Stockholm University
Department of English

Challenging the Gothic Heroine in Vernon Lee's "Amour Dure" and "Dionea"

Malin Andersson
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Supervisor: Giles Whiteley

Abstract

The gothic heroine is known for her beauty, virtue, and tendency to flight, but the way in which this widely used gothic trope reinforces victimization of women in gothic stories has also been a topic of critique. This paper will examine how one *fin-de-siècle* writer, Vernon Lee, approaches this victimization of women in her collection of short gothic stories called *Hauntings* (1890). More specifically, this paper will analyse the portrayal of the main female characters in two of the stories from this collection: 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea'. I will argue that the way in which Lee presents her female characters in these two stories challenges the basic idea of the gothic heroine. The first point of focus for this analysis will be the portrayal of femme fatales in relation to the gothic heroine. Secondly, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze will be used to discern whether the stories confirm to or differ from, the trope of the gothic heroine. Finally, the focus of analysis will be the way in which the women are portrayed in relation to men in the stories. As the women are portrayed via the femme fatale archetype, attacking the men, and simultaneously embodying patriarchal female ideals and cohering to the male gaze, it seems like Lee is creating ambiguous gender perspectives in the stories. By destabilizing stereotypical gender roles like this, Lee seems to provide new perspectives on women's roles in gothic stories, which challenges the idea of the victimized gothic heroine, and by extension, the general victimization of women in gothic stories.

Keywords: femme fatale; female archetypes; male gaze, Laura Mulvey; Vernon Lee; victimization of women; gothic

Gothic literature experienced tremendous commercial success in the 19th century, driven by its primarily female readership. The gothic genre was often recognized as feminine and targeting a female audience, considering that most early writers and readers of gothic fiction were women (Davison 2012, 124). Angela Wright describes the ways in which the gothic heroine, starting in the late 18th century, was influenced by Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels that typically portrayed a young, beautiful, and virtuous heroine in flight from some violent threat (2016, 16). Wright continues by discussing how contemporary writers such as Mary Alcock and Jane Austen critiqued and satirized this image of the victimized gothic heroine in their texts (2016, 16-17). For example, as Wright also points out, in her poem "A Receipt for Writing a Novel" Alcock recognizes the ways in which writers exploited the gothic heroine for commercial gain. Another recent critic, Carol Davison, considering the gothic's manifestation of social realism in the first half of the 19th century, describes the ways in which "[t]he predominant image that emerges from these texts is of women imprisoned, circumscribed sexually, intellectually, and legally, a status that actually reflected women's contemporary socio-political reality" (2012, 129). In this description it is possible to recognize a wider pattern of gendered violence in society more broadly, one which in turn was played out in gothic stories through the heroine. Even though the trope of the gothic heroine met critique early on from authors such as Alcock and Austen, this figure has persisted and has arguably become an archetype in gothic literature. We can find her (or traces of her) in everything from *Jane Eyre* to *Dracula*. However, this archetype has not remained completely unchanged through history. Davison points out that the industrial revolution opened new possibilities for women in

society, which also increased the pressure on the question of women's rights (2012, 125). This societal change influenced literature and society, including gothic literature and thereby also the gothic heroine. Maria Giakaniki describes how later in the 19th century, *fin-de-siècle* writers "created more sophisticated ghost stories, exposing complex psychological issues" (2021, 300). One such writer is Vernon Lee, whose gothic stories will be discussed in this essay.

Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of Violet Paget, born in France to British parents. Lee had a profound interest in aesthetics: she was a supporter of the Aesthetic movement of the late 19th century and a lot of her work was centred around this subject, writing essays on music, art, and travel (Pulham and Maxwell 2006, xvi). On the one hand, this interest in the Aesthetic movement dovetailed with Lee's interest in gender politics. As Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell have noted, Lee embraced and "exceeded the fashionable dress codes of the New Woman" (2006, 44). But at the same time, Lee had an uncertain relationship with women's rights, hesitating to commit herself to "The Woman Question", and did for example not agree with the actions taken by the suffragettes (Colby 2003, 273). However, this hesitation changed when Lee read Charlotte Perkins Stetson's (Gilman) *Women and Economics* (1898) where she found the strongest argument to be that women were "over-sexed": that women were perceived only by means of their being females (Colby 2003, 274). Men on the other hand, were not only perceived as males, but they were also perceived, for example, through their profession or their personal skills (Colby 2003, 274). Yet despite the impact of Stenson's book on her thinking, Lee remained distanced from active engagement in the question of a woman's right to vote, subordinating the issue to "what she considered higher causes of social justice" (Colby 2003, 274).

Besides her work on aesthetics, Lee is perhaps best-known today for her gothic stories. In 1890, she published *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, a collection of four supernatural stories where ghosts, psychological obsession, characters that challenge the gender binary and allusions to the past are important elements. This work will be the focus for this paper. A great deal has been written about the collection, particularly since the late 1990s, and much of the literary criticism tends to focus on the theme of queerness, or how the characters in the stories challenge non-normative sexuality. In addition, critics have discussed how these gothic texts are an extension of Lee's work on aestheticism. Victoria Margree and Bryony Randall argues that Lee's *Hauntings* revises earlier *fin-de-siècle* gothic by exploring "non-normative sexual desires and

identities" and thus challenging the debate around the limits of science during a period when "'sexologists' were claiming human sexuality for the authority of scientific discourse" (2012, 230-231). Furthermore, Margree and Randall claims that Lee challenges the authority of 'modern ghost experts' – who are parodied in her preface to *Hauntings*. For Margree and Randall, Lee does not discount the existence of the supernatural, but holds that its origin lies outside the range of the 'logical' or scientific. Instead, it is something that can be "conveyed only by an aesthetic capable of retaining ambiguity" (2012, 231). Stefano Evangelista combines the theme of non-normative gender and sexuality in *Hauntings* with a discussion of Lee's work on aesthetics. For Evangelista, "haunting" is an "aesthetic" exercise, and in the volume, Lee "explore[s] the relationship between art, scholarship and sexuality on which aestheticism is founded" (2006, 107). Similarly, Angela Leighton argues that Lee "uses the ghost story to express the seductiveness and ambiguity of aestheticism itself" (2000, 2).

However, while much has been written about *Hauntings*, one aspect that has not been given as much attention is how the female characters in the stories are portrayed in relation to the idea of the victimized gothic heroine. In other words, while previous scholars have considered the question of gender, sexuality and aesthetics, the ways in which Lee's heroines are placed into dialogue with gothic tropes has been less widely discussed. This essay will argue that Lee's stories challenge the trope of the victimized gothic heroine by utilizing different means of portrayal to destabilize gender expectations. Examining the stories from this perspective might provide a wider understanding of Lee's gothic, illuminating how and to what effect Lee uses these gothic tropes. The analysis will focus on two texts in particular, 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea'. Both texts are narrated by men in diary form, but centres around two female characters who appear to be the cause of the various troubles in the stories. These two stories are selected for analysis specifically on the grounds of their portrayal of a main female character that in some way threatens a male character. This essay will examine the way in which the idea of the gothic heroine is used in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' and how this in turn may challenge victimization of women in gothic stories. My analysis rests in part on the assumption that Lee's characters are in some fashion femme fatales, defined by the *OED* as 'An attractive and seductive woman, esp. one who is likely to cause risk to or the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her.' (Oxford English Dictionary 2021), and a figure in vogue during the *fin de siècle*. Another point of discussion will be Lee's classical inspirations for the texts, as well as

the theory of the *male gaze* as defined by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In addition to this, the way in which Lee uses gender perspectives to challenge victimization of women in gothic stories will also be discussed.

Firstly, it might be useful to establish some background understanding of the two femme fatales in the chosen stories and examine the classical inspiration for these characters. 'Amour Dure' is about the young historian Trepka who discovers the story of a 16th century Italian noblewoman called Medea da Carpi, renowned for having caused the deaths of all the men in her life. Trepka develops an obsession with Medea and starts seeing her everywhere he goes. Medea asks him to avenge her death in exchange for a meeting, which ultimately leads to his death. A similar femme fatale is the main female character in 'Dionea', which tells the story of a girl who is washed up on the beach of an Italian coastal village. As Dionea grows into a beautiful young woman, chaos breaks out in the village, and it is implied that she is the incarnation of an ancient goddess. Heather Braun has argued that during the 19th century "[t]he figure of the femme fatale served as a catalyst for revising biblical and mythical tales: Eve, Salomé, Medea, Circe, the Sirens, and Lilith represented the antitheses of the perception that women were the pristine upholders of virtue and restraint" (2012, 11). This is something that Lee seems to be doing in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea', where she has clearly used classical inspiration for Medea and Dionea.

In 'Amour Dure', the name of the femme fatale is inspired by the sorceress Medea in Greek mythology. In ancient Greek, the name Medea means 'schemer' or 'planner', which reflects her actions in the myth where she for example helps her husband Jason make plans to find the golden fleece. But it also alludes to Medea planning a violent revenge against Jason when he leaves her for another woman, as portrayed in Euripides' famous play *Medea*. In Lee's 'Amour Dure', the etymology of this name is also reflected in the character of Medea da Carpi, who cunningly but violently works her way to different positions of power. Medea from the Greek mythology and Medea da Carpi are femme fatales, a point which we can find sketched in 'Amour Dure':

> Right and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist, least of all for creatures like Medea. Go preach right and wrong to a tigress, my dear sir! Yet is there in the world anything nobler than the huge creature, steel when she springs, velvet when she treads, as she stretches her supple body, or smooths her beautiful skin, or fastens her strong claws into her victim? (22-23)

This excerpt from the text supports the idea of Medea as a femme fatale and is likely also a way to force the reader to make this association. In the excerpt Medea is likened to a tiger: tigers are exotic animals, and 'othered' during the period. In Victorian England the tiger was associated with the orient and stood as a symbol of the top predator. Not only is Medea likened to a tiger but a *tigress*, a female tiger, which may have been supposed to make Lee's readers react and understand Medea as a dangerous woman. Like Medea in 'Amour Dure', 'Dionea' too has its classical inspiration. As the male narrator of this story, Doctor Alessandro De Rosis puts it, "Dionea seemed to scandalize everyone, perhaps because these good folk had a mysterious instinct that the name is derived from Dione, one of the loves of Father Zeus, and mother of no less a lady than the goddess Venus" (65). The predecessor of the Roman goddess Venus was the Greek love goddess Aphrodite. In the story there are continuous hints that make us associate Dionea with Aphrodite or Venus. Dionea is often surrounded by doves, myrtle, and roses, all of which are symbolic to Aphrodite (Colby 2003, 237-238). For example, when the narrator meets Medea on the beach "she had twisted a wreath of myrtle and wild roses on her black, crisp hair" (88). And wherever Dionea goes, she causes love problems among the villagers, which further suggests a connection to the love goddess. Unlike Medea, the Greek mythology of Aphrodite or Venus is arguably not portraying them as femme fatales. However, in the context of the 19th century they are non-Christian goddesses and therefore 'othered'. Lee seems to draw on these classical figures and resituates them in her own story as the femme fatale Dionea.

As the narratives progress, it becomes obvious that these two characters do not really belong in the 19th century world in which the stories take place. In the case of Medea, she quite literally belongs to another period in time, since she is presented as a long dead renaissance noblewoman whose ghost is allegedly seen by to the story's narrator Trepka. Dionea also has what might be called a supernatural or mysterious aura. She is for example described as exceptionally strong and beautiful, and her past, her arrival and her leaving the coastal village is highly mysterious. It may be possible to argue that it is characteristic of gothic fiction to make use of old myths and legends like these, perhaps as a hint to the supernatural which is often associated with the gothic. Lee's way of using mythical inspiration for her characters might therefore be viewed as gothic. Nevertheless, while Lee's gothic stories are products of the *fin de siècle*, they do not fit neatly into certain histories of the gothic. On the one hand, they are not set in the late nineteenth century urban metropolis, as in *Dracula*. On the other hand, nor are

they set in a recognizably 'gothic' past. This is important to consider, because it may impact upon any claims about the gothic (heroine trope) in Lee's *Hauntings*. Gothic literature, particularly in Britain, is mainly focused on northern European history. If it is true that the gothic connotes horror situated in a medieval, and northern European context, then the 'classical' horror of Lee's 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' seems to problematise this. Recently, James Uden (2020) has written about the way in which the classics inspired the gothic, Uden suggests that, instead of being subject to repression in the gothic tradition, as most critics have suggested, the presence of classical literature in gothic stories might in itself be gothic, as it also brings back the uncanny power of the return of the past (Whiteley 2021, 131). In this sense, the femme fatale characters in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' would be precisely this, classical ghosts' producing the uncanny effect of a return of the past.

This classical femme fatale inspiration of the dangerous sorceress Medea and the pagan love goddess Aphrodite is one indicator of the fact that Medea and Dionea are actual femme fatales. Looking back on the OED definition of 'femme fatale', these classical figures reflect the two major characteristics which distinguish the femme fatale: a woman who is possibly dangerous, and also involving love or lust. Braun elaborates on this idea and gives a more detailed description and a historical understanding of the femme fatale:

> The changeable figure of the femme fatale has long embodied increasing fears about the mutability of gender and class. Throughout the nineteenth century, the fatal woman was a ready symbol for a variety of cultural concerns including sex, aggression, disease, madness, foreign contagion, and social degeneration. By the second half of the century, parallel epidemics of prostitution, pornography, and venereal disease emerged in fictional works depicting femmes fatales who were eventually punished for their deviant acts of seduction. Traditionally, such deviant acts were labeled masculine by leading medical experts such as William Acton, but they soon became linked to a female-centered social deviance that required restraint as well as retribution. We see this in such popular and experimental forms as sensation novels that feature independent women whose temporary freedom made only a minor impression on traditional notions of social class and masculine power. (Braun 2012, 11)

William Acton was a famous medical doctor in the 19th century, especially dedicated to gynaecology, who strongly believed that women did not have sexual desires (Degler 1974, 1467). Acton argued that sexual appetite was an exclusively male quality necessary for procreation, and that women were not "very much troubled with sexual

feelings of any kind", except perhaps as a necessary evil for fulfilling their strong desire to become mothers (Degler 1974, 1467). This historical perspective on sexuality is important when considering how the trope of the gothic heroine is challenged in Lee's stories, because these ideas and expectations of women during the time are reflected in the characteristics of the fair, good and virtuous gothic heroine. Just as Braun argues, the femme fatale represents the opposite of this female ideal and the way in which Lee uses the femme fatale characteristics (or what the femme fatale character embodied during this period) defies female gender roles such as these. Lee's femme fatale characters, who are dangerous and sexual, and dangerous because of their sexuality, therefore challenge the trope of the victimized gothic heroine. However, Braun's statement about femme fatales being "eventually punished for their deviant acts of seduction" is complicated in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea'. During her lifetime, Medea was punished to die for using her beauty to charm and kill the men in her life in order to take advantage of their powerful positions in society. However, in the shape of a ghost in the present of the story Medea takes revenge on her killer. Similarly, Dionea is criminalized by society for her sexuality (Whiteley 2020, 782). This makes it difficult for her to join the village community, but she also seems to at least take some action against this sexualisation by for example punishing advancements from men; a point which will be discussed in more detail in a later paragraph. The fact that Lee portrays Medea and Dionea as both being punished and defending themselves is interesting because it might be viewed as a way of challenging the way in which women are victimized in gothic stories. The trope of the gothic heroine seems to embody the most esteemed female ideals, while the femme fatale often connotes more negative ideas such as "increasing fears about the mutability of gender" (Braun 2012, 11). Yet, they both seem to be subjected to victimization and contemporary expectations of women. This is a result of society's expectations on women as shaped by patriarchal structures. In relation to the fair gothic heroine and the sexually attractive femme fatale, it is relevant to discuss the patriarchal *male gaze*.

Laura Mulvey was first to popularise the use of the term male gaze. While Mulvey uses the theory to analyse film, she also points out how the theory is not "intrinsic to film" (1999, 833), suggesting that it can be applied to all kinds of different situations. Mulvey's theory explains how visual art tends to be created and structured around a male spectator. This theory analyses how women in visual art are positioned in the work from a male point of view, on male conditions and using masculine

attitudes. By doing this, Mulvey's theory aims to reveal how women are sexually objectified and presented as passive objects to be looked at from a heterosexual male point of view. Mulvey explains that this perspective is also often forced onto the observer via the dramaturgy. Furthermore, Mulvey argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly" (1999, 837). The final part of this claim reflects contemporary expectations of women and might be used to indicate that the image of the gothic heroine appeals to the male gaze. Wright describes the typical gothic heroine as "well-read, refined, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, lachrymose heroines" (2016, 16). She also mentions Deirdre Le Faye's observation of typical Gothic heroines as being "of high birth, angelic beauty, extreme virtue and sensibility, and although usually orphaned and invariably growing up in poverty on some lonely foreign mountainside, nevertheless are so naturally gifted as to possess all the female accomplishments" (Le Faye 2002, as cited in Wright 2016, 16-17). All these attributes could be said to reflect the ideal woman of the time, a figure who is, in Mulvey's terms, styled according to the dominating patriarchal structures and attitudes in society. In addition to this, the trope of the gothic heroine also contains the element of flight (Wright 2016, 15). The gothic heroine is often 'hunted' by a male sexual predator, or in some way threatened by male violence. Of course, the gothic heroine is not limited to these attributes only, but overall, the quintessential trope of the gothic heroine and the general portrayal of women in gothic fiction, conform to contemporary female ideals like the ones mentioned above. A similar focus on ideals and appearance of women can be found in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea'. Owning to this, Mulvey's ideas are useful in reading Lee's short stories.

Readers of 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' get to know the characters Medea and Dionea only through the male narrators. Both women and their physical attributes are described in great detail on several different occasions in the texts. For example, Trepka gives a long and detailed description of Medea after having found a sculpture and a miniature portrait of her:

> The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls […] 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 red-haired beauty. (17-18)

In this passage, words like “mystery”, “seductiveness” and “suck” suggests a sexual tone, which is projected onto Medea’s character by the narrator, which in turn forces the male heterosexual perspective on to the reader. The more negative connotations made in this excerpt, such as “sinister”, “bite” and “leech” might be a hint to the femme fatale, which is usually connected to signs of ‘evil’ or ‘danger’. The role of the femme fatale could arguably suit the male gaze in the sense that this role might be viewed as a patriarchal idea of an attractive but ‘bad’ woman who leads men astray. However, the focus of this excerpt seems to be on Medea’s perfect beauty, which reflects Mulvey’s idea about objectification of women and the way in which the “male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure” (1999, 837).

A similar focus on appearance is present in ‘Dionea’, where the narrator describes how, not long after her arrival to the village, the young Dionea has become famous for her beauty and has earned the nickname “La bella Dionea” (73). He describes her appearance several times in the story focusing on her beauty:

> Dionea, instead of skill, has got the prettiest face of any little girl in Montemirto. She is tall, for her age (she is eleven) quite wonderfully well proportioned and extremely strong: of all the convent-full, she is the only one for whom I have never been called in. The features are very regular, the hair black, and despite all the good Sisters’ efforts to keep it smooth like a Chinaman’s, beautifully curly. I am glad she should be pretty, for she will more easily find a husband; and also because it seems fitting that your protégée should be beautiful. (67)

In the last sentence of this excerpt Dionea is objectified in the sense that her being pretty might please a future husband, in other words, being pretty will make her more attractive and appealing to the heterosexual male gaze. In the excerpt Dionea is also clearly eroticized by the narrator who is describing her, a girl of eleven, as having “the prettiest face” and being “wonderfully well proportioned”. This erotization occurs throughout the story, for example, the narrator later describes Dionea as “an amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, torturous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci’s women” (72). Another example of this erotization of Dionea could be when the narrator writes that “it is magnificent to see Dionea, in her short white skirt and tight white bodice, mixing the smoking lime with her beautiful strong arms” (80). This focus on Dionea’s beauty might be possible to connect to what Mulvey calls to-be-looked-at-ness. Mulvey writes that: “[i]n the traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they

can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (1999, 837). This idea is visualised in the story as Dionea's appearance is literally being made into a statue when she is modelling for Waldemar's Venus sculpture. The role of a statue is exactly this; being simultaneously looked at and displayed. This way of portraying a woman as appealing to the male gaze also positions her as a victim or a passive target for the pleasure of a male heterosexual spectator. In addition, this portrayal of Medea and Dionea is, as well as the overall male perspective of the story, forced on to the reader via the narration (Mulvey 1999, 836). Just like the gothic heroine trope, Lee's two femme fatales are subjected to appeal to the male gaze. On the one hand, the stories have this objectifying male perspective which places a great deal of focus on the women's appearance. On the other hand, the two main female characters in 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' are portrayed as strong, independent, and possibly dangerous. This portrayal is a stark contrast to the quintessential portrayal of the gothic heroine described by for example Wright as fair, nervous, in need of rescue or being in flight from some violent threat (2016, 16). Unlike the gothic heroine, Medea and Dionea are not the victims of violence in the stories, neither are they under any threat of violence. Rather, they seem to be the cause of much of the violence. Instead, it is the male characters who are the ones being haunted and killed by Medea and Dionea in the two stories. This suggests at least the possibility of a kind of inversion at work: an alternative image suggesting a male version of the victimized gothic heroine.

One example of this alternative image may be seen in 'Amour Dure' where Medea is described as a woman who changed her position in society by killing men that stood in her way. Trepka summarizes Medea's life story in the beginning of 'Amour Dure' as follows: "She was put to death just two hundred and ninety-seven years ago, December 1582, at the age of barely seven-and twenty, and having, in the course of her short life, brought to a violent end five of her lovers, from Giovanfrancesco Pico to Prinzivalle degli Ordelaffi" (16). Here, he is describing the violence Medea used to work her way to a position of increasing power, which points to Medea as a threat of violence. Since Trepka is a man, these historical facts about Medea's violent ways might be expected to leave him with a negative attitude towards her. But instead Trepka seems fascinated by this type of personality in a woman. This fascination becomes especially evident when he asks himself:

> What has become of the race of Faustinas, Marozias, Bianca Cappellos? Where discover nowadays (I confess she haunts me) another Medea da

> Carpi? Were it only possible to meet a woman of that extreme distinction of beauty, of that terribleness of nature, even if only potential, I do believe I could love her, even to the Day of Judgment, like any Oliverotto da Narni, or Frangipani or Prinzivalle. (19)

Here, Trepka is confessing that he is haunted by Medea. However, such a 'haunting' is likely to be more a figure of speech and not actually indicating that he is physically or mentally visited by the ghost of Medea da Carpi. On the one hand, Trepka might be perceived as a rather unreliable narrator, since the story is only told from his perspective, an idea given further support when he mentions that his family is prone to unstable mental health: "It is ridiculous that I should be put into such a state of excitement merely by the chance discovery of a portrait of a woman dead these three hundred years. With the case of my uncle Ladislas, and other suspicions of insanity in my family, I ought really to guard against such foolish excitement" (31). However, on the other hand, in contrast to the gothic heroine in flight who is usually the one being haunted or in some way chased (Wright 2016, 16), but using the information provided in the excerpt above, it might in this case be Medea who is haunting Trepka.

Ever since Trepka arrived in the Italian hometown of Medea, where he is supposed to be writing a paper on Italian history, he cannot seem to get her off his mind. Later in the story, Trepka's obsession with Medea is further enforced when he gets in contact with her and starts seeing her (or supposedly her ghost) in the streets. This obsession develops to the point that he becomes convinced that he must avenge her death. In this sense, Medea becomes something of a stalker. Trepka might not be explicitly "in flight from some violent threat", as Wright puts it (2016, 16). He does however seem to be mentally haunted by Medea, who is renowned for killing all the men in her life, which makes her a potential threat. Regarding the trope of the gothic heroine, we have seen that this way of stalking or posing a threat are usually actions taken by male characters directed towards women. Sexual threats or behaviours are traditionally also connected to men but, as Braun points out, is also portrayed via the femme fatale (2012, 14). The way in which Medea's person and extreme beauty haunts Trepka might be viewed as a type of stalking or 'seductive luring', which in turn poses a threat to him, even if he does not seem to realise it himself. This threat of violence comes to its culmination at the end of the story, after Trepka has avenged Medea's death and believes that he can finally hear her approaching him in the night. However, instead of a meeting between the two, the story ends with a note: "Professor Spiridion Trepka of Posen, in the German Empire, had been discovered dead of a stab in the

region of the heart, given by an unknown hand" (58). It is never explicitly confirmed who murders Trepka, but this ending would suggest the possibility, at least, that it is in fact the ghost of Medea who kills him. The death of Trepka and his being haunted by Medea might thus be viewed as an inverted version of the victimized gothic heroine.

This pattern of the woman causing trouble is also present in 'Dionea', but in a slightly different form. Dionea is not well-received by the villagers since they believe her to be the cause of a wave of love drama that seems to have taken over the village. The narrator reflects on these accusations: "It will be difficult to find a place for Dionea, and in this neighborhood well-nigh impossible. The people associate her somehow with the death of Father Domenico, which has confirmed her reputation of having the evil eye" (79). In this story, Dionea seems to be the one haunting people, just like Medea does in 'Amour Dure'. More specifically, Dionea seems to possess supernatural powers which poses a threat to the people around her. On the one hand, her presence supposedly causes inexplicable love drama among the villagers. On the other hand, she also seems to punish those who do her wrong. For example, the narrator writes that a man called Sor Agostino has made advancements on Dionea, which she disproved off. Later in the story the narrator writes: "Last week the lightning struck a huge olive in the orchard of Sor Agostino's house above Sarzana. Under the olive was Sor Agostino himself, who was killed on the spot; and opposite, not twenty paces off, drawing water from the well, unhurt and calm, was Dionea" (80). Nowhere in the quote, nor in the rest of the text, is it made explicit that Dionea is the actual cause of these events. However, it is suggested or hinted in different ways that Dionea is the cause of the man's death. Even in this short excerpt it might be possible to see hints in the adjectives describing Dionea as "unhurt" and "calm", which might seem strange or suspicious in a traumatic event of almost being struck to death by lightning. This makes it seem like Dionea was aware that this was going to happen, which is further enforced by her telling the narrator that "if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident" (82). According to Wright, the gothic heroine typically resorts to fleeing or being rescued in situations like these (2016, 17). While wanting to avoid all kinds of sexual intimacy may be in line with contemporary female ideals, to take forceful actions to defend oneself from a sexual threat like this would perhaps defy expectations of female passiveness (Degler 1974, 1467). Lee's way of portraying a woman who punishes unwanted sexual advancements from men therefore illustrates a very different type of character than the gothic heroine.

A similar event in the story occurs when Dionea agrees to model for a sculpture of Venus. The man who is making the sculpture is called Waldemar and during the sculpting process he seems to become obsessed with Dionea. The narrator describes how Waldemar has been heard shouting "How beautiful she is! Good God, how beautiful!" (94) and how he calls on Dionea to model for him in the studio at night. It is not clear what happens between him and Dionea in the studio, but it is suggested that Waldemar might be unfaithful to his wife Gertrude. In a fashion similar to Medea in 'Amour Dure', Dionea seems to have some kind of influence over Waldemar, which seems to lead to his death in the end. However, the ending is ambiguous especially considering that his wife Gertrude also dies. The following excerpt from the text describes the death of Waldemar and his wife Gertrude:

> 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? It looked like one, as we hurried down the hills to San Massimo: the whole hillside, dry grass, myrtle, and heather, all burning, the pale short flames waving against the blue moonlit sky, and the old fortress outlined black against the blaze. (102)

In this scene it is made clear that both Waldemar and his wife are dead. It is not quite clear how they die, but there are several different hints as to what might have occurred. Dionea is never explicitly identified as being their killer, however, it could be Lee's intention to make the reader believe that Dionea is the cause of their deaths. Symbolic hints to Aphrodite, which in the story is strongly associated with Dionea, are everywhere in this passage. For example, the mention of myrtle and roses which has been a reoccurring theme for Dionea throughout the story (Colby 2003, 237-238). The fact that Waldemar is found among the cliffs also suggests a strong connection to Dionea because it was on a similar spot, washed up from the sea among the cliffs that she was first found when she came to the village. This would of course allude to Aphrodite being born from the sea foam and stepping in land on a cliff. These details make it seem as if Dionea with her supposed 'supernatural influence' has caused Waldemar to first, kill his wife, and then commit suicide by jumping of the cliffs. Because of these two deaths, the scene becomes particularly interesting in relation to the gothic heroine trope, because if Lee wanted to challenge the trope, why would she

also kill the woman in the end? Does killing an innocent woman like Gertrude not defeat the purpose of trying to challenge the victimization of women in gothic stories? This may be interpreted in different ways. The story shows how "society criminalises a young woman for her sexuality" and Gertrude's death on the altar may easily be interpreted as a "sacrifice to patriarchal desire" (Whiteley 2020, 782). Considering aspects like these, the ending might just give the impression that patriarchal violence is inescapable, and that society and gothic literacy is inherently misogynistic. While this may be true, one important point to take away from this ambiguous ending is the fact that the story ends with the suggested thought of a woman as a killer or 'threat of violence'. In other words, the way in which this ending challenges the gothic heroine trope and victimization of women in gothic stories is by placing a woman in the typically male role of being 'a threat of violence' or to 'perform violence'. Again, suggesting a kind of inverted version of the victimized gothic heroine.

This alternative image of victimization suggested in both 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea', is also interesting in relation to the narrative perspective of the stories. Lee, a woman, is writing from a male perspective, as seen in the male narrators and the male gaze. However, in 'Amour Dure' there are some instances where this dominating male narrative perspective seems compromised or ambiguous. In the following excerpt, the narrator Trepka considers Medea's questionable actions in relation to her life situation:

> Yes; I can understand Medea […] Medea marries her Orsini. A marriage, let it be noted, between an old soldier of fifty and a girl of sixteen. Reflect what that means: it means that this imperious woman is soon treated like a chattel, made roughly to understand that her business is to give the Duke an heir, not advice; that she must never ask "wherefore this or that?" that she must courtesy before the Duke's counselors, his captains, his mistresses; that, at the least suspicion of rebelliousness, she is subject to his foul words and blows; at the least suspicion of infidelity, to be strangled or starved to death, or thrown down an oubliette. (23)

In this excerpt the narrator Trepka seems to defend Medea's actions in life by stating that he "can understand Medea". This way of trying to understand Medea becomes evident when Trepka points out difficult aspects of the young Medea's life situation and explicitly urges to "reflect on what that means". On the other hand, it might be possible to argue that Trepka takes on this perspective simply because he is haunted by Medea, and she forces him to take on this perspective of her as a form of excuse for her image as a coldblooded killer. However, Nicole Fluhr claims that the ghosts in Lee's *Hauntings* represent history and haunts the characters in the stories like history may

haunt people in real life (2006, 289). Fluhr argues that "[t]hrough their relationships with ghosts, the narrators are able to approach the past from the intimate perspective of another's consciousness, rather than from the distanced perspective of objective study" (2006, 289). If this is true, it must also follow that the narrators are able to take on "the intimate perspective" of a woman's consciousness. In this sense, it is Medea's haunting of Trepka that makes this reflection of a victimized woman possible. Regardless, by having the narrator give this reflection Lee provides a completely different perspective, not only on Medea as a character, but in terms of the narration, which could be said to highlight unjust treatment towards a young woman.

To conclude, Medea and Dionea, who are both portrayed as potentially dangerous and as sexual beings, stand in stark contrast to the fair and virtuous gothic heroine. However, when considering Mulvey's male gaze theory, the gothic heroine and Lee's characters still share some similarities. The narrative forces the reader to take on a male, heterosexual perspective where Medea and Dionea are objectified very much like the gothic heroine who seems to fit neatly into contemporary female ideals. Unlike the trope of the gothic heroine, these two female characters are not running from some male sexual predator, rather the opposite, for example as seen in the case of Dionea seemingly punishing a man's sexual advancement. In these respects, Medea's and Dionea's roles as femme fatales could perhaps be interpreted as an opposite to the trope of the gothic heroine. Apart from the sexualisation and objectification, Medea and Dionea constitute a threat to people around them, they are the ones 'haunting' or 'chasing' men and they seemingly both end up killing the men that they have been in contact with. This portrays a different kind of woman than the gothic heroine, also sending a signal to the reader: that these women are in control, and that they are violent threats. By shifting the two narrators' perspective of Medea and Dionea between the objectifying male gaze, to powerful killers, to contemplations on the women's lives results in an ambiguous gender perspective. This forces the reader to take on different perspectives and see the women's lives from more than one point of view. What is most significant in this case is perhaps the fact that the two femme fatales are not simply being "punished for their deviant acts of seduction" (Braun 2012, 11). Lee provides two perspectives here: Medea and Dionea being on the one hand punished for their actions, but on the other hand they also seem to take revenge or rebel against these punishments. In this sense, Medea and Dionea become something more than passive targets symbolising contemporary female ideals, which the gothic heroine arguably embodies.

The two women also become something more than the femme fatale symbol of ‘bad women’ in need of punishment. This is important because by portraying women who are victims in a patriarchal society, but who are also powerful and capable to fend for themselves, Lee presents gothic stories with more complex women. From a wider perspective, this may to some extent reflect Lee’s own thoughts about women’s situation in society at the time as being “over-sexed” (Colby 2003, 274). Furthermore, Lee’s way of seemingly inverting the trope of the victimized heroine, making the men victims of violence instead of the women, provides an eye-opening perspective on the gothic trope. And by writing ambiguous endings, where it is never completely confirmed if Medea or Dionea actually killed the men, Lee further challenges the reader to reflect on what actually happened in the stories. By doing this Lee is clearly “exposing complex psychological issues” (Giakaniki 2021, 300). In this case, Lee exposes misogynist ways of portraying and thinking about women, which challenges the idea of the victimized gothic heroine and in extension, the general victimization of women in gothic stories. As traces of the victimized heroine may still be found in gothic works, further research could show if Lee’s way of destabilizing gender expectations is a fruitful way of challenging victimization of women in today’s gothic stories.

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