

**OF SANKE LADIES AND OTHER REPTILES. THE
SUBVERSIVA TRANSITION FROM THE FEMME FATALE TO
THE GODMOTHER IN VERNON LEE'S *PRINCE ALBERIC
AND THE SNAKE LADY****

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Humans have always felt attracted to the figure of the *femme fatale* because it represents a 'beautiful yet deadly' woman at the same time. Then, it has always been taken for granted they were a model not to be imitated—at least, this was what one could hear internally because of their fear. Heirs to the values of a patriarchal society and to a Jewish-Christian tradition, women have been carrying a stigma—and they still carry it—if they do not conform to the rules. In her short ghost story, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', Vernon Lee tried to show us the fears of the women of her time. Our protagonist, Oriana, is the epitome of the *femme fatale* who fights against society, religion and she will have to demonstrate that she deserves a place in a predominantly masculine world which overcomes her.

Keywords:: *Vernon Lee, Literature and Feminism, Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady, Literature and the femme fatale.*

Todos nos sentimos atraídos por la figura de la *femme fatale* porque es representada como una mujer hermosa y mortal a la vez. Así, siempre se ha creído que era un modelo al que no se debía emular, al menos eso oíamos en nuestro interior y todo por temor. Herederos de los valores de una sociedad patriarcal y una cultura judeo-cristiana la mujer ha sido y a veces todavía sigue siendo estigmatizada si se sale de las normas establecidas. Así nos lo reflejaba ya Vernon Lee en su

historia 'El Príncipe Alberico y la mujer Serpiente'. Nuestra protagonista, Oriana, será el epítome de la 'mujer fatal' que lucha contra la sociedad, la religión y tendrá que demostrar que ella también merece encontrar su espacio en un mundo preponderantemente masculino y que al final la vence.

Palabras clave: *Vernon Lee, Literatura y feminismo, Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady, Literatura y la femme fatale.*

1. A DAUGHTER OF DECADENCE

Unfair as it is, Vernon Lee's fantastic stories have been dismissed as minor works and have been overshadowed by her main writings, which consisted chiefly of critical essays. However, it is in such fantastic stories that she excels. As a woman of her time, Lee had contact with all the literary circles of the age; she was the friend of Henry James and Oscar Wilde. Elaine Showalter includes Lee in what she called 'Daughters of Decadence,' together with Kate Chopin, Victoria Cross, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton, among others. Decadent women were starting to write about females. They started to touch on female sexuality, marital discontent and their own aspirations. This meant they were the first "New Women" who claimed to be defenders of the females at the *fin-de-siècle*. It cannot be denied that these stories were recounted from a feminine point of view and they were the link connecting Victorian women writers and modern authoresses.

Among all of Lee's decadent gothic ghost stories, it is especially in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' where fantasy outshines all other stories. This short story was published in *The Yellow Book* in 1896. Lady Oriana, the main feminine character, is a remarkable and unconventional representative of the decadent female ghost. What could especially draw the reader's attention is the fact that she is impressively attractive, charming and intelligent, as well as displaying many other positive qualities, in spite of being a serpent woman. Nevertheless, this may be the corollary of two distinct, differentiated facts. On the one hand, nobody would think that monsters could be such lovely creatures, because, in lieu of that and according to popular

belief, monsters are appalling. Maybe their face is a mere reflection of their distorted soul. On the other hand, Vernon Lee is subverting the Bible's figure of the snake, because she does not consider the snake as evil, but as a benefactor. And this benefactor is incarnated in the figure of the Godmother.

Victorian men used to feel displeased by the potential a *femme fatale* was thought to possess. When a woman displayed good qualities such as perseverance, common sense and intelligence—which were usually thought to belong to the masculine sphere—these females were represented as awful and disgusting beings. Vernon Lee tries to make us see—in her short stories—her worries about the role of women confronting a rigid society and attempts a redefinition of a new role for them. In her short tales, Lee was able to show erotic connotations from the part of women. Probably, Vernon Lee was inclined to believe that she could overcome the impediments she found in her life by verbalizing them through fantasy.

Part of the aim of this paper is to assess how Oriana uses her powers of enchantress, how she has the force to challenge Balthasar Maria and the patriarchal system he incarnates and how perseverant she proves herself when trying to obtain what she yearned for from a man of the house of Luna. Some questions should be addressed to help us in the consideration of these probing issues. First and foremost, to what extent was Oriana a *femme fatale* and how did she undergo her transition into a Godmother? This will be one of the approaches to her character. Secondly, one may wonder why a *femme fatale* could pose such a frightening menace to men. It would be necessary to adduce some reasons to prove that Oriana can be the epitome of a ghost in a serpent-woman form, which can be a symbol of the *femme fatale* in the *fin-de-siècle* Female Gothic. And, in closing, it can be attempted to put forward how, by dint of being a serpent-woman, Oriana is a scapegoat of Christian culture.

2. ORIANA'S SYMBOLS

2.1. Oriana as a serpent-woman

To begin with, the figure of Lady Oriana infringes the laws of nature by force of being a serpent-woman, and, furthermore, she

undermines men's power, insofar as she antagonizes men's rules and rebels against them. These rules impede the exercise of her free will and have been created by patriarchal voices. Oriana is not supposed to have any contact with a descendant of the house of Luna, since men from this family are barred from evil women. Nonetheless, contrary to these dictates of the male-controlled order in every time of her existence, she disobeys. In addition, she teaches young Alberic to be a Prince, but from the feminine point of view: he is delicate, sensitive and sensible. At the same time, she is a victim of the patriarchal system, since Oriana will need men's help to escape from her prison. In her case, Oriana is restrained in both senses, real—the trough—and metaphorical—being deprived of will because of being a woman. But the worst of all is that Oriana will need men's help—like many other heroines in popular tales—to overcome her spell. There are hackneyed examples in literature where women's fates lie in the hands of men who are their redeemers; just to name a few of them: *Snow White*ⁱ, *The Sleeping Beauty* or *The Little Mermaid*ⁱⁱ. However, in this last tale, some particularities should be pinpointed. If Oriana and the Little Mermaid are compared, it can be seen that the latter is much more victimized than the former. Killing a snake, which, after all, is an animal, is not as cruel as killing the mermaid by stabbing her in the heart, due to the fact that she is half-fish half-person. Similar as it may seem on a result basis, it is probably a truism that having one's heart traversed by a knife is radically different from being cut into pieces. The Mermaid's pain is concentrated in a point around which the person lives; and, metaphorically, there is penetration. Oriana is dismembered, her pain is diffused: there is a fragmentation by means of which her personality is dismantled. Maybe, it can be deduced that the Mermaid is attacked by her feelings and the snake lady is attacked for what she represents for men in all her facets. Feminine humiliation, which is constant in both tales, is far more brutal in the Snake Lady. The Mermaid renounces her life and voice for love's sake, willfully—she is somehow ignorant and disaffection overcomes her. The Snake Lady does not expect great faithfulness from men, and so, she did not decide to renounce to her attributes. For this reason, in the end, the Snake Lady uses men as a medium to defy society and to free herself, not as an end. She uses humanity as a means, not as an end, contrary to Kant's categorical imperative. As a consequence, we may accept that some men are redeemers whereas others are punishers.

Equally, the *Swan Lake* bears striking resemblances with Oriana's story. As the source is not completely clear, it is worth mentioning the story shares certain similarities with a Russian folktale named 'The White Duck'. In both stories, the concept of true love is prevalent, like in the story of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'. The difference arises from the fact that Oriana asks her lovers to remain faithful for ten years. Curiously, the enchanted princess of 'Swan Lake' can recover her human form only for one hour a day, just when the moon is over the lake. Oriana can also adopt her human form for one hour a day to perform her duty as a Godmother. Likewise, both coincide in recovering their human form with the moon, a feminine symbol. In this line, the enchanted women can be stronger thanks to the moonlight, as they can be in their own dominion.

Oriana is—as well as Vernon Lee—rejected by two of her lovers. As for her part, Lee adopted her male pseudonym because she wanted people to know she was resolute to share the masculine world. With Oriana's idiosyncrasy, Lee was demonstrating to us that she could not accept the role with which she had been imposed by a patriarchal society that did not accept women as their equal. For this reason, her character is a *femme fatale* and, with it, Lee makes patent her antagonism to the male-controlled social system she feels restricted within. With her monster woman, Lee is revising masculine power and the gnawing doubts as to the feminine sex which were awakening in the period.

2.2 Oriana as a Godmother

The figure of the godmother has been recurrent in the folklore and so has it been widely adopted and slightly reversed. The figure of these gentle women has not always been that of a fairy godmother: pretty, attractive and with magical powers. Such a trilled instance would be applicable to tales such as *Cinderella*, where there is a fairy godmother who helps her ward to achieve her aims—just as she is expected to. Still, it seems that it is in the manner in which Oriana is presented to us that appeals to the reader and to the boy, as well as her characterisation as a strong woman, half-animal half-person:

He stood for a few minutes before it, riveted to the ground. Then he ran to his nurse, exclaiming: 'O, nurse, dear nurse, look the lady—! ... 'Holy Virgin', she cried, 'why she's a serpent!' Then noticing the boys violent excitement, she added, 'You little ninny, it's only Duke Alberic the Blond, who was your ancestor, and the Snake Lady.' (6)

Even nowadays, many examples of this kind of relationships can be found in several novels or even in the cinema. Maleficent, in the homonymous film, is even reversing her name. Sleeping Beauty calls her 'godmother' despite her gross aspect—let us not forget Maleficent is half a woman, half a dragon—and her love is also determining to save Sleeping Beauty, since she, and not the prince, gives her a true love kiss, hence subverting the tale. It could be asserted that it is also due to what I would term 'the contemporary irresistible attraction to evil in tales': the youths prefer what *prima facie* seems evil to what appears as plainly, insipid good, mainly because of its fashionable features and its contesting nature with regard to society.

In the eyes of Christian religion, godmothers have the moral duty of undertaking the responsibility of the mother, in case the latter dies. Following the tradition of many Victorian stories, Lee depicts a surrogate mother as a heroine, contrary to what canonical writers would have done. Oriana is sharing the focus of the narrative with her ward. Due to the fact that the mother of young Alberic is never mentioned in the story, it can be understood the invisibility Victorian women had suffered from, and even in Lee's day was still commonplace. Here, Lee shows us an environment created by the godmother, where she is not invisible, but the controller of the situation. Outside Balthasar Maria's reach, in an alternative society, far from the power of God the Father, it is the Godmother, or, plainly, the mother, who can act with free will and sometimes over God. As Elizabeth Thaden says, heirs to the Christian tradition, we see God the Father as a punisher and, in this case, the worst punishment for Oriana can be the deprivation of her ward. Taking for granted that she is at the same time a *femme fatale* and a gentle godmother, I would venture that she subverts the role of the *femme fatale* in the sense that she is not malevolent or wicked to her ward, who is a young man. Unfortunately, and paradoxical as it is, she

cannot be said to have reversed her role fully in the end, as she is beheaded before achieving her goal and being aware of it. Her aim had been finding true love, which she partly accomplishes, to the extent that Alberic commits suicide when she is gone.

As this paper is concentrated exclusively on Oriana, the departure point will be the legend of her origin, enabling us to understand her nature. Alberic the Blond—the first man of the dynasty of Luna having contact with Oriana—was fighting in the Holly Land when he defeated the forces of Macomet the sorcerer, who felt, thus, gravely offended by his defeat. Consequently, the magician, who had adored the sepulchre of Christ, made the knight's vessel shipwreck in the whereabouts of what seemed a desert island. After trying to survive in the middle of a rainforest which looked like a paradise, he arrived in an enchanted castle with invisible people and eerie voices. In the midst of a delightful garden, he found a small marble sepulchre with an inscription: 'Here is imprisoned the Fairy Oriana, most miserable of all fairies, condemned for no fault, but envious powers, to dreadful state.' (33) As he continued reading, there was another inscription carved in the container and which required Alberic to kiss the creature coming out of the container, whatever her form might be and in order to free her from her prison. This is the first action patriarchal society sets in motion against Oriana. As she was a powerful fairy ('*envious* powers,' i.e. society admires her qualities with discontent), she was transformed into an animal, being humiliated to crawl on the ground (envy is thus mitigated and discontent appeased). And she was moreover imprisoned in a trough, an illuminating metaphorⁱⁱⁱ. Along with the fact of being contrived with her imprisonment, we can perceive Oriana is denigrated, as she had shown to own the control of her actions, through her magic and self-determination, differently from many women of the time.

Continuing with the story, Alberic the Blond kisses the snake, but not without a feeling of terror and nausea—"and three times presses his warm lips against its cold and slippery skin, shutting his eyes in horror." (34) With the antithesis which both adjectives 'warm' and 'cold' suggest, it can be inferred that the contact with the snake is repulsive or, at least, uncomfortable, in heightened tension. This repulsion, which makes him feel sick, could be interpreted as an

unconscious act, owing to the fact that he is disobeying—he belongs to a privileged status and he is aware that he is not doing what he is expected to. Actually, Alberic the Blond knows the serpent woman or *femme fatale* will never be the wife, daughter or mother that Victorian manhood bore still in their minds as a model of the ‘Angel in the House’.^{iv} Nevertheless, and despite everything, by kissing Oriana, Alberic the Blond is supposed to remain faithful to her for ten years, albeit contravening the Establishment. Something shocking is the Snake Lady requires men’s faithfulness for ten years. Men were not asked for eternal love, but it may be interpreted as true love because she asks for fidelity. Still, this could be seen from two standpoints. The first could be that maybe there was an underlying conviction on the part of the author that eternal, required love does not exist whatsoever. Alternatively, the second reason could be that perhaps the sorcerer had set a term which was tantamount to a finishing line. Ten years is a rather short term, but the closer we are to the end, the more frustrating is failure for Oriana, hence her punishment is harsher.

Unfortunately, after a lapse of time, Alberic the Blond is said to recover his consciousness and abandon Oriana’s promise. It was unthinkable that a woman, namely a *femme fatale*, could be well thought-out to become a proper wife. After all, he is regarded as proving his common sense, inasmuch as Alberic does what he is expected—and obliged—to do. Of course, we are in the kingdom of complete fantasy, as Rosemary Jackson would locate Lee’s ghost stories. And, even in fantasy, where everything is possible, we witness that, once more, a woman is defeated, just like in real life, and is considered as ‘uncanny’. Lee does not change the reflection of reality. As a representative of a social class, Alberic the Blond had to fulfil his duty and marry a Princess so as to provide the House of Luna with money and new inheritors with noble blood.

Equally, as for the second of the name, Marquis Alberic, young Alberic’s father, was faithful to the Snake Lady for nine years, even though he had been married before meeting her. Oriana can be supposed to be the mother of young Alberic because her union with Marquis Alberic lasted for a long time, and in the tale nothing is mentioned about Alberic’s mother. On the contrary, it is related that he was commended to his grandfather as an orphan. With regard to

Marquis Alberic, he prayed to Saint Romwald, who restored his wisdom, and then he entered into a convent, becoming a monk with an 'odour of sanctity.' It can be considered that the first time she is abandoned by Alberic the Blond, Lady Oriana is vanquished by the political status represented by the alliance the new marriage meant for the House of Luna. And the second time, with Marquis Alberic, Oriana is trounced by religion. All the patriarchal forces and *de facto* powers will act against her unless she finds a representative of the manly world determined to fight for her love.

The way Oriana had contact with young Alberic was not like the one she had with his previous two ancestors. Oriana had already met him under her human form, and had stated to be his 'Godmother:' "'Do not be afraid,' she said smiling at his terror. 'I am not a ghost, but alive like you; and I am, though you do not know it, your Godmother'"'. (26) She did not ask him for a kiss to break the spell; it was the young man who discovered what he had to do to seal the deal. When young Alberic was in the castle of Sparkling Waters, he approached the well and a small snake, coming out from the trough, moved towards the boy and rubbed against him. As the boy did not have any proper knowledge of life, he was not afraid of the snake—he was not aware a snake can be a deadly animal. Taking this into account, the snake, and analogically the *femme fatale*, does not pose a menace to him. It was as if Alberic had lived in Plato's cave—because he only knew the representation of things. Likewise, as well as in Plato's myth, he has seen the drawing of the objects, not the real ones, namely those in the painstakingly depicted tapestry. It will be Oriana who will teach him about reality in 'Sparkling Waters', just as the nurse had taught him through the objects represented in the tapestry. Alberic proves his childlike innocence. Furthermore, if we split hairs about his purity, it is this condition which makes him feel sorry for the Lady of the tapestry. It could be assumed he is uncorrupted, owing to the fact that he has never been in contact with the social order, or, when he has been in contact with it, he has only been subject to the orders of his tyrannical grandfather—just as a female would be to those of men. Could we say he has the same status as Oriana, doing the bidding of male powers and confined in an uncommunicated palace? Initially, when he first saw the lady with his ancestor, he could only catch sight of a part of it, because the lady's tail was covered by a wardrobe and a cross: "and on it a large ebony and ivory crucifix, which

covered the lower part of the lady's body." (6) It is significant that a religious sign covers her body as if protecting the other people from her. We have already seen these reactions in the literary world, e.g. with regard to vampires. Even so, and paradoxically, it is this same cross that is preserving her from the sun fading her tail and this is a remission to the subversion of the Bible we have touched upon beforehand: "But instead of a skirt, she ended off in a big snake's tail, with scales of most vivid (the tapestry not having faded there) green and gold." (6)

Later, Alberic was abandoned to his fate by all men in the 'Red Palace', being given only nurture and shelter. Balthasar Maria did not pay any attention to him until he needed money to repair his decadent possessions. Thus, Alberic continued being uncorrupted because it was a woman who was in charge of his education, his Godmother.

A considerable amount of literature has been written about *femme fatale* at the *fin-de-siècle*. Many ghosts in the novels of the women writers of the Decadence were powerful women who took the form of sirens, lamiae or serpent women. These two ideas are related to the categorization and the repercussions of this trope, which altered the vision of gender and sexuality in the *fin-de-siècle* literature. The apparition of the *femme fatale*—implying, with their beauty or physical metamorphosis, their sexual characterization—is to give vent to the cultural worries generated by the social and gender changes at the end of the century. In other words, we could say that the bestialized depiction of the *femme fatale* gives us an idea of how frightened patriarchy was feeling towards the flagrant defiance it supposed. Lee's vision of the *femme fatale* shows us she is aware of the power females are acquiring and how they oppose the figure of the 'Angel in the House.'²⁶ The female power is a mixture of sexuality and domination and the *femme fatale* Lee creates in this story, who shares characteristics with the others—the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, the Moorish Infanta, Dionea or Medea—, is an archetypal woman and a referent in Western literature.

2.3. Oriana as an heir to Christian tradition

If we go back in time, to the very origin of the world, we see that the first woman to appear in the creation was Lilith. She was Adam's

first wife, created at the same time as him. And, as she was not created from his rib as Eve was, Lilith^{vi} considered herself as his equal. Thus, Lilith protested against his haughty treatment and abandoned him because she did not want to be subjugated to his will. She had a severe punishment inflicted on her, hence becoming a demon—represented most of the times by a snake. Psychologically, she represents an independent, self-sufficient woman which could inspire an emerging feminine prototype: the New Woman. Men of the time did not like this model of female who could dress in men's garments, who would smoke and who demonstrated for voting rights. All of those changes were threatening their male preponderance because females started considering themselves as males' equals. As for their part, the masculine world had got used to the fact that women, including our serpent woman, remained concealed, inasmuch as they had to repress their feelings, namely in Victorian times. They could not show desire, determination, or taste for pleasure and, as a natural corollary, they had to be mutilated and dispossessed of all qualities. In this line, the serpent woman was actually an abject denigration of women. If we see it from the point of view of females' animalization, they are deprived of consciousness, intellect and only instinct makes them act. However, if we ponder it from the standpoint of the snake's connotation in our culture, there is a change in the meaning of the tale because the authoress subverts the Bible and History.

As mentioned above, I consider a crucial point in this discussion to make an in-depth analysis of the symbolism of the snake. This analysis can be done depending on the referent we examine. First of all, following the example of Lilith, according to the Bible's interpretation, the author of the Genesis takes the snake as an intelligent animal but, at the same time, as an evil one that can be dismissed as God and man's enemy. Secondly, the devilish snake is said to have exaggerated God's prohibition in order to awaken human pride. It tries to stir up men's desire for knowledge and wisdom, even though, to achieve it, they have to disobey God. By dint of contravening his orders, humans lose faith in God and, as a result, they are not afraid of punishment. Finally, in the case of Eve, she is easily tempted because she thinks the forbidden object is real happiness. Perhaps she is avid for knowledge, even more than her companion. In the three cases we have named, the snake has subverted God the Father's rules.

As far as Alberic is concerned with the Snake Lady, he was astounded when he contemplated her snake part and cried calling for his nurse to have an explanation on such an outstanding being. Alberic wanted to discover the origin of the legend of his own ancestor and the woman who accompanied him. In this sense, the understanding of the past would connect him with his ghosts. The tapestry was the reminder of the familiar secret. The legend was that which Freud considered no longer familiar and which should remain secret—the ‘uncanny’. Indirectly, from the tapestry, and through the nurse’s stories, Oriana had been teaching the boy everything about life. She carried knowledge with her, like in the scene. The connection between Oriana and the boy was so strong that the boy tore the new tapestry so as not to replace that of Oriana. This is the first act of rebellion Alberic does against Balthasar Maria, the representative of God and the patriarchal power. The boy’s act of tearing down the new tapestry could be inspired by Lady Oriana; the boy missed her and protested. From the boy’s disobedience, we can infer a *femme fatale*’s ability to induce to subversion against the established forces, hence the patriarchy’s growing—and recurrent—fear against such female characters.

Proceeding further with the physical features defining a Snake Lady / *femme fatale*, it is noteworthy that she shares some salient characteristics with Medusa. She would only reach death by beheading—just as a vampire or a serpent woman. And this naturally leads us to the masculine, circular obsession to dismember the feminine body. Is this because men can thus feel secure before this menace? Undisputedly, I should like to preface my argument with an illustration: Lucy Westenra—the first woman victim of Dracula in England—, as well as Medusa and Oriana, is beheaded. Additionally, Oriana is killed by three men, like Lucy Westenra is also destroyed by three men, all her lovers. In both women, their female sexual connotation is so strong that the power of several males is needed to overcome them. Moreover, decapitation connotes the separation of the body and the soul. The body can symbolise the sexual desire whereas the soul, self-determination and autonomy. Neither the feminine body, nor the soul can escape punishment.

Nevertheless, we can obtain a good formula: if we mix all the components Medusa and Oriana possess, as Theodora Goss claims, we

can conclude that a *femme fatale* will be ‘beautiful, sexual, supernatural and deadly.’ With these qualities, monster women can come close to their victims without being feared. Despite that, Oriana is given a kiss by Alberic the Blond while being a serpent, which makes her more powerful than a seductress—she has enthralled the knight before showing herself.

3. ORIANA’S SUBVERSIVE ROLE

One thing is certain, *femme fatales* have always been considered as a menace to society. Why? I would venture to surmise that if a snake is able to make a knight—the honour of the House of Luna—obey it without seducing him with womanly charms, then, either as a woman or as a monster, there is an impending danger. Nina Auerbach contends that a *femme fatale* is able to ‘break the boundaries of the family within which her society restricts her.’ Women who can control men’s determinations and make them promise faithfulness suppose an opponent to the established authority. This supremacy for temptation and rebelliousness gives them holiness and force to fight against the family they do not need, the patriarchal powers they confront because of the repression of women, and against God, to whom they show no fear or remorse to disobey. What can be done to deprive this kind of women of such strength? Obviously, they can be dispossessed of their charms in order to prove how strong they are. If, by having a monster’s appearance, women can displace all authority, then, they achieve a triumphal success for them.

A number of the characteristics we have mentioned so far are true for Oriana’s case. To begin with, the first fact we know about her is that Oriana was a fairy and that she was punished, unreasonably—*prima facie*—, to remain occult. Her punishment and later imprisonment is justifiable on the grounds that such an ‘envious power’ is coveted by a man. Taking into account the mythical tradition, I see a simile between Oriana’s story and that of Lilith. We deduce that condemning Oriana to be imprisoned in a small container is the same punishment as that of Lilith’s—they have been expelled from Paradise. Both are self-assertive women who want to be treated as equals by men. This self-assertion leads them to be castigated and

denigrated, i.e. to be metamorphosed into snakes. Their first fault, then, is not to abide by the divine power; they do not accept subjugation to male desire. Moreover, Oriana's temptation is directed towards a man who belongs to a noble class and is supposed to continue his ancestors' tradition. If this man places his absolute faith in her, then, she is opposing him to patriarchal society and, by doing so, Oriana destabilizes the social system. The familiar unity, so important in Victorian era, is condemned to disappear.

Contrary to what his ancestors had done, young Alberic investigates who the woman of the tapestry is and he associates the Snake Lady to Lady Oriana. In his despair, he summons Lady Oriana: "a terrible shout came from the bed where the sick Prince was lying—'O Oriana, Oriana!' cried Prince Alberic, sitting up on his bed with a look that terrified the priest as much as his voice." (40-41) There is no doubt Oriana understands the young's desperate call because she goes to him:

'Oriana!' whispered Prince Alberic again. And raising his hand to his face, he leaned down and pressed his lips on the little flat head of the serpent. ... But a coldness seized his heart, the moon seemed suddenly extinguished ... When he awoke ... and his head rested on the knees of the most beautiful of the ladies. She was dressed in cloth of silver which seemed woven of moon mists, and shivering moonlit green grass. It was his own dear Godmother. (43-44)

By kissing her, she obtains the first step for her liberation. And, as it can be construed from the passage, Alberic feels the coldness of the snake, too. Yet, it is not revulsion, as with his ancestors, what this symbolises, but the converse—this metaphor can be interpreted as the change to a sexually mature step. Alberic has known this deadly part of his Godmother. Although Alberic has decided to be faithful, we do not have to forget his grandfather has different plans. Of course, Alberic represents the decadent man or the man of the new order. Prince Alberic has feminine features: he pays attention to aestheticism when he arrives at the castle of 'Sparkling Waters,' which is also a place in line with decadent trend: magical, Romantic and strongly linked to the forlorn past. Here, he is said to be discreet, proud, brave and

diligent. Alberic is the epitome of the true male aesthete reinforced with his natural gift.

While Alberic is in Sparkling Waters, Oriana is acting as a godmother. She provides the boy with clothes, which I interpret as primary necessities; she brings him books, that is, culture and education; and she also gives him horses, in order to teach him to be a prince. Both physical and intellectual nourishment are now in a woman's hands. This woman, who is self-sufficient, provides the Prince with everything he needs to live and become a Decadent man, even displaying effeminate characteristics because of belonging to the *fin-de-siècle*. Balthasar had left his grandson alone and isolated, like imprisoned in 'Sparkling Waters'. On balance, his reclusion is similar to a woman's punishment, in his case waiting to be given in exchange of money.

Nevertheless, the Duke's men try to offer him all kind of commodities and luxuries to gain his favours, because they think that Balthasar is old and ailing and the boy is the imminent Duke. The three men—like snakes in the grass—spy on 'Sparkling Waters' and check that someone has already offered the boy what he needed. In this moment, the reader can appreciate how men's values are so different from female ones, and much more ill-intentioned than the serpent woman's. They all think about murdering Balthasar and jump over Alberic to obtain the Estate.

Balthasar needs the boy to marry a rich woman because he is in bankruptcy. When the boy comes back to his grandfather's lodgings, someone denounces he has a snake with him. The boy obviates his grandfather and does not come out of the room he is hemmed in. Seeing that Alberic is not in favour of obeying him, Balthasar irrupts into his room and the three men dismember the snake. Oriana has always been a victim of the system and of male forces. She has not been able to be herself except when she was with Alberic in 'Sparkling Waters', apart from re-adopting her woman figure for one hour a day.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Having reached this point, we can draw some inescapable conclusions. The representation of females as a *femme fatale* has

always been a stigma for womankind. A *femme fatale* represents the dichotomy of beauty and deadliness. She is extremely beautiful and, so, men feel attracted to her, and, instead of considering that as a man's weakness, it is said to be part of her malediction. The punishment for her beauty in order to avoid male's temptation is to transform her into something dreadful and, at the same time, to denigrate her. Lee denounces that women had to remain secretly concealed, kept secret, if they did not fit the standards of society. Perhaps she felt she had to hide because she was different. She felt as if dispossessed of her members, just like the Snake Lady. In point of fact, she had to change her name to publish her work and was denied university.

The Snake Lady is a subversive figure, that is, she plays a twofold role—that of being a godmother and a *femme fatale*. Although she acts as a mother for Alberic, she is never forgiven for trying to assume manly roles. She commits an outrage against Balthasar Maria, who is the maximum power and has hindered his grandson from real life. Oriana makes Alberic see his grandfather's prohibitions are exaggerated—and this is the tipping point in the transition from the menacing woman to the godmother. Once he understands he can manage by himself, he swells with pride and self-esteem and starts being avid for knowledge and love. Thanks to his learning, which comes along with the defiance against Balthasar, Alberic is less fearful of his grandfather each time. Because of these facts, one could compare the Snake Lady to Lilith and to the snake who tempted Eve. And, as the Snake Lady acts as she decides, she considers herself equal to men. Oriana is subverting the real world because she destabilizes the established order as well as protesting against it.

As a result of destabilization and protest, she shows her tremendous powers in controlling men. Her rebelliousness is dangerous for society, but it is even more perilous for the institutional family, given that mothers, wives and daughters are the pillars for society, without being its cornerstone. If women were strong and independent, they would not need men at all: in this case, one of the pillars of Victorian times would be crumbling away. Men feel they can curb these conducts by means of repression and force, what led many women to commit suicide or to suffer from neurosis, like Lee. Yet,

there is always a way to escape as there are always, unfortunately, new remedies to palliate such disobedience.

Patriarchy, helped by the *de facto* powers, finished and annihilated the discordant element. They could find the antidote for serpent women: decapitation. By beheading the animal, male forces have demonstrated they seize the power. With this kind of deed, so ferocious, they put violence at its maximum. This ultimately serves patriarchy as an example of scorn and repression to the feminine world.

NOTES

¹ In this vein, cf. Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979: 35-44 Print. The writers itemise and analyse a series of tales that are very illustrative in this respect and, among them, 'Snow White'. Snow White is expelled from home because a witch—i.e. the female power who destroys society—is jealous of her beauty. The heroine is sent to a Paradise, where she lives with seven dwarfs, who surrender to her beauty. In exchange, she acts as a mother for them. But, in the end, she has to be kissed by a prince—i.e. her redeemer—who is supposed to love her.

² When studying the feminine figure of the mermaid, Auerbach thinks that the Mermaid is one of the cruelest examples of mutilation.

³ It may be inferred Oriana has been banned from reaching the top of the social ladder. There is a similarity with the current expression 'to reach a glass ceiling,' which appeared for the first time in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1986. This term refers to the barrier in the world of business that women cannot achieve because, although it cannot be seen from the bottom, it blocks them at the top of their careers—representing factors such as family, sexual harassment or simply a refusal towards their entering in executive boards. It can be said that the metaphor has not changed despite the passing of the time, or that it has even regressed: some economists and sociologists are nowadays commenting on a much graver 'concrete ceiling'. See in this respect, among many others, "The glass ceiling". *The Economist*.

May 5th 2009. Consultado 14/02/5. <http://www.economist.com/node/13604240>

- ⁴This coinage comes from a narrative poem used to depict the ideal women in the Victorian period. Patmore, Coventry. 'The Angel in the House', 1854-1862.

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