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VERNON LEE

From a photograph of a pencil sketch by John Singer Sargent. The original sketch is inscribed by the artist "To Miss Anstruther Thomson, Aug. 1889". Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921), the author of Art and Man (London, 1924), was for many years Vernon Lee's closest friend.
“A MOST EXQUISITELY BEAUTIFUL PLAY” 
THAT FAILED TO REACH THE STAGE

By Alice Pattee Comparetti

When Professor Alfred K. Chapman addressed the Colby Library Associates on the centenary of Thomas Bird Mosher, he spoke of Mosher's pioneering habit of introducing to American purchasers of "the Mosher books" the works of little-known European authors, with or without their permission. In this way Vernon Lee's *Ariadne in Mantua*, first published by B. H. Blackwell at Oxford in 1903, came to be published by Mosher in Portland, Maine, in 1906. (A second Mosher edition appeared in 1912.)

This was the little play about which Edith Wharton once wrote Vernon Lee: "It is exquisite. . . . Certainly the idea is dramatic. . . . No one has your gift of suggesting in a few touches an Italian landscape or picture, and the little stage directions at the head of each act are . . . beautiful. . . ." (For the full text of Mrs. Wharton's letter, see Professor Hilda M. Fife's article, *Colby Library Quarterly*, February 1953, page 141.)

This comment on Vernon Lee's "gift" had been anticipated, years before, by Henry James. In 1890 he wrote to Vernon Lee: "I always taste, deeply, in all your work, the redolence of the unspeakable Italy, to whose infinite atmosphere you perform the valuable function of conductor or condenser." ¹

¹ For the full text of Henry James's letter, see "Henry James and his Tiger-Cat" by Carl J. Weber, *PMLA* (68: 679), September 1953.
Other Americans, too, responded to the attractions of Vernon Lee's *Ariadne in Mantua*. In March, 1907, Sarah Orne Jewett wrote to Miss Paget (i.e., Vernon Lee), referring to "the most dear copy of it"—the play—"the one with the Italian paper to its cover," 2 and in July, 1908, she wrote to Miss Paget again, mentioning "Miss McCracken, a magazine writer of talent, ... and Miss Julia Marlowe the [Shakespearean] player," and informing her that "they both loved the *Ariadne in Mantua*." 3

And well they might, for the play is "exquisite" as Edith Wharton said. The idea is dramatic, the little stage directions are beautiful, and throughout the play we feel vividly Vernon Lee's remarkable power of suggesting Italian landscape.

The plot of the play is constructed in reminiscence of the old Greek legend of Ariadne, daughter of Minos, who liberated her lover Theseus from the labyrinth and was deserted by him when their ship touched at the island of Naxos.

Characters and setting are changed: Theseus becomes Ferdinand, Duke of Mantua; Ariadne becomes Magdalen, disguised as Diego; Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons and wife of Theseus, becomes Hippolyta the affianced bride of Ferdinand. The action takes place in sixteenth-century Italy, in the palace of Mantua, shortly before the expedition to Cyprus under Othello.

The first act relates the seemingly incurable malady of Ferdinand, returned to Mantua after many years' captivity by the Turks. His moodiness is marked by loss of memory and by abhorrence of all women, particularly Hippolyta. His uncle the Cardinal has sent abroad for a musician, a singer, who may charm Ferdinand from his sickness. The Cardinal understands that the singer, Diego, a young courtier recommended by his Venetian correspondent, is

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2 *COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, August 1952, pages 111-112.*
a woman, disguised, but the Cardinal does not know who she is. Her identity makes the plot of the play. It is a very interesting, very moving, very beautiful play. And even though the author apparently thought of her work as closet-drama, we know (from the files of Vernon Lee’s correspondence now in the Colby College Library) that at least one actress saw in *Ariadne* the possibility of an attractive rôle.

It has, probably, not been previously known that in 1907 the actress Lillah McCarthy (then Mrs. Granville Barker, now Lady Keeble) actually approached Vernon Lee with a view to putting *Ariadne in Mantua* onto the London stage. We have two of Mrs. Granville Barker’s letters on this subject, and Vernon Lee’s answer to the second. The London actress opened the correspondence a few months after Julia Marlowe had made the summer visit to Europe about which Miss Jewett had written to Vernon Lee:

3, Clement’s Inn  
[London] W. C.  
Sept 26. 1907.

Dear Miss Lee,

Miss Ethel Smyth very kindly lent me her copy of your play *Ariadne in Mantua* to read. I tried to buy a copy from the publishers but could not get one. Can you please let me have a copy or tell me where I can get one, and would you mind if I try to get it produced, for I think it is a most exquisitely beautiful play, and am all impatience to play it.

Sincerely yours  
Lillah Granville Barker

Her second letter is dated nearly seven months later:

3, Clement's Inn  
[London] W. C.  
12 April 1908.

Dear Miss Paget  

I enclose a copy of *Ariadne in Mantua* ‘cut’ for acting purposes. I

4 Vernon Lee dedicated *Ariadne in Mantua* “TO ETHEL SMYTH, THANKING, AND BEGGING, HER FOR MUSIC.”

5 It is worth noting that the first letter was addressed to “Miss Lee,” this one to “Miss Paget.” In the interim Lillah McCarthy had apparently learned that Vernon Lee was a pen name, Violet Paget the real name.
am afraid it will be necessary for you to re-write the little play within
the play for, as it stands, there is not enough 'bite' in it to get through
the audience on the stage to the audience in the Theatre. If you could
write a little play in real dramatic form, as a poignant expression of
Magdalen's emotion in the bitterness of her situation, there would be
a real climax to the play. As it stands, the play grows up to the end of
the fourth act and then drops. I should be glad if you would let me
know as soon as possible if you will do this.

Miss Anstruther-Thomson⁶ tells me that you would not be able to
come over for the production. Will you therefore write me a letter
agreeing to my producing it for two matinée performances and, as
the play must be produced by subscription to cover the cost, (which
will amount to £350) without fee to yourself?

The play must of course be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain for
performance. You may have done this? Will you let me know?

As to the music and the songs with which each act closes, I am not
a professional nor a trained singer and probably should be unequal
to any music of a complicated character, and the music of the songs
should be simple and each song should be more powerful and appeal­
ing than the last. Will you let me have, when you write, the music of
the various lyrics selected and also your views on this subject. I sup­
pose there is a song of the 'Lament of Ariadne on Naxos' (at the end
of Act I).⁷

I hope that Mr Charles Ricketts⁸ will design the scenery and the
costumes and I shall of course engage the best available cast, but I
can take no steps until I have heard from you.

Yours sincerely

Lillah McCarthy⁹

[P. S.]
I have just read the play through aloud to time it and find that it
will occupy only an hour and a half in the playing. This makes it

⁶ Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921), author and friend of Ver­
non Lee. For her volume of essays, Art and Man (London, 1924), Vernon Lee
wrote an introduction.

⁷ Regarding this "song of the Lament" see the "Note" by Ermanno F.
Comparetti, page 226 below.

⁸ Nearly twenty years before the date of this letter, Charles Ricketts (1866-
1931) had been a book-designer, employed by Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. to design
(among other volumes) Thomas Hardy's Tess. Later, he took to designing books
for publication by his own Vale Press, and later still he turned to theatrical de­
sign. In 1914 he was associated with Lillah McCarthy's husband, Granville
Barker, in the production of Hardy's Dynasts, for which he designed a litho­
graph to illustrate the "Immanent Will" of this drama. A signed copy of this
lithograph now hangs in the Colby Library, a close neighbor of the Vernon Lee
 correspondence here quoted. (The information in this note has been supplied
me by the editor of this quarterly.)

⁹ This signature is the only part of this letter written in Lillah McCarthy's
own hand. A secretary, presumably Magdalen Ponsonby (see footnote 10),
 wrote the letter; she signed it. The first letter, however, written in September
1907, is entirely in Lillah McCarthy's handwriting.
impossible for production by itself and I should like, if you will con­
sider it, to cut the fourth act altogether, and in this way reduce the
play to such a length as will make it possible to produce with it an­
other play in regular three act form.

L. G. B.

To these several requests Vernon Lee replied at once, writing from her Italian villa in Florence:

IL PALMERINO
SAN GERVASIO
FLORENCE
April 15, 1908

Dear Mrs Granville Barker,

Your very kind letter and the annotated copy of *Ariadne* have just arrived. Miss Ponsonby\(^{10}\) will, by this time, have communicated to you a letter which crossed it, and which will have made clear my utter inability to entertain any of your suggestions.

There is therefore nothing more to be said about a performance of *Ariadne*. But I should like to assure you that, even more than my own disappointment, I feel the bitterness of having however unconsciously contributed to your wasting so much time and good will.

I have never believed much in the possibility of performing *Ariadne* (I called it on the title page not a play but a *romance in five acts*); and knowing that I would never consent to altering a word of it, I have never made an attempt to get it performed: it was intended for reading, not for the stage. All this I should have told you many months ago had you consulted me about your plans. But of these I have heard only once from you in the form of a mere request for permission to act my little work; since then I have heard only vague and contradictory reports from third persons; and it was only the day before yesterday that a letter from Miss A[nstruther-] T[homson] gave me the slightest intimation of your wishing to act not *Ariadne* but an adaptation thereof. Things having happened in this way, there is nothing left for me but to hope that your disappointment in this matter may have been less than mine; and to thank you very warmly for the honour and benefit of which I am, alas, quite unable to take advantage.

In great haste, I am, dear Mrs G[ranville] B[arker],

Yours truly,

[Vernon Lee]

\(^{10}\) From 1906 until her death about 1925, Miss Magdalen Ponsonby was a close friend of Lillah McCarthy. Her mother, The Hon. Lady Ponsonby, and her father, Sir Henry Ponsonby, were intimate friends of Queen Victoria. Lillah McCarthy often visited Miss Ponsonby at her London home, and Violet Paget—apparently informed of this fact—seems to have communicated with the actress through her friend. I am indebted to my colleague, Mr. William M. Milton, for this information.
Colby Library Quarterly

The autograph of this letter in the Colby Library is unsigned. It was Vernon Lee's rough draft, much scratched and revised, but she labeled it "Exact copy." Her reaction to Lillah McCarthy's two suggestions—that she rewrite the play within the play and cut out the fourth act altogether—seems a natural one. The fifth act, which contains the play within the play, accomplishes the author's purpose. The stage-directions and the speeches are finely turned, beautiful prose. This fifth act is exactly what Vernon Lee wished it to be. As for the proposal to omit the fourth act altogether, this was to ask the author to cut the very act where the conflict, which is the theme of the play, is given dramatic personification! It is therefore not surprising that Vernon Lee responded as she did.

As a result of her reply to Lillah McCarthy's proposals, the project was dropped, and so far as I know, Ariadne has never been given on the English stage. I have heard that it was given, in Florence, in one of the later years of Miss Paget's life; but I have been unable to verify this, or to learn whether the play was given in English or in Italian, or whether Miss Paget attended the performance. Doubtless she did, and I like to imagine her gratification.

A NOTE ON THE ORIGIN OF
ARIADNE IN MANTUA

By Ermanno F. Comparetti

In trying to locate the source of her Ariadne among her impressions of Mantua, Vernon Lee, looking into her "mind one day, found that a certain song of the early seventeenth century . . . had entered that Palace of Mantua, and was, in some manner not easy to define, the musical shape of what must have happened there. And that," she says, "was the story I have set forth in the . . . little