

Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography by Vineta Colby. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2003. 432 pp. + 10 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8139-2158-9. \$39.50.

Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual by Christa Zorn. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003. xxxi, 213 pp. + 1 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8214-1497-6. \$49.95.

In her 2000 biography of the archeologist Jane Harrison, Mary Beard recounts a period during which the writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) determinedly pursued Harrison through their friend Eugenie Sellers so that she might tell Harrison exactly what was wrong with her ideas. The episode recalls the Vernon Lee familiar to us through the accounts of others: vituperative, tactless, egocentric, and pedantic – the woman who, deaf in her later years, characteristically pulled the horn from her ear when others were speaking. The year 2003 saw the publication of two major studies that respectively illustrate and theorize a more complex Vernon Lee. Vineta Colby grounds Lee's writings in the context of her loyal friendships and troubled family relationships and weighs the author's public self-assurance against her private uncertainties. Christa Zorn adopts the taxonomy of the "female public intellectual" as an organizing principle in order to examine Lee's multifaceted, often oblique self-representation. While each study performs a distinct task from the other, one can interpret them in tandem, with Colby excavating the origin and reception of works that Zorn subjects to a thematized, poststructuralist, intertextual critique.

Recently, Lee has received increasing attention as a fiction writer, an historian and theorist of aesthetics, a critic of the popular Aesthetic "cult," and a key figure in the rarefied Anglo-Italian coterie of *fin-de-siècle* Florence. Colby's biography and Zorn's critical study appear at a time in which critics are reassessing the social circles of which Lee was a part, particularly with regard to the participants' feminism, sexual orientation, class sympathies, and Anglo-European identities. What confounded Lee's contemporaries is exactly what draws critics to her work today: her habitual refusal to be pigeonholed. We can recall Lee's reluctance to ally herself with any one nation, culture, or gender; her contradictory adoption of and rebellion against Victorian middle-class ideologies; her attraction to literati and impatience with their complacency; and her sympathies regarding social inequality and deliberate distance from the Woman Question. As a writer merging history and personal association in her work, Lee further transgressed categories of literary genre. Male Victorian critics regarded her flights into memory and association as the flaws of a female, undisciplined mind. In later years, she was dismissed by Moderns as a stodgy Victorian, passed over by early twentieth-century scholars