

Chapter 8

Snake Lady as an Emphatic Monster: An Analysis of the Monster Figure in Vernon Lee's *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*

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Abstract

This study examines Vernon Lee's short story *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* (1896) within the aesthetic and thematic context of Gothic literature and the monster figure of British Gothic tradition. The study is structured on three main axes: (1) a feminist-psychoanalytic analysis of the theme of monstrosity and the female body as a Gothic figure of fear, (2) the function of space in Gothic aesthetics, and (3) contemporary reflections of the monster image and snake woman. In the first part, the figure of the Snake Lady is analysed through Barbara Creed's concepts of "monstrous-feminine" and Julia Kristeva's "abjection". Oriana, an inversion of the *femme fatale* archetype, becomes a symbol not of fear but of wisdom and transformation. In the second part, spaces such as the Red Palace, Castle of the Sparkling Waters, and Alberic's apartment are examined according to the Gothic aesthetic principle of "horror within beauty". These spaces function as concrete extensions of the character's inner world; stone, light, silence, and colour are means for emotional experience. The study argues that Lee distanced the Gothic from traditional dark imagery and redefined it along the axis of empathy, aesthetics, and melancholy. Thus, *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* transforms the female monster figure and the gothic space, becoming a precursor to modern feminist and Eco-gothic narratives.

Introduction

Vernon Lee: on the boundaries of Gothic Aesthetics

Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Paget, 1856–1935) was a distinctive writer situated at the intersection of the aesthetic movement,

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psychological realism, and late Victorian Gothic in late 19th-century British intellectual life. Lee was a female writer that had always been an outsider (both literally and figuratively), who has been historically overlooked by most of her contemporaries. As well as examining the relationship between art, gender and morality through the filter of the psyche, in all of her literary works, she produced an extensive body of Gothic short stories. The themes depicted in her short stories regarding the duality of beauty and terror, desire and horror reflect to a degree the artistic sensibilities of Walter Pater and Henry James. Though recognised for her essays and her ghost stories, many consider that her Gothic short stories are the best examples of the stifled passion and subconscious desires of her characters, especially in works like *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* (1896) and *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890) (Stetz, 2006).

The evolution of the British Gothic literature began to take shape in the second half of the 19th century. Beginning with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), written by Horace Walpole, the genre would ultimately be shaped by the literary works created by Anne Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Mary Shelley. By the end of the 19th century, the original form of the Gothic was transformed into a more introspective style, incorporating the psychological, aesthetic and sexual concepts into stories. Most Gothic literature from this era focused on the human mind and its complex creations, public pressures, identity crisis, and traditional elements such as dark setting, supernatural events or mythological beings. Vernon Lee and her literary work contributed to the transformation of the Gothic literature. While many Gothic writers created fear through a variety of supernatural ways, Lee creates fear by presenting the reader with a portrayal of the dark parts of a person's psyche. In Lee's stories, she uses the concept of the "monster" to suggest the presence of a monster does not exist in the physical, worldly realm but rather it exists within oneself as a result of one's own fears, ambitions, and desires (Kane, 2006).

The writing style in Lee's works is considered to be associated with the Aestheticism movement closely. Aestheticism celebrates the art as the centre of life and the beauty as a representation of morality. The aesthetic approach can be strongly seen in her Gothic tales. In Lee's narrative, the search for beauty has never drawn a portrait of tranquillity and innocence; instead, danger, seduction and uncanniness (Pulham, 2002). The dual structure of her Gothic writing makes her distinctive: coexistence of darkness in destruction and pleasure of aesthetic in *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*. Lee's Gothic stories, as a result, arouse the melancholic feelings and spiritual confusions which has an enchanting effect on readers rather than frightening.

Vernon Lee's writings participate in a tradition that is referred to as the "feminine gothic". This form arose primarily from women's literature and provides an allegory through desires and fears, as well as for women's struggles against the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal structures of society; it serves as an avenue for women to express themselves through writings about their own experiences. The women that Lee writes about within this tradition are depicted as both alluring and threatening; Lee investigates the reasons why femininity can be interpreted as either desirable or a potential danger within this genre of literature. The concept of femininity and the representation of women's sexual bodies often functions as the major focus for both beauty and destruction in many of Lee's works. As an example, in the story of *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*, while the snake lady character is portrayed as a "monster", she is also viewed as representing wisdom, compassion, and spirituality. Lee's monstrous representation evokes fear and compassion for her characters and allow readers to develop an understanding of the internal conflicts of the characters. Thus, in Lee's works, rather than focusing solely on the aesthetic appeal of horror, she reinterprets the Gothic genre as a vehicle for intellectual and moral exploration.

Vernon Lee's Gothic literature is of particular interest in the male-centred literary environment of her era because she fictionalizes the figure of the "monster" not only as a supernatural being, but also as a representation of ideas, identities and desires excluded by society. (Blumberg, 2017). The monsters in Lee's writings deal with a variety of topics including female desire, aesthetic sense, liberation of thoughts, and gender identities. Oriana shows an archetypal *femme fatale* as she challenges the constraints placed on women by religion and society in her quest to show her value in a male-dominated world (Martorell, 2015). Lee's works, as a consequence, lead contemporary Gothic to be read from a feminist and queer point of view. Lee's monsters both confront the concept of morality of the time and reflect a question that remains relevant today: "Who is the real monster?"

Vernon Lee was not only a bearer of the Gothic tradition in the late 19th century, but she also reconstructed it as a model through which borders between human identity, nature, and animality could be explored. *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* could be cited as an exemplar text in this developing model, an area of ecological view, psychoanalysis, and gender issues (Murga Aroca, 2020). The "monster" in *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* was an internal construct, reflecting the world inside. Thus, Vernon Lee wandered on the limits of redefining Gothic literature, and this have been carried out until present day: the borders that connects death and desire; horror and beauty.

Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady: both fairytale and gothic

Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady combines both fairytale and gothic elements, redefining the concept of “monster” as a violation of psychological and moral boundaries rather than a physical deformity. Lee’s serpent woman, combining seduction with danger, desire with guilt, reveals the fragility of the Victorian patriarchal order. Thus, the author constructs the mechanism of Gothic horror not only as a supernatural threat but also as an aesthetic confrontation of repressed desires.

The story introduces young Prince Alberic whose grandfather is the Duke Balthasar Maria of Luna. The Snake Lady and the Prince’s bonding begins in his early childhood years when he was brought up -both socially and culturally- neglected, isolated and uncared in the Red Palace where is artificially manufactured in a baroque style. Besides, no living animals are allowed in the Duke’s Palace, which saddens the young Prince. His longing for nature is only met by picture on a tapestry in his room. Tapestry presents a compassionate scene of his ancestor Prince Alberic the Blond and a lady. The orphan and lonesome Prince admires and idealizes the lady as his only companion during his childhood. Due to a heavy iron crucifix hanged on the tapestry, only upper part of the beautiful lady’s elegant gown is visible. When the Prince becomes 11, her nanny decides he is older enough to rearrange his room. This rearrangement made Prince Alberic discover -and be as astonished as one can be- the fact that the beautiful lady’s lower body is a snake tail. Despite the first moment of great bewilderment, the lady’s long, twisted body of a snake’s tail leads Alberic to admire the Snake Lady more than before.

Once the Duke replaces the tapestry as he isn’t keen on the art of dark ages, the Prince goes mad and cuts the new tapestry into pieces. Thereupon, the Prince is banished from the Red Palace and sent to the Castle of Sparkling Waters, which is a remote, ruined home to only one peasant family and is surrounded by a wild garden. The Prince feels vivid because of this beautiful environment. However, he feels lonesome as well until the encounter to a green snake near a strangely decorated tomb. The innocent and naive Prince takes pity on the cold creature and wants to keep it warm. Without fear or hesitation, the Prince touches the cold body of the snake. Its body arouses a sensual pleasure in the Prince without guilt or regret.

When the snake glides out of sight, the Prince meets a beautiful lady at the Castle of Sparkling Waters and she introduces herself as Prince’s godmother. She visits him daily just for an hour “before dusk”, to play with him and to teach him a range of skills for being a righteous prince.

The Prince discovers the myth of the Snake Lady and her ancestors' connection to the story. According to the myth, Lady Oriana is cursed, and she has to have a lover who will be faithful to her for ten years for the spell to be broken. Two princes who are Alberic's ancestors have fallen in love with the snake but failed to be faithful for ten years. Alberic acknowledges his "fate" and takes on the task to rescue the lady, which requires him to kiss the snake. He adheres to the narrative of the historical legend and places his lips on the snake's head, rendering him unconscious. However, he soon wakes up to find his head resting on the knees of his beautiful godmother, who will care for him from that moment on.

As the story progresses, the Castle of Sparkling Waters represents a deeper contrast to Duke Balthasar Maria's Red Palace. Red Palace is characterized by rivalry, bribery, corruption and desire for power while the Castle of Sparkling Waters is heavenly furnished with love, sensual charm, and a refined education. As a prince, Alberic has never been provided the essential knowledge and the possessions such as books to learn to be a prince, clothes suitable to his social status and a horse to ride. In the time he passes in the Castle of Sparkling Waters, the beloved godmother provides him all he needs to become a prince. Duke's three ambassadors – the Jester, the Jesuite, and the Dwarf – visit the Prince and try to influence him through bribery but Alberic is resistant to all their flatteries and gifts.

The Duke's recklessness has left the palace facing financial difficulties, and he decides that the Prince must enter into an arranged marriage to resolve the issue. Indeed, Alberic has gained the independence to reject this and doesn't seem interested in any of the women his grandfather introduces him. The friendship between the Prince and his grass snake instils fear and loathing within the Red Palace and Duke's patriarchal order.

Suspecting that the creature influences the disobedient Prince "evilly", the Duke has the serpent killed. This devastates the Prince Alberic and he dies of grief shortly thereafter. The story comes to an end with a rumour that where the snake was killed, there was a deformed and mutilated naked body of a lady, lying dead on the floor.

Analysis

Monstrosity and Female Body: the dual nature of the Snake Lady

The union of woman and snake is one of the oldest "monstrous feminine" images in Western mythology; figures such as Lilith, Lamia, and Medusa can be read as symbols of male desire and fear embodied in the same body

(Creed, 1993, pp. 1-3). According to Barbara Creed (1993, pp. 7-8), these figures are the historical antecedents of the concept of the “monstrous feminine”; woman is represented as the source of fear because her body is a fluid and uncontrollable space that violates the “natural order”. Julia Kristeva (1982, pp. 10-12) also identifies this transgression in Powers of Horror, developing the concept of the “abject”: the maternal body is an “other” that society excludes to define its own boundaries, yet constantly returns. This mythological line is revived in Vernon Lee’s story *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*. Oriana is a snake woman figure, both seductive with her allure and transformative with her wisdom. Carmen Miralles Martorell (2015) emphasizes that Oriana is a character who inverts the *femme fatale* archetype; she is not fatalistic but “wise and loving”. Thus, Lee transcends the snake woman myth as a representation of patriarchal fear and associates it with wisdom, nature, and spiritual integrity.

In the aesthetic and gothic discourse of the fin de siècle period, the *femme fatale* is identified with fatal beauty. However, Vernon Lee’s Oriana transforms this tradition. According to Martorell (2015, pp. 1), Oriana is the woman “who fights against society, religion, and she will have to demonstrate that she deserves a place in a predominantly masculine world which overcomes her”. Patricia Pulham (2008) also interprets Lee’s female characters as monsters born of the “aesthetic form”: beauty here is not a threat but a form of transformation.

This transformation parallels Barbara Creed’s (1993) concept of the “monstrous-feminine”. For Creed, the “monstrous” aspect of women derives from fertility and sexuality, repressed by the patriarchal system; this aspect is the abject itself. Lee’s Snake Woman, as a figure that affirms this very repressed feminine power, points to the liberation of the “abject” (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 9-14). Thus, Oriana transforms the *femme fatale*’s fatal eroticism into “empathetic wisdom”; her beauty is not fear, but teaching.

In Lee’s story, desire (Eros) and death (Thanatos) are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they complement each other. Alberic’s attraction to the Snake Woman reflects an “uncanny reunion with the mother figure” (Kane, 2006, p. 45-46). This is a scene in which sexual desire and maternal affection are uncannily intertwined. Kristeva’s theory of the “abject” is similar to Freud’s (2003) concept of “das Unheimliche”: the violation of boundaries (human/animal, mother/beloved) is the source of the uncanny.

Oriana is a symbol of both love and death. When she encounters Alberic, rather than solely seducing him, she changed him on a spiritual and cognitive level. Therefore, the Snake Lady embodies two essential conflicts: life

within death and death within life (Martorell, 2015; Kane, 2006). Desire is the symbol of both freedom and destruction, and Gothic's conception of aesthetics appreciates this duality.

Gothic literature has always depicted the female body as a threat. Julia Kristeva (1982, pp. 70-71) introduces the "abject", which causes to be isolated in society: the woman, with her body's fluid aspects such as giving birth, bleeding, and milking, stains the "cleanness" of the social order. Barbara Creed (1993) points out that in patriarchal culture the terror and horror are caused by these bodily fluid deficiencies which breeds the belief that the woman body contaminates the social system.

In this regard, however, it may be said that Lee's point of view is transforming the fear around the woman's body to create a different identity for Oriana. This was an understanding made possible through Zeynep Lebe Watson's (2003; pp. 6-7) ecofeminism and their exploration of how Oriana reflects the disconnection between humanity and nature, with a female body serving as the voice of nature in that the female body represents the natural world. Serpent-like form of Oriana's body represents "living nature", rather than a "hostile nature" that is associated with patriarchy. Therefore, the female body can be viewed as a source of wisdom and empowerment, rather than an object of repressed fear (Watson, 2023; Creed, 1993).

In *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*, the "monster" figure dwells within the subject. Mary Patricia Kane (2006) connects Alberic's interest in the Snake Woman with the Lacanian "mirror phase", where Alberic experiences both his identity and alterity in Oriana. Here, the Snake Woman becomes an image of the unconsciously repressed wholeness of the subject's nature, body, and desire, therefore excluding her from becoming an object of external danger.

Kristeva (1982) argues that individuals disguise their bodily nature in order to become part of the social order; however, the "abject" in them always resurfaces. The signs of this can be seen in Alberic's attraction to the Snake Woman; the repressed natural feature of the "snake" within him resurfaces. Consequently, the "monster" exists as a mirror to the split identity of the subject instead of being an outside threat. The psychological elements of Gothic aesthetics create the introverted quality, which defines this artistic style (Kane, 2006).

Aurora Murga Aroca, in her article titled *Neither Animal nor Human* (2020), relates the presentation of the character of the Snake Woman to the "human-nature-woman triangle", through an Eco-Gothic lens. As stated in

the paper, Lee critiques the anthropocentric foundation that allows humans to dominate nature and women, making the character of the Snake Woman an example of rejecting that hierarchy and reconciling with nature.

Watson (2003, pp. 9-10) supports this interpretation, defining Oriana as “feminine wisdom identified with nature”; Alberic’s union with her symbolizes the collapse of human authority over nature. In this respect, Lee’s figure is not only feminist but also ecocritical. Woman and nature are reborn as two “*others*” united against the same system of oppression. As such, the combination of feminine and ecological elements, represented by Oriana and Alberic, reflects the idea of “returning” to the “repressed feminine”, as described by Kristeva (1982), whereby nature and truth are being reclaimed through feminine and ecological representation.

Gothic literature’s traditional concepts of the female body and monstrosity is transformed in Lee’s *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady*. Oriana is both a victim and a threatening figure, a blend of nature and culture, desire and fear. This character is “a kind of *transitional object* through which both art and identity are formed.” (Pulham, 2008, p. 114)

The Snake Lady of Lee inverts the monstrous-feminine type as characterized by Creed (1993). Rather than a terrifying bestiality, the Snake Lady is viewed through the lens of the viewer with empathy. Oriana’s wisdom signifies a rebirth of feminism and ecofeminism. Therefore, Oriana/the Snake Lady has become a precursor for the empathetic monster archetype, which has appeared in more recent Gothic literature. Within the context of this archetype, the empathetic monster can represent an individual who is able to understand and accept both themselves, their bodies (nature), as well as those around them (Murga Aroca, 2020; Watson, 2023).

Space as a Gothic Figure: the spatial representation of horror

The significance of place in Vernon Lee’s tale of *Prince Alberic and The Snake Lady* is not limited to being an element of the plot but also serves as an expression of emotion and a source of beauty within the story itself. Architecture and nature are key elements in all Gothic literature, as they reflect the mood of the characters and events taking place within a story. Lee’s knowledge and understanding of architecture, history and aesthetics are used to create an almost tactile experience for the reader through the use of Gothic spaces. The use of settings such as the Red Palace, the Castle of Sparkling Waters, the gardens, and the Prince’s apartment not only set the scene for impending doom but also personify the dualities of Gothic literature (e.g., beauty and decay).

This is seen in the Red Palace, which appears at the start of the story, being one of the locations most expressive of Lee's Gothic sense of space. The Palace is a setting described with these words: "a monolith built of cold red stone, surrounded by high walls, in echoless silence". The use of the colour red symbolizes both life and death, with the colour in Gothic art symbolically depicting the "depravity of the sacred".

According to David Punter (2013), Gothic architecture turns the threat of the world outside its walls into something you are inside of: that is, it creates an internal experience that feels less secure. The Red Palace is an example of this idea, where the function of what looks like a haven is actually more of a prison for you, with the repressed emotion echoing back at you from these confines. Patricia Pulham (2002) contends that Lee utilises space as a place where visual and emotional elements coalesce – in particular, he uses enclosed spaces to let us know about the character's mental state.

It is in this sense that the Red Palace is an architectural equivalent of emotional dullness and aristocratic decay. The grandeur of the palace contrasts with the emotional coldness inside; this is indeed one of the most obvious strategies of Gothic: beauty coexists with horror. Alberic's childhood in the heart of these stone walls, the space that is cut off from the vitality of the outside world, is one symbol of emotional repression.

The Castle of the Sparkling Waters is the second key setting in the story. In contrast to the Red Palace, it offers a strong atmosphere of splendour created through a combination of images that represent lights, reflections, and running water. Nevertheless, as in many cases of Gothic literature, this splendour is inherently unstable and potentially dangerous. In his description of the castle, Lee writes of light dancing on the surfaces of the water but at the same time swallowing the human voice. That is a captivating image, but one that also creates a sense of dread.

According to Fred Botting, the Gothic "produces a literature of shadows, of uncertainty and obscurity, where the Enlightenment's rational light cannot penetrate" (1996, p. 2); the brighter the beauty, the deeper its shadow. Lee strikes this balance perfectly: in Castle of the Sparkling Waters, aesthetic pleasure and unease are felt simultaneously. According to Kane (2006), it is a castle which combines romantic landscape with Gothic darkness, while the relentless movement of water evokes at once the life-bearing and death-bearing power of nature.

Alberic's meeting with the Snake Woman is in this dazzling realm. The radiant here, is a terrifying one. The Castle of the Sparkling Waters is the

model for the “sublime” idea in Gothic art: it generates a sublime feeling that is both amazing and chilling. Lee’s detailed colour and light descriptions turn the place into an emotional stage. According to Kutluata (2015, p. 79), Lee merges Renaissance aesthetics with “an understanding of art that transforms space into emotion”.

Lee’s gardens hide a dreadful Gothic vibe under their calm, pastoral charm. The pictures of the gardens with phrases like “long narrow ropes of maize, like garlands of gold” (p. 300), and “big carnations hung down from the tower windows” (p. 300), are showing how nature is slowly taking back what used to be its domain from people. It is a typical Gothic literature theme: nature is the symbol of the power that has been repressed by culture and reason making a comeback.

Zeynep Lebe Watson (2023) sees these images as an ecofeminist point nature taking over the space with a feminine wisdom. The quietness of nature here is not tranquillity but tough opposition. As Barbara Creed (1993) explains, “the uncontrolled fluidity of the physical and natural” is the patriarchal order’s fear; Lee’s gardens convey the sense of “fluidity” as well. Ivy is acting like snakes; marble and stone sculptures are turning into different forms as if they were alive.

Besides that, the gardens become a Gothic temple where nature and love are merged when Alberic and Oriana encounter in the scene, and they are surrounded by the gardens. According to Pulham (2008, p. 110), this moment portrays the idea of “aesthetic intimacy”; art, nature, and feelings are united within the same body. Lee’s portrayal of nature as a reflection of the human soul is the integration of the romantic sensibility in the Gothic space.

The most acutely melancholy space of the story is Prince Alberic’s chamber, with its faded tapestries hanging on walls, pictures of past kings, and curtains that have faded with time. This apartment symbolizes the burden of the past and the decline of an aristocratic lineage. In this place, typical Gothic building decay serves as both a physical and a psychological function.

Patricia Pulham (2008, p. 112) describes Lee’s Gothic interiors as “the architecture of memory”. In Alberic’s childhood apartment, the past that is repressed can return at any possible moment. This is, according to Kane (2006), a space that functions as a transitional element between personal memory and social history. The apartment’s heavy atmosphere is the source of Gothic melancholy: time seems to have stopped while the past exists only as pale echo.

As Kutluata (2015) mentions, when she was in Florence, Lee had a historic consciousness of the space; it was a living artifact of the past. This view is evident in Alberic's apartment with the scenes on tapestries. The room is a microcosm of the way that personal solitude and cultural decay intermingle. The room symbolizes an inner world, which is disguises the past time with its corruption.

Lee's creation of Gothic space highlights uneasiness within the beauty rather than generating horror directly. This creation represents the terror of a space as an aesthetic form of exaggerated emotionality. Botting (1996, p.1) describes Gothic as an “excess: the excess of reason, the excess of desire, the excess of meaning”, and Lee delivers “excess” through colour, light, and silence. All are forms of aesthetic horror, from the cold atmosphere of the Red Palace's stones, through the brilliant reflections from Castle of the Sparkling Waters, through the adorable silence of the gardens to the melancholy felt in the apartment.

Therefore, Lee constructs a Gothic space dissimilar to the *dark castle* narrative which is traditionally Gothic. In this story, space is not the source of terror but the space of emotional experience. Alberic's spiritual journey is in line with the change of the place: from the petrified palace to the bright castle, from the melancholic apartment to the peaceful garden. This change also serves as a sign of the Gothic genre; the co-existence of ruin and charm.

A Contemporary Echo of the Snake Woman

Vernon Lee's story *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* anticipates the transformation of the concept of the “monster” within the historical evolution of Gothic literature. This late-19th-century fin de siècle text reshaped representations of fear and otherness, paving the way for contemporary feminist, queer, and Eco-gothic narratives. This chapter will examine how the figure of the Snake Lady is reproduced in contemporary culture and how it relates to modern identity politics and environmental discourses.

Traditional Gothic literature positions the monster as the bodily expression of fears repressed by society. However, in the 20th and 21st centuries, this figure has transformed: the monster is no longer the excluded but the voice of difference. Lee's Snake Woman is a precursor to this transformation. Oriana evolves from a threat to a figure of empathy and wisdom; this directly connects to today's “empathetic monster” archetype (Pulham, 2008; Overman, 2022).

In modern Gothic narratives – for example, in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) or Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series – the

monster represents bodily differences excluded by society, queer desires, or existences that transcend the nature-human dichotomy. These figures continue an understanding pioneered by Oriana: the feared *other* is now part of the human being's inner whole. As Fred Botting (2014, p. 22) notes, contemporary gothic reveals "repressed anxieties and differences beneath rational order". Lee's text thus stands on the borderland of a period in which the monster ceases to be an object of fear and becomes a symbol of the search for identity. Alberic's attraction to the Snake Woman is the first expression of the modern individual's ethical relationship with the *other*.

From its mythological origins, the snake image has been associated with both wisdom and seduction. Figures such as Lamia, Medusa, and Lilith are symbols of feminine danger in Western mythology (Creed, 1993). Lee reverses this tradition, reconnecting the snake with wisdom, intuition, and nature. This transformation explains the reemergence of the snake in new forms in modern culture.

In contemporary examples in popular culture – for example, in the film *Medusa* (2021) or the half-human, half-snake female characters in video games – the snake figure no longer functions as a monster to be punished, but as a figure through which the woman regains control of her body. This transformation bears traces of the mythological rewriting initiated by Oriana. Aurora Murga Aroca (2020, p. 90) describes the Snake Woman as "a figure of rebirth in the human-nature-woman triangle", according to which the snake's body represents the repressed power of nature. Zeynep Lebe Watson (2023, p. 8) states that the snake figure has been reinterpreted as the "voice of nature", carrying a critique of the anthropocentric world, particularly in ecofeminist narratives. In today's culture, the snake is no longer a symbol of decline, but of transformation.

Lee's story is one of the forerunners of contemporary Eco-gothic literature, which questions the distinction between human and nature. Oriana is an intermediary being who possesses both human and animal qualities; her story thwarts humans' desire to dominate nature. Murga Aroca (2020, p. 94) interprets this figure as "a feminine-eco-consciousness that rejects human anthropocentric superiority" (p. 94).

In contemporary ecofeminist narratives, such as in Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* (2014) or Robert Eggers's film *The Witch* (2015), nature is no longer a punishing entity but rather an entity that integrates with humans. Lee's Snake Woman, like the nature-beings in these modern narratives, evokes both fear and desire because nature is the resurgence of the feminine consciousness suppressed by patriarchy. Watson (2023)

summarizes this relationship as follows: The Snake Lady's hybrid body represents reconciliation, not domination: a feminine wisdom that opposes anthropocentrism. In this context, Lee's story is not only a feminist but also an Eco-gothic manifesto. Oriana's transformation symbolizes the emergence of a subject integrated with nature. This sensibility aligns with the fundamental tenets of 21st-century ecofeminist theory.

The figure of the Snake Woman opens up a space for reading that is not only feminist and ecofeminist, but also queer. Oriana's nature, which transcends the boundaries of human-animal, woman-soul, mother-lover, dissolves fixed identity categories. Kristeva's (1982) concept of the "abject" gains new meaning at this point: the abject is that transitional space where the boundary between subject and other dissolves. Oriana inhabits this very space; her existence rejects the fixity of identity.

In modern queer gothic – for example, in the series *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) or the adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* (2022) – the figure of the monster becomes a representation of queer desire. In these narratives, the monster's "otherness" is no longer perversion but an acknowledgement of the plurality of existence. Lee's relationship between Alberic and Oriana can be read in the same way: Alberic's desire transgresses normative boundaries; his attraction to the Snake Woman is experienced as both sexual and spiritual union. Patricia Pulham (2008, p. 3) argues, Lee's characters occupy "states of divided subjectivity and the instability of self-other boundaries". In this sense, Oriana becomes a queer subject: her identity is fluid, neither fully human nor fully monstrous; neither woman nor nature. This fluidity anticipates the liberating power of anonymity, which lies at the heart of contemporary queer gothic narratives.

The Snake Woman figure echoes in contemporary culture, both in high art and popular narratives. In cinema, female characters featuring snake motifs are no longer merely figures of horror. The alien being played by Scarlett Johanson in *Under the Skin* (2013), like Oriana, conveys both death and empathy; upon contact with humans, she becomes transformative. Similarly, in *The Shape of Water* (2017), the "monster" lover represents the humanity within the inhuman. These figures carry the emotional DNA of Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady: beauty and threat, nature and culture, love and death are intertwined. Furthermore, in contemporary fantasy games – for example, in *Dark Souls* or *The Witcher* series – the "serpent woman" or "snake goddess" figures simultaneously convey themes of wisdom and curse. This is a contemporary version of Oriana's Gothic legacy, extending to digital culture. These forms of representation demonstrate that the monster

is no longer an *other* to be suppressed, but rather a way for humanity to recognize its own fragility. Lee's narrative offers a paradigm that transforms the aesthetics of fear into empathy.

The Snake Woman emerged at the end of the 19th century as a figure who disrupted the order of patriarchy and rationalism; today, she is a multilayered symbol that questions the boundaries of the anthropocentric world. Feminist, queer, and Eco-gothic readings have revitalized her mythological roots, revitalizing her in contemporary culture. Oriana's story opens up a space where nature and humanity, body and soul, and otherness and self can reconcile. Ultimately, *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* is an early forerunner of the modern Gothic's empathetic, environmentalist, and multi-identity sensibility. Lee transforms the monster into a means of understanding, not fear. Therefore, the Snake Woman is not merely a ghost of the past but a voice of the future – a symbol of re-hearing nature, the body, and otherness.

Conclusion

Vernon Lee's story *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* is a threshold text representing the formal and thematic transformation of late-19th-century English Gothic. This study explores the work along two main axes: monstrosity and the female body and the aesthetic function of the Gothic space. Both axes demonstrate Lee's inversion of traditional Gothic horror conventions and his redefinition of the boundaries between women, nature, and art.

As seen in the first chapter, the Snake Lady figure, unlike her mythological predecessors such as Lamia, Medusa, and Lilith, is not a deadly *femme fatale* but a bearer of wisdom and love. In a reading contrary to Barbara Creed's (1993) concept of the "monstrous-feminine", Lee transforms the monster figure into a symbol not of fear but of transformation. Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject" allows us to explain this figure's dual nature: Oriana inhabits the transitional space between human and animal, nature and culture. As Mary Patricia Kane (2006) has noted, the relationship between Alberic and the Snake Woman is an expression of an unconscious conflict oscillating between motherhood and desire. Lee's monster thus represents the rebirth of repressed feminine power as an "empathetic monster" figure.

The second chapter focused on the spatial dimension of Gothic aesthetics. The Red Palace, Castle of the Sparkling Waters, the gardens, and Alberic's room in *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* are not external scenes of fear but reflections of the character's inner state of mind. As Patricia Pulham (2008) notes, Lee's Gothic spaces convey "aesthetic and emotional resonance";

architecture is a form of memory and the self. While the Red Palace is a petrified state of aristocratic dullness and repression, Castle of the Sparkling Waters becomes a scene where light, desire, and death converge. The gardens symbolize the feminine power of nature and a vibrant beauty that transcends the boundaries of culture. Alberic's room, on the other hand, is an "architecture of memory" where personal solitude and historical decay converge (Pulham, 2008; Kutluata, 2015).

Lee's Gothic aesthetic, rather than directly generating fear, operates within a melancholic beauty. In Fred Botting's (1996) words, Gothic is the aesthetic of "excess" and Lee constructs this excess through emotional intensity, light, silence, and architecture. In her world, horror is intertwined with an aesthetic sense: a constant transition occurs between shadow and light, death and allure, stone and body. In this respect, Lee transforms Gothic from merely the Gothic "art of darkness" into a form of aesthetic consciousness.

At this point, the work's contemporary resonances become significant. In 20th- and 21st-century gothic narratives – for example, in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017), Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), or Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015) – the monster is no longer the feared *other*, but rather a way for humanity to confront its own fragility. Lee's Snake Lady is an early example of this transformation: as an "empathetic monster", she evokes understanding, not fear. As Aurora Murga Aroca (2020; p. 94) emphasizes, The Snake Lady demonstrates "a feminine-eco-consciousness that rejects human anthropocentric superiority"; that is, it re-centres nature through feminine wisdom. This perspective is a precursor to contemporary ecofeminist theories. Patricia Pulham (2008) defines Lee's characters as transitional figures living between self and other. When these two interpretations come together, *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* opens up an ethical and aesthetic space that transcends the boundaries of human-nature, self-other, and life-death.

Ultimately, *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* can be read as a feminist, Eco-gothic, and aesthetic manifest. The figure of Oriana transforms traditional myths in which women are identified with nature; space becomes the material form of the human soul. Lee transcends the dark structure of Gothic tradition to a sensory and intellectual plane – humanizing the monster and beautifying fear. Thus, her work becomes a modern bridge from the late 19th century to the queer, feminist, and Eco-gothic readings of the 21st century: The heart of the Gothic no longer beats in darkness, but in the aesthetics of understanding and empathy.

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