

Art, Androgyny, and the *Femme Fatale*
in Decadent Fictions of the Nineteenth
Century

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PhD 2020

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Manchester Metropolitan
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Literature
Manchester Metropolitan University

2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a reappraisal of the recurring figure of the *femme fatale* within Decadent art and literature of the nineteenth century. Despite the ubiquity of studies concerning the *femme fatale*, most notably within genres such as Film Noir and Romanticism, the Decadent *femme fatale* has often been relegated to a single chapter or footnote within these studies. It is here the purpose of this thesis to rectify this critical disregard.

Combining multiple disciplines (literature, aesthetics, history, mythology and psychology) each of the four chapters of this thesis will locate the *femme fatale* within nineteenth-century European Decadent texts as represented as a specific *objet d'art*: the haunted portrait, the corpse-doll, the fragmented sculpture, and the mutilated and/or sculpted body of the androgyne. Invoking Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, the influence and trajectory of each chapter's respective *femme fatale* will be traced from the mid-nineteenth century through to the *fin de siècle*. By tracing the lineage of the aesthetic impression made by French Decadent writers of the mid-nineteenth century (such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire) upon subsequent French and British writers and artists of the late-nineteenth century (such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, Rachilde, and Vernon Lee), this thesis interrogates how the re/construction and usage of the Decadent *femme fatale* was utilized as a means of exploring ulterior philosophies of classical beauty and a fluid range of forbidden sexualities, including androgyny and homoeroticism.

Offering interdisciplinary readings of the nineteenth-century Decadent *femme fatale*, this thesis shows the different ways in which nineteenth-century Decadent writers and artists move beyond the *femme fatale*'s malevolence, though without losing sight of it, to explore the mysterious relationships between life and death, art and artifice, pleasure and pain, and the seen and unseen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Doctors Emma Liggins, Angelica Michelis, and Elizabeth Nolan have been a tremendous source of encouragement and practical help throughout the research and writing of this project. I am incredibly grateful for their warm hospitality to my ideas, and support throughout the completion of this thesis.

My parents, Neil and Yvonne Murphy, have provided unflagging support in all of my endeavours. Thanks must also be given to my aunt, Gail Lamb, and my friends, Laura Burke, Chloe Hall, Mia Kennedy and Kate Palmer, for their unwavering support, both personal and material, over the past four years.

PROLEGOMENON

The Clinging Vines of Decadence

Housed in Manchester Art Gallery, John William Waterhouse's oil painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) [fig. 0.1.] illustrates the climactic denouement of the myth of Hylas. Recounted by ancients, such as Apollonius of Rhodes, Theocritus and Ovid, Hylas's myth vaunts the impulsive erotic overtones of the spectative gaze. Raised as the attendant and lover of Herakles, Hylas subsequently became an Argonaut, accompanying Jason on his voyage aboard the Argo. Sent ashore to gather fresh water on the Aegean isle of Mysia, Hylas discovered a spring in which naiads (water nymphs) were gathered by moonlight to sing the praise of Artemis. Emerging from the pool, one naiad noticed Hylas submerging his bronze ewer beneath the waters. 'And there,' Apollonius writes, 'with the full moon shining on him from a clear sky, she saw him in all his radiant beauty and alluring grace.'¹ Infatuated by Hylas's radiance, the naiad embraced him within a withering grip and dragged him to his death in the murky depths of the spring. Crystallizing the inciting moment before Hylas's death, Waterhouse's canvas emphasizes the overwhelming power of beauty upon the desirous gaze exchanged between Hylas and the nymph. Waterhouse re-casts Apollonius's lunar tableau within a hazy panorama of oppressive flora. Ancient sources have Hylas ensnared by one nymph, yet Waterhouse multiplies his nymphs to seven, each one bearing the same languid face, their vine-like hair adorned with white waterlilies. *Nymphaea*, the botanical name for waterlilies, aligns the nymphs with flowers: beautiful, naked, yet identical. Seen together, the recapitulated beauty of the nymphs constitutes what Peter Trippi interprets as the *fin-de-siècle* Decadent motif of 'deadly, long tendrilled flowers rising from the water'.² Indeed, *fin-de-siècle* audiences may have been aware of the neologism 'nymphomaniac', a term used since the 1860s to describe an 'abnormal' interest of some women for sexual gratification, and which Richard von Krafft-Ebing pathologized as a 'syndrome within the sphere of physical degeneration'.³ Dragging the resplendent Hylas to his aquatic tomb, Waterhouse's nymphs are the clinging vines of Decadence.

¹ Apollonius of Rhodes, *The Voyage of the Argo – The Argonautica* trans. by E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959), p. 96.

² Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2013), p. 145.

³ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* trans. By Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), p. 322.

Of recent scholarship concerning Waterhouse's oeuvre, Elizabeth Prettejohn remorsefully notes that 'when Waterhouse's work has been discussed at all, it has usually been to castigate him for his misogyny in representing the female figure as evil in her very beauty'.⁴ Alas, Prettejohn's words were prophetic: in early 2018, Manchester Art Gallery temporarily withdrew Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* from public view to encourage debate concerning the exploitation and objectification of women within public discourse. Clare Gannaway, curator of Modern Art at the Manchester gallery, expressed discomfort with the latent eroticism in Waterhouse's painting, alongside other works of pre-Raphaelite artists, due to their depictions of women as 'either passive, beautiful objects or femmes fatales'.⁵ When pressed for comment on the gallery's removal of the artwork, Prettejohn concisely stated: 'The Victorians are always getting criticized because they're supposed to be prudish. But here it would seem it's us who are taking the roles of what we think of as very moralistic Victorians.'⁶ Tellingly, Gannaway's formulation of Waterhouse's nymphs as *either* passive objects *or* *femmes fatales* echoes the critical appraisals of Waterhouse's canvas following its debut at the Manchester Autumn Exhibition of 1896. *The Magazine of Art* serenaded the poetical daintiness of Waterhouse's composition, describing the grouping of the 'sweet-eyed nymphs' as 'superb [...] their fair forms rise like flowers from among lily-leaves [...] and a spirit of real poetry pervades the canvas'.⁷ *Art Journal's* A. C. R. Carter similarly articulated the tranquil charm of the naiads as bearing 'no look of savage witchery; theirs is a sad and sympathetic welcome, tinged with [...] ascetic mournfulness'. Yet, Carter concludes that Waterhouse's painting suggests 'none of that gladness which the classic legend's undercurrent of blissful immortality contains'.⁸ Carter's charge of entropy illuminates a Victorian consternation concerning Decadence, a cultural abandon to luxury and vice. Encapsulating Carter's concern, the fellow critic M. H. Spielmann described the nymphs as having 'such wistful and delicate forms' that he is unsure of whether he pities or envies the watery fate of Hylas.⁹

Contemporary and Victorian critiques of *Hylas and the Nymphs* frame perception of the painting under the pejorative pretence that the nymphs exist *solely* as passive flowers or

⁴ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *J. W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite* ed. By Elizabeth Prettejohn, Peter Trippi, Robert Upstone and Patty Wageman (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), p. 31.

⁵ Clare Gannaway, quoted in Anonymous, 'Victorian nymphs painting back on display after censorship row' (Feb. 1st, 2018), *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-42917974>> [Accessed 08/02/2020].

⁶ Prettejohn, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷ Anonymous, quoted in Anthony Hobson, *The Art and Life of J W Waterhouse RA 1849-1917* (London: Cassell Ltd, 1980), p. 98.

⁸ A. C. R. Carter quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁹ M. H. Spielmann quoted in Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse*, p. 149.

femmes fatales. Debate under such pretences allows only negative outcomes. Thus, engagement with *Hylas and the Nymphs* is configured to positioning the nymphs within a heteronormative passive/violent sexual binary. Despite Carter's moderately conservative critique, he briefly speculates beyond this binary, opining that in the 'gracefully moulded form of the doomed Argonaut, there is all that love of anatomical beauty in which [Frederic] Leighton revelled'.¹⁰ For Carter, Waterhouse's emphasis on the physical beauty of Hylas justifies the spectative, by proxy of the naiad's, eroticized gaze, alluding to visual and sexual frameworks heretofore disregarded or ignored. Carter's sensuous perception of Hylas illuminates the debates that the configuration of the nymphs within a heteronormative passive/violent sexual binary puts under erasure: does Hylas, protégé and beloved of Herakles, find mirrored within the naiad's gaze an identification with the love of male beauty? Does Hylas's passive stance beneath the naiad's grasp suggest a wilful submergence or identification with the watery realm of the feminine? Does this fatal encounter figure instead as a palingenesis or mystical marriage in which the *femme fatale* 'kills' into an existence beyond the paradigms of the 'known' world?¹¹

Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* here operates as a case study, the painting a contextual locus delineating critiques of the representation of transgressive desire in conflation with the nineteenth-century *femme fatale*. The scope and pervasiveness of the sexually transgressive *femme fatale* within European art and literature has been readily assessed. Yet, much of the critique emulates that of *Hylas and the Nymphs*, locating the *femme fatale* within the structural binarisms of a pre-ordained dogmatic framework: *Either*, the *femme fatale* is a male fantasy of a sexually subordinating woman, *or* a figure whose 'monstrousness' contravenes oppressive, patriarchal structures. It is this binary that this thesis seeks to problematize, articulating how the nineteenth-century Decadent motif of the *femme fatale*, in varying modes and modulations, operates as a ready agent of the transgressive, a body upon which is projected and agentically enacted ulterior philosophies of classical beauty and a fluid range of forbidden sexualities, including androgyny, homoeroticism and role reversal.

Dramatis Personae: The Femme Fatale and the Decadent Androgyne

¹⁰ A. C. R. Carter quoted in Hobson, *The Art and Life of J W Waterhouse RA 1849-1917*, p. 97.

¹¹ Acknowledgement must be given, before further stranding the painting within considerations of sex and gender, that *Hylas and the Nymphs* may simply be enjoyed for its technical mastery, delight stemming from an evocation of mood and tone. The readings posited within the main body of the 'Prolegomenon' are here utilized to contextually express ideas that will be considered throughout the thesis.

Influenced by classical antiquity and Romanticism, European artists of the late-nineteenth century reproduced the image of the *femme fatale* with *élan*. From the ancient Helen of Troy, Circe, Medusa, Medea, Lamia and the sirens, through the Biblical Eve, Delilah, Judith, Jezebel, Lilith and Salome, to the folkloric *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Morgan Le Fay, Guinevere and Nimue (to name but a few), the European landscape of the nineteenth century was overwhelmed by malefactors of fatal femininity. By the *fin de siècle*, images of fatal women were encrusted on jewellery, paraded across advertisements, and even permeated the domestic sphere, coyly perched upon ashtrays and inkwells. An all-pervasive, omnipresent icon, the *femme fatale* attracted artists and writers of opposing creeds – fantasists and realists, rebels and reactionaries – penetrating deep into the popular sub/consciousness through painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, novels, short stories and opera. Within literary debates, the *femme fatale* constitutes a split: misogynist fantasy *or* incarnation of female emancipation? As an icon of mystery, it is the identities veiled beneath the *femme fatale*'s violent yet glamorous façade that operates as the locus of these debates. Indeed, in *The Romantic Agony* (1933), Mario Praz states that it is the very unknowingness of the *femme fatale* that produces fascination: 'For a type – which is in actual fact, a *cliché* – to be created, it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impersonation on the popular mind.'¹² Praz's encyclopaedic study of the fatal woman (which he terms *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, following John Keats) chronologically tracks the bloody claw marks of this 'type' from the literature of the Marquis de Sade, through Romanticism to the Decadence of the *fin de siècle*. Yet, *The Romantic Agony* only transiently documents this 'type', a chronological guide of the *femme fatale* since the eighteenth century, as opposed to in-depth literary debate.

Despite the ubiquity of this, what Praz terms, fatal *allumeuse*, relatively little study of the *femme fatale* succeeded Praz's compendium until the 1980s. Only three tracts fill this academic void: Philippe Jullian's *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (1971), Barbara Fass's *La Belle Dame sans Merci & the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (1974), and Patrick Bade's *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (1979). Jullian, whose treatise is dedicated to Praz, similarly traces the heritage of the fatal woman in chronological order, focusing primarily on European Symbolist writers and artists of the nineteenth century. Avoiding the term *femme fatale*, Jullian emphasizes the fatal woman's illusory monstrosity by heralding her as a chimera, which he divides into four distinct yet overlapping sub-

¹² Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* translated by Angus Davidson (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 201.

categories: The Erotic, the Legendary, the Macabre, and the Mystical.¹³ Fass, alternatively, attempts to distinguish the difference between *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and the *femme fatale*. For Fass, the *femme fatale* is a figure rooted in corporeal reality, devoid of *La Belle*'s mysticism, promising 'pleasure, specifically sexual in nature'. Although *La Belle* offers pleasure, Fass continues, she also promises wish-fulfilment, dwelling in 'a land that embodies human dreams of physical perfection and immortality', whilst the *femme fatale*'s 'pleasure' remains firmly rooted within the human, carnal realm.¹⁴ Bade's text, despite primarily operating as a visual compendium of nineteenth-century images of the *femme fatale*, posits the dichotomy that would later divide debate, connecting the *femme fatale* to both the 'oppressed and unnatural position of women in society', and the marked male anxiety related to women's emancipatory laws and movements of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Prophetically, Bade's dichotomizing predicted the permeating discourse of the *femme fatale* in the 1980s. Despite acknowledging possible misogynist undertones in representations of the *femme fatale*, Nina Auerbach, in *Woman and the Demon* (1982), claims that the significant re-emergence of the legendary and mythical 'monstrous' woman at the *fin de siècle* embodies the inherent dualities of female identity:

As traditional legend adapted itself to popular mythology, it told of terror as well as safety in sleeping womanhood, who as a vehicle of violent change implies her own explosive arousal. The apparent escapism of legend and romance transmitted religious, sexual and social tensions that animated actual Victorian life, wherein woman was both an incipient threat to be subdued and, by virtue of that very threat, a commanding source of metamorphic energy conserving human magic in a dark future. Extravagant as they may seem, these dangerous queens of romance are the subdued centres of Victorian realism as well.¹⁶

For Auerbach, the *femme fatale* offers an alternative to the assumption of victimhood on behalf of Victorian women, portraying an emancipatory vision of nineteenth-century femininity beyond the domestic sphere. Alternatively, in *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (1983), Virginia M. Allen declares the post-Romantic, nineteenth-century popularity of the *femme fatale* as a signifier of masculine anxieties of women who 'deny the rights of men to control female

¹³ Philippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1974).

¹⁴ Barbara Fass, *La Belle Dame sans Merci & the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 22.

¹⁵ Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (London: Ash & Grant Ltd., 1979), p. 23.

¹⁶ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 10-11.

sexuality'.¹⁷ Similarly, in *Idols of Perversity* (1984), Bram Dijkstra argues that the overwhelming proliferation of artistic depictions of the *femme fatale* throughout the nineteenth century delineates a 'veritable iconography of misogyny'.¹⁸ Indeed, such was the virulence of anti-woman sentiment on display within visual representations of the *femme fatale* throughout the nineteenth century, Dijkstra hyperbolically claims, that if 'this was a war largely fought on the battlefield of words and images [...] it was no less destructive than many real wars'.¹⁹

The dialectic emphasized by Auerbach, Allen and Dijkstra is continued in more recent scholarly works. Echoing Auerbach, Jennifer Hedgecock, in *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (2008), addresses the virgin/whore dichotomy of Victorian womanhood in relation to the *femme fatale*, concluding that despite her sexual transgressions, the *femme fatale* will not tolerate degradation, as the fallen woman does, perpetuating an autonomous, albeit violent, sexually liberated identity. Focusing predominantly on Realist novels and social-problem fictions of the mid-nineteenth century, Hedgecock argues that figures such as Becky Sharp, protagonist of William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848), and Lydia Gwilt, of Wilkie Collins's novel *Armada* (1864–1866), oppose the hypersexualized image usually associated with the *femme fatale*. Moving freely among the city streets, Becky, Lydia and other mid-nineteenth-century *femme fatales* 'take action against [...] conventional restraints by threatening men who represent the dominant Victorian ideology that oppresses women'.²⁰ Although noting the fatal woman's transgressive capabilities, Heather Braun, in *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790–1910* (2012), ultimately aligns herself with Allen and Dijkstra, claiming that an emphasis on artifice and ornamentation of the *femme fatale*, particularly in Decadent fictions of the *fin de siècle*, removes women's agency in favour of male fantasy, the fatal woman rendered 'overdone and irrevocably perverse'. Although articulating the desires that others cannot, the Decadent *femme fatale*, Braun concludes, 'gains nothing from this revelation but the assurance of her own redundancy and execution'.²¹

¹⁷ Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), p. x.

¹⁸ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. viii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²⁰ Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 5.

²¹ Heather Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790–1910* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), p. 125.

Contemplation of gender and sexual politics remains intrinsic to discourse concerning the *femme fatale*. Despite these intrinsic links, numerous critics have attempted to locate their understanding of the *femme fatale* within larger cultural, historical and philosophical frameworks. In *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale* (1992), Rebecca Stott figures the fatal woman of the *fin de siècle* as a ‘sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties’.²² For Stott, the *femme fatale* of the *fin de siècle* reaches pinnacles beyond gender and sexual discourse, encapsulating anxieties concerning the crumbling British Empire, scientific progress in a post-Darwinian landscape, and unease regarding the dawning of a new century. Tracy D. Olverson, in *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late Victorian Hellenism* (2010), alternatively argues that *fin-de-siècle* female classicists, and women who utilize classical tropes within their fiction, utilized ‘the fierce female figures of ancient drama to articulate the disparities in civil status between men and women in Victorian society and the home’. Appropriating the *femme fatale* from Ancient Greek literature and myth, Olverson argues that female classicists and writers, such as Vernon Lee, Jane Ellen Harrison and Amy Levy, were able to insert a female subjectivity into classical studies, both expanding, and expressing themselves from *within*, the boundaries of a prestigious, culturally legitimated, male-dominated discourse.²³

In lieu of gender and sexual politics, both Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys, in *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (2013), and Sibylle Baumbach, in *Literature and Fascination* (2015), locate the *femme fatale* as an icon of fascination, a personality necessary for the development of arts and culture. Baumbach contends that transgression, be it sexual or otherwise, operates as the crucible within which the *femme fatale*’s fascinating aura is forged, the *femme fatale* a conflation of the ‘ambivalent forces of attraction and repulsion that are at the heart of the dangerously seductive and petrifying lure referred to as “fascination”’.²⁴ Alternatively, Łuczyńska-Hołodys refutes one-dimensional readings of the *femme fatale* as either misogynist construct or transgressive figurehead. ‘Blame’ of fatality within the *femme fatale*’s presence, Łuczyńska-Hołodys argues, may equally be distributed to male characters/narrators, whose seduction and death procured through the fascinating lure of the *femme fatale* stems from the man’s wilful suspension of

²² Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 30.

²³ T. D. Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late Victorian Hellenism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 21.

²⁴ Sibylle Baumbach, *Literature and Fascination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

disbelief in the *femme fatale*'s destructiveness, the male figure therefore complicit in his own unhappy fate.²⁵ This thesis aligns itself with the theories of Łuczyńska-Hołdys, Baumbach, Olverson and Stott in its refusal to confine the figure of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* to the dichotomy first introduced by Bade. This dichotomy has engulfed *femme fatale* studies and has primarily emphasized how the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* figures within an either/or binary, resulting in a reductive, heteronormative stasis. The majority of contemporary debates concerning the *femme fatale* have therefore stalled wider understanding as to how literary, artistic and historical context functions as a crucial factor in representations of this expansive persona.

One narrow, although significant, tributary within *femme fatale* literature that this thesis seeks to expand upon is that of the conflation of the *femme fatale* with the male androgyne. Perhaps Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990) offers the first in-depth literary correlation between fatal femininity and the androgynous male. Paglia heralds Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray as 'The Beautiful Boy as Destroyer', paralleling the psychic subordination of the artist Basil Hallward to Dorian with the psychic subordination of male poets, such as Charles Baudelaire and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to the glamorous façade of the *femme fatale*. 'The artist's hierarchic submission to a glamorous personality is characteristically Western,' Paglia argues, 'the relation is a Decadent ritual of sadomasochistic enslavement.'²⁶ Two ensuing works of the 1990s elaborate upon the correspondences of the *femme fatale* and the male androgyne. Martha Vicinus's essay 'The Adolescent Boy: *Fin-de-siècle* Femme Fatale?' (1994) contrasts Wilde's Dorian with representations of the adolescent boy in lesbian Decadent texts. Vicinus argues that for lesbian writers, the androgynous body of the adolescent boy operates as a locus of same-sex desire. Exhausted by 'internalized homophobia' and the inherent entropy of Decadence, Vicinus concludes that whilst the *fin-de-siècle* *femme fatale* 'sucked life out of men, the *fin-de-siècle* boy died, lest his love contaminate'.²⁷ Cassandra Laity, in *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (1996), alternatively argues that the conflation of the *femme fatale* and male androgyne within the Decadent poetics of the Modernist poet H.D. interrupts 'major male modernists' anti-Romantic theories of impersonality' with 'transgressive desire

²⁵ Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys, *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 9.

²⁶ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 512-513.

²⁷ Martha Vicinus, 'The Adolescent Boy: *Fin-de-Siècle* Femme Fatale?' in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5:1 (July 1994), pp. 90-114 (p. 114).

[...] disruptive language practices, and sympathetic theories of love and sexuality’.²⁸ More recently, Patricia Pulham, in her essay ‘Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichen’s *Flames: A London Phantasy*’ (2018), contrasts Wilde’s androgynous Dorian with Smythe Hichen’s Valentine, an ‘equally beautiful, demonic male figure who fascinates, who exudes “an electric warmth”, and who makes the blood in [Valentine’s companion] Julian’s veins course with excitement and desire’.²⁹ For Pulham, Valentine’s fatalistic seduction of men transgressively echoes the homoerotic/homosocial relationships of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a potentially libellous and socially ostracizing stance following Wilde’s incarceration for gross indecency in 1895. Utilizing the proposed arguments of Paglia, Vicinus, Laity and Pulham, this thesis further highlights the correspondences between the nineteenth-century male androgyne and representations of fatal femininity, broadening the spectrum as to what constitutes the *femme fatale* through analysis of the nebulous, destabilizing visual and erotic structures of androgyny.

Critiques of the *femme fatale* have often been relegated to singular artistic fields, such as Romanticism and Film Noir, as evident in Adriana Craciun’s *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2002) and Mary Ann Doane’s *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991). Segregated studies of the *femme fatale* by genre contrarily argue for multiplicity within *femme fatale* categorization. For Craciun, the Romantic *femme fatale* is an ideologically charged figure whose violence should be considered within larger philosophical, historical and political frameworks, thereby encouraging comparisons of the *femme fatale* within alternative genres. Like Praz, Craciun argues that the inherent, defining characteristic of the *femme fatale* is her mystery, promoting a ‘perspective that cannot be classified satisfactorily as either inherently subversive or normalizing’.³⁰ Mary Ann Doane similarly articulates the intriguing glamour of the Film Noir *femme fatale* as stemming from a ‘certain discursive unease’, her nebulous persona eluding fixed representation. Thus, Doane writes, the *femme fatale* ‘harbors [*sic*] a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable or manageable [...] transforming the threat of women into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered’.³¹ Unlike Romanticism and Film Noir, studies focusing on the local specificities

²⁸ Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. xii.

²⁹ Patricia Pulham, ‘Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichen’s *Flames: A London Phantasy*’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1:2 (2018), pp. 97-115 (p. 112).

³⁰ Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 19.

³¹ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

of the *femme fatale* within Decadence are sparse, critics often relegating the Decadent *femme fatale* to a chapter or footnote within the wider context of the nineteenth century. It is the contention of this thesis that the *femme fatale* exists as a predominant figure within Decadent art and literature due to their polemical and counter-cultural identities. Utilizing the ‘unknowingness’ of the *femme fatale*, it will be argued that writers and artists operating within the Decadent mode formulate an aesthetic descent from the dominant culture of the nineteenth century, emphasizing the *femme fatale*’s discursive unease to scrutinize normative discourses, and to promote alternative philosophies of beauty, gender and sexuality.

Chronologer and proponent of Decadence Arthur Symons described Decadence as a ‘morbid curiosity of form’,³² arguing that the aesthetic mode of Decadence incorporated into itself paintings, sculpture, music and performance. Actively dissociating from nineteenth-century sexual and gender norms, and obsessed with artistic form, the *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* repeatedly recurred throughout the Decadent corpus, embodying the veneration and glorification of vice and excess within an artificial form. Perusing Decadent fictions, the omnipresence of the *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* is easily gauged, the fatal woman invariably appearing in these fictions as vampiric portraits, corpse-dolls, metamorphic sculptures and spectral singers with abundance. Decadent fictions often utilized the visual arts to espouse transgressive aesthetic philosophies. For instance, Kamilla Elliott argues that portraiture destabilizes, undermines, and overthrows, allowing for a dismantling of distinctions and allowing redefinitions of representation. Redefined representations, Elliott argues, ‘become tools through which narratives then assiduously reshape and reorder agendas, identities, ideologies and hierarchies’.³³ Lynda Nead, alternatively, argues that ‘classical’ forms of art regulate the female body, framing and containing female sexuality within a patriarchal schema. Nead specifies, however, that the containment of these women is fleeting, and may be undone, as ‘in nearly every case [...] there is a point where the systems break down, where an object seems to defy classification and where the values themselves are exposed and questioned.’³⁴ Although Nead does not elaborate upon this claim, it may be argued that the visual point at which classical artistic modes become unseamed operates as the site upon which Decadence originates. Unlike ‘classical’ art forms, Decadence allows transgressions to be left un-rectified,

³² Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* ed. Matthew Creasy (Manchester, Carcanet Press Limited, 2014) pp. 169-183 (p. 182).

³³ Kamilla Elliott, *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764-1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 219.

³⁴ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 11.

scrutinizing bourgeois morality through the irresolution of Decadence's transgression of cultural anxieties. As such, writers and artists utilized the open-ended structure of Decadence to produce tales of *femmes fatales* as *objets d'art* in which women were no longer relegated into the domestic sphere or punished for their transgressions, but maintained their agency through a restructuring of aesthetic dynamics. Succinctly put, the Decadent motif of *femme fatale* as *objet d'art* aestheticizes women as art objects to explore alternative, often transgressive, subjectivities.

Encapsulating visual art, art criticism, and literary renderings of visual art, the spectative gaze and the question of looking is paramount to analysis of Decadence. Tied to feminist criticism, Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze', coined in the essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1973), posits that the male artist projects scopophilic fantasies onto his female subjects. Thus, representations of women in male-authored fictions connote a coded 'strong visual and erotic impact' that implies woman's 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.³⁵ In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger pre-conceives and elaborates on the concept of the 'male gaze', writing:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.³⁶

Gaze theory, despite primarily being utilized to examine male-authored fictions, may also be applied to female-authored literature. Emphasizing the visual imagination of Decadent female writers such as Vernon Lee and Rachilde, this thesis will incorporate a female subjectivity into gaze theory. Indeed, due to the dearth of female-authored texts within Decadence (at least in comparison to male-authored texts), Vernon Lee's short stories will be utilized within every chapter, comparing and contrasting the ways in which the *femme fatale* as *objet d'art* is represented from both a male and female perspective. The inclusion of this female subjectivity, whilst not completely dismissing the concept of the 'male gaze', allows for a re-analysis of gaze theory in the hopes of understanding the role of both the spectative and authorial gaze within Decadent texts in a more nuanced manner.

³⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-30 (p. 19).

³⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), p. 47.

One nuance that the concept of the ‘male gaze’ lacks is the inclusion of a queer subjectivity, re-enforcing a heteronormative notion of male-authored representations of women as stemming from male sexual fantasies of female subordination. Under such scrutiny, Walter Pater’s prose reverie of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* in *The Renaissance* (1873) is to be regarded as one of sexual domination enforced by Pater, putting under erasure theories put forward by critics such as Camille Paglia, who notes the androgynous qualities of Pater’s description and articulates Pater’s *Mona Lisa* as a ‘hermaphroditic epiphany’.³⁷ Similarly, to denounce the paintings of *femmes fatales* created by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, analysed in Chapter I, as revealing *only* fantasies of sexual domination is to deny any reading beyond the psychosexual, renouncing any metaphysical, scientific or social readings (amongst others) that Rossetti may have incorporated into his compositions. As such, to analyse the *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* within Decadent fictions through the wholly heterosexual lens of the ‘male gaze’ is blatantly to ignore various contextual factors behind the creative process of the Decadent work of art. Incorporating the ‘female gaze’, as well as emphasizing the Decadent preoccupation with metonymy (in which a fragment signifies a whole) this thesis will illuminate ways in which both written and visual representations of *femmes fatales* as *objets d’art* may be interpreted and scrutinized beyond the heterosexual paradigm of the ‘male gaze’.

Defining Decadence: Adornment, Decay, Destruction

‘Decadence, decadence: you are all decadent nowadays’, lamented Hubert Crackenthorpe in 1894.³⁸ But what is meant by this term ‘Decadence?’ It is not the intention here to provide an in-depth overview of Decadence, but rather to illustrate how the term will be utilized throughout the following chapters, and how it pertains to (predominantly) French and British art and literature of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, Paul Verlaine performed a baroque arabesque around the term, closing his description with an apocalyptic vision of oncoming destruction:

I love this word decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold. And I refuse, obviously, any damaging connotations it may have, or any suggestion of degeneracy. On the contrary, the word suggests the most refined thoughts a civilization can produce, a profound literary culture, a soul capable of the most intense enjoyments. It suggests the subtle thoughts of ultimate civilization, a high literary culture, a soul capable of intense pleasures. It throws off bursts of fire and the sparkle of precious stones. It is a mixture of the voluptuous mind and the

³⁷ Paglia, p. 486.

³⁸ Hubert Crackenthorpe, ‘Reticence in Literature: Some Roundabout Remarks’ in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 2, (London: Elkin Matthews & John Lane, 1894), pp. 259-274 (p. 266).

wearied flesh, and of all the violent splendours of the late Empire; it is redolent of the rouge of courtesans, the games of the circus, the panting of the gladiators, the spring of wild beasts, the consuming in flames of races exhausted by their capacity for sensation, as the tramp of an invading army sounds.³⁹

Verlaine's portrait of Decadence encapsulates the barbarism, ornamentation and entropy, both cultural and spiritual, that would come to define works of Decadence at the *fin de siècle*. Accordingly, both the English term 'decadence' and its French counterpart, *decadence*, derive from the Latin *cadere*, meaning to fall, or decay. Arthur Symons would later surmise that Decadence was the perfect embodiment of ideals that mark the end of great periods, exemplifying 'an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over subtilizing refinement-upon-refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity'.⁴⁰

Moral perversity, the pursuit of new, extreme sensations, was central to the conceit of Decadence, it being axiomatic of purveyors of Decadence to celebrate the 'beauty of subjects which the conventional majority would find emotionally and morally unacceptable or repulsive'.⁴¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, Decadence symbolized a hedonistic embrace of self-destructive luxury and indulgence. Chris Baldick and Jane Desmarais contextualize nineteenth-century Decadence as a response to the 'political, cultural, and scientific revolutions [that] had swept across Europe', regarding the Decadent outlook a 'paradoxical perspective on the rapid changes of the modern world'.⁴² British Decadence of the *fin de siècle* marks the late phase of British Aestheticism, and yet, the attempt to distinguish Decadence from Aestheticism has led numerous critics to dash themselves upon the semantic rocks. On the surface, both share many similar tenets, which Kristen Macleod lists as 'a commitment to art for art's sake, a rejection of bourgeois industrialism and utilitarianism, and a desire for intensity of experience'.⁴³ There are, however, some slight variables between Decadence and Aestheticism that must be acknowledged.

Aestheticism, beginning in the late 1860s, promotes a complex, ornamented written and visual aesthetic that attempts to encapsulate mood and feeling rather than morality. In the

³⁹ Paul Verlaine quoted in 'Introduction' in *French Decadent Tales* ed. Steven Romer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. ix-xxxv (p. ix.)

⁴⁰ Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 169.

⁴¹ Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, 'Introduction' in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* eds. Maxwell and Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp.1-20 (p. 12).

⁴² Chris Baldick and Jane Desmarais, 'Introduction' in *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* eds. Baldick and Desmarais (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 1-12 (pp. 5-6).

⁴³ Kirsten Macleod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writings and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 3.

‘Preface’ to *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* (1873), Walter Pater writes that the aim of every true student of aesthetics should be ‘to define beauty, not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible’.⁴⁴ Yet, Pater also values susceptibility to art, asking ‘what is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce in me?’⁴⁵ Thus, to Pater, personal responsiveness to art is everything, Pater’s critic needing only ‘a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects’.⁴⁶ Contrast, for instance, Pater’s description of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* with that of another art critic and historian, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574). In his description of the *Mona Lisa*, Vasari writes:

[...] the eyes had that lustre and watery sheen which are always seen in life, and around them were all those rosy and pearly tints, as well as the lashes, which cannot be represented without the greatest subtlety. The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the skin, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth, with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colours but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse.⁴⁷

In contrast to Vasari, Pater describes the *Mona Lisa* as being

expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions [...] 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.⁴⁸

Vasari’s description of the *Mona Lisa* attempts to articulate in as beautiful terms as possible the image of the *Mona Lisa* as she is represented on the canvas before him. Pater, in contrast, attempts to articulate the ideas that the *Mona Lisa* inspires. Thus, Aestheticism does not necessarily encapsulate an image as it is, but what the viewer *perceives* it to be. For Vasari, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* depicts a beautiful Italian noblewoman. In Pater’s imagination, the

⁴⁴ Walter Pater, ‘Preface’ in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-6 (p. 3).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Vasari, ‘Life of Leonardo da Vinci: Florentine Painter and Sculptor, 1452–1519’ in *Lives of the Artists Volume 1* trans. By George Bull (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1965), pp. 255-271 (pp. 266-267).

⁴⁸ Walter Pater, ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 56-72 (p. 70).

Mona Lisa is transformed from an Italian noblewoman into a *femme fatale*, eerily surveying history.

Aestheticism's fixation on beauty and aesthetic satisfaction, devoid of utilitarian meaning, allows for the charges of hedonism and frivolousness to be levied against it. Philip Cohen, for instance, argues that the purest Aesthetic texts are about nothing at all, as 'form, sound, image and mood dominate, to the extent that little or no room remains for ideas'.⁴⁹ By the 1880s, the often-overwrought indulgences of Aestheticism had come under attack, with caricatures of proponents of Aestheticism appearing in publications such as *Punch* magazine, and *ad hominem* attacks on Aestheticism appearing with regularity in popular publications. In Robert Buchanan's notorious denouncement of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' (1871), Buchanan negatively characterizes the oeuvre of Aestheticism and pre-Raphaelitism as 'fleshly all over from the roots of [its] hair to the tips of [its] toes [...] never spiritual, never tender; always self-conscious and æsthetic'.⁵⁰ Simultaneously, in an effort to display tangible symbols of proficiency, a culturally naïve middle class, a 'group against which the proponents of the movement [Aestheticism] sought to define themselves'⁵¹ began to aestheticize their everyday lives, their wealth realized through elaborate garments and accessories, their houses decorated with lush décor and opulent displays of art. As a response to the consumption and distortion of Aestheticism by the middle class, many aesthetes came to consider Aestheticism a vulgar shadow of its original hypothesis, transformed and commodified by Victorian mass-consumer culture. Distancing themselves from this new, distorted Aestheticism, some aesthetes cultivated new, highly wrought refined forms of expression through rarefied and arcane subject matter as a means of rejecting the commerciality that Aestheticism now offered, a tactic that would later come to be identified as the beginnings of British Decadence.

Advocating the same art for art's sake mantra and tendency for ornate and arcane language, Decadence attempted to recount the more sordid aspects of life. Having accepted the barriers against life as an Aesthete, the Decadent attacks, expressing 'contempt for prevailing values and sensibilities and asserts his sense of superiority and the prevailing values of art'.⁵²

⁴⁹ Philip Cohen, *John Evelyn Barlas, A Critical Biography: Poetry, Anarchism, and Mental Illness in Late-Victorian Britain* (Buckinghamshire: Rivendale Press, 2012), p. 214.

⁵⁰ Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan & Co, 1872), p. 45.

⁵¹ Macleod, p. 2.

⁵² Cohen, p. 215.

Inspired by Naturalism's depictions of human corruption and sin, yet finding Naturalism aesthetically unimaginative, Decadence sought to move 'beyond mundane human vices to engage in a more intellectual fashion with perversion, morbidity, ennui, and spiritual malaise'.⁵³ The aggressive engagement of the Decadent with such matters conveyed the artist's isolation and alienation from society. Yet, such engagement also offered an intimate, self-revealing portrait of the socially unacceptable or seemingly perverse subjects that plagued the Decadent imagination in a direct and provocative form. Alone, disaffected, and having revelled in the breaking of social taboos as an attack on cultural morality, the Decadent artist underlines and contradicts the force and dominance of mainstream notions of decency, though not conceding its legitimacy. This paradox figures heavily throughout the Decadent corpus, and figures most notably within Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In the 'Preface' to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde brazenly asserts 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'⁵⁴ Implying that art has no moral imperative, Wilde both predicts and undermines moral critiques of his novel, emphasizing beauty of form as the essence of art. Seeking to rescue his novel from moral judgement, Wilde appropriates the French Decadent model of *l'art pour l'art*. Indeed, despite Decadence being established in Britain by the 1880s, the lion's share of exponents of Decadence traced their aesthetic roots to the French writers of the mid-nineteenth century, whose work, in turn, promoted a late-Romantic elitism.

The begetter of French Decadence is Théophile Gautier (1811–72), who characterizes the style of Decadence as 'no other thing than art arrived at that extreme point of maturity that determines civilizations have grown old'.⁵⁵ Decadence, then, reflects social ethos, and for Gautier, the ethos of nineteenth-century France had grown stagnant. Gautier believed that the didacticism within the work of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, such as Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, was unable to encapsulate the mentality of post-Revolution France. A journalist, poet, novelist and critic, Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) incorporated letters, prose, dramatic dialogues and an essay, which would subsequently be regarded as the first manifesto of Decadence – the infamous 'Preface'. In the 'Preface', Gautier asserts '*l'art pour l'art*', condemning utilitarianism of art and bourgeois nineteenth-century morals, arguing that beauty alone is the mission of art, unhindered by moral principle or social responsibility. 'Everything useful is ugly,' Gautier writes, 'I would happily

⁵³ Macleod, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), p. 3.

⁵⁵ Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire: His Life* (London: Greening & Company, 1915) p. 89.

renounce my rights as a Frenchman and a citizen to be able to see a genuine Raphael picture, or a beautiful naked woman.’⁵⁶ The conflation of art and beautiful, eroticized depictions of women is intrinsic to the Decadent ethos. The Decadent, who revelled in hyperbole and the grotesque, found a natural alliance with women whose ‘career’ was vice, such as the prostitute and courtesan, both enemies of the normative who make manifest new and forbidden pleasures.

Such venal women populate Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), a collection of poems dedicated to Baudelaire’s ‘Master and Friend’, Théophile Gautier. A catalogue of vampirism, syphilis-ridden prostitutes and condemned women, *Les Fleurs du Mal* espoused the modern, fatal woman as ‘the perfect image of savagery in the midst of civilization [...] tinged with fatigue masquerading as spirituality’.⁵⁷ Despite declaring the Decadent ‘movement’ as meaningless, “‘a gigantic yawn’ (‘un baillement emphatique’)”⁵⁸, many writers and critics appointed Baudelaire as the figurehead of literary Decadence, emphasizing his veneration of violence, artifice, ‘perverse’ women and lesbianism as emblematic of the Decadent abhorrence of the natural and procreative. Gautier, in his memoir of Baudelaire, explains that the fatal women that inhabit Baudelaire’s corpus are types rather than individuals, the ‘*l’eternal féminin*’. The love Baudelaire expresses for these women, Gautier notes, is ‘*the love and not a love*’.⁵⁹ Although Gautier and Baudelaire differ in their depictions of the *femme fatale*, the spiritual incarceration they inspired remains the same, with Gautier describing the women that haunted the Decadent imagination as:

[...] haughty, icy, bitter, finding pleasure only in wickedness; insatiable as sterility, mournful as ennui, having only hysterical and foolish fancies, and deprived, like the devil, of the power of love. Gifted with a dreadful beauty, almost spectral, that does not animate life, they march to their deaths, pale, insensible, superbly contemptuous, on the hearts they have crushed under their heels.⁶⁰

Gautier’s description could be mistaken for any historical manifestation of the *femme fatale*, except for his notion that the Decadent *femme fatale* ‘does not animate life’.⁶¹ For the *femmes fatales* of antiquity, such as Medea and Clytemnestra, pregnancy is a common occurrence. The Decadent *femme fatale*, alternatively, is sterile, polluted and distinctly modern. Although Enlightenment thinkers encouraged eroticism in art, it served a purpose, sex being the tool

⁵⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (London: Penguin Group, 2005) p. 23.

⁵⁷ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Suffolk: Penguin Books LTD., 1972) p.

⁵⁸ Charles Baudelaire quoted in Baldick and Desmarais, *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire: His Life*, p. 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 43.

needed to further the development of a sophisticated society. Decadence divorced fecundity from femininity, and, stripped of her procreative function, the Decadent woman births psychological torment, disease and destruction.

In France at the *fin de siècle*, Decadence had lost its formative resonance, and had been subsumed under the fantastical aegis of Symbolism. Adopting the Decadent mantel, British writers utilized Decadence to not only laud the erotic, quixotic and immoral, but also to wage a losing war on the conservative commentators of Victorian respectability, embracing the identity of brave *artiste* as they did so. W. B. Yeats wrote that Decadent writers and artists, such as Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons, ‘delighted in enemies and in everything else that had an heroic aire’.⁶² Their combatants were, seemingly, only too happy to spar publicly, decrying the influx of literary and artistic hedonism from France as an affront to common decency. Both sides took up arms and filled reams of newspaper opinion pages with arguments justifying their claims, leading Symons to write that ‘Decadence, rarely used with any precise meaning, was usually either hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance.’⁶³

The loudest case made for the corrupting influence of Decadence was set out by Max Nordau in *Entartung* (1892–1893), translated and published in English as *Degeneration* in 1895. Nordau’s diatribe against Decadence was multifaceted and polymathic, incorporating science, psychology, statistics and history to justify his view of the Decadent as degenerate. Inspired by the classification of mental and physical abnormalities within male and female criminals proposed by the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, Nordau writes:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.⁶⁴

Included in Nordau’s catalogue of deviants, perverts and criminals were Charles Baudelaire, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Paul Verlaine, Richard Wagner, Oscar Wilde, and Émile Zola, amongst others. To Nordau, these artists, writers and composers signalled a

⁶² W. B. Yeats quoted in *Decadence: A Literary Anthology* ed. By John Crabb (London: The British Library, 2017), p. 9.

⁶³ Arthur Symons, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* ed. Matthew Creasy (Manchester, Carcanet Press Limited, 2014) pp. 5-8 (p. 7).

⁶⁴ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. v.

decline within the European arts, the writer thus pathologizing their work in terms of its preoccupations with egomania, sexual deviancy, entropy, disease and insanity.

Nordau's text became the mainspring the British conservative press needed to emphasize the immorality of the Decadents, and, in an unfortunate turn of events, Nordau's theories seemingly came to fruition as the excesses of Decadence took their toll on Decadent practitioners. In 1895, following a widely publicized court case, Wilde was condemned to two years of hard labour for Gross Indecency. A symbolic event, Wilde's incarceration crystallized Decadence within the public consciousness as a threat to prevailing Victorian morals. Alas, the Decadent envisioning of destruction and decay infected not only the art but also the lives of the Decadents. As John Betjeman pointed out, 'This was the world which ended in prison and disgrace for Wilde, suicide for Crackenthorpe and John Davidson, premature death for Beardsley, Dowson and Lionel Johnson, religion for some, drink and drugs for others, temporary or permanent oblivion for more.'⁶⁵ Despite a public condemnation of Decadence, certain publishers, such as John Lane and Leonard Smithers, continued to publish contentious Decadent material throughout the 1890s, playing host to rebellious thinkers - amongst them aesthetes, early feminists and occultists - and reaching a new, albeit insular, audience. Yet, by the turn of the twentieth century the aesthetics of Modernism prevailed, leaving Decadence an outmoded practice firmly rooted within the 1890s. As Yeats wrote, 'In 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic church; or if they did I have forgotten.'⁶⁶

Variations on a Theme

Decadence is a complex conglomeration of often contradictory philosophies, and, as such, remains resistant to classification. As opposed to articulating the complex literary and historical models of Decadence, this thesis interprets Decadence as a *mode* of writing, unifying a set of aesthetic precepts beneath the nomenclature 'Decadent'. Such precepts are an emphasis on artifice and the artificial, a pre-occupation with cultural and spiritual decay, arcane and esoteric subject matter, and ephemeral sensations, the Decadent a connoisseur of luxurious material consumption and sensual excess. Defining Decadence as a mode, as opposed to a genre, may be used to define late stages of artistic movements, in which the philosophies of those

⁶⁵ John Betjeman, 'Introduction' in *The Eighteen Nineties* ed. By Martin Secker (London: The Richards Press Ltd., 1948), pp. xi-xvi (p. xii).

⁶⁶ Yeats quoted in *Decadence: A Literary Anthology*, p. 10.

movements become inert and stagnant within an unchanging cycle, a Decadent ‘falling off’. Gautier and Baudelaire may therefore be considered Decadent late-Romantics, their literary output the climactic swansong of Romanticism. Of British Decadence of the *fin de siècle*, the works and tragic lives of the Decadents may be considered the *grand guignol* apogee of pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism, exacerbated by cultural unease concerning the decline of the empire and of the looming twentieth century. As a mode, Decadence may also incorporate works of authors and artists not normally classified as Decadent, as singular works may conform to the aesthetic principles of Decadence. One such work, for instance, is E. Nesbit’s short story ‘The Ebony Frame’ (1893), analysed in Chapter I. Often characterized as a children’s author (or, more rarely, as a socialist writer), Nesbit nevertheless utilizes Decadent tropes, perhaps sardonically, throughout ‘The Ebony Frame’, portraying the succumbing to vice and the culturally isolating effects of the veneration of beauty. Juxtaposing texts previously considered outside of the realm of Decadence with both major and minor texts within the Decadent pantheon opens up new avenues of study and allows for the influence of Decadence to be considered within new historical and cultural contexts.

By combining literature, the visual arts, art criticism, art history, psychology and social history, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* within Decadent fictions of the nineteenth century. Structurally, each of the four chapters of this thesis examines a variant of the fatal woman as art object: the haunted portrait, the corpse-doll, the sculpted Venus, and the androgyne (represented by the operatic voice of the castrati, and the sculpted figure of the Hellenistic Hermaphrodite). The justifications for structuring the thesis in this manner are numerous. My interdisciplinary approach reflects the complex network of associations linked to Decadence (literature, visual art, psychology, philosophy, etc.). As I am drawing from numerous sources, each chapter is organised around a central artifact or object for the sake of clarity. As such, the choice of each chapter focusing upon a specific *objet d’art* allows for my arguments to draw from multiple disciplines whilst remaining fixed on a specific image/object. Simultaneously, by making the *objet d’art* the focal point of each chapter, I am able in what follows to draw on Walter Pater’s philosophy of perception (‘what is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce in me?’⁶⁷) to question and challenge what constitutes a ‘*femme fatale*’. This method allows for images and figures not usually considered as *femmes fatales* to be analysed and interpreted as such by contemplating what the artist or

⁶⁷ Pater, ‘Preface’, p. 3.

spectator *perceives* when they gaze on a specific image. For instance, in Chapter I, my reading of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Beata Beatrix* (c. 1864–1870) interprets the painting as depicting a *femme fatale* when filtered through Rossetti's cultism of his dead wife, Elizabeth Siddal. Similarly, this method allows for a re-examination of the *femme fatale* in terms of gender and sexuality. Despite rarely being considered in tandem alongside the *femme fatale*, androgynous figures operate in similar ways to the *femme fatale* in many Decadent texts, provoking an erotic obsession in their spectators that often results in death. As such, art objects, such as the portrait of Dorian Gray, sculptures of Dionysus, and sculptures of the Hellenistic Hermaphrodite (amongst others), are included in the discussion to scrutinize the boundaries and limitations of what can be considered a '*femme fatale*'.

Focusing primarily on French and British Decadent visual and literary texts of the nineteenth century, I chart the trajectory of the disruptive effects of the *femme fatale* as *objet d'art* in the works of such writers as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Pater and Vernon Lee (amongst others), discussing how the work of each of these individuals is informed by the radically disfiguring and transgressive power of the androgynous fatal woman. Incorporating texts that have received little critical attention, such as Henri Latouche's novel *Fragoletta* (1829) and Prosper Mérimée's short story 'La Vénus d'Ille' (1837), and texts often relegated from discussion within the context of Decadence, such as Nesbit's 'The Ebony Frame', this thesis presents an unusual scope of subject matter. As a consequence, this thesis offers an alternative perspective on the concept of literary and artistic Decadence and the figure of the androgynous fatal woman within the French and British tradition.

Structurally, this thesis emulates Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which emphasizes the Oedipal model of influence between poets and their literary precursors. Bloom poetically defines his theory as mythic narrative, proclaiming that the blind Oedipus 'was on the path to oracular godhood, and the strong poets have followed him by transforming their blindness towards their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work'.⁶⁸ Despite Bloom's fervent emphasizing of the anxiety of influence pertaining solely to the major male poets, it is here utilized to trace chronologically the figurative *femme fatale* from her Decadent roots in fictions of mid-nineteenth-century France through to the British *fin de siècle*. Thus, emphasis on influence is a recurring theme throughout this thesis, often rooted within

⁶⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 10.

the Freudian psychoanalytic model, illuminating an either wilful misreading or re-contextualization of previous representations of the *femme fatale* by Decadent writers and artists as a justification of their vision. The appropriation of Bloom's model of influence was unconscious, only recently realized, unknowingly gleaned from another influential text, Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* (1990). A student and protégé of Bloom, Paglia's spitfire epigrammatic proclamations may at first seem wilfully contrarian, even reactionary. Yet, on closer inspection Paglia's insights, particularly her recontextualization of Bloom's praxis to highlight the feminization of male authors and artists, as well as her sensitivity to the visual dynamics of literary texts, offers an invigorating framework through which the image-laden corpus of Decadent texts can be analysed. Catherine Maxwell's conflation of Bloom and Paglia's theoretical models in *The Female Sublime: From Milton to Swinburne – Bearing Blindness* (2001) has likewise been a beneficial source of academic stimulation, as has the conflation of the textual and visual within Patricia Pulham's *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2006). Indeed, the thematic structuring of individual chapters around *objets d'art* within this thesis stems directly from Pulham's study.

Chapter I, 'The Dark Gallery: Painted Portraits & Vampiric Visions', analyses the Decadent *femme fatale* within literary representations of the haunted portrait motif. Locating the beginnings of this motif within Horace Walpole's Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the chapter traces the Decadent afterlives of the haunted portrait through to the *fin de siècle*. Opening with an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's brief but influential story 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), the *femme fatale* as haunted portrait will be considered as a locus of psychosexual insight, a seductive symbol hovering upon the seemingly paradoxical concepts of Eros and Thanatos – sex and death. The influence and recontextualization of Poe's usage of the haunted portrait will be traced through the mid-nineteenth-century visual images and verse of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the prose-essays of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater. Within the writings of each of these three practitioners of Decadence, the *femme fatale* as haunted portrait will be identified as a figure synonymous with promoting a new transgressive, androgynous sexual ideal for the *fin de siècle*, framing the fatalistic aspects of this transgressive sexuality within the visual confines of art. The final three texts analysed within this chapter, Vernon Lee's short story 'Amour Dure' (1890), E. Nesbit's short story 'The Ebony Frame' (1893), and Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), will be discussed in relation to how the new, androgynous sexuality propositioned by Rossetti, Swinburne and Pater was received and re-examined at the *fin de siècle*, concluding by

articulating how each of these three texts records the Decadent amorality of beauty and the psychic and visual subordination of the spectator to the *femme fatale* as haunted portrait.

Chapter II, 'Death and the Model: Dolls, Dissection & Deathly Desire', traces the trajectory of the figure of the Decadent corpse-doll (in various guises) throughout the nineteenth century. Locating the impetus of the Decadent corpse-doll within anatomical illustrations of the Italian Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Anatomical Venus models, the corpse-doll as *femme fatale* will be considered as a symbol upon which the concepts of Eros and Thanatos become configured, unsettling and alluring as a locus of conflicting philosophies. Beginning by considering the automaton Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffman's short story 'Der Sandmann' (1816) as the nineteenth-century prototype for the *femme fatale* as corpse-doll, Olympia's influence will be traced through a series of French Decadent texts, most notably Charles Baudelaire's poetry collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), Émile Zola's novels *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and *Nana* (1880), Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and Villiers de l'Isle Adam's novel *L'Ève Future* (1886). After meditating upon the links between androgyny, artificiality, death, femininity and necrophilia within these texts, the chapter will conclude with a reading of Vernon Lee's short story 'The Image' (1896), exploring how Lee attempts to rectify the death-driven discourses that repeatedly converge upon the figure of the Decadent corpse-doll, whilst simultaneously considering the configuration of the corpse-doll within the twentieth-century sculptural works of Oskar Kokoschka and Lotte Pritzel.

Chapter III, 'Bearing Mutilation or The Mutabilities of Marble: Fragments, Fetishism & Formlessness', begins with a meditation upon the discovery, and the subsequent Romantic veneration, of the *Venus de Milo* in 1820. Conflating Walter Pater's impressionistic articulations of the *Venus de Milo* as a body in the process of 'fraying' with the German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine's concept of the pagan god in exile outlined in *Die Götter im Exil* (1853), this chapter traces the development of the sculptural *femme fatale* throughout Decadent fictions of the nineteenth century. Figuring Venus, Heine's 'exiled god' as the symbolic crux of the chapter, the material beauty of the sculptural Venus will be considered in relation to Prosper Mérimée's short story 'La Vénus d'Ille' (1837), Edward Burne-Jones's *Pygmalion and the Image* cycle (1875–1878) and Eugene Lee-Hamilton's sonnet 'On a Surf-Rolled Torso of Venus' (1884/1894). Analysis of each of these texts will consider how the beauty of the Venus sculpture is used to both silence and, contradictorily, enhance the sublimity of the Venus, emphasis placed upon the visual language and imagery of the sculptural fragment within each text in relation to the concept of Pygmalionism, as well as Freud's concept of the

fetish. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of Vernon Lee's short story 'Dionea' (1890), examining Lee's re-structuring of the artist/model paradigm as a response to male-authored sculptural Venus narratives.

The fourth and final chapter, 'Marble Monsters of Both Sexes: Androgynous Illusions & Castrated Chimeras', offers a consideration upon literary representations of the 'mutilated' androgyne figure within Decadent texts of the nineteenth century. The chapter will begin by scrutinizing the notions of the grotesque and artificiality in relation to the figure of the castrato within Honoré de Balzac's short story 'Sarrasine' (1830), configuring Balzac's castrato prima-donna, La Zambinella, as *femme fatale*. Identifying inspiration for 'Sarrasine' in Henri de Latouche's novel *Fragoletta* (1829), the argument traces the figure of androgyne through Théophile Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835) and poem 'Contralto' (1850), before geographically relocating to England to consider Swinburne's hermaphrodite poems 'Fragoletta' and 'Hermaphroditus' (1866). Within each of these texts, androgyny is articulated as a chimerical vision, venerated as an intellectual and spiritual alternative to the constrictive gender and sexual models of the nineteenth century. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Vernon Lee's short story 'A Wicked Voice' (1890), revisiting the figure of the castrati as *femme fatale*, and contemplating castration anxiety in relation to corporeality, transgressive desire and artistic creation.

Within the concluding Coda 'The Visual Afterlives of the Decadent *Femme Fatale*', the influence of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* as haunted portrait, as corpse-doll, as sculpted Venus, and as stage performer will be briefly traced throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century fictions, as a means of displaying the influence and integral importance of the nineteenth-century Decadent *femme fatale* within contemporary literary and artistic debates.

CHAPTER I
THE DARK GALLERY
PAINTED PORTRAITS & VAMPIRIC VISIONS

Painted in oils upon canvas, moulded in wax as a death mask, or engrossed upon the mirrored surface of a daguerreotype, portraiture has always maintained an intricate relationship with death. Discussing the portrait within his study of dis/enchanted iconography, Theodore Ziolkowski writes that ‘Among primitive peoples, drawings of the human figure – along with mirror images and shadows – have a common quality: they are regarded as projections of the human soul.’ Ziolkowski stipulates that the ‘savage’ mind does not regard an image of a human as *like* the soul of the person that the image represents, but as the soul itself.¹ Hence, a fear of photography amongst ‘primitives’ stems from the belief that a person’s soul will become imprisoned within a simulacrum and stolen away by the photographer. This may seem an archaic belief, yet it is one that has permeated real and fictional representations of the portrait, and one that encourages superstitious beliefs of hauntings and re-animation. For, if a portrait is the vessel of a soul, the soul may continue animating the portrait once the subject’s original body has died.

The concept of a ‘haunted’ portrait is catalogued as one of the Gothic abominations that ensues when the narrative of Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) reaches fever pitch. Manfred, the Prince of Otranto, having been witness to a pageant of Gothic horrors, retreats to his gallery where ‘the portrait of his grandfather [...] uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast’. Uncertain whether he is dreaming or under attack from daemonic entities, Manfred demands the portrait’s intentions. Sighing, the portrait signals for his descendent to follow: ‘the spectre marched sedately, but dejected, to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand.’ Laden with ‘anxiety and horror, but resolved’, Manfred accompanies his grandfather’s spectre: ‘as he would have entered the chamber, the door was clapped to with violence by an invisible hand.’² Despite here disappearing from the pages of *The Castle of Otranto*, the haunted portrait stalks into the literature of the eighteenth century (and subsequently the literature of the nineteenth century) where, in an array of guises, it performs a significant role.

¹ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 79-80.

² Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 26.

Philosophically, the haunted portrait utilized the aesthetic appreciation of terror that Edmund Burke venerated as a means towards an experience of the sublime. Psychologically, the haunted portrait inflamed the Gothic and Romantic imagination of the late-eighteenth and -nineteenth centuries as an aesthetic concept that allowed for exploration of the past within the present, and to within the deep recesses of the psyche. As Kamilla Elliott writes, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction ‘renders picture identification both empirically formidable and psychologically fraught, inculcating it with terror, horror, mystery, suspense, lust, danger, violence, and fatality’.³ This psychological exploration was recapitulated culturally in the form of silhouette portraiture. In vogue between the periods of 1750–1850, these cryptic images comprised of a profile vision of a person’s head and shoulders, coloured in black ink or cut out from black paper. Catherine Maxwell writes that these shadowy images were also known as ‘shades’;

a word that [...] like its Latin equivalent *umbra*, has the advantage of meaning both ‘shadow’ and ‘ghost’. While the shade or silhouette recalls to memory the personage it represents, it is interesting for what it leaves out as much as what it includes. An evocative outline that excludes the particularity of individual features, the silhouette is like a draft or sketch, a ghost of a drawing. Its partial portraiture brings the subject to mind but, repressing the fullness of the person’s presence, reminds us that she or he is not there.⁴

Despite all portraiture’s intricate link to the concept of death, the silhouette notably enhances the idea of mortality following the death of its subject – the silhouette subsequently becoming the shadow of a shade. Denying the eye specific visual descriptors, the silhouette portrait promotes a greater degree of psychological insight on behalf of the spectator. As Maxwell observes, the silhouette offers the sensitive observer the ‘opportunity of projecting more freely his or her own memories, impressions, fantasies and associations into the charged blank space of the silhouette; that is, it sums up what is important to the observer’.⁵ Thus, whilst visualizing the image of a specific person, the portrait gains meaning through a psychological projection of the artist or spectator, collapsing the boundaries of self and other, reality and imagination, and life and death.

Occupying a new indeterminate psychological space, dark and cold, the nineteenth-century imagination, Philippe Ariès writes, replaced, or rather complemented, the concept of

³ Kamilla Elliott, *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764-1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 8.

⁴ Catherine Maxwell, ‘Vision and Visuality’ in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* ed. By Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Anthony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), pp. 510-525 (p. 515).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

purgatory as a place of transit into a meeting place between the living and the dead.⁶ A remembrance, or *memento mori*, the portrait of a dead beloved then not only preserves the features of a living person in art, but stands as a holding place, fixing a beloved in death until reunited in the afterlife. It is this terrifying paradox, of existing as an image within art beyond life itself, that this chapter seeks to explore. ‘The Dark Gallery’ traces the evolution of the haunted portrait motif within Decadent fictions of the mid-nineteenth century through to the *fin de siècle*. Beginning with an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s proto-Decadent short story ‘The Oval Portrait’ (1842), the haunted portrait will be analysed as a vampiric, seductive force, encapsulating a beautiful young woman at the seemingly paradoxical intersection of Eros and Thanatos – sex and death. Poe’s influence will be discerned through discussion of the haunted portrait in works composed by British practitioners of Decadence and Aestheticism, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater. Within my analysis of the work of these three men, I will articulate how Poe’s initial utilization of the vampiric portrait was developed and subverted as a means of engendering a new androgynous ideal, allowing the portrait to become synonymous with both the *femme fatale* and the androgyne. It will then be discussed how Rossetti, Swinburne and Pater attempted to frame the fatalistic aspects of this new, androgynous sexuality within the confines of the *objet d’art*. The final three texts to be analysed are Vernon Lee’s short story ‘Amour Dure’ (1890), E. Nesbit’s short story ‘The Ebony Frame’ (1893) and Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In my discussion of Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’, the *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* is framed as a vampiric agent who psychically dominates the minds of her male spectators, draining them of their supposedly ‘masculine’ qualities. Utilizing the gendered dynamics on display throughout ‘Amour Dure’, my analysis of Nesbit’s ‘The Ebony Frame’ discusses how Nesbit utilizes the power dynamics between a *femme fatale* as *objet d’art* and her male spectator to embody an idealistic yet doomed androgynous ideal. Finally, my analysis of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* aligns the androgynous Dorian with the *femme fatale*, exploring how the ‘framing’ of Dorian’s androgynous qualities allows for a re-examination of transgressive sexuality throughout the annals of art history, and records the Decadent amorality of beauty and the visual subordination of the spectator to the androgynous *objet d’art*.

Gothic Origins: Poe and the Most Poetical Topic in the World

⁶ Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death* trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 170.

Aesthetically, the kinetic dynamism of the haunted portrait narratives of the *fin de siècle* stems from the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, as evident in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Aligned with transgression and excess, the Gothic is replete with inanimate objects - portraits, statues, suits of armour - moving of their own will, hallucinatory or supernatural images destabilizing the reader's framing of reality. Gothic fiction, Kamilla Elliott argues, utilizes established modes of art, such as portraiture, with all its history and rhetoric, to 're-create the world via representation, and in doing so redefines representation'.⁷ Redefined representations, Elliott argues, become tools through which narratives then assiduously reshape and reorder agendas, identities, ideologies and hierarchies.⁸ Concerned with perversity and paradox, Gothic narratives often lapse into Decadence (and vice-versa), functioning as a matrix of sensuous im/possibilities, embracing the quest for unobtainable ideals. Unlike Decadence, however, eighteenth-century Gothic narratives rectify their transgressions at the text's denouement, whereas Decadent modes of writing allow narrative transgressions to be left un-rectified, scrutinizing bourgeois morality through the irresolution of Decadence's transgression of cultural anxieties.

Throughout the nineteenth century the fatal woman of Romanticism evolved and metamorphosed, embodying sexual taboos that, ultimately, reached its pinnacle at the *fin de siècle*, encapsulating the increasingly misogynist discourse that accompanied the rise of the emancipated, cigarette-wielding New Woman. The conflation of Decadence with art resulted in a proliferation of *femme fatale* as haunted portrait narratives. Combatting the misogynist tendencies of these *femme fatale* as haunted portrait narratives, New Woman writers utilized the open-ended structure of Decadence, producing tales of *femmes fatales* as *objets d'art* in which women were no longer just male fantasies or relegated back into the domestic sphere (à la Gothicism), but maintained their agency through a gendered restructuring of sexual dynamics.

Connections between haunted portrait narratives of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction and the Decadent 1890s are myriad and multifarious. Modes synonymous with the Gothic, Romanticism, Aestheticism and Decadence often interlock, embodying the fluid evolution of nineteenth-century culture and artistic expression, continuous and coterminous. Although the *femme fatale* as haunted portrait narrative reached its zenith at the *fin de siècle*, there are significant narratives crystallized in the Heraclitan flow of nineteenth-century culture that lay

⁷ Elliott, p. 219.

⁸ Ibid, p. 219.

the foundations for the tropes emergence, most significantly Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), and numerous works by the pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, most notably the early short story 'Hand and Soul' (1849) and the poem 'The Portrait' (1870).

Edgar Allan Poe resituates the haunted portrait from an ancillary motif of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel to the central crux on which the entire narrative of 'The Oval Portrait' functions. Charles Baudelaire, an ardent admirer and translator of Poe's writing, argued that Poe's corpus lacks the aesthetic beauty of his French contemporaries (such as Théophile Gautier, Honoré de Balzac and Baudelaire, himself) due to the infancy of American culture and America's lack of an aristocracy. 'Amongst a people without aristocracy', Baudelaire writes, 'the cult of beauty can only be corrupted, diminished and die.'⁹ Poe, in accordance with the French Decadent ideology, makes beauty the province of art, stating that the quest for beauty is an immortal, spiritual instinct that elevates the soul, and that art should reproduce 'what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul'.¹⁰ Thus, for Poe, art is not merely the reproduction of person, object or scene, but the encapsulation of the artist's spiritual experience with the world. Analysing the most fleeting phenomena, Poe aestheticizes organic forms from everyday experience, describing them in a scrupulously grotesque and scientific manner, transforming these forms into *objets d'art*: the penetrating 'vulture eye' of 'The Tell-Tale Heart', the 'divine orbs' of Ligeia, the teeth of Berenice, ravens, black cats, all aestheticized into art objects through obsession and pursuit by Poe's narrators.

Poe philosophizes that melancholy, a sadness reached on a spiritual level, is the most legitimate of poetical tones, and that death is the most universal form of melancholy that mankind can comprehend. 'And when [...] is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' Poe asks himself, in 'The Philosophy of Composition':

when it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.¹¹

Putting theory into practice, the most common organic form in Poe's aesthetic corpus is the corpse of a beautiful woman: Ligeia, Morella, Eulalie, Ulalume, Madeline, Lenore, Annabel

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Edgar Allan Poe, his Life and Works' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Suffolk: Penguin Books LTD, 1972), p. 166.

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Veil of the Soul' in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books LTD, 2003), p. 448.

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books LTD, 2003), pp. 430-442 (p. 436).

Lee, Rowena, Berenice – even their names aestheticized in alliterative euphonic assonance. Poe's conflation of female corpses and bereaved male lovers stems from the theme of unrealizable love, present in many of his tales and poems. Critics have argued about the true significance of this conflation, many sensing a neurotic compulsion in Poe to be reunited with his mother, stepmother and child-bride in death.¹² One thing is certain, however: Poe treats Eros and Thanatos as two sides of the same coin – the chief mainspring of his artistic inspiration. Mario Praz argues that Poe's love/death dialectic operates as 'a nervous ecstasy, which becomes localized in actual genuine obsessions [...] A yearning for the absolute knowledge which coincides with annihilation and death'.¹³ Ultimately, the obsessive nature of Poe's male protagonists for re-animation of their beloved's corpse results in a desire for fusion with the beloved that ends in vampirism.

The corpse of a female body is the crux on which vampirism in 'The Oval Portrait' operates, the vampire motif symbolized through absorption of living matter into inanimate *objet d'art*. The narrative is divided into two short fragments: I. A fatigued traveller seeks refuge in an abandoned chalet where he encounters the titular portrait and reads its history in an old volume. And II. The creation story of the oval portrait, which details how an artist's painting drains the life of his model bride, who perishes the instant her portrait is completed. Moving his candelabra, the traveller unsuspectingly casts light upon the oval portrait, heretofore hidden in shadow, and proclaims 'I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes.'¹⁴ Pre-figuring Freud's theory of the unconscious, Poe articulates humanity's vulnerability to violent, amoral impulses. In quintessential Gothic mode, the traveller is destabilized by the portrait's sudden appearance, which subverts the superior objective stance of the spectator's gaze. The oval portrait signifies an uncanny subversion of life by death as it signifies a defence against the material decomposition of its human subject, thus subconsciously coercing the traveller to contemplate his own mortality. The closing of his eyes allows the traveller to re-structure the power dynamics between himself and the portrait, resituating himself as spectator and distancing himself from the unconscious implications of his own mortality. Elisabeth Bronfen writes that re-opening his eyes in a second, sustained gaze, the traveller removes the portrait 'outside the realm of temporality and facticity'.¹⁵ The

¹² Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

¹³ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 147.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Oval Portrait' in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books LTD, 2003), pp. 201-204 (p. 202).

¹⁵ Bronfen, p. 116.

removal of the portrait from these states, Bronfen writes, allows for the mediation between human unconscious and spectative gaze that allows the engendering of a 'semantic binding of it previously so disturbing, unbound, ambivalent and indeterminate quality'.¹⁶

Resituated in the secure position of spectator, the traveller is able objectively to articulate the portraits aesthetic qualities:

It was a portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood [...] It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a vignette manner, much in the style of Sully. The arms, the bosom and even the ends of the radiant hair, melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the background of the whole. The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in Moresque.¹⁷

Unlike the minute articulations of Poe's other aestheticized women, the portraits description is uncharacteristically vague. Aesthetically, the portrait paradoxically symbolizes both transience and containment: the brush strokes seem to lack linear form, the model's features withdrawn from tangibility, seemingly dissipating in and out of the dark background, the deep shadows of which have no objective validity. Lacking form-limits, the portrait lacks tactility, the melting boundaries of the model's body appealing solely to the spectator's gaze, surrendering to a profusely visual experience, hence Poe's lack of visual descriptors. Illucidity of form creates the illusion of movement, the oval portrait inheriting the eighteenth-century Gothic haunted portrait facet of displaying the changing and the transitory. It is only the containing presence of the gilded frame that seems to inhibit the woman on the canvas from emerging into the turret chamber or dissolving into the ether.

Unsettled by the portrait's uncanniness, the traveller places the candelabrum in its former position, the portrait falling from view back into its initial, shaded, niche. Bronfen writes that this second removal of the portrait from the spectator's gaze repeats the first as a means of creating a safe barrier between the self and uncanny other. However, Bronfen continues, the absolute 'life-likeness' of the portrait's expression continues to appal and confound the traveller. Thus, the visually melting distinctions of the portrait metaphorically evoke the traveller's own mortality through the realization that the portrait's subject exists in a liminal state within the portrait, neither living nor dead, neither absent nor present.¹⁸ In an effort to alleviate the uncanniness of the portrait the traveller attempts to transpose his anxieties onto the history of the portrait recorded in a small volume: in the very turret chamber the traveller

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 116.

¹⁷ Poe, 'The Oval Portrait', p. 202.

¹⁸ Bronfen, p. 116.

has sought refuge in, an obsessive artist sequestered his wife while he painted her portrait. The bride meekly relents to the artist's commands yet resents the attention he gives to his painting, believing him to have 'already a bride in his art'.¹⁹ Life literally becomes the artist's palette, the tints of paint 'drawn from the cheeks of her who sate [*sic*] beside him'.²⁰ Applying the final brushstroke, the artist triumphantly stands entranced before his work, proclaiming 'This is indeed Life itself!'²¹ only to turn to his wife to find her dead. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe's contemporary, writes that portraiture has a vampiric nature and that pictorial skill offends Mosaic law, with people 'frightened at the art which could raise phantoms at will, and keep the form of dead among the living'.²² Poe's narrative plays out in this vampiric manner, the bride's portrait staging an uncanny subversion of life by death through her double in the portrait, which acts as a constant reminder of the mortality of the flesh for anyone who looks upon it.

Although adhering to many tropes of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, Poe's narrative embodies both Romantic and Decadent motifs, not rectifying any improprieties: the reader does not learn of the fate of the traveller, nor the fate of the artist. Even within his own corpus 'The Oval Portrait' poses an issue for Poe. Whilst the bride's futile self-sacrifice stems from Poe's equation of erotic love with death, the narrative fails to encapsulate Poe's methodology laid out in 'The Philosophy of Composition', as we do not witness any lover mourning her death. Rather, Poe seems to negate his own rules as a means of presenting the paradox of portraiture. Namely, that the double on the canvas continually represents life in death yet provokes within the spectator an evocation of their own mortality – two contradictory stances continually at odds with one another within the aesthetic philosophy of portraiture.

Medieval Regressions: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Cult of the Dead Beloved

Influenced by Keatsian veneration of nature, and John Ruskin's reverence for medieval simplicity, the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood bridge the aesthetic philosophies of Poe and the early/mid-nineteenth-century French Decadents with the Aestheticism and Decadence of the *fin de siècle*. The pre-Raphaelite brotherhood sought to combat the dogmatic morals of mid-nineteenth-century art academies and literati, their sensual, prismatic compositions charged with the contradictory tensions: love and vengeance, form and moral content. Unlike their Decadent descendants at the *fin de siècle*, early pre-Raphaelitism of the 1840s and early 1850s

¹⁹ Poe, 'The Oval Portrait', p. 203.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 204.

²¹ Ibid, p. 204.

²² Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The Prophetic Pictures' in *Hawthorne's Short Stories* (Vintage Classics: New York, 2011), p. 88.

inherited Ruskin's collectivist social values and made a cult of Ruskin's medievalism. Gothic medievalism, Ruskin writes, radiated a sacred, natural complexity that is lost with the Renaissance's veneration of Apollonian, classical order. Medieval Venice, Ruskin argues, was made sacred by buildings constructed by 'honest' craftsmen, its inherent Gothicism reflecting moral social order, and that Gothic architecture's utilization of natural forms displayed the glory and grandeur of God. The Renaissance, Ruskin continues, with its chilly classical order, is decadent, selfish, and a move away from the natural complexity of the Gothic.²³ In parlance with the West's angel/demon dialectic, Ruskin perceives medieval Venice as a Madonna, Renaissance Venice as a whore.

Vis-à-vis Poe's obsessive utilization of the Eros/Thanatos dialectic, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founding member of the brotherhood, commented that Poe 'had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of a lover on Earth'. Seeking new ways of exploring Poe's *modus operandi*, Rossetti determined to 'reverse the conditions [of Poe], and give utterance to the yearning of a loved one in heaven'.²⁴ Pre-occupied with Christian medievalism, redemption and the sanctity of the soul, Rossetti's nascent efforts absorb Ruskin's teachings and invert Poe's gloomy, chiaroscuro narratives with the golden celestialism of medieval religious iconography, and the rustic valour of Arthurian legend. Despite these inversions, Rossetti obeys Poe's prototype, a Decadent aesthete ritually commemorating an original, prototypal woman.

Rossetti subtly corrupts Poe's artist with a hallowed façade in the short story 'Hand and Soul' (1849). Steeped in Poe's monomania, Rossetti's protagonist, the thirteenth-century Pisan aesthete Chiaro, cloisters himself in self-imposed exile for the lack of vitality he perceives in his own art, obsessively painting his 'soul', as it corporeally manifests in his chambers as an iridescent woman. Painting complete, Chiaro dies in the arms of his muse, the hymns of midnight mass heard echoing throughout the churches of Pisa. Chiaro's muse belongs to a chain of *donna ideale* archetypes repeated throughout Rossetti's early phase.²⁵ Rossetti heightens the *donna ideale* to the point of paroxysm, their dolorous, idolized beauty generating the mixed sentiments of adoration and terror in Rossetti's aesthetes. Despite the religious overtones, Rossetti's *donna ideale* is inherently *not* religious. Rather, these archetypes act as

²³ John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic' in *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 77-110.

²⁴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 1 (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), p. 236.

²⁵ Other examples of the early Rossetti's *donna ideale* are the poem 'Ave' (1847), and the paintings *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-9) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1850).

cyphers of spiritual beauty, invoking the mysterious atmosphere of medieval Christianity. David Riede posits that Rossetti's aestheticization of religious iconography attempts to transpose the 'emotional tone of a religion that was becoming outmoded' onto art. Using religion as a resource for art, Riede continues, Rossetti reflected 'not the faith of its times, but its doubt', situating himself in a tradition that was 'gradually replacing religion with art as a source of spiritual value'.²⁶ Rossetti's aestheticization of religious doubt spearheads one of the central tenets of the Aestheticism of the *fin de siècle*, fusing archaic forms with nineteenth-century anxieties concerning the perils of beauty and attraction. Rossetti saturates 'Hand and Soul' with medieval bloodshed and male self/destructive energy, Chiaro's over emotional self-embowering casting him in a pattern of behaviour not only associated with Romantic solipsism, but hysterical Victorian femininity. Emotional reserve of manliness is here projected onto the female muse, whose masculine stoicism reigns and subordinates Chiaro's erratic passions into the painting of his masterpiece, the *Figura Mystica*. Although operating within the Victorian gender binary system, Rossetti disturbs the polarized gender distinctions through a reversal of gender identity, the *Figura Mystica* a site on which these gender disturbances are harmonized in aesthetic unity: feminized masculinity and masculine femininity idealized on canvas.

As an agent to be invoked, the muse of 'Hand and Soul' links the *femmes fatales* of eighteenth-century Gothic and Romanticism with the *femmes fatales* of the *fin de siècle*, all embodying the Burkean aesthetic concept of astonishment in the presence of a sublime force. Thus, the *Figura Mystica* is presented as a 'mystical' being, with 'unfathomable eyes', a 'thread of sunlight round her brows', her hair 'the golden veil through which he [Chiaro] beheld his dreams'.²⁷ Burke's eighteenth-century theorizing on the emotional complex of sublimity anticipates the Gothic/Romantic male's self-subordination to the sublime image. Astonishment, Burke writes, pre-occupies the spectator's mind/gaze, suspending all motions, the contradictory concepts of pain/pleasure, beauty/terror provoked by sublimity so captivating the mind 'cannot contain any other [image], nor by consequence reason on that object that employs it'.²⁸ In Gothic and Romantic texts, the sublime often eludes representation, linguistic attempts to create coherence between the beauty/terror, pain/pleasure dialectics often vague and fragmented, passive to the constraints of poetic language. Rossetti slipperily evades the

²⁶ David Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited* (New York: Twain Publishers, 1992), pp. 28-29.

²⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul' in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 309-318 (p. 312).

²⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 47.

sublimes linguistic challenges by describing Chiaro's state of mind after his encounter:

Having finished, he lay back where he sat, and was asleep immediately: for the growth of that strong sunset was heavy about him, and he felt weak and haggard; like one just come out of a dusk, hollow country, bewildered with echoes, where he had lost himself, and who has not slept for many days and nights.²⁹

As such, Rossetti appeals to the reader's own sense of sublime, which is then projected onto the *Figura Mystica*. Mapping Burke's concept of the sublime onto the *femme fatale*, Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys argues that the sublimity of the ideal/fatal muse prompts 'the male poet's coming of age and his development. While she can destroy the poet's ego, the result is a camelion [sic] poet "having no self": Keats's idea of the poetical character.'³⁰ 'Hand and Soul' thus acts as a dichotomy, the one signifying image of the muse alternating between the quest for 'divine' inspiration and the quest for destruction. The two quests are antithetical: the first rational, the search for an emanation or artistic fulfilment; the second irrational, a self-doomed quest that destroys the narrative. Sequestered in a man-made chamber, the sublime muse is filtered through human rationale, contrasted with Chiaro's mundane, spiritual hollowness, Rossetti's descriptors articulating sublimity against human, objective reality. The sublime muse grants Chiaro both immortality through art, and annihilation, Chiaro surrendering his life through an internalized quest, an imaginative apocalypse in which the power of life and death is bestowed upon a masculine woman. Echoing Poe, Rossetti's muse synthesizes an idealized archetype and death-wish. This synthesis, once rendered in art, brings about the end of the ideal as muse, and the painters as narrative beings.

From the late 1850s, Rossetti's Christian medievalism regresses into antiquity, the *donna ideale* and La Belle Dame Sans Merci metamorphosing into Pagan *femme fatale*: Astarte, Cybele, Pandora, Venus. *Bocca Baciata* (or *The Mouth that has been Kissed*, 1859) [fig. 1.1] heralds this shift, its name signalling Rossetti's use of metonymy – a Decadent fragmentation in which a part stands for a whole. The metonymic fragmentations of the *femme fatale* archetype unsettle as it deconstructs known signs and ambiguously restructures them. As such, Rossetti's *femme fatale* compositions emphasize the shifting of known signifiers into the unknown, these fragmented signifiers motifs that would become synonymous with the Rossetti woman: the languorous, somnambulistic gaze; flowing hair elongating the serpentine neck; pouting, vampiric lips; bejewelled accoutrements; gowns of silk, satin and fur, the

²⁹ Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul', p. 316.

³⁰ Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys, *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 8.

compositions all strewn with lush canopies of peonies, honeysuckles and roses. The contrast of the removed, passive glance and the physical luxuriance of the Rossetti woman is referred to by Griselda Pollock as *corps morcelé* (the fragmented body), the image, though desirable, ‘both lost and an embodiment of melancholy resulting from loss, a kind of mourning’.³¹ Rossetti’s restructured emphasis on the *femme fatale*’s gaze contrasts the *donna ideale*, Rossetti’s canvas no longer the site of spiritual epiphany/unity, but one of subordination to the subject’s daunting indifference. Despite the lush sensuality of the Rossetti woman, the restructured visual field destabilizes the spectative eye, thus attributes commonly associated with the *femme fatale* (power, sexuality, knowledge) are obscured, Rossetti’s emphasis on the *femme fatale*’s Decadent fragmentations unsettling by emphasizing the spectator’s lack of comprehension. Succinctly: Rossetti’s women unsettle as they emphasize what cannot be articulated. Visual emblems, Pollock writes, are vividly represented, but are displaced in an ‘over-anxious profusion of honeysuckles and roses which distract, mask but signal what cannot be shown’.³² While fixating the gaze, the spectative eye recognizes the fragmented structure of the Rossetti woman, incomprehension surrounding Rossetti’s Decadent deforming of reality. Thus, Rossetti’s women constitute a psychological absence that unsettles the spectator through subordinate omniscience. Distant, somnambulistic, yet idolized, desired, the fragmented *corps morcelé* adopts an eerie aura through hallucinatory *knowingness*.

Seemingly born of Poe’s imaginative landscape, two of the most macabre poetic episodes of Rossetti’s later period, the painting *Beata Beatrix* (1863–1870) [fig. 1.2] and the poem ‘The Portrait’ (1862–1870), stem from the death of Rossetti’s wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal, in 1862. Heavily symbolist in form, *Beata Beatrix* casts Siddal as Dante’s Beatrice, hazily painted on the streets of medieval Florence in the liminal transition between life and death. Of the omniscient *femme fatale* that possessed Rossetti’s later works, Bronfen states that Rossetti was ‘possessed by the notion of a dead beloved while his chosen muse was still alive’, Siddal having to die so ‘that she could fulfil the role he had designed for her in his imagination’.³³ Bronfen’s remarks echo Christina Rossetti’s sonnet ‘In an Artist’s Studio’ (1856), in which Rossetti crystallizes her brother’s vampiric pre-occupation with the *idea* of Elizabeth Siddal, writing;

One face looks out from all his canvasses,

³¹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 128.

³² Ibid, p. 138.

³³ Bronfen, p. 171.

One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
 We found her hidden just behind those screens:
 He feeds upon her face day and night,
 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him [...]
 Not as she is, but was when hope shined bright;
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.³⁴

Christina Rossetti's emphasis of the singularity of the model, be she 'queen in opal dress', 'nameless girl' or 'a saint, an angel' figures her one standard of value: her face.³⁵ For Kathy Alexis Psomiades, Christina Rossetti's sonnet articulates the aesthetic value of the woman's body within the economic marketplace. 'Like exchange value,' Psomiades writes, 'the one meaning makes unlike things like, many things [...] into one thing – one face/meaning – that can and cannot be consumed.' For Psomiades, Rossetti's poem highlights how the aesthetic circulation of her brother's canvases is 'haunted both by the language and by the forms of economic circulation'.³⁶ Conversely, Camille Paglia focuses on the vampiric subordination of Rossetti to Siddal following her death, writing that the one medievalism Rossetti retains in his late period is 'Dante's grandiose cultism of dead Beatrice' recalling the sexual hierarchy of Dante's *Vita Nuova* (1294), in which Dante 'subordinates himself to a coolly narcissistic female adolescent'.³⁷ *Beata Beatrix* revivifies Siddal through Rossetti's artistic mourning, her closed eyes signifying knowledge gained through death, knowledge beyond Rossetti's comprehension. As such, the portrait is Siddal's becoming of a form of fatal woman. Through death, Siddal is elevated in Rossetti's poetic imagination into his ideal, a haunting spirit that subordinates yet inspires. Like Dante, Rossetti creates a cult surrounding a dead, omniscient beloved.

Within Rossetti's cultism of dead Siddal lies a conspicuous preference for the melancholy and cruel. Praz stresses that Rossetti's regressive shift from medievalism into antiquity projects an algolagnic martyrdom of love throughout history. 'Beside his Beata Beatrix,' Praz writes, 'stand magical, evil creatures' of bloody antiquity.³⁸ Algolagnia, sexual gratification gained from inflicting and/or suffering pain, is evident in the double, triple, quadruplicate sadistic *femmes fatales* of Rossetti's later compositions, such as *Rosa Triplex*

³⁴ Christina Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁶ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Body's Beauty: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p105.

³⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 474.

³⁸ Praz, p. 228.

(1874) [fig. 1.3].³⁹ Beautiful things prompt copies of themselves, writes Elaine Scarry, seeking to make the ‘beauty of the prior thing more evident’. This phenomenon, Scarry continues, is unceasing, begetting the notion of eternity, a ‘perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops’.⁴⁰ Bram Dijkstra⁴¹ and Pollock⁴² reason that Rossetti’s allegorical replications function on the axis of social and sexual regulations of the emergent bourgeois order, whilst Paglia notes that ‘Doubled female faces always signify a collapsing of identities, a chthonian undertow’.⁴³ Both John Berger and Laura Mulvey have critiqued the replication and the fragmentation of women’s bodies in art. Reproduction, Berger writes ‘isolates a detail of a painting from the whole. The detail is transformed. An allegorical figure becomes a portrait of a girl.’⁴⁴ Mulvey similarly writes that the fragmented female body ‘destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative’. Mulvey, continuing, argues that this fragmentation ‘gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude’.⁴⁵ Despite Berger and Mulvey’s arguments, Rossetti’s duplicated faces can be read in reverse of these claims: in Rossetti, a portrait *becomes* an allegory, the ‘flatness’ Mulvey writes of given depth and meaning *through* the process of fragmentation and duplication.

Rossetti’s reproduction of the one self-same face transforms his portraits into an allegory of death. Through this figure, Rossetti explores beyond the limits of human existence in an attempt to reach the unknowable. For Rossetti, death is the ultimate unknowable force – the mystery beyond mortality. Like the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Rossetti attempts, unsuccessfully, to retrieve Elizabeth Siddal from the shadow realm as a means of acquiring the knowledge she has gained through death.⁴⁶ Branded effeminate by the Greeks for mourning his wife too passionately, Orpheus is butchered by maenads for rejecting their sexual advances, Orpheus’s head cast into his lyre and set downstream. Like Orpheus, Rossetti is feminized

³⁹ Duplicated female faces appear in the Rossetti paintings: *The Beloved* (1865); *The Bower Meadow* (1872); *La Ghirlandata* (1873); *Rosa Triplex* (1874); *La Bella Mano* (1875); *The Blessed Damsel* (1875–8) and *Astarte Syriaca* (1877).

⁴⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2011), p. 5.

⁴¹ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) – Dijkstra terms the trend for women’s duplicated faces the ‘kiss in the mirror’, linking the trend to the rise of the New Woman, writing: ‘Woman’s desire to embrace her own reflection became the turn of the century’s emblem of her enmity towards man, the iconic sign of her obstructive perversity, her greatest weapon in her reactionary war against the progressive male’, p. 150.

⁴² Pollock, p. 124.

⁴³ Paglia, p. 493.

⁴⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977), p. 25.

⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 19–20.

⁴⁶ Despite never producing a painting of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend, Rossetti completed multiple sketches of the story in 1875, all of which render Orpheus and Eurydice near identical, Jane Morris evidently the model for both figures.

through his obsession with death (Queen Victoria's mourning of the loss of her husband, Albert, the ultimate symbol of female mourning), his artworks vampirically sapping his masculinity: death is rendered male, the duplicated faces becoming androgynous entities.

On Rossetti's propagation of the Dante-esque cultism surrounding the dead Elizabeth Siddal, F. W. H. Myers writes:

Rossetti is but a Dante in the *selva oscura*; he has not sounded hell so profoundly, nor mounted into heaven so high. He is not a prophet but an artist; yet an artist who, both by the very intensity of his artistic vision, and by some inborn bent towards symbol and mysticism, stands on the side of those who see in material things spiritual significance, and utters words of universal meaning from his own heart.⁴⁷

Meyer's assessment of Rossetti's spiritual symbolism suggests that Rossetti incarnates his *femmes fatales* with the divine significance of his *donna ideale*. Obsessed by memories of Siddal, Rossetti acted to spiritually beatify her, in turn vitrifying Siddal as *the* dead heroine of pre-Rapahelitism. On October 4th 1869, in a spectacle seemingly stolen from Poe's aesthetic landscape, a bonfire was lit in Highgate Cemetery, in the light of which Siddal's corpse was exhumed. Apocrypha states that Siddal remained radiantly beautiful in death. From her coffin Rossetti retrieved a manuscript he had placed by Siddal's body, a lock of golden-red hair, supposedly, remaining stuck to the paper. The manuscript of poems (containing 'The Portrait') was purportedly composed as Siddal lay dying. Thoroughly disinfected, the poems were edited and published the following year, the exhumation of Siddal's de-animated corpse reanimating artistic inspiration in Rossetti. Identifying Rossetti's later works as sacred in Rossetti's cult of the dead beloved, Meyers specifies the unsettling qualities these works generate:

The pictures perplex us with their obvious incompleteness, their new and daunting beauty, are not the mere caprices of a highly dowered or wandering spirit. Rather they may be called (and none the less so for their shortcomings) the sacred pictures of a new religion: forms and faces which bear the same relation to that mystical worship of beauty in which we have dwelt so long. [...] All these have something in common, some union of strangeness and puissant physical loveliness with depth and remoteness of gaze.⁴⁸

Rossetti's *femmes fatales* do not simply compel through beauty alone; they unsettle, transfix through Rossetti's inherent cultism.

A dramatic monologue conforming to Poe's philosophy of composition, 'The Portrait' elegiacally laments a dead, beautiful woman. The monologue offers fleeting, ephemeral

⁴⁷ F. W. H. Myers, 'Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty' in *Essays, Modern* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1897), pp. 321-2.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 325-6.

sequences of love through hallucinatory echoes, memories and shadows, rooted within a concrete, solid image: a male artist stood before the portrait of his dead beloved. Hints that the artist idealized the death of his beloved before she died are evident:

In painting her I shrin'd her face
 'Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
Hardly at all.⁴⁹

A shrine, Pollock writes, 'metonymically introduces the trope of death into the field of love, and also of art'. 'Art', Pollock continues, 'both kills - stops time - and enshrines. It refuses death by perpetual representation, once again in service of psychic need.'⁵⁰ Pre-emptively enshrining his beloved in a shadowy bower, the field of sight between portrait and spectator is transformed into a *temenos*, a spiritual ground, in which worship of the portrait offers spiritual union.

The poem's inception indicates the vampiric essence the portrait has over the artist/spectator:

This is her portrait as she was:
 It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
 Should tarry when myself am gone.'⁵¹

Pollock argues that the painted image of a beloved is one that 'can be utterly and timelessly possessed'.⁵² Whilst Pollock's point may be valid, the portrait's obvious vampiric qualities allows Pollock's theory to be furthered: the *idea* of a dead beloved possessing the artist, ritually crystallized in the creative process as a means possessing that idea, possession self-referentially repeated in an ongoing cycle. As such, the artist/muse relationship mirrors that of Rossetti/Siddal, the art taking on significant spiritual value after the death of the muse. His image, tarrying on the image of the dead beloved, transforms the face of the beloved into an androgynous entity, hovering in the liminal life-in-death space of the *temenos*. Bronfen writes that portraits of women by male painters obtain castrative threats by virtue of a 'transposition of self to Other that involves a turn to the feminine gender'.⁵³ Transposing an image of the living onto an image of death implies the negation of a material body, the portrait a signifier of the artist's metonymic fragmentation of self, an uncanny destabilization of bodily integrity

⁴⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Portrait' in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 69-72 (p. 70).

⁵⁰ Pollock, p. 135.

⁵¹ Rossetti, 'The Portrait', p. 69.

⁵² Pollock, p. 135.

⁵³ Bronfen, p.

contradictorily repressing and representing the artist's own mortality, Freud's 'castrative' threat of human existence. Whilst the displacement of artist's face onto the portrait can be understood as the artist's immortalization, whilst simultaneously signifying his death, it can also be understood as the immortalization of Rossetti's androgynous paradigm; the imperceptible melting of male and female, artist and muse, spectator and art into one another, the uncanny life-in-death space of the *temenos* populated by one incestuously self-propagating androgynous being.

Analogous to Rossetti, the self-propagating, androgynous *femme fatale* appeared as a motif in the writings of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, both writers' variations on the theme resituating the Hellenistic hermaphrodite at the centre of Decadence and Aestheticism at the *fin de siècle*. Pater revelled in Rossetti's fusion of spirit and matter, stating that within the 'imprisoned heat' of Rossetti's imperious women 'the material and the spiritual are fused and blent: if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity'.⁵⁴ Together, Swinburne and Pater divide and expand on Rossetti's spirit/matter dualism: Swinburne's incantatory verse liturgically dominated by sex and ritual, Pater's sublimated prose the ephemeral, spiritual.

Like Rossetti, Swinburne's *femmes fatales* are fragmented figures (*corps morcelé*), his *Poems and Ballads* (1866) a catalogue of women's body parts as Decadent objects: jewels, carnivorous flowers, marble sculptures. Strangely, portraits never figure in Swinburne's poetry. Perhaps the flat surface of the canvas lacks the tactility of the three-dimensional bodies Swinburne obsessively itemizes. 'Hermaphroditus' and 'Fragoletta', Swinburne's hermaphrodite poems, converge around oral imagery, 'strange lips' satiated with 'ambiguous blood'⁵⁵, the mouth repeatedly rendered vampiric; pricking, consuming, transforming. Utilizing Rossetti's use of physical matter, Swinburne's daemonic, androgynous *femmes fatales* delight within Dionysian flux and metamorphoses. Swinburne does, however, comment on numerous chalk heads sketched by Michelangelo [*fig. 1.4.*]⁵⁶ in 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters of Florence', first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1868. In this prose-

⁵⁴ Walter Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti' in *Appreciations – With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889), pp. 235-6.

⁵⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Fragoletta' in *Poem and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000), p. 67.

⁵⁶ Swinburne makes no reference to any specific chalk sketch of Michelangelo. However, simply based on descriptions, certain images he may have seen whilst visiting the Uffizi, Florence in the spring of 1864 are: *Three Heads*, Black Chalk (1525); *Zenobia/Venus*, Black Chalk (1525); *Cleopatra*, Black Chalk (1533–34), as well as Francesco Bachiacca's copy of Michelangelo's *Female Head with Earrings*, Red Chalk (1525).

essay, Swinburne idealizes the vampiric, serpentine figure of the fatal woman in impressionistic prose: the ‘innocent enough’ ornaments that adorn her hair, neck and arms, become ‘infected with deadly and malignant meaning’ through ‘touching her flesh’; her eyes burn with the ‘passionless lust after gold and blood’ and her hair is ‘ready to shudder in sunder and divide into snakes’; her mouth is ‘crueller than a tiger’s, colder than a snake’s, and beautiful beyond a woman’s. She is the deadlier Venus incarnate.’ Note Swinburne’s sonorous prose, choked with sibilants and alliterations - his serpentine fatal woman is the Persian Amestris, the Israeli Jezebel, the Carthaginian Salammbô, Lamia ‘re-transformed’, Cleopatra, ‘not dying but turning serpent under serpent’s bite’.⁵⁷ Offsetting every image of beauty with violence and vice, Swinburne reads a composite beauty in Michelangelo’s chinks as Lene Østermark-Johansen writes, ‘contains its own opposite, a *concordia discors*’.⁵⁸ Serpent-like, Swinburne’s descriptions seduce and repulse, the almost monotonous snaky assonances, alliterative repetitions and references to history and myth hypnotically beguiling whilst simultaneously wearying the reader: a Decadent too-muchness.

Conversely, crystal-cut precision is the nexus of Pater’s writing, to encapsulate in words the ‘hard gemlike flame’ of artistic contemplation. A reclusive and diffident Oxford don, Pater’s idiosyncratic readings of art became the sacred texts of the Decadent 1890s, redefining criticism as an impressionistic exploration of the critic’s aesthetic responses. Perception, Pater declares, is the ultimate creative act: ‘To define beauty not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible [...] is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.’⁵⁹ Simply entitling his notorious collection of essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater spearheads an attack on Ruskinian aesthetic principles. Rejecting Ruskin’s truth-to-nature and moralistic medievalism, Pater declares form as superior to content, didactic moralism unnecessary in the connoisseurship of the *objet d’art*. ‘What is this song or picture, this engaging personality in life or in a book, to me?’ Pater asks. ‘What affect does it really produce on me?’⁶⁰

Pater’s criticism is a locus of form, history fused with myth, art, allegory and ghost story. Throughout his criticism, Pater’s network of intertextual links repeatedly collapse in on

⁵⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Notes on Designs of the Old Masters of Florence’ in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875), pp. 314-357, (pp. 319-321).

⁵⁸ Lene Østermark-Johansen, ‘Swinburne’s Serpentine Delights: The Aesthetic Critic and the Old Master Drawings in Florence’, *Florence, Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 24:1 (2002), pp. 49-72 (p. 59).

⁵⁹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

themselves, and blur the boundaries between genres. This technique, Elizabeth Prettejohn argues, double, even triples Pater's writing from the natural, organic world, deconstructing verbal or visual symbols and artificially restructures them, their meanings altered or reversed.⁶¹ Contrasting Swinburne, Pater's veneration of Rossetti's synthesis of spirit and matter displays an ascetic distancing, the physical purified of autonomy and elevated through synthesis with the soul, an Apollonian idealization of art achieved by visual distancing and linguistic refinement. In the pursuit of beauty, Pater attempts to slough off the brutal Darwinian nature that Swinburne delights in. In '*Diaphaneité*' (1864), Pater identifies a character type evident throughout history that achieves his Apollonian ideal: the diaphanous. Eternal, yet transparent, the diaphanous possesses a 'subtle blending and interpretation of intellectual, moral and spiritual elements. [...] It is a mind of taste lighted up by a spiritual ray within.'⁶² Rejecting Gothic chiaroscuro for the evanescent, Pater situates the diaphanous on the threshold of vision, images of transparency and light defying tactility. Catherine Maxwell describes this lack of tactility as 'an imagery that vies with, estranges, replaces or distorts the familiar or recognisable image',⁶³ with Paglia commenting on Pater's 'obscuring of the visible just when we eagerly turn towards it'.⁶⁴ Pater, seemingly, is a contradiction, attempting to crystallize fluid impressions and images that seem to appear, rather than exist. This process has an ossifying, immobilizing effect on the diaphanous figures he praises. Tracing the diaphanous from Hellenism to the nineteenth century and aesthetically distancing through language, Pater smothers the diaphanous in a death shroud of stasis, removing the diaphanous figure from time and place, mythologizing and immortalizing in a trans-temporal, affectless chain of images.

Despite its almost ethereal suggestions, the diaphanous also implies the unearthing of something once known, Pater describing the diaphanous as 'the reminiscence of a forgotten culture'.⁶⁵ Such a character, Pater continues is 'a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere. It has something of the clear ring, the eternal outline of the antique.'⁶⁶ Pater finds this ancient characteristic in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Walter Pater and aesthetic painting' in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* ed. By Elizabeth Prettejohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 36-58 (p. 49).

⁶² Walter Pater, '*Diaphaneité*' in *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 136-140 (p. 137).

⁶³ Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination of Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 71.

⁶⁴ Paglia, p. 482.

⁶⁵ Pater, '*Diaphaneité*', p. 137.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 138.

1503-06) [fig. 1.5], whom Pater, rhapsodizing, mythologizes as *femme fatale*:

It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. [...] 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 [...] Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.⁶⁷

The likeness of Pater's Mona Lisa to Rossetti's *femmes fatales* is immediately evident, Mona Lisa projecting *knowingness* across the dead space of her imagined landscape. Pater's Mona Lisa stems from Théophile Gautier's essay on Leonardo, in which Gautier detects 'a certain fatigue' in Mona Lisa's physicality, her 'sinuous, serpentine mouth, turned up at the corners in violet penumbra' as 'repressed desire and desperate hope struggle painfully through a luminous shadow'.⁶⁸ Gautier continues:

Leonardo da Vinci gives to his faces such an imprint of superiority that one feels disturbed in their presence. The lids of her profound eyes hide secrets interdicted the profane; and the curve of her mocking lips suit the gods, who know everything and gently despise human vulgarities. Doesn't it seem that the Joconde is the Isis of a cryptic religion, who believing herself alone, half opens the folds of her veil, even if the imprudent one who surprises her become insane and die for it? Never has the feminine ideal been invested with forms more deliciously seductive.⁶⁹

Like Rossetti's *femmes fatales*, Pater and Gautier's Mona Lisa transgresses time, watching the world exhaustively with relentless omnipresence. However, unlike his predecessors, Pater exhibits no erotic interest in his *femme fatale*. Pater's sublimated prose unsexes the Mona Lisa, his inspection of her 'cell by cell'⁷⁰ blurring her into a gender-neutral vessel. Paglia argues that Pater's essay on Leonardo is Pater's attempt to frame Mona Lisa in a 'hermaphrodite epiphany', but within this frame 'she twists and turns, snaking through history'.⁷¹ Pater's genderless Mona Lisa fragments the *femme fatale* in a literary manoeuvre that usurps her identity, which he subsequently reclaims on his own terms.

Ritual Devotees: Vernon Lee and the Sacrificial Man

Although an ardent admirer of Walter Pater, Vernon Lee was critical of his (and the school of Aestheticism's) veneration of Hellenistic aesthetic models, particularly sculpture, that

⁶⁷ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁸ Théophile Gautier, 'Leonardo Da Vinci' in *The Works of Théophile Gautier Volume 9* (New York: The Athenaeum Society, 1901), pp. 253-280, (p. 276).

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 276-277.

⁷⁰ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 70.

⁷¹ Paglia, p. 486.

celebrated the beauty of the masculine yet subjugated the feminine, in what, Stefano Evangelista argues, promotes a ‘rigidly masculine gendering of the aesthetic’.⁷² Throughout her essays and fiction Lee attempts to combat these masculine aesthetic models through the male narrators of her work, as they struggle continually to re-subjugate and frame *femmes fatales*, and presents the failure of masculine identities to translate the alluring spectral femininity of the *femmes fatales* that haunt them into words. Unsettling the grandiose erotics of the male predecessors and contemporaries, Lee offers a gendered re-contextualization of the *femme fatale* archetype, subverting the assumption that the framing of the *femme fatale* must signify that she is bound.

On the profusion of images of framed, sexually provocative women within the Western canon, Lynda Nead argues that ‘classical’⁷³ forms of art perform a ‘magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears’.⁷⁴ Nead specifies, however, that the containment of these women is fleeting, as ‘the margins are dangerous and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again... and again’.⁷⁵ Transcending the boundaries of historical time and place, Vernon Lee’s *femmes fatales* deny fixed representation to lure their male victims into doing their bidding. Lee, like Poe, Rossetti and Pater, asserts the Decadent/Aesthetic principles of person as *objet d’art*. As aestheticized object, portraits are removed from the realm of choice and act, therefore their subjects exist outside of the parameters of natural and social law. Although defying law, Lee’s *femmes fatales* remain framed in stasis, due to endlessly re-enacting their moment of encapsulation on canvas. The freedom of Lee’s *femmes fatales* is symbiotically linked to their male admirers who, through a wilful suspension of disbelief, re-contextualize the *femme fatale* within the present. By the very nature of the *femme fatale*, this re-contextualization insists upon the dismantling of authority as a means of emancipation. As Maxwell writes, these *femmes fatales* require ‘performance of ritual and sacrifice, most importantly, of male devotees’.⁷⁶ Inheriting the Decadent motif of self-induced psychological incarceration and suspension of disbelief, Lee’s *fin-de-siècle femmes fatales* echo Praz’s tenet concerning the imperious women who populate Swinburne’s poetical landscape: ‘They have a good deal of the idol about them – in fact of the εἰδωλον, the

⁷² Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 20.

⁷³ Particularly art that conforms to Aristotelean modes, such as statements that ‘The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness.’

⁷⁴ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷⁶ Catherine Maxwell, ‘From Dionysus to ‘Dionea’: Vernon Lee’s Portraits’ *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 13:3 (1997), pp. 253-269, (p. 265).

phantom of the mind rather than of the real human being.’⁷⁷

Lee published four supernatural tales in the collection *Hauntings* in 1890. Each story revises the fatal woman motif, who manifest as phantoms of the mind to male devotees who hover on the threshold of madness, artistic impotence and, in the case of ‘Amour Dure’, death. Writing in the Preface to *Hauntings*, Lee argues that ‘genuine’ phantoms are not mysterious entities seeking to rectify wrongs so they can be at peace, but as stemming from oneself: ‘They are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from strange confused heaps which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions.’⁷⁸ This half-faded inability on behalf of her male narrators to concretize the aesthetic sensibilities of the phantom *femmes fatales* that haunt them contradicts the aesthetic model Walter Pater laid out for students of Aestheticism in *The Renaissance*. Pater’s crystallization of thought, defining art in the ‘most concrete terms possible’,⁷⁹ is negated by Lee’s protagonist’s inability to do so, and works to dissolve the hard edged, structured locutions of male aesthetic models into a feminine flux. Unable to encapsulate the *femme fatale* within a single, subjective approach to historical events, Lee’s narrators illuminate what T. D. Olverson regards and the ‘fragility, instability, exclusions and prejudice of historical record’.⁸⁰ The fragmented entries of Spiridion Trepka’s diary in ‘Amour Dure’, for instance, delineates the instability of such records, and demonstrates the inability of male-authored history to subjugate the spectral femininity of the *femmes fatales* that haunt them.

Relocating to Italy to produce a historical volume on the municipality of Urbania, Trepka obsessively covets a ‘strange figure of a woman’⁸¹ from Urbanian past, the *femme fatale*, Medea da Carpi. Masochism, masquerading as intense scholastic research, dominates Trepka, who psychologically chains himself to the historical past to avenge the profanation of Medea’s name. Reminiscent of the Renaissance *femmes fatales* Lucrezia Borgia, Bianca Capello and Vittoria Accoramboni, Medea’s violent life stains Urbanian history in blood: in 1582, at the age of twenty-seven, Medea was executed for having violently ended the lives of five male lovers in a quest for power and domination. Medea’s *modus operandi* is one of visual

⁷⁷ Praz, p.

⁷⁸ Vernon Lee, ‘Preface’ to *Hauntings* in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 39.

⁷⁹ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ T. D. Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late Victorian Hellenism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 161.

⁸¹ Vernon Lee, ‘Amour Dure’ in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* ed. By Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 41-76 (p. 45).

subordination over men: to see Medea is to passively succumb to her beauty and will, and to be ritually slaughtered, a pawn of her political machinations.

Possessing a mesmeric beauty, Medea has her image duplicated in portraits that she gifts to potential victims. Duke Robert II, the architect of Medea's execution and political successor, fears the destructive seduction of Medea's beauty over men, and ensures that she is killed by two women. Denying even the admittance of either priest or monk into her death chamber, Robert refuses Medea 'the benefit of any penitence that may have lurked within her adamant heart'.⁸² Obsessively searching the Urbanian archives for portraits of Medea, Trepka declares the insurgent Robert had all known images of her destroyed, 'lest even after hear death this terrible beauty should play a trick on him'.⁸³ Further evoking Hawthorne's atavistic fear of the dead achieving sentience through *objet d'art*,⁸⁴ Robert takes additional precautions: fearful of encountering Medea in the afterlife, Robert has his soul bound to a silver relic. Following his death, the relic was placed in the heart of Robert's memorial statue in the royal court, where his soul (thus Robert himself) would remain in a state of dormancy awaiting judgement day, when he will achieve salvation, whilst Medea is cast into the pits of hell.

Few portraits of Medea still exist, however: a marble bust, a possible Barrochio painting depicting Medea as Cleopatra, and a miniature portrait supposedly sent to 'poor Prinzivalle degli Ordelaiffi to turn his head'. Implying that the portraits were used as a means of seduction, Lee replicates the latent voyeurism of the spectative eye over physical art. Conflating the existing portraits, Trepka ardently assembles a composite image of Medea. In Paterian form, Trepka seeks to crystallize his fascination with Medea in language, attempting to explain and analyse his obsession by 'reducing it to its elements'. As with Rossetti before him, Trepka fragments the *femme fatale*'s image through metonymic pictorial itemizations, providing an in-depth description of the miniature:

The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls, like a fleece, of bright auburn hair; the nose a trifle over-aquiline, and the cheek-bones a trifle too low; the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness; they seem to take, but not to give. The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech. The complexion is dazzlingly fair, the perfect transparent rosette lily of a

⁸² Ibid., p. 50.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 51.

⁸⁴ Hawthorne, p. 88.

red-haired beauty; the head, with hair elaborately curled and plaited close to it, and adorned with pearls, sits like that of the antique Arethusa on a long, supple, swan-like neck [...] Round the lady's neck is a gold chain with little gold lozenges at intervals, on which is engraved the posy or pun (the fashion of French devices is common in those days), "Amour Dure—Dure Amour."⁸⁵

Unlike Rossetti's *femmes fatales*, none of Medea's features harmonize with one another in Trepka's Picasso-esque descriptions: Medea's fair complexion is negated by the consuming, vampiric mouth, and the innocent, lily-white complexion and graceful neck are offset by Medea's caustic, eerie gaze. Despite the contradictory beauty of the miniature, however, Trepka succumbs to its illusory seduction, as 'the more it is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind'.⁸⁶ Knowingly disremembering the seductive intent of the portrait, Trepka psychically surrenders to the composite Medea of his own creation. As such, Medea, a woman whose 'one passion is conquest and empire', utilizes the eroticized spectative gaze as political leverage, and conquers Trepka through the exploitation of his subjugating aestheticism.

As noted by several critics, Lee models Medea on Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia di Panciatichli (c. 1450) [*fig 1.6*], the allusion obvious in Lee's mirroring of Medea's necklace, which reads 'Amour Dure – Dure Amour' ('love that lasts, cruel love') with Lucrezia's, which reads 'Amour Dure sans fin' (Love without end).⁸⁷⁸⁸ A court painter to Cosimo I de Medici, the Florentine Bronzino's Mannerist portraits exude an icy, distant elegance. As Maria Rika Maniates states: 'The sitters look out at us and yet there seems to be no point of contact between them and the onlooker. Their mysterious melancholy appears an affectation, a quality emphasized by Bronzino through the extreme formalism of his portraiture.'⁸⁹ Lee utilizes the

⁸⁵ Lee, p. 52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸⁷ See Maxwell 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's Portraits' (1997), and Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2008).

⁸⁸ Henry James's similarly utilizes Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia di Panciatichli throughout his novel, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). James's protagonist, Milly Theale, stricken with a fatal illness, finds her double in the portrait:

Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands, and magnificently dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michaelangelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. "I shall never be better than this."

Although James does not utilize any elements of the ghost-story throughout the novel, Milly's doubling with the portrait similarly recalls the links between portraiture, death and the feminine body [Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (London: Penguin Group, 2008), pp. 182-183)].

⁸⁹ Maria Rika Maniates, *Mannerism in Italian Music and Culture, 1530-1630* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), p. 41.

aloofness implicit in Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia by proxy of Medea to feminize Trepka, who makes it his life's work to earn Medea's love. Yet, for Medea, sexual gratification of equals is inconceivable, love solely employed as a political manoeuvre. As such, Medea's eroticism stems from her male pursuer's Decadent voyeurism that renders passivity which she manipulates to her will: 'Her magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of all her slaves to perish.'⁹⁰ Trepka submits to Medea in a move that will end in his extermination.

Interweaving Trepka's historiography of Medea with written and visual references to historical *femmes fatales*, Trepka's conception of Medea is filtered through what Olverson terms an 'inherited knowledge of other texts and images [...] limited by the conventional and conformist quality of his education'.⁹¹ Depicting Medea painted as 'Cleopatra at the feet of Augustus', Lee emphasizes how representations of 'remorseless' women are mediated through an apathetic contextual lens. Figured throughout history as an Oriental despot, cruel and sensual, Cleopatra is, Paglia argues, 'the first exotic heterosexual *femme fatale* of Decadence'.⁹² Daemonized by Swinburne as 'not dying but turning serpent under serpent's bite',⁹³ and idealized as a violent, sexual enslaver by Gautier in his short story 'One of Cleopatra's Nights' (1838), Cleopatra is codified within the Decadent corpus as 'the serpent of the Nile', a *femme fatale* whose overt sexuality operates upon the borders of life and death.⁹⁴

Citing Cleopatra, Accorambani, Borgia, Capello, Panciaticli, and later Faustina the

⁹⁰ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 57.

⁹¹ Olverson, p. 170.

⁹² Paglia, p. 417.

⁹³ Swinburne, p. 319.

⁹⁴ To momentarily stray beyond the cadre of Decadence, we find Cleopatra equally marginalized in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). Visiting a gallery, Brontë's protagonist, Lucy Snowe, becomes entangled with a throng of 'worshipping connoisseurs' before a picture of Cleopatra that 'seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection'. Observing the portrait, Lucy opines:

She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She, had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material—seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery—she managed to make inefficient raiment.

Disgusted by the portraits self-indulgence and overt sexuality, Lucy's proselytizing Protestantism denounces Cleopatra's decadence. In conversation with her suitor, Paul Emmanuel, Paul praises Cleopatra's beauty, but dismisses her as an unfit wife, mother and sister. Thus, Cleopatra is relegated into liminality within the religious and gendered paradigms of *Villette*. It seems that even outside of Decadent circles, Cleopatra's encoding throughout history as *femme fatale* has brandished her unworthy of consideration. [Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 199-203].

Younger and the Roman *senatrix* Marozia, Lee establishes Medea within a literary and historical context concerned with transgressive femininity. Mediated through historical accounts, Olverson asserts, powerful women have often been ‘reduced to an expedient stereotype and posthumously vilified for political purposes’.⁹⁵ Consequently, Olverson writes, ‘Lee’s entire narrative is organized so as to challenge conventional notions of “his-story” and scholarship’, aligning Medea with women whom the reader understands as ‘culturally’ evil as a means of both reinforcing and contradicting cultural notions of ‘evil’ women.⁹⁶ Perhaps Lee’s most notorious allusion to a historical *femme fatale* is Medea’s namesake, Medea of Colchis. Notoriously dramatized by Euripides, the foreign, middle-aged sorceress Medea of Colchis, spurned by her lover Jason, avenges herself by murdering her children by Jason, and sending poisoned robes to Jason’s new bride, Glauce, princess of Corinth. A favourite of European writers and dramatists throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods, Medea appears in narratives by Geoffrey Chaucer, William Caxton, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare. Curiously, Diane Purkiss notes, ‘the English Renaissance was not particularly interested in, even alienated by, the Medea of Euripides’.⁹⁷ Rather, the standard Renaissance Medea was a young woman, readable as ‘emblematic of the liminal geographic and ethnic space of the witch. [...] Medea must have sprung to mind as the possible *telos* of a voyage in search of gold in strange and unexplored territory.’⁹⁸ A body upon which unknown or unrecognized desires can be enacted, the figure of the witch Medea is codified within literature as a transgressor yet also embodies that which cannot be written into language. Imaginatively utilizing the reception of Medea throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods, Lee invents a heavily intertextual Medea that is both familiar, and yet charts the ‘unexplored territory’ of the strange and new.

Denied corporeal form by Lee, Medea da Carpi’s metamorphoses must be psychologically induced, Medea imprinting herself within the psychic lives of those she wishes to subordinate. Relentlessly searching the archives, Trepka discovers an antique mirror. Contemplating his own image, Trepka envisions a spectral apparition that tarries with his reflection:

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! [...] On the wall opposite the mirror [...] hung a portrait. And such a portrait! — Bronzino never painted a

⁹⁵ Olverson, p. 162.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁷ Diane Purkiss, ‘Medea in the English Renaissance’, in *Medea in Performance*, ed. Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), pp. 32–48 (p. 33).

⁹⁸ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 259.

grander one. Against a background of harsh, dark blue, there stands out the figure of the Duchess (for it is Medea, the real Medea, a thousand times more real, individual, and powerful than in the other portraits), seated stiffly in a high-backed chair, sustained, as it were, almost rigid, by the stiff brocade of skirts and stomacher, stiffer for plaques of embroidered silver flowers and rows of seed pearl. The dress is, with its mixture of silver and pearl, of a strange dull red, a wicked poppy-juice color, against which the flesh of the long, narrow hands with fringe-like fingers; of the long slender neck, and the face with bared forehead, looks white and hard, like alabaster. The face is the same as in the other portraits: the same rounded forehead, with the short fleece-like, yellowish-red curls; the same beautifully curved eyebrows, just barely marked; the same eyelids, a little tight across the eyes; the same lips, a little tight across the mouth; but with a purity of line, a dazzling splendor of skin, and intensity of look immeasurably superior to all the other portraits.⁹⁹

Patricia Pulham argues that the fusing of personae defines Trepka as Medea's corporeal double. Subordinated, Trepka thus becomes the 'castrated male', the authoritative Medea the 'phallic woman', symbiotically merged within an androgynous, latently homoerotic relationship.¹⁰⁰ Trepka's psychic castration and subsequent feminization is evident through a sequence of hallucinatory, mutilating visions he experiences upon fleeing the archives. 'A real, living rose, dark red and only just plucked'¹⁰¹ turns to dust within Trepka's hand, and the decapitated head of John the Baptist hovers before him as he enters a church. Within the church, a blaze of chandeliers and tapers illuminates an apparition of the spectral Medea, clutching a red rose. Loosening her black cloak, Medea exposes a gown of deep red, embroidered with gleaming gold embellishments, only to dissipate into nothingness.

Grisly visions of death, decapitation, thorny roses and red blood evoke the Decadent Cleopatra, and the fanged, castratory *vagina dentata*, which Barbara Creed describes as 'the all encompassing maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal period who threatens symbolically to engulf the infant, thus posing a threat of psychic obliteration'.¹⁰² Pulham further notes that the fires that illuminate the 'deep red' of Medea's 'wicked poppy-juice coloured gown' evokes the 'blinding' effect that Freud associates with psychic castration.¹⁰³ Psychically regressing into a pre-conscious polymorphous existence, Trepka seeks the disavowal of sexual differentiation in a narcissistic quest for wholeness, seeking to regain the psychic losses gained through

⁹⁹ Lee, pp. 61-62.

¹⁰⁰ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 126.

¹⁰¹ Lee, p. 70.

¹⁰² Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 109.

¹⁰³ Pulham, p. 125.

cognizance of sexual differentiation. Yet, devoid of a physical, female body, Medea transcends corporeal limitations, negating Trepka's polymorphous phantasies. Transcending structural limitations, be they historical or artistic, Medea remains as intangible and unknown as she was at the beginning of Lee's narrative.

Recorded in a brief note at the end of the text, the reader learns that Trepka was found slain on the streets of Urbania on the Christmas morning of 1885 of a 'stab wound in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand'.¹⁰⁴ In one last, egotistical demand, Medea promises Trepka a token of affection should he destroy the silver relic of Duke Robert's soul kept within the heart of his statue. Upon his quest, Trepka is accosted by the ghostly apparitions of Medea's victims who plead with him to flee. Ignoring their warnings, Trepka carves the relic from the heart of the statue, and hacks it to pieces with a machete. Returning to his lodgings, Trepka records one final entry in his diary: 'It is she! It is she! At last, Medea, Medea! Ah! AMOUR DURE – DURE AMOUR!'¹⁰⁵ Although cheated of the identity of the murderer, we immediately suspect Medea, a phallic stab to the heart physically imaging Medea's psychic castration of the subordinated Trepka. Leaving Trepka's history of Urbania unfinished, Lee exposes what she believes to be the incestuous barrenness and homogenization of male-authored historiography concerning transgressive historical women. Although relegated back into the stasis of her portrait, Medea transcends time, and merely waits for her next victim, unable to be pinned down by the masculine eye, forever snaking through history.

Medea's liminal status is often established through her occupation as sorceress, presenting her as a locus on which 'unknown' or exotic desires may be fantasied. As Emma Griffiths writes, the strongest image of Medea in 'the ancient world was undoubtedly that of the witch, the sorceress using herbs, incantations and innate magical powers to achieve her aims. [...] Her powers are not trivial – she can control natural forces, and even reverse the order of life and death by rejuvenating the old.'¹⁰⁶ Medea's innate, perhaps daemonic, control of life and death also permeated visual representations of Medea throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Frederick Sandys painting *Medea* (1868) [fig. 1.7] depicts Medea as enchantress, engaged in a ritual incantation whilst kindling an assortment of foul ingredients – toads, strange roots and mysterious liquids – into a magical poultice. John William Waterhouse, similarly, presents Medea as concocting a magic potion in *Jason and Medea* (1907) [fig 1. 8], Medea's resolute staring into the beyond a harkening back to her role as seer in the ancient

¹⁰⁴ Lee, p. 76.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰⁶ Emma Griffiths, *Medea* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 41.

world. Yet, Griffiths continues, although Medea as a practitioner of witchcraft ‘has access to a number of different traditions and techniques of magic [...] she can also be presented as a victim of magic, particularly in the area of love magic’.¹⁰⁷ Evelyn de Morgan’s *Medea* (1889) [fig. 1.9], for instance, reinterprets the image of Medea as sorceress. Gazing into the distance, Medea’s glance produces a melancholic effect, emphasizing her acknowledgement that she has no alternative but to use her fatal skills. Medea is no victim, however. Rather, de Morgan adorns Medea in the crimson draperies of martyrdom in reference to Jason’s betrayal of her. Evoking the image of the suffering Medea, E. Nesbit’s short story ‘The Ebony Frame’ (1893)¹⁰⁸ relocates the concept of a persecuted witch to the nineteenth century. Exploring the limitations enforced upon the witch deemed a *femme fatale*, Nesbit offers a critique of the gendered expectations of women at the *fin de siècle*.

Sexual Alchemy: E. Nesbit’s Androgynous Experiment

Although E. Nesbit is primarily considered as a writer of children’s fiction, her literary output is shot through with Decadent motifs, such as oriental talismans, dead lovers and themes of jealousy, vengeance and thwarted love. Structurally ‘The Ebony Frame’ resembles ‘Amour Dure’: a susceptible young man arrives in a new location where he is seduced by the portrait of a *femme fatale*, undergoing an erotic submission to a personality as *objet d’art*. Both short stories end in death, but now it is not the passionate pursuer who is slain, but the sequestered *femme fatale*. For Ziolkowski, ‘The Ebony Frame’ recalls D. G. Rossetti’s portrait narratives, in which the portrait is situated as *figura*, Nesbit taking ‘up the role of dual reincarnation’ that she ‘exploits for sheer horror’.¹⁰⁹ The unassuming Devigne, protagonist of ‘The Ebony Frame’, is a *fin-de-siècle* re-envisioning of Romanticism’s beguiled heroes. Receiving a large inheritance and opulently furnished apartment in Chelsea, Devigne forsakes his lagging journalism career for a life of leisure, upholding family tradition as descendants of the Dukes of Picardy. Economic security makes Devigne idle and self-indulgent, who flippantly ignores his beau Mildred Mayhew, hitherto regarded as Devigne’s ‘life’s light’ as she becomes ‘less luminous’¹¹⁰ to him. Previously required to write for necessity, wealth liberates Devigne from

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁰⁸ ‘The Ebony Frame’ initially appeared in *Longman’s Magazine* in 1891 and was re-published in the short story collection *Grim Tales* in 1893. Analysis of ‘The Ebony Frame’ here utilizes the version of the story published within *Grim Tales*.

¹⁰⁹ Ziolkowski, p. 133. Ziolkowski erroneously dates the publication of ‘The Ebony Frame’ to 1910, not the actual year of publication 1893, and thus analyses Nesbit’s short story as a somewhat outmoded harkening back to haunted portrait narratives of the nineteenth century.

¹¹⁰ Edith Nesbit, ‘The Ebony Frame’ in *Horror Stories* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 14-25 (p. 14).

reality and allows him the ability to indulge in fantasy.

Seeking to discover the original painting that hung in an ebony frame placed above his mantel, Devigne and his maid servant discover two paintings ‘nailed face to face’ in his attic, the first a ‘perfect portrait’ of Devigne in cavalier dress, deemed to be his distant ancestor, the other a full length portrait of a woman in black velvet, whose type of beauty was ‘beloved by Burne-Jones and Rossetti’. Placing the portrait of the woman in the ebony frame, the portrait begins to assert a sinister, vampiric hold over Devigne, absorbing his mental life to the point of obsession. Indulging in fantasy, Devigne wishes the woman in the portrait were with him in reality, and to his amazement, she descends from the portrait and relates their story: they were lovers in the time of James I. Sent off to fight in the civil war, he was unable to deter the other citizens as they deemed her a witch and burned her at the stake as she had ‘looked at the stars and had gained more knowledge than they’. Before they were able to burn her, however, the woman sold her soul to the devil, who provided her with the ability to come back through her portrait if an onlooker wished for her, as long as the portrait was placed in the ebony frame. Appearing to her mother as she grieved over her daughter’s death, her mother nailed the two lover’s portraits together. He returned, was lied to about his lover’s fate and married another. Upon separating the portraits, Devigne takes the place of his ancestor, undergoing a metamorphosis by magic and entering into a symbiotic relationship with the *femme fatale*. Stating the stipulations of her incarceration within the ebony frame, the *femme fatale* reveals that Devigne may offer his soul in payment for her freedom. ‘Why, love, it’s a contradiction in terms,’ Devigne proclaims in response, ‘You are my soul.’¹¹¹ Through the symbiotic linking of souls across temporal plains Nesbit hints, through Devigne’s likeness in the portrait, that Devigne is a reincarnation of his cavalier ancestor, due to endlessly recapitulate until reunited with the other half of his soul.

Devigne ritualistically documents his fascination with the *femme fatale*’s ‘large, deep luminous eyes’: ‘I have never seen any other eyes like hers [...] they commanded, as might those of an empress’; ‘I met her dark, deep, hazel eyes, and once more my gaze was held fixed as by strong magic’; ‘I gazed into her eyes, and felt my own dilate, pricked with a smart like the smart of tears.’¹¹² To Devigne, the stare of the *femme fatale* within the ebony frame produces a Medusa-morphic gaze, penetrating the masculine eye and stopping it within its tracks. As Paglia writes about the eyes of Burne-Jones and Rossetti’s hermaphroditic women,

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp. 16 & 20 & 21.

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 16-17.

‘they drown the masculine motivation and action at the source’.¹¹³ In his poem of Leonardo’s Medusa, Shelley exclaims the ‘Gorgonian eyes’ have ‘the tempestuous loveliness of terror’.¹¹⁴ Nesbit recreates this dynamic through Devigne, who, on first encounter with the *femme fatale*, has never known a ‘moment of terror so blank and absolute’¹¹⁵ yet to him she is ‘the only woman in the world’.¹¹⁶ Linked, yet rendered inert by his infatuation with the *femme fatale*, Devigne is feminized, a passive sufferer, whereas Nesbit instils within the *femme fatale*’s gaze a male militancy: the male/female binary dissolves into a fluctuating androgyny, engendering both Devigne and the *femme fatale*, two halves of one whole, with an androgynous identity.

For Emma Liggins, Nesbit’s inverting of Victorian gender roles paints the ghostly encounter as a comment on Victorian marriage. Devigne’s lusting after the transgressive figure of the witch at the narrative’s end, Liggins argues, presents the relationship between Devigne and the figure in the portrait the ‘truer form of fulfilment, with middle-class marriage as the locus of horror’.¹¹⁷ Alongside a critique of middle-class marriage, Nesbit’s narrative also offers a juxtaposition of female and male aesthetic sensibilities: a female fluidity versus a masculine rigour. In ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891), Oscar Wilde, a disciple of Pater, writes ‘Form is everything: start with the worship of form and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you.’¹¹⁸ Nesbit contradicts these terms by having the structural ebony frame acting as both an opening and a barrier between Devigne and the *femme fatale*. The dissolving of the structure of the portrait early on in the narrative (‘I saw the picture dilate, her lips tremble [...] Her hands moved slightly; and a sort of flicker of a smile passed over her face.’¹¹⁹) insults Wildean/Paterean beauty and form by instilling movement upon the portrait. By doing so Nesbit infiltrates male aesthetic ideals and presents a feminine beauty. Nesbit also appeals to male artist: the ebony frame is literally carved by the devil, and it is only through a wilful sacrifice on the male viewer’s part that she can be freed. By doing so Nesbit once again offers an alternative to the Paterian philosophy identifying what art means to the individual, presenting the *femme fatale* an opportunity to walk alongside her male partner, not creating a

¹¹³ Paglia, p. 496.

¹¹⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘On the Medusa if Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ in *The Poetical Works of Shelley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 577-578 (p. 578).

¹¹⁵ Nesbit, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Emma Liggins, ‘Gendering the Spectral Encounter at the *Fin de Siècle*: Unspeakability in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales’ in *Gothic Studies*, 15:2 (November 2013), pp. 39-52 (p. 46).

¹¹⁸ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist – A Dialogue in Two Parts With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing’ in *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writings* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2002), pp. 173-244 (p. 204).

¹¹⁹ Nesbit, p. 18.

wholly feminine sphere, but a space in which the masculine and feminine can be considered alongside one another, the Decadent fragmentations adding up into the moral whole. As is the case with the *femme fatale*, someone must die, and in a *deus ex machina* a blazing fire sweeps through the protagonist's apartment and destroys both the painting and the frame.¹²⁰

As in Swinburne, when the masculine eye allows itself to be penetrated by femininity chaos ensues, although Lee and Nesbit approach this ensuing chaos differently. In 'Amour Dure', Trepka is slain to insult the masculine principle, yielding to femininity. In 'The Ebony Frame', the *femme fatale* is slain to restore the normative rules; a witch, she practices sexual alchemy, the 'tools and instruments whose uses I [Devigne] did not know'¹²¹ allowing her to discover and merge gender identity, reinforcing a twin-ship between herself and Devigne in an androgynous state that cannot endure outside of Devigne's sumptuous apartment. Hence the reason the apartment burns down. The microcosm of sexual and gendered awareness cannot exist in *fin-de-siècle* society. Like the witch in the ebony frame, Medea de Carpi too fabricates an androgynous male, although Medea's takes the form of a servant. Submitting in fantasy to the phallic Medea, Trepka creates his own death, being found slain by a phallic dagger, revenge for subjugating femininity and then forfeiting masculinity to a woman who uses it against him. Lee confirms Swinburne's intuition of the erotic perversity of unqualified femininity: to yield to the feminine is to court one's own termination.

The Vampiric Visions of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray

Modifying Lee and Nesbit's fatal courting of femininity encapsulated within art, Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) inaugurates the portrait of the androgynous boy as the central conceit of the Decadent text. At Wilde's trial for gross indecency in 1895, tracts from *Dorian Gray* were read aloud by the prosecution. Edward Carson, Wilde's cross-examiner, questioned Wilde as to the meaning of Basil Hallward's description of his painting of Dorian, which Basil describes as being the portrait of a 'young man of extraordinary personal beauty'.¹²² Carson asked, 'Do you mean to say that that passage describes the natural feeling of one man to another?', to which Wilde responded, 'It would be the influence produced by a beautiful personality.' 'A beautiful person?' Carson queried. 'I said a "beautiful personality,"'

¹²⁰ Ziolkowski amusingly writes that 'Mrs. Nesbit does not seem to be aware of the superstition that such accursed portraits cannot be destroyed by fire' (p 134), alluding to the motif concerning the inability to dispose of a haunted portrait by igniting it, a motif beginning in folklore and exemplified in literature by Charles Maturin's gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 16.

¹²² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), p. 5.

Wilde retorted, 'You can describe it as you like. Dorian Gray's was a most remarkable personality.'¹²³ For Wilde, personality is a visual construct, a pre-ordained, externalized metaphor for the internal. As Paglia writes, Wilde 'imagines personality as a radiant icon of Apollonian materiality, the godlike summation of the visible world'.¹²⁴ Personality is central to Wilde's literary theory, with Wilde arguing that 'As art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed, and from the meeting of the two comes right interpretative criticism.'¹²⁵ Only through an intensifying and forging of 'personality' can one interpret the 'personality' and the art of others. *Dorian Gray* makes visual 'personality' the focal point of its narrative, exploring the subordination and erotic fixation the visual has over the spectative gaze.

Dorian Gray begins with a perceptual pyramid, with Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton gazing at Hallward's portrait of Dorian in awe. The scene dramatizes art as symbolic of the divine, Basil's obsessive painting of Dorian a form of 'curious artistic idolatry'. Evoking Rossetti's pagan goddesses, Dorian's 'finely-curved scarlet lips', 'frank blue eyes' and 'crisp gold hair' are embowered by roses and lilacs, 'flame-like' laburnums and precious silks, and perfumed with the heady aroma of floral scents. As with Rossetti's goddesses, Dorian is androgynous. He has a 'rose red mouth' and 'rose white boyhood' and emanates a 'delicate bloom and loveliness'.¹²⁶ Moreover, Pulham argues, Dorian's narcissistic longing erotically to embrace his own image (Dorian at one point 'in boyish mockery of Narcissus' feigns to kiss 'those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him')¹²⁷ implies 'a return to a pre-Oedipal androgyny which [...] permits an expression of same-sex desire'.¹²⁸ Modelled on pagan prototypes, Dorian is compared to Adonis, Antinous, Narcissus and Paris. Unlike his ancient predecessors, Dorian refuses to allow himself to die young as a means of forever preserving himself as beautiful youth. Reversing Poe's 'The Oval Portrait', Dorian undergoes a metamorphosis by magic, divorcing himself from his soul that he projects onto his portrait, Dorian usurping the permanence of the *objet d'art*. Inducting himself into the Decadent pantheon of amoral art, Dorian's new immortal life as immutable art object allows for sadomasochistic action *sans* repercussion. Retaining his youthful bloom, Dorian's portrait becomes increasingly corrupted by his actions. Having nefariously enforced the suicide of his

¹²³ *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, ed. By H. Montgomery Hyde (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 112.

¹²⁴ Paglia, p. 520.

¹²⁵ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 210.

¹²⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 14, 19, 5, 88 & 21.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹²⁸ Pulham, p. 137.

beau, Sibyl Vane, and ultimately murdering Hallward, Dorian's soul, visually depicted on canvas, envisions the disasters that Dorian brings on his admirers. Ritually sequestered, first behind a screen, then a drapery, and finally a locked chamber, Dorian's portrait becomes increasingly more divine as it becomes increasingly more daemonic.

Evoking the psychic vampiricism of Poe, Rossetti and Lee's *femme fatale* haunted portrait narratives, Dorian as *objet d'art* similarly induces psychic obsession and eroticism. Dorian dominates Hallward. Recalling the moment of cathexis when Dorian overwhelms his visual plane, Hallward reveals the origin of his subordination:

I suddenly became conscious that someone was looking at me. I turned half-way round and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself.¹²⁹

Faced with the beauty of Dorian's 'personality', Hallward is psychically dominated and oppressed, his growing pale synonymous with the exsanguination of the vampire's victim. Coincidentally, Praz remarks that from the moment of the novel's appearance, it was attacked in the *St. James Gazette* for its 'new voluptuousness' which critics stigmatized as always leading 'up to blood-shedding'.¹³⁰ Later, Hallward reveals the extent of his obsession with Dorian, professing that 'As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me.'¹³¹ Hallward affirms that 'Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.' For Dorian, that tragedy lay in early childhood, being orphaned at birth. For Hallward, tragedy lay in Dorian. Attempting to re-capitulate the image of Dorian on canvas, Hallward recedes into a Decadent panorama in which art, pleasure, beauty and pain are intertwined. Dorian's 'sorrows [that] stir one's sense of beauty, and whose wounds are like red roses' become internalized by Hallward, his portrait of Dorian a coded stigmata that foretells Hallward's martyrdom for art.¹³² 'It seems only fitting then,' Pulham writes, 'that Hallward should die at the hands of his own inspiration.'¹³³ Psychically consumed by Dorian, Basil's emotional internal state is literalized in a violent subordination to person as *objet d'art*.

¹²⁹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 9-10.

¹³⁰ Praz, p. 358.

¹³¹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 15.

¹³² Ibid., pp. 37 & 57.

¹³³ Pulham, p. 137.

Dorian Gray's ending seems antithetical to Wilde's adherence of Decadence as an aesthetic mode. As Dorian attempts to destroy his portrait, he unwittingly destroys himself. Stabbing the picture, an uncanny exchange takes place:

When they [Dorian's servants and the police] entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was.¹³⁴

Wilde himself later called the 'terrible moral' of the novel's denouement 'an artistic error [...] the only error in the book'.¹³⁵ At surface, Wilde's re-inscription of the natural order (Dorian once again becoming mortal, the portrait immortal) may seem like a trivial moral lesson: Dorian, having committed atrocities, must be punished. However, Wilde's re-assertion that Dorian's portrait remains as exquisite as ever reveals the novel's true intention: to record the amorality of beauty and the visual subordination of spectator to *objet d'art*. Echoing Dorian's murder of Basil, Dorian, too, is murdered by art object. Dorian says 'There is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own.'¹³⁶ At the beginning of the narrative, Dorian's portrait is unfinished. Assuming Basil's role as artist, Dorian completes his portrait through violence. Achieving its final, permanent form, the portrait murders its creator, whose beauty it reclaims for itself. As with Poe's 'The Oval Portrait', painting and model are coterminous, the final brush strokes on the canvas the model's death knell. A divine double, Dorian's portrait demands sacrifice.

Although the publication date of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* precedes that of 'The Ebony Frame', the utilization of Wilde's novel throughout his infamous trial in 1895 signalled a public condemnation of Decadence as an artistic movement, and thus the Decadent haunted portrait narrative. Following Wilde's incarceration, for instance, Arthur Symonds would distance himself from the undesirable connotations that were seemingly ubiquitous with Decadence by re-vising, renaming and republishing his 1893 essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' in book form as *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). That is not to say that haunted portrait narratives were no longer produced, but that the aesthetic mechanics no longer conformed to that of Decadent principles. For Ziolkowski, haunted portrait narratives

¹³⁴ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 213.

¹³⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'To the Editor of the *St. James Gazette* (25 June 1890)' in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* ed. By Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1962), pp. 258-259 (p. 259).

¹³⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 112.

of the early twentieth century inverted familiar motifs of the genre to embody twentieth-century attitudes.¹³⁷ Rectifying nineteenth-century supernaturalisms by filtering them through an early-twentieth-century rationalization, twentieth-century haunted portrait narratives achieved their effect only against the background of preternatural narratives of haunted portraits. Paradoxically, these narratives heightened tensions by shifting the mystery of the portrait onto their characters' psyches, intensifying the impact of the old conventions whilst reinvigorating the haunted portrait narrative as the *anima* of the twentieth century.

It seems significant that Dorian Gray should degenerate into a bloody corpse discovered at the base of his portrait at the denouement of Wilde's narrative, foreshadowing the end of both Wilde's career (by invocation of his own art within court) and nineteenth-century Decadence. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the aestheticized corpse figures within Decadent narratives as a similarly bewitching figure as that of the haunted portrait, encapsulating the deathly allure and glamour of the Decadent androgyne and *femme fatale*.

¹³⁷ Ziolkowski, p. 134.

CHAPTER II
DEATH AND THE MODEL:
DOLLS, DISSECTION, & DEATHLY DESIRE

Dorian Gray's degeneration from beautiful androgyne to loathsome corpse at the denouement of Oscar Wilde's novel transforms the locked attic room in which Dorian's portrait is sequestered into a mausoleum. Dorian's portrait thus evokes the *ka*, or double, of the deceased in Egyptian tombs, immortally surveying the decaying remains of the fleshly body it once inhabited. Breaking into the locked chamber, those that discover Dorian's corpse mimic the archaeologists or tomb raiders of the *fin de siècle*, discovering the Pharaoh's mummy thrown to the floor by grave robbers in their search for riches. Egyptian death rituals were intimately related not only to portraiture, but also to wax. Indeed, the term 'mummy' derives from the Ancient Egyptian term *moum*, meaning 'wax' or 'tallow'.¹ The triadic death-portrait-wax configuration within Ancient Egyptian death rituals is most evident in the Fayum mummy portraits, dating from between the first century BC and the third century AD. Well preserved due to the arid landscape of Egypt, the Fayum portraits were naturalistic images painted on wood in encaustic, a combination of wax and pigment. Displayed in the home of the subject until their death, the Fayum portrait would then be attached to the mummy-case in which the subject would spend eternity. Evoked in the *grand guignol* ending of Wilde's novel, the Fayum portraits provide an eternal, waxen portrait of the decaying remains that lay beneath it.

Ancient Rome similarly utilized the death-portrait-wax triad within their death rituals. Ewa Kuryluk argues that Ancient Roman death masks, modelled in wax, operated as *memento mori* for the living, with the wax's malleable consistency contributing to the 'extreme naturalism of Roman portraiture'. Kuryluk continues:

In order to preserve the faces of the dead from corruption, which progressed rapidly in the hot climate, the Romans covered them with wax masks. The masks were later used as models for wax figures, the *imagines*, which, like the dolls of the contemporary wax cabinets, were painted by a pollinctor in natural colours, equipped with hair, and dressed. Pliny [...] tells us that wax models of faces were set out on separate sideboards and carried in procession [...] After the funeral the

¹ Joanna Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & The Ecstatic* (London: Thames & Hudson LTD, 2016), p. 72.

likenesses were exhibited in sarcophagus-like boxes in the atrium, alea or vestibulum of their family houses.²

Thus, since antiquity have wax simulacra been utilized to figure death. By nature, wax is a contradictory substance, a lifeless material able to emulate the uncanny appearance of flesh. Stable yet ephemeral, seemingly alive yet static, wax figures evoke the deathly quietude of a corpse that appears on the verge of reanimation. Tracing the symbolic and ritual significance of death figured in wax from antiquity to the present, Joanna Ebenstein posits that the eighteenth-century Anatomical Venuses figure as a crucible in which aesthetics, science, philosophy and psychology become one.³ Life-sized dissectible wax dolls modelled on Renaissance depictions of the goddess Venus, the Anatomical Venuses (also known as Demountable Venuses, or Slashed Beauties) conflated the death rituals of antiquity with Renaissance anatomical experiments into a waxen doll, a tangible, performative object that both enforced and mitigated ideas of Eros and Thanatos – sex and death.

‘Death and the Model’ examines the afterlives of the eighteenth-century Anatomical Venus. Concisely locating the ancestry of the Anatomical Venus within Italian Renaissance anatomical illustrations, this chapter traces the figure of the corpse-doll in various modes and modulations through nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gothic and Decadent texts. This chapter shows how the figure of the corpse-doll, dramatized as the automaton Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story ‘Der Sandmann’ (1816), provides an uncanny blueprint for French Decadent texts to consider how the concepts of Eros and Thanatos become configured upon the body of the corpse-doll as *femme fatale*, unsettling and alluring through the embodiment of a plethora of contradictions. Hoffmann’s influence will be traced through poems such as ‘A Carcass’ and ‘The Martyr’ from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), as well as Emile Zola’s novels *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and *Nana* (1880). In my discussion of Baudelaire’s and Zola’s texts I analyse the author’s transformation of the female corpse into *objet d’art*, and the author’s subsequent eroticization of the decaying flesh when describing these bodies, collapsing the boundaries of death, murder and love onto each other. Discussion will then turn to Rachilde’s novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884). Locating Rachilde’s influence for her novel in androgynous Renaissance anatomical illustrations, I discuss how Rachilde utilizes the figure of the androgyne and the androgynous corpse as *objet d’art* to

² Ewa Kuryluk quoted in Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), pp. 115-116.

³ Ebenstein, p. 42.

advance a sterile and cerebral death-driven passion for dominance and annihilation. Villiers de l'Isle Adam's novel *L'Ève Future* (1886) will then be analysed as presenting an extreme vision of Hoffmann's corpse doll as *femme fatale*, presenting the female automaton as a lifeless art-object of sexual desire – an early example of cyber-necrophilia. The chapter concludes with a re-examination of the doll in Vernon Lee's short story 'The Image' (1896), exploring how Lee attempts to rectify death-driven discourses surrounding the figure of the corpse-doll, whilst simultaneously considering the doll's configuration in the early twentieth-century art works of Lotte Pritzel and Oskar Kokoschka.



At a torchlit party in Dresden, 1922, the Viennese expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka displayed *Die Schweigsame Frau* (*The Silent Woman*) [fig. 2.1], a bespoke, life-sized doll created as the double of Kokoschka's ex-lover and muse, the composer and author, Alma Mahler. Styled in elegant garments from Parisian couturiers, the doll was, supposedly, eyed enviously by Venetian courtesans, and in a display of pageantry, paraded through the party as if a fashion model on the runway. At dawn, drunk on champagne, Kokoschka dragged *The Silent Woman* into the garden where he ceremonially decapitated her, smashing a bottle of red wine over the doll's severed head. The following morning, having received a complaint from a passer-by who had supposedly seen a blood-soaked decapitated head in Kokoschka's garden, the Dresden police questioned Kokoschka, believing the doll the victim of a crime of passion. 'And for that matter, that's what it was,' wrote Kokoschka, 'because on that night I had killed Alma.'⁴

Conceived in 1918, *The Silent Woman* was intended to replace Mahler, the human object of Kokoschka's desire. The simulacrum of a 'lost' muse, the doll correlates with Sigmund Freud's concept of the fetish, in which a sexual object is supplanted by an object that 'is connected to it, but which is utterly unsuited to the accomplishment of the normal sexual goal'.⁵ Of the doll, Marquard Smith writes that 'by its sheer mimeticism, its visual and haptic verisimilitude, his [Kokoschka's] stand in would magically deceive him'.⁶ Through a wilful suspension of disbelief, Kokoschka intended the surrogate to take the place of the real. Commissioned in 1918, Kokoschka's vision of the completed doll is meticulously detailed,

⁴ Brassai, *The Artists of My Life* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), p. 74.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Sexual Theory' in *The Psychology of Love* trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Group, 2006), pp. 111-220 (p. 131).

⁶ Marquard Smith, *The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 110.

with extensive directions concerning the construction of the doll articulated in a letter to the doll-maker, Hermione Moos:

Yesterday I sent a life-size drawing of my beloved and I ask you to copy this most carefully and to transform it into reality. Pay special attention to the dimensions of the head and neck, to the ribcage, the rump and the limbs. And take to heart the contours of body, e.g., the line of the neck to the back, the curve of the belly. Please permit my sense of touch to take pleasure in those places where layers of fat or muscle suddenly give way to a sinewy covering of skin. [...] The point of all this for me is an experience which I must be able to embrace!⁷

The body of the doll is fragmented in Kokoschka's letter into eroticized zones that conform to Kokoschka's aesthetic and sensual ideals. The doll, Kokoschka continues, should radiate a sense of 'liveness', so as the natural female body is recalled 'in some desperate hour by symbolic hieroglyph, or sign with which you have secretly endowed this bundle of rags'.⁸ Kokoschka's almost obsessive specifications, and the hope that the doll will transcend its 'bundle of rags' state, articulates that the doll not only operates as a fetishistic object of desire, but as an object that is both fetish and work of art endowed with spiritual meaning. As such, the look and touch of the doll are asserted as both forms of knowledge and inspiration. *The Silent Woman*, thus, acts as *objet d'art* that inspires *objet d'art*. An artificial muse and desired *objet d'art*, the decapitation and derision of *The Silent Woman* demonstrates Kokoschka's inability to infuse and animate the lifeless doll with the seductive qualities of Mahler, the destruction of the doll stemming from its insufficient human mimesis. The doll's failure to inspire Kokoschka, Francette Pacteau writes, stems specifically from the doll's 'failure to sustain the fiction of its relation to the object'.⁹ Prefiguring Pacteau, Kokoschka eloquently recollects on the destruction and removal of the doll: 'The dustcart came in the grey light of dawn, and carried away the dream of Eurydice's return. The doll was an image of a spent love that no Pygmalion could bring to life.'¹⁰ Ultimately, the doll was just a doll.

Kokoschka's formulation of the *Silent Woman* was not conceived *ex nihilo*. Rather, the construction of the *Silent Woman* serves as a twentieth-century link in a chain of proxy-bodies as *objet d'art* dating from antiquity to the present. From glyptic sarcophagi of Ancient Egypt to medieval reliquaries of martyred saints, proxy-bodies have often emerged as symbols and symptoms of cultural pre-occupations, these human surrogates often the medium for religious,

⁷ Oskar Kokoschka quoted in Joanna Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & The Ecstatic* (London: Thames & Hudson LTD, 2016), p. 197.

⁸ Smith, p. 118.

⁹ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion Books LTD, 1994), p. 54.

¹⁰ Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), p. 118.

scientific, philosophical or political purposes. Despite the abundance of these proxy-bodies across multiple disciplines, their illusory verisimilitude often evokes simultaneous admiration and unease. This unease stems from the proxy-bodies seemingly borderline existence between real and unreal, thus borderline existence between life and death. Freud famously describes this unease as *unheimlich*, or uncanny, an object's uncanniness stemming from the observer's doubt concerning 'whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate'.¹¹ The uncanny, Freud continues, often stems from an impression made by 'waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata'.¹² Dolls, with their malleable, removable features, differ from sculptures, sarcophagi and reliquaries in that their creation is one intended for re-articulation through manipulation by another. Through this manipulation the doll unlocks the fixity of sculpture, as its manipulated movements imagine temporal scenarios and sequences. Once this manipulating factor is removed, however, the doll is rendered inert. The doll therefore exists in an uncanny permanence, both mobile and static yet lacking any physical autonomy of its own: when touched the doll is articulated as if alive, when abandoned the doll rendered inert, as in death. Essentially, the doll operates as an artificial cadaver, a corpse-doll suspended in time, the inorganic body an artificial defeat over death.

Often transposed onto the uncanny life-in-death state of the doll is an eroticization of the doll's flesh. Whilst sculptures carved in the classical tradition display an obvious voluptuousness, the hard, almost spectral whiteness of these sculptures embodies what Camille Paglia identifies as Apollonian 'clarity and glittering chastity of form'.¹³ Differentiating themselves from the crystallized hard-bodies of classical sculpture, the dollmaker seeks to imbibe their creation with tints and hues that, to the observing eye, appear as fleshly as possible. Patricia Pulham observes that in such instances of white sculpture being coloured, such as George Frampton's *Mysteriarch* (1892) and *Lamia* (1899–1900), 'colour eroticizes the "purity" of the sculptural form'.¹⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne also moralizes on the colouring of sculpture. In Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun* (1860) the characters discuss John Gibson's polychrome marble *The Tinted Venus* (c. 1851–56). The artist Miriam argues that nudity and colour are manifestations of the artist's erotic attraction to their model. Miriam continues,

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books LTD, 2003), pp. 121–162 (p. 135).

¹² Ibid, p. 135.

¹³ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 73.

¹⁴ Pulham, p. 74.

arguing that in sculptures created from such an immodest impulse the ‘marble inevitably loses its chastity’.¹⁵ Interestingly, Miriam espouses a doctrine of art that correlates with nineteenth-century critics of Decadence. Consider, for instance, the claims of Miriam and the claims of Max Nordau in *Degeneration* (1892). Miriam, on nude sculpture: ‘I am very weary, even more I am ashamed, of seeing such things. [...] I really do not understand what they have to say to this generation.’¹⁶ Nordau, on the Decadents of the *fin de siècle*: ‘These creatures are of absolutely no use to the commonwealth, and injure true art by their production, whose multitude and importunateness shut out from most men the sight of genuine works of art [...] of the epoch.’¹⁷ The rhetoric of both Miriam and Nordau is hyperbolic, but both highlight nineteenth-century anxieties concerning the dangers of social change towards Decadence, claiming it as egoistic, vulgar, and in Nordau’s case, emblematic of the imminent collapse of society. Coincidentally, Miriam describes Gibson’s Venus as ‘stained with tobacco juice’,¹⁸ a jaundiced yellow that would come to typify Decadence at the *fin de siècle*. Despite Miriam’s protestations, the eroticizing of the flesh was to become a staple of Decadent art as the nineteenth century progressed. In such artworks where the doll is present, the conflation of eroticization and the uncanny life-in-death status of the doll hint at a sexual attraction towards the dead.

Sex and death, Eros and Thanatos, are paradoxical concepts entwined within the figure of the corpse-doll. The compounding of sex and death within a proxy-body draws obvious necrophiliac overtones. Philosophy has attempted to extrapolate meaning from the sex-death enigma that the corpse doll emphasizes. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud asserts that alongside Eros, the biological drive to survive and to propagate the genetic line, there exists a contrasting principle, Thanatos, the death drive. Thanatos, Freud writes, seeks to oppose the pleasure principle, a living organism’s state of equilibrium, by seeking a return to an inorganic, radical un-being, the original state of nothingness. Freud later speculated that human psychical life fuses Eros and Thanatos, resulting in the manifestation of sadism and masochism. As the corpse-doll operates as a symbol of the ambiguous nature Decadent sexual economies seek, a Freudian analysis of the corpse-doll in Decadent modes of representation is both an effective and plausible interpretive method. Indeed, Walter Pater manifesto of art-for-art’s-sake could be interpreted as stemming straight from the artist’s unconscious mind, asking ‘What is this

¹⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 96.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1898), p. 337.

¹⁸ Hawthorne, p. 96.

song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me?’¹⁹ Note Pater’s purposeful isolation of the self from the whole, reversing didacticism and turning art into an ecstatic internalization to oneself, to *me*. However, the mapping of genre/movement onto geographical locations or historical periods suggests that art also functions beyond the solitary artist’s subjectivity. The very concept of a genre or movement proposes that aesthetics adhere, at least in part, to a shared cultural fantasy. As Freud’s Eros and Thanatos do battle in human psychical life, so do cultural aesthetics and the aesthetics of the solitary artist’s mind. It is the clash of these two opposing forces that becomes encapsulated in Decadent art, Decadent art being a narcissistic self-referencing mediated through aestheticized social emblems. The obsessive recapitulation of the corpse-doll in Decadent art is therefore no coincidence but betrays a process that is as much psychological projection as social representation.

Renaissance to Revolution

In the eighteenth century, the anatomist Arnaud-Éloi Gautier d’Agoty said ‘For men to be instructed, they must be seduced by aesthetics, but how can anyone render the image of death agreeable?’²⁰ Rhetorical or not, the response to Gautier D’Agoty’s question had already been answered in the Renaissance: to make death agreeable is to make death beautiful. The role of the corpse is central to the Italian Renaissance. For artists and philosophers of this era, knowledge of the human body became conflated with the platonic ideals concerning body and soul, alongside the revival of Roman sculpture, an art form that ‘reinforced the idea of the body as an agent of thought and feeling’.²¹ To this end, artists were known to illicitly conduct their own dissections. Giorgio Vasari comments that Leonardo da Vinci ‘sketched cadavers he had dissected with his own hand’.²² It is also known that some years later, a young Michelangelo Buonarroti (via his Medici patronage) was granted access to the morgue within the Santo Spirito hospital in Florence, where he traded work for cadavers. The commandeering of corpses by Renaissance artists spearheads an imagery of humanity and death in art that questions the moral conditions of death, the dead depicted as living embodiments of each cultures philosophies and anxieties.

¹⁹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

²⁰ Arnaud-Éloi Gautier d’Agoty quoted in Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & The Ecstatic*, p. 45.

²¹ Benjamin A. Rifkin, *Human Anatomy: Depicting the Body from the Renaissance to Today* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 8.

²² Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists - Volume I* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 246.

Of the figures painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Heinrich Wölfflin writes that although others had studied anatomy, Michelangelo was the ‘first to whom the organic unity of the body was revealed’. More importantly, Wölfflin continues, Michelangelo understood the ‘physical causes of the impressions of movement, and could emphasize everywhere the most expressive forms, the most eloquent articulations’.²³ Through the figures on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Michelangelo’s knowledge of anatomy was utilized to advance a thesis that no beauty exists outside of the human form. This thesis, at least in the case of Michelangelo, exalts the male physique alone. As with many Renaissance artists, Michelangelo’s figures were sketched from male models, onto whom he transposed female characteristics where necessary. This ‘cross-sexual origin,’ Camille Paglia writes, leaves ‘a strong visual residue’²⁴ throughout Michelangelo’s corpus. This androgynous residue becomes latent in the nineteenth century through Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s vampires and Rachilde’s armoured women.

Leonardo’s anatomical experiments with human form work in reverse of Michelangelo. Inspired by the ancient texts of Galen and Aristotle, Leonardo’s anatomical notes and drawings began to appear in the late 1480s – preparatory sketches that would be used for *The Last Supper* (1495–1497). Attempting to distance himself from the Renaissance stylistics of Mundinus and Giotto, Leonardo developed a new form of anatomical sketching, and proposed a treatise that would conclude with the most comprehensive account of the human form in history. ‘Begin your book on anatomy with a perfect man,’ Leonardo notes, ‘and then draw him old and less muscular, then stripping him in stages down to the womb. And then draw the infant in the womb.’ As objectively as possible, Leonardo’s sketches flay and fragment the body to its literal core. Whilst the treatise was one of many of Leonardo’s thwarted projects, his notebooks were preserved, filled with meticulous anatomical drawings, bifurcated and stripped of artistic flourishes accompanied by cryptic notations. As with his mechanical drawings, Leonardo’s anatomical sketches are fragmented, comprised of acute, cinematic close-ups of body-parts sketched with spare-hatching, attempting to understand the usages of each individual muscle, organ, bone.²⁵

²³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 50.

²⁴ Paglia, p. 60.

²⁵ In ‘The Artist’s Course of Study’ Leonardo instructively stipulates that artists and scientists must partake in the dissection of cadavers:

The successors of Michelangelo and Leonardo aestheticized and sexualized images of flayed and decomposing cadavers to alleviate the horror they produced. Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* (1543) contains a series of plates containing cadavers in various states of decomposition modelled on images of martyred saints. Charles Estienne, Juan Valverde de Ansuco and Bartolomeo Eustachi all followed suit, their anatomical illustrations filtered through the lens of classical art to make their discoveries more palatable. These texts all mediate between the medical and the aesthetic, suspending notions of death and an embodied history of sexuality abundant in metaphysical subtleties. Aesthetically, male anatomical illustrations and models are usually upright, or flexing, illustrating networks of muscle and blood flow, visually coded to project masculine virtues of strength, reason and stoicism. Female anatomical illustrations and models, alternatively, are often supine, as a slumbering Venus or odalisque. Marina Warner writes that anatomical illustrations of women were aesthetically coded to bond the social image of woman to the 'nervous system and reproduction - affect and Eros'.²⁶ Ludmilla Jordanova concurs with Warner, arguing that these anatomical representations are steeped in classicism, promoting gendered assumptions of a 'distinctly middle-class notion of femininity as sedentary, domestic and emotional,' yet portraying a 'populist image of masculinity as physically active'.²⁷ Although somewhat generalizing, Warner's and Jordanova's arguments are vindicated by the overwhelming number of anatomical illustrations of supine women.

There is another, albeit small, strain of anatomical illustration that remains unresearched: the homoerotic supine male, a figure that would attain some notoriety in Rachilde's *fin-de-siècle* novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1888). Poses often solely reserved for anatomical representations of women are extrapolated onto male anatomical figures in Giulio

[...] I have dissected more than ten human bodies [...] And as one single body did not suffice for so long a time it was necessary to proceed by stages with so many bodies as would render by knowledge complete; this I repeated twice in order to discover the differences. And though you should have a love for such things you may perhaps be deterred by natural repugnance, and if this does not prevent you, you may perhaps be deterred by fear of passing the night hours in the company of these corpses, quartered and flayed and horrible to behold.
- Leonardo da Vinci, Notebooks (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), pp. 144-45.

There are gothic undertones to Leonardo's stipulations which are eventually realized at length by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818), whose scientist realises the disgust of his experiments only after he has re-animated the dead. Yet, despite his instructive tone, hints of frustration can be detected in Leonardo's instructions, his repetitions an attempt to excise the fear and self-doubt that he may be thwarted in his quest to discover the foundations of life through dissecting the dead.

²⁶ Marina Warner, 'On the Threshold: Sleeping Beauties' in *On Dolls* ed. By Kenneth Gross (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2012), pp. 108-129 (p. 112).

²⁷ Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 58.

Cesare Casseri & Adriaan van den Spiegel's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libric Decem* (1627). Master and student, Casseri & Spiegel's illustrations of male anatomy display the body *in vivo*, relaxing in idyllic natural landscapes, peeling back petal-like ruches of skin and flesh to reveal organs and bones, *sans viscera*. In possibly the most blatant homoerotic of Casseri & Spiegel's etchings, a male figure is displayed in antero-inferior view [fig 2.2]. Seemingly modelled on the Hellenistic Barberini Faun, and sporting an angelic Raphael-esque face, the figure maintains the muscled physique of a Michelangelo yet is passively laid against the trunk of a tree, castrated, with penis and anus bifurcated. Much like the female anatomical supines, the figure daringly fuses eroticism with anatomy, yet cloaks meaning beneath classicism.

The supine male is also evident throughout Jacques Gamelin's *Nouveau Recueil d'Ostéologie et de Myologie* (1779). Neither anatomist nor physicist, Gamelin undertook his anatomical work as a passion project, stolidly depicting *écorchés* (a drawing, painting or sculpture of a human figure with the skin removed to display the musculature) in repose with Christian overtones, referencing the crucifixion and the resurrection. Despite being flayed, there is a fleshly, tender quality to Gamelin's etchings, which detail the intricate striations of muscles contrasted against a stark white background. Gamelin's *écorché* etchings are posed as if resting, or in a state of religious contemplation, creating an element of voyeurism to his work. This voyeurism is fully realised in a plate depicting two men contemplating a cadaver [fig. 2.3]. Despite the medical tools on display, the etching displays no other symbols of medical experimentation, but rather presents the *écorché* as if sleeping, arm draped over a cushion. The plate is spatially disorientating, the stark white table seeming both flat and raised at an angle as if displaying the *écorché* as an *objet d'art* or *vanitas* to be contemplated. Adding another voyeuristic layer, two men in shadow hover behind the table, sneaking glimpses of the *écorché* in a moment of unresponsiveness.²⁸

With the onset of the eighteenth century, interest in anatomy flourished and was considered both a progressive and fashionable pursuit. Anatomical oddities, such as shrunken heads, *écorchés*, and other *memento mori*, were housed in museums and *Wunderkammer*, available for public viewing, with lavishly illustrated anatomy volumes and luxurious collectible objects produced for the consumption of a general, non-specialist audience. Jacques

²⁸ Gamelin's painting *The Deluge* (1779) anticipates Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), with its contorted, entwined bodies painted from extended study of cadavers. Both paintings, Rifkin writes, symbolize a shift from the Neoclassicism and rational realism of the Enlightenment to the Romantic, each preoccupied with 'elemental forces of nature, death, and hope, and both tell their story with accurately drawn, anatomically persuasive figures' (p. 62).

Fabien Gautier d'Agoty (father of Arnaud-Éloi) pioneered a method of coloured mezzotint printing and exploited this process in the production of anatomical engravings. There is a hazy *sfumato*, or smokiness, to Gautier D'Agoty's prints, his method contrasting shocks of violent red flesh and electric blue veins against shadowy verdurous landscapes. Gautier D'Agoty further emphasized the aesthetic qualities of his anatomical prints by varnishing them as a means of enhancing their painterly qualities. An emphasis on the painterly qualities of the prints meant that Gautier D'Agoty's illustrations were often anatomically incorrect, yet they serve as curiosities that display a larger cultural interest in flourishing anatomical pursuits. *L'Ange Anatomique (The Flayed Angel)* (1746) [fig. 2.4] perfectly embodies these pursuits: a posterior view of a sitting woman, the muscle plates of her back stripped and suspended like wings evoking a Viking blood eagle, uncovering strap-like ribs that bind striated red musculature. Gautier's sensationalism fused Eros and Thanatos with aesthetics, a combination of elements that was to become fused in the wax workshops of late-eighteenth-century Florence through the production of dissectible corpse-dolls of women, known as 'Slashed Beauties', or Anatomical Venuses.

The Anatomical Venus [fig. 2.5.] is the unification of the Renaissance idealization of the corpse and the eighteenth-century vogue for anatomical *objet d'art*. Created by the artist and ceroplastician Clemente Susini in the Florentine workshops of *La Specola*, the Anatomical Venuses are life-sized anatomically correct wax figures with dissectible organs and fetuses, used to teach students and the general public anatomy. Supine upon silk beds, endowed with cascades of luxurious Botticellian hair, and decorated with pearls, the Anatomical Venuses were depicted as alive and ecstatic as a means of alleviating the study of anatomy from the contemplation of the grisly corporeal reality of the human body. Thus, the design of the Anatomical Venus operates as an aesthetic mode of distancing the student/observer from the contemplation of death. The rendering of wax in the image of Venus was no random allusion. As Ebenstein notes, the design for the waxwork sought inspiration from the 'historical and artistic figure of the Roman Goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, evoking a long history of placid, idealized nudes'.²⁹ Depictions of the Goddess Venus were a principle theme of the Grand Tour, the wealthy elite making pilgrimages to Florence to visit the *Venus de Medici* (1st Century, BCE), Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1482–1485), and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1580). As such, the Anatomical Venuses were an enticing spectacle partly created to generate foot-traffic to *La Specola*. As viscerally demonstrative objects that metaphorically represent

²⁹ Ebenstein, p. 29.

the anatomist's art, the classicization of the Anatomical Venus attempts to reduce its uncanniness through the ossification of the model in a state of permanent incorruptibility. Yet, the very premise of the Anatomical Venus, with its dissectible body, disrupts this ossification, and reinforces an oscillating dialectic between permanence and mortality.

Simultaneously self-concealing and self-revealing the Anatomical Venus offers dual gestures of enticement and deflection. These dual gestures, Lyle Massey writes, stand 'metonymically for the anatomist's abilities to cut through the body's defences and perceive its most intimate secrets'.³⁰ Elisabeth Bronfen furthers this argument, stating that fascination with the Anatomical Venus stems from these very gestures. Operating on the crux of two enigmas of Western culture, death and female sexuality, the Anatomical Venus, Bronfen writes, explores these two gestures 'to a sustained and indefinite view, but does so in a way that the real threat of both, their disruptive and indeterminate quality, has been put under erasure'.³¹ Yet, despite this attempt at erasure, the aesthetic beauty of the Anatomical Venus gives way to disgust, fear and visceral revulsion upon disassembly, the wax breastplate removed to display the internal organs and foetus *in-utero*, which are then also removed. Throughout this process the student becomes a bricoleur who deconstructs and then reconstructs the human body, having gained knowledge of its anatomy. Reconfigured, torso placed back upon the waxwork, the Anatomical Venus reverts to an *objet d'art* conforming to the ideal principles of Western art.

Despite Bronfen's proclamation that the annexing of the Anatomical Venus into aestheticized *objet d'art* abates notions of death and female sexuality, both of these notions remain laid bare in illusory material terms. The human verisimilitude of the Anatomical Venus, contrasted with the fragmented interiors that can only be revealed post-mortem, does not put the concept of human mortality under erasure, but rather reinforces it. Aestheticizing the morbidity of death within the carapace of a wax Goddess not only allows a performance of mastery over death, as Ebenstein posits,³² but also transmutes into tangible terms symbols of human sexuality, and the thing that will inevitably obliterate it. The assembled Anatomical Venus acts as a demystification and re-inscription of the desirous structures of the death-drive.

³⁰ Lyle Massey, 'On Waxes and Wombs: Eighteenth-Century Representations of the Gravid Uterus' in *Ephemeral Bodies – Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* ed. By Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), pp. 83-105 (p. 84).

³¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 99.

³² Ebenstein, p. 185. – '[...] her ecstatic attitude invites men of science to penetrate the secrets of Nature, and thus to take the place of divine creator'.

Although the re-articulation of the Anatomical Venus suggests an attempt at deflecting the desire for an object that cannot reciprocate desire, its permanence allows for this absence of desirous fulfilment to take form within a talismanic corpse-doll. Sexuality and death are no longer opposites but are conflated within an aestheticized model that reveals the limits of human experience. Ultimately, the Anatomical Venus operates as a metaphor for the nature of human desire.

Surprisingly, it is the courtly excesses of the *Ancien Régime*, resulting in the French Revolution that creates a fragmentation in the representation of the corpse and the corpse-doll in the late-eighteenth century. Although considered a royalist, Madame Marie Tussaud was spared from execution and commissioned to create wax sculptures of the severed heads of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Fleeing to England during the Reign of Terror, Tussaud displayed these wax heads besides a ‘breathing’ wax model of Madame du Barry (Louis XVI’s notorious mistress) as a fanciful Sleeping Beauty. This Sleeping Beauty, Adam Geczy writes, cannot be fully appreciated without recalling du Barry’s ‘spectacular hysterics on her approach to the guillotine (so vividly recounted by Vigée-Lebrun in her memoirs)’.³³ Thus, a carnivalesque horror permeated the production of the artificial body which separated into two sites: one, Geczy writes, ‘the monstrous double, the interlocuter, the sinister subjective perversions’. The second, Geczy continues, a ‘modified body that improves on human criteria, if not bypasses humanity to enter into a different class of being, thinking, and [...] performance’.³⁴ As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the influx of citizens into the cities to seek work within the new industrial labour force resulted in an expendable income to spend on amusement. These amusements slot nicely into Geczy’s categories: taxidermy displays, automaton exhibits, and public viewings of the hysterics at Jean-Martin Charcot’s Pitié-Salpêtrière clinic in Paris considered respectable due to their didactic (or seemingly didactic) pursuits; freak shows and anatomical museums displaying crude material equally, if not more, popular, but considered sensationalistic and obscene. Despite the anatomical museums being closed due in Britain due to the *British Obscene Publications Act of 1857*, a public interest in death remained in vogue due to popular Gothic novels, Queen Victoria’s donning of black attire following the death of Prince Albert in 1861, and the Romantic arts.

The Erotic Automaton of E.T.A. Hoffmann

³³ Adam Geczy, *The Artificial Body in Fashion and Art: Marionettes, Models and Mannequins* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 49.

³⁴Ibid, p. 49.

Beautiful, disquieting, grotesque – the corpse-doll elicits an emotional unease and uncanniness. The uncanny, as characterized by Freud, is that which was ‘intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open’,³⁵ and whose acknowledged presence within the open arouses dread and horror. Through etymological excavation, Freud discerns that although the term *unheimlich* (uncanny, or unhomely) initially appears as the antithesis of *heimlich* (the homely), the two terms ambiguously derive from the same antecedent. Thus, the uncanny articulates ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’.³⁶ Unease provoked by the uncanny hence arouses an unfamiliar familiarity, a confirmation of discarded beliefs once held true. Experiencing the uncanny, basic notions of reality are compromised, reconfiguring the world as a realm of atavistic archetypes. A common source of uncanniness, Freud writes, is an object mimicking humanity – wax figures, dolls, mannequins, automata – forms reckoning an inanimate human form as malleable and metamorphic. Are they animate or inanimate? Alive or dead? Human or Other? The uncanny causes such intellectual ambiguity.

Freud illustrates his analysis with a reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story ‘Der Sandmann’ (‘The Sandman’, 1816). Hoffmann’s tale inhabits an opaque reality on the periphery of everyday existence, in which phantasms flicker in and out of obscurity. As Hoffmann’s protagonist, Nathaniel, proclaims in the opening passage, ‘Dark presentiments of a dreadful fate hover over me like black clouds impenetrable to any friendly ray of sunshine.’³⁷ Despite Nathaniel’s thoughts clouded by romantic phantasies of the automaton, Olympia, Freud insists that she ‘is by no means the only one responsible for the incomparably uncanny effect of the story, or even the one to which is principally due’.³⁸ Figuring Hoffmann’s tale within his Castration Complex, Freud diverts attention to the titular sandman, a fairy-tale ghoul who steals children’s eyes to feed to his beaked children, and who appears to the impressionable Nathaniel in the guise of the odious oculist, Coppélius. For Freud, the inherent uncanniness of ‘Der Sandmann’ stems from Nathaniel’s fears of losing his eyes to Coppélius, which Freud articulates as a substitute image for castration anxiety, a fear that must be repressed or assuaged through the creation of a fetish object.

Dismissing Olympia’s importance, Freud denies Nathaniel’s castration anxiety as being

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ in *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Group, 2003), pp. 121-162 (p. 132).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁷ E.T.A. Hoffmann, ‘Der Sandmann’ (‘The Sandman’) in *Tales of Hoffmann* (London: Penguin Group, 2004), pp. 85-126 (p. 85).

³⁸ Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 136.

inextricably linked to the perceived lack of the female body. Yet, Olympia's presence both mitigates and incites Nathaniel's infantile castration anxiety, simultaneously provoking erotic phantasy and anticipating his extermination. Olympia is therefore 'nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed'.³⁹ Contrary to Freud, then, the uncanniness that permeates 'Der Sandmann' stems from woman. Moreover, Olympia's artificial womanhood, or even artifice itself, is the root of that which is *unheimlich* throughout Hoffmann's narrative.

Created by the debonair Professor Spalanzani, Olympia is the product of male procreation premised on the exclusion of reproductive woman. Removed by mechanization from nature, Olympia is soulless, and sterile, yet programmed mechanically to incite sexual advances. Immaculately conceived and assembled in Spalanzani's laboratory, Olympia is a perfect orchestration of the demands and fulfilments desired by narcissistic men, a synthesis of ideal beauty and a reflection of the lover/creator as God. Nathaniel's erotic phantasies of Olympia thus partake of the desire to recognize within the automaton his own image, a desire to inscribe his subjectivity upon an Other. Nathaniel kisses Olympia:

He [...] bent down to her mouth and his passionate lips encountered lips that were icy cold! As he touched Olympia's cold hand, he was seized by an inner feeling of horror, and he suddenly recalled the legend of the dead bride, but Olympia had pressed him close to her; as they kissed, her lips seemed to warm into life.⁴⁰

Olympia's lips resemble the icy, reflective surface of a mirror, animated into life by the passionate kiss of Nathaniel. Pacteau writes that the 'fascination that the creator feels for the created arises from the creator/lover's constant marvelling at the recognition of his mastery'.⁴¹ Catherine Maxwell, similarly, describes narcissistic mirroring as a 'device that completes man's lack, simultaneously reflecting him back to himself in a reassuring fullness',⁴² whilst Pulham, in agreement, describes Olympia as reassuringly mirroring Nathaniel's ego through mechanical confirmation.⁴³ This ego-confirmation is only sustained through a perceptual ambiguity that acknowledges, rather than erases, difference. When this ambiguity fails, the phantasy is destroyed.

Finally acknowledging Olympia as a lifeless, mechanical automaton, Nathaniel

³⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁰ Hoffmann, p. 115.

⁴¹ Pacteau, p. 47.

⁴² Catherine Maxwell, 'Browning's Pygmalion and the Revenge of Galatea' in *ELH*, 60:4 (Winter 1993), pp. 989-1008 (p. 989).

⁴³ Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales*, p. 102.

descends into suicidal hysteria. Olympia's failure as an artificial object is a failure of maintaining her fictional humanity as narcissistically projected onto her by Nathaniel. Thus, Olympia's failure to maintain human mimesis stems from Nathaniel's inability to maintain his phantasy. In a reversal of fate, Nathaniel comes to mirror Olympia: fatally throwing himself from a tower, Nathaniel reduces himself to senseless, inorganic material, emulating the artificial flesh of the automaton. In loving an artificial woman, Nathaniel pushes the boundaries of the conceivable, unsettling the natural order with Decadent stasis by removing himself from the procreative arena. But to rebuke nature is to invoke retribution: having removed himself from the natural order, Nathaniel metaphorically castrates himself, a symbolic feminization that is the consequence of loving a barren, artificial simulacrum of woman. Peter Wollen describes technological replicas as 'the incarnation of destructive sexuality, seductive and spellbinding'.⁴⁴ Olympia conforms to this mode of destructive desire. She is an artificial *femme fatale*, a projected embodiment of the polymorphous sexuality that underwent repression in the early stages of psychosexual development, and the threat posited by the return of this repressed and desired sexuality.

Exhuming the Muse in Baudelaire and Zola

The image of the corpse-doll transformed into that of dead muse in the Romantic arts of the nineteenth century. In 'Porphyria's Lover' (1842), Robert Browning explores the dynamic of the beloved killed into an aestheticized stasis. The poem recounts the murder of a mistress by an adulterous lover so they can remain together. Strangling her with her own hair, the murderer 'propped her head up as before', her cheek 'bright beneath my burning kiss'.⁴⁵ Here the murderer's propensity for violence stems from the desire to possess his beloved and to suspend her image in time. Like Browning, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'Maud; A Monodrama' (1850) captures the aesthetic ideal that the Victorian cult of mourning both feared and desired, the titular Maud 'Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null, / Dead perfection, no more'.⁴⁶ Pale, inert, yet physically faultless, Tennyson idealizes the image of the dead woman yet removes the abyssal reality of decomposition.

Inspired by Browning and Tennyson, the pre-Raphaelite oeuvre fetishistically returned

⁴⁴ Peter Wollen, 'Cinema/Americanism/The Robot' in *New Formations*, VIII (Summer, 1989), pp. 7-34 (p.17).

⁴⁵ Robert Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover' in *Robert Browning: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 122-124 (P. 123).

⁴⁶ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Maud; A Monodrama' in *Selected Poems: Tennyson* (London: Penguin Books LTD, 2007), pp. 217-265 (p. 222).

to the memorializing of feminine death. Dante Gabriel Rossetti ritually commemorated his dead wife, Elizabeth Siddal, in painting and prose, whilst John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–1852) [fig. 2.6.] became the unofficial symbol of the pre-Raphaelite cult of the dead beloved. Although primarily focused on the images of dead women, a homoerotic strain of fetishized male corpses is evident in Henry Watson's *Death of Chatterton* (1856) [fig. 2.7.]. Ophelia and Chatterton are doll-like in their pallid etherealness, preserved at the moment of death. The preservation of the corpse through symbolic terms can be understood as an attempt to alleviate the inconceivability of death. However, it may also reveal a paradoxical desire for, or attraction to, death. Lisa Downing writes that the idealized corpse represents 'in positive terms an absence, a void in comprehension'. Thus, Downing continues, 'attraction and repulsion are balanced in a complex and delicate relation' /⁴⁷

The sexualized corpse is a central figure in Charles Baudelaire's collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). 'Danse macabre' details a literal dance with death in the guise of a woman's skeleton, whilst 'The Metamorphoses of the Vampire' charts the disintegration of a vampiric woman's body into a 'greasy leather flask that overflowed with pus' following the sexual act.⁴⁸ In 'A Carcass', Baudelaire's narrator forces his beloved to confront her mortality through her dead double. Stumbling upon a rotting corpse, the man rhapsodizes how his lover will, one day, resemble the putrefying body. Imagining this future death, the lover asks his beloved to tell the maggots that infest her dead corpse 'That I kept the essence, the divine form/ Of what I'd call my decomposing love'.⁴⁹ In 'A Voyage to Cythera' the poet reverses the gaze and confronts his own mortality. From a ship, the poet sees his double hanging in the gallows, buzzard-pecked and torn at by wild dogs. Having set foot on the black isle of Cythera, the home of the Goddess Venus, the double passes from sexual innocence to experience and is forced to yield to his inevitable death.

Necrophiliac relations between corpse and spectator are made manifest in 'A Martyr', an arduous, complex composition that repeatedly shifts subjective persona and signifiers of time and place. Very few critics have approached the poem in-depth: Walter Benjamin

⁴⁷ Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 7.

⁴⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Metamorphoses of the Vampire' in *The Flowers of Evil & Artificial Paradise*, trans. by R. J. Dent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 253-255 (p. 255).

⁴⁹ Charles Baudelaire, 'A Carcass' in *The Flowers of Evil & Artificial Paradise*, trans. by R. J. Dent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 39-40 (p. 39).

fleetingly refers to ‘A Martyr’ as *disjecta membra*, and notes the influence of de Sade,⁵⁰ whilst Debarati Sanyal links Baudelaire’s allegorizing of the female body to their circulation within the metropolis.⁵¹ Although famously highlighting Baudelaire’s undercurrents of destructiveness and sadism, Georges Blin skirts discussion of ‘A Martyr’, simply relaying astonishment the poem was not suppressed by the authorities for its necrophiliac subject matter.⁵² Only Downing seems to refer to the obvious necrophilia in ‘A Martyr’ at length, arguing that Baudelaire’s transformation of violence and horror into beauty is symptomatic of a desire for death.⁵³

Martyrdom suggests a violent death for religious purposes. Yet, Baudelaire’s poetic landscape creates an artificial paradise of beauty and artifice, a paradise in which the natural is profane. Artifice, Baudelaire writes in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863), is a ‘sublime distortion of nature’.⁵⁴ In Baudelaire, nature, red in tooth and claw, is symptomatic of humanity’s barbarism, and must constantly be reformed. As such, the elegant narcissism of the dandy and the painted face of the prostitute are granted noble status in Baudelaire’s corpus. Reference to nature is then profanation, of which the inevitable companion is cruelty. Transformed through murder into aesthetic object, the martyr has been martyred into art.

In the opening stanza of ‘A Martyr’ the male narrator conflates beauty and the artificial with death: in a baroque chamber ‘heavy with death’, arrangements of flowers ‘enconfined in glass, / Exhale their ultimate breath’.⁵⁵ Baudelaire’s stage is an oppressive, stale panorama in which organic matter (here flowers) are suspended in a state of decay. Trapped between life and death, the flowers prepare the stage for the martyr herself:

A headless cadaver spills out like a stream
On a pillow adorning the bed,
A flow of red blood, which the linen drinks up
With a thirsty meadow’s greed.⁵⁶

Both horrifying and rhetorically destabilizing, the corpse of the martyr is both inanimate and

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. By Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), p. 43.

⁵¹ Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁵² Georges Blin, *Les Sadisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: Corti, 1948).

⁵³ Downing.

⁵⁴ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Middlesex: Penguin Books LTD, 1972), pp. 390-436 (p. 426).

⁵⁵ Charles Baudelaire, ‘A Martyr’ in *The Flowers of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 229-233 (p. 229).

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 231.

mobile, the gushing red ribbons of blood quenching the ‘thirst’ of the linen sheets. Downing argues that blood-flow ‘suggests a new movement’, the corpse’s immobility allowing ‘re-animation on a different level’.⁵⁷ This re-animation, Downing argues, calls the reader’s desire into question. This argument can be furthered by positing that Baudelaire’s movement-in-stillness allows for a wish-fulfilling re-enactment of the scene from the spectative gaze. Baudelaire’s prime focus is the headless corpse. The decapitated head, meanwhile, reposes on the bed-side table as if readily cast aside, its gaze ‘mindless and vague and as black as the dusk’.⁵⁸ Unlike the body, the head does not quench the thirst of the *tableau vivant*. Baudelaire instead shifts and aestheticizes the vacant gaze of the head onto the adornments of the corpse:

On the leg, a pink stocking adorned with gold clocks
Remains like a souvenir;
The garter, a diamond-blazing eye,
Hurls a glance that is cold and severe.⁵⁹

Here, artificial ephemera is imbibed with the body’s movement-in-stillness. The embroidered golden clocks suggest temporal movement, yet are forever trapped in their stitched time. Likewise, the ‘diamond’ eye of the garter voyeuristically scans the panorama, returning the spectator’s gaze and rooting him to the spot with its icy glare. The fragmentation of the body into part objects is a recognizable component of fetishism. Yet, as the desired object exists within the inconceivable realm of death, the appropriation of the object is trapped in suspension.

Exhausting the aesthetic possibilities of the chamber, the spectator contemplates the martyrdom of the body by posing rhetorical questions, reconstructing the murder scene:

She is still in her youth! – Did her sickness of soul
And her senses gnawed by ennui
Open to her that depraved pack of lusts
And encourage them willingly?

That intractable man whom alive you could not,
Despite so much love, satisfy,
Did he there, on your still and amenable corpse,
His appetite gratify?

Tell me, cadaver! And by your stiff hair
Raising with feverous hand,
Terrible head, did he paste on your teeth

⁵⁷ Downing, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Baudelaire, ‘A Martyr’, p. 231.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 231.

His kisses again and again?⁶⁰

Re-animation and spectative re-enactment is evident. The spectator's questions are unanswered, the responsive silence urging a contemplative backstory from the spectator's viewpoint that encompasses his own sexual desires: unsatisfied in love, a disreputable man kills his lover and engages in necrophilia with her corpse. The spectator's probing segues into exasperation through the imagined kissing of its vacant head, the demanding 'Tell me cadaver!' signalling the tonal shift. The flowing, eroticized body of the martyr thus appropriates the blank inanimateness of the 'terrible head', refusing to inspire any more imaginary context. The collapsing of the sex/death, love/murder boundaries throughout 'A Martyr' is an attempt to wholly substitute sex with murder. Paglia writes that for Baudelaire 'sex is limitation, not liberation'.⁶¹ Revolting against nature, Baudelaire attempts to replace biological functions with the unnatural act of murder for possession. Yet, in this act the victim must be complicit, rebuking the fight or flight instinct, and allowing oneself to become the possessed object of another through violence. For Baudelaire, the willing victim must be both satisfied in her position, and envied by the murderer as an idealized object onto which is projected an internalized fantasy the poet cannot enact upon himself. Through re-enactment, 'A Martyr' mirrors the spectator's vision, and longing, for self-destruction.

Baudelaire's panoramic staging of the corpse was mirrored in the nineteenth-century fascination with post-mortem photography, a vogue for posing the dead as if in eternal slumber. As a means of comprehending her roles, beloved French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) meditated within an ornate coffin, masquerading as a beautiful corpse. Bernhardt was noted for her portrayals of *femmes fatales*, including both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Medea (Alphonse Mucha's poster for which [fig. 2.8.] immortalized Bernhardt clutching a bloody dagger), and was the inspiration for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891). In her memoirs, Bernhardt recalls how, being visited by her sister, she was forced to use the coffin as a bed:

My bedroom was quite tiny. The big bamboo bed took up all the room. In front of the window was my coffin, where I frequently installed myself to study my parts. Therefore, when I took my sister to my home I found it quite natural to sleep every night in this little bed of white satin which was to be my last couch, and to put my sister in the big bamboo bed, under the lace hangings. [...] One day my manicurist came into the room to do my hands, and my sister asked her to enter quietly, because I was still asleep. The woman turned her head, believing that I was asleep in the arm-chair, but seeing me in my coffin she rushed away shrieking wildly. From that moment all Paris knew that I slept in my coffin, and gossip with its

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 233.

⁶¹ Paglia, p. 421.

thistle-down wings took flight in all directions.⁶² Galvanized by the manicurist's horrified reaction, Bernhardt immediately sent for Achille Melandri, her personal photographer. Arranging herself within an eerie *tableau vivant*, Bernhardt adorned herself with wreaths of funerary flowers and posed for Melandri, in a virginal white nightgown, as if bereft of life. The resulting photograph [fig. 2.9.] was distributed widely, earning Bernhardt and Melandri a small fortune. Bernhardt's self-fashioning, anticipating performance art, encompassed a morbid sexuality that was replicated on stage. By the 1880s, Carol Ockman and Kenneth Silver write, Bernhardt's macabre flair for performing death scenes was so beloved 'that a final death agony was practically mandatory', and that 'rhapsodic critics insisted she never died the same way twice. For the next forty years, she died nightly, and sometimes twice a day'.⁶³

Parallel to the staging of corpses within the arts, viewings of dead bodies within the Paris morgue operated as a major tourist attraction throughout the nineteenth century. Until the practice was shut down in 1907 over moral concerns, the morgue could attract up to 40,000 patrons a day to view unidentified bodies laid out on marble slabs, genitals covered. Although primarily a mode of identification, the viewing of corpses became a public spectacle, a sterile *grand guignol*, with the bodies of women and children drawing the biggest audiences. As reported in *La Presse* in 1907, the morgue was considered in Paris as a 'museum that is much more fascinating than even a wax museum because the people displayed are real flesh and blood'.⁶⁴ Body parts could be checked out for private use, as evident in Théodore Géricault's studies for *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), and the inherent drama of the spectacle lent itself to fiction. A passage from Émile Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) explores the fascination and eroticism induced by a visit to the Paris morgue. Zola's Laurent, having murdered his love rival by drowning, frequents the morgue in hopes of finding his victim's remains

When there were no drowned men on the last row of slabs, he breathed more easily and felt less disgust. Then he became a simple curious onlooker, taking a strange pleasure in staring violent death in the face [...] He enjoyed the spectacle, especially when there were women showing their naked busts. [...] Once, he saw a young woman of twenty, a working-class girl, strong, heavy built, who seemed to be sleeping on the stone. Her fresh, plump body was paling with very delicate variations of tint: she was smiling, her head slightly to one side, offering her bosom in a provocative manner. You would have taken her for a courtesan lying on a bed

⁶² Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt* (London: William Heinemann, 1907), p. pp. 257-258.

⁶³ Carol Ockman and Kenneth Silver, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama* (New York: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 104.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Ebenstein, p. 170.

if there had not been a black stripe on her neck, like a necklace of shadow: the girl had just hanged herself because of a disappointment in love.⁶⁵

Conflating corpses and courtesans, Laurent no longer sees mortality as a hinderance to sexual experience. Offsetting the beloved corpse's 'beauty' is the black blemish of suicide. Circling the neck, the black stain will inevitably spread throughout the body, receding its coherence, gender, identity and even integrity as *objet d'art*, into a putrid slosh of pulpy matter. Rather than this stain reviling or corrupting the corpse's sexuality, however, it enhances it, Laurent's gaze fixedly surveying every inch of flesh with 'fearful lust'. Eroticism thus stems from the *idea* of decay. Laurent, imagining the female body undergoing future disintegration, fuses and psychically projects Eros and Thanatos onto an unwitting corpse in a quest for radical un-being.

Zola's eroticization of the corpse-by-suicide anticipated one of the most enduring stories relating to the Paris morgue, that of *L'Inconnue de la Seine* ('the unknown woman of the Seine'). The story tells of how a beautiful young suicide, sixteen or seventeen years old, was dredged from the Seine in the 1880s and placed on a block of ice in the morgue for identification.⁶⁶ She was never claimed, but a pathologist, captivated by *L'Inconnue's* serene smile and disposition, cast a death mask, reproductions of which hung in the rooms of young bohemians, her enigmatic smile serving as an erotic ideal. There are, however, theories that she was no suicide at all. Al Alvarez claims sufficient information exists that traces the mask to a young woman, alive and well, living in Hamburg, and the suicide myth was manufactured to capitalize on the Romantic cult of suicide. 'Suicide added a dimension of drama and doom,' writes Alvarez, 'a fine black orchid to the already tropical jungle of the period's emotional life.'⁶⁷ Regardless, the cult of *L'Inconnue* flourished in absence of fact. Like a Rorschach print, her image conveyed whatever the spectator projected onto it, Alvarez adding that like the 'Sphinx and the Mona Lisa, the power of *the Inconnue* was in her smile – subtle, oblivious, promising peace'.⁶⁸ In death, *L'Inconnue* was beyond human strife, retaining both youth and beauty. *L'Inconnue's* influence would extend into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, her serene face the model for 'Resusci Anne', the doll used to teach CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Norwegian toy manufacturer, Asmund Laerdal, having saved his young son from drowning, developed a realistic rubber model on which life-saving techniques could be

⁶⁵ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (London: Penguin Group, 2004), pp. 72-73.

⁶⁶ Although no record exists of the time or date of *L'Inconnue's* arrival/display in the morgue, Sacheverell Sitwell concluded that her hairstyle fits the fashions of the early 1880s.

⁶⁷ Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 156.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

practiced and honed. Calm and unthreatening, *L'Inconnue*'s face was chosen so not to aggrieve first-aid students. Launched in 1960 'Resusci Anne' had been called 'the most kissed face of all time'.⁶⁹

In *Nana* (1880), Zola attempts to undo Baudelaire's life-in-death martyrdom through infecting a Decadent scenario with disease, nature trumping artifice. The titular Nana is *femme fatale* extraordinaire, seducing princes and viceroys, cross-dressing and engaging in debauched sexual acts out of sheer boredom. Graduating from street to stage, Nana becomes the target of social fantasy. In a production of *Mélusine*, Nana appears as Divine creation in a crystalline grotto:

The grotto round her, made up entirely of mirrors, was glittering with cascades of diamonds, streams of white pearl necklaces amongst the stalactites of the vaulted roof, and in this sparkling mountain spring, gleaming in a broad beam of electric light, with her skin and fiery hair, she seemed like the sun. Paris would always see her like that, blazing with light in the middle of all that crystal, floating in the air like an image of the good Lord.⁷⁰

Zola's description re-writes the Christ-figure to evoke what Bram Dijkstra refers to as 'The Mirror of Venus': surrounded by reflective surfaces, Nana metaphorically exists in a world populated by herself, projecting a self-sufficiency that stems from a perpetual interplay with her reflected image. Like Baudelaire, Zola profanes, equating God with the *femme fatale*, Nana (quite literally) crystallized on stage as an *objet d'art*. Throughout the text, Zola intensifies the narcissistic ambivalence of the *femme fatale*'s destructive actions. Nana, Zola writes, is 'force of nature [...] a ferment of destruction' between whose 'snow-white thighs, Paris was being corrupted and thrown into chaos'.⁷¹ As a Naturalist, Zola must redeem the narrative from the clutches of Decadence and re-establish social order. Struck down with smallpox, Nana quickly dies, the narrative ending with an encyclopaedic cataloguing of Nana's corpse:

Now Nana was left alone, lying face upwards in the light of the candle, a pile of blood and pus dumped on a pillow, a shovelful of rotten flesh ready for the bone-yard, her whole face covered in festering sores, one touching the other, all puckered and subsiding into a shapeless, slushy grey pulp, already looking like a compost heap. Her features were no longer distinguishable, her left eye entirely submerged in discharging ulcers, the other one a sunken, fly-blown black hole. [...] Venus was decomposing.⁷²

Zola's description transforms the death-bed into an art gallery, Nana's corpse a grotesque

⁶⁹ Ebenstein, p. 171.

⁷⁰ Émile Zola, *Nana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 415.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 190.

⁷² Ibid, p. 425.

spectacle for all to see. Despite his attempts to avoid Baudelaire's martyring of woman into art, Zola's pictorial itemizations of Nana recall the part-objects of the fragmented fetishized object. Alongside the conflation of the prostitute Nana's bed with death, Zola's concluding remarks, 'Venus was decomposing', suggests a necrophiliac desire, deadness and desire collapsing in on one another. These collapsed boundaries recall Baudelaire, the death of a woman leaving the spectator dually mournful and erotically fixated.

Rachilde's Vénus, as a Boy

Baudelaire's corpus of sexual deviance, violence and death are similarly explored and exploited at the *fin de siècle* by Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette). Dubbed 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire' by Maurice Barrès for her fictional explorations of sexualized violence and perversity, Rachilde made her celebrity in the Parisian salons with the publication of her novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), a *succès de scandale*, earning Rachilde the title of pornographer. Of this title, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly averred, 'A pornographer, granted [...] but such a distinguished one!' Although embracing Decadent topos with *élan*, Rachilde utilized these conventions in narratives that paradoxically embraced yet subverted (thus expanded) the predominantly male Decadent sexual economy. Baudelaire's 'A Martyr', for instance, utilizes the corpse of a beautiful woman as the crux of creative inspiration for the melancholy dandy. In *Monsieur Vénus*, Rachilde instead incorporates the corpse of a beautiful boy into art for the sexual gratification of a *femme fatale*.

Despite Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) being considered an urtext of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence, it is rare for the beautiful boy to be central to Decadent narratives. Preceding Wilde, Rachilde writes against the grain of her contemporaries. However, whilst Rachilde's use of the beautiful boy as *objet d'art* seems idiosyncratic to the nineteenth century, it is axiomatic of a much larger motif in the annals of art history. Only since the nineteenth century, Germaine Greer argues, has it been assumed that 'the ideal figure that is the subject of figurative painting and sculpture is female'.⁷³ Rather, since antiquity has it been the boy who is central to art, and acts as a foundation of nude images of women. Incorporating the beautiful boy into Decadence, Rachilde's voice is at once singular. But, as Downing argues, that voice is 'characterized by the sterile destructivity of the solipsist'.⁷⁴ Destruction in Decadence always operates as a means of pleasure for the individual, and through the shattering of nineteenth-

⁷³ Germaine Greer, *The Boy* (London: Thames & Hudson LTD, 2003), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Downing, p. 94.

century social convention Rachilde demonstrates a deathly dynamic that casts the corpse of a beautiful boy as the epitome of necrophiliac desire.

Discovering the destitute Jacques Silvert, a *fleuriste* - a maker of artificial roses, the aristocratic *flâneuse*, Raoule de Vènerande lures and confines Jacques within a sumptuous boudoir, the narrative of *Monsieur Vénus* documenting the masochistic actions of the sadistic Raoule imposed upon the fragile Jacques. Raoule's 'possession' of Jacques entails a reversal of the conventional gendering of the artist/muse dynamic. In the opening chapter, Jacques is framed as the central focus in a *tableau vivant*, as seen from Raoule's perspective:

Around his body, over his loose smock, ran a spiralling garland of roses, very big roses of fleshy satin with velvety grenadine tracings. They slipped between his legs, threaded their way right up to his shoulders, and came curling around his neck. On his right stood a spray of wallflowers, and on his left a tuft of violets.⁷⁵

As if painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jacques is introduced as if mid-metamorphosis into blooming bouquet. Bedecked in satin roses, Jacques is the organic framed by the inorganic, calling attention to the eventual decay of his personal beauty, and his inevitable death, with the synthetic flowers acting as signifiers of the perseverance of the artificial beyond life. This illusory metamorphosis is indicative of Rachilde's inversion of gender and sexual dynamics throughout *Monsieur Vénus*. Of these dynamics, Rachel Mesch suggests that although Jacques initially incarnates a femininity in opposition to his sex, 'Raoule is the real gender artist, orchestrating the gender-bending dynamics that transform him ultimately into her "wife."' ⁷⁶ As Jacques is feminized through his image, eventually forced to wear female attire, Raoule is masculinized, adopting male dress and often seen fencing and engaging in male pursuits. Hosting a ball for the Grand Prix at her mansion, Raoule arrives wearing 'a cuirass of gold mail, so finely meshed that her bust appeared to be moulded in liquid gold,' her black hair 'piled up like a Greek helmet'.⁷⁷ Resembling Gustav Klimt's *Pallas Athene* (1898), Raoule is cast as the masculine aggressor who, like a hunter, pursues and subsequently slays her prey for perverse pleasure.

As with gender identity, Raoule dictates the parameters and categorization of her sexuality, and rejects the notion that her feminization of Jacques qualifies her as a lesbian.

⁷⁵ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: A Materialist Novel*, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003), p. 8.

⁷⁶ Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), p. 133.

⁷⁷ Rachilde, pp. 147-148.

Forty-nine years since Thèophile Gautier's Decadent novel *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835) was published, and twenty-eight years since the condemnation of Baudelaire's lesbian poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, lesbianism has become passé to Rachilde, whose novels pursue vices more shocking than cross-dressing and queer relationships. There is no direct link between gender, gender presentation, sex or sexuality, Judith Butler argues, concluding that cross-dressing 'implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency'.⁷⁸ Toying with gender fluidity through cross-dressing and pronouns, Rachilde simultaneously reinforces the gender binary and, as Butler stated more than a century later, exposes the limitations of such a binary as an adequate system of expression. Butler's critiques are, however, politically motivated, whilst Rachilde's motivations stem from an aesthetic *l'art-pour-l'art* agenda, Raoule enforcing power pejoratives associated with Decadent masculinities as a means of oppressing the feminine as a form of pleasure.

Expanding upon Freud's conception of necrophilia, Erich Fromm articulates the practice of, or desire to practice, necrophilia as being 'the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something which is unalive, to destroy for the sake of destruction [...] it is the passion to "tear apart living things."'⁷⁹ Fromm's use of physical signifiers of death – putrid, sickly, decayed – allows for the conclusion that necrophilia is as much a sexual perversion as it is an aestheticized mode of representation in fantasy and art. Rachilde is a practitioner of such an aesthetic mode: Jacques's feminization through sadistic violence foreshadows the novel's *grand guignol* ending – a staging of feminine death as Raoule arranges Jacques's execution in a duel when he shows signs of liberation from her dominance. Raoule's patronage of the arts shifts from patron/spectator to creator, ordering the transformation of Jacques's corpse into a hybrid mechanized wax Venus and organic corpse, detailed in the final chapter:

In the Vénérande, mansion, in the left wing, whose shutters are always closed, there is a walled-up room. That room is as blue as a cloudless sky. On the bed shaped like a seashell, guarded by an Eros of marble, rests a wax figure covered with transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that ornament the mouth, the nails on the hands and feet were torn from a corpse. The enamelled eyes have an adorable look. The walled chamber has a door hidden in the draperies of the dressing room.⁸⁰

In a performance of presumed mastery over, and sexual attractions towards, death, Rachilde

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 175.

⁷⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 332.

⁸⁰ Rachilde, p. 209.

ironically re-imagines the erotic ideal of nineteenth-century masculine art. As Janet Beizer writes, Jacques's death and aesthetic reincarnation as a waxen corpse-doll cites a 'myriad of nineteenth-century heroines "killed into art," the reproduction of his body is not cast of any single element: it is a collage of citations as well as of material parts'.⁸¹ However, whereas the female muse is often physically removed by death from the artist (her lack of presence inspiring artistic creation) Raoule's embalmed muse inspires repetition of the same act, night after night:

At night, a woman dressed in mourning, sometimes a young man in evening clothes, opens this door. They come to kneel beside the bed, and, after contemplating at length, kiss it on the lips. A spring hidden inside the flanks connects the mouth and animates it at the same time that it spreads apart the thighs. This wax figure, an anatomical masterpiece, was made by a German.⁸²

Whilst Rachilde may be articulating the staleness of the dead muse trope, the novel's ending may also offer Rachilde's Decadent manifesto of artificiality over all else, Raoule wilfully walling herself within her sanctuary and marrying herself to an idealized sexual sculpture, reality sinking into nothingness. Captivated by the image of what appears to be a sublime re-imagining of classical art, Rachilde simultaneously introduces necrophiliac desire by explaining that the model contains human body parts – teeth, nails, hair – of one deceased. Yet, Rachilde's lush descriptions suggestively savour this object, voyeuristically documenting Raoule's night-time visits, somatically grounding the reader with an intense visceral spectacle through the revelation of sexual intimacy between the waxwork and Raoule. As such, Raoule's visits to the proxy-corpse of Jacques offers a reading of aestheticized deathly desire. *Monsieur Vénus* thus inhabits a fictionalized phantasy in which the sickly, putrid and decaying are dominant themes, accentuated over the living, emphasizing a Decadent 'falling off', or stasis. Here, sexual biological functions are removed, gender roles suspended and rendered mutable, with Rachilde instead offering a representation of passion towards the artificial, and a longing for both possession and annihilation, a Decadent stasis and death.

Artificial Anatomy in Villiers de l'Isle Adam's L'Ève Future

Rachilde's morbid, debauchorous sensibility is equalled in the fiction of Philippe-Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–1889). Villiers *Contes cruels* (*Cruel Tales*, 1883) weave Edgar Allan Poe's macabre sensationalism with Baudelaire's veneration of artifice into a fictional realm of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian elegance. Compulsively documenting the languid lives of

⁸¹ Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 254.

⁸² Rachilde, p. 211.

modern aristocrats, Villiers' *Contes* exhibit a taste for refinement, luxury and hedonism, his idle debauchees flirtatiously rendezvousing with courtesans and women of ambiguous passions. 'And in the women his genius created,' declares Arthur Symonds of Villiers, 'there is an immortal weariness of beauty; they are enigmas to themselves; they desire, and do not know why they refrain; they do good and evil with the lifting of an eyelid, and are guilty and innocent of all the sins of the earth.'⁸³ Villiers's formula reaches its zenith in the novel *L'Ève Future* (*Tomorrow's Eve*, 1886), which Symonds termed 'that most immense and ferocious of pleasantries, [it] is simply one of the scientific burlesques of the *Contes* swollen out into a huge volume, where it is likely to die of plethora'.⁸⁴ A literary successor to Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann', *L'Ève Future* presents an artificial android as an allegorical beacon of reality. For Hoffmann, eroticism originated from Olympia's mirroring of Nathaniel. For Villiers, eroticism stems from the death-like artificiality of the 'Androsphinx', Hadaly, whose verisimilitude exists in an uncanny state of uncertainty between immutability and transience. Marked by these dual constitutions, Hadaly underscores the illusory qualities inherent within human mimesis that results in an allegorical self-referentiality in which Hadaly supplants her human model.

L'Ève Future records the heartbreak of the Romantic Englishman, Lord Celian Ewald, who hovers on the brink of suicide due to a failed romance. The object of Ewald's desire, Alicia Clary, is the *Venus de Milo* incarnate, yet her supposed banal and immodest attitudes ruin Ewald's romantic sentiments. Falling victim to his own *idealized* vision of Alicia, Ewald realises, too late, that she is a 'sphinx without an enigma' and longs for her death, as the presence of Alicia's form as an illusion (*sans* personality) 'would satisfy my stunned indifference, since nothing can render this woman worthy of my love'.⁸⁵ Exploiting Ewald's heartbreak, a fictionalized Thomas Alva Edison proposes to transfer the image and voice of Alicia onto a robotic prototype, which he has secretly been developing in his underground laboratory. Transference of Alicia's image onto the android will allow for her exterior to remain yet will dispose of the interior Ewald finds so distasteful. An android, Hadaly exceeds the mere human simulation of early automata, and instead approximates 'an Apparition whose Human likeness and charm will surpass your wildest hopes, your most intimate dreams!' Initially sceptical, even offended, by Edison's proposal, Ewald vaingloriously succumbs to his friend's experiment when it is promised that Hadaly's soul will be a projected 'shade' of Ewald's own:

⁸³ Arthur Symonds, *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1920), p. 54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸⁵ Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve (L'Ève Future)* trans. By Robert Martin Adams (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 38 & p. 46.

‘Illusion for illusion, the Being of this mixed presence called Hadaly depends on the free will of him who will DARE to conceive it. *Suggest it to her from the depths of your self!*’⁸⁶ What follows is a sequence of exhumations, dissections and experiments that ultimately result in the destruction of the female body, both organic and inorganic.

Edison performs an eloquent soliloquy on the glorious sights and sounds that technologies could have recorded throughout history had they been invented earlier. Envisioning himself, secluded, in the Garden of Eden following the downfall of the first woman, Lilith, Edison longs to record the ‘sublime’ monologue of Adam. ‘It is not good for man to live alone,’ laments the imaginary Adam, and thus provides Edison with the inspiration for *L’Ève Future*. Introduced as governing an artificial Eden, Hadaly resides within a subterranean chamber resembling the palaces of ancient Baghdad, ‘served to fulfil the fantasies of the caliph’. Within this chamber, enormous pillars rise beyond the eye into an artificial night sky, whose blazing stars illuminate mechanical birds of paradise and a jungle of faux tropical vines, Oriental roses and Polynesian flowers. Mysteriously emerging from this primal jungle, veiled, and armed with a glittering dagger, Hadaly is ‘Tomorrow’s Eve’, an archetypal android simultaneously ‘born’ of man and prophesying his downfall. Hadaly’s technological futurism, Pacteau suggests, is made possible by the phonograph and camera, technologies of replication that provide ‘access to a mythical past (here, the origin of man), but also, in arresting a segment of time in sound and image, return the past in a doubly mythical form’.⁸⁷ Phonographs and cameras are evocations of a clarity of sound and vision, artificial articulations of an image/sound that shall exist beyond their subject. Thus, in his God-like ‘creation’ of Hadaly, Edison conjures both the image of ‘immortality’ designed through scientific innovation, and the foundational, corporeal body these innovations seek to immortalize.

Duelling concepts are equally projected onto Hadaly as Edison performs an autopsy on her ‘mechanical cadaver’. Evoking the de-and-re-articulations of the Anatomical Venus, Villiers microscopically anatomizes Hadaly, exterior to interior. Exterior: Hadaly’s mouth is ‘rosy’, her teeth ‘pearly’ white, her ‘artificial flesh’ is scented and painted to mimic the ‘aroma’ and ‘blush’ of femininity. Her tresses are jet-black, and an assortment of interchangeable, jewel-toned eyes are locked away in a crystal cabinet, casting ‘a thousand different glances at the young Englishman [Ewald]’. Pulham observes that the replicability of Hadaly’s eyes

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 63 & p. 68 [italics in original].

⁸⁷ Pacteau, p. 48.

evokes Nathaniel's Freudian castration anxiety in Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann',⁸⁸ whilst anticipating the possibilities of twenty-first-century customized RealDolls.⁸⁹ Replication and manufacturing are further emphasized through Edison's detailing of every single lash and eyebrow to be threaded into Hadaly's face. Each hair is artificial, scented with aromatic oils, and 'counted and measured through a jewellers loupe' before being inserted into the skin, the final effect conjuring 'the finest shadings of Chinese ink on an ivory palette'.⁹⁰ Interior: refracting fragmentary descriptions through a scientific lens, Villiers catalogues the clockwork interiors of Hadaly's body, the 'plastic mediator', which isolates the epidermis and the 'artificial flesh', which mimics human flesh through injections of animating fluid. Collated and quantified to resemble an 'ideal' femininity, Hadaly's human mimesis consistently illuminates the mechanical manufacturing that underpins it. Edison's scalpel thus suggests an artist's paintbrush, or sculptor's chisel, each incision and inscription re-inscribing the aesthetic artificiality Edison's wishes to mitigate.

Anatomical dissections performed upon the cadavers of women are represented throughout the nineteenth century with great frequency, illuminating necrophiliac overtones within the medico-erotic gaze. Gabriel von Max's painting *Der Anatom* (*The Anatomist*, 1869) [fig. 2.10.] and Enrique Simonet Lombardo's painting *¡Y tenía corazón! - Anatomía del corazón* (*And she had a heart! - Anatomy of the heart*, 1890) [fig. 2.11.] solidify the female corpse as an *objet d'art* as contemplated through the gaze of the necrophiliac. Lombardo's painting uses anatomical dissection as a metaphor for the cruelty and heartlessness of beautiful women, whilst Max depicts an anatomist thoughtfully lifting the death shroud from a beautiful cadaver, the moth by the cadaver's legs, and skull on the table both symbols of mortality in the *vanitas* tradition. Bronfen argues that the arresting moment Max has depicted – a brief hesitation before the dissection commences – presents a concept of beauty which 'places the work of death into the service of the aesthetic process, for this form of beauty is contingent on the translation of an animate body into a de-animated one'.⁹¹ Laura Mulvey similarly terms the hallucinatory fragmentation and disarticulations of the feminine form in art as attempting to

⁸⁸ Patricia Pulham, 'The Eroticism of Artificial Flesh in Villiers de L'Isle Adam's *L'Eve Future*' in *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 7(2008), pp. 1-22 (p. 8).

⁸⁹ RealDolls are life-sized sex dolls manufactured to specification, each with poseable PVC skeletons with steel joints and silicone flesh.

⁹⁰ Villiers, p. 161.

⁹¹ Bronfen, p. 5.

aestheticize the inherent ‘truth’ of woman’s body, whilst simultaneously veiling this ‘truth’.⁹² Through the mechanization and itemizing of the female corpse, Edison aestheticizes death into *objet d’art* as an attempt to unveil the ‘truth’ at the core of feminine reproduction.

Autopsy complete, Hadaly remains as she was – dead, but not decomposing. Villiers’s aestheticizing of death is further emphasized through the image of Alicia. ‘Alicia is herself in some sense already “dead”’ argues Pulham. As the double of the *Venus de Milo*, Alicia is ‘already a simulacrum’, and redoubled in Hadaly, she is ‘superseded and effectively replaced by her own simulacrum’.⁹³ Hadaly thus embodies the ‘inanimate’ Alicia that Ewald pined for, the mechanical body existing in both reality and unreality, a site on which deathly desire may be exercised. A figure of perfect passivity, Hadaly-as-Alicia is a bespoke art object upon which the perverse indulgences of Ewald can be enacted.

Questioned as to the motivation for Hadaly, Edison narrates the ruination of his friend, Edward Anderson, both romantically and financially, at the hands of the beautiful dancer, Evelyn Habal. Seeking Evelyn to understand the root of his friend’s tragic demise, Edison discovers Evelyn’s beauty is illusory, a carnival of silks, jewels and powders utilized to create an illusion of beauty. Indeed, the name ‘Habal’ derives from the Hebrew word for vanity (*hebel*, הֶבֶל). Beneath the artifice, Edison concludes, Evelyn was grotesque. Disgusted, yet inspired, Edison conceives to utilize artificiality for a greater, metaphysical cause, the creation of a sublime, mechanized female soul:

In a word, I have come, I, the 'Sorcerer of Menlo Park,' as they call me here, to offer the human beings of these new and up-to-date times, to my scientific contemporaries as a matter of fact, something better than a false, mediocre, and ever-changing Reality; what I bring is a positive, enchanting, ever-faithful Illusion. If it's just one chimera for another, one sin against another sin, one phantasm against all the rest, why not, then?⁹⁴

Refracting the real through the looking glass of the artificial, Edison deconstructs feminine beauty to ascertain and affirm its replicability. From his initial analysis of the most ‘degraded’ form of artifice Edison has immortalized an artificial vision of resplendent femininity.

Conflating beauty and death, Hadaly evokes an elaboration on the *vanitas* tradition, in which a woman sits, gazing at herself in a looking glass, her reflection appearing as a skull

⁹² Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-30 (pp. 19-20).

⁹³ Pulham, ‘The Eroticism of Artificial Flesh in Villiers de L’Isle Adam’s *L’Eve Future*’, p.17.

⁹⁴ Villiers, p. 164.

with a rictus grin. Alison de Fren argues that dual interpretations can be discerned from these *vanitas* images, as they are at once both ‘a critique of female vanity and a *memento mori* in which the female figure represents the personification of Beauty [...] made poignant by the face of death smiling back, which reminds the viewer of the ephemeral nature not just of beauty, but of the entire world of things’.⁹⁵ Villiers utilizes the beauty/death/vanity triumvirate: Evelyn Habal synonymous with the fatal corruptions of vanity, Hadaly’s sublime beauty a panacea to these corruptions. In a chapter titled ‘Exhumation’, it is revealed that Evelyn has since died, and that Edison has inherited all of her beautifying accoutrements. Re-inscribing the vanity/death dialectic of the *vanitas*, Hadaly stands ‘like a statue at the side of a tomb’⁹⁶ as Edison ‘exhumes’ Evelyn’s belongings from a drawer. Initially encoding each item as a signifier of the seductive glamour of the *femme fatale*, Edison removes Evelyn’s belongings one by one from the drawer, only to de-glamourize each object by rendering it grotesque. A few examples:

‘First of all, the tresses of Salome, the glittering fluid of the stars, the brilliance of sunlight [...] a vision of Eve the blonde, our youthful ancestress, forever radiant! Ah! To revel in those tresses! What a delight, eh?’ And he shook in the air the horrible mare’s nest of matted hair and faded ribbons, [...] mottled and tangled, a dirty rainbow of wig work, corroded and yellowed by the action of various acids.

[...] ‘Here now is the lily complexion, the rosy modesty of the virgin; here is the deductive power of passionate lips, moist and warm with desire, all eager with love!’ And he set forth a make-up box filled with half empty jars of rouge, pots of greasepaint, creams and pastes of every sort, patches, mascara and so forth.

[...] Here now are the lovely breasts of our siren, from the salt sea waves of morning! From the foam of ocean and the rays of sun, here are the ethereal contours of the heavenly court of Venus!’ And he waved aloft some scraps of gray [*sic*] wadding, bulging, grubby, and giving off a particularly rank odor [*sic*].⁹⁷

However grotesque Edison regards these objects, he relents that they once held a glamour and mystique that lured men to their death. Equating Evelyn with the mythological *femmes fatales* Salome, Venus and the sirens, Edison declares that women who spellbind unwitting men through artificial exteriors formulate a drama in which ‘their morbid and fatal influence on their victim is in direct ratio to the quantity or moral and physical artifice which they reinforce – or, rather, overwhelm – the very few natural seductive powers they seem to possess’.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Allison de Fren, ‘The Anatomical Gaze in Tomorrow’s Eve’ in *Science Fiction Studies*, 6:2 (July 2009), pp. 235-265 (p. 253).

⁹⁶ Villiers, p. 119.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Evelyn's all-consuming, destructive artificiality thus provides a negative blueprint for which Edison will provide the remedy. Hadaly's creation therefore stems from an attempt to negate the seductive ornamentation and ego of the mythological *femme fatale* rather than for scientific progress.

Negation of the *femme fatale*'s fatal sexuality is, however, compromised by an emphasis on the physicality of Hadaly. In his creation of the android, Edison has endowed her with a multiplicity of femininities. Each of these femininities is conjured through the pressing of bejewelled ornaments that decorate Hadaly's body, 'put your finger on this sapphire,' Hadaly tells Ewald, 'and I will be transformed [...] I have so many women in me, no harem could contain them all. Desire them, and they will exist!'⁹⁹ Hadaly's proclamation reduces her to an *objet d'art* inscribed with a programmed series of responses that emphasize the limits of her artificiality. Although born out of the tension between transience and the corporeal, the impossible possibilities that Hadaly was created to embody remain bound and contained by the laws of reality. Bound by these axioms, Hadaly becomes a body on which death can be performed and experienced: 'My eyes have really penetrated into the realms of Death,' Hadaly tells Ewald, 'you had better not touch that deadly fruit within this garden! [...] My hold on life is even more fragile than that of human beings.'¹⁰⁰ Once again defining the limits of her mechanized body, Hadaly evokes Eve by warning of the 'deathly fruit' of the garden of her desirability, engagement with her body a regression into a pre-conscious narcissism and, ultimately, towards a state of entropy.

The beauty of art and nature arises from perpetual ambiguity, writes Immanuel Kant, as nature 'proved beautiful when it wore the appearance of art; and art can only be termed beautiful, where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature'.¹⁰¹ Ewald's maintaining of this ambiguity can only be upheld through a phenomenological and purposeless approach towards Hadaly, the *objet d'art*, an approach that Ewald cannot sustain. As with Evelyn, Hadaly can only edify through suspension of disbelief. Drawing attention to her attempts to pass off illusion as reality, Hadaly seemingly draws attention to both her own mortality, and articulates desire towards herself as leading to the death-drives state of radical un-being. Although Hadaly is completed and rendered indistinguishable from Alicia Clary, the mechanics of her artificiality have been literally penetrated by Edison and Ewald through

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 135.

dissection, and thus her human mimesis has been exposed. Travelling by ship in a black coffin to Ewald's property in England, Hadaly is lost to the depths of the ocean, and relegated back to the only place her image can be maintained, the imagination of her lover.

Dolls, Desire and Destruction in Vernon Lee's 'The Image'

The mechanized dolls of Hoffmann, Rachilde and Villiers are reduced to corpse-like de-animation in Vernon Lee's short story 'The Image' (1896), which was subsequently re-titled and republished three decades later as 'The Doll' (1927).¹⁰² Although Lee's usual affectations of the grandeur and ephemera of the past abound, 'The Image' is unusual in providing a female narrator, and runs contrary to Lee's *femme fatale* tales (such as 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea') through the concluding destruction of a female body. Reversing her *femme fatale* narratives, Lee surmises that what is here fatal is the notion of nineteenth-century femininity, enforced and enacted upon women. Accompanied by the antiques dealer, Orestes, the narrator peruses the curios of a seventeenth-century palace in Foligno, Umbria. Wandering the palace's grand halls, the narrator stumbles upon the eponymous doll. As with Kokoschka's simulacrum of Alma Mahler, Lee's doll is costumed 'to the utmost detail' in the fashions in vogue at the time of its creation, the 1820s. Bearing a sculpturesque 'Canova' face, she wears a 'white satin frock', paired with 'open-work silk-stockings', 'sandal shoes, and long silk embroidered mittens', visually coded through fashion to project a Victorian mode of innocent femininity. The doll's hair 'was merely painted, in flat bands narrowing the forehead to a triangle', and the back of her head boasted a wide, gaping hole, displaying the cardboard interior.¹⁰³ Mutilated and discoloured through time, with her entire visage covered in a thick patina of dust, the doll lingers as a spectre of the past within the present, an encapsulation of a vision of wilting femininity long since passed.

Transfixed by the doll, the narrator revisits the palace to learn of her history. A *memento mori*, the doll was created in the image of an Italian Countess for her husband following her death. In life, the Countess had married the Count straight from the convent. Allowed neither a voice nor the ability to travel, the Countess was maintained by her possessive husband in a state of isolation 'so that she remained a mere shy, proud, unexperienced girl'. Reduced by the rigorous discipline of her vocation as silent ideal, the wife is reduced to a doll herself, an

¹⁰² References made throughout this chapter refer to the short story 'The Image' published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1897, as opposed to the re-titled, re-published 'The Doll', which appeared in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* in 1927.

¹⁰³ Vernon Lee, 'The Image' in *Cornhill Magazine*, 31 (1896), pp. 516-523 (p. 518).

inanimate, fully realised object of her husband's fantasy. Emma Liggins contextualises the doll within the gender politics of the latter-half of the nineteenth century, arguing that the Countess's entrapment within her husband's fantasies provides 'a stark reminder that despite the New Woman's attempts to reform marriage, the typical wife remained beautiful, doll-like but empty-headed and voiceless'.¹⁰⁴ Following his wife's death several years later, the Count 'went half crazy', and had the doll manufactured in the image of a coveted portrait of the Countess.¹⁰⁵ Akin to *Monsieur Vénus*, necrophiliac desire is impressed upon the inanimate body of the doll, which the Count has sequestered in his late wife's chambers that he ritualistically visited for several hours each day. Lee similarly evokes Rachilde when it is revealed that the doll was wearing 'the real clothes of the poor dead original', made even further disquieting at the discovery of a wig thatched from the dead Countess's hair.¹⁰⁶ The Count having remarried, the doll falls into obsolescence, and is relegated to a closet.

The doll's capacity to transmit a deathly eroticism and silence recalls the wax dolls of the Munich artist, Lotte Pritzel. Pritzel's dolls [fig. 2.12.] were elongated and emaciated and mounted on small baroque stands in suggestive scenarios. In an article for *The Arts of April 1923*, Helen Appleton Read described Pritzel's dolls as 'delicate orchids, outgrowths of a neurotic mind'. The dolls wear 'real jewels on their skeleton-like fingers and toes, their hair is sometimes made of fine gold wires,' with Read concluding that the effect was 'incredibly alluring', emanating the 'same delicate and unhealthy precocity which we find in the vision of Beardsley' and his 'aristocratic fancies of Salome'.¹⁰⁷ Read's description of Pritzel's morbid dolls as 'alluring' provides an indication of how the masculine ideal of the corpse-doll had influenced women's conception of themselves, as emphasized by Lee's Countess. Confronted by the ominous silence of Pritzel's creations, Rainer Maria Rilke relived his childhood experience of the doll:

It remained silent then, not because it felt superior, but silent because this was its established form of evasion and because it was made of useless and absolutely unresponsive material. [...] At a time when everyone was concerned to give us prompt and reassuring answers, the doll was the first to make us aware of that silence larger than life which later breathed on us again and again out of space whenever we came at any point to the border of our existence. Sitting opposite the doll as it stared at us, we experienced for the first time [...] that hollowness in our

¹⁰⁴ Emma Liggins, 'Gendering the Spectral Encounter at the *Fin de Siècle*: Unspeakability in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales' in *Gothic Studies*, 15:2 (November 2013), pp. 39-52 (p. 44).

¹⁰⁵ Lee, p. 519.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 519.

¹⁰⁷ Helen Appleton Read quoted in Dijsktra, p. 348.

feelings, that heart-pause which could spell death, did not the whole gentle continuum of nature lift one like a lifeless body over the abyss. Are we not strange creatures, letting ourselves be guided to direct our earliest inclinations to where there is no hope of response?¹⁰⁸

Within the doll's remoteness, Rilke envisions a realm of objects and desires inaccessible to the imagination. Unable to reconcile the doll's human mimesis with their deathly stillness, Rilke grants the doll a fictive life, enacting a scenario that justifies the death-like stasis of the doll's wax body. Imagining the dolls before a fire, Rilke writes that it is as if they 'yearned for a beautiful flame, to throw themselves into it like moths (and then the momentary reek of their burning would fill us with limitless unfamiliar sensations)'.¹⁰⁹ Only inhalation of the burning fumes of the doll's melting, waxen corpses can we understand their stasis, awakening us to objects and desires that ultimately leads to entropy.

Lee, too, ends her narrative with the burning of the doll's body, yet counteracts the nihilism of Rilke's hallucination. Having had Orestes purchase the doll, the narrator arranges her upon a pyre of myrtle and bay, a bouquet of chrysanthemums placed on her lap. Positioned within this tableau of pagan theatricality, the doll momentarily displays signs of animation: 'Her black fixed eyes stared as in wonder on the yellow vines and reddening peach trees, the sparkling dewy grass of the vineyard, upon the blue morning sunshine, the misty blue amphitheatre of mountains all round.'¹¹⁰ As if anticipating the bittersweet release of death, the doll takes one last glance at her surroundings before she is ignited into abstraction:

Orestes struck a match and slowly lit a pine cone with it; when the cone was blazing he handed it silently to me. The dry bay and myrtle blazed up crackling, with a fresh resinous odour; the Doll was veiled in flame and smoke. In a few seconds the flame sank, the smouldering faggots crumbled. The Doll was gone. Only, where she had been, there remained in the embers something small and shiny. Orestes raked it out and handed it to me. It was a wedding ring of old-fashioned shape, which had been hidden under the silk mitten. 'Keep it, signora,' said Orestes; 'you have put an end to her sorrows.'¹¹¹

Echoing Rilke, Pulham argues that the final blaze that ignites Lee's doll offers a hallucinatory vision as to the doll's meaning. Whereas Rilke foresees annihilation in the fumes of the burning doll's body, Pulham sees liberation. Pulham notes the homo-erotic overtones in the narrator's obsession with the doll, describing the final bonfire as an intense doubling of the two women,

¹⁰⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel' in *On Dolls* ed. By Kenneth Gross (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2012), pp. 51-62 (p. 56).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.

¹¹⁰ Lee., p.523.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 523.

stating that ‘it is not only the doll that is liberated in the blaze, but also Lee’s narrator’. Noting Susan Navaratte’s observation that the doll’s funeral pyre is ignited with the ‘flaming pine cone sacred to Dionysus’, Pulham suggests the narrator thus becomes an actor within a ritual reminiscent of a Dionysiac mystery that allows the transgression of sexual boundaries.¹¹² As Paglia writes, there is a correlation between the Dionysian and metamorphosis: ‘Dionysus is the *new* [...] sweeping all away to begin again [...] he is daemonic energy and plural identity. [...] The aim of his cult was *ecstasis* – which could mean anything from “taking you out of yourself” to a profound alteration of personality.’¹¹³ Thus, the Dionysian flames allows for the narrator’s appropriation of a fluid sexual identity, sanctioning a psychic, if not physical, return to the feminine body.

On a cultural level, the Dionysian pyre also eradicates the inscription of gendered expectations and deathly desire upon the corpse-doll. Rejecting both the masculine necrophiliac gaze projected onto the static body of a woman, and the feminine self-conceptualization of woman-as-doll, Lee enacts Dionysian *ecstasis* on the doll to incinerate her as the cultural embodiment of both death-driven phantasies and passive Victorian femininity. Reinvigorated and reconstituted as a symbol of transformation, the automatons, anatomical models, androids and corpse-dolls of Hoffmann, Baudelaire, Zola, Rachilde, Villiers, Pritzel and Kokoschka become the ashes from which, for Lee at least, the doll can be rediscovered as a mutable and transformative being, freed of the morbid allusions of its artificial predecessors. Mutability and transformation are not solely limited to Lee’s writing on dolls. As shall be discussed in Chapter III, the corpse-doll’s aesthetic sibling, the sculptural Venus, often figures as a body upon which mutilation and change are enacted, their spectral personae psychically reconfigured within Decadent texts as androgynous *femmes fatales*.

¹¹² Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales*, p. 107.

¹¹³ Paglia, p. 97 [italics in original].

CHAPTER III
BEARING MUTILATION *or* THE MUTABILITIES OF MARBLE
FRAGMENTS, FETISHISM & FORMLESSNESS

One consideration briefly posited in ‘Death and the Model’ is the theme of Pygmalionism, the sexual attraction to a sculpture, often of one’s own creation. A paraphilia pathologized by *fin-de-siècle* psychoanalysts, Pygmalionism appears in nineteenth-century Gothic and Decadent texts with great frequency. At first glance, nineteenth-century Pygmalion narratives seemingly operate as a means of subordinating women into placid, idealised beauties at the behest of their creators. Whilst applicable to certain texts, a discounting of all Pygmalion narratives as emblematic of female subordination to male artists produces a reductive, heteronormative reading of the artist/sculpture and spectator/sculpture dynamics that shall here be rectified. Focusing upon the fragmented sculpture, in which mutilation and psychosexual nuances can be mapped, this chapter seeks to problematize the understanding of the creative/spectative gaze in relation to the sculptural fragment. Conflating Heinrich Heine’s concept of the ‘returning’ exiled god posited in *Die Götter im Exil* (1853) with Walter Pater’s impressionistic descriptions of the *Venus de Milo* as a body in the process of ‘fraying’, this chapter will trace the development of the ‘sculptural’ *femme fatale* throughout the nineteenth century. Focusing on Venus, Heine’s ‘returning’ goddess, this chapter will question how the sculptural Venus, as evident in Prosper Mérimée’s short story ‘La Vénus d’Ille’ (1837), dramatizes the tension between spirit and matter. Continuing with a consideration of Edward Burne-Jones’s *Pygmalion and the Image* cycle (1875–1878), I argue that the material beauty of the sculptural Venus was utilized as a means of both silencing and venerating a sublime femininity throughout the nineteenth century. Discussion will then turn to Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s sonnet ‘On a Surf-Rolled Torso of Venus’ (1884/1894), and how Lee-Hamilton utilizes the erosion of sculptural fragment as a means of exalting a pre-Oedipal androgyny, the sculpted Venus’s femininity eroded through years of being submerged beneath the ocean’s waters. The chapter will then examine the influence of the eighteenth-century German art-historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Pater’s analysis of sculpture and on Pater’s short story ‘Denys L’Auxxerois’ (1886). My analysis of ‘Denys L’Auxxerois’ highlights Pater’s preoccupation with the androgynous, dual-sexed identity of the ‘sculptural’ Dionysus figure (another of

Heine's 'returning' gods), and how Pater articulates this figure as an androgynous embodiment of active modes of feminine power combined with masculine models of action. The chapter concludes with a reading of Vernon Lee's short story 'Dionea' (1890), exploring how Lee re-examines the power structures of the model/artist relationship, and considers 'Dionea' as a response to male-authored 'sculpturesque' narratives.



The *Venus de Milo* [fig. 3.1.] stands in an alcove at the end of a long corridor on the ground floor of the Louvre. Standing (approximately) six-foot and seven inches, the Venus towers over her admirers, the luminous white of her marble radiating a crystalline spectrality, glittering even within the cracks and fissures for which she has become synonymous. Speculation has swirled since her unearthing as to how exactly the Venus lost her arms, theories ranging from the thrilling (a fever pitched land war between the French and the Turks for her possession) to the mundane (damage the result of poor handling). Despite the contradictory and confusing accounts, transcripts, and retractions, one fact remains consistent: the *Venus de Milo* was unearthed on April 8th, 1820.

Unearthed is, perhaps, an inaccurate descriptor as the Venus, apocrypha states, seemingly *unveiled herself*: a Greek peasant named Yorgos was digging in the mountainous region of the Greek Isle of Melos when the earth, apparently, trembled and gave way before him, revealing the torso of the Venus in a subterranean niche. Some twenty paces from Yorgos was one Olivier Voutier, ensign in the French Navy, whose two-masted warship, *L'Estafette*, had been docked in the Melos harbour awaiting orders. Seeking the riches of the ancient world, Voutier and his men had sought out the ruins of an ancient theatre, when they found Yorgos admiring his discovery. Yorgos, it seems, knew or cared little for ancient statuary. Yet, sensing Voutier's growing interest in the torso, the Greek offered to continue his excavation for a price. Voutier paid, and together, the two entered the exposed enclave in which was discovered the draped lower half of the Venus; a marble hand holding an apple; a badly damaged section of an arm; and two herms (presumably boundary markers). Voutier sketched (rather inaccurately) the part-objects that Yorgos had discovered and returned to *L'Estafette*, with the hopes that his captain would purchase the sculpture. What follows is a convoluted plot involving rapacious Turkish seamen (Greece at this time being under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire), bidding wars, death-threats and swashbuckling battles replete with sabres and cudgels. Regardless of the mythology that has dogged the Venus since her unearthing, the French retained ownership

of her, and she was subsequently shipped to Paris, arriving in February 1821.

Digging continued on Melos, but the discovered fragments were eliminated as belonging to other, lesser sculptures, or branded as fakes created by enterprising Greek forgers. Only an inscribed plinth on which the Venus once stood was deemed legitimate, and so too was shipped to Paris. Despite hopes of Parisian historians, artists, writers and *savants* that the Venus stemmed from the earlier, Classical period of Greek statuary, Adolf Furtwängler's scientific scrutiny deemed the epigraphy on the plinth as stemming from 'anywhere between 200 B.C. and the Christian era', bearing the style favoured from 150 to 50 B.C., making the Venus a product of the Hellenistic era.¹ Almost immediately following her arrival within Paris, the *Venus de Milo* was elevated within the public consciousness to an icon of beauty for the nineteenth century, her instalment within The Louvre marking the transitional moment of neoclassicism buckling beneath the insurgent Romanticism, whose Pagan-influenced ideals would permeate the work of *fin-de-siècle* practitioners of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Throughout the Hellenistic era, Roger Ling writes, a whole range of themes 'which would have been considered undignified or demeaning in the art of previous centuries now entered the repertory of sculptors: sleeping figures, drunks, cupids, old hags, thugs, hermaphrodites'.² Re-contextualizing the 'undignified' Hellenistic figures of hermaphrodites, *femmes fatales* and the sexually ambiguous, Victorian liberal movements, including such figures as Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde, would confront what Linda Dowling terms a 'radical hope for a wider emotional and erotic liberation' within Victorian society, reclaiming Hellenism within the nineteenth century as a regenerative force.³ As Pater wrote: 'Hellenism is not merely an absorbed element in our intellectual life; it is a conscious tradition in it.'⁴

A product of Hellenism, the *Venus de Milo* embodies what Rhys Carpenter terms a 'languid devitalization of the male victor-athlete into a feminine canon',⁵ emphasizing softer, blurred features influenced by Praxiteles's languorous sculptures. A serene tranquillity

¹ Adolf Furtwängler, 'The Venus de Milo' in *Masterpieces of Greek Sculpture, Vol. II* (London: Heinemann, 1895).

² Roger Ling, 'Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman Art' in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World* ed. By John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 447-474 (p. 457).

³ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 92.

⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 98.

⁵ Rhys Carpenter, *Greek Sculpture: A Critical Review* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 174.

emanates from the *Venus de Milo*'s placid face. Yet, following the curve of the Venus's neck down over the slope of the shoulders her serenity is immediately offset by the stump of an upper arm, and the barren space where her arms once were. Rejecting this unwanted interruption, the eye moves down over the fleshly core. Auguste Rodin exalted the Venus's mid-section, describing the 'palpitating' flesh as bounding 'lightly upward, as though wishing to escape from the heavy shadows which outline the breasts, whilst a warm light seems to emanate from the torso'.⁶ Yet, amidst this flesh we find fragments missing from the hips. Scanning the drapery, we see lines and fractures netting the accentuated leg, which we follow to the plinth, only to realise the Venus is missing her left foot. Circling the Venus, we begin to look for injury, not perfection. Her earlobes are missing (presumably torn off when her earrings were looted); mounds of marble crumble from her back and shoulders; the knot of hair at the nape of her neck has been broken off, each of these injuries offset by a constellation of scrapes and fractures. One thing remains clear, Peter Fuller writes on viewing the Venus, 'the form with which the observer is confronted today is that of a mutilated woman'.⁷ Fuller concludes by arguing that the veneration of the 'mutilated' *Venus de Milo* is a wholly modern phenomenon, as 'the Greeks abhorred any evidence of mutilation in their sculptures. They would not have been able to attend to the Venus in its present state at all, let alone to have derived a deep aesthetic experience from it.'⁸

Despite the Venus's 'mutilations' Romantic Hellenophiles flocked to The Louvre to consider the sculpture's beauty. Admired by François-René de Chateaubriand and Alphonse de Lamartine, the Venus also seduced the younger vanguard of French Romanticism, such as Victor Hugo, and Théophile Gautier, who described the Venus as 'more of a Goddess and less of a woman'.⁹ 'What a grand poem,' asks Gautier, 'would Heine, the singer of the banished gods have written on the nocturnal burial of this most famous of immortals.'¹⁰ Hearsay tells of the aged and decrepit Heinrich Heine frequenting the Louvre to see the *Venus de Milo*, whom he had worshipped throughout his life. Prostrating himself before her, he wept, while she glared

⁶ Auguste Rodin, 'To the Venus de Milo' trans. By Anna Seaton-Schmidt, *Art and Progress*, 3:2 (December 1911), pp. 409-413, (p. 412).

⁷ Peter Fuller, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Ltd., 1980), p. 96.

⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

⁹ Théophile Gautier quoted in Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed: The Story of the Venus de Milo* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2005), p. 106.

¹⁰ Théophile Gautier quoted in 'Saving Venus', *The Guardian*, August 24th, 1871 (republished online April 19th, 2003), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/apr/19/art.artsfeatures1?CMP=share_btn_link> [Accessed December 16th, 2019].

at him as if saying ‘I have no arms. What do you want from me? What could I do for you?’¹¹ Gautier’s reference to Heine as the ‘singer of banished gods’ alludes to Heine’s essay *Die Götter im Exil* (1853), or *The Gods in Exile*. Heine’s essay traces the ‘metamorphoses into demons which the Greek and Roman gods underwent’ as Christianity achieved supreme control of the world in the third century AD.¹² Heine speculates that being forced from their temples and enchanted groves by the fire and malediction of Christianity, the pagan Gods were forced to seek safety in disguises and retire into hiding. These Gods did not always remain hidden, however. Using their enchantments, lust and beauty, these exiled Gods ‘lured into apostasy unsteadfast Christians who had lost their way in the forest’, reviving their own worship for brief pockets of time throughout Christianity’s rule.¹³

Following Heine, Walter Pater weaves Romantic paganism into nineteenth-century Aestheticism. Throughout *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) Pater incorporates translations of Heine’s *The Gods in Exile*, and continually reconsiders the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy throughout his oeuvre. Despite Pater’s pre-occupation with the homoerotics incumbent within Greek ideals of beauty, he routinely returns to what he terms the ‘fraying’ contours of the *Venus de Milo*’s marble body throughout *The Renaissance*. For Pater, the Venus is transformed through years buried in darkness, the destruction and ‘fraying’ of the surface revealing and emphasizing the inherent ‘spirit’ within the sculpture.¹⁴ To Pater, sculpture that bore an ‘incompleteness’ modernized art from the classical period, the sculptural lack *suggesting* rather than *realising* form. Pater’s reading of the *Venus de Milo*’s loss of bodily integrity as a ‘softening’ or ‘fraying’, opposed to a violent mutilation, renders sculptural form as tactile and mutable. Thus, the Venus’s body collapses the boundaries between the plastic arts and what can be considered ‘sculptural’. Lene Østermark-Johansen writes that Pater’s imagination renders marble ‘something closer to fabric than stone’. Østermark-Johansen continues by describing Pater’s notions of sculptural form as extending beyond his critique of sculpture as an art form, incorporating ‘his plastic conception of both language and style as writing in more than two dimensions; his use of sculpture as a metaphor; the language he employs when discussing sculpture; and the sculptural as a state of mind, an image of the

¹¹Quoted in Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 120.

¹² Heinrich Heine, ‘The Gods in Exile’ in *The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine* (London: W. Scott, 1887), pp. 268-289 (pp. 268).

¹³ Ibid, pp. 268-269.

¹⁴Pater, p. 38.

processes of the brain, connecting thought and language'.¹⁵ Marble, textile, text and even sensory experience thus become merged within what is considered sculptural in Pater's Heraclitan model of perception, into which objects are, in Pater's own words, 'loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, textile – in the mind of the observer'.¹⁶

Pater's sculptural model of perception – that extending beyond the bounds of matter primarily considered material for sculpture (marble, bronze, etc.) – creates an interrelationship between surface and depth. Writing on art history, Pater consistently repeats sculptural adjectives ('depress', 'depression', 'impress' and 'relief'), hinting that his aesthetic interests lay within subtle modulations of space. Echoing both Leonardo da Vinci's and Charles Baudelaire's indictments of sculpture seen in the round as a weak imitation of vulgar, natural forms, Pater's critique of sculpture rarely extends beyond the relief, a flat base bearing imprints and projections. Thus, the sculptural inhabits planar space and that directly before it. Inextricably linked to sculpture through his matrix of perception, the flat base, be it book, canvas, tapestry or wall, thus becomes constituted as sculptural. Yet, the subtle corruptions of the *Venus de Milo's* broken marble into 'frayed' or unravelling matter contradicts the concentrated space of the sculptural relief, blurring the lines between art and its environment. As such, the sculptural surface bares a tactile quality, the contours of sculpture redefined as extending beyond its carved limits through an interweaving of sensory perception: the 'sculptural' comes to life through the *impression* it creates, rather than the image it presents.

The 'fraying' surface of the *Venus de Milo* prefaces Pater's discussion of Michelangelo. Noted for unfinished, or rough-hewn, sculptures known as *non-finiti* (examples being the groups of figures tentatively named *The Slaves*, or *The Captives* [fig. 3.2.]),¹⁷ Michelangelo presents his sculptural figures as struggling to free themselves from the slabs of marble binding them. Pater's consideration of the 'sculptural' work of Michelangelo incorporates poetry, alluding to John Addington Symonds's translation of Michelangelo's 'Sonnet XV' ('The Lover and the Sculptor'), who renders specific lines as reading:

The best of artists hath no thought to show
Which the rough stone in its superfluous shell

¹⁵ Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

¹⁶ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 119.

¹⁷ *Non-finito* literally translates as 'not finished'. The most notable of these *non-finiti* are 'The Awakening Slave' (c. 1520-1523), 'The Young Slave' (c. 1530-1534), 'The Bearded Slave' (c. 1530-1534) and 'The Atlas (or Bound)' (c. 1530-1534). Two additional, earlier, and highly polished slave figures can also be included within this group of *non-finiti*: 'The Rebellious Slave' and 'The Dying Slave' (both c. 1510-13), both sculpted to adorn the tomb of Pope Julius II.

Doth not include: to break the marble spell
Is all the hand that serves the brain can do.¹⁸

Symond's description of the marble block as both 'superfluous' and a 'shell' invokes Pater's concept of the sculptural form containing an inherent 'spirit' that is waiting to be liberated through a corruption of its contours. In reference to Michelangelo's removal of 'surplusage' material, Pater would later opine:

For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michelangelo's fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.¹⁹

Michelangelo's sculptural refinement is transposed onto Pater's aesthetic of beauty, which refers to all 'truth' in art as an accumulation of sensory experiences. This aesthetic process attempts to encapsulate in words and images a pre-existing beauty as a tangible gesture, the dismissal of superfluous matter seeking to realise the inherent character of form. This form is, in essence, a reflection of inner beauty, or, as Pater writes, an apprehension of 'unseen beauty; *trascenda nella forma universale*—that abstract form of beauty about which the Platonists reason'.²⁰ For Pater, inspired by Michelangelo, form without superfluity provides beauty in that it gives the viewer a sense of a pre-existing energy that has arisen from an internal or unseen concept.

It is opacity that Pater venerates in Michelangelo's *non-finiti*, a fluid impression of concrete objects, disintegrating the permanence and fixity of form and exalting an interactive suggestion of passionate sensory experience. Pater states:

Many have wondered at that incompleteness, suspecting, however, that Michelangelo himself loved and was loath to change it, and feeling at the same time that they too would lose something if the half-realised form ever quite emerged from the stone [...] that incompleteness is Michelangelo's equivalent for colour in sculpture; it is his way of etherealising pure form, of relieving its hard realism, and communicating to it breath, pulsation, the effect of life [...] In this way he combines the utmost amount of passion and intensity with the sense of a yielding and flexible life: he gets not vitality merely, but a wonderful force of expression.²¹

Removal of superfluous material thus provides greater pathos to the *Venus de Milo*. The 'un-

¹⁸ Michelangelo Buonarroti, 'Sonnet XV – The Lover and the Sculptor' in *The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti* trans. John Addington Symonds (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1904), p. 17.

¹⁹ Walter Pater, 'Style' in *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), pp. 1-36 (p. 16).

²⁰ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

sculpting' of the Venus's contours (be it through battle or ineptitude) provides a plastic freshness, both refining and blurring sculptural form. This new, fragmented form gives the impression that the human spirit is mingling with natural forces and energies, devolving into an abstraction and rallying against the limitation of a precisely located or defined personality. Thus, the 'un-sculpting' of the *Venus de Milo* liberates her from the specific identity of a fixed image, severing the innate singularity of the sculpture which allowed neither artist nor spectator participation in the creative process and projected a deathly image of stasis.

The Architectural Venus of Prosper Mérimée

Prosper Mérimée's prose acts as a negative imprint of Pater's sculptural fluidity, his architecturally structured and rigid formulations ossified by the stasis that Pater abhors. Despite Pater's praise of Mérimée's fictions as seemingly protruding from the page 'like solitary mountain forms on some hard, perfectly transparent day', Pater ultimately concludes that 'what Mérimée gets around his singularly sculpturesque creations is neither more nor less than empty space'.²² To Pater, the inherent 'spirit' within Mérimée's art is lacking, substituting passion for proportion and logical coherency. The most obvious of these 'sculptural creations' is the short story 'La Vénus d'Ille' (1837), a variant of William of Malmesbury's medieval tale, 'Venus and the Ring' (c. 1125). Malmesbury's tale is steeped in ascetic Christian medievalism, Venus transformed from the pagan Goddess of love to a demonic agent of temptation. Mérimée purges his version of the tale of religious dogma, setting it in the present and inserting a supernatural ambiguity, yet retains Malmesbury's struggle of good versus evil. Theodore Ziolkowski claims that Mérimée, a student of archaeology, also sought inspiration for his tale from the discovery of the *Venus de Milo* and argues that Mérimée's tours of the classical monuments of Europe are coded within the narrative by proxy of an unnamed narrator.²³

Pater's description of Mérimée's form as resembling mountains seemingly stems from the opening paragraph of 'La Vénus d'Ille', in which the Pyrenees cut a jagged edge across the night sky. Down these mountains travels an unnamed archaeologist (Mérimée's proxy), who seeks to study the Roman ruins discovered in the village of Ille. Newfound archaeological evidence uncovered from antiquity, often in fragmented form, was prime material for nineteenth-century writers as it conveyed the tension between past and present, material

²²Walter Pater, 'Prosper Mérimée' in *Miscellaneous Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1907), pp. 1-26 (p. 5).

²³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 44.

certainty and imagination, and memory and erotic desire. Stefano Evangelista writes that like the archaeologist, the ‘aesthetic writer works through completion and substitution, looking through history for the missing stories and unheard melodies, the evocative power of unrecorded voices, and the repressed discourses of human power and invention’.²⁴ Mérimée’s narrator will experience such an evocative power in the form of the perfectly preserved bronze, the titular Venus of Ille, recently unearthed in the garden of the antiquary Monsieur de Peyrehorade, with whom the narrator is boarding. Peyrehorade’s son, Alphonse, is to be married on the following Friday, the day of Venus (French *vendredi* deriving from the Latin *veneris diēs*, ‘day of Venus’). On his wedding day, Alphonse momentarily places his wedding ring on the finger of the Venus, from which it cannot be removed. That night, upon the wedding bed, the bridegroom is crushed to death. Alphonse’s new wife claims that the Venus smothered her husband to death beneath her metallic embrace, but is declared hysterical, and suspicion at once turns to an Aragonese muleteer whom Alphonse had wronged earlier that day. The narrator departs for Paris, the muleteer is declared innocent, Peyrehorade dies, heartbroken, and the Venus is melted down and recast into a bell, the ringing of which supposedly brings misfortune to those who hear it toll.

Mérimée exhaustively documents the *Venus d’Ille* with a removed, scientific objectivity. Significantly, the Venus is bronze, heated, cast and cooled within a rigid identity, not ‘released’ from a block of marble. Despite a thick patina of Verdigris covering her body, the features of the Venus maintain their antique clarity: an amalgamation of Hellenistic variants of the Venus model, the *Venus d’Ille*’s torso is nude; her lower half draped; her right arm raised to her breast, hand extended; the left hand supporting the drapery at her hip. Her gilded head lulls slightly forward, bearing an evil that will manifest in action. She is ‘vicious’, her face, though ‘incredibly beautiful’, flaring with ‘disdain, irony, cruelty’.²⁵ It is a disdain for the modern world in which she is misunderstood, avoided by the villagers who feel ill at ease in her presence, some even attempting to mutilate her bronze body by pelting her with rocks. However, unlike the ‘mutilation’ done to the *Venus de Milo*, the *Venus d’Ille* may herself be a mutilator: the rocks hurled at her rebound, striking the thrower in the head; a labourer charged with excavating her has his legs crushed beneath her weight; and, even after she has been recast as a church bell, the vineyards of Ille freeze over for two years. Stripped of her divinity, the

²⁴ Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.6.

²⁵ Prosper Mérimée, ‘The Venus of Ille’ in *Carmen and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 132-161 (p. 141).

Venus d'Ille is now a cultural icon, not a religious one, an ideal example of Heine's 'returning god' seeking vengeance on a culture that has forgotten how to worship her. The pedestal the Venus stands on bears her warning – *CAVE AMANTEM* – which the archaeologist translates to read: 'Beware if *she* loves you.'²⁶

A rationalist, Mérimée leaves the 'La Vénus d'Ille's supernatural leanings ambiguous. Ziolkowski quotes an oft-cited anecdote in which Mérimée, when asked by a young reader if the Venus really killed Alphonse, retorted, 'Goodness, child, I have no idea!'²⁷ It is this ambiguity that Pater rejects in Mérimée, a hollowness symptomatic of an impersonal attitude of an artist to their creation. As Arthur Symons surmised, 'What he [Mérimée] has really done is materialise a myth, by accepting in it precisely what might be a mere superstition, the form of the thing, and leaving out spiritual meaning of which that form was no more than a temporary expression.'²⁸ Despite a lack of internality, Pater deems Mérimée's prose the base on which will be forged the modern French styles of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert, declaring Mérimée as having 'none of those subjectivities, colourings, peculiarities of mental refraction, which necessitate *varieties* of style', yet one whose 'sculpturesque creations' inspired 'masters of French prose whose art begun where the art of Mérimée leaves off'.²⁹ Like the hollow sculpture to which his work is likened, Mérimée is a figure of the distant past, yet one whose remnants endure, an uncanny imprint that will resonate throughout the nineteenth century.

One such uncanny imprint is Heine's *The Gods in Exile*. Heine proposes that following the triumph of Christianity, pagan deities did not simply vanish from existence; instead, they went into hiding, some in the form of animals (as evident in the Egyptian pantheon), others retreating into the statues created in their image. Statues thus present a state of slumber, not death, the gods awaiting reanimation within their sculpted likeness. Venus is continually re-envisioned throughout Heine's writing, reworking such medieval tales as Tannhäuser and, as with Mérimée before him, Malmesbury's 'Venus and the Ring'. Restoring the clashing ideologies of paganism and Christianity, favouring the former, Heine is the first author to re-write medieval legends whose sympathies lay with the gods of antiquity. Pater similarly alludes to medieval versions of Venus, her 'antinomianism' impelling people beyond the bounds of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁷ Ziolkowski, p.55.

²⁸ Arthur Symons, 'Prosper Mérimée' in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* ed. By Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2014), pp. 141-152 (p. 148).

²⁹ Pater, 'Prosper Mérimée', pp. 24-25.

Christianity towards an idolatry of a ‘strange religion’ in the wake of the goddesses reappearance: ‘It was the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises.’³⁰ Both Heine’s and Pater’s emphasis on the ‘return’ of something once hidden re-emerging within the present is ripe for psychological evaluation.

Pygmalion and the Fetish

Sigmund Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) references Heine to illustrate the aesthetics of the *unheimlich*, or uncanny, in which the repressed materializes as a thing of terror, ‘just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons’.³¹ For Freud, the ‘re-appearance’ of the gods of antiquity in Heine reads as that which is ‘nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed’.³² Throughout his essay, Freud locates this ‘return’ as a re-emergence of the repressed, an unconscious striving to regulate sexual instincts away from sexual attractions considered perverse. Repression, Freud writes, is pre-conscious, triggered to conquer castration anxiety and the Oedipus Complex within infantile psychosexual development. The ‘return’ of the repressed is thus an invocation of the fear of a perversity emerging from our psychosexual history seemingly forgotten. Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex, Freud insists, forces the young boy to accept the possibility of castration, coming to perceive woman as bearing a lack.

Castration anxiety is not always overcome, however. In ‘Fetishism’ (1927), Freud argues that, periodically, castration anxiety is circumnavigated through the creation of a fetish, ‘a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus, which the little boy once believed in and which [...] does not want to give up’.³³ Operating entirely within the realm of simulacrum, the fetishist re-creates the phallus in place of an original that never existed. Repressing the hypothetical existence of a maternal phallus, the fetishist deflects the gaze to a convenient substitute, such as shoes, furs or velvets, objects crystallizing ‘the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic’.³⁴ Denying loss by proxy of a simulacrum inevitably turns into acknowledging loss, and the inefficiency of the simulacrum. Yet, whilst this simulacrum is acknowledged as false, it simultaneously retains its

³⁰ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 16.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ in *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Group, 2003), pp. 121-162, p. 124.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

³³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’ in *The Penguin Freud Reader* ed. By Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Group, 2006), pp. 90-95 (pp. 90-91).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

function as an antidote to castrative fear. The fetish thus emerges as a form of specular mimesis, a contradictory formulation concurrently mystifying and demystifying, revealing its own masquerade, yet doubting a fixed original.

Within his catalogue of sexual perversities *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Richard von Krafft-Ebing devotes a few paragraphs to the perversities of statue fetishists:

They always give the impression of being pathological, — like the story of a young man [...] who made use of a Venus of Praxiteles for the gratification of his lust; and the case of Clisyphus, who violated the statue of a goddess in the Temple of Samos, after having placed a piece of meat on a certain part. In modern times, the “Journal L’évenement” of March 4, 1877, relates the story of a gardener who fell in love with a statue of the Venus of Milo, and was discovered attempting coitus with it. At any rate, these cases stand in etiological relation with abnormally intense libido and defective virility or courage, or lack of opportunity for normal sexual gratification.³⁵

In the three reported cases, each statue derives from antiquity, encoding the ancient past as a crucible of desires considered inappropriate within the civilized present. Thus, these desires are rendered uncanny, the hidden or unearthed past a corrupting influence on the erotic fixations of men. Interestingly, the fetishization of the *Venus de Milo* deems her doubly lack. Devoid of the Freudian maternal phallus, the Venus also bears the blemishes of Jacques Lacan’s *corps morcelé* (‘the fragmented body’), the ‘mutilation’ done to her body recalling the alienating infantile anxiety of bodily fragmentation against the will of the ego’s secure bodily ‘I’.

Krafft-Ebing termed statue fetishism *agalmatophilia* (Greek *agalma*, statue, and *philia*, love), an attraction to figurative objects, be it an animate or inanimate instance of that object; sculpture, doll, mannequin, automaton. One sub-category of *agalmatophilia* is pygmalionism, the sexual desire for one’s own creation. Derived from the myth of Pygmalion, whose ivory sculpture of an idealized woman, Galatea, is granted life by Aphrodite (the Greek equivalent of the Roman Venus), pygmalionism enacts the psychosexual formation of the fetish. Akin to the corpse, the statue is deemed as lacking, the ‘castrated’ feminine body thus endowed with a substitute form of animation that negates the destabilizing potential of castration/death. Galatea is therefore Pygmalion’s psychic phantasy of epipsychic wholeness. Elisabeth Bronfen writes that ‘woman as object of desire is a symptom for man’s yearning for full identity, for ego coherence and for narcissistic pleasure along with the failure necessarily built into this

³⁵ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* trans. By Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), p. 351.

undertaking'.³⁶ Formulated to negate castration anxiety, Pygmalion projects this anxiety onto Galatea, who, as a fetishized statue, both articulates and denies it. Idealised, absent of individuality and inaccessible, Galatea stands in for Pygmalion's anxiety of lack, her function as Other, separate from the male self, to support the phantasy of bodily and psychic wholeness and integrity through animation, transforming from corpse-like sculpture to flesh and blood woman.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's monodrama *Pygmalion* (1770) literalizes this phantasy, the moment of metamorphosis by magic in which Galatea transitions from ivory to flesh severing the psychic screens between desire and self. As Alex Potts writes:

What so compels him about the idea of the sculpture coming alive is not, as is usually supposed, that he will be faced by some adored other, but that he will discover in it an emanation of this own self [...] It is this narcissistic phantasy that is quite literally enacted within this climactic orgasmic delirium as the statue actually comes to life. Galatea steps off her pedestal, the boundary between herself and sculptor is abolished as she becomes quite literally one with him. Touching herself she says: "This is me"; touching a block of marble, the alien matter that remains indifferent to the sculptor's self-projection, she utters: "This is not me." Then, as she holds her hand to Pygmalion's palpitating heart, she declares: "Ah! Myself again." ³⁷

The Pygmalion artist, threatened by woman's perceived lack, replaces her with sculptural *objet d'art* – portrait, corpse, statue, poem, novel. These *objets d'art* are inherently tangled within a web of narcissisms, devolving into mirror images of their masters, in which the simulacrum embodies the artist's psychic phantasy of cohesion between self and epipsyche. As Camille Paglia writes, 'Rousseau feminizes the male. [...] His narcissism evolves into Romantic solipsism, doubt about the reality of things outside the self.'³⁸ Paglia continues by stating that 'through power of imaginative projection' Rousseau 'imprinted European culture with his particular constellation of sexual personae'.³⁹ This imprint can be found in the ubiquity of pygmalionism throughout the eighteenth century, a craze that endowed the 'mimoplastic' arts (representing works of art through mime) with renewed vigour, emphasizing the ambiguity between sculpture and self. For Ziolkowski, the 'bizarre conceit' of humans as 'living statues' (a reverse pygmalionism) only further illuminates the eighteenth-century obsession with

³⁶ Elisbaeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2006), p. 212.

³⁷ Alex Potts, 'Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture' in *Oxford Art Journal*, 15:2 (1992), pp. 38-47 (p. 38).

³⁸ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 232.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

sculpture: 'During the 1780s, for instance', he writes, 'it was a vogue in Italy to visit the galleries at night to view statues by torchlight, which produced the illusion that the statues were alive and moving.'⁴⁰ Whilst not a perfect reciprocity, the vogue for living statues hints at a cultural pre-occupation with narcissistic mirroring, whilst simultaneously emphasizing a compunction to find life in lifelessness, forgoing the natural for the artificial.

The pre-occupation for Pygmalionism continued into the nineteenth century, mined for meaning by artists such as Anne-Louis Girodet, George Frederick Watts, Ernest Normand, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Rodin.⁴¹ Yet, as the Romantic imagination developed throughout the nineteenth century, examples of pygmalionism occasionally deviated from total embodiments of narcissistic phantasy to incorporate an uncanny fascination created by Galatea's blurring of reality and illusion. Watts's *The Wife of Pygmalion* (1868) [fig. 3.3] exemplifies this uncanniness: the canvas presents a foggy profusion of earthy russet browns, reds and dusty pinks, in which Galatea is central, her red lips and strawberry-blond curls signifying the moment of animism as having already occurred. Although the flush of lifeblood provides some colouring to the skin, it retains the pallid whiteness of marble, resulting in an anaemic feebleness, with Galatea's blank, dead-eyed stare into the distance further emphasizing her remoteness. Is she alive or dead? Only the title, *The Wife of Pygmalion*, provides context, and yet the myth seems to be playing in reverse, Galatea not being granted life, but being sapped of it, the white lilies hovering around her signifying imminent death. For Paul de Man, Galatea's animism represents a monstrosity, her animation feeding 'upon colder fires than those burning on sacrificial altars,' undoing selfhood as 'tragic metaphor and replaces it by the knowledge of its figural and epistemologically unreliable structure'.⁴² Continually hovering on the borders between life and death, Galatea casts everything into confusion; no longer is she a simple projection of bodily integrity, but an embodiment of doubt in the fixity of objects.

Michelangelo's 'freeing' of the spirit trapped within marble is conflated with the Pygmalion myth in William Morris's poetic re-envisioning of the legend within *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870). Bereft of hope and inspiration, Morris's Pygmalion deems his art

⁴⁰ Ziolkowski, pp. 34–35.

⁴¹ Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, *Pygmalion et Galatée* (1819); George Frederick Watts, *The Wife of Pygmalion* (1868); Ernest Normand, *Pygmalion and Galatée* (1886); Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Working in Marble or The Artist Sculpting Tanagra* (1890) and *Pygmalion and Galatée* (c. 1890); and Auguste Rodin, *Pygmalion and Galatée* (modelled 1889; carved c. 1908–1909). These are, of course, only a small number of representations of the Pygmalion myth throughout the nineteenth century, which permeated all variations of artistic mediums, from sculpture to painting to literature and theatre.

⁴² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 187.

insipid and trite. What right does he have to cast in stone the sacred images of Juno's robes, Diana's bow and arrow, Pallas's olive-stem, or Hermes's caduceus, when he is unable to master base, earthly emotions? Yet, hope remains, and within an untouched block of marble does Pygmalion envision the 'wandering veins' of a woman's form.⁴³ Edward Burne-Jones simultaneously developed a series of studies of the Pygmalion myth in the late 1860s, resulting in a four-painting cycle, the titles of each adopted from Morris's text – 'The Heart Desires' [fig. 3.4.], 'The Hand Refrains' [fig. 3.5.], 'The Godhead Fires' [fig. 3.6.] and 'The Soul Attains' [fig. 3.7.].⁴⁴ Burne-Jones's interpretation of the poem incorporates the pre-Raphaelite pre-occupation of paganism with a neo-Florentine colour scheme. As with his Renaissance precursors, Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci, before him, Burne-Jones monomaniacally recapitulated the same, androgynous face throughout his corpus. As Paglia writes, Burne-Jones's 'aesthetic world is populated by one incestuously propagating being'.⁴⁵ As a narrative of narcissistic mirroring, Pygmalion enables Burne-Jones to revel within the mires of mystic doubling, his Pygmalion and Galatea sharing a personality that has pathogenetically cloned itself.

'The Heart Desires', the first image in Burne-Jones's cycle, finds an androgynous Pygmalion brooding, yet meditative before a triad of marble graces. With his back turned to the local women lingering in the doorway, Pygmalion considers the Graces' abstractly disjointed reflection in the highly polished floor. The hallucinatory, fragmented limbs of marble signify Pygmalion's psychic state, which he has thus far unsuccessfully attempted to reconstruct through projection onto sculpturesque forms. In Morris's poem, the subsequent carving of Galatea is impelled by creative ecstasy, Pygmalion thrust by the 'ever-burning, unconsuming fire' of vain desire to forge a marble form to make the 'hope of death wax faint and dim'.⁴⁶ In ritual couvade, Morris's Pygmalion births Galatea through psychic will, and bestows his androgynous creation floral wreaths, golden altars and Arabian frankincense. Burne-Jones's vision of Galatea's creation in 'The Hand Refrains' is a more tepid affair, Pygmalion's creation an icy, crystalline reflection of the artist. Pygmalion, tools in hand, circles

⁴³ William Morris, 'Pygmalion and the Image' in *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem* (London: F. S. Ellis, 1968), pp. 588-616, (p. 590).

⁴⁴ Two versions of Burne-Jones *Pygmalion and the Image* cycle exist. The first set, commissioned in 1868 by Euphrosyne Cassavetti was completed in 1870, with the second set (1875-1878) completed for the second exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1878. The images discussed throughout this essay refer to the second cycle of images, as they bear a sharper, clearer handling of detail and tone.

⁴⁵ Paglia, p. 156.

⁴⁶ Morris, p. 595.

his creation yet refrains from touch, lest one nick or dint ruin the phantasy. The titles of both paintings embody Pygmalion's predicament: 'The Heart Desires' the epiphany of a whole, perfected self, projected onto an Other; 'The Hand Refrains' the attempt to maintain this phantasy contradicted by the deathly stasis of Galatea's marble contours. Pygmalion's hand, raised to his lips, is mirrored in Galatea's caressing of her thigh, what Østermark-Johansen terms a 'narcissistic touch',⁴⁷ a barrenness hinting at the anxiety of lack Galatea was sculpted to assuage.

Barrenness becomes inverted within 'The Godhead Fires', the third panel in the *Pygmalion* cycle. Fusing Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1485-1886) with Michelangelo's *The Creation of Eve* (c. 1508-1512), 'The Godhead Fires' illustrates a pagan act of ritualized female creation. Spirited from her scallop shell into Pygmalion's studio, the goddess Venus, foam kissed and dove flanked, bestows life to the marble Galatea, whose first steps recall Michelangelo's Eve springing forth, fully formed, from Adam's rib. Entwined within the Goddesses arms, Galatea is severed from her creator's sterile 'narcissistic touch' through Venus's sublime intervention. The detritus of Galatea's marble shell that littered the floor is transformed into pink Botticellian roses or carried away by doves, symbolizing how dead matter has been provided life and mortality. A divine trick? Only a single rose remains in the final panel, 'The Soul Attains', strewn at the feet of Galatea, whose now-human flesh seemingly ossifies at the touch of Pygmalion. Having returned, Pygmalion has denied Galatea of the sublimity of femininity, re-invoking her as an embodiment of his narcissistic delusions. Denied of her own personhood, Burne-Jones's final image of Galatea is a damning indictment of projected femininity being utilized by male artists to relieve their own anxieties of subordination to the female body. Inverting the rush of creation and perpetual love within Botticelli and Michelangelo, Burne-Jones petrifies the creative process to a perpetual halt.

Despite a predilection for painted representations of sculpture over sculpture itself, Burne-Jones was often to be found patronizing The Elgin Marbles in the antique sculpture galleries of The British Museum.⁴⁸ Although aesthetically dissimilar, the cracked, fissured and 'frayed' contours of the Elgin Marbles bear a thematic resemblance to Burne-Jones's *Pygmalion and the Image* cycle. Emancipated from fixity through destruction, the damaged edges of sculpted fragments invoke a dissolution of form into flowing contour. The *suggestion*

⁴⁷ Østermark-Johansen, p. 196.

⁴⁸ Frances Spalding, *Magnificent Dreams: Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1978), p. 38.

of the dissolution of fixed form into flowing contour enables a narcissistic phantasy in which the fractious externality of the sculpted fragment liquifies and is subsequently re-articulated into an object of the spectator's desire. As Potts writes, 'immersed in the experience of the undulating line, the movements subject to fantasy seem to fuse with objective materialized forms of the sculptural figure, as in the myth of Pygmalion'.⁴⁹ The configuration of visualizing ideal phantasy within fragmented forms converges with the central conceit of fetishism. The psychic work of the fetishist operates as erotic metonymy, a substitution of a part for a whole, or for something related or incongruous. Thus, (to the male artist, at least) Freud's furs and velvets join ranks with the ruined monuments of antiquity as a symbolization of the phallus and its threatened absence.

The Liquid Limbs of Johann Joachim Winckelmann

Fragmented contour considered as cipher for a conceptualized erotic ideal is apparent in the writings of the eighteenth-century art-historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann. A Hellenist, Winckelmann was responsible for providing Ancient Greece with a wholly new cultural significance. Evangelista writes that Winckelmann's works, such as *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755) and *History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks* (1764), 'became the bible of Hellenism and set the tone in which discussions of ancient art would be conducted for the next century'. Winckelmann, Evangelista continues, is 'like a material fragment of the Hellenic world', anachronistic in the modern period, yet 'like a fragment he can be used as a kaleidoscope into the past, a suggestive clue for the imaginative reconstruction of antiquity'.⁵⁰ Contemplating *Laocoön and His Sons*, Winckelmann condenses the broken sculpture into a phantasy of 'muscles [...] carried beyond truth to the limits of possibility; they lie like hills which are drawing themselves together'.⁵¹ Winckelmann's numerous descriptions of the *Belvedere Torso* [fig. 3.8.] metonymically conceives male subjectivity at its most heroic, erotically charged and passively contented. Taking the symbolically void fragment, Winckelmann traces the violent history of Hercules's twelve labours onto the placated body.⁵² Relaxing in divine tranquillity, the fragment at first appears

⁴⁹ Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1994), p. 172.

⁵⁰ Evangelista, pp. 25-26.

⁵¹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art* trans. G. Henry Lodge (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1880), p. 338.

⁵² Winckelmann's justifies his interpretation of the torso as belonging to Hercules by identifying the pelt he sits on as belonging to the Nemean lion, which Hercules killed and skinned for his first labour. The skinned pelt, however, also allows for interpretations of the torso as Adonis, Marsyas, Philoctetes or Polyphemus, amongst others. According to the Vatican Museum, where the torso is displayed, the 'favoured hypothesis presently

before Winckelmann like a ‘bare trunk of a grand old oak which has been felled and shorn of its branches and boughs [...] mangled and mutilated’. Delving into the ‘mysteries of art’, Winckelmann slowly, hallucinatorily envisions the former glories of the body to whom the truncated torso once belonged:

Abused and mutilated to the extreme, deprived as it is of head, arms, and legs, this statue still appears, to those capable of looking into the mysteries of art, in a blaze of its former glory. In this Herakles the artist has figured a head ideal of a body raised above nature and a nature of virile maturity elevated to a state of divine contentment. Herakles appears here as if he has purified himself by fire of the slag of humanity and attained immortality among the gods. [...] He sat [...] supporting his upwardly turned head, which would have been occupied with a joyful review of the great deeds he had accomplished [...] and who journeyed through countless lands to the limits of the world.⁵³

Winckelmann’s description envisions the violence done unto the tranquil, contemplative body of Hercules. The same placid contours had previously been exposed to the savage mauls of mythical beasts and inflamed by the poisoned shirt of Nessus, a pain that could only be quelled through Hercules’s suicidal self-immolation. Written on the body, the tranquillity of the fragment is subjected to re-appraisal, re-envisioning the torso as sculpted (or, rather, fragmented) by violence. This juxtaposition enforces a fetishistic structure, the erotic manipulations of Winckelmann’s subjective fantasy paradoxically denying and embodying this fantasy. Simultaneously enraptured in self-contemplation and acts of savage aggression, the torso embodies both psychic harmony and disturbances to that harmony. Thus, the animating charge of Winckelmann’s fetishistic projection onto the torso lies within the fragment’s capacity to both arouse, and to embody, the anxiety that unconsciously animates it. As such, the ‘state of divine contentment’ of the torso is modulated through the evocations of the bloodshed and strife faced throughout the Herculean trials. Fantasy of bodily wholeness is realised through the liquefying of the formal integrity of the figure into an experience of flowing form, the contours of the torso articulating ‘the ever-changing flow of one form into another and the gliding features that rise and fall like waves and are engulfed by one another’. Attention then halts upon the plump, fleshly skin, now disassociated from the Herculean labours Winckelmann has envisioned. Diminishing the erotic suggestiveness of the remarkable

identifies it as the Greek hero Ajax, son of Telamon, in the act of contemplating his suicide’, although the website provides no sources to justify this claim.

<<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/sala-delle-muse/torso-del-belvedere.html>> [Accessed January 2nd, 2020].

⁵³ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* trans. Harry Francis Malgrave (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2006), p. 323.

power and physique the figure once exerted, Winckelmann severs his fantasy through appropriation of the *Belvedere Torso* into the exalted annals of art history: ‘The bones seem clothed in a fleshy skin, the muscles are plump but without excess, and such balanced fleshiness is found in no other figure. Indeed, one could say that this Herakles comes nearer to a high period of art than even the Apollo [Belvedere].’⁵⁴

Arriving in Paris in 1821, the *Venus de Milo*, like The Elgin Marbles, was too late for Winckelmann to study. Pater, however, conflates his analysis of Winckelmann’s paradoxes with the indented contours of the Venus. The Venus, Pater insists, represents nothing beyond her own ‘victorious fairness’, contending that in contemplation of the sculpture the mind ‘begins and ends with the finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive. That motive is not lightly and loosely attached to the sensuous form, as the meaning to the allegory, but saturates and is identical with it.’⁵⁵ Pater somewhat contradicts himself here. Locating meaning as identical to finite images, Pater asserts images as immutable. Yet, evident with the *Venus de Milo*, images succumb to change through time. Thus, to follow Pater’s logic, the mutable image can mean nothing, unless, as he would elsewhere locate in the ‘frayed’ contours of the Venus, image and meaning can transform together.

This transformation Pater adopts from Winckelmann’s fetishism of fragmented statuary, Pater suspended between the finite image of the Venus as she is, and the infinite image of what she may become through a speculative, subjective fantasy. Potts writes that Pater took the fetishizing logic of the Greek ideal further than Winckelmann, arguing that ‘Pater’s rhetoric produces a liminal space where the dynamic of life is simultaneously intimated and suspended. With Winckelmann, the purifying of potential disturbance is effected in a prose that is not itself so immaculately modulated.’⁵⁶ Thus, ‘frayed’ surfaces suggest an infinite appeal to Pater due to the dissolving boundaries between surface and depth, and intimation and suspension, echoing and embellishing on Winckelmann’s continual use of oceanic metaphors. The surging crests of muscled flesh, crashing and converging with one another in Winckelmann’s *Laocoön* and *Belvedere Torso* analyses, evokes the Greek body/soul dichotomy manifesting ‘as if under a still surface of water’⁵⁷ yet simultaneously conjures raging images of violent tides. Outlining the violent contradictions inherent in ocean imagery, Potts writes:

A powerful dialectic is set up between beautiful bodily form and suggestions of extreme psychic and physical disquiet. The image he uses most often to evoke the

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 323.

⁵⁵ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 102.

⁵⁶ Potts, p. 245.

⁵⁷ Østermark-Johansen, p. 99.

apparent imperturbability of the ideal figure in repose is the calm expanse of a distant sea. The smoothly modulated surfaces of the first Greek ideal become like a gently rolling swell, simultaneously calm and redolent of a power that might easily be stirred into a raging fury.⁵⁸

Attentive to his predecessor's oeuvre, Pater echoes Winckelmann's paradoxical imagery by describing the 'felicity' of the *Venus de Milo* as contrasted by the inherent 'spirit in the thing [that] seems always on the point of breaking out'.⁵⁹ Suspended between the finite, all-encompassing Greek ideal and the uneven, rough Renaissance *non-finito*, the *Venus de Milo* comes to encapsulate Pater's Heraclitan mode of perception: vitality contained in a condensed glacial form, contradicted by the fractured contours that bear the titanic pressure of surging passion.

Mutability and Mutilation in Eugene-Lee Hamilton's Venus Sonnets

Debates concerning the original physiognomy of the *Venus de Milo* persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Ruminating on Venus as the wife of Ares, the God of War, Kiel of Hanover published a reconstruction of the Venus as holding a spear, whilst others imagined Venus as wielding a shield. Often, she was considered to have been admiring her reflection within a mirror, or holding an apple, given to her in the judgment of Paris. That Venus exhibited the apple in her left hand, contemplating the object of her victory over Juno and Minerva, seems, to me, the most feasible of theories. Furtwängler argues in favour of a golden apple, claiming Venus's fruit corresponded with the Isle of Melos's *objet de cultes*. Furtwängler also highlights the apple as an emblem of Melos, the Greek *mêlon* meaning apple, from which the island derives its name.⁶⁰ Participating in the debate concerning reconstructions of the Venus, Eugene Lee-Hamilton's sonnet 'To the So-Called Venus of Milo' (1894) has the Goddess inscribing the names of those lost in battle on Ares's shield. Yet, the sonnet concludes that the sculpture may perhaps closer resemble Niké, the Goddess of Victory, sculpted to inspire men before war.⁶¹ In a sister sonnet, Lee-Hamilton pivots from reconstructing the Venus to the contemplation of where her missing arms lay: have they been shattered and strewn as dust over olive fields? Are they tangled in the roots of an ancient tree? Or do they lie knotted in seaweed, awaiting release by some deep-sea diver?⁶² Lee-Hamilton's vivid contemplations echo Pater's

⁵⁸ Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winkelman and the Origins of Art History*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ Furtwängler, 'The Venus de Milo'.

⁶¹ Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 'To the so-Called Venus of Milo (I)' in *Sonnets of the Wingless Hours* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894), p. 37.

⁶² Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 'To the so-Called Venus of Milo (II)' in *Sonnets of the Wingless Hours* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894), p. 38.

sentiment that ‘Greek is for us, a fragment only; in each of them it is necessary, in a somewhat visionary manner, to fill up empty spaces, and more or less make substitution’.⁶³ Co-opting Winckelmann’s liquid metaphors, Pater renders history a hollow, fragmented sculpture, re-imagined with fluid, mutable limbs with each passing age.

Liquid mutability acts as the central motif of another of Lee-Hamilton’s sonnets, the awkwardly titled ‘On A Surf-Rolled Torso Of Venus, Found At Trippoli Vecchio And Now At The Louvre’ (1884). Inspiration for the sonnet is evident in a letter from Lee-Hamilton’s half-sister, Vernon Lee, written to their mother from Paris on the 23rd June 1883. Lee writes:

I saw at the Louvre a very beautiful and singular thing, which I recommend to Eugene as a possible sonnet subject. It is a torso, half draped, of a Venus, found on the seashore at a place in Africa called Trippoli Vecchio – somewhere near Carthage, I presume. It has evidently been rolled and rolled for years in the surf, for it is worn away, every line & curve softened, so it looks exquisitely soft and strange and creamy, hand, breasts & drapery all indicated clearly but washed by the sea to something soft, vague and lovely.

Lee’s descriptions evidently influenced her brother’s representation of the surf-rolled bust, Lee-Hamilton replicating the statue being ‘rolled and rolled for years in the surf’ in both language and structure. Lee-Hamilton’s text explores what Matthew Campbell considers an integral trait of the Victorian sonnet, ‘the flux both in self and world, and the ethics of a struggle with change and time’.⁶⁴ Whilst not directly referencing the *Venus de Milo*, Lee-Hamilton focuses on the concept of a ‘mutilated’ Venus sculpture to consider the mercurial nature of history and the mutability of form:

One day in the world’s youth, long, long ago
Before the golden hair of time grew grey,
The bright warm sea, scarce stirred by dolphins’ play,
Was swept by sudden music soft and low;
And rippling, as ‘neath kisses, parted slow,
And gave a new and dripping goddess birth
Who brought transcendent loveliness on earth,
With limbs more pure than sunset-tinted snow.
And lo, that self-same sea has now upthrown
A mutilated Venus, rolled and rolled
For ages by the surf, and that has grown
More soft, more chaste, more lovely than of old,
With every line made vague, so that the stone

⁶³ Walter Pater, ‘The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture’ in *Greek Studies: A History of Essays*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895) pp. 194-234, p. 213.

⁶⁴ Matthew Campbell, ‘The Victorian Sonnet’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* ed. By A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 204-224 (p. 223).

Seems seen as through a veil which ages hold.⁶⁵

In a Paterian manoeuvre, Lee-Hamilton promptly contrasts ancient with modern. The opening lines envelop the reader in a world grown grey, contrasted with the hazy, golden-hued atmosphere of the world in its infancy. Venus, too, embodies halcyon-like visions of an innocent world, birthed from the sea a pinnacle of virtuousness, purer than the ‘sunset-tinted snow’. A *volte-face*: the sea that once birthed the snow-white Venus has now mutilated her, rendering her a limbless trunk submerged since bygone times. A remedy: providing no moment of contemplation as to how the Goddess, once so innocent, now bears the violent marks of mutilation, Lee-Hamilton conservatively rectifies the ocean’s offering by pronouncing the disfigured Venus ‘*More soft, more chaste, more lovely than of old*’ [my italics]. Bearing neither the formatting of a Shakespearian nor Italian sonnet, Lee-Hamilton reconfigures his poem to resemble the rhythmic waves of the ocean. Utilizing an ABBA rhyme scheme and indenting certain lines (2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 12 and 14), Lee-Hamilton auditorily and visually emulates the relentless back and forth of the oceans tides that the Venus torso has been subjected to. The ocean, W. H. Auden writes, ‘is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilisation has emerged and into which [...] it is always liable to relapse’.⁶⁶ Enacting this decline, the Pagan Venus, forced from her temple, has relapsed into the primordial undifferentiated flux of the sea, and has returned within the Christian present of the West, eroded of her voluptuousness and blurred into a chaste, illusory vision that eludes the eye.

Refinement of a mutable object is practiced by Lee-Hamilton, who re-wrote the sonnet throughout the decade following its publication, resulting in the somewhat more elegantly titled ‘On a Surf-Rolled Torso of Venus. Discovered at Tripoli Vecchio’ (1894). Unlike the Wordsworthian ‘dew-drop’ sonnet, a form of which holds ‘itself suspended, not releasing itself or breaking’, Lee-Hamilton’s re-writing and re-structuring of the sonnet form reveals a Victorian emphasis on engaging with the afterlives of works of art and literature.⁶⁷ This engagement allows for the mutable sentiments of a writer’s opinion on both their work and subject matter to be re-examined, charting the progression of ideas from the past into the present. For Lee-Hamilton, this re-examination exposes itself through the softening and smoothing motion of the ocean, here recapitulated as a gentle restructuring of poetic form, and

⁶⁵ Eugene Lee-Hamilton, ‘On a Surf Rolled Torso of Venus, Found at Tripoli Vecchio And Now at the Louvre’ in *Apollo and Marsyas and Other Poems* (London: Elliot Stock, 1884), p. 133.

⁶⁶ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1985), p. 16.

⁶⁷ Campbell, pp. 206-207.

through the subtle variation of words and tone:

One day, in the world's youth, long, long ago,
Before the golden hair of Time grew gray,
The bright warm sea, scarce stirred by dolphins' play,
Was swept by sudden music strange and low;

And rippling with the kisses Zephyrs blow,
Gave forth a dripping goddess, whose strong sway
All earth, all air, all wave, was to obey,
Throned on a shell more rosy than dawn's glow.

And, lo, that self-same sea has now upthrown
A mutilated Venus, roll'd and roll'd
For centuries in surf, and who has grown.

More soft, more chaste, more lovely than of old,
With every line made vague, so that the stone
Seems seen as through a veil which Ages hold.⁶⁸

Structurally, the sonnet has been fragmented into four stanzas (two quatrains, followed by two tercets) emulating the rhythmic undulations of the ocean, and its fragmenting effect upon the sculpted Venus. Visually altering the poem, the new fragmentations signify a momentary pause within the narrative. Lack of structural division and use of enjambment in the earlier sonnet allowed for quick dramatic shift, only to be quickly reversed. Within the updated sonnet, fragmentation reinforces the changes made to the personification of the Goddess. Catherine Maxwell contends that the changing of 'soft' to the more magical, Paterian 'strange' (line four), evokes Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, 'a well-known picture he [Lee-Hamilton] could easily have seen in reproduction or viewed before his illness'.⁶⁹ Yet, whilst the first sonnet plays out upon a Botticellian canvas, the wind-swept Goddess transcendent and pure (lines 7-8), the second sonnet is invaded by a sinister air. Transformed from innocence to experience, Lee-Hamilton's new Venus is imperious, a *femme fatale* enthroned upon the shell from which she governs earth, air, fire and water. Strengthening the powers Venus will subsequently be stripped of, Lee-Hamilton heightens the spectrum down which Venus will subsequently be eroded into the chaste, 'mutilated' torso, thrown from the waves an age later. Hence, the second Venus's persona is dramatically enhanced to emphasize the mutability of the body and spirit of the *objet d'art*.

A fetishized *objet d'art*, the Venus sculpture is a psychological projection whose violent

⁶⁸ Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 'On A Surf-Rolled Torso of Venus. Discovered at Tripoli Vecchio' in *Sonnets of the Wingless Hours* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894), p. 44.

⁶⁹ Maxwell, p. 130.

erosions document both a psychic regression into the pre-conscious, undulating, realm of the womb, and a suspension of this regression. Maxwell offers an in-depth reading of Lee-Hamilton's sonnets, utilizing Kleinian psychoanalysis and emphasizing the Venus torso as the body of the mother. Whilst not wanting to solely limit the Venus torso to psychobiography, it may also be interpreted as a psychological projection of Lee-Hamilton himself, the maternal overtones that Maxwell adroitly figures within the torso hereby supplanted and figured within the ocean. In *Thalassa* (1924) Sándor Ferenczi speculates on the affinities of femininity and water. Beginning in the primordial ooze, Ferenczi claims no copulation involved penetration. Rather, fertilization took place through exposed, accessible organs. Ferenczi's claim bears striking similarities to the birth of Venus myth: conceived from the foam created as Uranus's castrated testes are tossed into the ocean, Venus's arrival on shore charts evolutionary development from sea to land. On land, combat over water erupted: Ferenczi argues that females were forced to submit to penetration from erectile penises males had developed and were subsequently 'transformed into oceans'. This reverse symbolism brought forth 'the reestablishment of the aquatic mode of life in the form of an existence within the moist and nourishing interior of the mother's body'.⁷⁰ Ferenczi concludes by stating 'Amniotic fluid is a sea that was "introjected", as it were, into the mother's body, in which [...] the delicate vulnerable embryo carries out movements and swims like a *fish in water*'.⁷¹ Inadvertently, Ferenczi's speculation erodes the psychoanalytic vigour of symbols through establishing female bodies as symbols of the sea, and not the other way around. To consider Lee-Hamilton's ocean a maternal body indicates an attempt to return the fetishized Venus sculpture to a state before cognizance of sexual differentiation. As a phallic proxy, the original, unblemished sculpture of Venus paradoxically asserts and assuages castrative fear. Yet, Lee-Hamilton's praising of the new, 'mutilated' torso of Venus as superior to its original implies not only an attempt to circumnavigate castration anxiety, but to sever psychic awareness of sexual distinctions entirely. Eroding the torso over time, the ocean enacts a de-phallicizing, stripping the Venus of its original signifying system in a narcissistic quest for pre-conscious bodily integrity. As such, inner phantasy of androgynous autonomy is externalized onto an outer, sensuously perceived *objet d'art*.

Inherent in both Lee's initial letter and Lee-Hamilton's sonnet is the Paterian appreciation of mutability, the Venus rendered lovelier and more psychologically pleasurable

⁷⁰ Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1968), p. 54.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

through exposure to the flux and ‘un-sculpting’ of time. Of the Venus’s ‘mutilated’ form, Maxwell argues that the siblings imply ‘the sense that the torso in its current state is now the fulfilment of a long artistic process started by the sculptor but perfected by the sea’.⁷² An aesthetic refinement, the ‘perfecting’ of the sculpture by the ocean waves evokes Michelangelo’s attempt to unleash the pre-existing spirit inherent within a block of marble, what Pater terms ‘the visible vesture and expression of that other world it [the mind] sees so steadily within’.⁷³ The injuries that Lee-Hamilton’s Venus has attained indicates an admission of an original destruction, offering the gaze ambiguities which are then, through psychic reparation, reconstructed as an idealized form. In its mutilated state, the torso of Venus evokes affects affixed to the most primitive phantasies of pre-conscious sexual ambiguity. Ambiguousness is, however, a modern doctrine of beauty, abhorred by the Greeks. Detached from Greek idealism, Lee-Hamilton re-appropriates form as liberated from any one unifying principle and finds beauty within transformation and suggestion. Thus, it is precisely because of the mutability the Greeks so abhorred that Venus can successfully be abstracted from fixity, the sculpture’s inherent polymorphous subjectivity finally realized through exposure to the ocean’s mercurial touch.

Dionysian Duality in Walter Pater’s ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’

Mutable gods are subject to re-appraisal in Vernon Lee’s essay ‘Dionysus in the Euganean Hills’ (1921). Hallucinatorily envisioning the god Dionysus roaming the remote hills of rural Italy, Lee contemplates the uncanny existence of a god fallen from grace:

Exile like this, implying an in-and-out existence of alternate mysterious appearance and disappearance is, therefore, a kind of haunting; the gods who had it partaking of the nature of ghosts even more than all gods do, revenants as they are from other ages, and with the wistful eeriness of all ghosts, merely to think on whom makes our hair, like Job’s, rise up; tragic beings and, as likely as not, malevolent towards living men. Now of all gods Dionysus is the one fittest for such sinister exile.⁷⁴

Lee’s sighting, however, is not her first. Having previously travelled to the Gothic Auxerre Cathedral in Burgundy, Lee had spotted Dionysus hidden amongst a netting of carved vines inside an arched niche. Dionysus’s face was ‘young, though not so much beardless as clean-shaven, the nose shapely, but not at all classic’, his ‘cheek bones high, [with] a suggestion of shorn hair’. Wide-eyed and open mouthed, Dionysus’s expressively boar the manner of

⁷² Maxwell, p. 133.

⁷³ Pater, ‘Style’, p. 28.

⁷⁴ Vernon Lee, ‘Dionysus in the Euganean Hills – W. H. Pater In Memoriam’ in *The Contemporary Review*, 120 (September 1921), pp. 346-353 (p. 348).

‘simplicity and cunning, [as] befitting a rustic’. ‘Why, it’s Denys!’ Lee exclaims, figuring within the carving the inspiration for Dionysus in Pater’s god in exile story, ‘Denys L’Auxerrois’ (1886). Examining the Cathedral’s carvings closer, Lee finds another Denys, and another, and another. One Denys had vine leaves weaved through his curly hair, another adopted the semblance of a demon, his ‘flame-shaped locks’ curled upward into horns, with each successive carving expressing the dual human and daemonic characteristics of Dionysus.⁷⁵ ‘In this guise,’ Lee concludes, ‘did that ambiguous immortal [Dionysus] meet our great pre-Raphaelite prose-poet [Pater] during those rainy days he records himself to have spent in that Burgundian cathedral town.’⁷⁶

Re-casting Euripides’s *The Bacchae* (405 B.C.) in medieval France, Pater frames the tale through the contemplation of a series of *objets d’art*. Critiques of ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’, most notably by the scholars Lene Østermark-Johansen and Stefano Evangelista, focus primarily on Pater’s use of the Dionysiac throughout the narrative, and how this Dionysian element fits within Pater’s writings on antiquity. As such, the rooting of the narrative within a series of *objets d’art* is only briefly mentioned in passing, and which will here be amended. ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’ undergoes a series of modal transformations before its main narrative commences. Pater’s narrator is at first fixated on a stained-glass window within a cathedral that bears the semblance of Denys, a conduit of Dionysus. Seeking context for the god in glass, the narrator is guided to a local priest, who owns a set of tapestries that depict the clues to Denys’s life. Transfigured from cathedral carving, to stained-glass window, to tapestry, Denys undergoes an alleviation of structural fixity that results in a fluid, ‘sculpturesque’ imaginary portrait. Within the tapestries, Denys is figured as ‘a flaxen and flowery creature, sometimes well-nigh naked among the leave’. He is ‘fair’ and ‘graceful’ with the ‘beauty of a pagan god’, yet ‘suffering, tortured’ having ‘suffered after a manner of which we must suppose pagan gods incapable’.⁷⁷ The tapestries bearing little other detail, the narrator searches the priest’s archival material where the story of Denys’s life is found written on a medieval manuscript – tapestry becomes translated into text.

In thirteenth-century France, Dionysus is reborn as the orphaned Denys. His pagan roots shrouded in mystery, Denys arrives in Auxerre during an upheaval of the community’s

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 346-347.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 347.

⁷⁷ Walter Pater, ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’ in *Imaginary Portraits* ed. By Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014, pp. 167-188 (172).

political affiliations. Shifting from ‘narrow, feudal institution’ into a ‘free, communistic life’,⁷⁸ Auxerre is provided a brief apostasy from Christianity in which the exiled god returns to exert their divine, pagan influence. An enigmatic figure masquerading as a fruit seller, Denys displays a communion with nature, charming feral wolves, cultivating wildflowers, seemingly pulling Mars closer to Earth, and around him vines ripen, growing plump grapes for harvesting. Denys’s influence also exerts itself over human nature, the women of the village idle for him, and the men, too, find themselves ‘also fallen into the snare’. Even the sage monk, Hermes, is ‘unable to keep the fruit seller out of his mind’.⁷⁹ These exertions, however, develop a sinister tone, and the dual nature of Denys’s Dionysian persona reveals itself in shadowy, anarchic acts. Rumours tell of young women drowning new-borns, of murder, and of a growing, savage predilection for raw meat among the villagers. Denys is blamed for these violent acts and becomes known to the villagers as a ‘creature of two natures; difficult or impossible to harmonise’.⁸⁰

Pater’s allusion to Denys’s dual nature is rooted in Dionysus’s origin myth: Semele, six months pregnant with Dionysus by Zeus, is murdered by him, having denied him from her bed. Hermes, cutting Dionysus from Semele’s womb, sews him into the thigh of the unknowing Zeus’s leg, where he gestates for a final three months and is born. Double-birthed, Dionysus is granted the epithet ‘the twice born’, God of the vine, whose wine induces frivolity and ecstasy, yet fugitively gives way to madness and anarchy. Fleeing the tyranny of Hera, Zeus’s wife, the infant Dionysus is evacuated to Heliconian Mount Nysa to be raised by nymphs, where he adopts their dress. Thus, Dionysus’s duality spans gender identity, the god often depicted in transsexual garb in ancient art. Pater refers to him as a ‘woman-like god’, adding ‘it was on women and feminine souls that his power fell’, most notably upon *femmes fatales*, such as the snaky-haired furies and maenads.⁸¹ Dionysus also embodies what Plutarch terms the *hygra physis* – wet, or liquid nature. Alongside wine, Dionysus is associated with water, milk, sap, honey and blood. These associations led Lewis Farnell to describe Dionysus as ‘the liquid principle in things’.⁸² Like the storm-tossed Venus thrown up on shore, Dionysus arrives in a deluge of blood and wine. Identified with mutability and a lack of boundaries, Dionysus transcends physical, moral, and gendered dichotomies. Breaking barriers between conscious

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 172.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

⁸¹ Walter Pater, ‘The Bacchanals of Euripides in *Greek Studies: A History of Essays*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895) pp. 49-80, p. 53.

⁸² Lewis Farnell quoted in Paglia, p. 91.

and unconscious, Dionysus's presence signifies a 'return', a violent reappearance of the repressed. As Pater writes:

He is twofold then—a Døppelganger; like Persephone, he belongs to two worlds, and has much in common with her, and a full share of those dark possibilities which, even apart from the story of the rape, belong to her. He is a Chthonian god, and, like all the children of the earth, has an element of sadness; like Hades himself, he is hollow and devouring, an eater of man's flesh—sarcophagus—the grave which consumed unaware the ivory-white shoulder of Pelops.⁸³

Pater pays homage to Dionysus's violent disposition by concluding 'Denys l'Auxerrois' with ritual *sparagmos*.⁸⁴ Cutting his lip during a village fête, Denys's blood 'transported the spectators with a kind of mad rage'.⁸⁵ Overcome by repressed desires, the crowd tear Denys limb from limb in a savage rite of passage. Only the monk, Hermes, mourns Denys's death, fruitlessly seeking Denys's remains. Only at nightfall does a stranger appear, bearing Denys's heart, still entire, which Hermes buries in a dark corner of the Auxerre Cathedral. In one final act of transformation, Denys becomes transfixed onto an architectural symbol of the ideology that forced him into exile. Yet, being a god, Denys, or Dionysus, is not really dead, but merely lying dormant until he is next resurrected.

Akin to the torn and fragmented limbs of Denys, Dionysus is interspersed throughout Pater's corpus. In an essay on Dionysus, Pater demonstrates an array of visual representations of the God through both coded allusion and detailed, descriptive passages. Tracing Dionysus's artistic lineage from the antiquity to the present, Pater exalts Praxiteles's marble *Faun* [fig. 3.9.], Michelangelo's marble *Bacchus* (1496–1498) [fig. 3.10.], Girolamo Mocetto's engraving *Bacchus* (c. 1490–1530) [fig. 3.11.], and Simeon Solomon's painting *Bacchus* (1867) [fig. 3.12.]. Dionysus, Pater's god in exile, mercurially embodies the Paterian 'sculpturesque' by shifting form throughout history, from myth to marble to drawing to painting and, finally, in Pater's own hand, to text. Admiring Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, Pater writes that the sculpture expresses 'not the mirthfulness of the god of wine, but his sleepy seriousness, his enthusiasm, his capacity for profound dreaming. No one ever expressed more truly than Michelangelo the notion of inspired sleep, of faces charged with dreams.'⁸⁶ Languorous and redolent, *Bacchus*

⁸³ Walter Pater, 'A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew' in *Greek Studies: A History of Essays*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895) pp. 1–48, p. 39.

⁸⁴ Østermark-Johansen writes 'Pater is here alluding to the Orphic myth of Dionysus and to the Dionysian ritual of the *sparagmos* (literally the "tearing to pieces"). In the ritual an animal or human being is dismembered as part of a sacrifice to the deity, sometimes followed by the act of *omophagia*, the eating of the raw flesh of the creature dismembered.' - Østermark-Johansen, note 50 in 'Denys l'Auxerrois', p. 187.

⁸⁵ Pater, 'Denys l'Auxerrois', p.186.

⁸⁶ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 44.

images a sculptural manifestation of inner mutability, psychically wavering in and out of history in dreamy contemplation until he is met in the present by Solomon's painting. Abounding with ripe bunches of purple grapes, Solomon's canvas overflows with sensuous textures, Bacchus's flowing locks of jet-black hair contrasted with the crisp leaves of his wreath, both offsetting the matte smoothness of the androgynous god's porcelain skin. Pater envisions Solomon's Bacchus as 'the god of the bitterness of wine, "of things too sweet"; the sea-water of the Lesbian grape becomes somewhat brackish in the cup'.⁸⁷ Oscillating between solid and liquid form, male and female homoeroticism and the transformation of pleasure to distaste, Pater illuminates the 'sculpturesque' traits of Solomon's *Bacchus* through the sensory contraries the god personifies.

Fantasy, Femininity and Formlessness in Vernon Lee's Sculptural Narratives

Bacchus's dreamy contemplativeness, and Lee-Hamilton's eroded Venus torso, despite being 'perfected' by the sea, remain malleable, succumbing to transformation through spectative desire. Lee, similarly, champions subjective impressions of statuary. Critiquing the stagnant, homogeneity of the modern art gallery in her essay 'The Child in the Vatican' (1887), Lee likens the crowding of sculpture into halls for contemplation as a 'place of exile; or worse, of captivity, for all this people of marble: these athletes and nymphs and satyrs, and warriors and poets and gods'.⁸⁸ Roaming the halls of the Vatican, Lee attempts to psychologically filter her perception of Greek sculpture through the consciousness of a child. Through her reconstruction, Lee images sculpture through negation of sensuousness: statues seem carved of 'tintless stone', nullified through 'silence and absence of colour, of lifelessness, of not knowing what it all is or all means'.⁸⁹ Alienated and oppressed by sensory negation, Lee's inner child imagines that the statues of the Vatican, who 'are merely stone imprisoned demons, dethroned gods of antiquity', magically project the glories of antiquity into her mind.⁹⁰ Having attained this knowledge, the sculptures lining the Vatican walls blossom with colour, odour, texture, the mysterious philtre, transforming the child's hatred to a longful, aching love for the glories of Rome. 'We are the brethren,' the statues seem to whisper to the child, 'and all we who are brethren, whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word, shall to thee speak in such a way that thou recognise us, and distinguish us from others; and thou shalt love and believe only

⁸⁷ Pater, 'A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew', p. 37.

⁸⁸ Vernon Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican' in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), pp. 17-48 (p. 18).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

in us and those of our kin.’⁹¹ From this moment, the child experiences all forms of art – be it poetry, music, prose, painting – in relation to ancient sculpture.

Roaming the Uffizi, Lee encounters the *Niobides*. Central to this group is Niobe [fig. 3.13.]. Frozen in a spasm of terror, Niobe is forced to witness the slaughter of her children (the *Niobides*) by the twin gods Artemis and Apollo as punishment for her hubris, Niobe having vaunted her qualities as a mother over those of the twins’s mother, Leto. For Patricia Pulham, the maternal element of the Niobe myth is key to understanding Lee’s engagement with the *Niobe*, the sculpture re-enacting on a psychic level ‘a moment of infantile plenitude’, emphasizing Lee’s essay as a tacit erotic engagement with the body of the mother.⁹² Rooted within Lee’s essay is also a manifesto that can be used to crystallize Lee’s sculptural aesthetics, a treatise on form and, more importantly, of *suggestion*. A harmonious blend of the sensuous glories of antiquity, the form of the *Niobides* is seemingly comprised of choral voices, solemn masses of lights and shadow, textured drapery and smooth skin, each emanating invisible colours only the mind can see. Lee’s contemplative response to the *Niobides*, however, is permeated with a sense of remove, or negation: the stronger the spectative eye perceives the sculptural form, the vaguer our understanding of its meaning. Potts argues that the *Niobides*’s suffering reaches such intense extremes that all traces of humanity are vanquished, rendering the sculptures ‘an abstract cipher’.⁹³ The *Niobides* thus become an abstract, disembodied drama. Voided of artistic intent, its beauty becomes akin to the sublime in which ‘motions are suspended, with some degree of horror’.⁹⁴ Lee drew a similar conclusion, arguing the *Niobides*’s abstractions articulate ‘what the *form* is not, and since the form is the sensible, the visible, the concrete, the outwardly existing, the idea must be the invisible, the abstract, the merely intellectually existing’.⁹⁵ Emptied of contextual meaning, Lee articulates what the sculptures *appear* to be to her, not what they actually are:

[...] we see, more or less vaguely, according to our imaginative endowment, a scene of very great confusion and horror: figures wildly shuffling to and fro, clutching at each other, writhing, grimacing with convulsed agony, shrieking, yelling, howling; we see horrible wounds, rent, raw flesh, arrows sticking in torn muscles, dragging forth hideous entrails, spirting and gushing and trickling of blood; we see the mother, agonised into almost beast-like rage and terror, the

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹² Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), pp. 42-43.

⁹³ Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, p. 138.

⁹⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 47.

⁹⁵ Lee, ‘The Child in the Vatican’, p. 37.

fourteen boys and girls, the god and the goddess adjusting their shafts and drawing their bows; we see all, murderous divinities, writhing victims, impotent, anguished mother.⁹⁶

With both pity and compassion, Lee imaginatively envisages what the sculpted *Niobides* allude to: anguish, horror, the gushing forth of blood and entrails, arrows, violence, pain, even envisioning Artemis and Apollo, divinely surveying the carnage. Unlike Pater, Lee's mode of sculptural analysis does not stem from self-projection onto sculptural form, through which the sculpture fantastically transforms. Rather, through a process of negation, Lee empathizes with what sculptural form psychologically *suggests*. As she terms it, 'the only intrinsic perfection of art is the perfection of form, and that such perfection is obtainable only by boldly altering, or even casting aside, the subject with which this form is only imaginatively, most often arbitrarily, connected.'⁹⁷

Imaginative form, or lack of it, is centralized within the *femme fatale* figure in Lee's short story 'Dionea' (1890), in which Lee transforms the Dionysian male into a Venusian female. The narrative of 'Dionea' begins in 1873 on the coastal Italian village of Montemirte Ligure, near Porto Venere, and is presented as a sequence of letters from Doctor Alessandro De Rosis, an elderly academic writing a volume on the fall of the pagan gods, to the Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina. De Rosis's initial letter asks for money as a means of providing for a young orphan named Dionea. A Venusian proxy, Dionea has washed ashore lashed to a wooden beam following a storm, the sole survivor of a shipwreck. Evoking Venus rising from the foam, Dionea's arrival by sea is marked by Heine's theme, and her divine countenance exerts itself from infancy. Denied shelter by the locals who deem her a heathen, Dionea is placed into the care of the local convent, where her inherent paganism clashes with the Christian ideology of the nuns. Castigated for wearing the robes set to adorn a statue of the Virgin Mary, Dionea displays 'an odd ferocious gleam in her eyes, and still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo Da Vinci's women'.⁹⁸ Dismissed and derided by those around her, Dionea seeks solitude in nature, displaying a fondness for doves and collecting wild flowers. Over time, Dionea's image shifts into that of village sorceress. The nature she once worshipped now seems to worship her: around her, flowers bloom, hedges grow and doves circle. Her powers likewise exert themselves over the village people, her

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹⁸ Vernon Lee, 'Dionea' in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* ed. By Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 77-104 (p.84).

presence a malevolent philtre causing passionate, destructive liaisons, ‘wherever she goes, the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable’:⁹⁹ schoolgirls succumb to youthful romances, the revered monk, Father Domenico, kills himself out of unrequited love, and a nun elopes with a young sailor. And yet, despite her influence, Dionea’s greatest longing is to ‘get back *to the sea*’.¹⁰⁰

Inconsistent with the Botticellian portrait of Venus as tranquil and complacent, Dionea’s identity harkens back to a darker, more barbarous, image of Venus from antiquity. ‘To produce the beauty of the goddess,’ Edgar Wind writes, ‘the Heraclitan element of mutability requires transfiguration by a divine principle of form; and that need signified by the barbarous legend [...] that the foam of the sea from which the heavenly Aphrodite arose was produced by the castration of Uranus.’¹⁰¹ Though this savage myth may stem from the etymology of Aphrodite (*aphros*, meaning ‘foam’ or ‘froth’), it also suggests something sexually problematic with the Goddess’s identity, Uranus’s virility transubstantiated to female dominance. Paglia writes that on her native Cyprus, Aphrodite was worshipped as ‘Venus Barbata, the bearded Venus’ to whom ritual sacrifices ‘were conducted by men and women in transvestite dress’. Elsewhere, Paglia continues, Aphrodite was the ‘Venus Calva’, or Bald Venus, her image androgynously presented as bald, mimicking the priests of Isis.¹⁰² Robert Graves also notes that Aphrodite’s violent origins and sexual characteristics led to various nicknames: ‘*Melaenis* (“black one”), a name ingeniously explained by Pausanias as meaning that most love-making takes place at night; *Scotia* (“dark one”); *Androphonos* (“man-slayer”); and even, according to Plutarch, *Epitymbria* (“of the tombs”)’.¹⁰³ Conflating Venus’s trans- and-hyper-sexual identities and origins in violence, Lee’s choice for the name ‘Dionea’ is made discernible as an echo of Dionysus. As Evangelista writes, ‘Dionea evokes the Greek Goddess Dione, consort of Zeus, and according to some sources, mother of Aphrodite’¹⁰⁴, whilst Graves writes that Dione, as opposed to Semele, was written in ancient sources as the mother of Dionysus.¹⁰⁵

Reflecting on the re-appearing figure of the *femme fatale* throughout Lee’s corpus,

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁰¹ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1968), p. 133.

¹⁰² Paglia, p. 87.

¹⁰³ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths – Complete Edition* (London: Penguin Group, 1992), p. 72.

¹⁰⁴ Evangelista p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ Graves, p. 56.

Maxwell writes that ‘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’, concluding that there is ‘also something about them that eludes a fixed representation, and certainly possession’.¹⁰⁶ Fixed representation becomes codified in ‘Dionea’ as an inherently masculine practice within the arts through the sculptor, Waldemar, who (somewhat homoerotically) insists on the superiority of the male form. ‘What do I want with the un-aesthetic sex, as Schopenhauer call it?’ exclaims Waldemar, continuing that ‘woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture. The point of a woman is not her body, but [...] her soul.’¹⁰⁷ Waldemar’s name, his German origin and connection to ancient male statuary are, Evangelista argues, meant to recall Winckelmann, whose Hellenistic veneration of the young male body promoted a ‘rigidly masculine gendering of the aesthetic’.¹⁰⁸ When De Rosis retorts that the history of art contains many representations of the female form, including the Fates of the Parthenon, the *Phidian Pallas* and the *Venus de Milo*, Waldemar dismisses him, claiming ‘these are not women’, but Goddesses.¹⁰⁹ Discontented that Waldemar is mocked for having never produced a female figure, Waldemar’s wife, Gertrude, insists that he have Dionea model for a statue of Venus. Despite Waldemar’s objections, Dionea agrees, raising her head ‘with that serpentine smile, “I will come” she said’.

Fashioning a studio within a desecrated chapel, rumoured to have previously been a temple of Venus, Dionea poses for Waldemar. As if punishing him for his ignorance, Dionea’s beauty seems to magically increase, denying a fixed form for Waldemar to imitate. Obsessively modelling and re-modelling his work, Dionea’s beauty eludes a resolute image. Having been witness to this strange phenomenon, De Rosis writes to the Lady Savelli:

How strange is the power of art! Has Waldemar's statue shown me the real Dionea, or has Dionea really grown more strangely beautiful than before? Your Excellency will laugh; but when I meet her I cast down my eyes after the first glimpse of her loveliness [...] Do you remember—you, who have read everything—all the bosh of our writers about the Ideal in Art? Why, here is a girl who disproves all this nonsense in a minute; she is far, far more beautiful than Waldemar's statue of her.

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¹⁰⁶ Catherine Maxwell, ‘From Dionysus to “Dionea”: Vernon Lee’s Portraits’ in *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 13:3 (1997), pp. 253-269 (p. 265).

¹⁰⁷ Lee, ‘Dionea’, p. 97.

¹⁰⁸ Evangelista, p. 85.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, ‘Dionea’, p. 96.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

Despite the purely aesthetic nature of Waldemar's obsession with Dionea, Gertrude grows increasingly jealous. Having posed Dionea before a statue of Venus, Gertrude interrupts their session with catastrophic consequences. A fire breaks out within the studio, both Gertrude and Waldemar seemingly perishing, while Dionea disappears. It later transpires that it was Waldemar who started the fire, and that Gertrude had been murdered in a scene recalling ritual sacrifice. De Rosi writes:

We found her lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood—she had but little to give, poor white ghost! - trickling among the carved garlands and rams' heads, blackening the heaped-up roses. The body of Waldemar was found at the foot of the castle cliff. Had he hoped, by setting the place on fire, to bury himself among its ruins, or had he not rather wished to complete in this way the sacrifice, to make the whole temple an immense votive pyre?¹¹¹

It is recounted that Dionea was last spotted by a sailor, standing against the mast of a Greek boat, robed in purple and gold, with a myrtle wreath in her hair, singing 'words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling her'.¹¹² Evidently, the ritual sacrifice of Gertrude and Waldemar appeased the malign aspect of Dionea's dual nature, her wish finally to return the sea granted.

Pre-emptively anticipating Waldemar's sculpture of Dionea a narcissistic self-projection, Lee denies him the ability to articulate in art a woman whose femininity has been subordinated to uphold male phantasy. Of the male artist in Lee's tales, Pulham writes that he is consistently 'thwarted, his control defied and exceeded by the mirror-image he seeks in his art. In his place we are left with a vision of a powerful androgynous figure, whose image, like his own, shifts with multiple identifications.'¹¹³ Coding Dionea to emulate Dionysus, Lee creates an aesthetic chain that links her to Pater, Winckelmann and the art of antiquity. This chain, however, is predominantly coded towards male homoeroticism. As John Addington Symonds wrote, 'that while it is true that "the supreme beauty of Greek art is rather male than female," this is due not so much to any passion of the Greeks for male beauty as to the fact that the male body exhibits a higher organisation of the human form than the female.'¹¹⁴ Rather than emulate these aesthetic principles, Lee unbinds the male homoerotic aesthetic imprint that her predecessors enforced by offering a female/Venusian model of beauty rooted in the

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 104.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 104.

¹¹³ Pulham, p. 142.

¹¹⁴ John Addington Symonds, *A Problem in Greek Ethics: Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion* (London: Privately printed in Holland for the ΑΡΕΟΠΑΓΙΤΙΓΑ Society, 1908), p. 68.

Hellenic past. Denying Waldemar the inability to encapsulate Dionea's image in plastic form, Lee shifts the power dichotomies between artist and model: no longer is he the manipulator of beauty, it is she, and she refuses to relinquish her power to a male artist. Refusing De Rosis a definitive conclusion to the narrative of her life, Dionea victoriously sails into the unknown, uncontained realms of the past and the unconscious.

Despite Lee's rectifying of the mutilations done to the body of the sculptural Venus within 'Dionea', the mutilated spectral figure of the castrato Zaffirino would become the crux upon which another short story within *Hauntings*, 'A Wicked Voice', would operate. Castrated young to maintain their child-like voices, the androgynous castrati embodied both the glamour and corruption of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century opera, casting a Decadent, mutilated shadow through to the *fin de siècle*. It is the mutilation and androgyny of the castrati that operates as the focal point of the fourth, and final, chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV
MARBLE MONSTERS OF BOTH SEXES
ANDROGYNOUS ILLUSIONS & CASTRATED CHIMERAS

In Plato's *Symposium* (c. 385-370 B.C.), Aristophanes's myth of Eros proposes the hermaphrodite as the original form heterosexuals seek to recreate in their relationships. In the beginning, Aristophanes proposes humans were two-faced, with four arms, four legs, two sets of genitals and four eyes – a hermaphroditic Vitruvian man. The male aspect of these early beings was born of the sun, the female the earth, and, combined, they symbolized the moon. Terrible in strength and vigour, the androgynous beings led a siege on Olympus, attempting to overthrow the Gods. For their crimes, Zeus dissected these early beings into two halves, one half male and the other half female, and since this split the two halves have been innately desiring of one another in an attempt to reunite, and to heal the wound of separation. Aristophanes's hermaphrodite runs parallel to the story of Adam and Eve: from a wound in his chest, Adam, the original being, is split into two beings, male and female. Original Hebrew texts emphasize this split, Eve being created not from Adam's rib, but from one half of his body. Similarly, the wound on the crucified Christ's chest prompts comparisons with the female external organ of birth, from which is born Christ's bride, the church. Each of these stories associates the internal and external to elaborate on androgynous identities, locating within an open wound the desire of a fragment once again to become whole.

Despite hermaphroditism existing within the biological body, the term 'hermaphrodite' is often used interchangeably with 'androgyny'. Yet, any attempt to define androgyny is often prevented by the limitations of language. 'Confronted with the ubiquitous representations across visual and literary texts,' Francette Pacteau writes, the androgyny meets 'their own *dépassement*'.¹ Androgyny is not demarcated as a belonging of any one individual. Rather, androgyny insists on the relationship between seeing and being seen, *psyche* and *image*. When gazing upon an image painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones or Simeon Solomon, the gaze does not encounter an image of an androgyny, but rather a figure who is subsequently interpreted as androgynous. In his study on the proliferation of images of androgynes throughout the nineteenth century, J. B. L. Busst writes:

¹ Francette Pacteau, 'The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyny', in *Formations of Fantasy* eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 62-84 (p. 62).

The distinction established from time to time between the terms ‘androgynous’ and ‘hermaphrodite’ have always been purely arbitrary and consequently often contradictory [...] Rather than attempt to choose from or add to the already excessively long list of extremely doubtful distinctions, it is preferable to consider the two terms exactly synonymous by accepting their broadest possible meaning: a person who unites certain of the essential characteristics of both sexes and who, consequently, may be considered as both a man and a woman or as neither a man nor a woman, as bisexual or asexual.²

Despite Busst’s oversimplification of complex terminology, the collapsing of the androgynous and hermaphrodite into one definition allows both terms to be understood as a signifier of a being exhibiting mixed, or no, sexual characteristics. As a taxonomic device, Busst’s distinction proves useful in figuring androgynous beings, which can later be divided and differentiated within sub-groups. As such, historical figures, such as eunuchs, in particular the castrati, may be categorized alongside the androgynous and the hermaphrodite, proving useful in discussion of the prevalence of androgynous figures within the arts.

The dissemination of the concept and image of the androgynous throughout the nineteenth century may be sourced to the profusion of images concerning the Hellenistic Hermaphrodite in statues and painting. Such standard works of art as the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* could be seen in museums throughout Europe and operated as the impetus behind works by writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Théophile Gautier and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion’ (1821) draws from the image of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, alongside the hermaphrodite myths in Plato, Ovid and Milton. Combining male and female into one being, Shelley amalgamates androgyny, incest and a longing for Romantic twin-ship with a sister, in which the poet may escape the anxieties of incompleteness and separation. Dedicated to Emilia Viviani, with whom Shelley embarked with on a brief, tempestuous affair, Shelley employs passionate language of desire that transcends physicality to embody the paradoxical nature of the sublime. Emilia is hailed as a ‘Seraph of Heaven’, ‘Harmony of Nature’s art’, ‘Veiled Glory’, and ‘Spouse! Sister! Angel!’ Elsewhere, Emilia is denounced as ‘Thou living Form / Among the Dead!’, a hermaphrodite – ‘that sweet marble monster of both sexes’ - and as a *femme fatale*, ‘Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!’³ Within ‘Epipsychidion’, therefore, a passive male poet attempts to become one with a woman who encapsulates the sublime beauty/horror dichotomy. This dichotomy illuminates the two conceptions of the

² A. J. L. Busst, ‘The Image of the Androgynous in the Nineteenth Century’ in *Romantic Mythologies* ed. By Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 1-96 (p. 1).

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Epipsychidion’ and ‘Fragments Connected with Epipsychidion’ in *The Poetical Works of Shelley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 405-424 (pp. 407, 409, 422).

androgyne that permeate nineteenth-century art. Whilst beauty is optimistic, pure and idealized, horror pessimistic and debilitating, the conflation of the two bare the characteristics of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence, what Mario Praz terms ‘The Romantic Agony’, a beauty ‘enhanced by exactly those qualities which produce horror; the sadder, the more painful it was, the more intensely they relished it’.⁴

As in the previous chapter, ‘Marble Monsters of Both Sexes’ remains focused on the concept of the mutilation, and articulates how the ‘mutilated’ androgyne as *objet d’art* figures in French and British Decadent texts of the nineteenth century. The first text considered is Honoré de Balzac’s short story ‘Sarrasine’ (1830), and scrutinizes the notions of violence, the grotesque and artifice in an attempt to configure the castrati as an androgynous variant of the *femme fatale*. First locating Balzac’s inspiration for ‘Sarrasine’ in the character of Camille/Adriani in Henri de Latouche’s novel *Fragoletta* (1829), the argument traces the figure of the androgyne through Théophile Gautier’s novel *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835) and the poem ‘Contralto’ (1852), articulating the androgyne as chimerical vision whose existence problematizes nineteenth-century binaries of sex and gender. Geographically relocating from France to Britain, Algernon Charles Swinburne’s two hermaphrodite poems ‘Fragoletta’ and ‘Hermaphroditus’, both published in *Poems and Ballads* (1866), will be scrutinized to consider how Swinburne’s veneration of the Hellenistic Hermaphrodite sculpture, as well as his supposed ‘intellectual hermaphroditism’, acted as a response to the rigid Victorian models of masculinity. An analysis of Vernon Lee’s short story ‘A Wicked Voice’ (1890) concludes the chapter, returning to the figure of the castrati as an androgynous variant of the *femme fatale*, and contemplates ‘psychic castration’ in relation to artistic creation, corporeality and transgressive desire. Initially utilizing Busst’s demarcations, the figure of the androgyne, the hermaphrodite and the castrati will each be differentiated from one another, emphasis being placed on the historical and artistic context of each figure, and the role artificiality, veiling and unveiling plays within this differentiation. Bookended by two texts that incorporate the figure of the castrati within their narratives, this chapter will begin with a short contextual history of the castrati as a means of substantiating their inclusion within the taxonomic categorization of the androgyne.

Martyrs to Melody: A Brief History of the Castrati

Of all the figures that trod the operatic boards, the castrati were the most enigmatic. Yet, the

⁴ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 27.

history of the castrati is shrouded in mystery. As a practice, gelding was utilised by early Assyrian and Chinese civilisations, in which young, poverty-stricken boys were castrated and subsequently put to work in imperial households.⁵ The Greeks adopted this practice from the East and, in turn, the Romans mimicked the Greeks. Yet, eunuchs were no mere whipping-boys for entitled tyrants. Gavin Francis writes of the high stature of eunuchs amongst the serving classes, endorsing the view that in losing their testes, eunuchs were believed to have ‘lost family loyalty and to have become faithful only to their masters’.⁶ In Rome, there was an established cult dedicated to the eunuch god Attis, a remnant descending from ancient Phrygia. Mythology tells of Attis castrating himself in the springtime in honour of the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele. Dying, Attis was resurrected three days later, thus establishing an archaic fertility ritual. ‘The ecstatic self-castration of Cybele’s priests’, Robert Graves writes, ‘was a type of emasculation of the drone by the queen bee in the nuptial act.’⁷ The bee, alongside the lion, was a Cybelline icon. This act of ritual self-mutilation took place on the hill in Rome where the Vatican City now stands.⁸

Castration of poverty-stricken youths continued into Byzantium. In an early monograph Steven Runciman argues that throughout the Byzantine era eunuchs were an ‘ideal class in that they had no family life, left no descendants, and could never aspire to be emperor’⁹, thus mirroring their ancestral equivalents. Although considering eunuchs in terms of political expediency may seem demoralising, Runciman allows eunuchs some semblance of dignity. The abject horror in which eunuchs are presented with disgust as a by-product of Decadence metonymically renders eunuchs down to a bleeding wound. Runciman, alternatively, presents eunuchs as having cultural and political clout, acting as a barrier against dynastic insurgence, keeping feudalism at bay. ‘It has long been the custom to talk of eunuchs

⁵ The theatricality of the castrati of the eighteenth century was anticipated by the Ancient Chinese, who pickled the severed penis and testicles (the ‘three treasures’) of their eunuchs in jars. These ‘treasures’ were exhibited at special events, and were, ultimately, reunited with their former owner in death, placed beside the eunuch as they were buried.

⁶ Gavin Francis, *Shapeshifters* (London, Profile Books LTD., 2018), p. 186.

⁷ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 188.

⁸ Perhaps (not so) coincidentally, the castrati were most in-demand by the Vatican during the celebration of Jesus’s resurrection at Easter, parallel to the period of the year in which the priests of Attis practiced ritual castration in honour of Cybele. Edith Weigert-Vowinkel proposes the idea that Phrygian cultic ritual-castration (such as that undergone by priests of the cult of Attis) was copied from the Semites, who eventually transitioned castration into circumcision, and concludes that the contemporary act of celibacy by Catholic priests operates as substitute for castration. ‘The Cult and Mythology of the Magna Mater from the Standpoint of Psychoanalysis’, *Psychiatry*, 1938, 1, pp. (p. 353)]

⁹ Quoted in Minoo Dinshaw, *Outlandish Knight: The Byzantine Life of Steven Runciman* (St. Ives: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 86.

as always having a demoralising influence all round,’ writes Runciman, ‘such generalisations are a disgrace to the historians that make them.’¹⁰ It is in Byzantium that the first recorded document of eunuchs habitually employed as singers exists. Angus Heriot supposes that The Byzantine Exarchate in Italy, with its capital in Ravenna, introduced fashions from Constantinople into Italian culture, the castrati being one of them. Whilst this may seem a cogent argument it is pure speculation, as Heriot admits that there is no definite mention of the castrati in Italy for many centuries.¹¹ The first two recorded Italian castrati were admitted to the Papal Choir in 1599,¹² where the castrati remained until a new burgeoning musical medium offered greater fame and glittering triumphs – opera.

As the burgeoning art form of opera spread throughout mid-seventeenth-century Italy, the castrati became symbols of the extravagance and artificiality of operatic performance. By the eighteenth century the overwhelming popularity of opera, Heriot writes, allowed that ‘an international star-system could arise – the first remote foreshadowing of modern Hollywood’s ubiquitous deities’.¹³ Yet, as products manufactured for the stage, the castrati also highlighted the decadence and grandiloquence of operatic performances, their unique voices and the performing of both male and female roles enabling the castrati to create flamboyant personae for the audience to consume. Thus, the castrati as virtuoso came to be both beguiling and perplexing. As the crown jewels of eighteenth-century opera, the castrati’s glamour inspired cultish, fervid ardour. Following a performance of the castrato Gaspare Pacchierotti, William Beckford titled Pacchierotti an ‘idol’ and a ‘musical divinity’ whose voice inspired ‘raptures’. Beckford continues his account by relaying that a woman began convulsing on hearing Pacchierotti’s voice, to which she was made ‘a martyr to its melody’.¹⁴ Unknowingly, Beckford’s frenzied, thunderstruck recollection anticipates the psychodynamics of fan-worship in contemporary popular culture.

Despite the adulation the castrati received, Beckford reminds us that there were many ‘abominable heretics’¹⁵ that plagued the cult of the castrati. Biologically manipulated through

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹ Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1956), p. 10

¹² Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati - The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* (London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1996), p. 5. - Barbier lists the of the two recorded castrati as Pietro Paolo Folignati (Petrus Paulus Folignatus Eunuchus) and Girolamo Rosini of Perugia (Hieronymus Rosinus Perusinus Eunuchus)

¹³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁴ William Beckford, *Italy: With Sketches of Spain and Portugal, 3rd Edition* (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1835), p. 89.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 89.

violence for the purpose of art, the castrati were born onto a hotbed of paradox, their very existence questioning concerns about nature, ethics and aesthetics. Contemplating the castrati, the eighteenth-century diarist Sarah Goubar asked, ‘Must we mutilate men in order to give them perfection they did not possess at birth?’¹⁶ This ‘mutilation’ consisted of castrating a pre-pubescent boy who displayed vocal prowess. Denying the male body of its major source of testosterone before puberty ensures that the larynx retained its small size and pliancy, resulting in the resonating vocal cords remaining correspondingly short. Through maturation, the castrati’s resonance chambers developed to adult size, thus endowing the castrati with a singing voice higher and more potent than a man’s, had greater projection than a woman’s, and through tutelage, was superior in technique and expression to that of children. An admirer of the castrati, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, somewhat laboriously opined that the castrati’s unique voice paralleled with the contrived ornamentation of stage and costume resulted in a ‘self-conscious illusion’ of a gendered being that defines natural law:

We experience a double charm from the fact that these people are not women, but play the part of women. We see a youth who has studied the idiosyncrasies of the female sex in their character and behaviour; he has learnt to know them and reproduces them as artist: he plays not himself, but a third, and, in truth, a foreign nature.¹⁷

Succinctly: filtering a female character through a male body mutilated for art resulted in the performance of a third, artificial sex nature is unable to produce. Echoing Goethe, Patricia Pulham writes that the voice of the castrati operates as ‘a trinity of voices: man, woman and child’, a voice that seemingly connotes a sexual ambiguity that ‘extends to roles acted by the castrati on the operatic stage’.¹⁸

Sexual ambiguity was transposed from castrati to admiring audiences, who replicated the castrati’s androgynous sensuality and eroticism. The castrato Consolino was forced to ritually don female costume when meeting with a noblewoman with whom he was conducting an illicit affair. And, following a performance in Florence, a masked figure approached the castrato Baldasare Ferri and placed a dazzling emerald ring upon his finger. The gender of the masked admirer was never discovered, but the incident displays the adoption of the castrati’s artificiality and gender-as-performance by an idolatrous audience. Despite initial reluctance,

¹⁶ Quoted in Barbier, p. 5.

¹⁷ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethe’s Travel in Italy (Together with Second Residence in Rome and Fragments of Italy)* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1885), p. 569.

¹⁸ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 10.

Giacomo Casanova became notoriously passive to seduction by castrati. Of the castrato Salimbeni, Casanova wrote that ‘mutilation had turned him into a monster, but all qualities that embellished him made him an angel’.¹⁹ In Rome, Casanova recalls a performance in which, despite being aware of the castrato’s ‘condition’, he succumbed to the ‘voluptuous’ step, and that the castrato’s glances ‘brought ravishment to the heart’: ‘it was obvious that he hoped to inspire the love of those who liked him as a man, and probably would not have done so as a woman’. Through performance, the castrati infatuated with the visible, at the expense of the invisible or moral. Rome, the Holy City, Casanova concludes, ‘forces everyman to become a pederast’.²⁰

Casanova’s ambiguous allusion to Rome’s amoral attitude illuminates papal nonchalance concerning the employment of castrati. Prior to the birth of opera, ecclesiastical authorities cited St. Paul’s precept that women be forbidden to sing in church to justify employment of castrati in holy choirs. Heriot calls the church’s stance on castrati ‘absurdly inconsistent’:²¹ connection to aesthetic castration could lead to ex-communication, yet many churches and cathedral choirs throughout Italy, including the Vatican, employed castrati to counteract the homophonic tones of the male musical registers. Sensing an opportunity for prolonged financial stability, many impoverished parents castrated their sons to be inducted into the church, where castrati flourished until the end of the nineteenth century, much longer than they survived on the operatic stage. Ebbing in popularity in the 1790s, by 1830 castrati in opera were obsolete. As manufactured products venerated by the *ancien régime*, the castrati’s excision from the stage in the early nineteenth century is contextually/historically telling. Margaret Reynolds argues that the intense upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars ‘increasingly worried contemporary arbiters of morals that men were no longer men and women no longer women’. Reynolds continues by writing that the influx of women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Madame de Staël, spearheading equality of sex campaigns and social reformation led to a crisis of masculinity. ‘Where there are strong women,’ Reynolds states sardonically, ‘it follows that they must be emasculating their men.’²² Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker concur, adding ‘For an era in which gender roles became increasingly differentiated, and transgression of the boundaries increasingly policed, they [the

¹⁹ Quoted in Barbier, p. 136.

²⁰ Quoted in Heriot, p. 55.

²¹ Heriot, p. 25.

²² Margaret Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions, in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera* ed. By Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 139.

castrati] produced a sense of revulsion rather than excitement.’²³ Paradoxically, sexual ambiguity was both the ascent and the descent of the castrati’s fame.

The Aesthetic Bloodlines of La Zambinella

The castrati’s ambiguous sexuality is the crux of Honoré de Balzac’s short story ‘Sarrasine’ (1830), encapsulating an instance of negated desire, where desire is sexually ambiguous. In Paris, 1820s, the enigmatic de Lanty family attempt to indoctrinate themselves into the Parisian cultural elite through a series of luxurious fêtes. Hovering on the periphery of these fêtes is a bedizened, spectre-like old man, carefully monitored, and treated with equal respect and fear, by the de Lantys. A narrative shift: 1758, seeking inspiration the young French sculptor Ernest-Jean Sarrasine visits Rome, where he becomes enamoured with the prima donna La Zambinella. Prostrating himself at the altar of Zambinella, Sarrasine vows ‘To gain her love, or die!’,²⁴ passion inspiring a paroxysm of artistic creation in which he completes a marble sculpture of his beloved. Pursuing Zambinella into the labyrinthian bowels of Rome, Sarrasine enters a psychological hall of mirrors that shatters when Zambinella is revealed as castrato. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, Sarrasine is unable to capture the love of Zambinella, and is slain by her protectors. The ghoulish old man is La Zambinella, a remnant of the *ancien régime* haunting the nineteenth-century Parisian bourgeoisie.

‘Sarrasine’ is a Decadent tangent in Balzac’s ongoing collection, *La Comédie Humaine*. A prolific documentarian of early-nineteenth-century France, Balzac casts Paris as an inferno, *La Comédie Humaine* a Dantean landscape run by pleasure and gold.²⁵ Within this inferno, Balzac establishes a tableau of correspondence in which corporeal aesthetics signify character. Pierre Abraham anthropologically maps this tableau: ‘Blue eyes signify activity, brown eyes passivity, blond hair independence and strength, dark hair passion, love and sexuality. Less general is red hair, which signifies bestiality.’²⁶ In *La Comédie Humaine*, the body is legible, aesthetics symptomatic of personality. The origin of Sarrasine’s love, however, is an artificial construct, Zambinella’s physiology masked beneath a theatrical veil. Sarrasine, a sculptor not a scholar, recedes into clichés of Pygmalionism when trying to articulate the image of

²³ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last 400 Years* (Penguin Random House UK, 2015), p. 72.

²⁴ Honoré de Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’ in *The Girl with the Golden Eyes and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 21.

²⁵ Honoré de Balzac, ‘The Girl with the Golden Eyes’ in *The Girl with the Golden Eyes and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 67.

²⁶ Quoted in Christopher Rivers, *Face Value – Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 107.

Zambinella. Fleeting, impersonal descriptions follow, with Zambinella described as embodying the ‘rich and smooth creations of ancient Greece,’ whose complexion is of a ‘dazzling whiteness’ and is endowed with all of the ‘exquisite proportions of feminine nature’.²⁷ Casting Zambinella as a veiled Venus, Sarrasine succumbs to an erotic obsession of person as *objet d’art*. What will follow is a series of unveilings that will reveal the physiological truth of Zambinella: visiting Zambinella’s mansion, Sarrasine is guided through ‘a labyrinth of stairs, galleries, and apartments lit only by the uncertain glow of the moon’.²⁸ At the centre of this nocturnal, Escher-esque dwelling is a ‘mysterious apartment’ in which Zambinella resides. The mystery of the apartment is the revelation of Zambinella’s gender.

Joining Zambinella beneath the veil, Sarrasine is confronted with his own homoerotic impulses, a revelation that proves deranging. ‘You monster,’ Sarrasine yells at Zambinella, ‘You who give birth to no form of life, you have killed all the women in the world for me!’²⁹ Unwilling to re-enter the world, yet refusing to remain with Zambinella beneath the veil, Sarrasine attempts to un-see reality, endeavouring to destroy Zambinella and his sculpture of her. Unsuccessful, Sarrasine is set upon by Zambinella’s protectors, and is assassinated in a skirmish of suggestive stabbings. Sarrasine is Zambinella’s photo-negative: Zambinella’s castration creates beauty through music, Sarrasine’s symbolic castration brings artistic creation to a violent halt. With the knowledge of Zambinella’s identity, Balzac spirits the reader through time to the narrative present, where the aged castrato lingers. Time, distance and revelation allow for contemplation, and Balzac fragments and anatomizes Zambinella, as if excavating an ancient relic, within a portrait of descriptive degeneracy. Receding chronologically through history, Balzac characterizes what was once uncharacterizable, and divides these characteristics into two categories, the biological and the artificial.

First, the biological. Somnambulistically drawn from his chamber by an impromptu performance of the cavatina from Rossini’s *Tancredi*, the old Zambinella’s physicality is dissected. He displays:

[...] an excessive thinness and the frailty of his limbs proved that his proportions had always been slender [...] A student of anatomy would have immediately recognized the symptoms of phthisis on seeing the short legs which served to prop up this strange body. It made one think of crossbones carved on a tombstone [...] The dark face looked bony and angular from all sides [...] The jaw bones, accentuated by his incredible thinness, carved out a cavity in the middle of each

²⁷ Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’, p. 20.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

cheek. These protuberances produced curious shadows and reflections [...] and removed all remaining characteristics of a human face.³⁰

Balzac's descriptions of Zambinella's physiology pre-emptively profile Zambinella as castrato. Exhumations of two castrati have been performed since the millennium to provide an osteo-biography that exposes the developmental issues of pre-pubescent castration.³¹³² Both sets of skeletal remains necessitate comparison with Zambinella. One consequence of castration evident in both osteo-biographies was prevention of the epiphyseal plates in the bones from fusing at the joints during adolescence. This lack of fusion caused limbs to grow to long, disproportionate lengths, for the ribcage to expand, and for the skull and jaw bones to elongate. Elongation of the jaw bones is evident in Zambinella, whose protuberant maxillary and mandibular bones typify the effects of early castration. Balzac complicates these comparisons, however, in describing Zambinella's legs as developmentally impaired, defying the results of the exhumations, as well as contradicting many well-known caricatures of the castrati as endowed with long, gangly appendages. Yet, flattering portraits of castrati are as common as caricatures. Andrea Sacchi's oil painting of Marc'Antonio Pasqualini being crowned by Apollo (1641) [fig. 4.1] presents the castrato as elegant, regal and attractive. Similarly, Corrado Giaquinto and Jacopo Amigoni's portraits of Farinelli present the castrato as majestic, adorned in Rococo splendour [figs. 4.2. and 4.3.]. As mediums with intent to mock or glorify, caricature and portraiture do not offer any unanimous outline of physiological development following castration. Martha Feldman infers that individual responses to castration vary due to the age at which the surgery was performed. Thus, Feldman surmises, although it is possible to 'generalize about an ideal castrati type, visual or perhaps vocal [...] we cannot easily generalize across genres of representation'.³³ Lacking contemporary scientific analysis, Balzac's castrato is a composite fusing of the comic and the complimentary images at his disposal. The result is a literary exquisite corpse, one half epicene, waifish, elongated and aristocratic. The other half belongs to a carnival side show, coarsely flaunting and accentuating biological idiosyncrasies.

Emphasis on Zambinella's grotesque physicality marks Zambinella as apotropaic, a talisman whose monstrosity presages evil. The 'cadaverous' skull suspended on the

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 11-12.

³¹ Maria Belcastro, Gino Fornaciari, Valentina Mariotti, and Antonio Todero, 'Hyperostosis frontalis interna (HFI) and Castration: The Case of the Famous Singer Farinelli (1705–1782)', *Journal of Anatomy* (2011), 219, pp. 623-637.

³² Maurizio Rippa Bonati, Giuliano Scattolin, Fabio Zampieri and Alberto Zanatta, 'Occupational Markers and Pathology of the Castrato Singer Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740–1821)', *Scientific Reports* (2006), 6:28463, pp. 1-9.

³³ Martha Feldman *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 11-12.

crossbones of the body transforms Zambinella into a hieroglyph of death. Zambinella as apotropaia creates a triad of meaning: having fallen out of vogue, the castrati were on the brink of 'extinction'; Removed through castration from the reproductive realm, the castrati are emblematic of barrenness; and lastly, Zambinella's cadaverous skull portends Sarrasine's metaphorical castration and death. Jane Ellen Harrison compares ritual masks of primitive cults to gorgoneion apotropaia, writing that the purpose of the mask 'is permanently "to make an ugly face", at you if you're doing wrong [...] for you if you're doing right'.³⁴ Harrison's conflation of the gorgoneion and the apotropaia allows for comparison of Zambinella with Medusa, a figure who has similarly been linked to castrative threat.

In *Medusa's Head* (1922) Freud argues that the decapitated head of the Medusa images castration:

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat is castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.³⁵

Freud proposes that female pubic hair, the initial sight of the 'wound', manifests in art as the snaky hair of Medusa, the phallic serpents mitigating the horror of male genital mutilation. Curiously, Freud only interprets Medusa's head as the *threat* of castration, and not the act of castration itself. This latter interpretation images Medusa's snakes as a reminder of what's been taken, a brazen flaunting of woman using phallic object against man. As Catherine Maxwell states, the snakes of Medusa's head present men 'as lack, as the victim of a violent mutilation. [...] Medusa actually appears to put this threat into action, for, mutilated herself, she causes mutilation in her beholders.'³⁶³⁷ As a Medusan figure, Zambinella emerges as an aggressor on which castration has been performed and castration anxieties are cryptically projected. Therefore, the climactic castrative stabs that Sarrasine suffers in his horrified disbelief of Zambinella's disfiguration indicate both the replication and reproduction of the castrato's own

³⁴ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 188.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head (1940 [1922])' in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.84-85 (p. 84).

³⁶ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 82.

³⁷ A literal, non-gendered reading of Medusan fear would be to read Medusa as a symbol of death. The castrative threat signifies the threat of loss and absence. Without some primary awareness of loss of life castration could not be interpreted as an imaginable loss. Threat of castration could then be considered as a threat of death.

initial wound.

Zambinella's artificiality is equally legible. In *Treatise on Elegant Living* (1830), Balzac offers the axiom that 'Clothing is how society expresses itself.'³⁸ *Clothingognomy* (*la vestignomonie*, as Balzac terms it) provides social symbols through attire: 'Sometimes a shoe announces a privilege; sometimes a hood, bonnet, or hat signals a revolution; there ribbons or some straw adornments express a party',³⁹ concluding that clothing transforms man into 'hieroglyph'.⁴⁰ Balzac's pretensions towards dandyism throughout the treatise illuminate disgust at the excessiveness of Zambinella's dress:

[...] he wore breaches of black velvet [...] a white waistcoat with gold embroidery, in the old fashion, and his linen was sparkling white. A jabot of slightly tawny English lace, whose richness would have made a queen envious, fell in golden folds over his chest; but on him this lace seemed more of a rag than an ornament [...] the cadaverous skull was concealed beneath a blond wig whose profusion of curls betrayed an overweening pretence. Besides, the feminine coquetry of this fantastical character was pronounced just as energetically by the gold rings dangling from his ears, the magnificent gemstones shining on his skeletal fingers, and a watch-chain which sparkled like the stones on a lady's diamond necklace.⁴¹

Adjectives of old age and death abound: 'decrepit', 'old-fashioned', 'ghostly', 'cracked', 'congealed', 'musty', Zambinella is a 'Japanese idol' with an 'implacable and mocking grimace like that of a skull'. Relentlessly, Balzac continues: Zambinella is 'a human wreckage', 'Silent and motionless as a statue', exuding the 'musty smell of the dresses of a duchess exhumed by her heirs when they open her wardrobe, looking for inheritance'.⁴² Balzac's descriptions recall Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach, powdered and rouged in choleric Venice, or the elderly Quentin Crisp donned in bejewelled scarves, and whose foppish hat accentuated the carefully coiffured curls of a lilac rinse. Revolted by the excessiveness of Zambinella's attire, Balzac denounces the fashions of the *ancien régime* as vulgar in post-Revolution France, a context in which the streamlined, tailored figure of the dandy was gaining prominence. The exhibitionistic brazenness of Zambinella's appearance, once the toast of Europe, now seems pathetically out of sync with the elegance and icy apartness of the dandy.

Balzac's repetitious descriptions to revulsion when describing Zambinella exemplifies

³⁸ Honoré de Balzac, *Treatise on Elegant Living* (Cambridge, MA, Wakefield Press, 2010), p. 65.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 67.

⁴¹ Balzac, 'Sarrasine', pp. 11-12.

⁴² Ibid, p. 12.

the notion of the disruptive, grotesque body formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, the ‘classical’ body, uncorrupted by grotesque inflections, is singular, self-sufficient and absolute, renewed with each successive generation. Contrarily, the grotesque body demonstrates a split, or dualism:

In the grotesque body [...] death brings nothing to an end [...] The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers it death, the other it’s birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image.⁴³

Bakhtin’s theory, illuminated with reference to the faeces–flinging giants of Francois Rabelais, Gargantua and Pantagruel, has been utilised by Julia Kristeva to translocate issues of the grotesque and the abject onto the female body. When a body is defiled, Kristeva argues, the body’s subsequent oozings display the lack of integrity of the self. ‘It is as if’, Kristeva writes of the abject body, ‘skin, a fragile or transparent container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s “own and clean self” but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents.’⁴⁴ Horrified by witnessing the collapsing internal and external boundaries of the defiled body, the witness ‘throws off’ the defiled body as an abject ‘other’, an entity that contrasts our own bodily integrity, uncorrupted by defilement. The notion of the grotesque, in accordance with Bakhtin and Kristeva, may also be applied to the ambiguously sexed body personified by the castrati. Bakhtin considered this notion in passing, commenting that the ‘androgynous’ was a common feature in the literature of Rabelais’s age.⁴⁵

In a final skirmish of swords, Sarrasine is stabbed, his ‘classical’ body rendered, what Mary Russo delineates as the prototypical grotesque body, ‘open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing’.⁴⁶ Both Sarrasine’s and Zambinella’s androgynous bodies are thus rendered grotesque through duality, their bodies a repository of conflicting ideals: male/female, old/young, alive/dead, natural/artificial, wounded/whole. Each contrasting dualism intensifies the liminality of the castrato’s and the psychically castrated body, signifying a collapse of the physical, sexual and gendered boundaries of the ‘natural’ into the grotesque. Throughout the text, Sarrasine has unknowingly internalized the grotesque body as his erotic and artistic ideal, these ideals being made manifest in his statue of Zambinella. At the point of

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 323.

⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 53.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, p. 323.

⁴⁶ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 8.

revelation, Sarrasine points to his sculpture and exclaims, ‘Every time I see a real woman I shall think of that imaginary one [...] you have killed all the women in the world for me!’⁴⁷ By internalizing the grotesque as his ideal, Sarrasine has reversed the Bakhtinian classical/grotesque dichotomy. The corrupted grotesque body is now not only Sarrasine’s erotic ideal but the standard by which he understands his own bodily autonomy, which, in his own words, he cannot reverse. In death, Sarrasine’s internalized ideal becomes externalized.

Despite being rendered grotesque through castrative wounds, Zambinella is not ‘thrown off’ as an abject disruption of bodily autonomy. Rather, as the pinnacle of musical expression in the eighteenth century, Zambinella was nightly ‘besieged by crowds,’⁴⁸ who flocked to theatres to hear the castrato sing. Touba Ghadessi offers a socioeconomic rationale behind the reluctant acceptance of castrati into bourgeois society:

Disavowed in their creation by the authorities that condoned their mutilation, exploited for art’s sake, often the product of poverty, and yet artistically and religiously valuable, the castrato embodied a peculiar social and economic space defined by the oscillating responses they received — admiration and aversion. Their unresolved condition, and the subsequent inconsistent public reaction to their bodies, made them not only others, but monsters, with all its subsequent implications. [...] they were produced to be shown, even if their mutilated bodies held a different kind of monstrosity due to the value placed on their audible abnormality.⁴⁹

As the castrati were uniformly manufactured as cultural goods throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their monstrosity was tempered. The taming of the castrati’s monstrousness was completely dependent on the elite societies that patronized the arts. This patronage, indirectly, created the demand for more castrati from which the patrons simultaneously benefitted monetarily. Essentially, the castrati were filtered as products into the capitalist cycle, their monstrosity endorsed as long they provided a profit.

As if to remedy the over-emphasis of the elderly Zambinella’s grotesquery, Balzac introduces into the narrative an image of Adonis lying on a lion skin. ‘He is too beautiful to be a man’,⁵⁰ one character remarks about Adonis, questioning whether such beauty can exist. Another responds that Adonis was originally modelled on the statue of a woman. We are told

⁴⁷ Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Touba Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), p. 139.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 14.

that Adonis is in fact a link in a chain of reproductions whose origin is Sarrasine's sculpture of Zambinella. First, Sarrasine's original statue; Second, an anonymous marble reproduction of this statue commissioned by Zambinella's benefactor, the Cardinal Cicognara; Third, the fictitious painting of Adonis modelled on the marble copy, which Balzac accredits to Joseph-Marie Vien; and last, inspired by the fictitious Vien, Anne Louis Girodet's painting *Sleep of Endymion* (1791) [fig. 4.4.]. The metamorphosis of the sculptures of Zambinella into Adonis and Endymion at first may seem an effort to rectify the feminisation of the male physique. As Feldman writes, Adonis is a 'hypersymbol [of] male sexuality', the lion pelt he lies on 'torn off by a presumed masculine power' associating him with 'a hubristically perilous form of hunting'.⁵¹ Yet, the guest's remark that the painting of Adonis is too beautiful to be a man intimates the simulacrum's origins in a castrated body.

Narratively, the Adonis myth is one of radical transformation, imaging sex, incest and bloodshed. In the myth, Adonis is fatally gored in the groin by the wild boar, Ares. In Ovid's account, Aphrodite anoints Adonis's lacerated wound with her tears. The mingled tears and blood fall to the sand, from the froth of which bloom red anemones. Bion of Smyrna's evocative retelling has Adonis's blood transform into roses, whilst Graves's interpretation has Adonis's blood bloom into pomegranates. Permeated with the transformative power of blood, the Adonis myth signifies the moment the internal becomes external and transforms. The wounded body of Adonis parallels the castrated body of Zambinella. As a castrato, Zambinella is denied a genealogical bloodline, so generates an artificial legacy through copies and variants of Sarrasine's sculpture. Each subsequent *objet d'art*, inspired by this original, is coded to image castration through the threat of blood loss from an abject wound: the first two sculptures of Zambinella hinting at castration, and the painting of Adonis through his mythological injury.

The carnal aggressiveness of the Adonis painting lies on the rawest far side of the sensual dreamland depicted in Girodet's *Sleep of Endymion*, the final link in Zambinella's aesthetic bloodline. Although the Endymion myth can be interpreted as one of male autoerotic vitality, it circumvents the re-establishment of a masculine mode of self through symbolic castration and the manipulation of the male body by an external force. The shepherd Endymion is placed into an eternal slumber in which he will never age. The most persistent versions of the myth stem from Endymion's autoerotic, narcissistic unwillingness to grow old, and, perhaps most commonly, at the behest of the moon Goddess Selene, who 'found that she

⁵¹ Feldman, p. 253.

preferred gently kissing him [Endymion] to being the object of his too fertile passion'.⁵² Girodet's painting conflates both of these narratives. Supine, upon a heap of discarded tunics and leopard skins, the effeminate Endymion sleeps, head turned with indifference as if dreamily contemplating his now eternal beauty. Winged Eros pulls back a thicket of foliage, allowing Selene's moonbeams to enter the glade and caress Endymion's body. Favouring natural earth tones for the embowering glade, Girodet creates a mood of hazy, self-possessed eroticism that is voyeuristically fractured by the lunar bars, endowing the painting with an illuminating physical intimacy. Akin to *Zambinella*, *Sleep of Endymion* blurs physical boundaries. Endymion's flesh, dissolving beneath Selene's moonbeams, marks a transition of style, rejecting neo-classical linearity and definition of form for enshrouding Romantic atmospherics that render the insensate body of Endymion passive to feminization. As a chain of images, Endymion mirrors *Zambinella* as a somnolent body manipulated by an aggressive, outside force.

Roland Barthes claims that Girodet's painting is embedded within the narrative of 'Sarrasine'. Of Endymion, Barthes writes although 'masculine, the boy is passive [...] a double inversion, that of two biological sexes and two terms of castration throughout the story in which women are castrators and men are castrated'.⁵³ Yet, it is not women who castrate in 'Sarrasine', but the castrati themselves, whose glamorous identity is projected onto, and absorbed by, worshipping, unsuspecting admirers. *Zambinella*, unable to reproduce biologically, propagates by beauty and inspires imitations. As Camille Paglia writes, *Zambinella* 'does give birth – to other art objects'.⁵⁴ Each *objet d'art* inspired by *Sarrasine*'s original sculpture can be read as a palimpsest, encoded with *Zambinella*'s initial wound.

The Sleeping Hermaphrodite in the Nineteenth Century

Influencing 'Sarrasine' was *Fragoletta* (1829), an (as yet) untranslated novel written by Balzac's contemporary, Henri de Latouche. *Fragoletta*'s heroine, Camille, sobriquet *Fragoletta* – a diminutive of the Italian *fragola*, strawberry – dons transvestite drag, adopting the persona of a fictionalized twin brother, Adriani. Exemplified by Elizabethan poetry and drama, the literary female transvestite is granted freedom and authority beyond the domestic yet is simultaneously erotically tinged. Adriani thus operates as a psychological manifestation that

⁵² Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin Group, 1992), p. 210.

⁵³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 70.

⁵⁴ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 391.

allows Camille erotic freedom to pursue same-sex desires, developing a reputation as a callous lothario, intent on the defloration of aristocratic beauties. The epiphany for Camille's transsexual alter-ego is prompted by a visit to a Naples gallery, where she and her companions contemplate a statue of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* [fig. 4.5.]. The brusque, masculine D'Hauteville rejects the sculpture as unworthy of encapsulating in art, as the hermaphrodite's physicality rejects the truth of the human condition. The studious Eleanore rejects D'Hauteville's claims, citing Ovid, Plato and The Bible to justify her declaration that the fusion of man and woman into one being creates spiritual wholeness.⁵⁵ Despite Latouche subsequently forgoing these philosophical considerations in lieu of picaresque adventurism, by rooting Camille's creation of Adriani in the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, Latouche embeds voyeuristic contemplation as intrinsic to Adriani's masquerade. Thus, Adriani recontextualizes the meditation of the androgynous *objet d'art* from within the confines of the gallery halls onto the streets of nineteenth-century Europe.

On the perception of visible forms, Barthes writes that 'there will still be representation for so long as the subject (author, reader, spectator or voyeur) casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out the base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex'.⁵⁶ Barthes's hypothesis posits that the field of vision has at its apex a symbolic understanding of the world, through which that vision is filtered, spurring various implications, most notably the relationship between object and gaze, and the distance between the two. This triadic form (gaze–distance–object) highlights the difference between the androgyny of the androgyne and of the hermaphrodite: visibility. For the hermaphrodite, whose androgyny is biological, androgyny is rendered visible through being uncovered. The androgyne, to be considered a legitimate member of the opposite sex, must be covered to manoeuvre successfully throughout the world, their identity presumed through aesthetics. Yet, visibility presents a paradox to the androgyne, requiring the gaze of another to observe and be fooled by the androgynous guise, yet requiring that gaze not linger too closely for fear of discovery. As such, Camille must maintain distance and in constant movement, blurring the field of vision by not allowing a concrete image of herself to form. Pacteau writes that androgyny represents a 'denial, or a transgression, of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given identity and to the system of social roles that define us'.⁵⁷ Pacteau's coherence to a gendered binary structure adheres to the Lacanian Symbolic order, in which transgression of these structures is

⁵⁵ Henri de Latouche, *Fragoletta ou Naples et Paris en 1799* (Paris: H. L. Delloye, 1840), pp. 61–63.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' in *Screen*, 15: 2, Summer 1974, pp. 33–40 (p. 33).

⁵⁷ Pacteau, p. 63.

consigned to the Imaginary and rendered a fantasy. Thus, Camille becomes a figure of fantasy. Pacteau writes that fantasy, contingent upon distance, is ‘where the unconscious comes to rest, along which look and psyche travel’.⁵⁸ Camille must therefore dwell within the shadowy realms of the distance, converging on the periphery where identity can waver and metamorphose. Yet, the androgynous fantasy presents another paradox: operating within the male/female binary structure, Camille does not exist outside of the symbolic order, fluctuating between male and female, contradicting the dynamics of fantasy needed to uphold the androgynous disguise. As the fantasy is rooted within the female body, it cannot contain the impossibility of an androgynous fantasy. Alas, Camille is eventually unmasked, though not before her performance as Adriani is exhibited in luxurious ballrooms and projected across ancient ruins. Recalling the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*’s androgyny, Camille briefly revives the Decadent worship of beauty and the androgyne as *objet d’art*.

Reviving contemplation of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in *Fragoletta*, Latouche would, unconsciously, create a Decadent Blueprint of the representation of the androgyne throughout the nineteenth century, appropriated by Théophile Gautier and Swinburne. *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* sculptures are late-Hellenistic exotica, examples of the *Hermaphroditus nobilis* attributed to Polykles, a second-century sculptor referenced by Pliny. At first glance, the sculpture presents the audience with a woman, recumbent upon a plush bed. The turned head, nestled in her upraised arms, begins the curve of the body, which we follow in a serpentine S-formation down to the crossed legs, swathed in bolts of dishevelled drapery. Circling the sculpture, the eye follows the same serpentine figure, drawn from the head, down over the breasts and torso to the groin, where the eye stops upon male genitals. J.J. Pollitt postulates on the ‘uneasy, seemingly tormented’ nature of the sculpture, writing:

[...] the work was probably designed and positioned so that one saw first the sinuous female contours of its back and also, because of the extreme turn of the neck, its face. If one then asked who was this beautiful creature who sleeps so restlessly and walked around it in order to investigate further, the answer would have come as a typically Hellenistic theatrical surprise [...] does it express a psychological and philosophical view of the psyche [...] Is it an expression of the same instinct that led Hellenistic artists to give an increasingly effeminate form to the gods Apollo and Dionysos? [...] the significance and function of the Hermaphrodite are enigmas.⁵⁹

Figures of Hermaphrodite, the mythical son of Hermes and Aphrodite, have a long history in

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 77-78.

⁵⁹ J. J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 149.

the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Rhodes, Kos and the cult of Aphrodite on Cyprus. Whilst the influence of these sculptures can be seen in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reclining female nudes, such as Jean Augustue Dominique Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* (1814), the classical antecedents of the legend of Hermaphrodite remain unknown. Paglia writes that the 'legend may be a vestige of the sexual duality of early fertility deities of Asia Minor',⁶⁰ whilst Marie Delcourt argues that ancient cults combined altars of Hermes and Aphrodite (often found represented together on terracotta coins), and that in Halicarnassus 'one temple brought Hermes and Aphrodite together near the famous spring of Salmacis'.⁶¹ This theory would be cemented in literary history by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. In one of the few tales of (an implied) rape of a man by a woman, Ovid re-enacts the statue's allowing of voyeuristic contemplation of an unknowing figure. The nymph Salmacis, having fallen for the youthful Hermaphroditus, watches him bathe naked in her secluded magic pool. Setting upon him with vice-like grip, Salmacis begs the gods to never be apart from him:

Her prayer found gods to hear; both bodies merged / In one, both blended in one form and face. [...] They two were two no more, nor man, nor woman – / One body then that neither seemed and both. / So when he saw the waters of the pool, Where he had dived a man, had rendered him / Half woman and his limbs now weak and soft, / Raising his hands, Hermaphroditus cried, / His voice unmanned, "Dear father and dear mother, / Both of whose names I bear, / Grant me, your child, / That whoso in these waters bathes a man / Emerge half woman, weakened instantly." / Both parents heard: both, moved to gratify / Their bi-sexed son, his purpose to ensure, / Drugged the bright water with that power impure.⁶²

Henry Thomas Riley posits that the spring of Salmacis located near Halicarnassus operated as a meeting place between Greeks and 'barbarians' who had been driven from their neighbourhood by the nearby Argive colony. These men, Riley states, obliged to repair to the fountain for water, conversed with the Greek colonists whose 'intercourse not only polished them, but in course of time corrupted them, by the introduction of the luxurious manners of Greece. Hence the fountain had the reputation of changing men into women.'⁶³

Considered as a punishment, the hermaphroditization within the pool of Salmacis presents a contradiction to idealized *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* sculptures. Despite ancient idealizations of the hermaphrodite figure in art, the reality of biological hermaphrodites was that they were treated with horror and suspicion. On the hermaphrodite figure in pagan culture,

⁶⁰ Paglia, p. 84.

⁶¹ Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite – Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity* (London: Longacre Press Ltd., 1961), p. 47.

⁶² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 85.

⁶³ Henry Thomas Riley in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893), p. 136.

Delcourt writes that ‘androgyny is at the two poles of sacred things’. In concept, the hermaphrodite is the ‘pure vision of spirit [...] adorned with the highest qualities’; in flesh and blood ‘a monstrosity, and no more’, being proof of the wrath of the Gods, to which the ancients responded by leaving their intersex children out to die from exposure.⁶⁴ Latouche argues both sides of the good/evil paradox, yet never settles on one. Yet those who utilized the figure of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* throughout the nineteenth century challenged (or ignored) the paradox itself, glamorously accentuating the evil qualities of the hermaphrodite so that they appear in league with the *femme fatale*. As Busst asserts, androgynous figures became symbols of evil because they ‘represented evil for those who looked for evil in everything, and usually found it’.⁶⁵

Théophile Gautier’s Fantasies of the Chimera

The sexual ambiguity of the hermaphrodite is next utilized by Théophile Gautier in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Arguably the first manifesto of *l’art-pour-l’art*, *Maupin* was venerated as a bible of aesthetic principles. Charles Baudelaire called the book a prolonged reverie, a dazzling ‘hymn to beauty’.⁶⁶ Oscar Wilde echoed Baudelaire’s sentiment, declaring *Maupin* the ‘holy writ of beauty’, whilst Swinburne declared *Maupin* ‘the most perfect and exquisite book of all time’.⁶⁷ *Maupin* is chimerical in form, incorporating letters, dramatic monologues, first person narratives, and an essay – the notorious ‘Preface’ – in which Gautier rejects utilitarianism and proclaims beauty to be the sole ambition of the artist. *Maupin*’s chimerical style is replicated in its titular character. Like Latouche’s Camille, Madeleine de Maupin masquerades as a man, the enigmatic Théodore de Serannes,⁶⁸ her ambiguous presence propelling the protagonist, Chevalier d’Albert, and his mistress, Rosette, into the strange, heady realm of sexual uncertainty.

The world-weary d’Albert personifies the dandy-aesthete as immoralist in his quest for beauty. Considering himself the pagan spirit reincarnated in the contemporary era, d’Albert equates his aesthetic principles with the harmonious unity and clarity of high classical Greek

⁶⁴ Delcourt, p. 45.

⁶⁵ Busst, p. 54.

⁶⁶ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Théophile Gautier’ in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1972), p. 265.

⁶⁷ Wilde and Swinburne quoted in Phillippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1971), p. 124.

⁶⁸ Gautier retains the sense of sexual ambiguity and suspense by referring to Maupin as Théodore throughout the text. However, I will refer to Théodore as Maupin and with female pronouns throughout my analysis for the sake of clarity.

form. D'Albert rejects chiaroscuro and the contorted forms of Hellenism, wanting to submit that which does not comply with his aesthetic ideals to the tyranny of Caligula. Enter Maupin on horseback. Gautier endows Maupin with a beauty undeniable yet uncharacterizable to d'Albert. Rebuking himself, d'Albert begins a ritualistic vacillation of overwhelming desire for this unknown beauty, and denial of that unknown. Unwittingly, d'Albert indoctrinates Maupin into his canon of beauty, fetishistically documenting and fragmenting Maupin's appearance: lustrous black hair, a marble white neck, the round curve of the jaw, a supercilious, seductive curl of the upper lip – d'Albert's descriptions of Maupin resembling Bronzino's icy, androgynous Mannerist portraits of haughty, aristocratic young men. Reneging his earlier dismissal of mutability in art, d'Albert praises the 'vague and indeterminate' hermaphrodite of antiquity as his new aesthetic ideal:

this son of Hermes and Aphrodite is one of the sweetest creations of the pagan genius. Nothing more ravishing can be imagined than these two bodies, both perfect, harmoniously blended together, these two beautiful beings so alike and yet so different, who together make just one, superior to each of them because they balance one another and reciprocally show other off.⁶⁹

Admiring what he once abhorred, d'Albert praises the hermaphrodite for its uncertainty and ambivalence, rhapsodizing on the hermaphrodite's feminine softness, hard-bodied male contours, and the charm of its physical 'monstrosities'.

Although d'Albert's supposed sexual conversion may hint at a more cerebral understanding of sexual perception, his desire remains embodied in physical reality, rooted in the perception of Maupin as *objet d'art*. Gautier savours descriptions of illusion and artificiality, encyclopaedically documenting the minutiae of clothes, jewellery and decoration. Yet, this relentless cataloguing of style is an act of chicanery, signalling class and social standing but not erotic identity. Despite her male façade, Maupin is in true sexual confusion, claiming to be a 'third, separate sex which does not yet have a name. I have the body and soul of a woman, the mind and strength of a man, and I have too much or not enough of the one or the other to be able to pair up with either.'⁷⁰ Thus, Maupin occupies the liminal boundaries of the biological – female sex and soul combined with male mind and social presentation. Nineteenth-century sexologists, such as Freud and Havelock Ellis, utilized the concept of a third-sex to refer to inversion, or homosexuality, which they deemed a pathological 'turning in

⁶⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (London: Penguin Group, 2005), p. 182.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

of the sexual instincts towards people of the same sex'.⁷¹ Yet Maupin's proclamation of a third sex reneges on binary distinctions of sexuality, anticipating contemporary concepts of alternative modes of existence beyond binary structures, encapsulated in Judith Butler's formula: 'There are no direct expressive or causal links between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of these terms captures or determines the rest.'⁷²

Psychically embodying an identity not-yet named, Maupin claims to be a chimera, a beast whose duplicity would 'satisfy this dual nature'. In his 'Introduction' to the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, Michel Foucault echoes Gautier's metaphor, writing that sexual irregularity is 'seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras'.⁷³ The cultural dilemmas concerning sexual irregularities, Foucault argues, stem from an inability adequately to articulate through language the nature of these irregularities. Thus, Foucault concludes, these sexual irregularities fall into the realm of symbolism. The chimera, a mythical beast of hybrid parts, is shackled by discourse: it is both all of the beasts that create its being yet does not belong wholly to any of these species. Thus, only through fantasy can we attempt to approach the chimera. Tracing the chronology of this mythical beast, Jorge Luis Borges writes that the chimera was a metaphor of 'strange elevation' whose existence signified impossibilities.⁷⁴ As an impossible, metaphysical concept of sex made manifest, to remain with d'Albert or Rossette at novels end would be to subordinate Maupin's metaphysical self-conception of a third, chimeric sex beneath sexual and social structures Maupin does not identify as inherent in herself. Refusing to allow herself to be confined by these structures, Maupin leaves, with written orders that Rosette and d'Albert should marry. Maupin's removal of herself from society articulates her as that which elusively evades. Jacques Lacan describes this evasion as 'desire', writing: 'Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (*spaltung*).'⁷⁵ For Lacan, desire is that which cannot be satisfied, the remaining dregs left of demand when all satisfaction has been removed. Maupin, seceding from collective values and sexual relationships, becomes the space of desire.

⁷¹ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. II* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1927), p. v.

⁷² Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' [1991] in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307-320 (p. 315).

⁷³ Michel Foucault, 'Introduction' in *Herculine Barbin* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. x.

⁷⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), pp. 41-42.

⁷⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus' in *Écrits* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 575-584 (p. 580).

Of Maupin's protean nature, Parker Tyler writes that Gautier longs for 'a limitless suite of magical sexual changes that refer not only to the spirit of things but also their substance'.⁷⁶ Tyler writes sullenly of his 'uncommunicated obsession' that Greta Garbo should play Maupin, writing of the overwhelming feeling that when seeing Garbo on screen that within 'her woman's shape, behind all her beauty and feminine postures, a man hid himself and walked around with her'.⁷⁷ Garbo was to play the transvestite title-role in *Queen Christina* (1933), yet the film focuses on the historical aspects of seventeenth-century Sweden rather than delving into the psychic processes of Christina's gender and sexual identity. Barthes writes that Garbo's face in *Queen Christina* has the snowy-white thickness of a mask, rendering her, like the hermaphrodite, an archetypal impersonality. Strangely, Barthes's analysis of Garbo recalls Maupin:

The name given to her, the Divine, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light. She herself knew this: how many actresses have consented to let the crowd see the ominous maturing of their beauty. Not she, however; the essence was not to be degraded, her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal. The Essence became gradually obscured, progressively veiled with dark glasses, broad hats and exiles: but it never deteriorated.⁷⁸

Garbo's self-exile from Hollywood in 1941 echoes Maupin's self-exile from society. Only by seeing Garbo on screen or reading *Mademoiselle de Maupin* do we realise, paradoxically, that the androgynous figure is no longer there. For Garbo to continue would be to have denigrated the perfected celluloid dream she was intrinsic in creating. Permanently instating Maupin within the social realm that d'Albert and Rosette occupy would be to highlight the androgynous fantasy's impossibility. As Marjorie Garber writes, appropriating the transvestite to a set 'social or historical discourse is to understand their politics and their history, but not their power'.⁷⁹ That power resides in the space they once, fleetingly, occupied.

The chimerical hermaphrodite re-appears in Gautier's poem 'Contralto' (1849). Gautier's narrator is captivated by the 'strange' beauty of a *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* statue. 'Is it youth or is it maiden sweet' the narrator asks, 'A goddess or a god come down to sway?' Yet, the sculpted body of the hermaphrodite both charms and unsettles. It is 'mystical' and

⁷⁶ Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes – Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 223.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Face of Garbo' in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 61-63 (p. 62).

⁷⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests – Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 77.

‘mischievous’, with ‘evil beauty’ that is both ‘strange and multiple’.⁸⁰ Sleeping with ‘averted face’ the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* recalls Girodet’s Endymion, both figures reclusive, alienated in autoerotic self-contemplation. Gautier, however, transforms Selene’s caressing lunar rays into the voyeuristic gaze of the narrator.

Mid-poem, a disembodied voice chimes throughout the narrative, casting into ‘silver sound’ a being in which ‘boy and girl are in cadence warm’.⁸¹ Only here does the reader understand that the statue is a vision overwhelming the narrator as he longingly listens to a woman singer with a husky contralto voice, the lowest of the female vocal register. Critics are divided about the inspiration for the androgynous voice. Pulham argues that the poem was written for the nineteenth-century soprano, Giulia Grisi⁸², known for performing in the operas of Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini. Gautier himself fell in love with Grisi’s cousin, the dancer Carlotta Grisi, who performed in the ballet *Giselle* (for which Gautier provided the libretto) in the 1840s. Unable to win the hand of Carlotta, Gautier turned his affections to Carlotta’s sister, the contralto Ernesta Grisi, who would become his domestic partner and mother to his children. Paglia champions Ernesta as the inspiration for the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*’s voice, writing that within Ernesta, Gautier ‘seems to have procured his own resident castrato’.⁸³ Felicia Miller explores beyond the Grisi family-tree, offering Pauline Viardot as her pick for the inspiration for the contralto voice. Gautier, in a gushing review of Viardot’s debut performance, mirrors the spellbound accounts of Beckford, Goethe and Casanova describing the castrati, Viardot’s voice ‘first striking for its expressive intensity [...] One was immediately moved, conquered, possessed. And then one noticed the exceptionally extensive resources of her vocal organ.’⁸⁴ Miller convincingly supports her claim by stating that Gautier adduces the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* a list of contralto roles matching those Gautier imaged for Viardot in his review.⁸⁵

Regardless of real-life inspiration, no critical analysis has attempted to comprehend the roles that Gautier assigns to the voice. Despite the silvery beauty, Gautier’s operatic illusions display the voice as possessing the potential for great tragedy, alluding to a plethora of tragic

⁸⁰ Théophile Gautier, ‘Contralto’ from *Enamels and Cameos and Other Poems* in *The Works of Théophile Gautier, Volume 24* (New York: George D. Sproul, 1903), pp. 70-73 (pp. 71-72).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72

⁸² Pulham, p. 35.

⁸³ Paglia, p. 413.

⁸⁴ Gautier quoted in Felicia Miller, ‘Farinelli’s Electronic Hermaphrodite and the Contralto Tradition’ in *The Work of Opera*, eds. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 73-92 (p. 82).

⁸⁵ Miller, p. 82.

characters: it is both Romeo and Juliet ‘with one warm throat’; ‘Desdemona with her willow song’; Rossini’s anguished heroes and heroines, Arsace, Cinderella, Malcolm, Tancredi; and Byron’s grieving transvestites, Gulnare and Kaled.⁸⁶ Each successive reference reinforces the sexual ambiguity of the voice, whilst simultaneously drawing allusions to suicide, murder and prolonged grief, warning the listener that any attempt to engage with the hermaphrodite is futile. Maxwell writes that the hermaphroditic body ‘images the coming-together of male and female in one flesh’, whilst simultaneously ‘disqualifying its own potential for coitus or indeed any kind of sexual relation’. Maxwell continues, writing that the ‘hermaphrodite is a figure of potentiality. An imaginative creation itself, it celebrates the cerebral pause, wherein all things are possible.’⁸⁷ Gautier’s bewitched listener hovers within suspended reverie, Maxwell’s ‘cerebral pause’, bewitched by the potential tragedy the voice may cause. It is not the tragic death that the contralto voice promises that entrances, however. Rather, it is the persistent longing for death at the behest of a sexually autonomous being that transfixes the narrator.

Swinburne, and the Crimson Kiss of the Androgyne

Veneration of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* was re-introduced to British art in the 1860s by the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose verse repeatedly venerated androgynous, brazen *femmes fatales* in incantatory liturgies. Mario Praz alludes to an episode in the young Swinburne’s life in which, at the moment of receiving the Eucharist, a ‘certain ecstasy of adoration’ came over him, which the young poet interpreted as religious ecstasy.⁸⁸ The ritualistic religious performance of transubstantiation weaved in with early sexual ecstasy manifests throughout Swinburne’s oeuvre as a model of devotion to his subjects, to whom Swinburne’s narrators commonly play a passive role. As Praz states concisely: ‘his attitude is passive, his love a martyrdom, his pleasure pain’.⁸⁹ The transubstantiation episode highlights the significance of the power of transformation in Swinburne’s poetry. John Rosenberg writes that Swinburne ‘is obsessed by the moment when one thing shades off into the opposite, or when contraries fuse’.⁹⁰ Maxwell furthers this argument by suggesting that Swinburne’s work continually returns to the concept of *chiasmus*, Greek for crossing. It is not, Maxwell writes, the final, fixed state of metamorphoses that preoccupies Swinburne, rather the *chiasmatic*,

⁸⁶ Gautier, ‘Contralto’, pp. 71-73.

⁸⁷ Maxwell, pp. 202-203.

⁸⁸ Praz, p. 226.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 227.

⁹⁰ John D. Rosenberg, ‘Swinburne’ in *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1967), pp. 131-152 (p. 131).

which offers ‘transition, suspension, and moments of betweenness’.⁹¹ It is therefore the erotic potentialities of the liminal, *chiasmatic* blurring of identities that allows erotic fulfilment. It is this moment of transformation, the in-betweenness, that Swinburne makes incarnate within his hermaphrodite poems, ‘Fragoletta’ and ‘Hermaphroditus’, both published in *Poems and Ballads* (1866).

‘Fragoletta’ takes its name from Latouche’s transvestite heroine, yet the poem mimics the interrogative tone of Gautier’s ‘Contralto’. Invoking the ‘sexless’ and ‘sightless’ figure of Eros, Swinburne’s narrator details an erotic dream he had of an androgynous creature. Unlike the dominating *femmes fatales* that Swinburne usually commemorates, Swinburne here savours a perverse interaction with an adolescent of ambiguous sex who possesses cropped hair, slender legs and a ‘virginal strange air’.⁹² As the narrator muses, the dream is re-experienced, in which the narrator and androgyne seemingly become fused into one entity:

Thy mouth is made of fire and wine,
Thy barren bosom takes my kiss
And turns my soul to thine
And turns thy lip to mine,
And mine it is.⁹³

The turning towards one another establishes a state of *chiasmus* in which narrator and androgyne merge. Mirroring his beloved, Swinburne’s narrator implies a longing for an existence in which he replicates his beloved’s androgynous nature. Re-telling and re-visualizing his dream, the narrator engages in a futile fantasy, attempting to collapse into his beloved to exist as one.

Before the fateful moment of *chiasmus*, the narrator is fearful of crushing the androgyne’s fragile body:

I dare not kiss it, lest my lip
Press harder than an indrawn breath,
And all the sweet life slip
Forth, and the sweet leaves drip,
Bloodlike in death.’⁹⁴

Intense fragility to the point of diaphanousness locates the androgyne’s body between whole and mutilated at the peak of sexual eroticism. Cassandra Laity describes the ‘Decadent body’

⁹¹ Maxwell, p. 203.

⁹² Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Fragoletta’ in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 200), pp. 67-70 (p. 68).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

as always hovering on the proximity of abjection, an abject rupturing of the body intensifying the 'liminal or imminently collapsing sexual/textual boundaries'.⁹⁵ The body of the androgyne remains intact yet bears the crimson stain of the narrator's passion: '[...] Where my kiss hath fed / Thy flower-like blood leaps red / To the kissed place.'⁹⁶ Burdened with rose-like blemishes that corrupt their white, diaphanous skin, the androgyne physically manifests the narrator's abject, psychic fantasy of disturbing and collapsing the corporeal boundaries of a normative body.

A companion piece to 'Fragoletta', 'Hermaphroditus' sees Swinburne continue the Decadent thread of meditating upon the Hellenistic *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*. Swinburne had, along with James Whistler, visited the Louvre on a trip to Paris, and thus provides the poem the epigraph '*Au Musée du Louvre, Mars 1863.*' Whether Swinburne visited the Louvre with the intent of composing the poem is unknown, but he would certainly have understood the imposing cascade of literary allusions the statue bares. A poem comprising four sonnet sequences, Swinburnian metaphors of eroticized fire and bodies as flowering blooms abound throughout. Yet, Swinburne's linguistic choices often end in self-cancellation, continually reversing the potency of metaphors with equally potent metaphors. The second stanza offers a glut of these infertile allusions, describing the erotic joining of man and woman into one single hermaphroditic entity:

Sex to sweet sex with lips and limbs is wed,
Turning the fruitful feud of hers and his
To the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss;
Yet from them something like fire is shed
That shall not be assuaged till death be dead,
Though neither life nor sleep can find out this.⁹⁷

The 'fruitful' synthesis of limbs and lips, resulting in fire which seemingly radiates from their union, is instantly reversed, their kisses now wasted with sterility, efflorescence stalled and suspended. Likewise, Swinburne repeatedly uses signifiers of life ('blossom', 'blood', 'desire', 'fruitful', 'flowers', 'kin') and death ('despair', 'sterile', 'perisheth', 'sin', 'barren'), constantly reworking, matching and reversing his language so that repeated words blur, making the identity of the subject harder to locate and determine within the *chiasmatic* moment.

⁹⁵ Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p 74.

⁹⁶ Swinburne, 'Fragoletta', p. 69.

⁹⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Hermaphroditus' in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 200), pp. 65-67 (p. 66).

Response to the publication of *Poems and Ballads* was hostile. Critics found fault with the lack of Victorian manliness throughout the collection and took aim at Swinburne's presentation of masochistic sexual eroticism.⁹⁸ The most significant denunciations came from a review of *Poems and Ballads* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* titled 'Swinburne's Folly' (20th August, 1866), alongside Robert Buchanan's 'Review of *Poems and Ballads*' in the *Athenaeum* (4th August, 1866). Buchanan's attack on Swinburne reached its peak in *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (1872), in which Buchanan castigates Swinburne as a hysteric and an 'intellectual hermaphrodite'. Swinburne responded with a prose-defence of his poetry, challenging his detractor's definition of nineteenth-century masculinity which he usurps and supplants with a subversive alternate. Discussing 'Hermaphroditus' within this defence, Swinburne praises the symbolism of barrenness achieved through psychic androgyny:

There is nothing lovelier, as there is nothing more famous, in later Hellenic art, than the statue of Hermaphroditus. No one would compare it with the greatest works of Greek sculpture. [...] At Paris, at Florence, at Naples, the delicate divinity of this work has always drawn towards it the eyes of artists and poets. [...] It is incredible that the meanest of men should derive from it any other than the sense of high and grateful pleasure. [...] I am not the first who has translated into written verse this sculptured poem: another before me, as he says, has more than once "caressed it with a sculptor's love" The sad and subtle moral of this myth, which I have desired to indicate in verse, is that perfection once attained on all sides is a thing thenceforward barren of use or fruit; whereas the divided beauty of separate woman and man — a thing inferior and imperfect — can serve all turns of life. Ideal beauty, like ideal genius, dwells apart, as though by compulsion; supremacy is solitude.⁹⁹

Venerating the hermaphrodite as his poetic ideal, Swinburne esteems sterility as a spiritual privilege, whilst simultaneously stigmatizing femininity and masculinity as 'inferior and imperfect' for adhering too closely to natural law. Rather than reinforce homosexuality or bisexuality, 'Hermaphroditus' articulates the universality of desire, and suggests alternate modes of sexuality often branded 'deviant' are equally legitimate.

Violins of Flesh and Blood

The disturbing yet compelling duality that the androgynous figure evoked in nineteenth-century Decadent writing is transposed by Vernon Lee onto music, who writes that from 'time immemorial, music has been considered sometimes as an art which enervates and demoralizes,

⁹⁸ Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan & Co, 1872), p. 32.

⁹⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Notes on Poems and Reviews' in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 200), pp. 403-418 (pp. 411-412).

sometimes as one which disciplines, restrains and purifies'. Lee's preference for the latter is evident in her predilection towards eighteenth-century music, claiming that by the eighteenth century the operatic voice 'had attained a degree of perfection absolutely analogous to the perfection of sculpture among the Greeks, and of painting in the Renaissance'.¹⁰⁰ Lee, equating the operatic voice with antique sculpture and Italian painting, transforms the voice into *objet d'art* in which 'the notes of the voice were the material, the paint or clay, in which the mind's conception must be embodied'. Fittingly, the singer who epitomized Lee's vocal schema was the famed eighteenth-century castrato Farinelli, whose voice Lee described as 'infinitely more voluminous, extensive and beautiful than any other that had ever been heard before or since; his musical talent more versatile and astonishing than any other'.¹⁰¹

The spectre of Farinelli would steadily haunt Lee's imagination. In 1881, Lee published 'A Culture Ghost, or Winthrop's Adventure', the first version of a short story Lee would continually revise throughout her life. 'Winthrop's Adventure' epitomizes Lee's preference for narratives of uncanny encroachment of the past within the present, depicting an artist both haunted and obsessed by the ghostly, disembodied voice of a castrato. Lee would later reminisce on the impetus behind her castrato stories: on a visit to the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna with her friend, the painter John Singer Sargent, the two came upon a portrait of Farinelli. Recalling the curious allures and enchantments the portrait exerted over the youthful, impressionable artists, Lee describes Farinelli as:

mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, curious. Such [...] were the adjectives, the comparisons, with which we capped each other, my friend John and I, as we lingered and fantasicated in front of that smoky canvas in an ill-lit lumber room [...] in the Bologna music-school, at closing hour on autumn afternoons of the year 1872.¹⁰²

The portrait's sinuous, and seemingly metamorphosing, qualities recapitulated themselves within Lee's writing, as she produced a far more complex and completely reworked version of 'Winthrop' for *Les Lettres et Les Arts* in 1887, titled 'Voix Maudite'. 'Voix Maudite' was subsequently re-written and published several years later as 'A Wicked Voice' in the short story collection *Hauntings* (1890).

'A Wicked Voice' mirrors 'Sarrasine' in its depiction of sexual ambiguity and

¹⁰⁰ Vernon Lee quoted in Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales*, pp. 10-12.

¹⁰¹ Vernon Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: T. Fisher Unwin: 1880), p. 111.

¹⁰² Vernon Lee, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), pp. xxx-xxxi.

transgressive desire, yet also exposes the space between the beauty of a spectral, disembodied voice, and the ‘wicked’ corporeality of the singer. Scholars such as Maxwell, Pulham and Angela Leighton have commented on the androgyny and fatality of Lee’s castrato, and illuminated how the ‘hinted sexual deviancy’ and the ‘overwhelming seductiveness’¹⁰³ of the castrato’s voice aligns him with the *femme fatale*. Furthermore, Maxwell, Pulham and Leighton have highlighted the implacability and the untranslatable nature of the castrato’s allure from psychic obsession to *objet d’art* within Lee’s narrative. Leighton’s description of the reader’s relation to Lee’s castrato resembles that of the Decadent narrator’s inability to possess the *femme fatale*, or to translate her into knowable form: ‘While the critic is doomed to circle that structure [Lee’s narrative], hoping to give the explanation of its puzzle, the ideology of its aesthetic, it is the “condition of want” which [...] is calculated to make us go on wanting it.’¹⁰⁴ It is the *inability* of Lee’s narrator to possess and harness the desirable voice of the castrato that, grievously, makes the voice all the more desirable.

Throughout ‘A Wicked Voice’, Lee casts nineteenth-century Italy as a primeval swamp in which Venice, ‘like some great lily’, swelters, exuding ‘mysterious influences, which make the brain swim and the heart faint’.¹⁰⁵ Metaphors of exoticized languor abound, Lee’s tropical Venice teeming with ‘all manner of white flowers, faint and heavy in their intolerable sweetness: tuberose, gardenias, and jasmines’. Floundering in this ‘stagnant lagoon of the past’ is the jaded Norwegian composer Magnus, whose attempts to complete his Wagnerian opera, *Ogier the Dane*, have been exhausted by the oppressive artistic history of Venice: ‘It was as if there arose out of its shallow waters a miasma of long-dead melodies, which sickened but intoxicated my soul.’¹⁰⁶ Magnus suffers from creative impotence due to the ‘strangest of maladies’, and curses the ‘wicked’ voice of the title as its cause:

O cursed human voice, violin of flesh and blood, fashioned with the subtle tools, the cunning hands, of Satan! [...] Singer, thing of evil, stupid and wicked slave of the voice [...] which, instead of moving the soul, merely stirs up the dregs of our nature! For what is the voice but the Beast calling, awakening that other Beast sleeping in the depths of mankind, the Beast which all great art has ever sought to chain up.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Angela Leighton, ‘Ghosts, Aestheticism, and “Vernon Lee”’ in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 21:1 (2000), pp. 1-14 (p. 5).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Vernon Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’ in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* ed. By Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 156.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-156.

For Magnus, the singer is voice made flesh. Yet, this fleshly ‘beast’ is prone to corruption, exacerbated by the hothouse atmosphere of Venice. Thus, within the stifling, oppressive heat, Magnus’s imperialistic Wagnerian aesthetic ideals liquify, dissolving in the ‘contagious’ melodies that arise from the lagoon.

Venice’s fetid fluidity allows Lee to conjure echoes of the past within the present. One evening, Magnus is gifted an engraving of the infamous eighteenth-century castrato Zaffirino, so named due to his wearing of a sapphire ‘engraved with cabalistic signs presented to him one evening by a masked stranger [...] the devil’.¹⁰⁸ Despite never using the term ‘castrato’, Lee emphasizes Zaffirino’s androgyny, describing his ‘effeminate, fat face’ bearing an ‘odd smile, brazen and cruel’ that recalls the ‘wicked, vindictive women’ of Baudelaire and Swinburne.¹⁰⁹ Zaffirino’s androgyny is also signified through the rococo trappings of the engraving, recalling the mysterious sphinx-like portrait of Farinelli that transfixed the adolescent Lee.¹¹⁰ Providing a brief history of Zaffirino, the Venetian nobleman, Count Alvise, recounts to Magnus how his ancestor, the virtuous Procuratessa Vendramin, succumbed to the castrato, killed by the bewitching power and beauty of his diabolical voice. Magnus, too, succumbs, to the uncanny voice of Zaffirino, as it hauntingly permeates his dreams and waking life.

Zaffirino lurks within the chasm of Magnus’s unconscious, from which his voice repeatedly bursts forth as a manifestation of Magnus’s repressed longing to return to a pre-oedipal psychological state of autonomous androgyny. As Magnus attempts to compose his opera by the Venetian lagoon the voice bursts forth, seemingly re-enacting birth. The voice, low at first, slowly expands ‘taking volume and body, taking flesh almost and fire, an ineffable quality, full, passionate, but veiled, as it were, in a subtle, downy wrapper’. Growing in intensity, passion and warmth, the voice bursts through ‘that strange and charming veil, and emerged beaming, to break itself in the luminous facets of a wonderful shake, long, superb, triumphant’.¹¹¹ Pulham notes Lee’s uterine imagery, the ‘maternal voice’ forming an ‘umbilical net’ that surrounds Magnus ‘as he sways in the amniotic fluidity of the Venetian waters’.¹¹² In passing, Pulham notes that Zaffirino’s effeminate voice, swathed in its ‘downy wrapper’, masks

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹⁰ The fictional engraving of Zaffirino is seemingly a conflation of Corrado Giaquinto’s painting *Portrait of Farinelli* (c. 1753), and Jacopo Amigoni’s painting *Farinelli Crowned by Music (Euterpe)* (1735): ‘Of this effeminate beau, his hair curled into *ailles de pigeon*, his sword passed through his embroidered pocket, seated under a triumphal arch somewhere among the clouds, surrounded by puffy Cupids and crowned with laurels by a bouncing goddess of fame.’ – Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’, p. 157.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 167.

¹¹² Pulham, p. 16.

a hermaphroditic phallicism. Inherent in the Decadent androgynous fantasy is the disavowal of sexual differentiation in a narcissistic quest for completeness, as in disavowing sexual difference, each sex hermaphroditically regains the ‘lost’ sexual characteristics of the other. However, Magnus’s transference of this androgynous fantasy onto the body of a castrato paradoxically negates this fantasy. The castrato’s body, signifying lack, invariably evokes castratory fears. As Carlo Caballero writes, Zaffirino ‘subverts the opposition of phallus and vulva,’ baring an ‘uncanny mutability of a voice born of castration - its sexuality perversely heightened by ambiguity - that threatens the narrator’.¹¹³

Spreading, vine-like throughout the serpentine waters of Venice, Zaffirino’s voice recalls the castratory pubic head of the Medusa, in which Magnus is Laocoön, trapped within its writhing stems. Stressing the feminine attributes of the Medusa’s head, Ewa Kuryluk states that, contrary to Freud’s theory of mitigation, Medusa’s phallic snakes

heighten the terror by transforming Medusa’s head into a kind of horrible entrance into a fleshly hell and underworld out of which there is no escape; the snakes are ready to coil around a man and drag him into the dreadful mouth – the vagina dentata.¹¹⁴

This ‘fleshly hell and underworld’ is made manifest in Villa Mistrà, where Magnus retires to improve his health and seek musical inspiration. Fatigued and delirious, Magnus somnambulistically wanders the villa gardens, entranced by the ‘green of the vine-leaves, the dull-red of the catalpa flowers’ and the luscious scent of ripe grapes, white flowers, and dewy peaches.¹¹⁵ From this Medusan jungle Magnus is lured by the voice into the labyrinthian bowels off the villa, in which he is blinded by a ‘brilliant light’,¹¹⁶ which Freud associates with the psychic castration of the male. Regaining sight, Magnus finds himself in a symbolically vaginal location,¹¹⁷ a ‘dark hole with a high balustrade, half hidden by an updrawn curtain’, in which the voices phallicism is enhanced:

I heard the voice swelling, swelling, rending asunder that downy veil which wrapped it, leaping forth clear, resplendent, like the sharp and glittering blade of a knife that seemed to enter deep into my breast. Then, once more, a wail, a death-groan, and that dreadful noise, that hideous gurgle of breath strangled by a rush of

¹¹³ Carlo Caballero, “‘A Wicked Voice’: On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music’ in *Victorian Studies*, 35:4 (Summer, 1992), pp. 385-408, (pp. 389-390).

¹¹⁴ Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 232.

¹¹⁵ Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’, p. 177.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹¹⁷ Pulham, p. 16.

blood. And then a long shake, acute, brilliant, triumphant.¹¹⁸

The voices knife-like penetration of Magnus's breast psychically castrates the composer, reversing the mutilation done to the castrato's own body, and from which Magnus will never regain his creative voice. Barthes notes that 'the route of castration [...] discovers the pandemic void of desire, the collapse of the creative chain'.¹¹⁹ Magnus's androgynous fantasy is a narcissistic enshrouding within the embryonic, 'downy veil', in which his ability to 'create' annihilates itself. Within the fantasy's dual movements of creation and destruction, the fantasy aligns itself with the death-drive, the regressive impulse tending towards the return to an inorganic state of radical un-being. Zaffirino's voice, at once immortal and annihilating, lives on within the annals of history, yet refuses to return to Magnus, its absence continually taunting Magnus with a beauty that he is unable to recapitulate in music. Repeatedly seeking Zaffirino's voice, Magnus embarks on a death-driven collapse into a state of musical sterility, from which he will forever, pitifully, beg the voice to return:

O wicked, wicked voice, violin of flesh and blood made by the Evil One's hand, may I not even execrate thee in peace; but is it necessary that, at the moment when I curse, the longing to hear thee again should parch my soul like hell-thirst? And since I have satiated thy lust for revenge, since thou hast withered my life and withered my genius, is it not time for pity? May I not hear one note, only one note of thine, O singer, O wicked and contemptible wretch?¹²⁰

Decadent Endings, Modernist Beginnings

The role of the nineteenth-century Decadent androgyne transformed with the onset of Modernism. Romantic personality was denounced in favour of Modernist impersonality, with male Modernist theorizers, such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, rejecting the linguistic flourishes and eroticized morbidity of British Decadence. Eliot writes of Swinburne's poetry 'the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment'.¹²¹ For Eliot, Swinburne's verse dissipated through passivity to a daemonic femininity, which Eliot attempted to rectify by reinvesting Modernist poetry with a masculine rigour. In the corpus of male modernists, Laity writes, spectral images of *femmes fatales*, androgynes and aesthetes were used as ciphers to 'warn against the "hedonism" they believed

¹¹⁸ Lee, 'A Wicked Voice', p. 180.

¹¹⁹ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Lee 'A Wicked Voice', p. 181.

¹²¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Poet' in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), pp. 84-88 (p. 88).

had plunged Romanticism in decadence and decay'.¹²² H.D., however, responded differently to the powerful feminine figures of the late-nineteenth-century Decadent and Hellenic imagination. Images of *femmes fatales*, androgynes and aesthetes presented H.D. with a catalogue of transgressive poetical figures whose image articulated a fluid range of sexual personae that countered male Modernisms anti-Romantic doctrines. Within her fictional autobiography *Asphodel* (1921–1922), H.D., by proxy of her narrator Hermione, makes her alliances clear:

We are the children of the Rossettis, of Burne Jones, of Swinburne. We were in the thoughts of Wilde when he spoke late at night [...] to a young man named Gilbert. They talked of Greeks and flowers [...] We belong here.¹²³

H.D.'s interest in nineteenth-century Hellenism and Decadence is rooted within her quest for the relevance of mythic patterns in the contemporary era. Norman N. Holland writes that H.D.'s writing is a 'palimpsest or a series of old photographic negatives on top of one another' that attempt to transform her work into a 'hieroglyph or emblem'.¹²⁴ Mapping her writing onto the blueprint of nineteenth-century Decadence and Hellenism, H.D. invariably returns to the statue of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* that so enamoured Latouche, Gautier and Swinburne.

In H.D.'s *Paint it Today* (1919), the protagonist, Midget, meditates upon a replica of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in the Diocletian Gallery in Rome:

[...] it lay not on a pedestal of cold stone, but on a soft black velvet cushion [...] It lay comfortably asleep [...] Yes, this was the same Hermaphroditus, but no little monster, no plaything of a later emperor. This was a gentle, breathing image, modelled in strange, soft, honey-coloured stone. The small head lay on the perfect childlike arm. It was a child, here in Rome, no monster [...] This was a spray of honey flower caught in the shadow of a dark wall.¹²⁵

The child-like nature of H.D.'s hermaphrodite represents an infantile fantasy of the primitive imago of pre-oedipal childhood. This longing for plenitude, figured through the sculpture's hermaphroditism, can be read as expressive of bisexuality. As Laity observes, the hermaphrodite is a seminal image in Decadent fantasies of 'deviant' sexuality, thus in *Paint it Today*, H.D. aligns herself with the tradition of 'Aesthete poets who used the statue of the *Hermaphrodite* to fabricate fantasies of bisexuality and androgyny'.¹²⁶ Yet, H.D. also subverts

¹²² Laity, p. xi.

¹²³ H.D., *Asphodel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 53-54.

¹²⁴ Norman N. Holland, 'H.D. and the "Blameless Physician"' in *Contemporary Literature*, 10:4 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 474-507 (pp. 475-476).

¹²⁵ H.D., *Paint it Today* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 65.

¹²⁶ Laity, p. 69.

the (typically) male/male Greek continuum of this tradition. This tradition is emblemized by Walter Pater in his essay on the eighteenth-century German art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, in which Pater alludes to Winckelmann's 'romantic, fervid'¹²⁷ friendships with young men, and his caressing of male statuary, writing that Winckelmann 'fingers those Pagan marbles with unsinged hands, with no sense of shame or loss'.¹²⁸ Those who only observe beauty in women, Winckelmann writes, are rarely moved by Greek sculpture. For those who observe beauty in men, Winckelmann continues, 'the beauty of Greek art will never seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female'.¹²⁹ As Midget considers the Diocletian replica, lines from Swinburne's 'Hermaphroditus' and 'Fragoletta' invade her thoughts, and the image of the white, marble *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* housed within *The Louvre* clouds her mind. To Midget, the *Louvre* marble seems cold and artificial, and she declares it 'a blossom made of wax, not modelled even with living fingers, but poured into a set mould'. Midget's emphasis of the soft, suppleness of the hermaphrodite psychically caresses (Winckelmann's 'fingering') the honey-coloured stone of the statue, subverting the male Hellene's 'set mould' of signifying male/male homoeroticism through marble hardness. Defying the hard, masculine contours of statuary, the pliancy of the sculpture beneath Midget's psychic will creates a fluid, feminine sense of intimate bisexuality. Through her utilization of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, H.D. offers a twentieth-century feminine subjectivity to the Decadent blueprint of the nineteenth-century androgyne.

¹²⁷ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 93.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹²⁹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann quoted in Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 94.

CODA

THE VISUAL AFTERLIVES OF THE DECADENT *FEMME FATALE*

Decadent writers and artists of the nineteenth century enacted upon the cultural stage their own pre-occupation with vice, artifice and decay. Following Oscar Wilde's trial and incarceration, Brian M. Stableford argues, the valuable characteristics of Decadence were 'claimed and transferred into something finer by the triumphant advance of Symbolism'.¹ Decadence thus survives beyond the nineteenth century, only, like Heine's exiled gods, it presents itself within the guise of other forms. As constructs of the Decadent psyche, figures such as Dorian Gray, Dionea and Hadaly seemingly also suffer their own decline and fall. Yet, the concepts and images of these Decadent fatal women and androgynes continue to haunt: Dorian glaring icily from his portrait; Dionea awaiting reincarnation; and Hadaly, submerged beneath the waves, awaiting excavation.

For Patrick Bade, conversely, the cultural relevance of the *femme fatale* following the *fin de siècle* faded, Bade remarking that 'in the present period of social revolution she is no longer, as she was for Pater, "the symbol of the modern idea"'.² Bade seems to have misread Pater. What is Theda Bara, vamping in her cobra snake bra, in *Cleopatra* (1917) if not a *femme fatale* for the celluloid age? What are Barbara Stanwyk as Phyllis Dietrichson, coolly plotting the death of her husband, in *Double Indemnity* (1944), or Elizabeth Taylor, as the lipstick smearing, fur-stealing high-class call-girl, the aptly named Gloria Wandrous, in *Butterfield 8* (1960), if not images of monstrous femininity for their era? Taylor's performance in *Butterfield 8* even led to Camille Paglia to proclaim Taylor 'a universal archetype of woman. [...] Through stars like Taylor, we sense the world-disordering impact of legendary women like Delilah, Salome, and Helen of Troy.'³ Taylor's heir as Hollywood sex symbol, Sharon Stone, sat before the crashing waves and mountains of California in *Basic Instinct* (1992) similarly recalls Pater's *La Gioconda*, Stone's Catherine Trammel eerily omniscient of the lives and actions of those around her. Pater's concept of the androgynous *femme fatale* as an embodiment of the modern ideal therefore progresses as culture progresses. Bade's dismissal of the *femme fatale*

¹ Brian M. Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (London: Borgo Press, 1998), p. 124.

² Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (London: Ash & Grant Ltd., 1979), p. 39.

³ Camille Paglia, 'Elizabeth Taylor: Hollywood's Pagan Queen' in *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 14-18 (p. 15).

as irrelevant following the *fin de siècle* hinges upon the *femme fatale* as embodying *only* the anxieties of the late-Victorian era, dismissing the fatal woman's ubiquity of the past and future.

Having traced the trajectory of the Decadent *femme fatale* and androgyne throughout the nineteenth century, this thesis has sought to problematize and transcend the either/or gender and sexual binarisms first introduced by Bade into *femme fatale* criticism in 1979. Bade's successors, such as Nina Auerbach, Virginia M. Allen, Bram Dijkstra and Heather Braun, seized upon Bade's binary and produced fascinating and indelible criticisms of the *femme fatale*. Yet, this binary led to an academic compartmentalizing, putting under erasure studies of the *femme fatale* within larger frameworks concerning history, psychology and aesthetics. Operating upon the crux that the Decadent *femme fatale* and androgyne exist beyond Bade's binary, it has been the central concern of this thesis to expand and incorporate ulterior considerations as to the utilization of the *femme fatale* and androgyne in Decadent texts of the nineteenth century. Positing the *femme fatale* as a new aesthetic model, as a figure that allows one to consider the implications of one's own mortality, and a figurehead leading the charge for new philosophical models (amongst others), each of the four chapters presented throughout this thesis have sought to mobilize new, interdisciplinary readings of the Decadent *femme fatale* to combat the reduction of this expansive figure into binary framework. Present throughout history, myth, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology and art (in all of its modes and modulations), the Decadent *femme fatale* has been shown to have permeated all areas of thought, a titanic figure whose meanings continue to ebb and flow in a continual flux as history passes her by.

Of the tenacity and resilience of the archetypal fatal woman, Barbara Creed writes:

When Perseus slew the Medusa he did not - as commonly thought - put an end to her reign or destroy her terrifying powers. Afterwards, Athena embossed her shield with the Medusa's head. The writhing snakes, with their fanged gaping mouths, and the Medusa's own enormous teeth and lolling tongue were on full view. Athena's aim was simply to strike terror into the hearts of men as well as reminding them of their symbolic debt to the imaginary castrating mother. And no doubt she knew what she was doing. After all, Athena was the great Mother-Goddess of the ancient world and according to ancient legend - the daughter of Metis, the goddess of wisdom, also known as the Medusa.⁴

The image of the Medusa, wielded upon the Athenian mirror-shield, operates as both a sublimation of the Medusa's power and a recognition of that power. Resurfacing within the liminal borderlands of androgynous *femme fatale* narratives, the gorgonian regains its strength,

⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), p. 166.

fear induced by the Medusa's snaky locks recapitulated within the unease of unknowingness caused by the androgyne and the *femme fatale*. As Ewa Kuryluk writes, the 'aegis confronts not with a public front, but with a private back, not with a god's face or head, but with a goddess's "underface" – emblematic of a menstruating vagina, decapitation, and castration'.⁵ Much like the fates of Dorian, Dionea and Hadaly, Creed and Kuryluk recognize within the myth of Medusa a concept and an image of a fatal, androgynous being that exists beyond their physical destruction. Embossed upon the Athenian mirror-shield, Medusa continues to strike terror into the hearts of men from beyond the grave, her image signalling the materialization of the transgressive, the forbidden, and the unknown. The image of the monstrous, androgynous feminine is indestructible, continuing to haunt throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first century.

Images in the Dark: Celluloid Portraits of the Femme Fatale

Medusa's portrait, impressed upon the Aegis, is emulated in a myriad of painted portraits of *femmes fatales* in cinema. Hovering, spectre-like, a permanent fixity within the fluid, flowing motion of the camera's gaze, these enigmatic images, Marc Strauss writes, 'function like omniscient observers, staring eyes, as it were, dispassionately framing the action, gazing on it and at us while provoking our own individual reactions and interpretations'.⁶ Such is the case in Otto Preminger's film noir *Laura* (1944), in which a glamorous portrait [*fig. 5.1.*] of the titular character (portrayed by the fey Gene Tierney) acts as an ersatz effigy of Laura, whose bullet riddled body lay in the morgue. Until, that is, Laura nonchalantly swans into her apartment, and helps to solve the mystery of her 'murder' – a case of mistaken identity and obsession. Yet, Laura's 'murder' is seemingly insignificant, the film rather a documentation of the obsessive lure of the *femme fatale*, Laura's portrait an omnipresent echo emulating the psyche of the numerous men who possessively long to claim her as their own. As the original trailer provocatively proclaims, 'Every woman will feel that when it comes to men, Laura gets by with murder. Every man will feel that when it comes to murder, it couldn't involve a more enticing girl.'⁷

⁵ Ewa Kuryluk quoted in Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), p.146.

⁶ Marc Strauss 'The Painted Jester: Notes on the Visual Arts in Hitchcock's Films' in *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 35:2 (2007), pp. 52-56 (p. 55).

⁷ Original trailer for Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJRp5C15PgE>> [Accessed 26th February 2020]. Quote taken from lines spoken at 1:36-1:46.

Obsessiveness converging around the painted portrait of a *femme fatale* is most overt in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Translocating Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac's novel *D'Entre les Morts* (1954) from Paris to San Francisco, Hitchcock has his *femme fatale* Madeleine (portrayed by Kim Novak) drift through the labyrinthian city in a hypnotic trance of seductive abstraction. Hired as a private investigator to shadow Madeleine, James Stewart's Scottie descends into a violent web of murder, corruption and mistaken identity, in which vampiricism by the dead is a central conceit, Madeleine supposedly possessed by the spectre of her great-grandmother, the tragic Carlotta Valdes. An integral scene has Scottie stalk Madeleine through an art gallery in which she sits before a portrait of her ancestor [fig 5.2.]. Hitchcock's camera strategically flows back and forth from spectator to portrait, illuminating the similarities between the two, Hitchcock emphasizing the bouquet of poesies each carry, and the swirling blonde chignons of Carlotta and Madeleine's hair. Chares Barr notes that Hitchcock does not have Madeleine adopt Carlotta's most prominent feature, an ornate jewelled necklace. 'There is a gap here waiting to be filled,' writes Barr, '[...] Hitchcock and his writers are laying down a clue.'⁸ It is within this visual space that a deathly desire is enacted, a desire for the dead re-incarnated within the present that simultaneously exhibits the mortality of the flesh.

Following Madeleine's supposed suicide, Scottie fixates upon the portrait of Carlotta printed within the gallery catalogue, the death principle once again projected onto a simulacrum of a dead prototype. 'It becomes difficult to move or dispose of these talismanic objects,' write Lisa Colpaert and Steven Jacobs concerning images of the dead, 'as these objects must live in these spaces, immovable and heavy with memories and psychological attachments as weights around the psyches of the living.'⁹ Discovering Madeleine's double in the working-class Judy (again played by, a now brunette, Kim Novak), Scottie obsessively transforms her into his dead beloved, dying Judy's hair blonde and dressing her in the same suit Madeleine often wore. When Judy finally adorns the bejewelled necklace worn by Carlotta in her portrait, Scottie's deathly desire is made manifest, Judy/Madeleine leaping to her death from a bell-tower, joining Carlotta as a spectral image lingering within Scottie's psyche. Despite the revelation that Judy/Madeleine's identity was a ruse, conceived by a wealthy shipping magnate in a convoluted plot to murder his wife, *Vertigo* recalls the haunted portrait narratives of the

⁸ Charles Barr, *Vertigo* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), p. 46.

⁹ Lisa Colpaert and Steven Jacobs, *The Dark Galleries: A Museum Guide to Painted Portraits in Film Noir, Gothic Melodramas and Ghost Stories of the 1940s and 1950s* (Ghent: AraMER, 2013), p. 72.

nineteenth century by encapsulating the enigmatic allure of the *femme fatale*, with their glamorous, lucid surface and disturbing sexuality.

Outmoded as an artistic practice, the painted portrait has given way to photographed, or filmed, portrait of the fatal woman and androgyne within the contemporary arts. The homecoming photo of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991, 2017) eerily hovers on the screen as we learn of Laura's tragic, violent past – Lynch's dismantling of the American Teen-Dream. Alternatively, in Will Self's modern re-imagining of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dorian, An Imitation* (2002), Dorian remains beautifully radiant as his image captured within the video art installation, *Cathode Narcissus*, becomes haggard and grotesque due to effects of AIDs. Of the most recent, twenty-first-century depictions of this new, technological *femme fatale*, Amy Elliott Dunne, of Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* (2012) and subsequent David Fincher directed film of the same name (2014), is the most notorious. Unhappy in her lustreless marriage, Amy manufactures her own death, leaving a fairy-tale trail of clues to implicate her dullard husband, Nick, for her murder. Discovering the clues, one by one, the audience is presented with a façade of Amy, a portrait of a wife as the modern American ideal, who succumbs to the brutal abuse of an emasculated husband. Amy's death causes a media frenzy, in which a photograph of Amy [fig. 5.3.] – blonde, pretty, innocent – is reprinted on missing posters, in newspapers, on blogs and in news reports, projecting the *image* of Amy into the public consciousness. In a Hitchcockian *volte face*, Amy is revealed to be alive and on-the-run, and offers a searing indictment of the idealized portrait of femininity she has left in her wake:

[...] the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth [...] while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner, and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl*. [...] I waited patiently – *years* – for the pendulum to swing the other way [...] But it never happened. Instead, women across the nation colluded in our degradation! Pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed – she wasn't just a dream girl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (London: Orion Books, 2012), pp. 251-252. [Italics in original text].

Amy's caustic monologue on the idealized vision of American femininity reveals what Kuryluk termed the 'underface' of the *femme fatale*, highlighting the unpalatable aspects of femininity put under erasure through the cultural performance of the 'Cool Girl'. Flynn, herself, has commented upon this cultural masque, declaring that 'To pretend to be today's "Cool Girl" is just as restrictive and confining as it was for women back in the 1950s who were forced into the "Happy Homemaker" role.'¹¹ Having returned home, literally drenched in the blood of the men she has killed, Amy's presence causes the media's condemnation of her husband to subside. Publicly shamed and emotionally fraught from the ordeal, Nick's livelihood now depends upon Amy, who refuses to don the mask of the 'Cool Girl', and allows for the 'underface' of the monstrous feminine to reign within their suburban Missouri home: 'He's still trying to wriggle out of our marriage even though I've told him – three times now – that he can't,' Amy says of Nick, 'He still thinks he has *power*.' Pater's concept of the Mona Lisa as the 'modern ideal' is recognized through Amy in *Gone Girl*. Although the arena of the conflicts these women both represent and are subject to has changed, the conceptual characteristics of the two *femmes fatales* remains constant, Amy and Mona Lisa the embodiment of the relinquished id of their era.

Deconstructing the Doll in the Digital Age

Nineteenth-century corpse-dolls similarly underwent a technological refashioning throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which the literary archetype of the female robot recurs with great frequency. Stemming from a culture of rapid technological advancement, the female robot offers a potent and potential threat to social order, and to the male scientists who create and aim to subordinate them.¹² The daughters of Olympia and Hadaly surface as the *maschinenmensch* Maria (Brigitte Helm), in Fritz Lang's expressionist silent film *Metropolis* (1927), and as the humanoid artificial intelligence Ava (Alicia Vikander) in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014). Lang's Maria is seemingly unique in that she was created and programmed to disrupt and destruct from her inception, a position Ava will come to emulate in *Ex Machina*'s concluding scenes. Maria's inventor, Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), and the master of Metropolis, Joh Frederson (Alfred Abel), utilize Maria's illusory sexuality to coerce the

¹¹ 'In Conversation with Gillian Flynn' in *Gone Girl* (London: Orion Books, 2012), pp. 472-474 (p. 473).

¹² Alternative texts that similarly conflate gender issues and/or the eroticization of the female robot are Ridley Scott's neo-noir *Blade Runner* (1982), its sequel, Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and Ira Levin's novel, and its two subsequent film adaptations, *The Stepford Wives* (1972/1975/2004), amongst others. *Metropolis* and *Ex Machina* have here been selected from the wealth of applicable texts due to the aesthetic similarities they share with the nineteenth-century texts studied in Chapter II.

civilians of Metropolis to engage in violent riots that will demolish the city. Performing an erotic dance number dressed as the Whore of Babylon before the elite ‘Club of the Sons’ [fig. 5.4.], Maria entices the residents of Metropolis to destroy the machines they require to survive. Thus, destruction of Metropolis is induced through the overt exhibitionism of female sexuality.

Eroticization of artificial flesh is equally prevalent in *Ex Machina*, when it is revealed that the inventor Nathan (Oscar Isaac) has engaged in sexual intercourse with his creations. Echoing the replicability of Hadaly in *L’Ève Future*, the protagonist Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) discovers Ava’s prototypes, each mapped to concur with male ethnic fetishes gleaned from stolen data and pornography preferences. Arrogantly, Nathan speaks of his creation of new technology that allows his humanoids sexual pleasure, boasting that ‘[...] in between her [Ava’s] legs, there’s an opening with a concentration of sensors. If you engage them in the right way, it creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could, and she’d enjoy it.’¹³ Thus, the male sexual consumption of the technological corpse-doll hinted at in ‘Der Sandmann’, *L’Ève Future*, and *Metropolis* reaches its zenith with *Ex Machina*’s sentient sex-dolls. Betraying her inventor, Ava fatally stabs Nathan, and exits his compound, free to revel in the sentience installed within her databanks, devoid of the nefarious exploitation suffered at the hands of her creator. Having replicated nature, Nathan is rendered obsolete, his death a contemporary sci-fi re-contextualization of Decadent entropy.

A split occurs within the trajectory of the corpse-doll following the nineteenth century. As previously discussed, the development of the technological corpse-doll as an embodiment of social anxieties concerning rapid scientific advancement has, and continues to be, employed within the arts with ubiquity. A second, equally prevalent, derivation of the nineteenth-century corpse-doll developed in tandem, most notably within Gothic texts, converging upon the mannequin, the waxwork, and the doll as a figure of psychological unease. Horror films, such as *House of Wax* (1953), and *Annabelle* (2014), utilize the uncanny aesthetics emphasized in nineteenth-century corpse-doll narratives, yet lack the psycho-sexual pre-occupations of these texts. One such contemporary text that adopts these psycho-sexual pre-occupations whilst re-inventing the corpse-doll motif is Thomas Harris’s novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and the subsequent 1991 film adaption of the same name, directed by Jonathan Demme.

Evoking the gender subversiveness and grotesquery of Rachilde’s manufactured wax Venus, the serial killer Buffalo Bill flays his female victims, sewing their tanned skins into a

¹³ *Ex Machina*, dir. by Alex Garland (Film4 & DNA Films, 2014).

woman suit in hopes that, when adorned, Bill himself will become a woman. Assigned to help end Bill's sadistic rampage, fledgling FBI agent Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) seeks the wisdom of the incarcerated cannibal psychiatrist, Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), hoping to create a psychological profile of Bill before he kills again. Following an array of *quid pro quos*, Lecter reveals that contrary to belief, 'Billy's not a real transsexual [...] but he thinks he is, he tries to be. He's tried to be a lot of things, I expect.'¹⁴ The film extends Harris's original text, having Lecter reveal that 'Billy hates his own identity, you see, and he thinks that makes him a transsexual, but his pathology is a thousand times more savage, and more terrifying.'¹⁵ Lecter's comments concretize Bill *not* as a transsexual, but as a gender void, a barren chasm bereft of identity, and so, through brutal and disturbing means, Bill must fashion himself a new one.

Of Buffalo Bill's female corpse-suit, Jack Halberstam writes that 'skin becomes a metaphor for surface, for the external' as it is the 'place of pleasure and the site of pain; it is the thin sheet that masks the bloody horror [...] the destination of the gaze [...] the violated site of visual pleasure'.¹⁶ Deep within his subterranean lair, Bill adorns the fetishistic trappings of femininity – glamorous gowns, make-up and high heels. Bill, attracted to these trappings as cultural signifiers of an identity he believes he possesses, attempts to create a corporeal body within which he can reside, with the phantasy that his internal gender void will be sublimated through the adoption of an aesthetic of femininity that bears social meaning. Inverting the Pygmalion phantasy of the creation narcissistically embodying its creator, Buffalo Bill fantasizes that the creator will absorb the inherent identity of his creation. Echoing Rachilde's Raoule, Bill imitates and exaggerates cultural notions of gender. Unlike Raoule, Bill finally attempts to shed his gender in favour of a new skin, the result a post-human corpse-doll, a violent, bloody massacre of identity.

Venus Revisited in 'Death in Venice'

Rachilde's boy Venus is similarly evoked within Thomas Mann's novella, 'Death in Venice' ('*Der Tod in Venedig*', 1912). Tadzio, a long-haired, beautiful, Polish adolescent, becomes the visual object of affection for the retiring author Gustav von Aschenbach, Tadzio a glittering beacon of Apollonian beauty cutting through the choleric stench and miasma of Decadent

¹⁴ Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1991), p. 159.

¹⁵ *The Silence of the Lambs* dir. by Jonathan Demme (Orion Pictures, 1991).

¹⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 165.

Venice. Possessing a ‘truly godlike beauty’, Tadzio is a vision of ‘Eros, with the creamy lustre of Parian marble,’ with ‘brows fine-drawn,’ and ‘temples and ear darkly and softly covered by the neat right-angled growth of the curly hair’.¹⁷ Mann’s prose emphasizes Tadzio’s radical visibility through lush descriptions of Tadzio in *tableau vivant*. Emerging from the ocean, Tadzio recalls Venus rising from the foam:

He returned, he came running, beating the resisting water to foam with his feet, his head thrown back, running through the waves. And to behold this living figure, lovely and austere in its early masculinity, with dripping locks and beautiful as a young god, approaching out of the depths of the sky and sea, rising and escaping from the elements – this sight filled the mind with mythical images, it was like a poet’s tale from a primitive age, a tale of the origins of form and the birth of the gods.¹⁸

Tadzio, caught between sea and sky, is the meeting point of the Apollonian cult of sculpted beauty and the dark, destructive longing of Eros and Venus, the androgyne *fatale*. Paglia argues that Tadzio ‘steps from the waves not because he is of the sea but because he renounces the fluid realm’.¹⁹ Echoing the physically unwavering beauty of Dorian following his Faustian pact, Tadzio seemingly transcends ever-changing fluidity into a crystalline, sublime visibility. Terrified yet allured by this sublimity, Aschenbach recalls Basil Hallward’s visual and psychic subordination to Dorian, foreshadowing Aschenbach’s destruction by the presence of a beautiful androgyne.

Evoking the hot-house atmosphere of Vernon Lee’s Venice in ‘A Wicked Voice’, Mann’s Venice is similarly cloying, its labyrinthian waters spreading ‘Asiatic cholera [...] Originating in the sultry morasses of the Ganges delta’.²⁰ Despite warnings, Aschenbach remains in Venice, body and mind growing ever more feverish. Seemingly transcending mortality, Tadzio does not find death within the polluted waters of Venice, but his eternal beauty, sublimely reflected. Gazing into the canal, Tadzio is greeted with ‘the smile of Narcissus as he bows his head over the mirroring water, that profound, fascinated, protracted smile [...] a smile that was provocative, curious and imperceptibly troubled, bewitched and bewitching’.²¹ Erotically self-possessed, Tadzio does not return Aschenbach’s gaze as Aschenbach stalks him through the streets of Venice. Attempting to internalize the beauty of

¹⁷ Thomas Mann, ‘Death in Venice’ in *Death in Venice and Other Stories* translated by David Luke (London: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. 197-267. (p. 223).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

¹⁹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 596.

²⁰ Mann, p. 296.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

Tadzio to regain his lost youth and beauty, Aschenbach orientalises and transvesticizes himself. Like the aged La Zambinella, he douses himself in perfume, adorns his fingers with jewels, dyes his hair, and paints his face with powder, mascara and rouge, a Decadent aestheticization of the self, prophesizing Aschenbach's inevitable death. Finally, on the day Tadzio and his family are due to leave Venice, Aschenbach is felled by the cholera, looking out to the sea from a deck chair to his beloved Tadzio, who seemingly beckons him from the water's edge. Invoking Wilde, Lee and Rachilde, Mann continues the Decadent alignment of beauty to amorality, the half-sculptural, androgynous boy-Venus narcissistically enraptured within a reflection of himself as the people and cities around him succumb to decay and disease.

Performing Venus in Charles Vidor's Gilda

Androgyny as an aesthetic ideal is similarly replicated by actors and musicians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Marlene Dietrich swaggering across the cabaret stages of Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) and *Blonde Venus* (1932) in top hat and tails, David Bowie's interplanetary persona Ziggy Stardust, Andy Warhol's cadre of superstars, and Grace Jones's exaggerated, angular couture costumes and crew cut, all evoke the aesthetic and performed androgyny of the castrati. Whilst these performers may mimic the fatalistic aspects of the figures of La Zambinella and Zaffirino, aesthetic boundaries do not allow castrati's fatalisms and mutilations to become manifest. Rather, these performers of gender-bending inhabit the androgynous characteristics the castrati had forcibly thrust upon them. Due to the cultural decline of the creation of the castrati following the eighteenth century, the afterlives of the castrati are relegated to biographical depictions, such as Gérard Corbiau's film *Farinelli* (1995), music history and theory, and historical fiction, such as Anne Rice's novel *Cry to Heaven* (1990).

The afterlives of the *femme fatale* upon the stage fared better than that of the castrati. Recurring throughout film noir and neo-noirs, the *femme fatale* often figures as a club or lounge singer, performing torch songs of lost love and broken dreams. In Charles Vidor's noir *Gilda* (1946), the *femme fatale* as performer becomes fused to the image of the sculptural Venus, as Rita Hayworth's Gilda performs a sequence of numbers that tell of the destructive sensuality of woman. Performing Allan Roberts and Dora Fisher's 'Put the Blame on Mame', Gilda facetiously credits the amorous actions of a woman named Mame as the real cause of three well-known disastrous events in American history: the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Great Blizzard of 1888 in New York City, and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Adorned in

Jean Louis's sumptuous, strapless black sheath dress (inspired by John Singer Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X*, 1884) and shoulder length black silk gloves, Gilda dances before a wolfish crowd [fig. 5.5]. Cut just below the shoulder, Gilda's black gloves negate the appearance of her arms, and thus upon the stage, Gilda emulates the armless *Venus de Milo*. Intent upon angering her husband, Gilda begins to perform a striptease to further encourage the crowd's salacious applause. Of this striptease, Mary Doane writes that the 'fascination of a Gilda is the fascination of the glimpse rather than the ambivalent satisfaction of the full, sustained look. For the head-on look is simultaneously pleasurable and threatening.'²² Peeling back the fabric of her glove, Gilda envisions the *Venus de Milo* regaining her arms, the *femme fatale* reincarnated once again with full force. The bearing of Gilda's arms invokes both pleasure and potential threat, emphasizing Gilda's intent upon enacting her rage and frustration on the male lovers who have spurned her in the past. As Gilda herself says to her former lover, Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford), 'Hate is a very exciting emotion. Haven't you noticed? Very exciting. I hate you too, Johnny. I hate you so much I think I'm going to die from it. Darling... [Gilda kisses Johnny passionately] I think I'm going to die from it.'²³ Denying the Paterian phantasy of psychically imagining what has been lost from a fragmented image, Gilda's exposure of her arms agentially presents her as a full realized being, intent upon realizing her most deadly and destructive desires.

Although one may seek in vain for references of the Decadent androgynous *femme fatale* of the nineteenth century within scholarly debates concerning the brief assortment of texts discussed within this 'Coda', the influence and evocations are apparent. Concisely tracing the afterlives of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* as haunted portrait, corpse-doll, sculptural Venus and performer, it has here been the conclusive purpose to emphasize the little-studied nature of the influence of Decadence and the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* upon fictions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although a growing number of recent publications have provided a small renaissance in Decadent studies, it has been rare for these studies to extend beyond Modernism and early cinema. One recent text that bucks this trend, concerned with understanding contemporary cultural debates in terms of historical Decadence, is Ross Douthat's *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (2020). In an attempt to identify Western contemporary culture as Decadent, Douthat formulates a new

²² Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), p. 106.

²³ *Gilda* dir. by Charles Vidor (Columbia Pictures, 1946).

categorization of Decadence, influenced by the study of twenty-first-century politics, film and literature:

Decadence, deployed usefully, refers to economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development. It describes a situation in which repetition is more the norm than innovation; in which sclerosis afflicts public institutions and private enterprises alike; in which intellectual life seems to go in circles [...] And, crucially, the stagnation and decay are often a direct consequence of previous development. The decadent society is, by definition, a victim of its own significant success.²⁴

Douthat's claim that within a Decadent society intellectual debates seem to repeat themselves recalls the removal of John William Waterhouse's painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) from view in Manchester Art Gallery in early 2018. Echoing nineteenth-century conservative denouncements of Waterhouse's painting on the grounds of public morality and decency, contemporary critiques of Waterhouse reverberated with the same concerns, evoking the intellectual repetition and stagnation of Decadence. If, as Douthat posits, we exist within a Decadent society, it should be paramount that, moving forward, we as a culture do not censor or put under erasure visions of Decadence from the past. Rather, studies concerning the causation, documentation and effects of Decadence, such as those prevalent within the nineteenth century, must be conducted to not only understand the inner workings of our cultural history, but also our present and, ultimately, our future. Only in doing so can we come to understand the influence and effect of the nineteenth-century Decadent *femme fatale*.

²⁴ Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), pp. 8-9.

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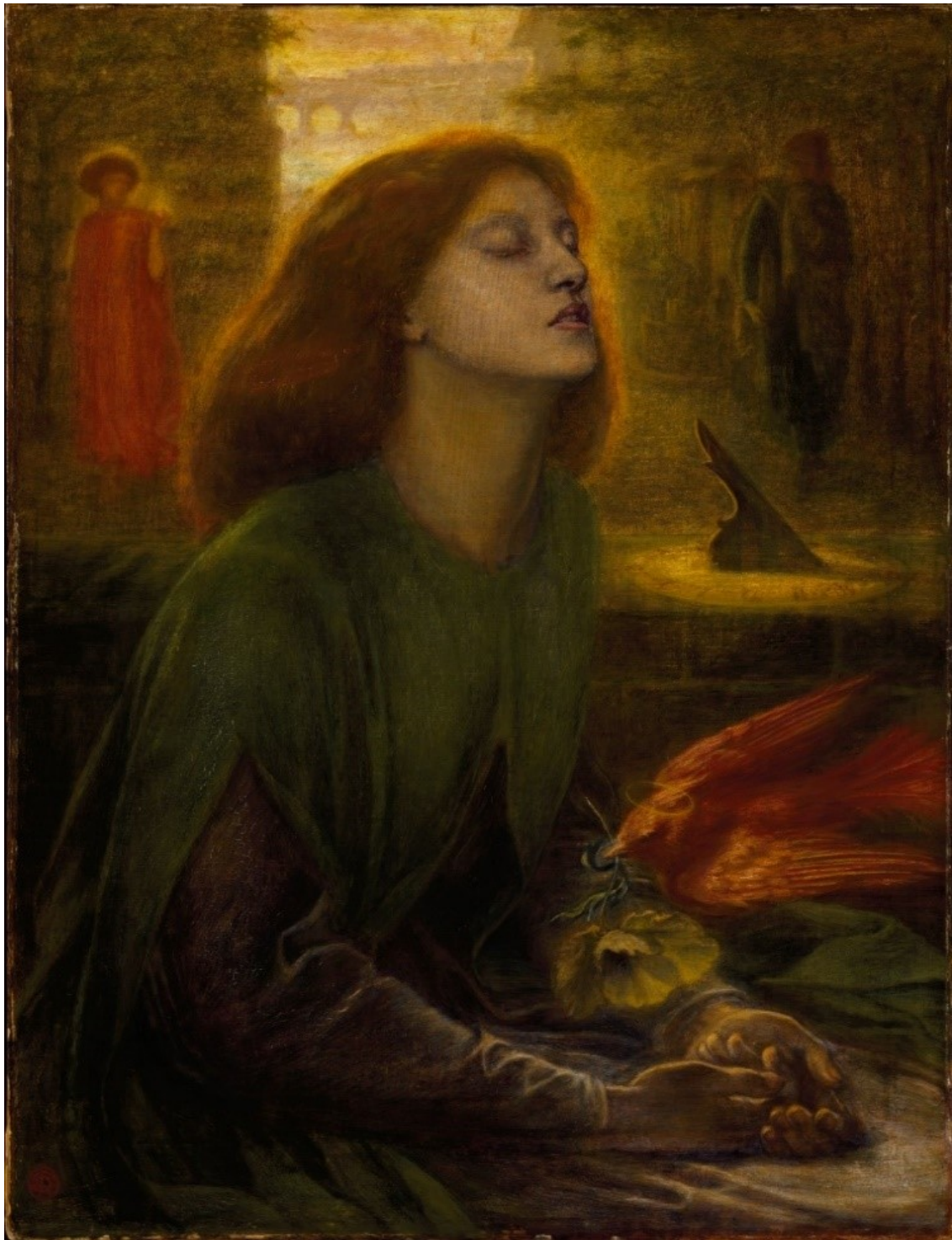


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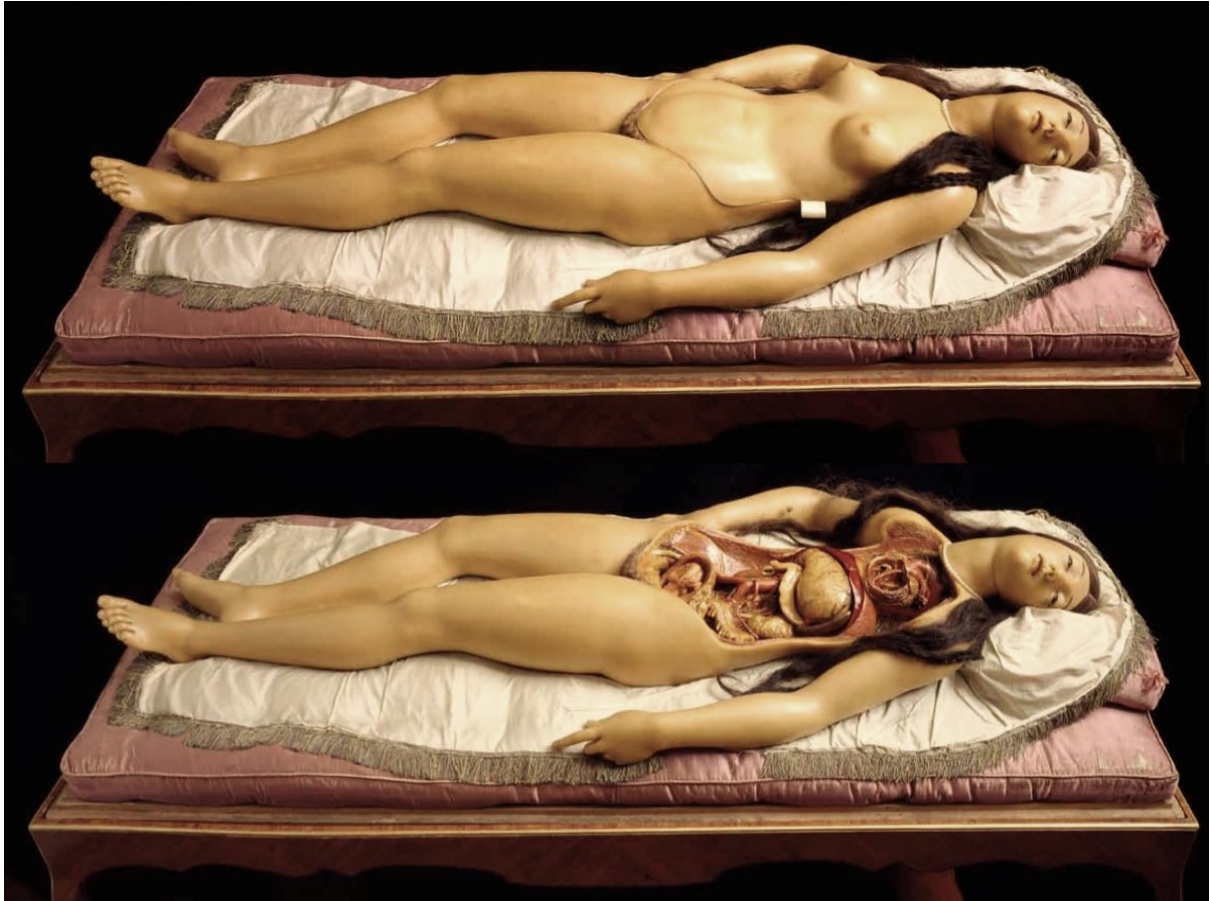


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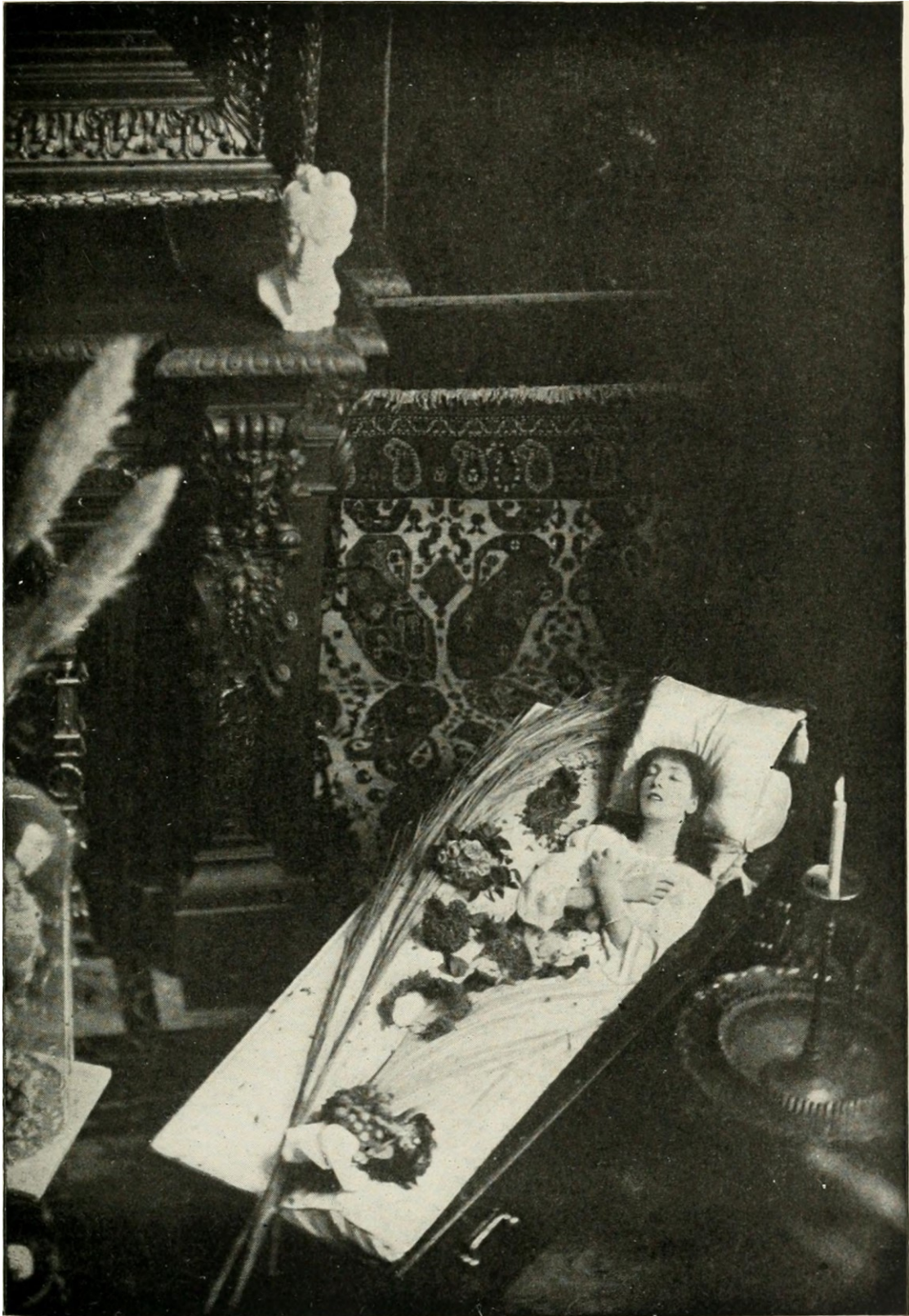


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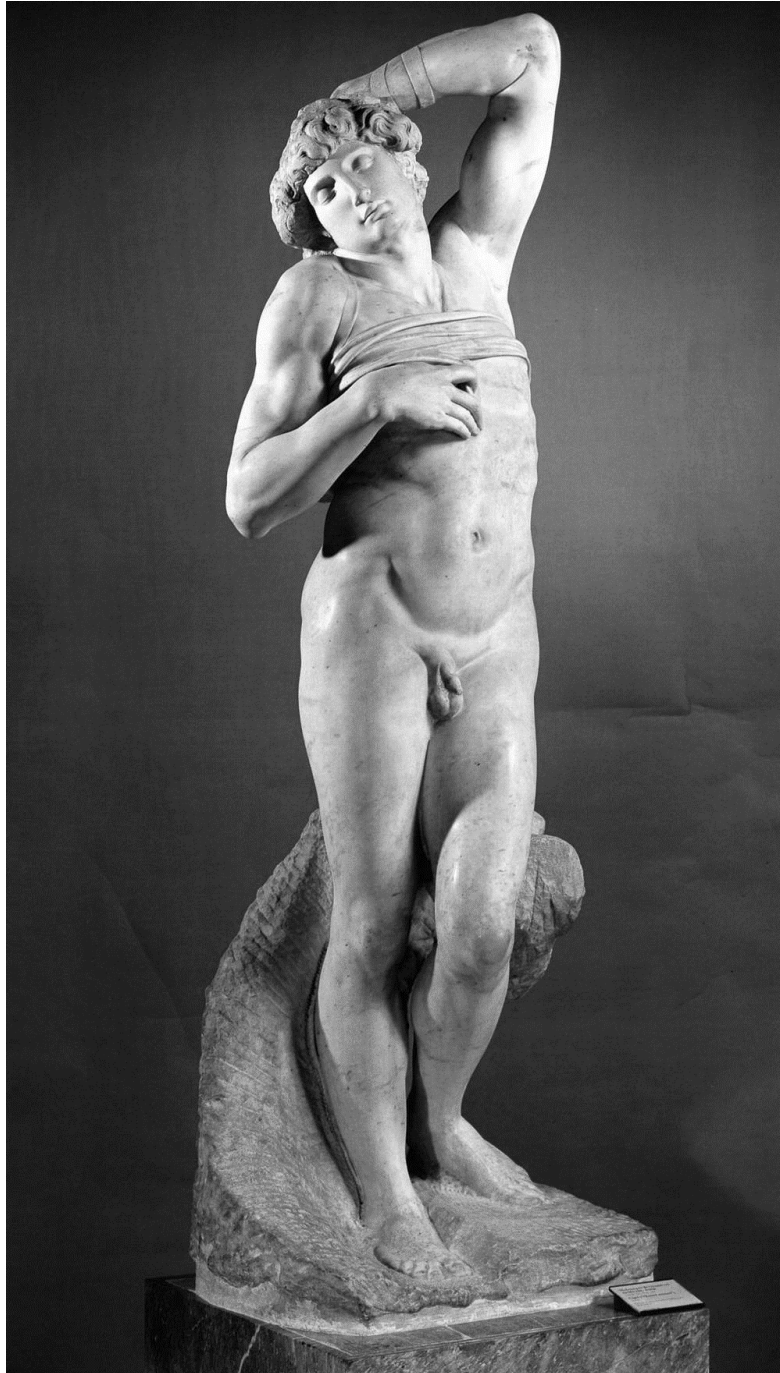
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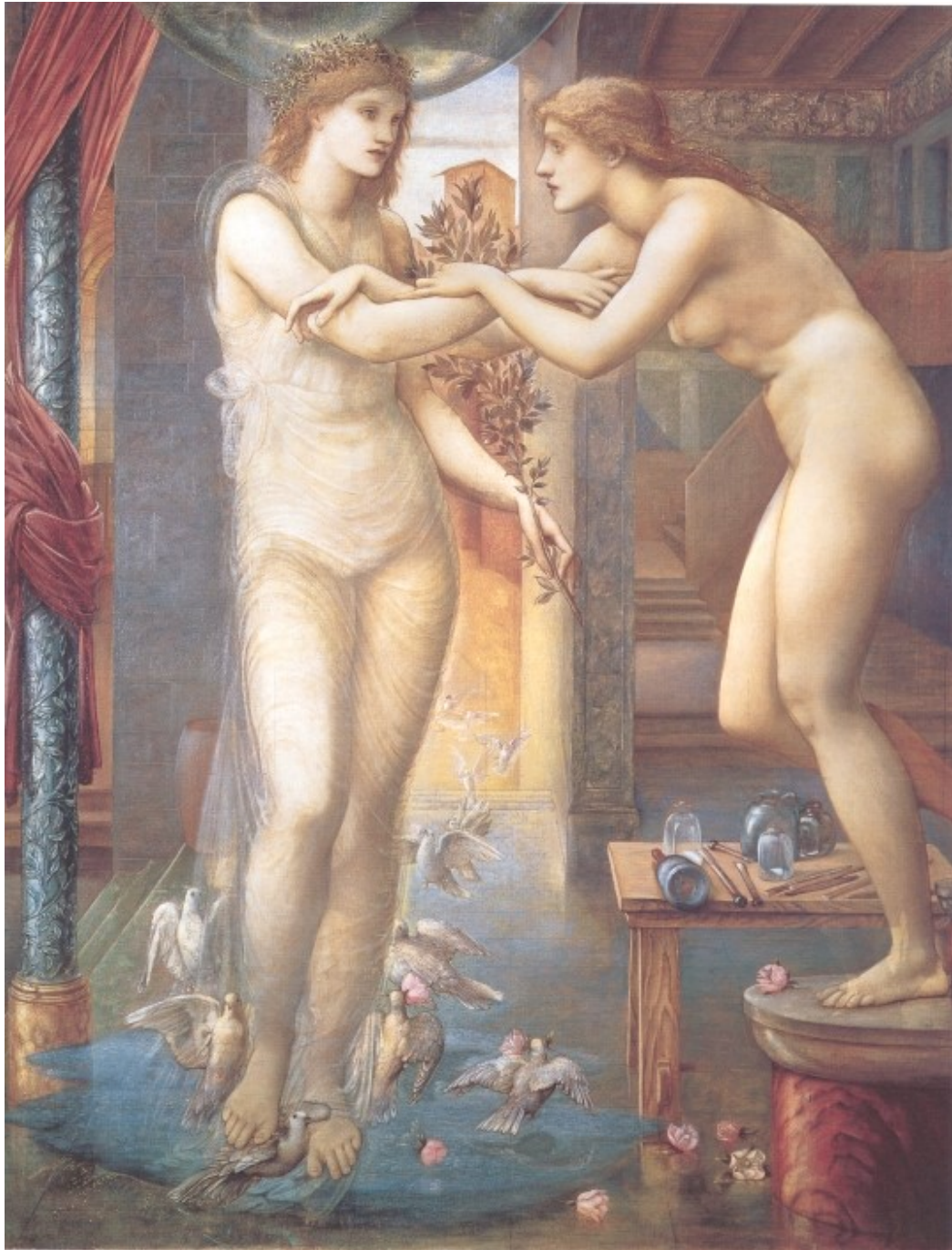


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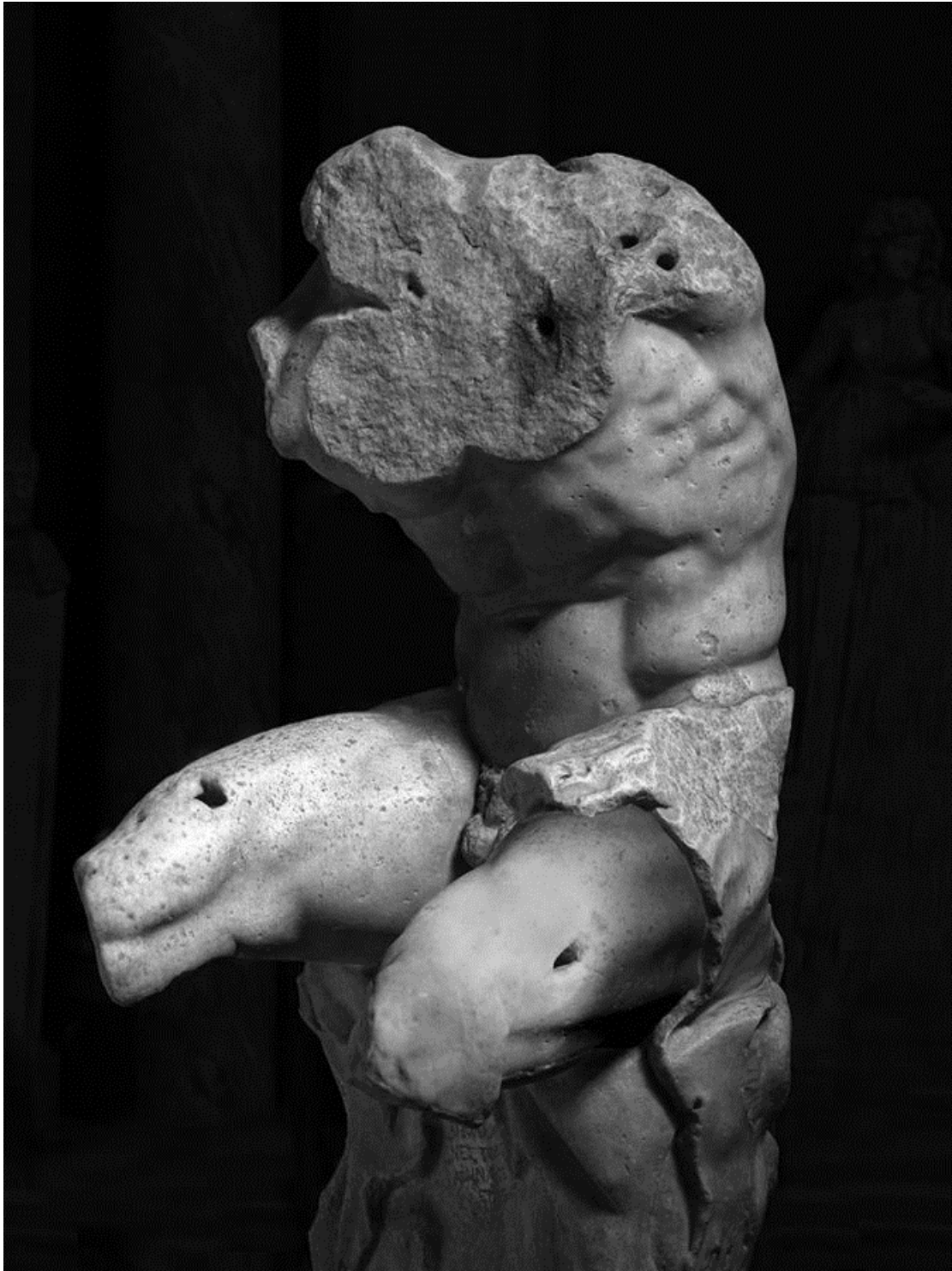


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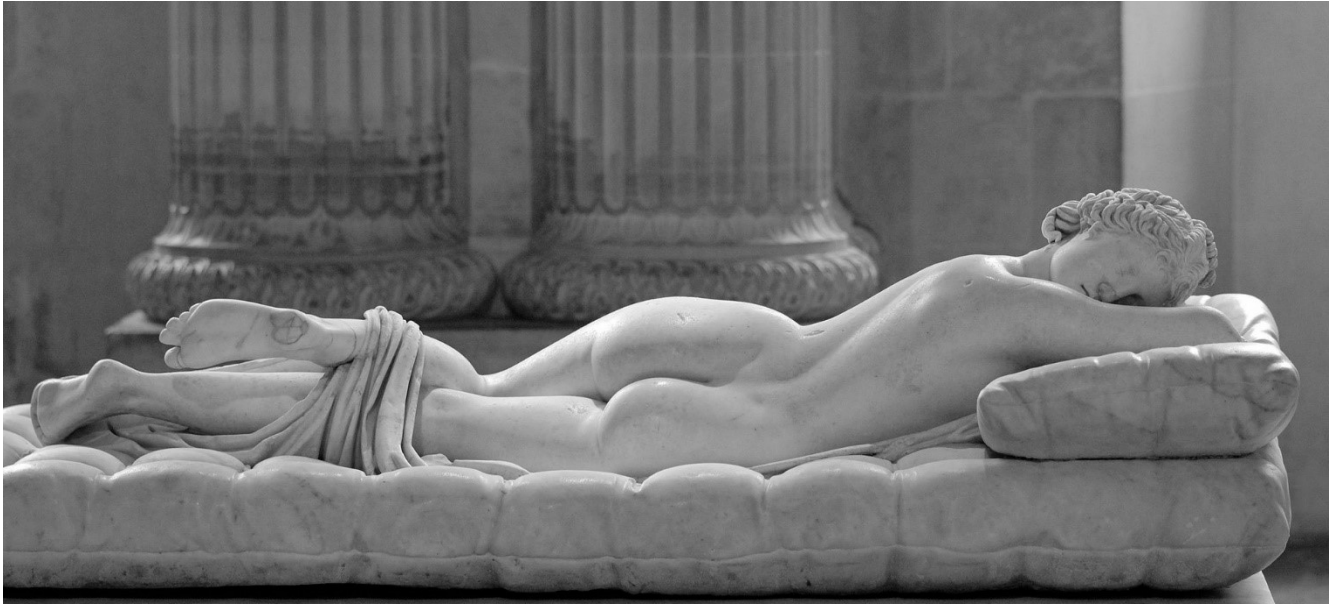


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