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Rewriting the Myth of Atalanta: Sex and Style in Vernon Lee's "Lady Tal"

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<1>Vineta Colby's literary biography of Vernon Lee and Christa Zorn's study of Lee's aestheticism have recently brought back to the fore this long-neglected author. A multilingual child prodigy, Vernon Lee, born Violet Paget, published her first short story in French at age 14. Later, in 1881, when she travelled to England for the first time, she immediately assumed a prominent position in English artistic and intellectual circles, quickly becoming a revered, prolific writer, famous for her wit, conversational skills, scholarship, and intelligence. Although she always remained aloof from any active political engagement, her fiction and her essays show a deep awareness of feminist issues.⁽¹⁾ In her own lifestyle Lee must have struck her contemporaries as the typical New Woman, financially independent, pursuing her career passionately, rejecting marriage, and traveling across Europe as freely as any male writer. Colby calls her a "nonmilitant feminist" (xii). And, although Zorn is hesitant to call Lee a feminist, she recognizes that, while "Lee may not have been an active participant in the women's movements, [...] her arguments reflect and interact with feminist and liberal contemporary thought." Zorn adds: "Aware of cultural gender imbalances, she was interested in exploring the entrapments of both genders, not through political activism but rather as an intellectual exercise" (89).

<2>Such an exercise is the deceptively frivolous short story "Lady Tal," too easily dismissed as "a reasonably good imitation of a Jamesian character and a Jamesian plot" (Colby, 193). While Colby considers it mostly as a mere "roman à clef" (194) which alienated Lee from her good friend Henry James, Towheed calls the story "inconsistent" and a "failure" (232). These analyses, however, have ignored the feminist undertones of the narrative, which give it coherence, unity and depth. My aim is a close reading of this text that retrieves the "alternative, female, or even feminist subtext" of Lee's fiction and to recapture Lee's "different voice" (Zorn, 89).

<3>In this novella about a New Woman with literary ambitions, the first story in Lee's 1892 collection *Vanitas: Polite Stories*, Vernon Lee revisits a theme that she had broached eight years earlier in her long first novel *Miss Brown*: the relation between women and creation and the seemingly obligatory subaltern role of woman as muse, an instrument in the hands of male-fashioned art. By using the Greek myth of Atalanta, a female character known for her participation and excellence in traditionally male activities, and especially by rewriting the race of the golden apples which put an end to Atalanta's exploits, Lee challenges accepted definitions of gender roles. She asserts the need to re-imagine women beyond sexuality and to re-think the relationships between women and men. Furthermore, "Lady Tal" emphasizes the relevance of texts by contemporary women writers and pleads for the recognition of the equal intellectual abilities of female and male novelists. Recognizing sexuality as socially constructed, Lee suggests that gender is essentially a pose or a mask. While emphasizing the invaluable uniqueness of women's voices in literature, Lee is therefore also careful to avoid the binary oppositions on which gender identities are constructed by suggesting possible literary partnerships between men and women writers as equals.

<4>Lady Atalanta Walkenshaw, also known as Lady Tal, is a humorous, modernized, late nineteenth-century version of the Greek Atalanta. On the one hand, Lee modernizes the legend to bring it to bear on the contemporary debates on marriage and women's employment. On the other hand, she debunks the femme fatale myth as it had been presented in Algernon Swinburne's 1865 *Atalanta in Calydon*:

Not fire nor iron and the wide-mouthed wars
Are deadlier than her lips or braided hair.
For of the one comes poison, and a curse
Falls from the other and burns the lives of men. (265)

Instead, Lee portrays an intelligent, down-to-earth, charismatic, independent woman who refuses to conform to masculine norms of gender identity and heterosexuality.

<5>Disappointed by the birth of a daughter, Atalanta's father decided to abandon her on the side of a mountain to die. A female bear took care of her and later she was adopted by a family of hunters. Atalanta became an adventurous young woman, who was more skilled and audacious than any of the male chiefs, capable of beating them at racing, wrestling and hunting. She became the protégée of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the wilderness, the hunt and wild animals. As Artemis's follower she was involved in the Calydonian Boar Hunt. In order to punish king Oeneus, who had forgotten to honor Artemis at the beginning of harvest, Artemis sent a monstrous boar to the country of Calydon. The boar was wreaking havoc in the fields, killing herds and the men trying to come near. So, the king asked the best chiefs of Greece for help, among them Atalanta. Other male members of the hunt objected to her presence, but consumed with lust, Meleager, son of Oeneus, insisted that Atalanta be allowed to participate. Atalanta shot the first arrow to pierce the boar, which prompted Meleager to give Atalanta the boar's pelt. But Meleager's two uncles protested to Atalanta receiving the pelt, so Meleager killed them. When Meleager's mother heard that he had killed her brothers, she decided to have him die. Atalanta thus served Artemis's plan in which the real weapon of revenge was love.

<6>The Calydonian Boar Hunt is the episode which Swinburne's tragedy focuses on. It reinforces the idea of Atalanta as yet another "idol of perversity" (Dijkstra) who, like the overpowering, devouring Salomé, brings death and devastation to men. Lee, on the other hand, seems to have been more interested in the subsequent episode in the legend: the race of the three golden apples.

<7>Atalanta's commitment to Artemis's ideal of chastity makes her in fact a very different figure than Salomé. Like her mythical namesake, Lady Atalanta attracts men but has no taste for them. "Lady Tal" is placed under the auspices of Artemis's influence. The moon, traditionally associated with the Greek goddess of maidenhood, is present from the beginning of the short story in an aestheticized form.⁽²⁾ In Lee's tale, Lady Atalanta Walkenshaw may not be virginal, but she is a celibate widow constantly turning down suitors and determined to avoid marriage. In the Greek legend, Atalanta's sex is problematic, her face being too virginal to be that of a boy and too boyish to be that of a young woman. Similarly in the novella, Tal blurs the boundaries of sex: she is a "mannish" (231), cigarette-smoking New Woman who attracts men and women alike. She is the daughter of Lord Ossian, an allusion to Oscar Wilde which suggests her rejection of heterosexuality. She lives with, and devotedly takes care of, her tomboy cousin Gertrude, of whom she feels very possessive.⁽³⁾ Furthermore, she resents "having to see such a lot of ugly white men in [her] drawing-room" (197). We are told that she is "six foot high" (206), never flirts (216), has a slightly "masculine voice" (197), and is "tall, straight and strongly built [...], active and stalwart, suggestive of long rides and drives and walks" (198).

<8>In the Greek legend, after Atalanta participated in the Calydonian hunt and received the pelt, her father claimed her as his child and wanted her to marry. Similarly in Lee's story, Tal's entourage would like her to remarry and her refusal to do so causes much disapproval. Just as her circle of acquaintances object to her walking the streets of Venice unchaperoned, they also object to her remaining unmarried, inventing all sorts of unseemly reasons behind her choice (chapter II). Tal later confesses to Marion that she suffers from such social pressure, but that despite her best efforts at conforming she can't and she won't (245). Finally, like Atalanta who had no interest in men except as hunting partners, Tal has no interest in Marion except as a writing partner. Her coolness and aloofness infuriate Jervase Marion who, much against his own will, feels overcome by the "temptations of that demon of psychological study" (218) and by a compulsive need to watch Tal. One is tempted to interpret Marion's sudden passion for studying Lady Atalanta as a displacement of his unconscious desire: indeed, Marion reacts as a jilted lover when Tal brings an end to their literary collaboration. In fact, the outrageously unfeminine coldness which Marion dislikes in Tal is in keeping with the Greek Atalanta's power and control over sexuality. In this respect, Lee's Atalanta is very similar to Aubrey Beardsley's representation of the mythical figure as an impassive, androgynous creature whose emotions and libido are completely under her control. By representing Atalanta's darting hound suspended in mid-air, arrested in its forward movement, positioned like a massive, irrelevantly erect penis, Beardsley suggests the remarkable control of the Greek virgin over sexuality, at least in its masculine manifestation. In Marion's mind, Tal is also associated with the goddess Athena, as he likens her hair with a "helmet" (Lee, 214), a metaphor for the fighting spirit, intelligence, and rationality of Tal

<9>In the legend, in order to find her a husband, her father made a deal with Atalanta that she would marry anybody who could beat her in a foot race. Atalanta happily agreed, as she was confident that she could outrun any suitor. The one that finally became her husband was Hippomenes. Hippomenes knew that he could not win a fair race with Atalanta, so he asked Aphrodite for help. Always eager to teach a lesson to maidens disdainful of love, the goddess gave him three golden apples and told him to drop them one at a time to distract Atalanta. Sure enough, she stopped running to pick up each golden apple and was delayed long enough for Hippomenes finally to win the race and Atalanta's hand, which put an end to her adventurous life. Significantly, this is the part that Lee chooses to rewrite. Chapter VI of "Lady Tal" strikes us as a parodic reenactment of the treacherous race which led to Atalanta's defeat and her marriage to Hippomenes. The scene, strategically placed right in the middle of the short story, unfolds in a Venetian market, where Tal and Marion have just fortuitously met. Against the backdrop of the sexualized food items of the fruit and vegetable stands, the encounter between Marion and Tal at the market and the burlesque dropping of the oranges which ensues are more crucially significant than first appears:

'You don't mind carrying parcels, do you?' Lady Tal had stopped at one of the front stalls, and having had three vast yellow paper bags filled with oranges and lemons, she handed the two largest to Marion. [...]

'What an odious, odious creature a woman is,' thought Marion. He wondered, considerably out of temper, why he should feel so miserable at having to carry all those oranges. Of course with three gaping bags piled on his chest there was the explanation of acute physical discomfort; but that wasn't sufficient. It seemed as if this terrible, aristocratic giantess were doing it all on purpose to make him miserable. He saw that he was intensely ridiculous in her eyes, with those yellow bags against his waistcoat and the parcel of snuff in his coat pocket; his face was also, he thought, streaming with perspiration, and he couldn't get at his handkerchief. It was childish, absurd of him to mind; for, after all, wasn't Lady Atalanta equally burdened? But she, with her packets of rolls, and packet of books, and basket of eggs, and her umbrella tucked under her arm, looked serene and even triumphant in her striped flannel.

'I beg your pardon—would you allow me to stop a minute and shift the bags to the other arm?' Marion could no longer resist that fearful agony. 'If you go on I'll catch you up in a second.'

But just as Marion was about to rest the bags upon the marble balustrade of a bridge, his paralysed arm gave an unaccountable jerk, and out flew one of the oranges, and rolled slowly down the stone steps of the bridge.

'I say, don't do that! You'll have them all in the canal!' cried Lady Atalanta, as Marion quickly stooped in vain pursuit of the escaped orange, the movement naturally, and as if it were being done on purpose, causing another orange to fly out in its turn [...].

'Damn the beastly things!' ejaculated Marion, forgetful of Lady Atalanta and good breeding, and perceiving only the oranges jumping and rolling about, and feeling his face grow redder and hotter in the glare on that white stone bridge. [...]

'Bless my heart, how helpless is genius when it comes to practical matters!' exclaimed Lady Atalanta. And putting her various packages down carefully on the parapet, she calmly collected the bounding oranges, wiped them with her handkerchief, and restored them to Marion, recommending him to 'stick them loose in his pockets.' (227-228)

Hippomenes's voluntary dropping of the golden apples to slow down Atalanta in order to secure her hand is replaced by Marion's involuntary dropping of the oranges, which Lady Tal herself has forced on him, and his immobilization. The inevitable result of this confusion of roles being that, instead of "catching up" with Tal, he is paralyzed and loses face in front of Lady Atalanta, as well as some Italian spectators and a large party of Americans from his hotel. Tal's success at retrieving the oranges (the Greek *χρυσομηλιά*, and the Latin *pomum aurantium* both literally describe oranges as "golden apples") without losing time or temper suggests that here marriage will never be on the agenda. Clearly, the modern Atalanta gets the upper hand and the revised version of the legendary race signals to the reader that the new Atalanta will not be stopped in her aspirations and ambitions.

<10>As it happens, the ambitions of Lee's Atalanta are of a literary, not athletic, kind. Lady Tal's

As it happens, the ambitions of Lee's Atalanta are of a literary, not athletic, kind. Lady Tal's chosen field of interest is fiction writing, on which she wishes to receive the advice of the famous novelist Jervase Marion, a character partly modeled on Henry James. Writing, however, according to Marion, is better left to men, who have been taught the supposedly masculine art of rhetoric. But, instead of being content with the subaltern, Muse-like role in which Jervase would like to confine her, so he can use her story and her personality for his own novel, Tal asserts her right to success, fame, independence, creativity, and authorship. "Lady Tal" is an unpretentious comedy of manners which wittily articulates Lee's notions of independent womanhood and female authorship. It presents female independence as a fact, mostly problematic for men who, like Marion, feel insecure in their gender identity: nothing irritates him more than Tal's burly cousin's pronouncing his name "Mary Anne" or his being reduced to the role of "male daily governess" (234). Tal's name, on the other hand, is not only suggestive of her "tall" stature but it also confirms her "tal-ent," both in the usual sense of giftedness and in the etymological sense of having equal status (with men).⁽⁴⁾ Even Marion confesses to himself that he sees a certain talent for plot and dialogues in Lady Tal's piece (213). Vernon Lee's veiled allusion to the myth of Atalanta thus serves a plea in favor of recognizing female literary talent and women's equal intellectual abilities. In fact, it is Tal's majestic head which impresses Marion the most, so much so that he describes it inwardly to himself for twenty three lines (214-215); on the other hand, the part of himself that occupies him the most seems to be his feet and his tight boots. The race of sorts between Tal and Marion at the market thus epitomizes the more general literary contest in which the budding fiction writer and the famous novelist are involved.

<11>Lady Tal fascinates Marion, to the point that he finds himself mentally using everything she does and says, and even the decoration of her house, for a future novel of his.⁽⁵⁾ But the narrative subverts Marion's expectations and ours because, as Marion gradually realizes, she knows full well that he is studying and using her (247), and she is using him. Unlike Marion, who tries to convince her—and himself—of his disinterestedness (247), she frankly acknowledges that she will be borrowing his remarks for her novel (239). Her honesty and directness differ from his own intellectual "duplicity," which he tries to justify:

Jervase Marion was in the humour when he considered Lady Tal a legitimate subject of study, an intellectual vivisection a praiseworthy employment. Such study implies, as a rule, a good deal of duplicity on the part of the observer; duplicity doubtless sanctified, like all the rest, by the high mission of prying into one's neighbour's soul. (235)

Occasionally, his duplicity causes him to feel guilt, as if he sensed that his using Tal was unseemly, akin to exploitation and plagiarism: he realizes that he could "scarcely venture to write that novel of his; he might as well call it *Lady Tal* at once. It was doubtless this discovery which made him grow suddenly very red" (246). Tal's own open use of Marion's remarks or ideas, on the other hand, suggests a freedom or independence of thought and an ability to learn from others in a creative, non-exploitative, non-plagiaristic way.

<12>Often using Marion as the focalizer, the narrative voice allows us to see the discrepancies and inconsistencies between his narrow perception and the facts. He appears deeply muddled about Lady Tal and about his own desires and motivations. For example, he starts wondering how he was talked into helping Tal (207) or why he is drinking so much tea when it is bad for his nerves (236). In the opening chapter, Marion thought he had her pegged as a "type" well-known to him. But when she baffles his expectations, he decides to categorize her as having "no soul" and being mean, grasping, and horrid (198, 231).⁽⁶⁾ Marion's analyses of Tal, however, are never really convincing. He never knows where he stands with her, in turn liking her, admiring her, and then hating her, being annoyed at her. At one point he believes that he has found, beneath Tal's formidable personality, the "real Lady Tal" (251), the woman who has suffered an unhappy marriage and the death of an invalid brother, and he is ashamed of having thought of using her as a character in a book. He feels moved by the thought of an emotionally fragile Lady Tal (241) because that would fit with his conventional way of thinking about women. But she is always a step ahead and the next minute, just when he has been "moved" by her little display of emotion, she tells him, "Just now you thought I'd got a soul, didn't you, Mr. Marion? You've been wondering all along whether I had one. For a minute I managed to make you believe it—it was rather mean of me, wasn't it? I haven't got one" (239-240). As for Tal, the reader is not given access to her internal thought process, for she remains a surface, a mask:

the whole face affected Marion as a huge and handsome mask, as something clapped on and intended to conceal. To conceal what? It seemed to the novelist as he listened

to the stream of animated conventionalities of jokes unconnected with any high spirits, that the mask of Lady Atalanta's face, like those great stone masks in Roman galleries and gardens, concealed the mere absence of everything. (214-215)

This "mask" is the surface onto which Marion and the other characters project their beliefs and fears about the hypothetical essence or "secret" (235) of womanhood, investing Tal with an identity that is entirely constructed. In fact, Tal's beautifully *penciled* eyebrows even suggest that gender in general is always merely the effect of discourse, a social construction, a "performance" (212). Tal thus remains mostly an elegant and complex "enigma" (233), a "riddle" (223), typically embodying the mystery of Victorian femininity.

<13>Exasperated at not being able to pin her down, the psychological novelist longs to be in his Westminster apartment, his ivory tower, his Simon Stylites' column (257), where everything seems more stable and people can be contemplated from a distance and dissected coolly (240). He cannot understand Tal because, in his mind, there is nothing a woman's heart desires beyond "carriages, horses and diamonds, and frocks from Worth, and portraits by Lenbach and Sargent, and bric-à-brac, and —ever so much money for charities, hospitals, that sort of thing—and—and complete leisure and freedom and opportunities for enjoying the company of men" (244). Lady Tal, on the other hand, turns out to be more perceptive than the novelist: her remarks on Marion "hit the right nail on the head" and are "singularly correct" (232), as the narrator points out.

<14>Regarding her manuscript, Marion is especially disconcerted because he believes, like most critics of the time, in the theory of female autobiographical authorship. He is therefore surprised at the discrepancy between plot and author. His confusion between author and protagonist leads him to try to "make out how on earth this woman had come to write the novel he had been reading" (212). "There was nothing at all surprising in the novel, the surprising point lay in its having this particular author" (215), he reflects. But he soon solves this apparent contradiction by coming to the conclusion that her book is simply "a case of unconscious, complete imitation. The explanation of Lady Tal's having produced a novel so very different from herself, was simply that, as a matter of fact, she had not produced that novel at all" (215). In fact, his prejudice against Tal's novel is evident from his immediate reaction after reading the very first word of the book: "'Violet—' it began. 'Violet! And her name's Violet too!' ejaculated Marion to himself" (211), a line especially humorous considering that Violet was Vernon Lee's real name.⁽⁷⁾ Unable—or unwilling—to even consider the possibility of Tal's writing being original or compelling, he focuses on the subject of punctuation and length of sentences, without saying anything about the literary merit—or demerit—of Tal's plot and style. With the intention of deterring Lady Tal from a literary career, he prepares a condescending little speech for her and plans to recommend "an invaluable little work on the subject—'Stops: and how to manage them'" as well as "a book which I used in my boyhood, —a great many years ago, alas!—called 'Blair's Rhetoric'" (212). Interestingly enough, concern over style and grammar rose significantly in the 1890s, fueled by a sense of insecurity concerning the democratization of education and of the novel (Bonnell, 137). Remarks about punctuation, syntax, and grammar were common criticisms leveled at *fin de siècle* women writers⁽⁸⁾ by male critics, who had been raised on classical education and erudite scholarship in exclusively male institutions and were trying to edge women out of the field of novel-writing (Bonnell, 139). Tal's single-sentence-long paragraph (211),⁽⁹⁾ which astonishes Marion, is not unlike Vernon Lee's own prose "with long chains of independent clauses weaving sentences so intricate that the reader is forced to go back to the distant beginning of a sentence to bring all its ideas together" (Colby, 56). Marion's other criticisms of Tal's novel suggest his own limitations as a reader, whose expectations are that there will be no ambiguity, nothing left unsaid about the characters and the plot: "You are perpetually taking all sorts of knowledge for granted in your reader. Your characters don't sufficiently explain themselves; you write as if your reader had witnessed the whole thing and merely required reminding" (217). Lee herself had high expectations of her readership. As Shafquat Towheed has shown, she was committed to training and instructing her readers, making reading "research" more than "entertainment" (Shafquat, 228). Unlike Marion, Lee favored literature which demanded the active participation of the reader in the elaboration of meaning, a meaning that was necessarily complex, elusive, and partial.

<15>Considering their divergences, it is no wonder that Lady Tal eventually rebels against Marion's tutelage and his appropriation of her novel. While Marion feels quite satisfied with what her novel has become under his supervision, Lady Tal exclaims, "You put all your ideas into poor *Christina*, and you just expect me to be able to carry them out, and when I make a hideous hash, you're not satisfied. You think of that novel just as if it were you writing it—you know you do" (253). We are later told elliptically that Tal has sent her manuscript for publication after working

on the novel on her own. Hopefully, she was able to instill into it more of her own personality. But on this, the novella is silent. It ends abruptly on a witty note, with Lady Tal turning the tables on Marion and claiming that he is really going to need her help with his future novel. Whereas in *Miss Brown*, Anne, the main protagonist, was a victim of the Pygmalion myth, Tal is able to disengage herself from the exploitative relationship. With this novella, Vernon Lee examines the usual relationship which connects the literary genius to his (female) muse, exposing the ways in which male artists or writers have often used and abused their muses, while the muses' own talent went ignored. As Talia Schaffer has shown in her analyses of Lucas Malet's aestheticism, literary aestheticism is the genre which best enabled women writers of the 1890s to elegantly broach subjects which would have seemed outrageous in realist novels (46-47). In "Lady Tal" too, the aesthetic form acts precisely as a screen for a subversive critique of the masculine literary world, a device which prevented this text from being too blatantly and unacceptably political.

<16>From a feminist standpoint, "Lady Tal" is clever because it effectively challenges gender categorizations by subtly operating a series of reversals: the subversion of the myth of the race of the golden apples as well as the inversion of the hierarchical relationships between mentor/ pupil directly follow from Tal's initial refusal to be the *object* of Marion's desire, the *object* of his "gaze": "Before even beginning to think about Lady Atalanta, he had begun to watch her; he was watching her now consciously; indeed all his existence was engrossed in such watching" (222). "Lady Tal" effects a dialectical reversal of power because Lee's narrative emphasis is on Tal's determination to be an agent who reverses the gaze, a speaking subject who writes back. Indeed, Marion is struck by her "bright, cold, blue eyes, which looked you in the face when you expected it least, and which looked away from you when you expected it least, also" (213). In other words, Tal challenges Marion in his position as authoritative male subject and thus undermines the internal stability of the binary opposition man/woman. Tal shakes up Marion by what Judith Butler calls the "sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object,' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position" (vii).

<17>Questioning Marion's masculine viewpoint begins with a critique of the notion of "author." The challenge to Marion's position as literary authority actually starts in the opening pages when, upon meeting Jervase Marion, "a lady of high literary tastes" mistakenly —or perhaps mischievously—congratulates him as "the author of a novel by Randolph Tomkins, whom he abominated most of all living writers" (197). Is the lady less knowledgeable than Miss Vanderwerf claims? Or is the lady not interested in the person behind the author? Has Marion possibly been guilty of plagiarism? Or, more interestingly, is Lee suggesting that any writing necessarily takes place within and against other texts, with the effect of blurring such notions as uniqueness, origin, originality? Regardless of how one interprets the blunder, this mix-up demystifies and deflates the concept of "author." Lee's skepticism regarding the notion of "author" is repeatedly conveyed, as when she has Miss Vanderwerf discover that the psychological novelist's intuition isn't always right (201) or when she later has Lady Atalanta disrespectfully poke fun at the practical ineptness of genius (228). Clearly, Tal is not impressed by a big name. She does not believe in genius as an ontological category. Tal neither idealizes nor idolizes the renowned novelist. Nor is she impressed by grammatical rules, or constrained by her husband's will or his heir's demands. In fact, she makes light of most established rules. But Tal's sense of humor, her ability to laugh, is precisely what guarantees her ability to operate a critique of phallogocentrism. "Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism" (viii), Butler notes. Indeed, Tal's laughter is what differentiates her the most from the serious, paternalistic Marion and makes her entire attitude worthy of Cixous's laughing Medusa.

<18>One way in which Lady Tal is able to assert her position as subject is through writing, and more particularly through writing about women's lives. But of course she encounters much resistance on the part of Marion, who dismisses this subject as unimportant. After reading the novel for the first time, Marion disparagingly summarizes the plot: "The story was no story at all, merely the unnoticed martyrdom of a delicate and scrupulous woman tied to a vain, mean, and frivolous man; the long starvation of a little soul which required affections and duties among the unrealities of the world" (215). Later, he finds fault with the characterization, claiming that "a woman who makes up her mind to avoid the temptation of all passion in the abstract, and what is more, acts consistently and persistently with this object in view, particularly when she has never experienced passion at all, when she has not even burnt the tips of her fingers once in her life—; that does seem rather far fetched, you must admit" (235). Marion's impression that Tal's character and situation seem unrealistic is in fact typical of someone socialized to masculine identification and his remark reveals Marion's double standards, as Tal immediately points out: "I don't see

why you should say so, merely because the person's a woman" (235-236). In fact, not only are Marion and Tal involved in writing *Christina*, but more literally they are engaged in discursively producing Christina the woman. In other words, their literary collaboration involves them in a negotiation over the meaning and identity of "woman." Naturally, it is only after *severing* her tie with her instructor —the separation scene shows Tal appropriately looking for her "long pair of dressmaker's scissors" (253)—, that Lady Atalanta will be able to complete her novel and emerge as a subject in her own right.

<19>Initially introduced as a mere "voice" (197), Tal has by the end of the story acquired a body, the body of a text all her own. The narrative ultimately tells the story of Lady Tal's incarnation or actualization into words, into the body of her text. In *Christina* she has written what Cixous calls the "text of her self":

To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot," for not being both at once, for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. (351)

Like Cixous's woman, Tal has experienced the impossible position of the always "guilty." Her friends have accused her of marrying for money, but also condemned her for not remarrying; they have been furious that she inherited money, but have criticized her for not spending more of it and have blamed her for her late husband's unusual will. While they recognize that she nursed her brother devotedly until his death, they also suspect that she used him to flirt with his male acquaintances and they object to her not having shown public signs of grief. They complain about her lack of kindness and warmth, but also disapprove of her buoyant way of taking care of the sick at the hospital. Lee's female character has known instinctively all along that writing was what she wanted, what she needed, precisely to "tear her away" from this position of the guilty one and to achieve "emancipation": "I'm a great deal more patient than you imagine, Mr. Marion, when I want a thing —and I do want this—I want to write novels. I want the occupation, the interest, the excitement. Perhaps some day I shall want the money too" (218).

<20>Lee's story, however, does more than simply reverse the hierarchical binaries Marion/Tal, man/woman. In the end, the focus is less on gender *opposition* than on the possibility of a dynamic process of exchange from one subject to another. Lee's short story is an attempt at thinking beyond or outside the binary man/woman. Just as the package containing the successive drafts of the novel travels back and forth between Tal's house and Marion's hotel, the intense literary collaboration between Marion and Tal over *Christina* may be construed as representing an attempt at working the in-between, exploring the dependency of Marion/Tal, man/woman:

by the end of ten days, there was established, between Lady Tal's lodgings and Marion's hotel, a lively interchange of communication, porters and gondoliers for ever running to and fro [...]. The number of parcels must have been particularly mysterious to these messengers, unless the proverbially rapid intuition (inherited during centuries of intrigue and spying) of Venetian underlings arrived at the fact that the seemingly numberless packets were in reality always one and the same, or portions of one and the same: the celebrated novel traveling to and fro, with perpetual criticisms from Marion and corrections from Lady Atalanta. This method of intercourse was, however, daily supplemented by sundry notes, in the delicate, neat little hand of the novelist, or the splashing writing of the lady, saying with little variation—'Dear Lady Atalanta, I fear I may not have made my meaning very clear with respect to Chapter I, II, III, IV—or whatever it might be—will you allow me to give you some verbal explanations on the subject?' and 'Dear Mr. Marion, —*Do* come *at once*. I've got stuck over that beastly chapter V, VI, or VII, and positively *must* see you about it.' (219).

In the end, "Lady Tal" represents the relationship between the sexes as an on-going process taking

place within language, a discursive praxis, a dialectical text; a text which, at the end of the short story, Tal promises to continue to write *with* him in a future book.

<21>To conclude, analyzing the feminist substratum of “Lady Tal” leads us to acknowledge Vernon Lee’s contribution to the debate on New Women and sexuality. In this short story, Lee suggests that sexuality is never pre-discursive and that the “sexual dissidence” analyzed by Kathy Alexis Psomiades and Martha Vicinus begins in the body of language.

Endnotes

(1)On Lee’s feminism, see Christa Zorn, 81-90.(△)

(2)The “white carpet of moonlight” (192) and “the moonbeams [...] weaving a strange, intricate pattern, like some old Persian tissue” (195) convey the aesthetic vision of Marion.(△)

(3)When Gertrude is sick, Tal refuses to stay longer at Miss Vanderwerf’s. She gives the “aesthetic gentleman” a “shutting-up look” and says talking about Gertrude: “Learn to respect my *belongings* [...]. I must go back to my cousin” (my emphasis, 198). Moreover, Gertrude herself is said to like the company of “effete Italian youths” (198), which confirms her lesbianism: as

Martha Vicinus points out, the adolescent boy in fin-de-siècle literature “signified the coming of age of the modern gay and lesbian sensibility” (Vicinus, 83-84).(△)

(4)L.T. Meade must have had the same etymological meaning in mind when she started *Atalanta* (1887-1892), a feminist girls’ periodical which promoted women’s employment opportunities.(△)

(5)Marion’s novel is nothing but a sentimentalized, simplified version of what he understands Lady Tal to be about (242-243).(△)

(6)The reference to Tal’s absence of “soul” is probably an allusion to the group known as the Souls: Tal has/is no s/Soul. As Margaret Stetz explains: “Among the aristocratic classes, women associated with the group known as the Souls were particularly keen to divert themselves, in their country houses, with avant-garde male artists” (27). Colby reveals that Vernon Lee’s lectures also attracted this group of “privileged women (and some men) who cultivated witty conversation, good food and wine” (175).(△)

(7)Unfortunately, most of the contemporary readers of “Lady Tal” –and *Miss Brown* too—did the same, interpreting the characters in the story as direct imitations of real people. Henry James especially felt satirized and was deeply offended. And yet, as a friend of Vernon Lee observed, the same Henry James also used real individuals and friends unconsciously as material for his novels (Colby, 198).(△)

(8)Sarah Grand for example (Bonnell, 137-138).(△)

(9)Significantly, Modernists such as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf (who read Vernon Lee) would later experiment with punctuation and syntax in order to break up the successiveness on which written language and narratives usually rely. The first sentence of Lady Tal’s novel is the only evidence we are given of Tal’s style as Lee imagined it, but the punctuation and the use of the present tense and of stream of consciousness are interestingly modern in hindsight. It makes one want to speculate on the style of the rest of Tal’s novel.

Violet is seated in a low chair in the gloom in the big bow window at Kieldar—the big bow window encircled by ivy and constructed it is said by Earl Rufus before he went to the crusades and from which you command a magnificent prospect of the broad champagne country extending for many miles, all dotted with oaks and farmhouses and bounded on the horizon by the blue line of the hills of B—shire—the window in which she had sat so often and cried as a child when her father Lord Rufus had married again and brought home that handsome Jewish wife with the *fardée* face and the exquisite dresses from Worth—Violet had taken refuge in that window in order to think over the events of the previous evening and that offer of marriage which her cousin Marmaduke had just made to her— (211)(△)

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