

WOMEN DISCUSSING MEN: GENDER AS  
IT IS WRITTEN IN LETTERS  
TO VERNON LEE

by

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## ABSTRACT

In "Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England," Sharon Marcus effectively complicates earlier critics' definitions of gender by examining letters exchanged between women. Offering an ideal framework for future projects, such as this one, that attempt to study relationships between women constructed through life writing, she proposes epistolary exchange as a relatively under-examined genre through which women's polyvalent participation in the process of gender normalization can be studied. Somerville Library, Oxford England, hosts a special collection of letters written to Vernon Lee/ Violet Paget, donated by her estate. This collection is in the process of being digitized and until now, no major moves have been made towards transcription and/or critical interaction with these letters. This overlooked collection contains almost 2,500 letters, many of which were written by prominent figures in the later Victorian era, and holds numerous possibilities for critical evaluation and engagement, especially for gender, cultural, and queer studies. Vernon Lee was a popular writer of her time, and the number of prestigious correspondences she maintained, contained in Somerville's collection, reflect her popularity and importance. Letters and life writing hold the unique ability to provide some level of insight into the era from which they originated: discussions hosted in a patriarchal society have the power to complicate the standard perception of gender roles in the Victorian era, and the focus on language surrounding the performance of gender can be used to ascertain the different forms women's dissidence can take. In particular, the letters Emily Sargent, Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and Ethel Smyth wrote to Vernon Lee about men and their

behavior refocus women's conversations around gender in the late 19th Century and illustrate the power these letters hold for providing an un-essentialized, moderated, look into the past.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus effectively complicates earlier critics' definitions of gender by examining letters exchanged between women. Offering an ideal framework for future projects, such as this one, that attempt to study relationships between women constructed through life writing, she proposes epistolary exchange as a relatively underexamined genre through which women's complicated participation in the process of gender normalization can be studied: "Studies of Victorian women have focused on how they both accepted and contested belief systems that defined women in terms of male standards, desires, and power, but have paid relatively little attention to how relationships between women defined normative gender."<sup>1</sup> Marcus further emphasizes the significance of epistolary exchanges by highlighting the importance of female relationships within the constraints of the patriarchal system, "The Victorian gender system, however strict its constraints, provided women latitude through female friendships, giving them room to roam without radically changing the normative rules governing gender difference."<sup>2</sup> Marcus offers a heuristic method for distinguishing the difference of language between women's friendships and women's romantic relationships in epistolary texts, noting the prominence of both types of relationships within the era and the importance of negotiating these relationships when discussing women's letters. As a whole, Marcus provides ample material for framing an individual life-writing project centered around epistolary exchanges: focusing on language and

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*, 27.

content to elucidate the types of relationships and transgressions against normative gender performances that letters can illustrate.

### **The Case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

While Marcus does not directly identify Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her research, Browning's letters have long been available to the public. Unlike Robert Browning, much of Elizabeth's juvenilia and early correspondence was carefully preserved by her family.<sup>3</sup> Barrett Browning's letters have been used in anthologies which tend to focus on specific relationships or specific letters and attempt to use her correspondence to illuminate her life and writings. Paul Landis, who authored *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, asserts that any saved collection of life-writing holds prominence due to the fact that it was preserved, meaning it merits study.<sup>4</sup> Criticism such as Landis' is, then, required: it fills an important hole in the critical field. Anthologists have worked with Elizabeth's letters to expound upon her beliefs,<sup>5</sup> the situations under which her texts were produced,<sup>6</sup> or in an attempt to better understand the people she surrounded herself with.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, these critical editions indicate an awareness of the power contained within the language used within these epistolary exchanges.

Another letter anthology, written by Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, demonstrates that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letter exchange with Mary Russell Mitford "simultaneously presents a biographical, social, and historical record."<sup>8</sup> In addition to the multifaceted use for a collection such as this, the editors ascribe further importance to the study of Browning's letters: "this correspondence reveals insights into the creative process- the labor,

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Garrett, *A Browning Chronology*, ix.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Landis, *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Landis, *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, *Women of Letters*, x.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Landis, *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, *Women of Letters*, xvi.

aspirations, failures, and successes attendant upon the efforts of two women writers whose achievements won them, and continue to win them, deserved recognition.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly to Raymond and Sullivan, Paul Landis finds that Elizabeth’s correspondence with her brother contains important content. Though Elizabeth’s correspondence is with a man in this case, her address of gender is noted by Landis: “Elizabeth’s letters to George contain much of the same domestic matter which fills those addressed to her sisters, but in different proportion, mingled with comments on politics and society more calculated to catch the interest of the barrister.”<sup>10</sup> This assessment of Elizabeth and George’s correspondence is further complicated by the language Landis uses in describing Elizabeth’s correspondence with George. Landis explains that “subjects about which she is conscious of their disagreement she states her position with wit and firmness and sometimes with scorn, but always with the confidence that disagreement, honestly maintained, on matters of belief cannot affect the firm foundation of love between them- almost, one might say, as man to man.”<sup>11</sup> The use of “man to man” in this context addresses women’s varied engagement in gender performance. Though these critics are approaching the subject very differently, they are all confronting gender roles through Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s prominent letter collections.

The study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s letters has changed the field of research surrounding the writer, as can be discerned through a survey of reviews written about anthologies such as Landis’. These reviews cover the reception of epistolary research in the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s letters and identify the work as necessary, implying that a new conversation began with the release of these critical letter anthologies. Reviews of Paul Landis’

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<sup>9</sup> Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, *Women of Letters*, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Landis, *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

*Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, released in 1958, address the ways the critical field has been changed by a publication such as this. Kenneth Allot writes that he considers Landis' work to be a risk to "Mrs. Browning's reputation."<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that Allot is unenthusiastic about the entirety of Landis' project, he nevertheless asserts the importance of Landis' research, stating that "there will be few readers who will not learn something from the introduction and commentary. Nor does Mr. Landis exaggerate the importance of what he has edited."<sup>13</sup> Allot finishes his review by expressing gratitude to Landis for curating a collection such as this, even if he disagrees with some of the author's critical approaches. Another reviewer, K.L. Knickerbocker, expresses similar gratitude: "*Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett* is a notable and important contribution to the better understanding of two major persons."<sup>14</sup> A final review from the period about this text, written by John Pick, distinguishes the collection as being unique for both its completeness and intimacy.<sup>15</sup> Martin Garrett's *A Browning Chronology* is another anthology that was under review for the critical moves it made in evaluating letters of the Brownings. Garrett's chronology is highlighted by M. Reynolds as a text that focuses on overlooked correspondence between the two prominent authors- making a critical contribution.<sup>16</sup> Garrett, like Allot and Knickerbocker, stresses the importance of critical collections that focus on epistolary exchange. In summation, these works have been identified as important contributions to the critical field, revealing information about the authors that was previously unknown.

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Allott, "Letters of the Brownings," *The Review of English Studies*, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Allot illustrates his displeasure at the revealing study into Browning's life throughout his review; Kenneth Allott, "Letters of the Brownings," *The Review of English Studies*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> K.L. Knickerbocker, "Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett," *Modern Language Notes*, 175.

<sup>15</sup> John Pick, "Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett," *Books Abroad*, 186.

<sup>16</sup> M. Reynolds, "A Browning Chronology," *Review of English Studies*, 466.

## The Vernon Lee Letters and Their Context

Much in the way that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letters provided "both an attractive introduction to the career and personality of one of the century's best letter writers and an enlightening view of relationships between women writers in nineteenth-century England," a prominent collection of Victorian author Violet Paget, who wrote under the name Vernon Lee, provides an appropriate case study for Sharon Marcus' model, with particular insight into gender and gender roles within the later Victorian era.<sup>17</sup> Somerville Library, Oxford England, hosts a special collection of letters written to Vernon Lee, donated by her estate. This collection is in the process of being digitized and until now, no major moves have been made towards transcribing and/or engaging critically with these letters. This overlooked collection contains almost 2,500 letters, many of which were written by prominent figures in the later Victorian era, and holds innumerable possibilities for critical interaction and evaluation, especially for gender, cultural, and queer studies. Vernon Lee, as she will be referred to throughout this project, was a popular writer of her time and the number of prestigious correspondences she maintained reflect her popularity and importance.<sup>18</sup>

In 1964 Peter Gunn released what was famously the first Vernon Lee biography: *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget 1856-1935*. However, it has become woefully outdated- refusing to engage with the possibility of Lee's queerness and lacking the spread of materials that later critics employ in their biographical writings.<sup>19</sup> Published the same year, Christa Zorn and Vineta Colby's books *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* and

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<sup>17</sup> Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, *Women of Letters*, x.

<sup>18</sup> Vernon Lee was a prominent aesthetics and supernatural fiction writer in the later Victorian period. Zorn and Colby both note her notoriety in her period and how well she was respected among her male peers for her intellect and Lee was often called "The Infant Prodigy," Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 98.

*Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, respectively, take different approaches to exploring Lee's life and works. Zorn identifies how a deficit in research materials has created a problem for studying Lee: "the absence of personal memoirs has led to bold speculations or distortions."<sup>20</sup> Lee, then, remains a bit of a mystery despite critics' efforts to understand her role within the later Victorian era. Zorn and Vineta Colby both relied heavily on Colby College's Vernon Lee Special Collection, which contains around 900 letters written to and from Vernon Lee. In contrast, Somerville's much larger collection has attracted little scholarly attention due to its being unavailable to the public until recently- though Vineta Colby appears to acknowledge the use of a few Edith Wharton letters from the archive in her preface.<sup>21</sup> Somerville's collection, still in the process of being digitized, has the potential to completely recast the study of Lee and her writings.

The Somerville collection contains a cache of observed information from the late Victorian era. This information can be used, not only to broaden our understanding of the period, including women's lives and writings, but also our understanding of Lee herself. According to Zorn, Lee is "one of the most underread and underrated critics from the period between 1880 and 1920" who "provides an apt model for the study of the public intellectual in that era."<sup>22</sup> In incorporating Somerville's collection into this project, I will attempt to frame woman's place and perception of place in this period. I will specifically look at women's language around and about performances of masculinity and the ways in which those performances, or failed performances, are evaluated and discussed by women. As Marcus has previously shown, discussions hosted in a patriarchal society have the power to complicate the standard perception of gender roles in the

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<sup>20</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, xv.

Victorian era, and the focus on language surrounding the performance of gender can be used to ascertain the different forms women's dissidence can take.

Though the focus for this project will be conversations between women about performances of masculinity, the patriarchal system these letters are operating within must first be defined along with the feminist discourse that they are positioned against, and the regulations of femininity that they are potentially contradicting. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* gives evidence of the system in which Lee and her female interlocutors would have been operating as one that requires women to be submissive. Mill argues for a shift in power throughout his work, but his identification of the existing social structure is what is important for placing Somerville's collection in context: "the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other."<sup>23</sup> Or, putting it another way: the "mode in which women are wholly under the rule of men, having no share at all in public concerns, and each in private being under the legal obligation of obedience to the man with whom she has associated her destiny, was the arrangement most conducive to the happiness and well being of both."<sup>24</sup> The social structure necessitated women's obedience and subservience in exchange for a secure future. Many women were unhappy with their inability to operate independently from men and began rebelling against these conventions.

Women were divided by their individual goals, but many of them were ultimately calling for social change.<sup>25</sup> As women began fighting for legal freedoms and protections, with the rise and fall of the Infectious Diseases Act of 1864 and the growing Suffrage movement in the later Nineteenth Century, so too were they fighting against normative gender ideology. The raging,

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<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, 8.

liberated, feminist that so deeply contradicted the docile, submissive, domestic became the popularized way of framing the activist women during this period.<sup>26</sup> While women were seeking to “correct inequitable divorce laws, to establish new laws governing financial arrangements in marriage, and above all to demand participation in the ballot,” they were fighting against ideals that would cast them as the saint, the Madonna, the mother, or the whore.<sup>27</sup> Patriarchal society, which allowed little movement between these ideological constructions, experienced conflict with the sexually liberated New Woman that appeared toward the end of the century as new laws began to pass and women gained rights.<sup>28</sup> Women were fighting back, in a changing, but still broadly patriarchal society and it is through these complicated lenses that we must understand the Vernon Lee Special Collection.

Life writing does not only encapsulate the evaluation of letters, but also includes; diaries, autobiographies, journals, and other raw materials. Letters potentially provide a middle ground between that which was written for the public and the author’s private sphere. Though letters were often edited for eventual publication in journals and biographies,<sup>29</sup> and certainly Vernon Lee would have followed this practice to some extent, information from Lee’s private sphere is still being communicated throughout the letters. Letters, then, have the ability to act as edited communications of private relationships. Letters also allow entry into the autobiographical genre, which many female authors exhibited reluctance towards participating in: “Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some Victorian women still struggled with reservations about the egotism of writing their own life story and the conflict between public disclosure and private reticence.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*.

<sup>29</sup> Carol Hanbery Mackay, “Life-Writing,” *Travel Writing*, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Carol Hanbery Mackay, “Life-Writing,” *Travel Writing*, 170.

Letters were a permissible form of life writing for women to undertake within a literary system controlled by men.<sup>31</sup> The Lee letters would have been an especially important form of communication between women, as there would have been less oversight by men; epistolary exchanges were expected between women.<sup>32</sup>

### **Evaluating Letters**

Epistolary exchange was an important form of communication for women and evaluation of these letters is necessary work, but life writing poses problems that other writing forms do not. First, of course, is the problem of interpretation. While most of the letters I evaluated were written in a clear hand and well preserved, it still holds that my interpretation could be flawed. In transcribing each letter, I have created visual representatives for unknown or uncertain factors. For example; a completely unidentifiable entity is marked by the symbol [?]. An entity that has been identified through context clues and through comparison with similar entities throughout the letter (for matching letters, words, etc.) is marked with a question mark tacked on to the end of the word. For example, if it is unclear as to whether or not the word is “when” or “then” due to the handwriting but appears to be “then” based on context and comparison to similar entities, the entity will be marked “then?”. Some of the dates are also marked with question marks and this indicates that no date was written on the letter, but the archivist has dated the letter. The date may be somewhat uncertain, but the given date was reached through studied research undertaken by Somerville’s archivist. I have also incorporated these efforts into a digital project in order to make the facsimile available to those who wish to look at the original letters themselves, which can be found at <https://lbailey.people.ua.edu/>. Additionally, a problem with interpreting the collection itself, is the lack of letters written by Vernon Lee. The letters

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<sup>31</sup> Carol Hanbery Mackay, “Life-Writing,” *Travel Writing*, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*, 27.

contained in the Somerville collection are solely to Vernon Lee and therefore her actions, opinions, and writings must be inferred by the responses contained in others' letters.

My approach attempts to make up for the lack of correspondence written by Lee, focusing instead on people in her life, as they were written about and characterized by others. I will be focusing on twenty letters from the collection that I will have personally transcribed. Though this is only a fraction of the letters contained at Somerville, it is the largest research effort undertaken with their collection so far and attempts to appropriately evaluate the correspondence and language of Lee's collection and its prominence, while not overly weighing the words of others in respect to Lee's actions and perspectives. While the Lee letters should not be essentialized as wholly representative of Victorian culture or women's fight against the male dominated society they lived in, women's conversations about men can be used to illuminate particular failures in conforming to normative gender standards, instituted by society. Due to this fact the terms and their definitions will depend on the chapters and context. The letters contained in Somerville's special collection will be evaluated in three chapters. Each chapter will deal not only with letters but with periodicals of the era in order to clarify the conversation that the writers were engaging in. This will illustrate how the letters discussed, from the Vernon Lee Special Collection, were taking place within a broader conversation and not existing simply as stand-alone conversations cherry picked for evaluation.

### **Chapter Overview**

The first chapter will deal explicitly with prodigality, and the failed performance of masculinity. The ways women discuss masculine failure will be illuminated through letters written by Emily Sargent about her brother in law Francis Ormond. Spanning the period of almost a year, Sargent's letters cast Francis as a prodigal character. The language used around

his behavior implies that his prodigality is a failure of masculinity, which result in a shift in observable gender dynamics. Sargent's letters to Lee, which demonstrate the pain and suffering caused by Francis, depict a man who is unable to follow the moral codes that guide masculine performance, as outlined by John Tosh in *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Tosh's evaluation of masculine norms will be important for this chapter. After briefly outlining women's roles in the Victorian era and appropriately addressing life writing, I begin by defining prodigality and gender, more specifically masculinity, within the era. In order to establish the discussions people were having about prodigality in the Victorian era, periodicals and Victorian writers are referenced. In establishing the contemporary conversation around masculinity and prodigality, which Sargent and Lee would have been engaging in, this project will be able to take Sargent's letters as a representative case of a broader problem presented within Victorian writing; Sargent's letters about Francis characterize a societal conversation about prodigal characters such as Francis. I first look at Francis' poor behavior in comparison to what was expected of gentlemen within the period. Francis' lack of responsibility and his absence is then scrutinized, with special attention to how these factors shift traditional gender power dynamics within his family. Finally, his failed masculinity is confronted in order to reveal life writing's relationship to real-life conversations women were having about men that, on some level, interrogated patriarchal norms and expectations.

The second section will focus on male invalidism as it is discussed by women. The terms and texts used, therefore, will be related to illness and the sickroom. Illness and invalidism will be represented in the letters written to Lee about her brother Eugene Hamilton-Lee's illness, penned by Clementina Anstruther-Thomson. Eight letters, spanning the period of four months, will be consulted in an effort to recast how gender is represented in the sickroom. Judith

Flanders' *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* works in tandem with Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* and Maria H. Frawley's *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* to define the function of illness, invalidism, and the sickroom in day to day Victorian lives. Additionally, a text of great concern in this chapter is John Kucich's *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* as it relates to the role of shifting power dynamics and caretaking in the specific case of Lee as a caretaker, or at least the way in which Anstruther-Thomson describes Lee as a caretaker. Illness and caretaking were distinctly gendered, and the letters Lee received from Clementina Anstruther-Thomson blur the traditional gender lines laid out in the aforementioned texts. While Anstruther-Thomson is not presenting a case for equality through nursing, it is important that women were discussing how women and men's power relate to each other, even in illness. It is in epistolary exchanges about male invalidism that we find conversations that complicate modern critical understanding of gender and power in the nineteenth century.

The third and final chapter will investigate women's conversations about men's writing, contrasting male public engagement in political topics with women's private epistolary exchanges involving male writing. Focusing on six letters written to Lee by Ethel Smyth, a well-known suffragette, over the course of ten years, this chapter will focus on Smyth's citations of men's writing and rhetorical analyses of writings involved in the suffrage movement. Laurel Brake's *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* and Rita Karnidis' *Subversive Discourse: The Cultural Production of Late Victorian Feminist Novels* typifies the modern perception of gender and criticism in the Victorian era, creating a framework for the reversal of traditional critical roles, which illustrates the power shift created by women's self-aware examination of writing. The chapter will begin by illustrating the state of

criticism on women's writing, as written by men, within the period in order to contradict the criticism that Smyth gives to her male interlocutors. Once the critical field is established the publishing culture, which women were forced to conform to or which women attempted to restructure and rebel against with their own publications, will be examined. This multilayered framework will then be used to examine Smyth's words on men's writing. Smyth's concern with men's writing and her engagement in criticism of men's writing has the power to connect women's conversations in life-writing, their observations of their position and power within a patriarchal society, to the written discourse prominent at the time. Surprisingly, women's life-writing and discussions of men then become directly representative of Victorian women's writing culture.

## PRODIGALITY: FAILED MASCULINITY, POWER, AND GENDER

### **Prodigality, Masculinity, and Contextualizing Representations**

Prodigality is a behavioral pattern defined by irresponsibility followed by atonement and forgiveness of the prodigal character's sins. The biblical tale, appearing in Luke 15:11-32, tells the story of a son who has squandered his inheritance. The son is forced to work for his livelihood until he returns home repentant, made modest by circumstances. In a sense the son returns victorious, regaining his father's love and trust after having been separated from his family. However, this tale leaves out prodigality's primary victims: women, who remained dependent on men regardless of their behavior. The question then becomes, if such a character existed in real life, in a predominantly patriarchal society, how would a mother, sister, daughter, or wife perceive and talk about prodigal behavior? Furthermore, the way women communicated about prodigality in the Victorian era could clarify women's perception of gender roles and their position in society. If gender roles and the ways prodigal characters fulfill gender roles are to be better understood, prodigality as it relates to gender must first be understood.

Prodigality will be defined through a failure to fulfill traditional masculine roles, as defined by society, by male bodied individuals. Failure, in this case, refers to an inability to perform masculinity adequately as opposed to a choice to perform against conventions (transgressive masculinity). Additionally, the ways in which prodigality fails to live up to conventions can affect others negatively, meaning that the behaviors exhibited by the prodigal character end up devastating more than just the one acting them out. These factors indicate a lack

of choice and therefore steer prodigality away from transgression and into the realm of failure. Finally, the prodigal character depicted is unable to recover himself at the end of the events related. This lack of choice is a failure as opposed to an intentional transgression against masculinity codes of the later Victorian era. Masculinity is defined by the dominant code of manliness within the Victorian period, which involved an “emphasis on self-control, hard work, and independence” and belonged, primarily, to “the professional and business classes, and manly behavior was what (among other things) established a man’s class credentials *vis-à-vis* his peers and his subordinates.”<sup>1</sup> Despite there being no single definition of masculinity John Tosh, in *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, is able to establish traditional codes of conduct, previously referenced.<sup>2</sup> The prodigal character is unable to follow these codes of conduct and live up to the gender-based expectations of his peers.

The letters from the Vernon Lee special collection portray prodigality as a failure of gender performance, and this portrayal of failed masculinity can also be found in periodicals from the later Victorian era. Periodicals published in the Victorian era tend to shift the conversation away from the biblical prodigal character. The type of prodigality documented during this period is more closely associated with the aforementioned failure of masculinity, due to a simple change to the biblical story: the forgiveness arc. Though some of the Victorian periodicals that document prodigality incorporate traditional, biblical, discussions of repentance and forgiveness, many do not. Mary Howitt’s “The Woefully Wedded” (January 1847) tells the tale of a man who exhibits prodigality in every aspect of his life- a man unable to perform the roles expected of him. A father thinks deeply on the trouble his son has caused him and his companions in Watts Phillips’ “Fortune’s Wheel; a Story of Ups and Downs” (October 11,

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<sup>1</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, 34.

<sup>2</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, 14.

1862). Unlike the biblical narrative the son in Phillips' tale finds no welcome at home, "no welcome at his father's board."<sup>3</sup> Audrey Burke's "Margaret Grenfield's Repentance" (November 1891) is another contemporary text that addresses prodigality. Burke identifies the prodigality of a married Colonel and his eventual return to his family: her tale exemplifies the ways in which a husband must fail to perform his duties in order to emulate the prodigal parable. *The London Journal's* "Marrying a Begum" (April 9, 1870) follows the biblical prodigal narrative, which ends with repentance and forgiveness, but more importantly this article identifies the colloquial use of prodigality in the later Victorian era, "when we speak of the return of the prodigal son the epithet is merely used in a colloquial sense."<sup>4</sup> In the examples given, many keep the conversation around prodigality alive, while shifting it away from the biblical passage. This shift exemplifies that the parable, in Victorian conversation, may have been an interrogation of spirituality and religion, but was a conversation that also existed outside of and beyond biblical traditions, making it a relevant topic for Lee and her female interlocutors.<sup>5</sup>

The extant conversation that Lee and her female correspondents would have been entering is also exemplified in parabolic works by authors such as Charles Dickens and Margaret Oliphant.<sup>6</sup> Dickens wrote characters such as Captain George in *Bleak House* and Wopsle in *Great Expectations*, who were "casual allusions" to the prodigal parable.<sup>7</sup> Captain George is referenced by John R. Reed as a "benign version of the type who, though he has not sinned abundantly, is, because of his reduced station in life, ashamed to return to the home and mother he cherishes."<sup>8</sup> Wopsle, on the other hand, observes thematic prodigality that is present

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<sup>3</sup> Watts Phillips, "Fortune's Wheel; A Story of Ups and Downs," *The London Journal*, 229.

<sup>4</sup> "Marrying a Begum," *The London Journal*, 235.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1975), 242.

<sup>6</sup> Susan E. Colón, *Victorian Parables*, 63; Linda M. Lewis, *Dickens: His Parables, and His Reader*, 88.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 241.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout the entire novel. Wopsle “exhorts the company gathered for Christmas dinner at the Gargery,” an apt observation due to the fact that Pip has “stolen a pork pie to feed a genuine prodigal, and has thus allied himself with sinners and outcasts as the prodigal son did.”<sup>9</sup> Oliphant used the trope throughout her career, from “*The Perpetual Curate* (1864) to the recurring subject of the late novels *The Prodigals and Their Inheritance* (1885) and *Who was Lost and Is Found* (1894)” Oliphant “used the parable in her fiction to think through the moral, relational, and existential dilemmas.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that Victorian authors were considering the prodigal character in their writing not only illustrates the prominence of the parable in the period, but also connects Sargent’s letters to Victorian writing culture. Susan Colón states that the varied use of parables during the era demonstrates the developing dynamic of religion and society during the period.<sup>11</sup> An important difference in the use of the prodigal parable within Victorian literature, versus the original biblical tale, is that the Victorian prodigal often “returns too late to offer repentance to his injured family.”<sup>12</sup> When an individual is unable to be forgiven, and therefore is denied redemption, it is the beginning of a moral debate according to John R. Reed.<sup>13</sup> The real-life prodigal character discussed does not get a redemption arc and engages in a debate of morals as they relate to gender performance.

For reference, I have created a chart (figure 1) in order to better clarify the relationships between the individuals I will be discussing. Vernon Lee was familiar with everyone listed, sharing direct correspondence with Emily Sargent, the painter John Singer Sargent, Mrs. Ormond, and Violet Sargent Ormond. Francis is the primary character touched on and is a

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<sup>9</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Susan E. Colón, *Victorian Parables*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Susan E. Colón, *Victorian Parables*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 240.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 243.

unique example of real-life prodigality. As depicted in the chart below, Emily Sargent, John Singer Sargent, and Violet Sargent Ormond were siblings and Francis Ormond was the man Violet married. The Sargents were childhood friends of Vernon Lee, which explains their regular correspondence.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Ormond was Francis' mother and, therefore, Violet's mother in law. Francis and Violet had six children, some of which are mentioned in the letters. The letters Emily Sargent sent to Vernon Lee about Francis Ormond depict an essentialized prodigal character: perfect for evaluation and discussion of gender dynamics and power and epitomize the important exchanges women had about men's behavior- or misbehavior.

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<sup>14</sup> "Genealogy of John Singer Sargent and Family." *JSSGallery*. 8 Sep. 2018.

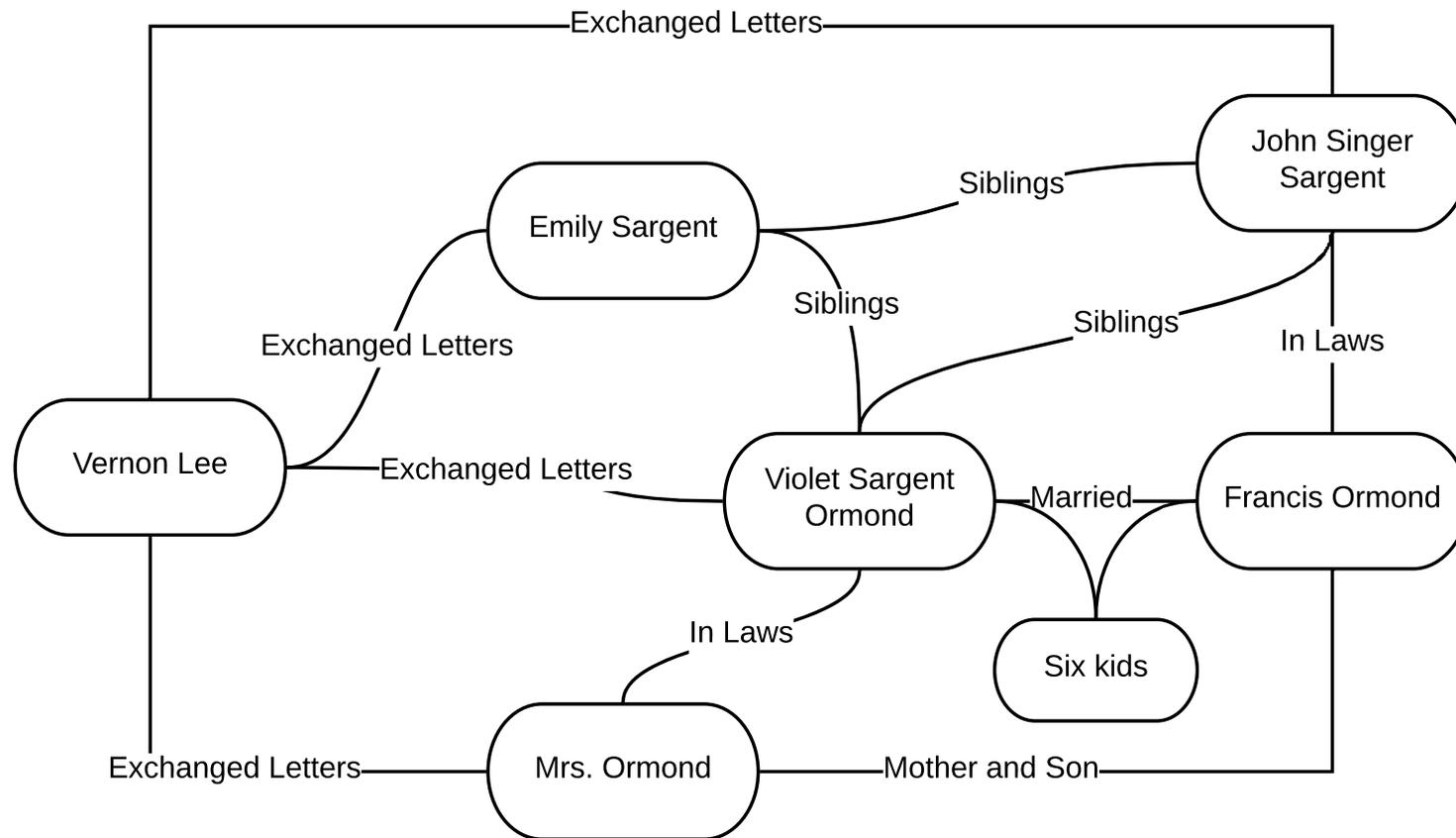


Figure 1: (Above) A chart representing the relationships between individuals mentioned in this section.

## A Man's Disgraceful Behavior

Emily Sargent writes to Vernon Lee about the troubling dynamic that has formed between Violet Sargent and her husband Francis Ormond. Sargent's letter portrays a man of weak character and a woman of endearing strength. Violet is considered "so sweet and brave, and uncomplaining," a woman who wants to fulfill the duty of her position, exhibiting poise and grace even in difficult circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Contrarily, Francis' behavior is, perhaps, best illustrated by his failure to live up to his position and the expectations placed upon him. He is unlike Violet, not having seen his children or mother in years according to Sargent.<sup>16</sup> More than expressing criticism of Francis' behavior in this letter, Sargent appears concerned, "What worries us both much more though, is Francis."<sup>17</sup> Sargent seems to feel sorry for the man: ruined by his own character and folly, trapped with the consequences of his weakness but too fearful to behave in a way more becoming of his position. Violet is left responsible for her family- judging what is right and what is wrong for the individuals under her care. This is a key point in beginning to define why Francis' behavior is so disgraceful and connecting his behavior to that of masculine failure, since the head of the household is traditionally associated with masculinity.<sup>18</sup> Violet confides to her sister that his disgraceful behavior, his inability to fill the key role in their family dynamic, leaves her with a dilemma: "she admits that his flaws, so far, would not warrant her uprooting the family for, and she would not consent to doing that, unless she saw something much more promising than she has seen."<sup>19</sup> She is unable to aid her husband as one might expect her to and she requires him to improve before she moves to assist him. Her refusal to aid him is a

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "The location of authority within the household was the other key determinant of masculine status here," John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

refusal to be submissive to Victorian conventions and indicates a shift in power as a result of his poor behavior.<sup>20</sup> Her help is conditional and at this point she is the head of their household: it seems that she is in control.

Francis Ormond's behavior is treated as a secret, as if it is disgraceful; "let me whisper it in your ear" and "I know it will be just as if I had not said it" with those words distinctly underlined by the letter's writer.<sup>21</sup> The language that Sargent uses to introduce Francis' behavior, and the problems his behavior has caused his family are important. The words Sargent uses communicate pity for Francis and sympathy for whatever condition that would allow him to behave in such a way. She describes his behavior as "abnormal," differentiating his actions from her perception of normative gender performance.<sup>22</sup> Sargent also directly identifies her pity, "The pity is that he has it in his power to cloud so many lives!"<sup>23</sup> She expresses sympathy for the situation that Francis has put Violet and his family in, as well as his ability to negatively affect those around him. The negative impacts that Sargent outlines in her letter direct Francis' "abnormal" behavior away from intentional transgression towards an unintentional failure. These negative sentiments do not end there as Emily writes Lee, "The more one thinks of it all, the sadder it seems."<sup>24</sup> Her sadness is only interrupted by her account of how well Violet is handling the entire situation, the vote of confidence in her sister refocusing the narrative from masculine failure to feminine success and power. Yet it remains that Emily Sargent pities Francis for being an unusual man, one who would spend all of his money and then refuse to face his family in fear of the repercussions.

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<sup>20</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Francis' wife and children are left to deal with the fallout of his unusual behavior. Emily Sargent expresses to Lee the complicated emotions that Violet experiences when faced with Francis' return, "she dreads his coming, but hopes he will."<sup>25</sup> Violet is trapped by two warring emotions: dread and hope. When Sargent penned this letter, much like the March 14<sup>th</sup> letter, there was still hope that Francis would live up to expectations- that he would eventually be able to perform in the role of father and husband. The scheme to meet up is initially described with hope, "we have the most delightful plan."<sup>26</sup> However, we find out in the next letter that Francis has failed to live up to those hopeful expectations, confirming Violet and Emily's worst fears.<sup>27</sup> As Francis continues to disappoint Sargent's language changes, growing resigned as time goes on. His behavior contradicts that of a traditional father, husband, or son and in doing so he is failing to perform his assigned gender role.

### **Power, Responsibility, and Absence**

According to Sargent, Violet is in charge of the family's movements and it is her judgement that controls what is right for her family. Violet's inability to comfort Francis until he proves himself deserving, her refusal to go to him, despite it being her duty as a woman,<sup>28</sup> leaves her with the power in their relationship. In the March 14<sup>th</sup> letter Emily communicates Violet's disappointment with Francis' behavior. Francis, then, is left without help and it is unclear if he is capable of the drastic improvement that Violet seeks, or if his behavior is unchangeable. The expectation is for Violet to care for a man who has been identified as abnormal due to his prodigality, but Violet's behavior contradicts this expectation and it is the man who becomes

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<sup>25</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 24 July (1907?).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 September (1907?).

<sup>28</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 36.

dependent on his wife.<sup>29</sup> The weight of this role is communicated in Sargent's letter; she feels the weight of her societal obligation, "Violet feels she must go to him."<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, Violet ultimately refuses to go to him as his wife.

Francis' failure to perform his duties, not to mention his failure to perform masculinity, is contrasted once more when Violet's planned trip to visit her mother-in-law, Mrs. Ormond, is held in the balance by Francis. In preparation for a trip spanning three weeks, Violet sets a deadline for Francis, "Violet replied [to Francis] if he did not come before Aug. 21<sup>st</sup> she would take the children to the mountains first."<sup>31</sup> In response to Violet's deadline, Francis decides that he will delay, and therefore miss their trip. He claims that he "did not want to interfere with her plans."<sup>32</sup> Francis again proves that he is unable to fulfill his duties, in this case a previously agreed upon trip. Violet resolves to follow through with her original plan, with or without Francis: "Francis is such an uncertain quantity, and when he proposed himself to come a month later, she concluded to stick to the plan."<sup>33</sup> Sargent now perceives Francis as an uncertain quantity and the language Sargent uses differs greatly from the hopeful outlook expressed in the March 14<sup>th</sup> letter. Additionally, due to her children's needs, Francis' proposed delay would make the trip impossible: "she suspects to return to London about the 21 of September, to meet Francis, the children's schools re-open about the 26<sup>th</sup> of that month, too."<sup>34</sup> Violet resolves to follow through with her original plans and disregard a husband that may or may not fulfill his obligations. She is prioritizing her children, taking on the responsibility that Francis seems to refuse in avoiding his family. Furthermore, Sargent's belief that Francis is uncertain is reiterated

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<sup>29</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>30</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>31</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 24 July (1907?).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

when she writes Lee “Privately, I hardly suspect Francis will come at all.”<sup>35</sup> If manliness is a quality defined by and observed by others, then according to Sargent Francis is failing.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that Emily believes Francis’ continued failure to perform means that he should no longer be expected to, and it is apparent that his presence is no longer expected as a result of his continued absence from his family.

Francis’ real-life absence is another failure that exaggerates his already disgraceful behavior. In her March 14<sup>th</sup> letter Sargent identifies an additional impact of Francis’ prodigality in this letter: his absence from his children’s lives. He is apparently afraid to face his mother, Mrs. Ormond, because of his poor behavior; “I am sure he would not hesitate to come, if it were not that he will have to face Mrs. Ormond.”<sup>37</sup> His refusal to go home to his mother prevents him from visiting his family, leaving their children without their father’s presence. Early on in this series of correspondence, Sargent expresses confidence in Francis’ return and his ability to face his family. Paradoxically, the same letter describes his prolonged absence from his family: “I do hope and trust he will come here, to see the children too, which he has not done for nearly three years.”<sup>38</sup> Sargent conveys her hope that Francis is not beyond help, believing in his ability to turn his behavior around; Sargent believes he is capable of fulfilling the roles society requires of him. Yet his absence remains, and she simultaneously defines him as incapable, writing of her hope and trust in the character of a man who has been absent for years.

Francis’ continued absence has shifted power within the family while also placing undue burden on his wife and children. Sargent pities Violet, understanding that Francis’ absence has created pressure for his wife. After parting Sargent writes, “I was very sad at seeing them go, for

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<sup>35</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 24 July (1907?).

<sup>36</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

I feel that Violet's holiday is now over." <sup>39</sup> While Sargent is saddened by Violet and company's departure, Violet's own sadness may result from her husband. The language Sargent uses is striking, as she identifies Violet's holiday as over; Violet's holiday ends with an impending encounter with Francis: Violet "expects Francis to arrive in London about the 21<sup>st</sup> of Sept. so must get back a day or two before that." <sup>40</sup> Francis continues to disappoint, to the extent that it appears Sargent has given up hope in his recovery from life as a prodigal character: "The children's schools commence on the 24<sup>th</sup> of Sept. of course Francis may change his plans, but in his last letter here he mentioned that date." <sup>41</sup> Not only does Francis plan to arrive only three days before his children are set to go back to school, but his arrival should not be depended on. Violet, apparently, is conflicted. She both looks forward to reuniting with her absent husband, while also dreading his arrival. Sargent writes: "Poor Violet dreads his coming, and yet thinks he ought to come, and wants him to." <sup>42</sup> Regardless of the outcome of this visit, Francis' family has already been negatively impacted by his absence. Violet has acted as head of the family, a burden placed upon her by a man too afraid to face his mother and, in general, apparently incapable of fulfilling any of the expectations placed upon him.

### **Francis' Failed Masculinity**

The language Emily Sargent uses to describe Francis identifies him as a flawed man lacking courage- a man that must be pitied for his failed performance of masculinity who does not live up to the traditional man and lacks traditional qualities of masculinity. <sup>43</sup> However, Francis appears aware of his failure: "He has lost a lot of money, writes in despair, wants to bury

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<sup>39</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 September (1907?).

<sup>40</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 September (1907?).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

himself.”<sup>44</sup> Francis expresses how ashamed he is of himself. In writing the woman as the figure of stability within a family, Sargent associates emotional impulsivity and a lack of financial control with the male figure. The head of house is traditionally responsible for money and his family’s well-being, but Francis has failed to behave as head of house.<sup>45</sup> It is implied that he has, instead, pursued his own pleasures and self-interests. In communicating Francis’ failure, Violet’s ability to fulfill a variety of roles is highlighted. Violet fills the role of head of house, taking on the responsibility of her family and their well-being: she performs in a way that Francis is unable to.

The letter Sargent pens to Lee on January 3<sup>rd</sup> discusses Francis’ return. It appears that Francis has only just returned, months later than originally expected, having missed the deadline given to him by Violet in an earlier letter. Sargent states that “Francis returned on the 12<sup>th</sup> of Nov. and went to see his mother and little girls, who are spending the winter in Paris.”<sup>46</sup> Not only has Francis returned in November instead of September, but it appears that his return was scheduled right as his mother and children were leaving for Paris, and according to Sargent he is returning to his place abroad soon after his visit with his family.<sup>47</sup> Sargent writes, “He is really just as cranky as ever, though when he is with Violet she feels his charm, and when he is away she does not at all.”<sup>48</sup> Sargent diagnoses Francis’ irregular temper and erratic behavior; it is apparent that Francis’ behavior has not much improved from the March 14<sup>th</sup> letter, in which his abnormality was first brought up. Sargent’s letter relates a less than pleasant visit, with Francis exhibiting an inability to observe the positive in anything, according to Sargent. It is “Poor

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<sup>44</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

<sup>45</sup> “The location of authority within the household was the other key determinant of masculine status here. The power of the paterfamilias is most assured when he controls the labour of household members,” John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 January (1908?).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 January (1908?).

Violet<sup>49</sup> who must deal with Francis' lack of enjoyment at their exploration of the coast, during which Francis "saw nothing he liked."<sup>50</sup> Sargent not only describes his dissatisfaction with the coast as a whole, but his interest in a location that Sargent identifies as "too dark."<sup>51</sup> Even his interests fail to meet Sargent's standards, and perhaps this is a communication of Francis' general failure to fit in with the societal mold. Francis complains about their trip, according to Sargent, and Violet is left to bear the brunt of his unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Despite his failures Francis is not without his charms, but when Violet is separated from his magnetic personality she is faced with his charmless failures. Francis' personality continues to conflict with moral masculine values and he is unable to meet the approval of his peers, an important factor in judging Victorian masculinity according to John Tosh. Francis, despite being present, fails his performance of masculinity.

Francis' overall failure is stressed in Sargent's final letter to Lee about the prodigal man. The fourth letter in an almost yearlong saga surrounding Francis' behavior, Sargent writes that Francis "has lost a lot of money, you know, at Los Angeles."<sup>52</sup> In light of this major loss, Violet is unsure of what comes next and Sargent tells Lee that Violet does "not know what they will do."<sup>53</sup> This letter is the culmination of Violet's experiences over the past year and reflects the impact Francis has on his family. It is no longer only about reputation: his prodigal behavior may require them to move. Sargent writes Lee, "He will not stay in London, so they have given notice to give up their house in June."<sup>54</sup> Francis' inability to settle is another in a long line of attributes that do not match with the code of masculinity defined by Tosh or Emily Sargent. Francis'

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<sup>49</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 January (1908?).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 3 January (1908?).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

prodigal behavior has led to his family's having to move in order to follow him, a contradiction to Violet's refusal to go to her husband in the March 14<sup>th</sup> Letter. He has created a situation so bad that his family must give up their place of living, forcing them to follow him on his prodigal journey.

## **Conclusion**

Francis has failed his family; his wife, his children, and his mother have all suffered from his prodigality. Emily and Violet's brother, John Sargent, is often mentioned by Emily and contrasted with Francis; Emily often communicates John's dedication to his work and his ability to fulfill his duties.<sup>55</sup> Francis may change for the better at some point, but the months-long recollection of his behavior by Sargent leaves the reader with diminished hope. Francis, as depicted in Emily Sargent's letters, is a man that has failed to fulfill his assigned gender role. Francis' failure complicates the normalized view of masculinity and the expectations placed upon the masculine figure. Francis appears to diminish the hope and spirit of those around him and his irresponsibility leads to not only a major loss of wealth, but also the forced relocation of his family. This final outcome emphasizes Francis' failure, as his family is forced to carry the weight of their prodigal father: a man who has not, by Sargent's estimations, finished his prodigal journey in his lack of repentant behavior and the continued burden he places upon others.

Sargent's language about Francis and his failure exemplifies the ways in which women's talk about men has the power to be subversive. Sargent appears to be sympathetic with her suffering sister and the at times scathing references to Francis' behavior do not align with a woman's performance of the submissive domestic. It is because of this that communications

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<sup>55</sup> John Sargent and his work is mentioned in the March 14 letter and the July 24 letter.

about men are so important; they have the power to expose the ways in which women do not follow the rules or, alternatively, the ways in which women lack confidence in the patriarchal system. Violet is raised up in Sargent's letters, her irreprehensible behavior contrasting that of her prodigal husband. Francis, despite being a man and the head of the household, can do wrong and the financial burden discussed in these letters is not that of Violet upon her husband, but rather Francis upon his family. These epistolary exchanges illustrate the complexity of gender and how unhappy women in situations such as Violet's might have been with the patriarchal system. Sargent's letters about Francis create an important narrative about gender and power that contradicts the established, essentialized, representations of masculinity and femininity.

ILLNESS AND INVALIDISM: LIES, CARETAKING, AND SHIFTING POWER  
DYNAMICS

**Eugene Lee-Hamilton and Definitions of Invalidism**

Many letters written to Vernon Lee express concern for her brother's health. The first letter discussed in the prodigal section, Emily Sargent's March 14<sup>th</sup> letter, contains such an inquiry: "I am dreadfully sorry you have had such a bad? two months, your brother's wonderful recovery will be complete. I had no idea his illness had been so severe and trying."<sup>1</sup> Sargent is not alone in her concern for Eugene Hamilton-Lee's health and many of Lee's correspondences contain worry, including letters written by Mary Robinson, Ethyl Smyth, and Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson. A selection of Kit's letters illustrates nursing culture as it relates to a woman being in charge of care for a male-bodied individual: Lee's brother Eugene.

Kit Anstruther-Thomson, a figure notorious not only for her writings but for her potentially romantic connection to Lee, exchanged letters with Lee at a frequency and volume that has little match in Somerville's collection. This frequency allows for the study of a particular time period involving Eugene Lee-Hamilton's health, as her letters engage in an ongoing conversation about Eugene's condition. Kit's letters also include inferences of Lee's suffering at the hands of her relative's illness, and the measures she takes to care for and protect her family. These letters, which depict the masculine patient in the Victorian sickroom, have the power to complicate not only our modern perception of gender and illness within the era, but also our

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Sargent, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 March (1907?).

perception of power dynamics as they relate to the act of nursing. In light of her brother's illness Lee becomes not only a caretaker, but also the knowledgeable authority directing Eugene's care and controlling the dispersion of information related to his illness. Kit's illustration of Eugene's illness has the potential to create a representative case of differing gender roles that do not fit within the normalized views of gender in Victorian society. Women's writing on men's invalidity and women's power in situations of male invalidism trouble the expectation of female subservience to masculine power and reveal the unexpected power contained in women's work.

Contemporary criticism is often concerned with gender in the sickroom and in respect to the act of nursing. Illness is a prominent theme within nineteenth century scholarship and this popularity can be attributed to the Victorian fascination with mortality and the commonality of the sick-room in the middle- and upper-class household. There was a notable obsession with health throughout the nineteenth century and the sickroom was perceived to be a necessary part of the home.<sup>2</sup> Historical scholarship has reconstructed women's place in the sickroom, establishing them as both caretaker and invalid. For instance, Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* attempts to complicate gender within the sickroom, but meets some resistance, due to the fact that the sickroom is primarily associated with femininity. Despite her efforts to present gender in the sickroom as a multifaceted location in Victorian England, she finds the association with women "inescapable."<sup>3</sup> Bailin is not completely unsuccessful in complicating the modern understanding of the sickroom and its patients, but Kit Anstruther-Thomson's letters provide an alternative perception of the sickroom. Kit closely relates illness to male figures, using language that has the ability to broaden our understanding of

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, 3-9.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, 26.

gendered roles in the sickroom, problematizing the sickroom through a discussion between women about a man's health and woman's care.

As Bailin has established, nursing was a role associated with women. Despite the complicated aspects of caring for another's health, women were thought to be uniquely suited to the role of caretaker and according to Judith Flanders women were perceived to have an innate ability that allowed them to become a nurse: "every woman was a possible nurse" and when care was needed the woman "transformed herself" to care for her patient.<sup>4</sup> An alternative view of women as nurse is observable in Florence Nightingale, a near contemporary of Lee's. While Nightingale "unusually, felt that nursing had to be taught, she neglected to consider, through the strength of her own vocation, that not every woman was a nurse by inclination."<sup>5</sup> The perception of nursing was based on associations of gender and natural instincts while still creating unexpected dynamics within those traditional roles: "reversals of class positions (old-style nurses "ruling" their middle- and upper-class patients; new style nurses tending to the sick poor) and gender roles (military nurses saving the soldiers; the supine, sickly, male patient and the powerful, healthy female nurse) inform the anxieties and charisma surrounding the mid-Victorian nurse."<sup>6</sup> The perception of a nurse's behavior had a lot to do with gendered societal expectations and Kit's letters outline both a compliance with these expectations as well as a reversal of traditional power dynamics when discussing Lee's care of Eugene. The exploration of Kit's letters about Lee and her brother is not only related to the broader conversation of women talking about men's health but is also a potential interrogation of perceived power in standard gender roles and domesticity.

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 340.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 342.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Judd, *Bedside Seductions: Nursing and the Victorian Imagination*, 6.

Reconstructing gender and its relationship to illness in the Victorian era is dependent on mediating texts, such as periodicals, which can illustrate some aspect of real-life conversations about illness and the sickroom in the nineteenth century. “The Sick-Room,” an article found in *Bow Bells* in 1866, discusses the female role in the sickroom: “The care of the sick devolves on women. From the highest to the lowest none are, properly speaking, exempt from this charge.”<sup>7</sup> The *Bow Bells* article also discusses the preconceived notions of womanhood which are associated with a natural aptitude for nursing. Women are identified as having qualities of “Gentleness, watchfulness, firmness, judgement, some delicacy of feeling, and a truly Christian spirit,” which are “the distinguishing characteristics which will best adapt a woman for fulfilling the phase of her duties.”<sup>8</sup> A *Courier-Journal* article from 21 years later (April 18, 1887), on the other hand, expresses a distaste for women’s behavior in the sickroom. “Women in the Sick-Room” focuses on women’s ineffectuality as both patient and caregiver due to their ever persistent curiosity and their interest in experimenting with medicine.<sup>9</sup> Woman’s medicinal inquiry is presented in a negative light; *The Courier-Journal* article asserts that women are incapable of fulfilling the roles to which they are supposedly predisposed due to their pursuit of scientific inquiry instead of remaining in the domestic sphere. There are a few articles that also present the patient as agendered. These periodical articles are certainly not as frequent as those that associate womanhood with invalidity, but they exist. *Scribner’s Monthly’s* “The Sick-Room” (November 1872) is an example of this type of representation, often referring to the patient rather straightforwardly as “the patient.”<sup>10</sup> Although “he” is used in a few instances, the general lack of gendering in this article stands out.

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<sup>7</sup> Elise M., “The Sick-Room,” *Bow Bells*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Women in the Sick-Room.” *Courier- Journal (1869-1922)*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> “The Sick-Room,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 172.

Periodicals of the period also contained associations of masculinity with invalidism. Though this is not the popular perception of invalidism in modern criticism, these representations complicate essentialized gendered portrayals of illness. The image of a mustachioed man in bed is memorable and apparent, illustrating the man as the patient in a sick-room, a domestic sphere that, once made warm and bright, is considered a necessary part of any household in the article. Figure 2, found in *The Youth's Companion* (1907), is an entity which conveys the intricate relationship between invalidity and gender:

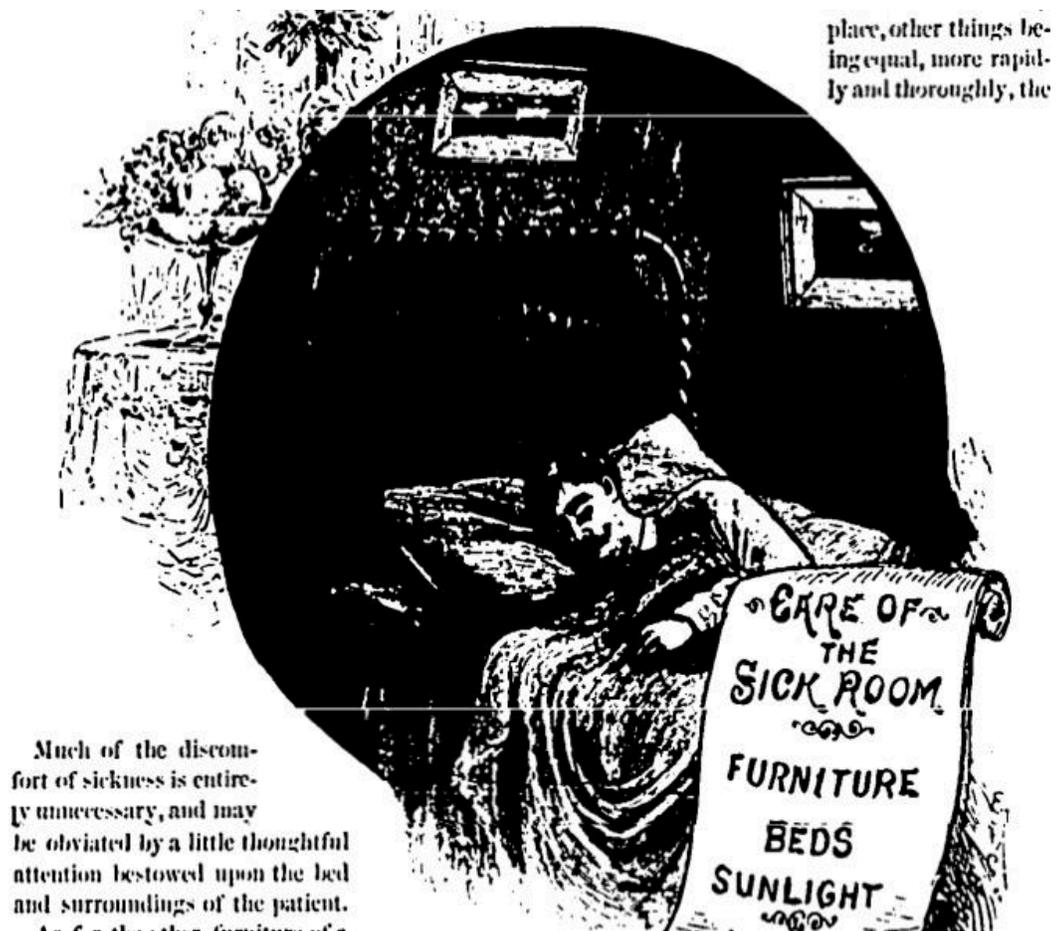


Figure 2: (Above) An illustration depicting a male invalid.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Frederic C Shattuck, "Care of the Sickroom," 359.

This image presents its viewer with a stark illustration of male illness and is accompanied by other articles that describe patients with he/him pronouns. “In the Sickroom,” found in *The Speaker* in November 1898, uses masculine pronouns to describe a feeble man who is too weak to even cry out and is worried about flies swarming his body.<sup>12</sup> While “In the Sickroom” is a dramatized story, the association between maleness and weakness is distinguishable. Depictions of male illness create an opening for Kit’s letters about Eugene, as there appears to be a place in Victorian discourse for conversations that complicate relationships between illness and gender.

Kit Anstruther-Thomson has often been characterized as more than just a friend of Lee’s, and in fact many modern critics think that Kit and Lee were involved in a romantic relationship.<sup>13</sup> The 284 letters written by Kit make up one of the largest subsets of the Somerville special collection. The large number of letters indicate that Kit and Lee were frequent correspondents for a long time. Figure 3 depicts the people described in this chapter by Kit, including; Lee, her brother, and her brother’s family. This chart defines the relationships between those mentioned in Kit’s letters. The letters evaluated in this chapter represent only a small portion of the letters written to Lee by Kit, but they specifically recount a time in which Eugene’s health was a primary concern. The way Eugene’s illness fits into their conversation, and their relationship, creates a dynamic that, when taken as a representative account of women’s interrogation of gendered power in the sickroom, have the potential to renegotiate the modern critical perception of gender and illness in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>12</sup> A.B.W., “In the Sickroom.” *The Speaker: The Liberal Review* 18, 632-633: 1898.

<sup>13</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 98.

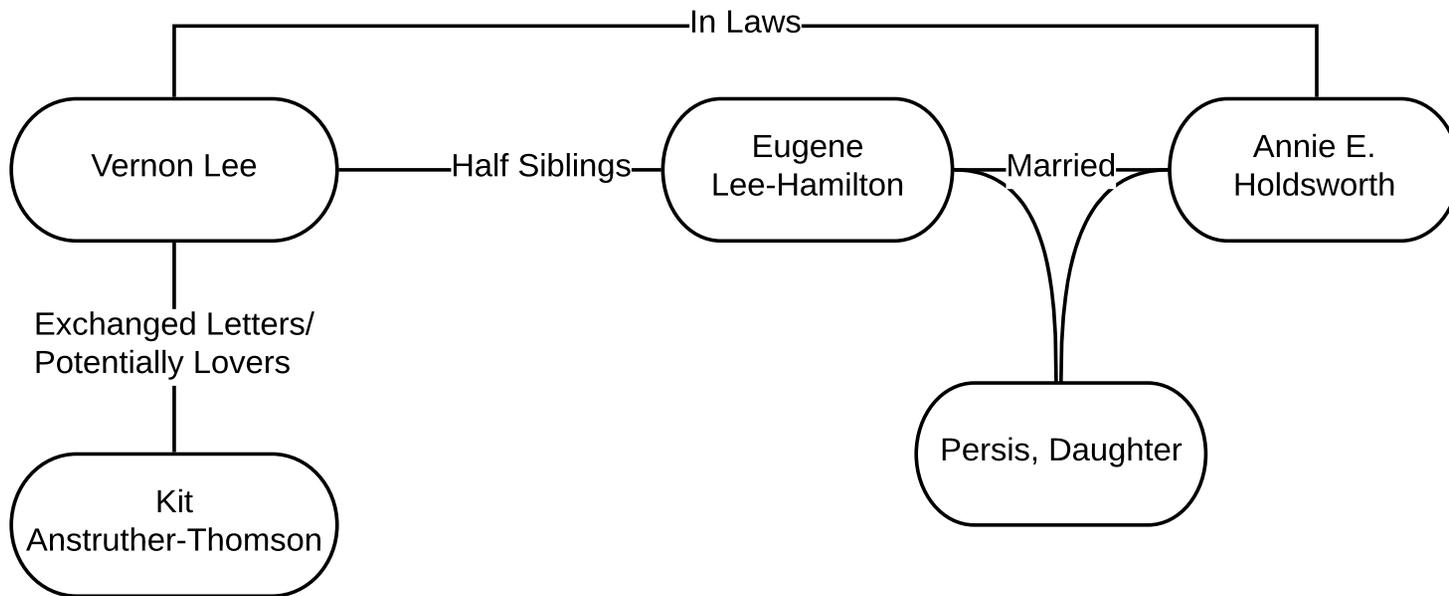


Figure 3: (Above) A chart representing the relationships between individuals mentioned in this section.

## The Shifting Power Dynamics of Caretaker and Invalid

The first letter of import is dated August 12; a simple card containing only a few lines. Kit begins by admitting that she's writing in a port in order to expedite her reply.<sup>14</sup> Her letter is apparently a reply to bad news communicated by Lee: "I am so grieved to hear this bad news about your brother and I am so so sorry my dearie for you for of course it is a shock and a grief."<sup>15</sup> While illness was closely associated with women, men were, unsurprisingly, susceptible to illness as well. However, when a man fell ill in Victorian England traditional relationships of power and gender experienced a reversal: "The disabled male under the care of a woman permits imaginative, if not actual, access to traits that were associated with femininity and allowed a retreat from those associated with manliness."<sup>16</sup> Kit's grief over the bad news is no surprise, in being an expected and necessary response in such circumstances, but her identification of Lee's shock and grief may be. Instead of grieving for Eugene, the patient, Kit identifies her grief for Lee, the caregiver. Lee and Kit's intimacy is also exemplified in these letters as her phrasing of "so so sorry my dearie" emphasizes a close relationship. Kit appears far more concerned with how Lee is handling Eugene's illness and admits her hope that Vernon Lee will not have to endure his illness much longer: "I hope he will let you go for your care for it is so [?] that you shouldn't have to go on enduring if it can be helped."<sup>17</sup> Though I have not been able to identify what could be a key word here, Kit's focus on relieving Lee's suffering as opposed to her brother's is apparent. Admittedly, Kit's focus on Lee's wellness could be attributed to their relationship, however minimizing Eugene's illness and inflating Lee's suffering instead goes

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<sup>14</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 12 August 1906.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 12 August 1906.

against expectations of illness and male illness, re-centering their conversation around women instead of society's traditional discussion axis of maleness and masculinity.

Written only a week later, the following letter reiterates Kit's concern for both Lee and her brother. Kit attempts to comfort Lee through the anxiety she's experiencing about her brother. She mentions this anxiety as something grand and not easily overlooked: "My dearest I feel for you to the depths of my heart in your anxiety about your brother."<sup>18</sup> Kit's expression of sympathy acknowledges the burden placed upon Lee to deal with the emotional weight of her brother's illness, focusing on Lee's burden instead. This burden is potentially rooted in prospects of loss and the expectations placed upon the woman to prevent this loss. Bailin provides an example of this generalized burden by stating that the "unacknowledged pressure of a personal loss, a desire to stage the recitation of the beloved dead, may also be discerned in many of these scenes" that depict illness.<sup>19</sup> Kit goes on to inquire about his status, but once again focuses on Lee instead of the patient. She asks: "did the Dr. say anything different to what you had heard, did he give you any light?."<sup>20</sup> What is particularly intriguing is her phrasing, asking if the doctor had given her any light. Kit is interested in what Lee knows and her state of hopefulness or hopelessness; whether or not the information she gained from meeting with the doctor was any different than the information she already knew. Kit is focused on knowledge- a theme that appears in subsequent letters when it becomes clear that Lee holds knowledge of the patient that no one else does. Kit also, whether intentionally or not, identifies the relationship between nurse and patient. Both subservient to doctoral practice, and above patient knowledge, Lee becomes the center of communication around her brother's illness. Her role is one of both submission and

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<sup>18</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 19 August (1906?).

<sup>19</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 19 August (1906?).

authority: “Unlike the doctor who diagnoses and prescribes, the function of the nurse is to comfort and to serve... The interaction between the nurse and the patient in Victorian fiction is characterized by a combination of submission and authority, self-abnegation, and self-assertion, with the sick body providing the mediating term by which these apparent opposites can be simultaneously expressed and reconciled, and their destructive aspects neutralized.”<sup>21</sup> Kit’s language acknowledges this power structure and touches on the burden placed upon the woman caretaker.

The letter then takes an intriguing turn, and references Lee’s withholding knowledge from her patient’s wife. Kit apparently agrees with Lee’s deceit: “Yes I think you are right, it is much better that your sister in law shouldn’t know the worst.”<sup>22</sup> It can be inferred, based on this sentence, that Lee’s sister in law does not know the extent of Eugene’s illness, and that in taking care of him and his family Lee has decided to keep the worst from them- choosing to bear the truth on her own. According to John Kucich, lies are powerful due to the importance of truth telling in Victorian England.<sup>23</sup> Masculinity has been, traditionally, associated with truth telling and is especially reliant on candor within the nineteenth century, whereas femininity was more associated with the act of lying.<sup>24</sup> Lee is not necessarily operating in opposition to traditional gender roles, yet she finds power in being the only one to know the full extent of the patient’s illness and controlling the knowledge of those around her by choosing what she should and should not reveal. After referencing this act of deceit, Kit again redirects the conversation from Eugene’s illness to Lee’s status: “but it is hard on you my poor [?] to know it and I am very very

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<sup>21</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 19 August (1906?).

<sup>23</sup> John Kucich, *The Power of Lies*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> John Kucich, *The Power of Lies*, 12.

sorry.”<sup>25</sup> Eugene’s illness is hard on Lee and Kit communicates her sympathy to Lee’s situation and her emotional experience. However, Kit retains hope, expressing an optimism that resembles Emily Sargent’s optimism in her early letters about Francis’ prodigality. She believes things may turn out better than expected: “of course one cannot deny though, that the unexpected is continually happening and so perhaps things may after all turn out better than you fear they may.”<sup>26</sup> Kit’s optimism could be made as an offer of relief for Vernon Lee, who has only just been identified as carrying the weight of her brother’s illness on her own by keeping the truth from his wife. Her optimism may also be rooted in the idea that men were not physiologically predisposed to illness the way that women were thought to be, her hope of Eugene’s recovery may be reliant on the idea that men were virile, healthy, beings.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, Kit’s optimism attempts to create a moment of respite for Lee within a stressful situation.

Kit’s optimism is once more expressed in a letter penned on September 7 (1906?), when Kit once again references Eugene’s illness. Kit alludes to a letter from Lee that presumably contained an account of Eugene’s health: “I thought your account of your brother a shade better than I had expected.”<sup>28</sup> It cannot be ascertained if Lee’s account actually contained a hopeful relation of her brother’s status, as we do not have the letter written to Kit. Kit again conveys her sympathy: “I am so so sorry he is so ill,” however, her sympathy is somewhat weakened by the words that follow the sentiment: “but it sounds as if with care he might live as long as other people.”<sup>29</sup> This expression minimizes the severity of his illness and also creates a dynamic that could require further exploration at another time, which is the association of masculinity with

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<sup>25</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 19 August (1906?).

<sup>26</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 19 August (1906?).

<sup>27</sup> Maria H Frawley, *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

<sup>28</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 7 September (1906?).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

invalidism. Masculinity's relationship with invalidism complicates modern understanding of gender power dynamics in the domestic sphere, to which the sickroom belongs, and this shift in power emerges from the "reduction of the male to a condition of debility and dependence on the protective care of the woman he loves" and thereby the "equalizing of an asymmetrical power structure and even the temporary ascendancy of the female."<sup>30</sup> Kit identifies Eugene's dependence on care for survival, and this sentiment has the potential of taking away his power, placing it in the hands of his caretaker. After touching on Eugene's mortality and dependence on care, Kit once more redirects attention to Lee's suffering. She refers to Lee's burden as a task filled with anxiety: "but it is anxious work for you my dearie and I am so sorry about it."<sup>31</sup>

### **The Dispossession of Authority in Invalidism and Changing Roles**

In her letter written on September 21, Kit references a morally questionable move of Lee's. As was previously established, Lee chose to keep the truth of Eugene's illness from his wife, but the moral problem is intensified as it becomes apparent that Lee is also deceiving Eugene. Kit begins by saying that she is glad that Lee's brother is better and suggests her confidence in the choices Lee has made as caregiver: "how wise you are not to let him know that there is much the matter."<sup>32</sup> The information Kit relays is stark, and Lee is definitively in possession of power over her brother's care. This power lies not only in her having more knowledge than others involved, but also due to the fact that, as Kucich identifies, lying has the power to exist as a means of private empowerment- deceit exists "both as an inwardly cherished sign of self-development and as a social sign of sophistication and privilege."<sup>33</sup> Lee's deceit, in this case, is identified not only as a means of power over her patient but as a self-identification of

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<sup>30</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 7 September (1906?).

<sup>32</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 21 September (1906?).

<sup>33</sup> John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction*, 29.

professionalism and control over a man. Women's lies allow women to forcibly insert themselves into a male sphere of authority, becoming the central power of the household instead of the man.<sup>34</sup> She is assured by Kit that her refusal to communicate the truth of her brother's condition is correct, indicating that Lee either expressed doubts in her previous letter or that Kit is reassuring Lee of having chosen the correct path. Regardless, Lee is thus assured that she is doing the right thing, despite potentially compromising moral sensibilities, in taking on the burden of his illness and prevented the worst of the information from reaching her brother or his wife.

The letter that Kit writes to Vernon Lee on October 14 is tinged with anxiety. Kit identifies a distressing length of time having passed since their last exchange of letters and requests for Lee to "Please write and give me the latest news of you, first tell me how you are for I am very anxious to know."<sup>35</sup> Of course, we are unable to diagnose the reasons that Lee had not written Kit in so long, however the fact that there is a missing letter- that Lee had not written Kit and Kit had grown concerned, is an important note to make with this letter. Kit is clearly worried about Lee's current state and her concern aligns itself to the rest of Eugene's illness arc- Kit's concern for the burden Lee is experiencing under the position of caretaker for her brother. Kit inquires after the health of Lee's brother, as seems to be the trend while Lee continues to suffer through her brother's illness: "tell me also how your brother is. Has he got back to F? yet."<sup>36</sup> This letter illustrates either Kit's lessening concern around Eugene's illness or refers to a reprieve from the illness. Kit seems to expect that Lee is becoming well enough to be moved, though he remains under Lee's care as her patient. In asking Lee about Eugene's current status,

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<sup>34</sup> John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 October (1906?).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Lee's role as caretaker is reiterated and the prominence of this role in her life remains a factor in Kit's epistolary exchange with Lee.

In the following letter, written only nine days later, it appears Kit has finally received word from Lee and expresses her relief before writing a reply to what seems to be news about Eugene. Kit writes that she is "very very sorry your brother has been so bad" and that she is very sorry for Lee "having the anxiety."<sup>37</sup> Lee's "anxiety" about this situation is identified as suffering in relation to her role in Eugene's care. Despite seeming to have received only bad news for the last couple of months, Kit still expresses hopes in her questioning of his condition: "Is he making a good recovery? I do hope so."<sup>38</sup> For Kit, the situation is not hopeless, and it is instead Lee's suffering that continues to be her primary concern. Hope in the success of masculinity is a consistent theme across these letters, similar to Emily's hope in Francis' ability to overcome his failures, Kit expresses her hope that Eugene will prevail.

In a letter written on November 21<sup>st</sup> (1906?), Kit is awaiting news of Lee and hopes that she will write back soon, however it does seem that Kit has been updated on Eugene's condition. The writing is a little unclear on this section of letter, but it appears that Kit is inquiring into the condition of Eugene's health: "I do hope that you are pretty well? And that your brother is [?] unsatisfactory [?] of health?"<sup>39</sup> While Kit's message cannot be fully transcribed, her fixation on Lee's help continues to be thematically significant. As with many of the previous letters she relates her sympathy to Lee: "I am so sorry both for him and for you, for you must be suffering much anxiety you poor little dear."<sup>40</sup> Kit's concern with the impacts of care on Lee's health

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<sup>37</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 23 October (1906?).

<sup>38</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 14 October (1906?).

<sup>39</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 21 November (1906?).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

exposes her concern with the caretaker over the cared for, although she does admit concern for Eugene as well.

In a letter written December 2<sup>nd</sup> of the same year, Kit relates Eugene's condition once more. Her language does not hold the same hope that her previous letter did and, surprisingly, this letter focuses more on him and his family than Lee. Kit writes that had she not been on her way out of London when she received Lee's letter she would have: "written that moment to tell you how grieved I was to hear of your poor brother."<sup>41</sup> There is some urgency in her need to convey this sympathy to Lee, potentially due to the severity of Eugene's condition. Kit's urgency to reply to the news of Lee's "poor brother" Eugene also casts the focus on Lee's brother for a change; in this letter the primary focus for Eugene's illness is the patient. The language Kit then uses to describe Eugene's condition is more explicit than in many of her other letters. Kit states: "His being so tired and weak seems so bad doesn't it, as if he had not much [?] power left."<sup>42</sup> Kit's illustration of Eugene's condition is that of a man losing a battle. He is weak and has little power left, as though the fight is almost over as his stores of energy dry up. Kit's grief is apparent in this letter: "I am sad about his being so ill, sad for you my dearie, and very sad for your sister in law, poor little lady."<sup>43</sup> Once again, the language Kit uses is distinct in its identification of the source of her grief and her eventual focus on not only Lee, but her sister in law.<sup>44</sup> As Kit signs off on this letter she asks Lee if she will keep her informed "as to his condition."<sup>45</sup> This is a unique request for Kit, not found in the other letters explored in this section, and indicates the severity of his condition for her to be so increasingly concerned,

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<sup>41</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 2 December (1906?).

<sup>42</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 2 December (1906?).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kit uses the phrase "poor little lady" to describe Lee's sister in law. This diminutive phrasing is not unusual for Kit, due to her use of "my dearest little Vernon" to open a majority of her letters. The phrase "poor little lady" could illustrate any number of things, including Kit's tendency to refer to women that way.

<sup>45</sup> Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, Letter to Vernon Lee, 2 December (1906?).

especially after a period of time that appeared to communicate a remission as indicated by her hope of his traveling, penned in the October 14 letter.

### **Conclusion**

These letters only provide a sample of Kit and Lee's correspondence, but discuss illness broadly and constantly, creating an illustration of illness and its presence in Lee's life. Lee's brother's condition as an invalid is intriguing, as is Kit's description of Lee's role as caretaker. Eugene represents the dependent nature of the male invalid and Lee is left in control of the power in these letters, since she has knowledge that others do not, and Eugene's survival is defined as being dependent on Lee as caretaker. Gender in the sickroom is certainly a complicated venue of study, further complicated by Kit's words and her discussion of Lee's role as caretaker. Kit's accounts of Lee and Eugene's rolls as caretaker and invalid partake in gender dynamics of the sickroom that existed, as is apparent in periodical illustrations, but were not the focus in Victorian society the way that narratives of female illness were.

## WOMEN CRITICS: MEN'S WRITING AND THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

### **Men's Writing and Fin-de-Siècle Criticism in the Suffrage Movement**

Men's writing is well addressed throughout the body of modern criticism, but few critics have explored women's epistolary exchange on the topic of men's writing. Private engagement between women about men's writing has the potential to elucidate a new perspective within the fin-de-siècle much in the way the broader genre of life-writing has been used by critics such as Sharon Marcus to broaden modern understanding of nineteenth century gender dynamics. In reframing the critical conversation around women's rhetorical engagement in the Victorian era, it can be concluded that women's private conversations about men's public political writing is a subversive act that acknowledges women's dissatisfaction with their place in society. As with the chapters on prodigality and illness, specific instances taken from the letters in the Lee special collection can be used to illustrate the broader narrative surrounding gender in the Victorian era. Ethel Smyth was a prominent figure in the suffrage movement who engaged with patriarchy in the public sphere, but her private letters include conflicting perspectives on men and men's writing. Lee also troubles our understanding of first-wave feminist creators by not openly engaging with the suffrage movement the way that Smyth does, despite engaging in a private conversation with the famous suffragette.<sup>1</sup> Lee's reluctance to engage in suffrage discourse publicly does not remove her from the role of feminist, as she continued to break barriers in other writing genres, yet it problematizes an essentialized representation of women's engagement in

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<sup>1</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, xiii.

first-wave feminism.<sup>2</sup> Smyth's letters to Lee create a case-study for women's critical view of men and men's writing as it is involved in the women's liberation movement and, once more, demonstrates the ways in which women's conversations about men have the potential to complicate contemporary understanding of Victorian gender performance.

Ethel Smyth adroitly conveys the intricate dynamics of the women's suffrage movement in her letters about men's writing, specifically as it relates to women's progress. Her letters focus on men's opinions and writing, specifically men's writing in a feminist (suffragette) context. Unlike previous chapters, this chapter does not focus on failed masculinity or changing power dynamics, but instead looks at the way Ethel Smyth perceives male writing in the context of feminist discourse. Smyth's letters rely on men's writings about a female issue, both subverting the norms of Victorian society in the struggle for women's empowerment and the right to vote, while also conforming to patriarchal norms by giving voice to these problems through the male perspective. Smyth inadvertently prioritizes the masculine voice within the suffrage movement in her selection of articles and authors and women's suffrage appears to be best defended by the writings of a select group of men.

Men were allies in the fight for women's rights and Smyth finds men's writing to be an accurate expression of female sentiment, despite the fact that men are not subject to the same rules of domesticity and subjectivity as women. Women's work to obtain the vote is then not only a movement made by women, for women, but also one that is dependent on male aid. It is unclear whether or not Smyth's dependence on male aid is due to the fact that women were living within patriarchal society and understood the necessity of male backing, or if Smyth is unknowingly influenced by social systems that oppressed women's voices. Either way, Smyth

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Pulham, "Vernon Lee: A Forgotten Voice," 53; Perhaps Lee was worried about how women's voices about women's liberty would be represented by or oppressed through men's writing.

creates a space for female criticism in her letters to Lee- connecting life-writing back to the larger genre of literary engagement and criticism of the Victorian era. Smyth's letters about men's writing are representative of the ways in which subversive discourse may, in fact, require non-subversive means (male support) and betters modern understanding of changing, or unchanging, gender dynamics in the fight for women's rights.

Smyth's letters to Lee depend on periodicals and therefore relay the prominence of periodical culture in the Victorian conscious. Smyth not only expresses her wish for Lee to write feminist articles and engage in the debate, but often cites articles in defense of the movement. Periodicals were an established means of criticism and public discussion throughout Lee's life and women's criticism was a rising genre within this larger context. In first understanding the culture that women were tasked with publishing in, women's criticism of male writing and the ways in which this particular type of criticism fits into Victorian society can be better understood. Though the press was a forum for conversation and debate and is now an important mediation tool for Victorian texts, the "periodical press is now defined not as a mirror reflecting Victorian culture, nor as a means of *expressing* Victorian culture, but as an 'inescapable ideological and subliminal environment', a (or perhaps *the*) constitutive medium of a Victorian culture which is now seen as interactive."<sup>3</sup> It holds then, that periodical culture is an important means for ascertaining the temperature and content of public discussions of the Victorian era. This form of writing, however, enforced traditional gender dynamics: "These locations of higher criticism and literature are gendered, and all pertain to areas of knowledge associated with men- politics, science, psychology, philosophy, classics, drama and poetry, while the novel is clearly associated in the period with women readers and authors."<sup>4</sup> Men's writing, in the context of

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<sup>3</sup> Lyn Pykette, "Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context," 7.

<sup>4</sup> Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 30.

patriarchal society, was therefore prioritized. Middle- and upper-class Victorians engaged in cultural study and criticism consciously and methodically. Laurel Brake writes, in *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature of the Nineteenth Century*, that the “self-consciousness of the Victorian critics and their preoccupation with their own critical practices and discourse indicate the perceived importance at the time of this mode of literary production.”<sup>5</sup> Brake also asserts that these conversations did not take place independently of a larger critical conversation: “A journal can hardly be said to *direct* public opinion, which makes that opinion in any material degree the rule of its sentiments, which cautiously sounds the depths of the national mind before it makes up its own, and launches forth tentative articles as aeronauts send up pilot-balloons.”<sup>6</sup> The articles Ethel Smyth references in her letters were engaging in a broader societal discussion, one that Smyth wanted to convince Lee to join- but one that still required male writing.

The evaluation of male writing by women does not take place within a bubble and the conversation around women’s criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century requires evaluation. Lee was an important writer in her time and had a complicated relationship with public feminist discourse: “Even from this brief discussion of Vernon Lee’s work, it must be clear that aestheticism could be both enabling and oppressive for the women who produced and consumed it, and not necessarily in obvious and predictable ways.”<sup>7</sup> Women were beginning to change, or at least have an influence, on critical discussion in the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> While women fought to publish, women’s publications did important work for the women’s liberation movement. The reception of women’s writings was not entirely positive: “despite their

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<sup>5</sup> Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Kathy Psomiades, “Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace,” 37.

<sup>8</sup> Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 97.

material bases and practical implications, the marginalization of feminist text was represented in social rhetoric as being based strictly on ideological- moral, religious, “cultural”- grounds and hence as lacking in popular acceptance.”<sup>9</sup> The progression of the women’s rights movement, and women’s writings, were slowed by society’s placement of traditional feminine performance upon writing. Women’s writings were often associated with the domestic sphere in order to conform with gender roles of the period. This act exemplifies the patriarchal nature of the press: “As an indication of the textual power of her sphere, proprietors of women’s periodicals began to identify their product as closely as possible to women’s lives by putting the word “domestic” in the title.”<sup>10</sup> Women continued to be relegated to the domestic sphere against their wishes and faced criticism from those around them. Early feminists fought against their traditional roles, while also fighting against the backlash that resulted from their behavior: “One of the most frequently reiterated critiques to be raised in the periodical press was the accusation that ‘new women’ were unwilling or unfit to uphold what conservative commentators saw as the primary duty of woman: to have children and raise them within a domestic setting.”<sup>11</sup> The takeaway in modern evaluation of Victorian women’s writing is that the act of writing was an attempt to fight against patriarchal oppression, but was often met with resistance.

Periodicals were an integral part of the critical culture in the late Victorian era and demonstrate significant themes of said culture, including the ways in which women’s writing conformed to or contradicted with societal norms. Vernon Lee was a well-established and respected female writer and can be used as an example of Victorian culture’s reception of female writing. In one periodical (January 1885), Lee is identified as an anomaly and her writing is,

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<sup>9</sup> Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Women’s Periodicals*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Beth Palmer, *Women’s Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture*, 167.

therefore, not representative of women's writing or intelligence.<sup>12</sup> The expression of female intellect, as an anomaly, ties into the theory that women's writing was often relegated to the domestic sphere. In this case, it was instead identified as an unusual occurrence. Lee is represented as a remarkable essayist in another article, one which discusses her criticism (1888).<sup>13</sup> This identification also appears to associate a prominent female writer with abnormal characteristics, though this article regards her as remarkable despite her gender. Women's criticism, in general, appears to necessitate review and approval by masculine counterparts and periodical engagement with women's criticism illustrate the ways in Smyth's letters fit into fin-de-siècle periodical culture: Smyth's letters to Lee fit into a larger conversation about gender and writing within the period.

An article in *The Contemporary Review* (January 1882) discusses two women's engagement with the critical process and, once again, identifies this engagement as remarkable-unusual. Criticism, as a whole, is discussed in periodicals of the period as well. Male critics tend to confine criticism to being a practice for men, as a means to explore male writing. An article in *The Art Journal* (November 1894) characterizes criticism as something that most people are not able to write and uses masculine pronouns to associate the practice as a whole, with a particular socio-economic group of male bodied individuals.<sup>14</sup> Other articles, like one entitled "Old and New Canons of Poetical Criticism" (January 1882), investigate the male canon and its necessity: "we must provide ourselves with critical canons, that, raised above the bias of individual taste or the prevailing spirit of any current age, and that having their foundation in permanent laws of

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<sup>12</sup> "Art Chronicle," *The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical*.

<sup>13</sup> "Vernon Lee on Musical Suggestiveness and Musical Personality," *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, 76-78.

<sup>14</sup> A.L. Baldry, "Critics and Criticism," *The Art Journal*.

human nature, will bear being tested by the consensus of critical opinion in past generations.”<sup>15</sup> Periodicals mirror male dominated publication culture, especially in their reviews of women’s articles that place them within the culture.

Women began to create their own print culture as a subset of the larger Victorian publication culture. Publications such as *The Suffragette*, *The Women’s Journal*, and *The Women’s Suffrage Journal* are examples of the influx of women-led publications during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> While popular publications, such as *Punch*, often depicted the suffrage movement in a negative light, women’s publications attempted to rewrite the narrative surrounding their activism. According to Michelle Elizabeth Tusan in her article “Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics During the Fin-de-Siècle,” women writers began “manufacturing their own image of the political woman.”<sup>17</sup> Women’s journals were written to promote women’s interests; women were actively writing about and criticizing their position in society and the oppression they faced.<sup>18</sup> Women’s publications, therefore, were born from the popular publication culture of Victorian society but attempted to preserve women’s self-interests in a way that the patriarchal publishing press would not.

The people mentioned by Ethel Smyth can be found in the chart below. In one letter she mentions Maurice, presumably Maurice Baring whom she had a traceable relationship with and whom Lee maintained an independent correspondence with as well.<sup>19</sup> Richard Pankhurst, Mr. Pankhurst, is mentioned in another letter and Richard’s wife Emmeline was a suffragette, like

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<sup>15</sup> Alfred Austin, “Old and New Canons of Poetical Criticism,” *The Contemporary Review*, 124.

<sup>16</sup> “Women’s Suffrage: Periodicals.” *Harvard Library*.

<sup>17</sup> Michelle Elizabeth Tusan. “Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics During the Fin-de-Siècle,” 169.

<sup>18</sup> Michelle Elizabeth Tusan. “Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics During the Fin-de-Siècle” 31.

<sup>19</sup> Smyth wrote a book on Baring.

Smyth.<sup>20</sup> Gerald Gould is mentioned by Smyth as an adept writer in support of the suffrage movement. Gould was involved with the women's liberation movement and it can be assumed that he at least knew of Ethel Smyth.<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill is another male writer mentioned by Smyth in her letters. John Stuart Mill preceded Smyth's movement by several decades, but her mention of him makes clear that she has engaged with his writings. Unlike previous chapters the relationships depicted are not in a single family, nor is there evidence that Lee or Smyth met all of the men mentioned- in fact we can assume that neither woman ever met Mill simply due to their ages at the time of his death. Yet, the fact that Maurice corresponded with both women illustrates that perhaps, after being introduced to a male writer, Lee could have developed an independent relationship with the writers and their publications.

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<sup>20</sup> Paula Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> John Simkin, "Gerald Gould," *Spartacus Educational*.

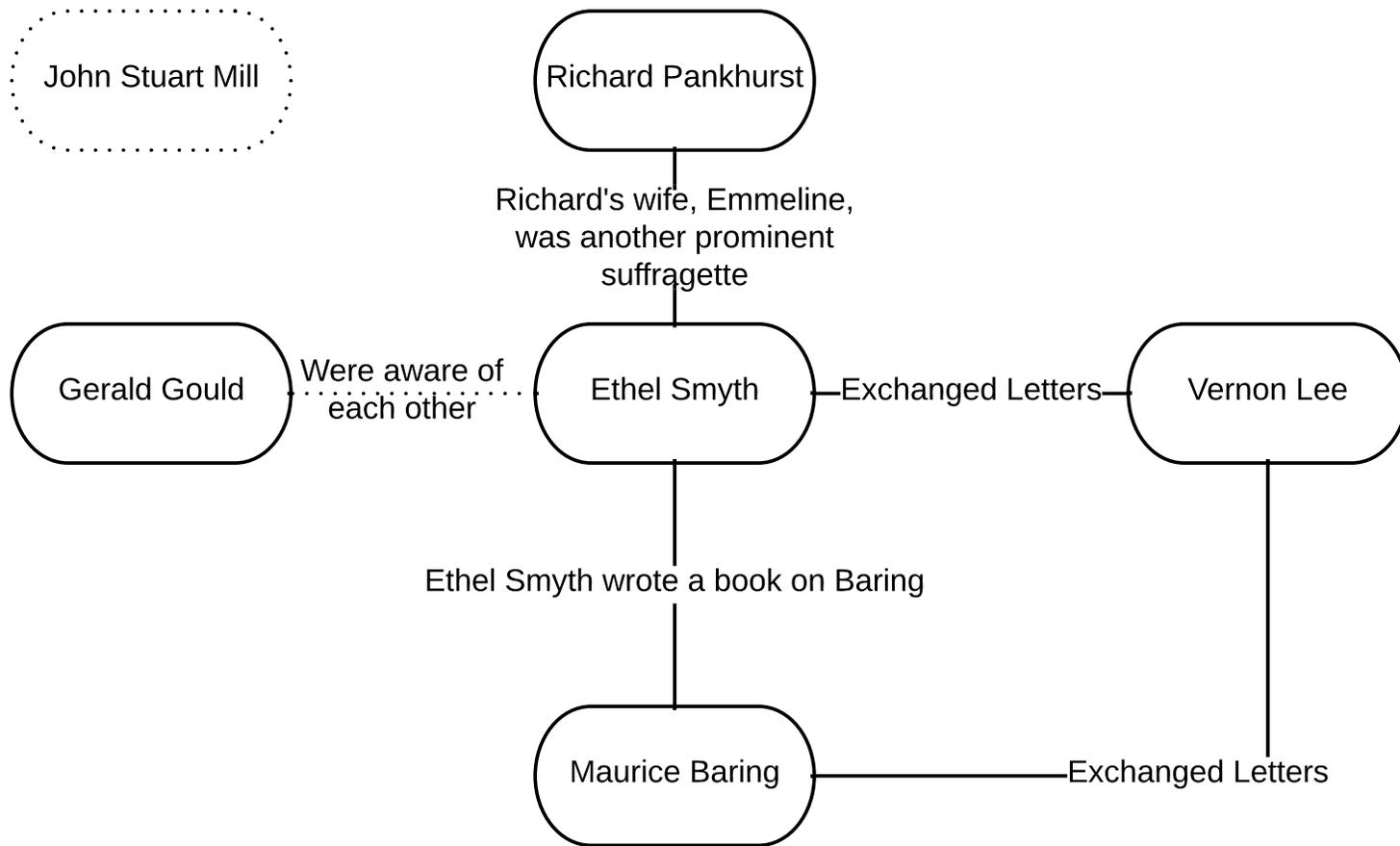


Figure 4: (Above) A chart representing the relationships between individuals mentioned in this section.

## Criticism of Vernon Lee's Writing

Ethel Smyth, a prominent suffragette and composer, often wrote Lee with hopes of having Lee write for *The Suffragette*.<sup>22</sup> Their discussion of Lee's writing is important, first as Smyth shows appreciation for Lee's writing ability, and secondly as their discussion of male critics and male writing begins with Lee's work. It is unclear if Smyth requires male praise for Lee's work or if Smyth, being the Suffragette that she is, is simply conveying praise from men she knows, respects, and trusts. Smyth's investment in masculine writing for the cause is significant, often recommending or including articles penned by men in her letters to Lee, expressing their ability to speak for a cause that was primarily driven by women for the benefit of women. Smyth's discussion of male writing and criticism creates a dissonance in letters that are otherwise expressive of first-wave feminist ideals; Smyth's reliance on masculine voices and opinions does not quite fit within a conversation centered around women's issues. Though the men Smyth writes about appear to be invested in the cause, male voices have the ability to override female voices in a patriarchal society: "the potential limitations of this directive are obvious: woman is restricted to a silent role behind the man; while her role may be patronizingly acclaimed, she is not allowed the freedom to choose."<sup>23</sup> Maybe Smyth's awareness of this fact caused her to embrace opinions and articles penned by members of the ruling sex, as they had the strength of their gender behind them, or possibly Smyth's indoctrination in a patriarchal society ran too deep for her to ignore the writings and opinions of male bodied individuals. Regardless, Smyth's letters to Lee about male writing and criticism creates conflict in the letters penned between two intelligent, groundbreaking, women.

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<sup>22</sup> The topic is first broached by Smyth in a letter penned on November 15 of 1912 but appears to be part of a debate between Smyth and Lee as she continues to try and convince Lee of writing this article in following letters.

<sup>23</sup> Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Women's Periodicals*, 22.

Lee was portrayed as an anomalous female writer and the men who authored those portrayals validate Lee's work, exemplifying the requirements placed upon women's writing in order to transcend domesticity and garner the same level of esteem of male authored texts.<sup>24</sup> The dominant publication culture consisted of the bourgeois patriarch who monopolized intellectual discussion, according to Rita S. Kranidis' *Subversive Discourse*.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, male critics controlled printing culture by necessitating male approval and this control is identifiable in Smyth's letter to Lee, written on May 31<sup>st</sup> 1896. In this letter Smyth writes: "I saw Maurice and we talked much of you."<sup>26</sup> Smyth attempts to convey the content of their discussion and writes that Maurice "thinks you're the most interesting brain he knows and likes you most tremendously besides."<sup>27</sup> Smyth accompanies Maurice's opinion of Lee's intellect with a caveat: that he likes her for qualities other than her intelligence, which is a significant disregard of Lee's importance as an intellectual and prioritizes her other feminine qualities. Smyth's evaluation of Lee's work through male critical praise also highlights the monopolization of intellectual discussion by men that Kranidis discusses. Smyth forces Lee's writing into patriarchal publication culture by validating male control over female writing and requiring Maurice's opinion of Lee's work in order to ascertain its value.

Lee's writing is a topic of interest that is further explored by Smyth in subsequent letters. Smyth wants Lee to write for the cause- to use her writing to encourage the Suffragette movement, and potentially to get more conservative individuals involved.<sup>28</sup> Lee may have

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<sup>24</sup> Art Chronicle," *The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical*.

<sup>25</sup> Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> This is probably referring to Maurice Baring, a mutual acquaintance of Lee and Smyth and the subject of a book authored by Smyth; Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 31 May (1896?).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "What I want you to do, if you will (in that you, a distinguished woman, possibly voice many others, and aimed to do so in a way many? cannot attempt) is, what [?] Venus was requested to do, bring your powerful mind to bear on the subject of your convictions." Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 24 January (1913?). Somerville Library Special Collections.

expressed fear or hesitation at having radical views published under her name and Smyth later acknowledges that this fear is not misplaced.<sup>29</sup> Lee's apparent hesitance to engage publicly in the suffragette movement causes Smyth to send Lee articles in a bid to change Lee's mind. Smyth even attempts to validate *The Suffragette* through the use of a male supporter who requires Lee's writing for the cause: "I want you to do something for me- write an article for our paper "The Suffragette"- Mr. Pankhurst specially wants it to be very good on the side of things not connected necessarily with [?] Suffrage."<sup>30</sup> Though Smyth is the one requesting Lee's writings, Mr. Pankhurst decides what types of articles are necessary for the movement's success. It is a man deciding that in order to legitimize the periodical, a specific type of writing is required. Mr. Pankhurst is apparently not the only man involved in the movement, or the only man whose contributions are acknowledged, but what is perhaps most intriguing about the articles Smyth sends to Lee, or the authors that she references, is that many are men. While they range from already prominent figures involved in the fight for women's rights, such as John Stuart Mill, to up and coming allies of the movement, Gerald Gould, Smyth places men's criticism of the movement at the forefront.<sup>31</sup> Smyth begins a conversation with Lee that engages the two in a critical debate of writing, more specifically Lee's writing, while also introducing a critical debate about men's writing.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "My dear Vernon. You are right- I quite understand your [?] and my chief risk was to have [?] well stated by a representative person and well replied to publicly." Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 4 February 1913; Referring to Richard Pankhurst, husband of Emmeline Pankhurst, a notable suffragette; Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 15 November 1912.

<sup>30</sup> Referring to Richard Pankhurst, husband of Emmeline Pankhurst, a notable suffragette; Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 15 November 1912.

<sup>31</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 12 December 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 24 January (1913?).

## Men Writing on Suffrage

Smyth identifies a batch of essays by a male writer in a letter written on November 15 of 1912. Though the name of the writer is unclear in this letter, due to the poor quality of the scan, Smyth uses “his” when writing about the author, indicating that it is in fact a man that she is referencing. Smyth’s letter uses powerful language, indicating that this man is well suited to writing about women: “I am getting an article from [?] for whom I have [?] sympathy- (see for instance his last little lot of essays “[?]”and it is one of the best articles on woman I ever read).”<sup>33</sup> A man may recognize societal issues that led to the women’s liberation movement, but Smyth’s assertion that a man’s articles are some of the best ever written about the women’s movement lies at odds with the fact that a man has never lived under the same conditions as a woman. It is as if woman’s voice is overridden by the voice of the patriarchy: dependent on a man’s writing to communicate woman’s predicament. Women’s writing has the power to “reconfigure the traditional notions of femininity to include public engagement with professional careers in business, journalism, and literature for middle- to upper- class women.”<sup>34</sup> Smyth unintentionally disregards women’s ability to recharacterize gender and power by focusing on a man’s writing. Contrarily, Smyth’s critical approach to a man’s writing is in and of itself subversive as it reverses traditional gender roles that require women to seek approval from the patriarchy, instead requiring female approval of male writing. Smyth’s prioritization of male writing about the suffrage movement does not subvert Victorian gender norms and instead indicates a limit to Smyth’s engagement with the progressive aspects of women’s writing.

Smyth acknowledges her dependence on male voices, requiring collaborators of both sexes in her publication- perhaps in an attempt to garner interest from a variety of people or

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<sup>33</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 15 November 1912.

<sup>34</sup> Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Women’s Periodicals*, 33.

accidentally aligning herself with notions of masculine intellectual authority. Smyth writes, about her publication, that they “decided to look about us to see what can be done toward organising a staff, overseeing the paper editorially, engaging the interest of a good long list of collaborators of both sexes, and on all subjects having even a shadowy connection with feminine activity! (not feminism!) and providing a competent financial administration.”<sup>35</sup> Smyth’s refusal to use “feminism” as an identifying term for her practice is also telling- she distances herself from a term that could cause harm in the public press. The press often portrayed women as domestic entities and when they failed to fit into that category would represent the liberal woman’s character as something negative.<sup>36</sup> Smyth’s letter to Lee conveys fear and the restrictions women faced when fighting for their rights, those same fears that Smyth appears to be responding to in her letters to Lee. She wants to create a wide spread of articles, written by men and women, in order to optimize writing’s role in the progression of the movement. Again, it is unclear if Smyth is doing this subconsciously or not, aware of the patriarchal restrictions that prevent straight forward progress or if she’s simply conforming to societal perception of masculine authority/ superiority- though it might be safe to assume the former as Smyth was an intelligent leader in the fight for the vote.

As previously mentioned, Smyth’s letters reference famous male figures involved in the fight for women’s rights. Smyth cites John Stuart Mills’ *The Subjection of Women* in a letter to Lee in an effort to convince her of the necessity of the fight- of the need for her active involvement as a suffragist or suffragette.<sup>37</sup> In attempting to convince Lee to become involved, Smyth writes: “two facts escape your attention. First of all it is nearly 50? years since Mill

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<sup>35</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 12 January 1913.

<sup>36</sup> John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Robinson notes the difference between the two categories of female activists in *Hearts and Minds: The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote*.

pronounced the vote to be nothing less than a necessity- and nearly 50 years since women have been working for it).<sup>38</sup> Smyth values Mill's words, his pronouncement of the vote's necessity appearing to be a golden standard to be actively pursued by the group of people it most affects: women. Again, this might be a simplification of Smyth's language, but men's words appear to be leading the charge in a movement largely involving women. This same letter contains the names and works of two other men, men who are currently fighting with women to further the cause. She begins with the words of a minister who notes the difference between the militant suffragette movement and the activist suffragist movement.<sup>39</sup> She writes that the minister said, "the wonder is that only one union is militant."<sup>40</sup> She then writes that she would send Lee a book of essays on the subject, ones that interrogate the ethics of the fight for women's vote: "I am sending you a book of essays by Baker?- all very good- specifically the one on the ethics of our case."<sup>41</sup> This letter uses male writings to try and convince Lee of the necessity of becoming openly involved in the feminist movement. Smyth prioritizes men's words in this letter and though her great wish is for Lee, a woman, to write for the movement, the dependence on masculine observation of the movement and criticism of the fight is noteworthy.

Smyth's reliance on men's writing is identifiable in other letters as well. Smyth includes a copy of *The Suffragette* in a letter to Lee, the very publication that she is attempting to get Lee to write for. Smyth writes about two articles of import, one written by E. Robin and one written by Gerald Gould.<sup>42</sup> Smyth appears to be asking Lee for her opinion of these writings, while simultaneously expressing her reception of Gould's work: "I send you this copy of the

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<sup>38</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 12 December 1912.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Robinson, *Hearts and Minds*.

<sup>40</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 12 December 1912.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 24 January (1913?).

Suffragette for this reason: I want you to read 1) the excerpts from notices of E Robin's book which I have not yet read and 2) a speech by a [?] man who I think the world will hear much of one day Gould by name."<sup>43</sup> Smyth writes that she thinks Gould will become a notable, if not popular, writer in the women's liberation movement. Smyth, once again, expresses a belief in man's ability to write an apt portrayal of women's situation, feelings, and opinions: "I think he puts admirably all I feel about the disgrace of women, specially of those who are by [?] of being seen [?] the Suffrage, of folding their hands either in patience, or in prayers to men, at this hour of the day."<sup>44</sup> Smyth expresses her admiration of a man's writing while also directly identifying woman's submission to man and expected feminine behavior. Smyth appears dissatisfied with women who do not take up arms at their systemic oppression, they are disgraced in betraying the advancement of their sex, but Smyth's belief that a man can correctly convey the complex feelings of a woman often disappointed by her own sex is intriguing. Once again, Smyth is attempting to convince Lee to become involved in a women's movement with a man's words.

## **Conclusion**

Smyth's letters illustrate the complex relationships that modern critics stumble upon when evaluating women's article writing and criticism in the Victorian era, the patriarchal system oppressing women and restricting their writing. Smyth's dependence on male discourse about suffrage is either indicative of a deficit of women's writings or an expression of the necessity of male support in creating popular, political, publications. Writing culture was evolving at this time, and while women had the opportunity to empower themselves through writing it is apparent that this was not a straight forward process.<sup>45</sup> Smyth's dependence on male

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<sup>43</sup> Ethel Smyth, letter to Vernon Lee, 24 January (1913?).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Lyn Pykette. "Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context," 8.

writing is representative of broader gender issues within the period and her need for Lee's approval of these articles, to engage in critical discussion with a woman, is also telling of the self-consciousness required of those participating in Victorian publication culture. Though Smyth's belief in men contradicts the representations of failed masculinity discussed in the first two chapters, her critical engagement with men's writing has the ability to contradict and support gender roles- complicating the modern perception of gender and power in the Victorian era, through conversations about writing.

## CONCLUSION

The evaluation of men's writing connects the Lee letters to the broader writing culture of the period. The prodigal man and the male invalid described in earlier chapters also represent aspects of larger Victorian conversations about gender and gender performance. Therefore, the Lee letters provide a foundation for interrogating modern understanding of traditional gender roles by providing cases of performances that do not conform to modern expectation. Francis' prodigality is illustrated as part of a written interrogation of masculinity and appropriate performances of masculinity. Nineteenth century writer's interest in prodigality is pinpointed in both fictional writings and as a conversation extant in the periodical publishing culture. Francis Ormond, then, is not alone or solely representative of masculine failure in the period, but instead requires modern critics to reevaluate their perception of nineteenth-century masculine performance and failures to perform. Eugene Lee-Hamilton loses his power due to his invalidism and necessary dependence on his sister Vernon Lee. Like Francis, Eugene is not the only illustration of male invalidism and Anstruther-Thomson's letters to Lee about Eugene's illness, and her depiction of shifting power dynamics, troubles a clear-cut understanding of domesticity and domestic power. As Lee gains power through her domestic duty, Eugene loses his place as the knowledgeable authority of the household and Anstruther-Thomson's discussion of Eugene's illness dissociates illness from feminine weakness, which contradicts typified portrayals of illness and invalidism. The final chapter illustrates a critical conversation about men's writing, placing women into the primary position of critical power, questioning the knowledge that men

contain as it relates to women and the women's liberation movement. Ethel Smyth's letters to Lee force this project to consider the ways in which women's conversation about men can be duplicitous: both creating subversive discourse, while still relying on masculine authority to conduct aspects of the movement. Women's writing about men in epistolary exchanges ultimately problematizes modern perception of Victorian gender dynamics, simply in illustrating the unexpected performances depicted within letters written to Lee. This work necessitates a polyvalent understanding of Victorian gender and creates a framework for further research into women's letters, validating the necessity of studying women's conversations about men through the illustrations of shifting gender dynamics they contain.

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