to render him passive; he cannot act or speak while the portrait faces him.

If in “Dionea” Lee dismantles (or reverses) the Pygmalion and Galatea myth so favored by her male contemporaries in aesthetic circles and if in “Oke of Okehurst,” Lee gives life to her theory of art and the supernatural, then in “Amour Dure,” Lee fully acts out her new myth, providing voice and body to the story of Helena and Faustus, thus not only dismantling but completely replacing the dominant aesthetic story of the male artist and female subject. In Lee’s “Amour Dure,” the Faustus figure is a disenchanted Polish scholar, Spiridon Trepka, who has come to the Italian city of Urbania to study its history. He is no magician who has sold his soul to the fiend; instead, he has given over his intellect to dry and dusty academia, lamenting that he has “written a book like all those other atrocious books of erudition” and is now a “semblance of a German pedant” (41, 42). He, like Faust, fears that he will reach the limits of his knowledge and longs to “come in spirit into the presence of the Past” (42), a request that evokes Lee’s theory of the supernatural and the connection between the past and haunting so familiar from the discussion of “Oke of Okehurst.” As Fluhr has observed, over the course of “Amour Dure,” “Trepka’s quest for historical knowledge is transformed. It is as a lover rather than a researcher that he most fully experiences the past” (290). In this sense, Trepka enacts some of Lee’s ideas about the importance of the past as a lived and living experience and is similar to Mrs. Oke.

The title refers to Medea da Carpi’s favored saying – “Amour Dure, Dure Amour” – which Lee translates as, love that lasts, cruel love. In her portrait and miniature, Medea wears a necklace of gold lozenges that are emblazoned with these words.
Like all the other stories in *Hauntings*, this one, too, employs a narrative device that distances the story, keeping it at arm’s length from the reader. “Amour Dure” is told through Trepka’s diary, an erratically kept journal that documents his time in the city. Unlike the frame device that Lee uses in other stories, notably “Oke of Okehurst,” Trepka’s diary would seem to offer a more immediate entry into the tale; “the frame tale” in gothic literature “serves as…a means of distancing the writer from the literary work” while the diary entry would seem to be highly personal and interior (Miller, 294). Yet, I see Trepka’s diary as being just as distancing as a frame tale – it effectively mediates the story, standing between the events and the reader, filtering everything through Trepka’s psychology and language (and therefore providing more distance than if we simply had a first-person narrator without the device of the diary). In this way, like other gothic narrators that Miller writes about, Trepka is able to maintain “control over his narrative” (292). However, just like the frame in “Oke of Okehurst,” which is never properly closed, so too Trepka’s narrative disintegrates despite (or perhaps because of) his attempt to maintain control.

Over the course of several months – the diary entries span from August 21, 1885 to Christmas Eve of that year – Trepka becomes increasingly obsessed with the historical figure of one Medea da Carpi, who, as he says, “appeared from out of the dry pages of Gualterio’s and Padre de Sanctis’ histories” (45). From this first encounter, Trepka then discovers more, reading up on Medea and, eventually, encountering her portrait in the archives. She is a 16th century femme fatale who was married off at the age of twelve and went through a succession of husbands, marrying them and then seducing other men who killed her husbands and then died for

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6 Many critics have noted the Trepka’s entries become increasingly bizarre as the story goes on. It is, indeed, quite possible to read the story as having been written by a madman. This would keep the story from being a “ghost story” and make Medea’s character a projection of a male mind. While I don’t which to negate this reading and certainly don’t deny that it is possible, I am interested in exploring the concept of haunting in the sense that Lee describes it in her essays.
their crimes, until finally the brother of one murdered husband arranges for Medea’s death. After uncovering this story, Trepka abandons his studies and devotes all of his time to pursuing the story of Medea.\(^7\) Eventually, Medea herself appears to him and reveals certain truths about how she was killed. Trepka, with her guidance, sets out to seek vengeance for her long-ago death by disfiguring a statue of her killer, Duke Robert, and destroying a totem secreted therein that is meant to protect his soul. Though Trepka completes this action and believes he will be rewarded by Medea’s presence (and possible consummation of their relationship), the narrative instead ends with an appended note that reports that Trepka’s body was “discovered dead of a stab in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand” (76). This ending, as unsatisfying as it may be, fits in with others of Lee’s tales which, like “Oke of Okehurst,” end with a sudden death that leaves the central mystery largely unresolved, or, like “Dionea” are concluded with a coda that serves as an incomplete frame to the text. These stories model formal irresolution and, in their resistance to simple closure, emphasize Lee’s commentary on the limitations of the male aesthetic gaze and its attempts to objectify and control.

Even from this brief sketch of the story’s plot, it is evident that Medea bears some simple resemblances to the Helen and Faustus that Lee describes in her essays. Medea is a historical person, a femme fatale, whose allure has led men to their deaths, and she is conjured up from the past to the present through the research of a scholar whose historical work is self-described as “modern scientific vandalism” – in short, the sort of study of history that renders the past inert (41). Trepka’s encounter with Medea very much fits Lee’s *Belcaro* description of Faustus’s encounter with Helena: he “forgets the scholarly interest in [Helen]...forgets that he had

\(^7\) The mythological namesake of Medea does not escape Trepka, nor should it escape the reader of “Amour Dure.” The narrator makes the connection explicit in his recounting of one of Duke Robert’s epithets for her “‘la pessima Medea’ – worse than her namesake of Colchis” (58). The reference to Medea in the context of her mythology reinforces not only the evil character of this woman but also her historical resonance, in a similar way to Dionea’s name.
summoned her up to gratify his and his friends’ pedantry; he sees her, loves her” (316). Even more, I would like to argue that “Amour Dure” bodies forth the theory that Lee presents around the myth of Faust and Helen in *Euphorion*. That is, though Faust is scholarly and knowledgeable, though he “has plunged his thoughts like a scalpel into all the mysteries of life,” yet Helen “knows much more” because of her previously-lived existence, because of her survival and passage though “good and evil” (5). It is because of Helen’s past that she can wield power over the living, more-learned Faust, and it is because of this power dynamic that Lee wants to use the Faustus and Helena myth to unseat the Pygmalion and Galatea myth. Lee sets Trepka on a similar path; he comes to Urbania with a scholarly pursuit, and he is already a master of history, looking to put forward his second book. Like Faust, though, his knowledge is all scholarly; it is based on research rather than lived experience. Theirs is a dry scholarship, steeped in the archives and accumulation of facts rather than imagination and emotion. When Trepka encounters Medea, who lived in the past, he discovers that what he thought he knew, what he had spent his life learning, was unimportant compared to the life of this woman and the desire he feels for her – and not just for her beauty, but for her as a historical person. Trepka is drawn to Medea because of the life she lived. “Amour Dure” therefore fits Lee’s *Euphorion* project of reclaiming the Pygmalion myth and reinventing it through Faustus and Helena. Just as she says that “for some the antique has been an impure goddess Venus, seducing and corrupting the Christian artist; the antique has been for others a glorious Helen, an unattainable perfection, ever pursued by the mediæval craftsman, but seized by him only as a phantom” (172), so it happens in the story. Medea is pursued by a historian but remains out of reach of his scholarship.
Unlike the other tales in *Hauntings*, “Amour Dure” does not focus on an artist or on the production of art. Trepka is most similar to the narrator of “Dionea,” in that, like the doctor De Rosis writing a book on the fall of the pagan gods, Trepka’s artistry takes the form of a scholarly pursuit. I would argue that this is properly labeled artistry (in both cases) because the man, through his scholarship, is trying to impose his understanding on the past – he is creating and shaping a narrative in a similar fashion to how one might shape or craft a sculpture or painting. One could also argue, as Jackson does, for Trepka’s diary itself being an artistic production, that “At the core of this work is a man’s production of a text, the driving force behind which is the desire for a dead woman” (101). Though Trepka is far from an aesthetic male, he is nonetheless part of the sort of peripheral hegemony that many of the decadents belonged to: Trepka is a Polish scholar pursuing his work in the academies of Germany. He is keenly aware that he is but a “Pole turned Prussian Professor” (43). He is an outsider to the dominant social mainstream, but uses this position to make social commentary on that mainstream. Much of that commentary, at least at the start of the diary, has to do with the women around him and the lack of desire they provoke in him. Indeed, his critique of these women sounds vaguely aesthetic: he dislikes “the younger ladies in bright yellows and greens…[the] horribly bad pictures” that hang on the walls (54). He eschews the gaudy nothingness of the present for the relics of the past. Therefore, he can be seen as representing the typical (the aesthetic, in Lee’s world) male manner of characterizing women and their relationship to art and culture.

Even though Trepka is not a visual artist, Lee still situates portraiture at the center of the story, for Trepka’s relationship with Medea begins in earnest when he comes in contact with her portrait. Coming out of the archives one evening, he reports that “my eye was caught by a very beautiful old mirror-frame let into the brown and yellow inlaid wall. I approached, and looking
at the frame, looked also, mechanically, into the glass. I gave a great start, and almost 
shrieked...behind my own image stood another a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to 
mine; and that figure, that face hers! Medea da Carpi’s!” (61). As was the case with the two 
Alice Okes, one in portrait and one alive, in “Oke of Okehurst,” there is a curious doubling in 
this scene. Trepka sees the portrait not as an art object on a wall, at least initially, but as his own 
reflection. There is a certain ambiguity in the way that Lee phrases the encounter: “a face close 
to mine.” Is it close because the face appears next to his in the mirror? Or is it close in the sense 
of looking similar to? The latter reading seems more likely given that the preceding phrase, “a 
figure close to my shoulder,” has already established the physical proximity of the two. Thus the 
phrase might imply that Trepka sees or feels something kindred between himself and the portrait. 
Just as Alice Oke gave herself over to, or brought back to life, the spirit of her ancestress, so too 
Trepka in some way melds himself with Medea, or at least he wishes to. He is not Pygmalion, 
creating a woman from his own sculpture. Indeed, something quite the opposite is happening. 
Trepka gazes into the mirror and has a moment in which he recognizes both self and other – he 
and Medea appear there simultaneously. They are co-created. And yet she has preceded him. 
Though he discovered her story, her story was already there. In this way, she is like Helen rather 
than Galatea. There was no Galatea until Pygmalion made her. But there was a Helen before 
Faust summoned her up. Through becoming enchanted with her story, Trepka’s obsession with 
Medea has brought her back to life. His male gaze – his scholarly gaze – what renders the past 
into fact, has been undone by his encounter with Medea’s portrait. She is not the passive object 
to be studied, but an active subject who imposes upon Trepka’s emotions and behavior. 

Maxwell reads this scene wherein Trepka encounters the mirror and the portrait as the 
moment when the story begins to “rewrite[] the femme fatale with a feminist purpose” insofar as
Medea “break[s] out of her frame” (267, 266). Medea “does not simply replace his mirror image, she appears behind it demanding his attention. She then makes him turn away from the mirror to her own portrait hanging on the wall opposite” (266). In this moment, of turning away from his own image to face hers, of undoing the doubleness, Maxwell reads that Trepka gives himself over to Medea. She is no Galatea, awaiting his instruction. Once he turns to face her portrait, his description of her image is one that fits the classic femme fatale: her “tight eyelids and tight lips” “seem to take, but not to give” (52). Likewise, he recounts that she possesses an “artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold, which, the more it is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind” (52). In a phrase that is reminiscent of Christopher Marlowe’s formulation of Helen – the face that launched a thousand ships – Trepka stares at Medea’s portrait and finds himself “wondering what this face, which led so many men to their death, may have been like when it spoke” (52). He, like Faust, wishes to conjure this woman up for himself. And so, though I agree with Maxwell that Medea does control Trepka, it is important to note that he, at least initially, labors under the illusion that he is the one in command, that he – through his love and scholarship – has come to understand her and has brought her, if not into being, then at least into the present. He believes that his scholarly understanding of the past, an understanding that Lee suggests is how male intellectuals view and write about history, is equivalent to Medea’s lived experience.

As the story proceeds, Trepka makes the mistake of believing that Medea is his. Like the painter in “Oke of Okehurst,” Trepka believes “I can understand Medea” (56). His sympathy for her even shows some compassion and understanding of what it might have been like to be a woman of that time period: “fancy a woman of superlative beauty, of the highest courage and calmness, a woman of many resources….being wedded…claimed, carried off…locked up” (56).
But despite this sympathy for her, Trepka suffers from the egotistical belief that he alone understands (and can therefore save) Medea. When he tells her story to a Bavarian professor who has come to visit, he bristles at the professor’s opinion that “such a woman as I made out was psychologically and physiologically impossible” and insists that it is the professor who is mistaken while he, Trepka, has discovered the true nature of Medea (60). Trepka, like the intellectuals of Lee’s time, believes that archival research on a subject leads to understanding, which in turn leads to control. Lee is intent to show that without empathy – with letting the past affect and influence one – without being, in a sense, acted upon by the past (passive and receptive to it), true understanding will be elusive.

Lee is intent to prove that Medea controls her own fate. Her story might written by men but it is made by her own action. She emerges, seemingly, from the portrait to encounter Trepka in real life. Has he summoned her? Or has she summoned him? Trepka understands the relationship to have been initiated by him. After he follows her to the Church of San Giovanni Decollato, he reflects on the meeting: “Why should there not be ghosts to such as can see them?” a question that seems to privilege his own ability of perception, his own gaze. There is something special about him that he can perceive this other world (69). Further, he thinks: “Why should she not return to earth, if she knows that it contains a man who thinks of, desires, only her?” (69). In his mind, it is his desire and love, together with his knowledge, that has summoned her forth. Mahoney sees the direction of power as follows: “While Trepka’s longing for Medea may have once threatened to transform her into nothing more than an object of erotic desire…[the] response the portrait evokes in him restores power to the femme fatale and to the work of art itself” (52). In other words, Trepka cedes his active role to Medea; she gains control over him. Trepka might not perceive his own role as Medea’s pawn – indeed, he might think that
this is what he wants – but his failure to perceive his subject position doesn’t suggest in any way that he is in control.

The ending of the story, abrupt as it is, reinforces Lee’s theory that the past is what animates and creates the supernatural and that art only deadens by creating a static representation. Not only has Medea been freed from her portrait, she also urges Trepka to mount an attack on the statue of Duke Robert, the man who arranged her death. In using these two objects, the portrait and the statue, Lee plays with the aesthetic principles about the importance of art: without the portrait, Trepka never would have fallen so deeply in love with Medea. On the other hand, the portrait is misleading; it gives Trepka the impression that he understands Medea, that she can be contained when in fact she uses Trepka to break free and gain revenge on Duke Robert. The statue is equally ambiguous in what it represents. It is clearly a monument to masculine dominance: a bronze equestrian piece planted before the palace, which Trepka sees as threatening: “the statue of Duke Robert, shimmering green, seemed advancing towards me on its horse” (75). But it is also the site of vulnerability. Medea, in a letter, has instructed Trepka to “take a hatchet and saw; cut boldly into the body of the bronze rider…near the waist. Saw open the body, and within it thou wilt find the silver effigy of a winged genius. Take it out, hack it into a hundred pieces, and fling them in all directions, so that the winds may sweep them away. That night she whom thou lovest will come to reward thy fidelity” (71). Trepka’s attack on the statue can easily be read as one man defeating a rival to win the love of a woman. But Duke Robert was not a lover of Medea’s. Trepka does pass through a veritable ghostly gauntlet of

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8 The silver effigy was affixed by Duke Robert so that “he should sleep awaiting the Day of Judgment, fully convinced that Medea’s soul will then be properly tarred and feathered” (58). In other words, Duke Robert was afraid of the time between his death and the ultimate judgment of the dead, and that in the intervening years, his soul would once again be tormented by Medea’s soul.
Medea’s former beaus on his way to the statue, and these men variously warn him away from what he intends to do and also claim Medea as their own. Despite this, I read the attack on the statue as part of Lee’s commentary on the limits of art and the power of the past and the imagination over the representational. Trepka’s attack, which is fueled by Medea’s haunting of him (her bringing the past into the present), occurs because of his imaginative (rather than archival or scholarly) interaction with Medea. Trepka destroys the body (and soul) of the Duke; he takes down a symbol of masculine hegemony. His action can surely be seen as a gender-inversion of the Pygmalion myth as well.

As the story hurtles towards its end, the question then becomes, as with “Oke of Okehurst,” how to understand the death that concludes the story. Is it repressive? Is it liberating? Who has won? Christensen argues that “ultimately [Trepka] has divorced [Medea] from her own time and woven her into his own fantasy” (34). This reading seems to suggest that because Trepka brought Medea into the present day, enabling her to haunt him, Trepka has won. However, I think that it is Medea who emerges triumphant. Any attempt Trepka made to “divorce” Medea and take her out of her historical context is a failed attempt because of his masculine desire. Surely Trepka read the final line of Medea’s note about her intention to “reward thy fidelity” as a promise to consummate their relationship. Yet instead of consummation, he is dead. At best, he joins the ranks of her ghostly lovers and would-be lovers. It is Medea’s mission that has been accomplished: Duke Robert’s effigy is destroyed. Contrary to Christensen’s claim, she can return to the past; she no longer has any need for the present. Moreover, the story ends not with Trepka’s own words, but with the odd appendage of an anonymous note that records the nature of his death. With this gesture, Lee takes away Trepka’s power as a creator – as an artist or intellectual. His scholarly work is reduced to the form of a
personal diary, to anecdote. It lacks authority; a woman’s hand (and knife) has undone what he attempted to create. Medea is the one who is active. She is her own subject, while Trepka ends the story as passive object, as corpse.

All three of the female protagonists in these stories wrestle against the constraints of art and the aestheticist men who would define and restrict them as art. All three women achieve self-realization and freedom through their awareness of history and, in particular, through their ability to connect that history to both self and art. In the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, the standard trope of the aestheticist movement, the perfect woman is created by a male artist as a statue and then is brought to life through prayer. She is empty – she is perfect form and man-made substance with no interiority and no connection to anything that came before. Vernon Lee’s stories in Hauntings rewrite the relationship between art and women, complicating it by insisting on the presence of the past as an animating and liberating force. “Dionea” offers a clear reversal of the Pygmalion motif – a woman who resists being turned into a statue because she is not representation but reality: she is not a woman who can made to look like Venus, but is, in fact, Venus herself. In the other stories, Lee doesn’t follow the Pygmalion motif as closely and instead puts more emphasis on the importance of the past. Alice Oke is able to escape the portraitist’s gaze – and her own pastoral existence – through her attunement to her ancestress’s story. She eludes simple depiction; she cannot be flattened to one plane. Medea is an inverse of this process: unlike Alice Oke, Medea begins the story as art. She, however, escapes the confines of the portrait because of her historical presence. The fact that she lived and acted in the world is what allows Trepka to recognize her as more than a portrait – it is her past life that lets her come alive and haunt, that allows her to control and manipulate the men who have restrained her.
“Amour Dure,” as with “Dionea” and “Oke of Okehurst,” as Maxwell points out, “deal with this uncontainable female energy. The strange, beautiful and demanding women who figure in these stories insist on crossing the boundaries of historical time; they require the performance of ritual and the sacrifice, most importantly, of male devotees. There is also something about them that eludes fixed representation and certainly possession” (265). The women in the stories are doubled, but not divided. They are doubled in the sense that there is a present and active version of them as well as a past version of them. It is the past that empowers them in the present, that helps them to defy or subvert the male gaze and repossess themselves, becoming more than art objects. Lee replaces the empty Galateas of aestheticist art and fiction with women whose powers are derived from their lived experiences or their access to past lived experiences – to women who are much more like Helen, conjured from the past rather than from the male imagination.

Thus, Lee’s stories not only rewrite the dominant myth of aestheticism but also speak to the theories and biases of the intellectual circles of her day, summed up by Crosby: “in the nineteenth century, ‘history’ is produced as a man’s truth, the truth of a necessarily historical Humanity, which in turn requires that ‘women’ be outside history” (qtd. in Fraser, 81). Lee, through her fiction, is rewriting the relationship of women to history. By using the genre of the ghost story, and particularly the genre’s trope of the femme fatale, Lee shows that women can access the past and be uniquely empowered by it, overcoming the limitations of the present. Further, Lee’s efforts not only convey a way in which women might become subjects and more empowered, but also redefine the relationship between women and art. Indeed, in her theoretical writings and her development of the idea of empathy, Lee redefines the relationship between people, not just women, and art.
At the core of this relationship is the inter-relatedness of sight, imagination, and history. In her memorial words for John Singer Sargent, with whom she was friends since they were both children, Lee wrote, “seeing is a business of the mind, the memory and the heart, quite as much as the eye” (qtd. in Maxwell 268). In those three attributes – “the mind, the memory and the heart” – lie the core of Lee’s theoretical work. Her ghost stories show the power of imagination as well as the power of memory, or history. It is not merely an academic knowledge of history that interests Lee, but a living one, as exemplified by the figure of Helen. Indeed, in her essay “Faustus and Helena,” Lee offers a scathing critique of how the relationship between art and history can be mishandled: we have artworks, she says, “in our historic museums, where they are scrutinized, catalogue and eye-glass in hand; others dusty on altars and in chapels, before which we uncover our heads and cast down our eyes: relics of dead and dying faiths, of which some are daily being transferred from the church to the museum” (309). Just as museums have deadened the appreciation and understanding of art, so too have male artists deadened the lives of the women they have created as their art objects – indeed, Lee’s fiction argues that the artists aren’t “creating” at all, but reducing and confining. Lee’s theory and fiction argues for a living and active experience of art – an empathic response that is physical and emotional. Through the powers of imagination, through their ability to comprehend the past in their own terms, women will no longer be the passive objects but will become the active creators of understanding.

Lee was aware of her own precarious stance. She, like her female protagonists, was doubled – she was both Vernon Lee and Violet Paget – and, as her female characters struggle to negotiate the relationship between self and art, so too did Lee struggle to find her own place within the intellectual movements of the day. Her early stance, as the epigraph to this thesis captures, was to accept that the dominant masculine circles had no interest in women’s writing.
and so assume a masculine disguise: to try to write as a man would write. But Lee’s disguise did not last long and by the time she published *Miss Brown* it is evident that – pseudonym or no pseudonym – she was not writing as a man. Yet, Lee never abandoned her pseudonym. In fact, she embraced the doubleness that it implied. Speaking of genre, Lee claimed, “The Essayist is an amphibious creature, neither fish, nor flesh, nor fowl…something of the nature of the centaur” (qtd. in Zorn xvii). It is telling, however, that Lee describes here not the essay itself, but the essayist, the one who is doing the writing and the research. It is as if the nature of the writing shapes the person who is composing the essay. This quote – and the sense of the connectedness between artist and art – explains the relationship at the heart of Lee’s fiction and non-fiction, the theory of empathy. According to Lee, there is something “amphibious” about how one should connect to art. In her writings, she repeatedly strikes down the notion of the creator in control of the art, or of the viewer enlightened by art. Instead, she composes a complicated relationship that empowers both the art – as a historical and real artefact – and the viewer/artist who responds to the art. There is an “amphibious” nature – a doubled state – the art must be part of the artist rather than being an “other.” Lee’s theory of empathy, as played out in the short fiction of *Hauntings*, eliminates the position of object. She replaces the empty Galateas and the deathly tinted-Venuses with women who are complicated amalgams of past and present, women who insist on living, who defy the artistic gaze, and who force the men who would control them to see beyond the present form and into the past.
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