June 1971

Shaw Reviews Satan the Waster

Richard Cary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.6, June 1971, p.335-347
Colby Library Quarterly 335

reread the story some time between then and the experience described in the poem, are questions to which no emphatic answer is possible. Nevertheless, the correspondence between the two works in tone, imagery, and attitude is perhaps too pronounced to be dismissed as simple coincidence. It appears likely that Yeats's boyhood recollection of "The Ugly Duckling" did, in some indefinable manner, enter the poet's mind many years later when his imagination was bringing into being "The Wild Swans at Coole."

SHAW REVIEWS SATAN THE WASTER
By Richard Cary

By 1893 George Bernard Shaw's conversion to Socialism was more than a decade old. He had spent the intervening years doggedly espousing its virtues from every available podium, and had made some public impress with his edition of Fabian Essays (1889) before he passed under the chill, assessing eye of Vernon Lee. By now also a veteran of the London literary arena, she had achieved a not inconsiderable reputation as essayist, novelist, and redoubtable foe in verbal or epistolary clashes. On July 3rd of 1893 she wrote to her mother: "Yesterday Miss Newcomb . . . made me meet Bernard Shaw, a young socialist, who despite (I think) his socialism, is one of the most really brilliant writers & thinkers we have, paradoxical wrongheaded & perhaps a little caddish, but original."

For Vernon Lee, a tendentious iconoclast, this alloy of praise

---

1 Pen name of Violet Paget (1856-1935), Englishwoman born in France and resident of Italy, who came to London in 1881 and quickly settled into the esthetico-literary milieu. Already the author of several precocious essays in periodicals, a notable book of criticism, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, one of fairy tales, and a third in press, she eventually proliferated some two-score volumes of fiction, drama, and philosophic travel sketches, as well as hundreds of articles, book reviews, and multilingual letters to editors. An outspoken proponent of often unpopular causes, a fascinating, quixotic personality, her career is ably delineated by Peter Gunn in Vernon Lee (London, 1964).

2 For a selection of her acridulous appraisals of noteworthy contemporaries, see Richard Cary, "Vernon Lee's Vignettes of Literary Acquaintances," Colby Library Quarterly, IX (September 1970), 179-199.

3 Shaw was in fact close upon his 37th birthday, July 26, as was Miss Lee, October 14, a scant two and a half months younger. Her attribution of "young" in apposition to "socialist" must be taken as pejorative.

4 Irene Cooper Willis, editor, Vernon Lee's Letters (Privately printed, 1937), 349.
and prick was as close to celebration as she could come, barring the exceptional instances of Robert Browning and Henry James. Temperamentally as paradoxical, wrongheaded, and caddish herself as she presumed Shaw to be, there appeared from the start small probability of a friendship germinating between them. And none did, even though their published positions on the subjects of war and women's liberation ran in close parallel. Not one of Shaw's army of biographers and interpreters as much as mentions Miss Lee's name, nor does he figure prominently in her subsequent letters and diaries. Indeed, it is a full year later before she alludes to him again, as speaker at the Pioneers' (Women's) Club, still "very personal & caddish, but delightfully suggestive, like his book."  

Thereupon, silence shrouds any other meetings or reactions she may have had until the appearance of her "Gospels of Anarchy" in the Contemorary Review, July 1898, later to become the introductory essay to a volume of the same name. In the company of anarchists esteemed by Miss Lee as premiers in the fields of science, sociology, philosophy, art, psychology, and literature, Shaw comes off rather a limping follower than a mantic leader; the originality she had ascribed to him at first brush is nowhere to be discerned. Compared to the vaulting ideas of a Stirner, Nietzsche, Ruskin, Emerson, Tolstoi, William James, or Ibsen, Shaw's are "something similar, however unformulated," his manner of presentation "bluff," and his programme a "jaunty fanaticism." Seldom one to sidestep a challenge, Shaw seems not to have deigned a riposte to these thrusts, if in fact he was ever aware of them.

The onset of World War I fanned Miss Lee's inherent pacifism to a flame of high passion. She had long execrated war and threats of war: the Balkan altercations, the Italians in Tripoli, the Russo-Japanese engagement, the Boer War. And now this holocaust of Britons and Teutons at her own dooryard — it was more than she could contain. At Whitsunside of 1915 she extemporized in narrative form The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality, twenty pages of text with pictorial commentary by Maxwell Armfield, which Chatto & Windus issued during the Christmas season. This "shadow-play" swayed no perceptible segment of the public consciousness, engrossed as it

5 Ibid., 376. The book is Shaw's The Quintessence of Ibsenism, originally published in 1891, reissued in 1894.
was with the actualities of carnage, and had of course no effect whatever on the conduct of the war.

A satire in allegorical trappings, The Ballet expounds Vernon Lee's convictions that the war could only have come about by consent — or at least acquiescence — of all the nations in the world, active or passive, through a complex of motives noble and base; and that no nation has a monopoly on moral principles. These conceptions are played out on a stage within stage, directed by Ballet-Master Death, subaltern of Satan, the Im­presario. The Dancing Nations whirl vertiginously to tunes by the Orchestra of Human Passions, a mixed component of Fear, Suspicion, Panic, Idealism, Adventure, Sin, Rapine, Lust, Murder, Hatred, Self-Righteousness, Science, Organisation, and Statecraft. Heroism is the drummer. The audience of Sleepy Virtues (Wisdom, Equanimity, Temperance, Truthfulness), Neutral Peoples, and Ages-to-Come watch the accelerating butchery as the tempo of the music becomes frenzied, the tone raucous, the stage slippery with gore and entrails. When "all the Nations have danced themselves to stumps" and the action begins to flag, two non-sleepy Virtues — Pity and Indignation — invade the scene, respectively sobbing and roaring. For all their good intentions, they simply add fuel to the flames, "And the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing."

The cessation of hostilities and the equivocal Treaty of Ver­sailles, signed at the close of June 1919, did nothing to quell Miss Lee's internal wrath. Within barely a month of the official conclusion of peace she published "Satan's Prologue to the War," an interview in hell between Clio, the Muse of History, and Satan, who asserts his deepest pleasure is to "waste whatever it may be: earth, and time's opportunities of joy and betterment; man's life, man's labour and man's thought. But most of all, man's goodness. So that Satan's truest name might be: the Waster of Human Virtue." He invites her to ascen­d to the World's Theatre for a view of his latest production.

The next month Miss Lee brought out "Satan's Epilogue to the War," an exposé — ingeniously using phonograph and films — of the duplicities of munitions makers, prelates, professors, politicians, and military leaders which inexorably create the ambience of distrust and war. Heroism comes within a
in tender madness. But Indignation hissed and roared like a burning
granary when the sparks crackle as they fly into the ripe standing harvest,
and the flames wave scores of feet high in the blast of their own making.
Death was overpowerd with delight.

"Now nothing can stop the dancing," he cried; "and this shall yet
be the greatest triumph of Ballet-Master Death!" and, rapping on his
desk, spoke as follows: "Ladies and Gentlemen, dear valiant Nations
of my Corps-de-Ballet! we will now proceed to the third and last figure;
the last because, as you know, it is made never to end! For it is called
Revenge."

"You might have trusted to me, dear Ballet-Master Death," purred
Satan, the World's great Stage-Lessee, quite softly to himself. "Pity
and Indignation can renew Death's dance when all the Nations have
danced themselves to stumps, and the ordinary band, except perhaps
Fear and her Children, can fiddle and blow no longer."

And thus the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing.

BLACK AND WHITE REPRODUCTION (REDUCED) OF THE
LAST PAGE OF The Ballet
trice of discovering that Death's ballet is a "preposterous, indecent anachronism," and Satan exults, for that revelation would have meant the last of his Ballets of the Nations, his demise as the supreme Waster.

In the summer of 1920 John Lane published *Satan the Waster: A Philosphic War Trilogy*, With Notes & Introduction, by Vernon Lee. This volume comprises the Prologue, the Ballet, and the Epilogue structured as a progressive satirical drama, with the Introduction and Notes occupying two-thirds of the book. Thus, in the mode of Shaw's own frequent practice, Miss Lee's commentary overshadows in bulk the nucleus of her presentation. She explains her extensive overhaul of the central Morality and the two enfolding additions: "This crude emblematic improvisation at first satisfied my need for expression. But the thing once written, I began to see its shallowness. Surely this visible performance was not the only one; . . . Recognizing this, it became necessary I should add to Satan's glorious and terrible public exhibition, which I had called the *Ballet of the Nations*, those cinematograph and gramophone records of private realities . . . . After that arose the question of what would happen in the future" (pp. vii-viii). Edward Garnett warned her that the Notes are *de trop*, might even be put down as a bore. In the face of this wisdom she persists through 186 pages cheerlessly justifying the nature and relationship of Prologue and Ballet, and hotly inveighing against war as "an outrage on the Reality of Things."

In the Introduction Mr. Bernard Shaw is highlighted as "the perhaps solitary exception" among the two groups of belligerents to make "any attempt to estimate the special horrors inflicted on invaded or besieged populations as against the general, universal horrors incident to war itself" (p. xxxvi). With conceivably something of a glow over this proclamation of his uniqueness, Shaw approached his assignment to review *Satan the Waster*. The finished product takes up just short of two pages (758, 760) in *The Nation* of September 18, 1920. Entitled "A Political Contrast," it is a hybrid of gross flattery and castigation, Vernon Lee the recipient of the first, Lloyd George victim of the latter. As an evaluation of the book's theses, techniques, or esthetic merits, the review is baldly deficient. During the entire round of his commendation Shaw provides precisely one phrase which may be defined as critical,
and that only semi-specific, before he sloughs off into apology and mass quotation of twenty-one passages from the text. His final paragraph begins: "But this is by way of being a review of Vernon Lee's book, and not a phrenologist's chart of Mr. George's bumps. The book, of first-rate workmanship from beginning to end, is far too thorough to leave the reviewer anything to say about it that is not better said in the book itself."

Up to this point he has concentrated on lambasting the ineptness of Prime Minister Lloyd George, whose strenuous efforts to conciliate his colleagues in the Big Four at the recent Versailles peace conference had led to charges that he had compromised England's national interests. In his best forensic vein of personal assault, Shaw saddles Lloyd George with the bemoaning analogy of a maladroit nanny, then contrasts his bourgeois reasoning with the indefeasible logic of Lenin. Shaw, in short, is infinitely more concerned with shredding a political opponent than appraising an immediate author. So he devises glib hyperboles along the way, aggrandizing one constituent in order to dilate his denunciation of the other.

His initial statements set the tone of extravagant generalization. "This book is something more than the latest literary product of a well known author. It is a trophy of the war for England. It proves what everyone has lately been driven to doubt, that it is possible to be born in England and yet have intellect, to train English minds as well as English muscles, and to impart knowledge to Britons." This grand flounce is succeeded by an explicit minifying simile ("Put the Prime Minister's most important speech... beside the most trifling of Vernon Lee's notes to Satan the Waster, and it immediately becomes apparent that Mr. Lloyd George leads the English people only as a nurserymaid leads her little convoy of children"), which he soon expands into a rhythmic series of clownish polarities:

Vernon Lee has the whole European situation in the hollow of her hand: Mr. Lloyd George cannot co-ordinate its most obviously related factors. Vernon Lee knows history philosophically: Mr. Lloyd George barely knows geography topographically. Vernon Lee is a political psychologist: Mr. Lloyd George is a clap-trap expert. Vernon Lee, as her dated notes to this book prove, has never been wrong once since the war began: Mr. Lloyd George has never been right, as his speeches will prove if anyone will take the trouble to dig them up. Vernon Lee, by sheer intellectual force, training, knowledge, and char-
acter, kept her head when Europe was a mere lunatic asylum: Mr. Lloyd George hustled through only because, in matters of wide scope, he has no head to lose.

Twice again Shaw interrupts his diatribe on the Prime Minister to limn the glories of Miss Lee. “Vernon Lee is English of the English . . . . I take off my hat to the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism, and salute her as the noblest Briton of them all.” And the crowning compliment: “the sooner we put Vernon Lee into the position occupied three hundred years ago by Queen Elizabeth the better.”

Never having been the mark for such heady plaudits from so distinguished a source, Vernon Lee rose joyously to the bait. A week and a day after the review came out, she completed this “Scrawl of thanks to G.B.S.” and presumably mailed a clear copy to him:

Dear Mr. B.S.

It would take a truly Elizabethan (since you mention Elizabeth!) splendor & spread of skirts to drop you, even in metaphor, such curtsey as should answer the hyperbolic magnificence of your greeting in the Nation. But below the exuberance of your cordiality toward a co-religionary (or co-infidel) and the delight which you delightfully take in occasional talking of nonsense I seem however to discern something for which I really would like to thank you: you have guessed that, perhaps, even in my own eyes, my Satan has been suffering under an interdict, or excommunication, and this interdict, you with your splendid generous gesture, have raised. Probably a transparent Quixote of good sense like you cannot quite realise what this means to a writer who labours under the least satisfactory kind of obscurity, the obscurity of being just a little well known, through thirty-odd years of incessant fabricating; & whom finding herself at hopeless variance with even her own small public during the War, has reduced to a sadder acquiescence in her own uselessness. Once before (perhaps on other occasions which I do not happen to know) you did a similar good turn, namely to Samuel Butler. I have not sufficient faith in myself or even in you to expect that your notice will do for me what it did for him. Indeed even as regards a public even you could not set matters right for me. But, I repeat it, you have set matters right with myself at a moment when they were in a bad way, and it is for this I want to thank you,

8 Rough draft of a holograph letter on five sheets, profusely recast and emended, dated “Sept 26 XX” at head of salutation (now in the Colby College Library). The version printed here makes no attempt to indicate her innumerable redactions.

9 As far back as 1906 Shaw ridiculed August Weismann’s denial of the inheritability of acquired characteristics and gave frequent support to Samuel Butler’s movement into neo-Vitalism, “a new religion” leading science back to metaphysics. In the preface of Back to Methuselah, Shaw calls Butler “pioneer of the reaction” against Darwin’s mindless evolutionary universe, and messiah of the “genuinely scientific religion.”
both for the deed & also for the intended kindliness I seem to recognize in it.

What can I possibly offer you — Du hast Diamanten und Perlen, so to speak, so to speak — in return for this benefit? Certainly no reference on my part to your own work. But stop, perhaps this, which I find in my diary of Nov. 14, 1914, after remarking that during a railway journey on a fine autumn day I had felt for the first time since the beginning of the War some of the happiness which such things used to give me, I write: "and what has set the Genius Loci free (if only to sink again after that flutter) is not so much this winter journey reaching back to meet other ones — in the happy past, but even more this article (Common Sense about the War) 10 by B.S., the voice & glance of a free man through the War's hideous fumes & incantations exercising them ..."

And so, for that & now for this please accept my thanks, dear Mr Shaw

Violet

Miss Lee's plaint of ostracism smacks of self-dramatization. True, the published critiques preceding Shaw's were weighted on the side of censure. The *Times Literary Supplement* chided "this transparent artifice of a philosophic war trilogy. Her satire fails because never from the beginning can the reader believe in it ... an unconving fable in which [certain] assumptions are made . . . . She has committed herself to an artificial attitude which she must keep up at all costs," in an essay-review curiously like Shaw's in that it preeminentely ignores the book to discuss other matters at far greater length, and coincidentally mentions Shaw. The *Daily News* found fault with her "prolixity," "ungrammaticalness," and emphasis: "Perhaps too much heavy ammunition is spent on proving the undisputable." The *Times* rated "the form she has chosen [as] not the most convincing," and *The Athenaeum* indulged in straightfaced mockery by giving her dedicatory lines a sly twist. The *Glasgow Herald* declared the play "unplayable." In marked contradiction, the *Pall Mall Gazette* said, "We do not think that the pacifist point of view has ever been more powerfully presented": the *Daily News* hedged handsomely, "But it is ingeniously put together, and the epilogue is really entertaining," also

10 Shaw's essay of that name published as a supplement to the *New Statesman* of November 14, 1914. His most widely circulated anti-war declaration—a condemnation of militarism, Machiavellianism, and national self-delusion, British no less than German—it brought him accusations of loyalty to the Huns, loss of friendships, boycott of his plays, and rejection of his manuscripts. It was cried down as a blow to national morale, and Shaw later surmised that he escaped lynching merely because people treated everything he said as a huge joke.
noting “Vernon Lee’s imaginative powers and . . . her usual accurate metaphysical thinking”; as did the Herald, “The Play is the most tragic satire the war has produced . . . . The introduction and notes constitute the strongest argument for pacifism we have met with”; in The Flame, Caroline E. Playne opined that “there is a great chance that her ‘bit’ may survive.” On balance, one could scarcely concur with Miss Lee that she experienced irreparable interdiction.11

In her eagerness to accept the laurels so grandiloquently bestowed, Miss Lee obviously scant ed Shaw’s subtler purpose. She either underestimated or chose to overlook his wily use of reductive irony: comparing invidiously a major with a minor figure, and by the very juxtaposition to diminish the major. Now Vernon Lee, by dint of her thirty-three books and extensive polemicizing in four countries was not exactly unknown at this date, but she could by no admissible standard be accounted the incontestable superior of Lloyd George in the arbitration of world problems. Through linkage of this patently mismatched pair, Shaw accomplished the equivalent of asking the Prime Minister when he had stopped beating his wife. The inverse valuation, with its overtone of absurdity, was bound to cut down his size and seriousness. Preternaturally sensitive to slurs on her own stature, Miss Lee gives no sign of having apprehended any here. She is as fulsome in her reply as Shaw is in his review, two master strategists tilting each to his private vantage.

Vernon Lee’s protestation that she could not repay Shaw’s public kindness to her with a corresponding benefit—“Certainly no reference on my part to your own work”—was soon rescinded. Within a year of her letter, almost to the day, there appeared over her signature a review of his Back to Methuselah,12 provocatively captioned:

11 An interesting sidelight may be gleaned from Miss Lee’s file of reviews on this book. Among them is one by Marta Waser from the German-language Zollikon (date undetermined). Predictably eulogistic, it reinforces the contemporary indictment that she provided abundant aid and comfort to the enemy. Of the original Ballet of the Nations, the critic lauds its visionary greatness, its intellectual depths, its prophetic force, its fine literary achievement; in the later Satan the Waster she espies a magnificent discussion of the deeprooted and universally felt forces which caused the war, a rich philosophical insight, a penetrative power without parallel, and the wisdom of an important thinker—“ein Buch der Weisheit, ein Prophetenbuch.” Shaw she embraces into the fold in consequence of his overwhelming delight in this brave and fearless work. The fact that a book which has received such marked praise from Bernard Shaw has not found acceptance in England seems “obvious” to her.
12 New Statesman, XVII (September 24, 1921), 674-676.
It may be that in the interim Shaw’s deviousness dawned upon her. Or, fully aware of it from the first, its rankling had demanded release. There is, too, the third premise that she had simply regained her perspective regarding Shaw and treated his work in her renowned unshackled style, with total honesty according to her lights. Whichever propelled her, Vernon Lee went after his “enchanting and infuriating” book tooth and nail, displaying in no phrase the deference and gratitude ablaze in her unsolicited letter. She emulates Shaw in disregarding his drama as drama but does cleave to consideration of his ideas as expressed in the preface. Mainly she excoriates him for preaching belief in the transmissibility of acquired characteristics. Shaw’s folly, she clamors, is in his going Back to Butler, he not of the Analogy but of the (innumerable false) analogies. These anthropo-centric, ego-centric analogies Mr. Bernard Shaw accepts and makes his own. Less even than Butler, moreover, does he affect to hide that it is his — how shall I call it? dramatising-moralising preferences — rather than any scientific probability which make him oppose to Darwinian “Fatalism” a doctrine of what he calls Purposive Evolution . . . . Of course, Butler wrote his chief books before the genetic discoveries of Weissmann [sic] had made inheritance of acquired characteristics very questionable . . . . As regards Mr. Bernard Shaw, he does not condescend to discuss this little difficulty thus put in the way of Butler’s identification of physiological heredity with psychological memory, and merely overwhelms Weissmannism under the rain of fiery jokes on the whole of “Mechanism” . . . .

Not content with baring his intellectual fatuities, she lets fly a barrage of taunts at Shaw’s overweening amour propre: “my unbelieving soul does not share Mr. Shaw’s faith that Reality must needs conform to what I should like to be true”; “Mr. Bernard Shaw’s new (and decidedly improved) First Chapter of Genesis”; “Mr. Shaw is unmistakably a Priest and Prophet of a new, or ‘as good as new,’ religion.” And this perorating lampoon:

So being, fortunately for all of us readers, himself a bona fide Cre-

13 Joseph Butler (1692-1752), English divine, author of The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed (1736).
14 Shaw’s contemporary, Samuel Butler (1835-1902), advocated in a series of books the theory that heredity and therefore evolution depends not on natural selection but on an “unconscious memory” transmitted from generation to generation.
ator, he takes, instead of Adam's rib, one of his own pet preferences, calls it Creative Evolution, and bids us celebrate the purifying and soul-redeeming rites of Neo-Vitalism. Since, as he hastens to assure us, "the Problem of Evil yields very easily to Creative Evolution."

It does indeed. O great Arch-Priest and Prophet, enchanting Sarastro-Papegeno G.B.S.; on one condition, to wit, that, besides hey-prestoing evil away in the Future, you could also neutralise it in the Past.

Looking back to his brawny accolades in a similar circumstance, Shaw, like Lear, is to be forgiven if he entertained some thoughts about serpents' teeth and thanklessness.

Vernon Lee was to make amends of a sort on two later occasions. In her Proteus (London, 1925, p. 52), while not aligning Shaw with "the great challengers" like Ruskin, Tolstoi, Ibsen, and Nietzsche, she does rank him among "the more purely beneficent (because lighter-hearted) stirrers-up of thought." In 1930 John Lane judged the time ripe for a reissue of Satan the Waster. Remarking that "such things could not be said without impiety" during the war or for years after, Miss Lee reverts to the tenor of her letter and drops this second curtsey: "So, with the generous exception of Mr. Bernard Shaw, Satan the Waster was boycotted by reviewers; my own friends turned away from it in silence; and I myself felt rather ashamed of having written it." In respect to the last, she need not have been. As closet drama, her "allegoric puppet-show" rises strong in its tradition, and has earned unqualified tributes from more recent objective criticism. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as "a powerful indictment of war"; and Peter Gunn, "one of the most cogent, moving, powerful denunciations of war ever written. It is a brilliant analysis of the psychological effects of war on individuals . . . . polemical writing at its best" (p. 208). Shaw, for all his subterfuge, seems not to have been wholly a fraud in his audacious testimonial.

A final fillip to the affair, amusing as much as significative, occurred a decade later. On January 13, 1930, Irene Cooper Willis, Miss Lee's good friend and eventual executrix, dispatched the following barb to Blanche Patch, secretary of the august playwright:

Dear Madam,

I wrote to you last August on behalf of Miss Paget ("Vernon Lee") to ask you if you could get Mr Shaw to reply to a personal letter which Miss Paget had written to him. Her letter was a request that Mr Shaw would allow her publishers (John Lane) to quote from a laudatory review by him of her book Satan the Waster, in the Nation of
proposed of casting from them.
I should be. I have found. patch
of m. words induce her. Shaw to
reply on England.

from him
(min) Irene Cooper within

This is perfectly muzzle. Of course Miss Page may quote
anything of mine she likes. Those who the John D. v. P. sold
at least 50,000 times. I tell Miss Wilson is about twice a month.
They take no notice of my suggestions. If you can find Miss Page's
present address I will write to her saying that her London
representatives are suffering from total loss of memory.

16/30

Hi. Shaw must be suffering from total loss of
consciousness to tell such whoppers. This is
the first reply I have received from him.

WILLIS TO PATCH, SHAW TO PATCH LETTERS, LAST PAGE
Sept. 18, 1920, on the cover of a new edition about to be published. Mr Shaw's review was written so many years ago that Miss Paget felt that she ought to ask his permission before letting her publishers quote from the article. Mr Shaw has never replied to Miss Paget's letter and again on Vernon Lee's behalf I am approaching you — as the matter is important to Miss Paget — to ask you if Mr Shaw would be so kind as to send a postcard to me saying no more than "yes" or "no" to this request.

I enclose a typescript of the extracts in question which if you could bring to Mr Shaw's royal notice might elicit this assent or dissent to the proposal of quoting from them.

I should be, I assure you, most grateful if you would induce Mr Shaw to reply as suggested.

On the 16th Shaw appended below her signature this lofty, exasperated retort, which he initialed with prodigal flourish:

This is perfectly maddening. Of course Miss Paget may quote anything of mine she likes. I have told the John Lane firm so at least 50,000 times. I tell Miss Willis so about twice a month. They take no notice of my assurances. If you can find Miss Paget's present address I will write to her warning her that her London representatives are suffering from total loss of memory.

Not to be faced down, by Zeus himself, Miss Willis snapped back testily just below his autograph: "Mr Shaw must be suffering from total loss of conscience to tell such whoppers. This is the first reply I have received from him." Shaw, now nearly seventy-five, may have tired of the fray, or bowed to the professional tact of his amanuensis. On the 22nd she sealed a truce with Miss Willis:

Dear Madam,

I showed your letter to Mr Shaw, and he admitted that he might have been mistaken, and had confused Miss Paget's request with that from another lady who wanted to quote from his books. I told him that I thought your letter was probably lost when he was at Malvern, as yours is by no means the only complaint we have had about unanswered letters.

And so Shaw had the last lash. Did Vernon Lee's letter actually go astray? Did he consciously slight it in reprisal for her derogatory review? Did he subconsciously depersonalize her into just another innocuous "lady?" Vernon Lee, virtually at the end of her skein, must have undergone bitter recall of the day, not long gone, when he had dubbed her surrogate of the sole Virgin Queen. And now, to be dealt with through underlings. It was the obverse of his Lloyd George tactic, wasn't it. A reversal of a reversal.