



TITLE OF THESIS: Seeking Transcendence: Death, Rebirth and Transformation in the poetry of Renée Vivien (1877-1909)

Name of Author: Vivien Hennessy

Student number: 0717029

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Department of French Studies

Mary Immaculate College

University of Limerick

Internal Supervisor: Dr. Loïc Guyon

Internal Examiner: Dr. Mairéad Ní Bhriain

External Examiner: Professor Diana Holmes

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Abstract

Renée Vivien, born Pauline Mary Tarn in England in 1877, moved to Paris at the age of twenty-one, where she pursued a literary career. Between 1901 and 1909, when she died at the age of thirty-two, Vivien published over thirty volumes of poetry, several short stories, translations of Sappho's fragments, and a novel. Vivien chose to write exclusively in French, and her proficiency in that language is evidenced in her adherence to the strict conventions of French prosody. She was also a Classics scholar, and her knowledge of Greek facilitated her translation of Sappho into French. Vivien was a familiar member of the lesbian community of Paris, known as 'Paris Tout Lesbos'. Paris at the turn of the century was known for its relaxed moral attitudes, and lesbianism was fashionable amongst the bohemian and literary circles of the Belle Époque. However, while these circles enjoyed sexual and cultural freedoms, an undercurrent of misogynistic and anti-feminist sentiment prevailed in French society. Such misogyny found expression in the medical discourse of the period and was articulated in literature and the popular press. Vivien's poetry and prose, influenced by decadent and symbolist writing, challenged and subverted the androcentrism of these genres, confronting their anti-feminist/lesbian bias. Contemporaneous criticism of her work, focused on her image as a doomed and tragic lesbian, infamous for her hedonistic lifestyle, while modern critics pointed to her Decadent influences as an example of the anti-feminist aesthetic at play in her poetics. This thesis however aims through a close analysis of Vivien's poetry to demonstrate the proto-feminist rhetoric of Vivien's writing, and through the prism of the themes of death, rebirth and transformation, to reveal Vivien's quest for transcendence.

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Dedication

À mes enfants et toute ma famille

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and has not, in full or part, been submitted to any other institutions.

Signed:

Vivien Hennessy

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Parts of this thesis have been presented as papers at various conferences as listed below:

‘Reinventing Poetic Desire: Diversity, Sapphic Discourse and Feminist Decadence in the works of Renée Vivien (1901-1910)’. New Voices 2013: “Diversities in Literary and Cultural Studies.” 13th- 15th June, 2013, NUI Maynooth.

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Introduction

Born in Paddington, London on the 11 June 1877, to an American mother and British father, Pauline Mary Tarn moved to Paris with her family a year after her birth. The family were to remain in Paris until shortly after the death of John Tarn, when around the age of nine, Pauline, her younger sister Antoinette and her mother all returned to England. Showing a precocious interest in French literature from an early age the young Pauline began to write in both French and English throughout her childhood. Her relationship with her mother was a fractious one and as soon as Pauline turned eighteen, and had legal access to her inheritance, she left England for France where she settled permanently in Paris in 1898. Here she rejoined her childhood friend Violette Shillito and was introduced to Natalie Barney. She quickly became part of that community of women writers and artists known collectively as *Tout Lesbos* in Paris at the turn of the century. Vivien's first collection of poetry, *Études et préludes* published in 1901 by Alphonse Lemerre, was written under the *nom de plume* R. Vivien, a pseudonym which eventually became Renée Vivien by the time *Évocations* was published in 1903.¹

Vivien led a tragic and short life. Her doomed love affairs, principally with Natalie Barney, her alcoholism and addiction to chloral hydrate, as well as her anorexia have been well documented. However, the real tragedy that surrounds Vivien is that the story of her life has too often overshadowed her work. Much of the accounts of Vivien's lifestyle have also unfairly influenced the reception of her writing. Nineteenth-century critics such as Charles Maurras focused on her tripartite foreignism (as a woman, as a

¹ The full account of Vivien's life is detailed in her biography by Jean-Paul Goujon, *Tes blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses: Vie de Renée Vivien* (Paris: R.Deforges, 1986).

lesbian, and as an Anglo-American writing in the French language)² while Yves-Gérard le Dantec focusing on her deathbed conversion to Catholicism classified her as a *Femme damnée, femme sauvée*.³ Much of what we know of Vivien is derived from Colette's accounts of her in *Le Pur et l'impur* published in 1932 and some two decades after Vivien's death. Tama Lea Engelking writing on Colette's portrait of Vivien reveals the negative light in which she is shown, an almost damning depiction which would haunt future perceptions of Vivien and her work:

Colette never mentions her lesbianism, but when she rewrote the portrait for inclusion in *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932), the material added was generally negative, depicting Vivien as a neurotic, oversexed and tragic figure whose lifestyle Colette finds frankly offensive. She not only rejects Vivien as a sort of lesbian Don Juan whose indiscretion is shocking, but Colette is completely revolted by the stifling decadent decor of her apartment, the strange exotic food Vivien serves and the thinness of the anorexic poet herself [...]⁴

Moreover, Colette reveals little details of Vivien the writer, and admits that she only became interested in her friend and neighbour after managing to forget that she was a poet. 'Quand commençai-je de pouvoir oublier que Renée Vivien était poète, c'est-à-dire de lui témoigner un intérêt véritable ?'⁵ It becomes clear that Colette classifies Vivien as an example of impurity, citing her overt sexuality, labelling her a 'Madame Combien-de-fois' in response to the poet's boasting of her conquests. Her impurity also lies, according to Colette, in her '[...] empoisonnement d'alcool, aggravé par l'inanition et quelque « doping »...'⁶ However, Colette's portrait of Vivien is most damaging when, in one of the few references to her writing, she dismisses Vivien's talent as unoriginal, equating it with the puerility of her character:

² Charles Maurras, *L'avenir de l'intelligence suivi de Auguste Comte, Le romantisme féminin, Mademoiselle Monk, l'invocation à Minerve* (Paris : Flammarion, 1927). Maurras' treatment of Vivien will be further discussed in a later chapter.

³ Yves-Gérard Le Dantec, *Renée Vivien : femme damnée, femme sauvée* (Aix en Provence : Éditions le feu, 1930).

⁴ Tama Lea Engleking, 'A la recherche de la pureté : Colette on Women Writers', *Atlantis : Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice*. 26 (1), p. 8.

⁵ Colette, *Le Pur et l'impur* (Paris : Librairie générale française, 1989), p. 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.84. Ellipsis and quotation marks in original.

En outre, l'œuvre de Renée Vivien habite une région de tristesse élevée, où les « amies » rêvent et pleurent autant qu'elles s'enlacent. Admirablement au fait de notre langue, rompue du mètre français, Renée Vivien trahit sa qualité d'étrangère – c'est-à-dire l'assimilation ralentie des chefs d'œuvre français – en n'exsudant son baudelairisme qu'entre les années 1900 et 1909. C'était, pour nous autres, un peu tard.⁷

Colette's meditations on Vivien, and their emphasis on her lifestyle over her writing, serve not only to undermine her status as a writer, but also to pre-empt any future reception of her œuvre. As Engleking remarks, 'Her portrait of Vivien detours her readers from a serious consideration of Vivien's poetry to focus instead on the impure aspects of the poet's lifestyle.'⁸ Vivien's writing was later 'rediscovered' in the 1970's by lesbian and gay academics, notably in the United States, as research in the area of queer studies began to concentrate on establishing historical literary precedent. Jeanette Foster's translation of Vivien's novel, *Une femme m'apparut* (1904) as *A woman appeared to me* (1976) accompanied by an introduction by Gayle Rubin, introduced Vivien to an English speaking audience. In her influential examination of love between women from the renaissance to the present, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (first published in 1981) Lillian Faderman also makes the claim that Vivien's writing is influenced by Baudelairean poetics, wherein she believed Vivien finds, '[...] both the language and imagery of lesbianism. Her poetry most often associates lesbian love with vice, artificiality, perfume, and death [...]'⁹ Faderman's assertions are largely based on accounts of Vivien's lifestyle and her various addictions. Later, Cassandra Laity, contrasting the manner in which H.D and Vivien attempt to carve out feminist identities while working within the Decadent-Romantic tradition, accuses Vivien of allowing the

⁷ Colette, *op.cit.*, p.86.

⁸ Engleking, *op.cit.*, p.10.

⁹ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), p. 362.

‘[...]‘dark’ side of Decadence to rule her imagination.’¹⁰ Such critical perspectives lead Elaine Marks to suggest that attempts to classify Vivien and place her in the modern feminist tradition are anachronistic and distort any serious consideration of her work, leading instead to the ‘[...] creation of a succession of imaginary "Renée Vивиens."’¹¹

This thesis aims to avoid such a biographical perspective (as much as possible), instead proposing a hermeneutic reading and thematic analysis of Vivien’s poetry. Any writer deserving of inclusion in the canon (and Vivien surely is) is worthy of critical analysis that primarily focuses on their work regardless of their personal life. Vivien herself was of such an opinion, writing in her satirical *L’Album de Sylvestre* (1908) as ‘Zucco-Zévy’ she reflects:

Je n’ai jamais compris cette manie de ceux qui, ayant été distraits ou charmés par un livre, veulent connaître l’auteur.

L’écrivain, s’il a quelque valeur réelle, est et doit être au-dessous de son œuvre.¹²

Nevertheless, so much has been written on Vivien’s work particularly in the last twenty years that this thesis owes much to the excellent standard of Vivien studies which precede it. Scholars such as Diana Holmes in the United Kingdom; Tama-Lea Engleking, Juliette Dade, Karla Jay, Rachel Mesch, Elyse Blankley and Melanie Hawthorne in the United States; and as interest in Vivien revitalized in France, writers such as Nicole G. Albert, Virginie Sanders, Marie Perrin, Marie-Ange Barholomot Bessou, have all profoundly contributed to an original and innovative reading of Vivien’s work. Jean-Paul Goujon’s biography of Vivien, *Tes Blessures sont plus douces*

¹⁰ Cassandra Laity, ‘H.D and A.C Swinburne: Decadence and Sapphic Modernism’ *Lesbian Texts and Subtexts: Radical Revisions*, eds., Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p.235.

¹¹ Elaine Marks, “‘Sappho 1900’: Imaginary Renée Vивиens and the Rear of the Belle Époque’, *Yale French Studies*, 1988 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2930313>>. p.189.

¹² Renée Vivien, *L’Album de Sylvestre* (Paris : E. Sansot, 1908), p.53, entry no. XXV.

que leurs caresses: Vie de Renée Vivien, published in 1986, rekindled interest in Vivien's life, uncovering her work and personal correspondence for a new generation.

The poetry that will be examined in this study is to be found in those volumes published between 1901 and 1910, written under the pseudonyms R. Vivien and Renée Vivien. These collections, namely *Études et préludes* (1901); *Cendres et poussières* (1902); *Évocations* (1903); *La Vénus des aveugles* (1903); *À l'heure des mains jointes* (1906); *Flambeaux éteints* (1907); *Sillages* (1908); *Dans un coin des violettes* (1910); *Le vent des vaisseaux* (1910) and *Haillons* (1910) are collectively published in one volume by ÉrosOnyx.¹³

As a thematic analysis, this thesis traces the motif of transcendence in Vivien's poetry, as found in the three major identifiable themes of death, rebirth and transformation. Transcendence, herein defined as the will to surpass the ordinary; as the subversive manner by which a higher level of understanding and perception is obtained in the dissolution of orthodoxical frameworks; and as the striving towards knowledge of the divine, is reflected throughout Vivien's poetics.¹⁴ The quest for transcendence in Vivien's poetics takes many forms. Principally, as a lesbian writing at the *fin de siècle*, this quest takes shape in her desire to break free from the heteronormative and phallogocentric literary order, in an effort to establish a new form of proto-feminist/lesbian discourse.¹⁵ Vivien wrote at a time when female intellectualism underwent particular scrutiny. Women writers, known derogatorily as *les bas bleus* were considered a threat to patriarchy, as symbols of gender anarchy and a menace to the moral order. Medical discourse helped perpetuate the ideology that female intellectualism was inherently

¹³ Renée Vivien, *Poèmes: 1901-1910* (Courbessierre : ÉrosOnyx, 2009) Henceforth all references to this edition will be placed in brackets after each citation as (R.V, followed by page number).

¹⁴ Transcendance as defined by Larousse: Existence de fins du sujet en dehors du sujet lui-même ; caractère d'une cause qui agit sur quelque chose qui est différent d'elle, qui lui est supérieur.

¹⁵ This study assumes that Vivien's work is proto-feminist in that it precedes modern feminist ideology.

malsain, linking it with hysteria, sexual aberrancy and infertility.¹⁶ Foucault illustrates in *Histoire de la sexualité* how the hystericization of the female body was shaped by medical discourse and led to a definition of women's physiology and psychology through sexuality, in turn inscribed on the social body. Confined by the parameters of her sexuality, the nineteenth-century woman was thus circumscribed as a reproductive organism, a moral and biological guardian of children.¹⁷ However as women's writing continued to proliferate in spite of, and in reaction to, the dominant misogynistic discourse that threatened to curtail it, male writers began to respond accordingly. From the popular press, to the still predominantly masculine literary canon, male writers overtly and covertly found ways to suppress, disparage and undermine female literary pursuits. Holmes and Carr outline how:

In essays, novels, lectures, plays and press articles men exhorted women to be what they claimed (with some lack of logic) they inevitably and essentially were: kind, more concerned with the good of (male) others than their own, gracefully passive, chaste, the guarantors of a humane society not through any political role but indirectly, by taming the brute that was one aspect of masculine strength. They waxed vehement on the dangers of any other course of female behaviour: women who wrote, voted pursued their education too far would become sterile, hysterical or mad, while their men folk would become feminised and French civilisation would decay.¹⁸

Difficult as it was for female writers to transcend such overwhelmingly patriarchal censure in order to create a discourse of their own, the lesbian woman faced an even greater challenge. Just as medical discourse attempted to define female sexuality, science also turned its attention towards a codification of homosexuality, resulting in the formation of new vocabulary to describe homosexual acts.¹⁹ Terms such as *gynandres* and *tribades* were employed derisively to describe lesbians, as Sapphic sensuality began

¹⁶ See Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité : La volonté de savoir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), pp.136-139.

¹⁸ Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, 'New Republic, New Women? Feminism and Modernity at the Belle Époque' in *A Belle Époque? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*, eds. Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), p. 14.

¹⁹ Foucault, *op.cit.*, pp.136-139.

to capture the public imagination as an oddity and amusing perversion. That Sapphism became such a cultural fascination was due in a large part to the increase of exploration of lesbian sexuality in literature. From Balzac's *La fille aux yeux d'or* which appeared in 1835 to Joséphin Péladan's *La Gynandre* published in 1891, the lesbian became a frequent character between the pages of the novel. The apogee of male-generated literary depictions of lesbianism (which generally centred on a fatalistic narrative brought about by the deviance of such abnormal sexual behaviour), is arguably Baudelaire's poetic treatment of the subject in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). His depiction of lesbianism in *Lesbos* and *Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte* captures the cultural ambivalence at the heart of society's perception of female homosexuality at the time, in that in these poems he seems to favour the women's decisions to live true to their sexual inclinations while at the same time suggesting that they return freely to a time and place where such practices were unrestricted (Lesbos). However, in his portrayal of the lesbian sterile caress, he feeds into to the prevalent societal disdain for unhealthy and moreover infertile sexuality, all the more dysfunctional in the absence of the male.²⁰ And yet the male is not truly absent from such discourse. What Baudelaire, Balzac and Péladan (along with scores of other male authors writing on the Sapphic body) had in common, was the presence of the voyeuristic male (in the shape of both writer and readership) for whom the lesbian existed exclusively for their pleasure. As Elyse Blankley states:

The nineteenth-century "vice of lesbianism," however, was fundamentally a fantasy created by the male imagination and perpetuated to shock and to stimulate. Despite the proliferation of lesbian disguises – whether of Zola's *Nana*, Gautier's bisexual *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, or Balzac's *Marquise de St. Réal* – these women are set in motion to cavort in front of the male eye poised at the keyhole.²¹

²⁰ A more detailed examination of Baudelaire's lesbian poetry will be made later in this thesis.

²¹ Elyse Blankley, 'Renée Vivien and the City of Women', in *Women Writers in the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p.48.

Vivien therefore, faced the task of transcending the negative image of the lesbian as both an object of male concupiscence and herald of moral degeneracy. Furthermore, she became one of the first lesbian writers to explore and articulate her lesbian identity and desires (which she did overtly, without recourse to code or euphemism) and in doing so offered an authentic, unapologetic insight in lieu of tainted speculation.

Not only does Vivien's poetry demonstrate the desire to transcend this discourse, it goes further in her attempt to usurp phallogentrism in the creation of a gynocentric universe which places lesbian sexuality at the pinnacle of her self-designed social, moral, cultural and spiritual order. To this end, and as will be explored further throughout this thesis, Vivien's poetics can be viewed as proto-feminist, as it prefigures modern feminist and lesbian theory.²²

The motifs of death, rebirth and transformation are considered in this study as thematic of transcendence, as analysis of Vivien's poetics through the lens of these motifs reveals an articulation of her will to redefine death, to welcome a philosophical rebirth, and to engage in transformation. From this perspective, it offers a close reading of Vivien's poetry, some of which, thus far, has been left unexamined. It therefore sheds new light on a body of work which can be viewed as a positive rhetoric of proto-feminist discourse, as well as a creation of a new narrative of alterity, thus delineating Vivien's poetic corpus as *innovateur* against previous classifications which place it as mimetic. And yet, the multi-disciplinary approach of this study does not intend to follow a strict feminist/lesbian theoretical exploration of the poetic works of Vivien. The close analysis of themes in this study also allow for a contextual historical-cultural review as

²² Vivien's efforts to establish a lesbian literary heritage, is echoed in the scholarship of later lesbian critical theorists such as Bonnie Zimmerman. See Bonnie Zimmerman, 'What has never been: An overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism' in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter, (London: Virago Press, 1986).

well as an inter-textual reading of Vivien's poetics alongside writing ranging from Hellenistic sources, the courtly tradition, the renaissance, as well as Romantic and Decadent literature. This thesis also reveals how Vivien's poetry attests to her far-reaching intellectualism and esoteric appreciation of biblical, folkloric and philosophical wisdom.

Critical analysis of Vivien's work has long pointed to her preoccupation with death, allying this to the decadent sensibility of her writing as well as to her personal fixation with morbidity, which it has been claimed led to her early demise.²³ However, this study proposes that death as a theme in Vivien's poetry was not exclusively steeped in pessimism. Nor does death pertain to a negative inculcation of the Decadent aesthetic. Death, decay, and degeneracy exist as potent symbols in Decadent and Symbolist literature as they pertained to amongst other themes, an exploration of the end of history epitomized by the ending of the century, as well as the demise of traditional values which governed sexuality, religious belief and personal liberty. As a female Decadent, Vivien subverts the genre from within as she redefines the thematic rhetoric of death. Engelking asserts that Vivien '[...] was able to adopt decadence as part of a conscious feminist strategy to redefine the relationship between creativity and sexual identity.'²⁴ Rather then, death for the poet is an intrinsically transcendent state, a metaphorical ending before a figurative rebirth. In the first chapter, Eros and Thanatos, we examine the complex interchange between the tropes of death and desire in Vivien's poetics. In the poetry of Vivien desire is at times portrayed as fatalistic, as it precipitates the end of the affair and the loss of friends and lovers. Death as a theme in Vivien's poetics also, most significantly, is born out of her desire to both dissect and subvert the fatalistic

²³ Goujon, *op.cit.*

²⁴ Tama Lea Engelking, 'Decadence and the Woman Writer: Renée Vivien's *Une Femme m'apparut*', in *A Belle Époque? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*, *op.cit.*, p.225.

rhetoric that surrounded lesbian sexuality during her lifetime, one which posited lesbian sexuality as aberrant, dysfunctional and a threat to heterosexuality. Diana Holmes writing on the societal context of Vivien's love poetry (which could also include that love poetry which portrays the dichotomous elements of death and desire) that:

The lesbian love poetry of Renée Vivien (1877-1909) is profoundly marked by her society's construction of the lesbian as erotic spectacle, or as deviant and damned, but it also expresses a defiant resistance and sketches a utopian celebration of imagined happiness beyond the patriarchal order.²⁵

Death and desire appear as dichotomous elements in Vivien's poetry, existing at times in symbiosis, as demonstrated in *Sommeil (Études et préludes, 1901)*, where the poet speaker unable to completely abandon herself to joy and to the pleasure of desire, is haunted by the spectre of death, where death symbolizes at once the possibility of the end of the affair as well as an internalization of society's condemnation of their love:

Je ne sais, présageant les mortelles douleurs,
Si dans la nuit lointaine où l'aurore succombe,
Ton souffle n'a pas fui comme un souffle des fleurs,
Sans effort d'agonie et sans râle et sans pleurs,
Et si ton lit d'amour n'est pas déjà la tombe. (R.V, 44)

Death therefore, as with the themes of rebirth and transformation, marks a quest for transcendence in Vivien's poetics, as each demonstrates a desire to break free from societal convention and to subvert the phallogocentric order.

The second chapter of the Death section examines the archetype of the *femme fatale* in Vivien's poetry. The nineteenth-century image of the *femme fatale*, from Gustave Moreau's *Salomé* and Waterhouse's *Circe*, popularized the myth of female sexuality as threatening, evil and dangerous. Vivien employed the image of the *femme fatale* in her

²⁵ Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing, 1848-1994* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1996), p.xvi.

poetry as a symbol of pride, whereby she reclaims the potency of female sexuality in her depiction of hitherto maligned feminine archetypes such as the witch and the female vampire. Her revision of the story of Delilah and Samson reveals the rightfully vengeful woman's attempt to claim the strength of men. Vivien's imagined universes, the 'deathscapes' and 'nightvisions' of her poetics, recreate *loci* for the marginalized, whom she designates as 'êtres de la nuit' (R.V, 232) (and amongst whom she claims to belong) in order to validate their existence.

The third chapter, and the final in the death section, 'Death and the Poet', examines Vivien's own personal relationship with death. When confronted with the actuality of death, rather than its figurative representation, Vivien returns to some of the characteristics of Romanticism as she articulates the loss of her friend, Violette Shillito. Vivien's poetry of mourning reveals her wish to commune with the dead, first in eulogistic terms and eventually supernaturally. As the poet in mourning, Vivien also questions her own personal awareness of, alongside societal opinions on, the relevance of the dead amongst the living. In doing so her poetry contributes to the debate prevalent towards the end of the nineteenth century with regards to societal attitudes to mourning and the practicalities of the physical placement of the deceased.

The middle section of this thesis explores themes of rebirth in Vivien's poetics. The first of these chapters, entitled Return to Mytilène, is concerned with the poet's utopian vision of a female-centred universe based on the teachings and writing of Psappha. Psappha (as Vivien referred to Sappho in the Aeolic form) was of such an influence to the poet, that this chapter will examine how Vivien viewed herself as her reincarnation, as *Psappha revit*. The motif of return and of memory will also be examined as it pertains to Vivien's desire for transcendence through rebirth.

Chapter five, 'To Name and Rename', analyzes the important role of naming and renaming in Vivien's poetry. The process of renaming and revision contributes strongly to this theme of rebirth for Vivien as it characterizes the poet's own name revisions over time. It also serves to emphasize Vivien's authorial control as she refashions her own history and that of others through her verse.

The sixth chapter, 'New Women from Old', aims to explore the figure of the New Woman as envisaged by Vivien. The New Woman captured the public imagination of the *fin de siècle*. As a cultural prototype, she epitomized the free-spirited female, unfettered by domestic duties, driven to succeed in a patriarchal society. Although Vivien herself did not subscribe to a particular model of political feminism, the gynocentric rhetoric of her poetry constitutes what Mary Louise Roberts would describe as a 'disruptive act'²⁶. Roberts' notion of the 'disruptive act' (broadly defined as an example of the anti-normative behaviour which characterized the New Woman) is inherent to Vivien's poetics, in its transgression of gender roles and its validation of women, in particularly the lesbian woman, as a superior being. As a female writer at the *fin de siècle* Vivien fulfils many of the criteria of the New Woman and as Mesch believes, a *fille publique*.²⁷ However, this chapter is mainly concerned with Vivien's resurrection of forgotten feminine icons and the restoration of their historiography. She does so in the wake of societal fear of the emergence of the archetype of the New Woman, and consequently sheds valuable light on feminine fortitude throughout history. Just as Psappha acts as an emblem for lesbian literary heritage, these resurrected heroines provide validation for those women seeking recognition and equality in the late nineteenth century. Vivien draws on historical, biblical, mythological and folkloric

²⁶ Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*, first edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁷ Mesch defines the *fille publique* as one whose identity was '[...] determined by their public role [...]'. Mesch *op.cit.*, p.41.

narrative as sources for evidence of these women. Furthermore, attention will be given to Vivien's treatment of her 'perverse Ophélie', and to what extent she reveals society's guilt in the universal condemnation of women as sentient beings.

Transformation, the final section of this thesis, explores the themes of transformation at work in Vivien's poetics. Transformation is vital to Vivien's quest for transcendence as it represents her vision of renewal and reform. In her poetry, just as death constitutes figurative endings with the promise of a form of rebirth, so transformation is presented as the apogee of her poetic vision. However, it is important to note that these thematic motifs do not operate on a linear plane. They exist throughout her poetics in no particular chronological order. It is impossible, therefore, to distinguish any particular collection as being wholly representative of death then leading to rebirth and eventually evolving towards the theme of transformation. The theme of transformation is first explored in the seventh chapter, 'Metamorphosis'. Metamorphosis, a familiar paradigm of literature, presents in Vivien's poetry as literal transformations embodied in the physicality of the siren. For Vivien, the image of the siren represents the dichotomy of female suppression and female power. The bifurcated body of the siren is emblematic of the submerged feminine which must resurface; as well as, conversely, a form of feminine paralysis at the behest of men. However as Vivien makes the decision to heed the sirens's call, as portrayed in her version of the Odyssean tale in *Vers les sirènes* (*Évocations*, 1903) she demonstrates her desire to break with convention and embrace the alternative vision of life presented by these creatures. This desire to embrace the unknown is further elaborated through the poet's many verses dedicated to her anthropomorphic incarnations. The poet sees herself as metamorphosed into amongst other beings animate and inanimate, a conch shell embedded on the ocean shore and on many occasions a gull in full flight. Such metamorphisms highlight Vivien's

ambivalence to a society in which she sees herself as marginalized, both as woman and lesbian. Immersing herself in the lesbian aesthetic, Vivien finds solace in the transformative effect of lesbian sexuality as a manner of transcending the harsh realities of androcentrism. Vivien also considered transformation or metamorphosis as an artistic imperative, as a dialogic exchange between writer and audience through which both were presented with the opportunity to evolve and change accordingly. The poet's role, for Vivien, is that of a harbinger of change, one who allows a glimpse of possibility amidst chaos and uncertainty.

'Seeking the divine' as the eighth chapter, continues to examine the role of transformation, in this instance as it presents throughout Vivien's spiritual poetry. Vivien's esotericism will be examined alongside the emergence of new religious ideas in the long nineteenth century. The spirit of questioning which characterized the era, also manifested as a challenge to traditional religious beliefs. In her search for transcendence the poet re-imagines religion, as she subverts, contests, and borrows from Hellenic, Abrahamic, Christian and pagan spirituality. This syncretistic approach reveals her wish to create a new form of spirituality which places woman or more precisely, lesbian woman at its heart. In this chapter Vivien's poetic treatment of androgyny as a sacred state will also be explored. The figure of the androgyne became a symbol of decadent sexual ambiguity as portrayed by Balzac and Banville and as a symbol of the integrated soul as a symbol of revolt '[...] against the bourgeoisie, and against the society of exchange values and polar oppositions which the bourgeoisie had fostered.'²⁸ Vivien seeks to reveal the divinity of the androgyne in her portrayal of the androgynous nature of her lovers in her poetics, where such androgyny she sees

²⁸ Bram Dijkstra, 'The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature', *Comparative Literature*, 26 (1974) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1769675> pp.62-73.

embodied in beloved contradictions. For the poet these ‘contradictions’ represent a resistance to convention and thus a doubling of their beauty, and therefore increasing their desirability. This is exemplified in *Sonnet (Évocations, 1903)* wherein the beauty of her mistress described as ‘Grave comme Hamlet, pâle comme Ophélie’(R.V, 76) is further sanctified in the lines ‘Ton être double attire ainsi qu’un double aimant, / Et ta chair brûle avec l’ardeur froide d’un cierge.’(R.V, 76) Sapphic love is also portrayed as religious experience, one through which, in a Dantean fashion, each lover transcends the physical world in a journey towards the divine. As such Vivien elevates Sapphic sensuality over that of heterosexuality, immortalizing herself and her lover through their mutual love.

The final chapter, ‘Re-transformations’, scrutinizes Vivien’s poetry of introspection, as it signifies a will to re-examine her life as a *femme de lettres* and a lesbian woman whose poetry enshrines the rhetoric of revolt against the societal norms which threaten to confine her. As already stated, female intellectualism and particularly female authorship was subjected to such a strong degree of disdain during the period of Vivien’s life, that it became associated with ‘moral decay and mental instability’.²⁹ Vivien’s poetics of self-reflection reveal her anxiety as an author and her doubts and uncertainties as to the relevance of her writing in terms of any future audience. ‘Et, d’une voix parfois troublé et parfois claire, / Ô femmes ! j’ai chanté dans l’espoir de vous plaire.’ (R.V, 225) This self-reflective discourse also allows her to contemplate her past affairs and in turn to externalize the female homosexual experience for an audience whose previous understanding of lesbianism was derived from male-generated voyeuristic literary representations.

²⁹ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p.1.

Finally this thesis will attempt to address three important questions, firstly to what extent does a study of the thematic elements of death, rebirth, and transformation contribute to a further understanding and appreciation of the poetry of Renée Vivien? How do these themes manifest as Vivien's quest for transcendence? And lastly to what extent does the poetry of Renée Vivien deserve to be studied independently from certain aspects of her life?

Part I Death

Chapter 1: Eros and Thanatos

Death constitutes one the major themes of *fin-de-siècle* literature and art. Recurrent motifs relating to death such as moral and physical decay and *dégénération*, as well as a fixation with morbidity proliferate. As the century began to draw to an end, artists explored the philosophical significance of endings and beginnings, death and life. Medical discourse shared this preoccupation, with its theoretical philosophy of degeneration as a psychical condition. Within the field of psychiatry, Benedict Morel and Jacques-Joseph Moreau's hypotheses of degeneration defined the decline of human behaviour as a separation of the body from the mind, focusing on physical and mental disintegration with an emphasis on the feminization of the intellect.³⁰ Decline and deterioration, and the value of artifice over nature, are the major themes of Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The dichotomous relationship between death and life also took shape in literary explorations of the connection between death and desire. Baudelaire fuses these elements in his poetry where sexual desire and physical pleasure are juxtaposed with omnipresent death, as a sinister reminder of human mortality. In *Danse Macabre*, the late medieval allegorical representation of the universality of death is given a decadent revival in his portrayal of death as a seductive courtesan.

Fièrè, autant qu'un vivant, de sa noble stature
Avec son gros bouquet, son mouchoir et ses gants
Elle a la nonchalance et la désinvolture
D'une coquette maigre aux airs extravagants.³¹

Indeed throughout literary history the association between death and desire has long been observed. In biblical terms this connection exists within the discourse that lays

³⁰ Edwin R. Wallach and John Gach, eds., *History of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology*, (New York: Springer, 2010).

³¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p.279.

blame on the first woman, whose desire to gain knowledge results in the fall from God's grace and as a result brings death and sin into the world. Sex and death exist idiomatically in the French expression *la petite mort*, as it describes the aftermath of orgasm, and the eroticization of death exists within many texts including *Hamlet* where the protagonist in Act III Scene I describes it as 'a consummation'.³²

In the poetic universe of Renée Vivien death and desire are common bedfellows. Death and desire exist as part of the poet's articulation of her disillusionment with the ephemerality of love, and her romanticization of same. Vivien's engagement with representations of death and desire in her poetry is born out of her personal belief in the intrinsic relationship between love — amatory, romantic and spiritual — and death, both figuratively and literally. The poet's literary impulse is impelled by the philosophy that life cannot be thoroughly experienced without truly embracing death and its diametrical force, desire. In this sense Vivien subverts the traditional perspective of desire as life-affirming, and death as the end of life. In Vivien's poetry desire and death are fused, and more often than not desire precipitates death, while death rather than representing a state of non-being is a point of transcendence — a movement towards a new form of life. Desire is therefore transcendent in that it signifies a movement towards death; while death itself is emblematic of a desire towards a new state. In an era when lesbian sexuality was portrayed in literature as damned and dysfunctional, and therefore associated with the death of traditional sexual and gender traditions, Vivien's poetics attempt to normalize homosexual desire. To this end, death and dichotomous desire exist in Vivien's poetics as a means to portray the profundity of her love for other women, where the end of the affair or despair in the treachery of a lover are as

³² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

significant as those experiences felt in the heterosexual world. Therefore death is not associated with ‘abnormal’ sexuality, but rather sexuality alone. Vivien candidly expressed her lesbian sexuality through the medium of verse and prose, yet paradoxically was acutely aware of, and emotionally shaken by, any public criticism or condemnation incurred by such expression as poignantly underlined in *Le Pilon*:

Pendant longtemps, je fus clouée au Pilon,
Et des femmes, voyant que je souffrais, ont ri.

Puis, les hommes ont pris dans leurs mains une boue.
Qui vint éclabousser mes tempes et ma joue. (R.V, 214)

Vivien’s poetry is not only characterized by a preoccupation with death and its relationship to desire, it is in itself a panegyric to both. In Freudian terms, the most basic conflict at the heart of human nature is that between the death-drive and desire, and the desire for life. For Freud, a near contemporary of Vivien, ‘Eros’ represented the instinct for life, love and sexuality, and ‘Thanatos’, the instinct of death and aggression. While ‘Eros’ propels the drive towards sex, reproduction and birth, ‘Thanatos’ gravitates towards death and destruction, yet both are central to the human condition, to life itself. In Lacanian theory,³³ the death drive as it masks the symbolic order, is central to desire as it attempts to: ‘[...] go beyond the pleasure principle, to the realm of excessive *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as suffering.’³⁴ Vivien’s poetics of desire, however, challenge the Freudian theory that ‘Eros’ represents the move towards reproduction and birth, as more often than not for Vivien the erotic equals pain and pleasure, and endings over beginnings. ‘Thanatos’ on the other hand, presents as a more discernible and definite impulsion towards knowledge and freedom in an altered state of being. Elaine Marks claims that any reading of Vivien’s poetry within the context of the

³³This thesis does not aim to analyze the poetic works of Renée Vivien from an exclusively psychoanalytical perspective *per se*, but some aspects of this theory help to elucidate artistic impetus.

³⁴Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W Norton, 2006), p.7.

Belle Époque must consider the counter discourse of that period. Traditional discourse of the time describes '[...] a period in which nature, love, and women were glorified, including the figure of the lesbian, a period of artistic innovation and feminist activity with Paris as the cultural center of the Western world.'³⁵ Marks also observes the other side of this discourse however, and reminds us that:

[...] there are other discourses of the belle époque, discourses that tell of and react to the "Death of God," discourses that explicitly or implicitly often use the clichés of social darwinism to construct anti-semitic, nationalist, racist, and sexist theories thereby strengthening and solidifying the binary categories superior/inferior, white/black, aryan/jew, male/female, order/anarchy. These other discourses, from the underside of the belle époque, are still prevalent today. Therefore, the appropriate intertexts for Renée Vivien, writer and woman, include not only Sappho, Colette, Natalie Clifford Barney, and art nouveau, but also Nietzsche, Freud, and Charles Maurras.³⁶

Therefore, while intertextuality exists between Vivien, Freud and Nietzsche, her poetics of death and desire must be placed contextually alongside Decadents such as Baudelaire and Swinburne. For these poets death and desire are also inextricably linked. Baudelaire frames desire as a kind of death in *Le Poison*, 'Tout cela ne vaut pas le terrible prodige / De ta salive qui mord,'³⁷ While Swinburne sees the demise of love in *Félice* as it 'Ends in a laugh, a dream, a kiss, / A song like this'.³⁸ Their exploration of the tangential themes of death and desire however reflect their pessimism in the materialism of reality and their misogynistic view of female sexuality. Virginie Sanders traces the influence on Vivien of Victorian poets such as Swinburne, Rossetti and Keats, whose poetry of death she asserts is marked by '[...] la volupté qu'ils cherchent à atteindre à travers la douleur.'³⁹ While the influence of these writers can be seen in Vivien's poetry, they are not so pervasive however that they inhibit her originality of

³⁵ Elaine Marks, "'Sappho 1900': Imaginary Renée Vivien and the Rear of the Belle Époque', *Yale French Studies*, 1988 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2930313>>, p.177.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, p.231.

³⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), pp. 217-228.

³⁹ Virginie Sanders, '*Vertigineusement j'allais vers les étoiles...*': *la poésie de Renée Vivien* (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 1991), p.163.

voice and purpose. Vivien, therefore, manages to adapt Decadent literary conventions to convey a feminine perspective in a male-dominant genre, and in doing so (and in particular when read alongside her poetics of rebirth and transformation), her treatment of death also contributes to the proto-feminist/lesbian rhetoric of her verse.

I 1.1 Fatal Desire

The first poem from her first published collection, *Études et Préludes* (1901), *À la Femme aimée*, immediately establishes the conjunction between death and desire contained within Vivien's poetry. In the first stanza the speaker's lover appears amidst a cloud perfumed with oriental spices. The speaker is both fearful and awestruck before this woman in whose hands: 'De longs lys religieux et blêmes / Se mouraient...' (R.V, 23) This mistress is a temptress, a bearer of love and desire, and yet the speaker is quick to reveal the perilous nature of the love that she bears, wherein the purity of the lily and the sanctity of religion are threatened.⁴⁰ The poet is magnetized by her lover while all the while aware of the dangers inherent in this liaison as it is characterized by the paradox contained within '[...] le souffle pâmé des angoisses suprêmes. / De tes clairs vêtements s'exhalèrent tour à tour / L'agonie et l'amour'. (R.V, 23) A mere kiss is overshadowed by this dangerous and pervasive conflict, which indicates the fatal beginnings of a new love affair: 'la douceur et l'effroi de ton premier baiser.' (R.V, 23)

Bacchante triste, from the same collection is a highly fantastical and evocative poem which portrays a victim of love and all of its cruelty. Several priestesses of Bacchus romp through the forest at twilight where: 'Leurs cheveux emmêlés pleurent le sang des vignes'. (R.V, 23-24) Amidst the merriment however a perturbing note is registered, all

⁴⁰ The importance of the symbolism of floral imagery in Vivien's poetry will be examined in more detail in the chapter *Death and the Poet* as well as in subsequent chapters.

is not well within this idyllic scene, it is after all '[...] l'heure troublée' (R.V, 24) and one amongst them, the youngest, and who is described as '[...] point pareille aux autres', (R.V, 24) is unable to fully abandon herself to joy. 'Demi ivre' she is merely half intoxicated by desire, and this drunkenness rather than joyful is denoted by the poet as decidedly *triste*. The natural surroundings which seem to engulf and suffocate her are described as 'feuillages noirs' (R.V, 24) which 'ceignent son front pâli' (R.V, 24) presaging her possible demise. Vivien further emphasizes the dance of death which accompanies desire, whilst in the midst of 'soirs d'orgie' (R.V, 24) flowers are devastated, trampled underfoot symbolic of this lost victim of Eros who like the poet herself 'n'apprendra pas le désir sans douleur'. (R.V, 24)

Indeed, for Vivien desire and anguish are almost constant companions, irrevocably linked. Suffering is not only an unfortunate casualty of love as it is often shown in her poetry to be the direct intention of her calculating lover.⁴¹ The mysterious lover is always silent, immutable, and intent on tormenting the poet-speaker as she is portrayed in *Ta forme est un éclair*: 'Rien ne vaut ce tourment, ni cette extase amère/ De tes rares baisers !' (R.V, 27)

Yet figuratively speaking death is also the epitome of true beauty for the poet. It is the ultimate truth. Vivien recognizes death in desire because she is not repulsed by, but rather intensely attracted to, both. The face of the mistress/lover of *À l'Amie* holds the dubious charm of: 'des fleurs mortes'. (R.V, 30) Their love is enshrouded by 'cet âpre parfum, cette amère musique.' (R.V, 30) While the speaker is a victim of a cruel mistress, she herself is wary of inflicting harm. This circumspection, like death, overshadows the joy of desire in *Chanson*, where fear of love is presented as a troubling

⁴¹This in part reflects biographical aspects of Vivien's life. Intensely jealous she still continued her affair with Natalie Barney despite the latter's open infidelities. For more on this see Karla Jay *The Amazon and the Page* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

refrain throughout the poem: ‘J’ai peur de ce frisson nacré’ and later: ‘J’ai peur, c’est le remords spectral.’ (R.V, 31)

As death is an unquestionable inevitability, along with birth it is the common experience which binds all humanity. Death therefore is the unifying factor which joins Vivien and her lover in *Sonnet à la Mort*. This poem is ostensibly about the marriage of two lovers through sexual union, though its very title alludes to the spectre of death within desire. The sexual pact is celebrated as a religious ceremony, their bed the altar upon which their marriage in passion is consummated. The duality of death and desire is captured in the oxymoronic phrase of: ‘[...] ton baiser d’amour est subtil et profond.’ (R.V, 33) Vivien sets a scene which is reminiscent of the death of Albine in Zola’s *La Faute de l’Abbé Mouret* (1875) whereby: ‘Notre lit sera plein de fleurs qui frémiront, / Et l’orgue clamera la nuptiale ivresse.’ (R.V, 33) Death is transcendent and these lovers cross a threshold from which there is no return. In the last verse the two lovers sleep beyond the break of day, denying the coming of light and hence the active world beyond their bed. These sleeping lovers, having consummated their desire are as corpses in the grave, oblivious, ‘et notre longue nuit ne craindra plus l’aurore.’ (R.V, 33) However rather than a living mistress the mysterious *bien-aimée* of this poem is death itself.

This thematic thread is resumed in *Sommeil*, wherein Vivien’s speaker compares her lover’s sleep to the final submission to death, and her bed to a tomb. However this enigmatic two versed poem alludes as much to a fear of eternal slumber as to the real and present fear of the possibility of losing her lover. The first line, ‘Ton sommeil m’épouvante, il est froid et profond’ (R.V, 44), with its use of the verb ‘épouvanter’, underscores the speaker’s profound dread as she gazes upon her lover sleeping deeply. ‘Ainsi que le Sommeil aux langueurs éternelles, / J’ai peur de tes yeux clos, du calme de

ton front.’ (R.V, 44) Sharing a bed, the lovers are intimately close, yet a deep chasm is cleaved between them as one is awake and observant, just as the other is unconscious and unaware. This distance creates a psychological vantage point for the speaker. As she envisions ‘les mortelles douleurs’ (R.V, 44) the speaker fears not the literal death of her mistress, but rather the end of the affair. Death consumes all, just as desire, now that desire is spent, the poet wonders whether her lover’s soul has not already departed only to be received elsewhere.

Je ne sais, presageant les mortelles douleurs,
Si, dans la nuit lointaine où l’aurore succombe,
Ton souffle n’a pas fui comme un souffle de fleurs,
Sans effort d’agonie et sans râle et sans pleurs...
Et si ton lit d’amour n’est pas déjà la tombe. (R.V, 44)

Although she was referring directly to Vivien’s novel *Une femme m’apparut* (published firstly in 1904 with a new edition a year later) Juliette Dade claims that for the author ‘[...] le monde spirituel vainc le monde physique et efface sa présence’, a hypothesis that may well be applied to her poetic œuvre, as for Vivien, the living presence of love in this world is always overshadowed by her desire to reach beyond life itself.⁴²

I 1.2 Pleasure and Pain

In their introduction to *Pleasure and Pain in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture* David Evans and Kate Griffiths point out that:

The long nineteenth century in Europe begins and ends, in the figures of Sade and Freud, with a literary examination of pleasure and pain and their complex interaction.⁴³

⁴²Juliette Dade, ‘La Décorporalisation de la Femme dans les deux éditions d’*Une femme m’apparut...*’, *Renée Vivien à rebours, Études pour un centenaire* (Paris: Orizons L’Harmattan, 2009), p.111.

⁴³David Evans and Kate Griffiths eds., *Pleasure and Pain in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2008), p.9.

They go on to identify the influence of Sade in the work of certain *poètes maudits*, in particular Baudelaire in whose poetry the ‘Sadean erotics of pain’⁴⁴ are especially evident. Resurgence in interest in the work of the Marquis within a late nineteenth-century context was in part due to a collective cultural reaction to ‘The psychological scars inflicted on the nineteenth-century subject [which] find recurrent expression in the *mal de siècle*.’⁴⁵ With respect to Baudelaire, Evans and Griffiths inform us that:

Sade is also a distinct presence in those Baudelarian aphorisms where sexual pleasure is characterized by physical suffering, an imbalance of power and a cold clinical detachment; in his *carnets*, for instance, Baudelaire writes, ‘Il y a dans l’acte de l’amour une grande ressemblance avec la torture, ou avec une opération chirurgicale’[...]⁴⁶

As Vivien introduces the lesbian aesthetic to the Decadent tradition she also explores the tortuous aspects of desire shaped by this Sadean influence. While sexual desire is allied with death in the previously mentioned poems, *Désir* from the 1902 collection *Cendres et Poussières*, equates passion with violence and even murder. Here the poet describes her lover after sexual intercourse, her body listlessly laid out like a cadaver:

Elle est lasse, après tant d’épuisantes luxures,
Le parfum émané de ses membres meurtris
Est plein du souvenir des lentes meurtrissures.
La débauche a creusé ses yeux bleus assombris. (R.V, 57)

Repetitious use of various forms of the verb *meurtrir*, all serve to emphasize the aggressive nature of passion. The lover’s embrace leads to: ‘une ardeur si sauvage et douce à la fois.’ (R.V, 57) The troublesome message delivered in the last two lines, reminds the reader of the thin divide between love and hatred and also highlights the poet’s own inner conflict and psychological struggle between death and desire. ‘Et sur

⁴⁴ Evans and Griffiths, *op.cit.*, p.11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁴⁶ *Idem.*, p.11.

le cou, pareil à quelque tige morte, / Blêmit la marque verte et sinistre des doigts.’
(R.V, 57)

These sinister marks ostensibly describe those of strangulation but also signify complete possession and a form of silencing. It is important to read this poem contextually, as it describes lesbian sexuality within a nineteenth-century cultural framework, and may thus be viewed as polemical; a venting of anger towards a society (rather than one person) which not only marginalized same sex desire but in the case of lesbianism refused to recognize it. Foucault asserted that Victorian sexuality required repression which: ‘[...] operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence.’⁴⁷ Therefore while this is true of heterosexuality it was doubly true for homosexuality. From this perspective, the association of death and desire in Vivien’s poetics exists in part as a reaction to the silencing of women particularly in terms of their sexuality, and moreover lesbian sexuality.

In *Ressemblance inquiétante (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* Vivien explores the disquieting resemblance that she perceives between her lover and a snake. Resemblances, reflections, mirrored images and echoes are also recurring themes in Vivien’s poetry and they frequently refer to the parallel nature of same-sex desire.⁴⁸ As the speaker’s body is paralleled with that of her lover, it is therefore possible that as she registers this serpent likeness in her mistress, she is also referring to herself. The snake as a metaphorical image represents alienation, a creature normally reviled and feared: mysterious and elusive, it is the ultimate outsider of the animal kingdom. This status is reflective of that of the lesbian woman, a creature which engenders both fear and fascination. The serpent reference is also derived from Genesis and it is suggested that

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), trans. Robert Hurley, p.4.

⁴⁸ These themes will be explored in depth in the Part II.

the paradisiacal element of their love affair is compromised by this evil contained within the soul of her lover, the temptress:

J'ai vu dans ton front bas le charme du serpent.
Tes lèvres ont humé le sang d'une blessure,
Et quelque chose en moi s'écœure et se repent
Lorsque ton froid baiser me darde sa morsure. (R.V, 60)

Once again violence and aggression are portrayed as inherent to sexual desire: 'Tes lèvres ont humé le sang d'une blessure.' (R.V, 60) Vivien, it seems is incapable of enjoying pleasure without pre-empting its darker potential. She is sickened and repelled by her own lust:

Je te hais, mais la souplesse de ta beauté
Me prend et me fascine et m'attire sans cesse,
Et mon cœur, plein d'effroi devant sa cruauté,
Te méprise et t'adore, ô Reptile et Déesse ! (R.V, 60)

From revulsion to sardonic amusement, the symbiotic relationship between death and desire is caustically highlighted in *Intervalle crépusculaire* from the 1903 collection *La Vénus des Aveugles*. Initially the poet paints an affable portrait of her lover, an alluring 'Adonéa' dispelling darkness with light:

Tes yeux sous tes cheveux sont comme des poignées
De rayons à travers des toiles d'araignées.

Ton sourire d'été, que l'aube colora,
Est pareil au sourire orgueilleux de Sara. (R.V, 152)

The suggestion however, of artifice as symbolized by 'Tes parfums indiens, tes onguents et tes fards' (R.V, 152) sharply contrasts with the purity and 'la candeur simple des nénuphars' (R.V, 152) and acts as a reminder that nothing is ever truly transparent within the realm of love. The title of the poem implies vagueness which ironically leads to the only message of certainty for the poet as encapsulated in the pivotal fifth couplet where the duality of love is powerfully evoked:

La haine de l'amour et l'amour de la haine
Se partagent mon cœur et mon âme incertaine. (R.V, 152)

Never far away, death again gains the upper hand as well as the last word in this poem where the beautiful Adonéa, 'plus belle que le puéril Adonis' (R.V, 152), is destined to expire within: 'un linceul de lys.' (R.V, 152) For Vivien the lily is not only symbolic of purity and womanhood, it also represents chastity where such chastity is defined by lesbian sexuality and strict abstention from heterosexuality. The crushing of flowers, expiration of blossoms and other such floral imagery can be interpreted as representative of societal condemnation of lesbianism but also of personal suffering endured in the name of love.

I 1.2 Surrender and Loss

An invitation to dream of death is also an invitation to surrender to sexual rapture, in *Explicit Liber Veneris Caerorum*, the last poem of the *Vénus* collection, as its Latin title indicates. In a twilight setting echoing the atmosphere of *Intervalle crépusculaire*, wherein again ambiguity is embedded in the oxymoronic use of language 'clair-obscur' (R.V, 162) the poem begins with the poet-speaker enticing her lover, 'Viens rêver de la Mort... J'adore tes paupières.' (R.V, 162)⁴⁹ The closed eyelids redolent of one lost in ecstatic bliss also elicit the image of a death mask. Vivien's poetry of death and desire embody a form of *jouissance précaire*, whereby the poet exhibits her longing for amatory, erotic and artistic transcendence yet fails through fear to achieve the ultimate state of *jouissance*.⁵⁰ Hélène Cixous' feminist interpretation of

⁴⁹ Ellipsis in original.

⁵⁰For more see Jane Gallop, 'Precocious Jouissance: Roland Barthes, Amatory Maladjustment, and Emotion' *New Literary History* 43 (2012), 565-82 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0034>>

jouissance as a literary model of female pleasure, an: ‘[...] explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance [which] takes pleasure in being limitless,’⁵¹ is essentially interrupted in the case of Vivien’s poetry, thereby adding to its innate sense of unease and plaintive disquietude, forever linking pleasure with pain. This unfulfilled desire can be viewed as the poet’s internalization of the cultural condemnation of lesbian sexuality. However, as Vivien is unapologetic and defensive of her lesbianism, and although some of this vituperation is internalized, Vivien’s poetic alliance of death and desire is more complex. From this perspective Vivien’s poetry demonstrates an overarching endeavour to achieve this *jouissance* of subsequent *écriture féminine*, defined by Sandra Gilbert as an attempt:

[...] to escape hierarchical bonds and thereby come closer to what Cixous calls *jouissance*, which can be defined as a virtually metaphysical fulfilment of desire that goes far beyond [mere] satisfaction... [It is a] fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political.⁵²

‘Quelle tristesse après le plaisir, mon amie’, (R.V, 226) begins *Paroles soupirées* from the 1907 collection, *Flambeaux éteints*, as the poet despondently meditates the transience of pleasure. The ending of momentary delight signifies physical parting and emotional detachment, ‘Et je te sens déçue et je me sens lointaine...’ (R.V, 226) A note of anxiety discloses possible disappointment in the physical act of love, which Vivien tellingly compares to textual as well as sexual deficiency, ‘Pareille au vers qui ne sait plus nous émouvoir.’ (R.V, 226) Like the closed eyelids of *Explicit* the ‘paroles soupirées’ of the title relate to the shared physical manifestations of both death and desire (reminiscent of those whispered words of intimacy as well as last words uttered

⁵¹As quoted by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.60.

⁵² Sandra Gilbert from the Introduction to Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.2.

on the deathbed) and again the spectre of death in the ‘noir cortège’ (R.V, 226) follows persistently in the wake of pleasure. For Vivien consummation of pleasure is ever associated with a sense of loss, guilt and sometimes regret as described here in *Devant l’Été* (*Sillages*, 1908) — ‘Dans le désir et le regret de la nuit douce.’ (R.V, 256) The poet is rarely afraid to express her vulnerabilities and uncertainties. However, in the erotically charged *Chair des choses* from the same collection, Vivien dismantles her role as a melancholic and doomed victim of love, and assumes a more assertive if not seditious role on love’s stage, where now sexual consummation is likened to that of a conquest. Through physical contact the speaker of *Chair des choses* unveils her lover, laying her as bare and vulnerable as prey, mimetic of a distinctly male approach to lovemaking. The speaker is now the dominant partner, and from this heightened sensory vantage point approaches lovemaking with wariness and cynicism. Initially suggestive and seemingly benign, the verse begins as the speaker describes gently touching her lover, but increases in momentum from stanza to stanza as the gentle touching gravitates towards aggressive incursion. The sensory power of touch allows the speaker intimate knowledge not only of her lover’s body (and not only one lover, the poet/speaker here refers to all with whom she has or has had intimate contact) but also of her surroundings, rendering her all perceptive and fully awake to ‘[...] le sens du monde’. (R.V, 262-263) In the second and third stanzas we observe the speaker move from light sensual strokes to tender caresses as she communes with her lover gleaning increasing knowledge and understanding: ‘Je comprends mieux en les frôlant, les choses belles’. (R.V, 262-63) The fourth stanza progresses in ardour moving to deeper probing and uninhibited sexual allusion:

Ils ont connu la vie intime des fourrures,
Toison chaude et superbe où l’on plonge les mains, (R.V, 262-263)

In the last two stanzas the speaker now compares herself to a voyager, one who through the medium of touch has travelled and crossed boundaries returning with the rewards of sensory memory and knowledge born out of intimacy.

Semblables à ceux-là qui viennent des voyages,
Mes doigts ont parcouru d'infinis horizons,
Ils ont éclairé, mieux que mes yeux, des visages
Et m'ont prophétisé d'obscures trahisons. (R.V, 263)

Aloof, assuming a proprietorial gaze, the speaker, through sexual congress has colonized her lover's body and in peeling away the layers which superficially allude to the embodiment of something 'De noble, de très doux et de pareil au chant'(R.V, 262-263) she goes on to reveal the capriciousness of feminine 'frissons cruels et ses parfums sournois'. (R.V, 262-263) Again intimacy is shown to be a troubling, problematic issue for Vivien. She is both driven and repelled by the need to love and be loved and yet persistently associates ecstasy with agony. In this sense *Chair des choses* is a very important poem in that it performs on several levels; firstly as an explicitly erotic poem about female homosexuality it is itself seditious given the era in which it was written. Secondly, it signifies a marked change in poetic tonality for Vivien, one in which a more assured if not latently angry approach to love is uncovered. As Vivien's poetry was increasingly withdrawn from publication (by request of the author herself) her poetry was written for a small selective audience, her own circle of friends and lovers, therefore the didactic nature of this poem cannot be ignored.⁵³ It is essentially a poem that is intended to disturb, disrupt and instruct as Vivien informs those with whom she is intimate of her exclusive knowledge both physically and spiritual thus positioning herself in a place of great power:

Chair des choses! J'ai cru parfois étreindre une âme

⁵³ The relevance and history of this decision is examined in the last chapter of this thesis.

Avec le frôlement prolongé de mes doigts... (R.V, 262-263)

The very title of *Pour l'une en songeant à l'autre* implies callous intent. The speaker here addresses her lover in the first few verses in glowingly flattering tones. It is the speaker's pæan to a woman of great beauty but one from whom she maintains a careful distance: 'Je vous admire, ainsi qu'un poème éternel' (R.V, 264) However by the fifth stanza the tone changes. Despite her lover's worthy attributes the speaker now identifies her suddenly as: '[...] despotique, invincible, éternelle', (R.V, 264) one whose: '[...] caprices ont l'autorité du vent.' (R.V, 264) While her lover is indisputably beautiful, 'parfaite' (ironically it is subtly implied that part of her perfection is her innate capacity for cruelty), the poet still yearns for another woman. This collection, *Sillages*, published in 1908 is dedicated to 'H.L.C.B' (Hélène de Rothschild) and it is possible that this poem is addressed to her, however it is not clear whether this 'autre' is a former lover or one deceased (possibly Violette Shillito idolized and idealized by Vivien especially after her early death for which Vivien felt some responsibility).⁵⁴ The poet acknowledges that the other lover pales in comparison as her face is '[...] blêmi comme une image ancienne' and her pale hair is '[...] sans rayons et sans ors.' (R.V, 265) The woman directly addressed in the verse on the other hand is described as being 'fleur de votre race', yet Vivien ponders: 'Pourquoi faut-il qu'on aime ailleurs? Toujours ailleurs ?' (R.V, 265) Why indeed? However, the one possible answer is that again the poet demonstrates the shortcomings of love and the incapacity to love without doubt, all the while desiring something, if not someone, elusive. In Vivien's world, pure love just like pleasure must always be haunted by some dark spectre resulting in satisfaction curtailed, true contentedness repressed.

⁵⁴ For more see K. Jay *op.cit.* Vivien's relationship with Shillito and its influence on her poetry will be examined in the chapter *Death and the Poet.*

The dichotomy between pleasure and pain is never more apparent than in the following poems from the same collection and in those that appear in the later collections. The first of these poems is the sonnet *Elle règne* (*Sillages* 1908). The poem opens with what seems to be the setting for an amorous tryst when an enigmatic voice, described simply as ‘La Voix’ invites the speaker to behold the ominously named: ‘[...] palais de la Douleur.’ (R.V, 267) The speaker is as drawn to pain as she is repelled by pleasure. This verse reveals the darkest desires of Vivien as she surrenders as she would to a lover to the palace of pain. ‘Douleur’ is capitalized and personified throughout, it is ‘she’ who reigns as the poet stands in reverence before: ‘[...] l’unité de sa grande pâleur.’ (R.V, 267) This pervasive sense of melancholy and impending doom is continued in *Mon cœur est lourd* again from *Sillages*. ‘Mon cœur est lourd dans ma poitrine. / Le soir tombe... Que l’on m’enterre avec mon cœur.’ (R.V, 273) The *double entendre* in the usage of ‘tombe’ (one being the first person singular form of the present tense of the verb *tomber*, and the other as the French noun for tomb) underscores the urgency of the poet’s death-wish as she craves to be buried alive along with her wounded heart. The long vowels employed in the opening line further add to the atmosphere of despair. As with ‘Douleur’, ‘l’Amour’ here is equally personified as an entity: ‘qui dompte et qui domine.’ (R.V, 273) Again the poet finds herself overpowered as she is subjected to the rule of both love and pain.

Car toujours, en vivant, un destin nous domine,
Et mon destin, ce fut ce dur amour vainqueur (R.V, 273)

Intrinsic to Vivien’s poetic and personal concept of the dichotomous nature of death and desire is her fear of, and ironic attraction to, the notion of abandon and abandonment. The poet seems to long for the *chute libre* essentially experienced in love, yet is terrified of the idea of the loss of self-control and the possibility of desertion by a lover. This

double bind propels the fascination, within Vivien's poetry, with the thematic elements of water and drowning, as she explores the impulsive desire for total immersion as it is allied to the lure of a suicidal death.⁵⁵ *Naiade moderne* from *Études et préludes* (1901) describes the poet's lover in whose dress she sees 'les remous de la mer.' (R.V, 41)⁵⁶ Vivien is drawn to her as she is to '[...] l'abîme et l'eau'. (R.V, 41) The poet's desire will not transport her to a place of joy but rather to the abyss as she recognises in her naiad: 'Cet attrait décevant qui pare le danger.' (R.V, 41)

Marine symbolism is once again employed to evoke the presence of death in love in *Sonnet* from *Cendres et poussières* (1902) wherein: 'Les algues entr'ouvraient leurs âpres cassolettes.' (R.V, 55) A highly sensual poem, the 'cassolettes' are representative of a distinctly feminine aroma composed of natural body scent and perfume, a type of olfactory manifestation of female desire. The sensuality of scent in Vivien's poetry is summed up by Nicole Albert:

Au parfum des fleurs et des fragrances exotiques se mêle celui des corps féminins – femmes-fleurs, femmes mortes ou moribondes -, des ombres disparues et des souvenirs embaumés au double sens du terme.⁵⁷

Again the mermaid of this verse captivates the poet:⁵⁸

Les flots très purs brillaient d'un reflet de miroir...
La Sirène aux cheveux rouges comme le soir,
Chantait la volupté d'une nuit amoureuse.' (R.V, 55)

⁵⁵ A theme explored in further depth in both sections *Rebirth* and *Transformation*.

⁵⁶ With reference to the many representations of women's dress in Vivien's poetry Elisabeth Cardonne Arlyck notes that the long pleated flowing dresses featured in the verse of Renée Vivien owe much to the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones as to the sartorial fashion of the Fin de Siècle. Amongst other motifs they represent fluidity in texture and movement as well as circularity – a major characteristic of Vivien's poetry. Elisabeth Cardonne Arlyck, 'Un néant follement attifé : modernité de Renée Vivien et Catherine Pozzi.' *L'Esprit Créateur*, Volume 37, Number 4 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press. Winter 1997).

⁵⁷ Nicole G. Albert, 'Parfums de femmes : 'Variations sur les senteurs dans l'œuvre poétique de Renée Vivien.' *Renée Vivien à rebours*, op.cit., p.169.

⁵⁸ The mermaid, a recurring symbol in *Fin de siècle* art and literature will be examined more closely in the section *Transformation*.

However the last verse, as visually arresting as a work of art, conjures up the *malaise* ever present in love and desire:

Dans la nuit, sanglotait et s'agitait encor
Un soupir de la vie inquiète et fiévreuse...
Les étoiles pleuraient de longues larmes d'or. (R.V, 55)

Prophétie from the same collection echoes the themes of Shakespeare's sonnets XVIII and LXIII as they confront the notion of ageing and its effect on beauty, love and desire. Shakespeare's speaker asks that the young man of sonnet LXIII love him all the more for his aged appearance:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang ...

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.⁵⁹

The metaphors employed in this sonnet, although they depict the onset of winter rather than the fecundity of spring, serve to add to the speaker's beauty rather than detract from it, thus challenging the cultural association between beauty and youth. However in *Prophétie*, the speaker, assuming a mocking and superior tone, claims that just as lovers sometimes abandon each other, so she is certain that love itself will abandon her lover's faded beauty:

Ta chair sans désir, tes membres perclus
Ne frémiront plus dans l'ardeur profonde :
L'amour désenchanté ne te connaîtra plus. (R.V, 56)

And yet again death is summoned in the last lines as the speaker eagerly is swift to remind her lover of her mortality: 'Ton âme de vierge amoureuse et triste / S'éteindra dans tes yeux plus froids que les tombeaux.' (R.V, 56) Compared to Shakespeare's

⁵⁹ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's sonnets* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011), p.73.

sonnet the tone of Vivien's verse seems harsh and cruel. However on a deeper level it is born out of insecurity in love, the message conveyed is admonitory. In an effort to secure her lover she attempts to frighten, and as such this poem acts as a warning — love now before it is too late.

I 1.3 Love: La bête sournoise

Love which is nourished on 'songe' and 'mélancolie' is once again confronted in the poem *Amour* from the 1910 collection *Dans un coin de violettes*. Love is portrayed as devious, deceptive, a 'mirage' and feared by the poet along with madness, '[...] à l'égal de ta sœur folie !' (R.V, 287) The poet/speaker here speaks to love as she would a mistress, fearing it and hating it yet irresistibly drawn to it. 'Je te crains, je te hais et pourtant tu m'attires.' (R.V, 287) Death seems to provide the only solace as the speaker declares in the final line how she would be prepared to die for love's recognition: 'Et je mourrais pour l'un de tes moindres sourires !'(R.V, 287)

Cruel and imperious love, while personified in the previous works is now deified in *Le Dernier Dieu* from *Le Vent des vaisseaux* (1910). Defiant of death, 'l'Amour' is the one remaining god on earth described as — '[...] trois fois maudit' (R.V, 311) — and who refuses to die and to follow in the wake of the other 'Divinités mortes' (R.V, 311) therefore causing Vivien to ask: 'Pourquoi ce dernier Dieu survit-il sur la terre ?' (R.V, 311) This god-like entity is contrary to any common cultural depiction of a love deity. Ruthless, instead of joy it inspires anger, and in place of happiness it sows hate. The poet wishes to remove herself from this, the last of the gods as she implores: 'Ah! détourne de moi ta colère et ta haine.' (R.V, 311) Thus Vivien essentially states that she wishes to live in a world devoid of love, or love as she knows it.

Haillons is Vivien's last collection of verse, composed shortly before her death and published posthumously by her longstanding editor and friend, Edward Sansot. The poem *Bête sournoise* from this collection attests to the fact that even towards the end of her life Vivien had not revised her personal and artistic opinion on the pernicious nature of love and desire. Though the poet derides love, she is ever its willing victim, fervently hoping for some reprieve. Here we see love depicted as a sly beast, a parasitic evil that co-exists with the poet herself: 'Mon mal insinuant est la bête qui ronge.' (R.V, 326) From its former incarnation as imperious god, love now shifts in form to a cunning creature slowly devouring her. Just as Vivien seems to grasp some momentary semblance of happiness she is besieged by disruptive love the: '[...] ancienne rancœur' (R.V, 326) as it brutally tears at her heart. The use of the nouns 'griffes' and 'dents' accompanied by the verb 'ronger' serve to effectively conjure up images of a small clawing animal which rather than feast upon the poet whole, is intent on gnawing at her slowly, prolonging the agony of death.

Je crois tout oublier de l'ancienne rancœur...
Dans la splendeur du soir mon âme se pavoise
De l'or des étendards... Mais la bête sournoise
M'enfonce lentement ses griffes dans le cœur. (R.V, 326)

Vivien's last declaration on the nature of desire and its association with death, is unequivocal, and unrestrainedly filled with anger: 'Mon cœur garde toujours l'empreinte de tes dents, / Ô chagrin d'autrefois, vile et puante bête!' (R.V, 326)

I 1.4 Death as transcendental desire: homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality

The poet, having issued a warning on the ravages of old age now invites her lover to the ‘Étang mystérieux’ of *Je connais un étang*, (*À l’heure des mains jointes*, 1906). Initially, this poem of fourteen couplets evokes a lyrical paradise wherein ‘Aucun souffle ne fait balancer les roseaux, / Le ciel qui s’y reflète a la couleur des eaux.’ (R.V, 180) But by the time death rears its ubiquitous head in the fifth couplet it becomes apparent that all is not what it seems in the mysterious landscape of the poet’s imagination:

Là, les larges lys d’eau lèvent leur front laiteux.
Les éphémères d’or y meurent, deux à deux... (R.V, 180)

Like the mayflies (one notes the wordplay here, as ‘éphémère’ signifies mayfly in French and also alludes to their ephemerality) the poet/speaker invites her ‘Loreley’⁶⁰ to join her in gliding: ‘[...] lentement vers l’oubli’ (R.V, 181), a gesture that could be viewed as a type of lover’s suicide pact. The poet/speaker is happy to abandon herself completely to love only when reassuringly united with another. The ‘étang’ is an exclusively female domain. In the eleventh couplet she claims: ‘[...] « Voici l’Étang Mystérieux / Que ne connaîtront point les hommes curieux...»’ (R.V, 181), *les hommes* mentioned here, curious and greedy for a glimpse into this enigmatic female realm, are not merely indicative of mankind but are to be interpreted literally as men. Vivien was notoriously anti-heterosexual, and according to Dade:

Vivien retained the admiration of beauty and youth in women, which she then transformed into symbolic and immaterial beauty, avoiding not only old age and disease, but also the

⁶⁰ Vivien rarely mentions female characters (as derived from her personal life, unlike those biblical or mythical figures which also feature strongly) by name, and this ‘Loreley’ is an exception. We know from her semi-autobiographical novel *Une femme m’apparut* that Loreley is the fictional name given to Natalie Clifford Barney. The significance of the name Loreley will be examined in Part II.

transformations of the female body due to the socially imposed roles of woman in marriage and maternity.⁶¹

It is not surprising therefore that she associates death (not in the transcendent, redemptive form) with heterosexual love and desire in her verse. For Vivien, a woman engaging with a man marked an end to a much cherished and revered virginity (which, as previously mentioned, she believed was uncompromised by lesbian sexuality) and also heralded the demise of female autonomy, both public and private.⁶² In *Le Sang des fleurs* (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902) Vivien condemns: ‘[...] la muette mort des fleurs sur la montagne’. (R.V, 61) Throughout her work the poet employs floral imagery to symbolize women, and in this verse men are presented as ‘pâtres’ (R.V, 61)⁶³ and it is they who are responsible for callously crushing underfoot ‘[...] les frêles hyacinthes’. (R.V, 61)

A more robust proto-feminist argument is broached in Vivien’s depiction of *Les Emmurées* (*La Vénus des aveugles*, 1903). Walled in and silenced, these nameless and faceless women are literally dying as they are denied any desire, herein described evocatively as a ‘soif’ the deprivation of which ‘[...] a noirci leurs lèvres altérées.’ (R.V, 143)

A walled-in heart is besieged by the poet of *La Douve* from the same collection. *La Douve* is a complex poem which hints at the poet’s problematic vision of homosexual desire, one which at times mirrors the autocratic nature of heterosexuality much derided

⁶¹ Juliette Dade, *Exploring Sapphic Discourse in the Belle Époque: Colette, Renée Vivien and Liane de Pougy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2009), p.229.

⁶² In the 1904 edition of *Une Femme m’apparut*, the narrator decries a friend’s proposed marriage: ‘Le jour de son mariage, je m’attristerai sur cette grâce virginale barbarement immolée. La maternité hideuse déformerait donc ce corps insexué. Et le rut conjugal souillerait cette chair pétrie d’églantines puériles...’ Renée Vivien, *Une femme m’apparut* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1904), p.141.

⁶³ Our attention is drawn to the wordplay of ‘pâtres’, meaning shepherd, and its etymological relation to patriarchy.

by the poet. Here, Vivien describes her ‘amour féodal’ (R.V, 161) as she, without mercy and regardless of her would be lover’s ‘regard triste’ (R.V, 161) batters down ‘La tour aux murs noirs qui t’encloître’. (R.V, 161) The poet admits her similarity to a man in her ruthless pursuit of conquest: ‘Je suis aussi lâche qu’un homme, / Et je t’ordonne et je te somme.’ (R.V, 161) The swift rhythms of the final verse, played out in short, bold and assured phrases, contain a frank and brutal honesty which underscore the poet’s rapacious desire to control and subjugate. The action involved in the third and fourth lines suggest the unleashing of a repressed aggression brought about by obstinacy on the part of the other woman in the past. While the ‘emmurées’ of the last poem were dying of thirst, the woman addressed here is threatened with perilous hunger.

Et je maintiendrai sur ton sexe
 Mon droit de suzerain :
 Tu briseras ton front complexe
 Contre mon front d’airain.
 Lasse de voir tomber la brume
 D’un ciel malade d’amertume,
 Dans l’ombre où l’espoir se consume,
 Tu périras de faim. (R.V, 161)

Vivien as she speaks in *Je t’aime d’être faible* (*À l’heure des mains jointes*, 1906) feels no shame in divulging her desire to protect her enfeebled lover, enacting once again a fantasy normally associated with male desire. She takes delight in seeing her lover weakened to the point of dying, mimicking the throes of sexual pleasure: ‘Et je t’aime surtout d’être pâle et mourante, / Et de gémir avec les sanglots de mourante.’ (R.V, 178) This verse as well as *La Douve* when compared to the didactic *Chair des choses* can also be interpreted as a polemical critique of heterosexuality. Its exposition of the fantasy of sexual control acts as a reminder of the prevailing patriarchal values of the time. This hypothesis is upheld when regarded in contrast to the celebration of the balanced, egalitarian nature of lesbian sexuality as portrayed in *Pareilles* (*Sillages*,

1908). Physically alike, both lovers treat each other with mutual respect and therefore despite ‘[...] la véhémence agressive et farouche / De tout désir’ (R.V, 270) the poet’s possessive love of her counterpart: ‘[...] ne meurtrit pas ses seins.’ (R.V, 270)

Perhaps the best example of Vivien’s belief in the evil intrinsic to heterosexual sexual culture is contained in the deceptively wrought gothic fairytale of *Conte de fée* (*Sillages*, 1908). Here the archetypal beautiful princess is violated and murdered by the sinister ‘bourreaux’. (R.V, 280) We are told that this brutal fate was predestined because as the poet explains: ‘Elle est belle...elle est jeune...elle est infortunée.’ (R.V, 280) Vivien thus, in a proto-feminist fashion, succeeds in dismantling the fairytale myth of the princess who lives out her days happily ever after, as she portrays a tragic heroine sacrificed at the altar of male desire.

In Vivien’s poetry death and desire are inextricably linked. For the poet, desire propelled life to its inevitable transcendent point of death and beyond. From this point of view desire, as encapsulated in the symbiotic representations of Eros and Thanatos in Vivien’s poetic œuvre, signifies more than physical pleasure and erotic fulfilment; it is in the words of Paul Gifford:

[...] a *principle of transcendence*... (we exceed or excel because we desire, and reach out for some ‘greater thing’). We can equally say: ‘love transcends desire’ – that is, there is more to it; it represents an added value in respect of some human potential, a ‘more and other’ in some obscure scale of being.⁶⁴

While pleasure is often associated with pain it is for the poet a necessary evil, an essential inevitability epitomized by: ‘l’extase cruelle’ (R.V, 178) as described in *D’apres Swinburne*. (R.V, 178) Death is also allied to her perception of the thwarted

⁶⁴ Paul Gifford, *Deciphering Eros: Love, Desire and Transcendence in French Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), p.5.

misogynistic desire at the heart of heterosexuality, one which she believed quenched the female principle, and this same desire is present and sometimes parodied in her latter poems. As Karla Jay states:

The strategy which Barney and Vivien adopted to defend their sexuality was an aggressive one. Rather than pleading for toleration on the grounds that their lives were the product of uncontrollable destiny or congenital abnormality for which they could hardly be held responsible, they went on the offensive, attacking heterosexual institutions as disgusting and abnormal. Characteristically, they turned the heterosexual attack back on the heterosexuals themselves, using much the language and many of the same emotions. In Barney's case, this kind of transformation could be frequently witty, for Vivien, it came from the soul.⁶⁵

Finally, death and desire in Vivien's poetry represent dichotomous states of being. While death is at the heart of desire, Vivien's poetics share common elements with the male Decadents, however her portrayal of their dichotomous and sometimes intrinsic nature furthers her desire to articulate the lesbian experience as equal (if not at times superior, which will later be explored) to that of heteronormative discourse. No discussion of Vivien's poetry would be complete without an examination of the role of death, a theme so prevalent in her poetry. Nonetheless, death is not the only theme that shapes her poetics; and even if her conjunction of death and desire seem problematic and certainly seem unredemptive and pessimistic, read alongside the other two major themes of rebirth and transformation, they form a continuum. Vivien's treatment of death alongside desire also acts as a response to contemporary literary representations of the lesbian as doomed. Following this, Vivien's poetry works to elucidate the notion that when pain and pleasure exist within the lesbian aesthetic they demonstrate normative anxieties such as the pain experienced in love's treachery or the heartache inherent to the end of the affair: and not because of the supposed 'doomed' nature of Sapphic sensuality.

⁶⁵ K. Jay, *op.cit.*, p.110.

Chapter 2: La Femme Fatale.

The *fin-de-siècle* saw a radical change in the portrayal of woman in art and literature. While literal representations of women, particularly from the Renaissance onwards, focused on the archetype of Madonna and virginal muse, the late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a darker paradigm of womanhood.⁶⁶ Woman had become cruel, dangerous, an insidious threat to male hegemony. Female figures from the annals of history, mythology and biblical lore were resurrected and refashioned to feed societal fears of an insurgence of feminine might. Once again, as in the Middle Ages, women became associated with the dark forces, the supernatural, and the outsider, as represented in the iconoclastic images of the witch and vampire.⁶⁷ Woman was now the *femme fatale*. For Bram Dijkstra, in *Idols of Perversity*, artistic representations of women at the *fin-de-siècle* were born out of such fear and acerbic resistance that they constituted a ‘veritable iconography of misogyny’.⁶⁸

In her introduction to *Cette femme qu’ils disent fatale*, Mireille Dottin-Orsini quotes an extract from Huysmans’s *Lettres à Th. Hannon* (23.8 et 26.11.1877), which captures the predominant misogynistic mood of the period, one which actively fostered the gender division:

[...] et l’on dira que nous méprisons les femmes ! quand nous passons notre temps à penser à elles et à essayer de les reproduire !

⁶⁶ For further reading on the emergence of this feminine archetype, one portrayed as morally and transgressively erotic, see Richard A. Kaye ‘Sexual Identity at the Fin de Siècle’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶⁷ The middle ages too, witnessed the dichotomous paradigm of woman as both the virginal maiden of *amour courtois* literature and the daughter of Eve associated with the supernatural, culminating in the European witch hunts of the 15th to the 18th centuries. For more see Christa Grössinger *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

⁶⁸ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), viii.

Ô femmes ! femmes ! divines gouges, lamentables pompoirs.⁶⁹

Furthermore, with regards to the phenomenon of this new cultural depiction of the *femme fatale*, Dottin-Orsini reveals that:

La littérature de la deuxième moitié du XIXème siècle dit clairement que la femme fait peur, qu'elle est cruelle, qu'elle peut tuer. [...] hiératique chez les symbolistes, elle assassine d'un sourire, traîne sa robe dans le sang, a des yeux impassibles de pierre précieuse. De toute façon elle est dangereuse.⁷⁰

While male authors from Oscar Wilde (*Salomé*, 1891) to Jules Bois (*L'Éternelle poupée*, 1894) seemed to relish their portrayal of the *femme fatale*, female writers were presented with a particular challenge in their approach and reaction to such representations of their gender. The female author Marguerite Eymery writing under the pseudonym Rachilde chose to perpetuate the male-dominant myth of the *femme fatale* most notably in her novels such as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Jongleuse* (1900). Renée Vivien conversely, treated the image of the *femme fatale* as a positive shift from the hitherto depiction of woman as passive symbol. Rather than rebel against the image, she chose to appropriate and incorporate it within her poetics, revising the archetype as a proto-feminist symbol. Ideologically Vivien's poetry refutes Huysmans' (or any other man's) intention to reproduce or to reconstruct the image of woman.

As an extension of the theme of death expressed in her poetry of desire, Vivien portrays the *femme fatale*, as a mistress of death true to her name. And as we have already seen, death for the poet is a fundamentally transcendent state, at times symbolic of new life. In Vivien's poetry the *femme fatale* heralds the death of heteronormative patriarchy and allegorizes the role of the outsider, as she advocates for the neglected voice of the marginalized. Vivien's *femme fatale* is manifested in various forms, namely the

⁶⁹ Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale* (Paris : Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1993), p.13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.17-18.

banshee, the witch, the vampire and the succubus. As a manifestation of the *femme fatale*, the poet herself retreats into specific loci in her poetic universe which are characterized as tenebrous domains; sites of artistic creation. If the *femme fatale* of Vivien's poetics represents the darker potential of the feminine and the outsider, these spaces, which this thesis designates as 'nightvisions' and 'deathscapes', form part of their natural domain.

I 2.1 Delilah, Vampires, and Witches

The Old Testament account of Delilah is one of a woman whose all-consuming desire for power and money is driven by her need to seize the strength of one man, Samson. She, along with Lilith and Salomé, is emblematic of the biblical representation of women as vengeful and threatening to male power.⁷¹ For Vivien, however, Delilah embodies feminine aspiration for equality or more radically, women's quest for superiority over men.

Vivien's *Dalila* of *l'Éternelle Vengeance* (*Études et Préludes*, 1901) is first presented to the reader as a '[...] courtisane, au front mystérieux.' (R.V, 32) In her own words she describes herself as an outsider, a wronged and forgotten woman, '« Je suis l'esclave et la prostituée, / La fleur que l'on effeuille au festin du désir [...] »'. (R.V, 32) Vivien's *Dalila* is very different from her characterization as an ambitious and treacherous woman as traditionally depicted in art and literature, and is contrasted most notably with Camille Saint Saëns' anti-heroine from his 1877 opera *Samson et Dalila*.⁷² Objectified, expendable, and a mere oblation on the altar of male lust, Vivien's *Dalila*, on the other

⁷¹ While Vivien frequently plundered biblical testaments for subject matter in her poetry, and notably features Lilith in her verse. Lilith (though considered by many as the first woman and also the first *femme fatale* of 'literary' history) is represented more as a 'New Woman' by the poet as will be further elaborated in a later chapter.

⁷² The world famous opera composed by Camille Saint-Saëns and first performed in Weimar on the 2nd of December 1877 featured a distinctly treacherous, cunning and manipulative portrayal of Delilah as the ultimate *femme fatale*.

hand, epitomizes the universal fate of womankind, as she is ‘ce qui charme, ce qu’on enlace et qu’on oublie.’ (R.V, 32) Desirous of the secret knowledge which holds the key to power, she is disillusioned by her treatment at the hands of men; particularly those despised as ‘passagers amants’ (R.V, 32). She plots her vengeance against Samson, ‘le fils d’Israël’ (R.V, 32) using sex as ‘le piège’ and her body as ‘amorçage’ (R.V, 32). The title of this poem, *l’Éternelle Vengeance*, signifies Vivien’s emendation of Delilah’s defamation throughout history, a woman she sees as victim rather than culprit, and representative of those maligned and deprived of their natural right to power. While the biblical tale of Delilah has her shearing Samson’s locks and thereby divesting him of his masculine strength, Vivien’s *Dalila* mercifully allows Samson an opportunity to willingly reveal the ‘[...] secret de [sa] gloire.’ (R.V, 33) His refusal leaves her no choice but to wreak revenge upon ‘[...] l’amant de ses nuits sans amour [qui] lui mentit’. (R.V, 32) The final image of Samson as he cedes to *Dalila* is highly sexually charged, and implies victory for womankind in general:

Sous les yeux de la femme, implacablement doux,
Dans l’ombre et dans l’odeur de ses ardents genoux,
Sans souvenir, cédant à l’éternelle amorçage,
L’homme lui soupira le secret de sa force. (R.V, 33)

Thus the poem’s title also refers, on a larger scale, to Vivien’s belief in the desire for eternal vengeance that lies in the heart of every woman. A vengeance she feels must be sought in the form of fatalistic revenge for the injustices of men.

In a further effort to appropriate the potency of the *femme fatale* trope, Vivien aligns herself with her poetic portrayals of the supernatural outsider. To this end the poet makes fruitful use of the vampiric symbol indicative of degenerative women at the end of the century. Elena Thuault reminds us that for Vivien ‘le vampire se fait parabole

socio-symbolique d'une poétesse rejetée.⁷³ Indeed the vampire is also symbolic of queer sexuality. Judith Halberstam, referencing literature's most famous vampire points out that:

Dracula's racial markings are difficult to distinguish from his sexual markings. Critics, indeed, have repeatedly discussed vampire sexuality to the exclusion of 'race' or the vampire's foreignness as merely a function of his strange sexuality.⁷⁴

Sue Ellen Case locates the trope of the vampire within the double strands of race and sexuality, whereby she views the vampire of the nineteenth century as: '[...] a lesbian vampire and as a markedly queer and outlawed body.'⁷⁵ According to Case, the bloodlust of the vampire is connected both to the history of anti-semitism and the cultural disdain for lesbian sexuality. For Case the vampire represents: '[...] the double 'she' in combination with the queer fanged creature, the vampire is the queer in its lesbian mode.'⁷⁶ As a further example of how the vampire is connected to lesbian sexuality, Dade makes the point that the derogatory term *tribade*, as it pertains to a certain type of lesbian mythologized in popular nineteenth-century culture, were considered: '[...] immutable lesbians—often under the term *tribades* or *gynandres*—who were vampire-like women who often bore masculine features, preying on the morality of good, upright people [...]'⁷⁷

Vivien's 'vampires' are creatures of the night. They do not live by the rules of men and their preference for night over day is an act of defiance in the face of a society that demonizes difference. Though not particularly bloodthirsty, these creatures are

⁷³ Elena Thuault, 'Le Vampirisme dans les œuvres de Renée Vivien', *Renée Vivien à rebours : études pour un centenaire* (Paris: Orizons, 2009), p.156.

⁷⁴ Judith Halberstam, 'Technologies of Monstrosity', *Cultural Politics at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Eds. Sally Ledger and Scott Mc Cracken (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.257.

⁷⁵ As cited by Halberstam, *op.cit.*, p.257.

⁷⁶ Sue Ellen Case, 'Tracking the Vampire', *Differences*, 3:2 (Summer 1991), p.9.

⁷⁷ Dade, *op.cit.*, p.19.

contrasted with contemporaneous images of the vampire such as Baudelaire's which is noted for its portrayal of a deviant form of female sexuality: 'Toi qui, forte comme un troupeau / De démons, vins, folle et parée.'⁷⁸

La Nuit est à nous is Vivien's declaration to the 'étrange compagne' (R.V, 96) of this eponymous poem from *Évocations* (1903). Outsiders, quasi vampires, their landscape is evocatively coloured like death itself, in the livid hues of decomposition: 'Car la lune a Verdi le bleu de la montagne'. (R.V, 96) Separated from the rest of humanity, their difference distinguishes them, and once again Vivien posits herself in the domain of the 'Other' both as female and homosexual: 'Car la nuit est à nous comme à d'autres le jour' (R.V, 96). They are cradled by nature and together alone are swaddled in all its nocturnal beauty: 'Un arbre, traversé du souffle des abîmes, / Tend vers nous ses rameaux, crochus comme des doigts.' (R.V, 96) These other-worldly beings find that it is only at night when the entire world sleeps that 'La joie est plus ardente et l'angoisse meilleure.' (R.V, 96)

Continuing this theme, in *Les êtres de la nuit (Flambeaux éteints, 1907)*, Vivien compares those 'beings' associated with night to those of day. While admitting her allegiance to both she regards them impartially, as an objective observer:

Les êtres de la nuit et les êtres du jour
Ont longtemps partagé mon âme, tour à tour
Les êtres de la nuit m'ont fait craindre le jour. (R.V, 232)

However, these night beings who have persuaded her to turn away from the light of day, themselves described as: 'triomphants et libres' (R.V 232) still wield the strongest influence over the poet as is evidenced by the very title of the poem. While with *les*

⁷⁸ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

êtres du jour ‘[...] nulle secrête horreur ne fait vibrer leurs fibres’ (R.V, 232), those spirits of the night on the other hand, ‘[...] sont faibles et charmants : / Ils trompent, et ce sont les fugitifs amants.’ (R.V, 232) Vivien is attracted by imperfection, deviance, and the anomalous essence of human nature. For Vivien, this side of human nature is associated with marginalized beings, and in her poetic universe darkness is the domain of womankind. In this sense, the poet claims night and darkness for women as a manner of carving out a site for them in a world where they are universally excluded. As vampiric creatures of the night, Vivien’s community of women are *femmes fatales* as they are characterized by their dangerous and threatening potentiality, and inherent strength.

Il faut craindre l’attrait des êtres de la nuit,
Car leur corps souple glisse entre les bras et fuit,
Et leur amour n’est qu’un mensonge de la nuit. (R.V, 232)

From this perspective, the above stanza, rather than viewed as a revelation of the fact that *les êtres de la nuit* are insidious beings, actually advocates that they are instead fearsome and powerful rather than passive and weak. Thuault claims that:

La principale originalité de Vivien consiste à renverser les valeurs négatives associées à la nuit et aux ténèbres. Dorénavant, elles ne sont plus liées à un refus de Dieu, puisque leur force purifie et régénère. En revanche, elles peuvent symboliser un espace-temps, soit antérieur à l’instauration des lois religieuses, soit les abolissant momentanément. Les ténèbres acquièrent une possible dimension anticléricale chez une poétesse qui met en scène sa condition de femme damnée, parallèlement à celle du vampire, contraint à vivre la nuit.⁷⁹

Vivien’s sentiment that she proudly belongs to the margins of society is further developed within the theme of *J’ai jeté mes Fleurs* (*Sillages*, 1908). The title, *J’ai jeté mes Fleurs*, constitutes a definitive statement, one that implies volition, a choice based on a decision made after much deliberation.

⁷⁹ Thuault *op.cit.*, p.157.

C'est en vain que, pour moi, ma raison s'évertue,
Car je n'aime que ce qui me raille et me tue.

Et ma grande douleur terrible, la voici :
Partout je redirai : Je ne suis pas d'ici.

Je n'ai rien calculé, je suis née ivre et folle.
Au hasard, j'ai semé mon âme et ma parole. (R.V, 254)

Throwing away her 'flowers' (the importance of which is emphasized by the capitalization of *Fleurs*) the poet thereby rejects the cultural symbols of purity, femininity and moral virtue. The complex and polysemic nature and function of flowers in Vivien's poetry is of immense importance. Vivien uses the symbol of flowers in their multitudinous variety to diversely connote the realm of the erotic, virginity and the idiosyncratic nature of individual friends and lovers.

Yet aside from their significance as symbols of beauty and grace, and along with their association with the cultural constraints imposed on women through the ceremonial practices of amongst many, the presentation of debutantes and of course marriage, flowers also represent a darker potency in the realm of Decadent literature with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* immediately called to mind.⁸⁰

Flowers are the blossoms of organic vegetation capable of taking root, and like weeds hold the potential to propagate, ruthlessly strangling all in their wake. The bouquet of flowers with its strong connection to bridal apparel, was as previously outlined, an

⁸⁰ The critic F.W Leakey on the symbolic nature of the title of Baudelaire's seminal work claims: 'Baudelaire's pun on 'fleurs' is rather more subtle than the obvious one on 'mal', but on reflection it seems clear that the two senses he has in mind can only be the following: his poems may be considered a *product* of evil, and in that sense to 'flower' from it; at the same time like flowers they are the *adornments* of evil. Or to put it more fully: his poems are 'flowers of evil' first of all by virtue of their depiction or the illustration of the evil from which they derive; but secondly also, by showing that a product of evil may be beautiful, *like* a flower, and that true poetry by definition, beautifies whatever it may come into contact with.' F.W Leakey, introduction to *Baudelaire: Les Fleurs du Mal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.48.

aspect of heterosexual culture strongly opposed by Vivien.⁸¹ By all accounts the gesture implied by the defiant manifesto of the title signifies Vivien's rejection of society as reiterated in the second line of the second couplet: 'Partout je redirai : *Je ne suis pas d'ici*'.⁸² (R.V, 254) Far from being flippant, the poet is at pains to communicate her decision as an emphatic fact to be repeated — 'je redirai'. (R.V, 254) Also, this couplet as it rhymes directly with the final lines — 'Et dans le long repos qu'aucun mot ne traduit, / Que je dorme parmi les choses de la nuit' (R.V, 254) — firmly places the poet in the domain of the outsider, the witch and the vampire.

The return of a lost love assails the heart of the speaker in *Résurrection mauvaise* (*Haillons*, 1910). This is a ghostly resurrection in its malevolent intent to emotionally unsettle the poet/speaker whose heart is described as being vampirically fed upon: '[...] mordu par l'angoisse légère.' (R.V, 322) The vampiric spectre is conjured up as the speaker attempts to exorcise her demon:

Je dis alors, la voix un peu triste, un peu lasse :
« Toi qui passes, la route est large et longue... Passe !

« N'espère point troubler le calme de mon deuil.
Ô Morte qui survis, regagne ton cercueil ! » (R.V, 322)

Here the vampiric spectacle of a former lover threatens the poet's *deuil*; however it is her acknowledgement of the concept of ghostly return that acts as a warning to those who attempt to ignore the constant presence of death in life. For Vivien, the vampire as the dead returned, represents the monster within and without, the physical manifestation of the Freudian concept of the return of the repressed. While Baudelaire's female

⁸¹ Vivien herself was presented at English court as a *débutante* in 1877. See: Diana Holmes *French Women's Writing, 1848-1944* (London: Continuum, 2000).

⁸² Italics in original.

vampire of *Les métamorphoses du vampire* perpetuates the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic of the evil *femme fatale* associated with fear of female sexuality:

Quand elle eut de mes os sucé toute la moelle,
Et que languissamment je tournai vers elle
Pour lui rendre un baiser d'amour, je ne vis plus
Qu'une outre aux flancs gluants, toute pleine de pus !⁸³

Vivien's vampires on the other hand celebrate the release and resurrection of robust female sexuality, a force that cannot be suppressed:

Le ciel l'encadre ainsi que ferait une châsse,
Et je vivrais cent ans sans jamais la revoir.
Elle est soudaine : elle est le miracle du soir. (R.V, 198)

Just as Vivien's vampire women allegorize the potency of female sexuality, the Witch iconography of her poetry upholds her desire to see women's history revised. In her article *Feminist Constructions of the 'Witch' as a Fantasmatic Other*, Justyna Sempruch believes that the figure of the witch in literary theory represents:

[...] a benevolent 'wise-woman', a victim of phallogocentric hegemonies. This particular identity construction derives above all from mythic stories of the 'Burning Times' and beliefs in the 'Craft of the Wise', both drawing on the historically documented medieval and postmedieval European witch-craze.⁸⁴

Referencing both Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin, Sempruch asserts that the premise of these feminist's 'radical theses':

[...] posit the 'witch' simultaneously as a female source of authority and as a patriarchal scapegoat, equating patriarchy with the relentless persecution of women by (physical) torture. In *Woman-Hating*, Dworkin informs her readers that 'the magic of witches was an imposing catalogue of medical skills concerning reproductive and psychological processes, a sophisticated knowledge of telepathy, auto- and hetero-suggestion' (1974: 148). Accused, in history, of stealing male fertility (or even dismembering the male body), the all-devouring, death-dealing hag returns in Daly's *Gyn/ecology* to represent the protective (maternal) instincts of an archaic character. The witch-crone, Daly's most prominent 'archetype' of female powers, becomes a guardian of birth-giving as well as virginity and homosexuality unstained by patriarchal semen.

⁸³ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, p. 312.

⁸⁴ Justyna Sempruch, 'Feminist Constructions of the 'Witch' as a Fantasmatic Other', *Body and Society*, 10 (2004), 113-33 http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034_x04047858.

Daly's rewriting of *hagiography* as *hagrography* modulates the *hag*, making her the very embodiment of feminist sisterhood.⁸⁵

Sempruch goes on to quote Daly who claims that:

Our foresisters were the Great Hags whom the institutionally powerful but privately impotent patriarchs found too threatening for coexistence...For women who are on the journey for radical being, the lives of the witches, of the Great Hags of hidden history are deeply intertwined with our own process. As we write/live in our own story, we are uncovering their history. (Daly, 1978: 14)⁸⁶

Likewise, Vivien in claiming the right to reproduce the *femme fatale* in her poetry sees the witch as herself, the outsider whose domain is the 'deathscape' and 'nightvision' of her verse. She represents the maligned homosexual woman and the misunderstood female poet. Like the vampire, the witch is outlawed but more so because of her gender and the history of fear with which she is associated. Moreover, the witch's paganism and moon worship correspond closely to the poet's own vision of female-centred spirituality. Vivien in rewriting the *femme fatale* is also rewriting the history of the witch, and subsequently all women, as those wrongly oppressed and ostracized.

La Pleureuse (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902) is a form of banshee or wailing woman whose commerce in death is illustrated by her haunting of the burial path on the way to the cemetery where 'Elle vend aux passants ses larmes mercenaires' (R.V, 58).⁸⁷ Detached and removed in 'Son deuil impartial' (R.V, 58), she observes and assists the mourners as they lament the departure of 'les pervers et les purs tour à tour.' (R.V, 58) This line, echoing the title of *Le Pur et l'impur* by Vivien's contemporary Colette, also

⁸⁵ Sempruch *op.cit.*, p. 120.

⁸⁶ As cited by Sempruch, *op.cit.*, p.120.

⁸⁷ In Irish mythology the Banshee or *Beansí* (literally meaning fairywoman), is the female herald of death. For further reading on this supernatural creature in Irish folklore see Patricia Lysaght *The Banshee: The Irish Death Messenger* (Lanham: Roberts Rhinehart, 1996).

serves to highlight the recurring dichotomy essential to the poet's œuvre, whereby good and evil live cheek by jowl.⁸⁸

However, when all the mourners have left the burial ground, and 'quand la luciole illumine le près' (R.V, 58) it is *La Pleureuse* alone who returns to the graves of the dead, sharing with them '[...] leur couche désirable'. (R.V, 58) In this poem, the living are the dead and the dead the living. Those left behind are consumed by doubt, ignorance and uncertainty, while the dead have crossed the threshold into a world of knowledge. This banshee woman occupies the anteroom between both worlds, and being on the threshold of both, she herself is neither dead nor alive. Vivien employs the symbol of the banshee to emphasize woman's function in death, removing her from her traditional role as life-giver. Thus woman completes the circle of life, as both life-giver and taker. The threshold is a supernatural site wherein the dead and living commune and, along with the banshee is an important element in Celtic paganism, itself a matristic system of belief.⁸⁹

The followers of Séléné, the mythical moon goddess sacred to witches, are portrayed in *Fleurs de Séléné (Cendres et poussières, 1902)*. Karla Jay stresses the importance of the witch in Vivien's works whereby she:

[...] as later feminists were to do, identifies with the witches as victims of persecution because of their supposed "abnormality". [...] she identifies with them because of her own Lesbianism and persecution by a majority which neither understands her nor will allow her to pursue her own beliefs in peace.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ This dichotomy was also later repeated in the title of Lucie Delarue-Mardrus' novel *L'Ange et les pervers*, whose plot is based loosely on the relationship between Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien. For more see: Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *L'Ange et les pervers* (Paris: J. Ferenczi et Fils, 1930).

⁸⁹ Amber Wolfe describes Celtic philosophy as matristic by which she explains: 'The Celtic culture was and is neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. The Celtic cultural philosophy is essentially *matristic*, which means the core of the philosophy, as well as the culture reflects a mother-centred point of view. The mother in this case, around which all life still revolves, is Mother Earth.' Amber Wolfe, *Druid Power: Celtic Faerie Craft and Elemental Magic* (Saint Paul MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2004), p.18.

⁹⁰ Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

In this instance, these *Fleurs de Séléné* are distinguished from the rest of the world in their possession of an ‘âme solitaire’ (R.V, 59), as twice repeated in the second stanza. Separated from society, especially that of men, they jealously guard their ‘chastity’ indicating their repugnance for heterosexuality, ‘Elles gardent l’amour des sombre chastetés.’ (R.V, 59) Vivien reverses the traditional image of the witch as wizened hag; these women instead are beautiful moon worshippers:

Elles ont des cheveux pâles comme la lune,
Et leurs yeux sans amour s’ouvrent pales et bleus,
Leurs yeux que la couleur de l’aurore importune. (R.V, 59)

Yet despite their serene grace these women are also characterized by their potential for danger and their affinity with death. After all, these are archetypical representations of the poet’s vision of the *femme fatale*:

Elles aiment la mort et la blancheur des larmes...
Ces vierges d’azur sont les fleurs de Séléné.
Possédant le secret des philtres et des charmes,
Elles aiment la mort et la lenteur des larmes. (R.V, 59)

The quiescent yet powerful followers of the moon-goddess are contrasted with the succubi of *Les Succubes disent...*⁹¹ from the 1903 collection *La Vénus des aveugles*, who are depicted as creatures of vitality, and harbingers of unrest:

Quittons la léthargie heureuse des maisons,
Le carmin des rosiers et le parfum des pommes
Et les vergers où meurt l’ondolement des saisons,
Car nous ne sommes plus de la race des hommes. (R.V, 135)

The succubi of lore are female demons, descendants of Lilith, whose purpose is to visit men in their dreams and through sexual intercourse drain their souls. Here Vivien’s succubi are agents of insurrection, they discard society and ‘la race des hommes’; the

⁹¹ Ellipsis in original.

bourgeois ‘léthargie des maisons’ with its mind-numbing comfort characterized by the manicured banality of ‘Le carmin des rosiers et le parfum des pommes.’ (R.V, 135)

In the face of societal fear of homosexuality and female emancipation, these succubi celebrate infertility as a symbol of revolt against the bourgeois values of family and heteronormative culture, ‘Nous cuillerons les fleurs qui se fanent sans fruit’. (R.V, 135)⁹² The poet’s reference to *les hommes* in this poem is likened to their representation in *Je connais un étang (À l’heure des mains jointes, 1906)* whereby rather than simply signifying the human race, they are to be interpreted literally again as men. Taken by surprise, these men will be ambushed by Vivien and her succubi; a band of rebel females: ‘Les hommes ne verront nos ombres sur leurs seuils’. (R.V, 135) Once again a threshold will be crossed, from which there is no return, and this boundary between the world of men and women will prove to be frangible against the might and determination of the demons. A sense of supernatural possession is intimated by the poet, adding to the overall impression of urgency and unease contained in the poem. The poet/speaker herself, along with likeminded companions are not the succubi, but are willingly possessed by them:

Tes cheveux livreront leurs éclairs bleus et roux
Au râle impérieux qui sourd de la tourmente,
Mais l’horreur d’être ne ploiera point nos genoux.
Dans nos yeux le regard des Succubes ferment. (R.V, 135)

Vivien concludes the poem on a prescient note; they will become, she claims ‘[...] les Banshees qui présagent les deuils / Et les Jettatori des naissances prochaines.’ (R.V,

⁹² Rachel Fuchs has written extensively on the lives of women in nineteenth-century France. In particular, her research on the control exerted over female sexuality and fertility, and the social pressures on women to reproduce, offers an invaluable insight on the difficulties and changing responsibilities of women at the time. See Rachel G. Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

135) Theirs will be an ongoing revolt, one which will cross generations, casting malediction from the all-seeing evil eye of the *Jettatori*.⁹³

Vision, knowledge and the light to be found in metaphorical and literal darkness, are thematized in Vivien's ode to witches in *Enseignement* (*Sillages* 1908). The poet's didactic voice is clearly heard in this poem, as she wishes to enlighten her readers of the secret knowledge said to be possessed by these *sages femmes* as evidenced by the title and her use of verbs which connote learning and understanding: '*allumerai, apprendrai, comprendre, connaître*.'

Tu veux savoir de moi le secret des sorcières ?
J'allumerai pour toi leurs nocturnes lumières,
Et je t'apprendrai l'art très simple des sorcières. (R.V, 265)

With regards to the appeal of witches to both Vivien and Barney, Jay believes:

[...] that it was not simply as victims of patriarchal power that the witches appealed to Barney and Vivien. To them, as with Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the witches had a transformational power, the power to alter substance through magic arising out of their willingness to evoke the dark side of the human psyche.⁹⁴

Appealing to a society whose preconceived notions regarding Sapphic sensuality consigned lesbian women to the realm of spectacle and contempt; these concluding lines from the last stanza request that such society embrace and accept those whose existence lies 'beyond the pale': 'Pour les comprendre, il faut quelque peu les connaître / Et savoir qu'elles ont le droit d'être et de naître.' (R.V, 265)

Emboldened by her supernatural powers, the poet as witch implores her demon familiar in *À mon Démon familier* (*Le Vent des vaisseaux*, 1910) to: 'Emporte-moi sur les ailes

⁹³ From Italian folklore, the *Jettatori* are said to be those possessed of the evil eye. For further reading on the origins of such folkloric superstition see Edward S. Gifford *The Evil Eye: Studies in the Folklore of Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

⁹⁴ K. Jay, *op.cit.*, p.77.

de goëmon’.⁹⁵ (R.V, 310) In Shamanistic and Wiccan traditions, the witch-familiar was a supernatural entity who would often appear as an animal or humanoid figure assisting the witch in their practice of magic. Flying above the earth, the poet and her familiar regard the world beneath. From their vaulted position people are seen as insignificant figures; pin-pricks of irrelevance, ‘Les peuples sont petits et laids. / Allons loin d’eux.’ (R.V, 310) Together they ride bravely through the storm, garnering strength from each other, ‘Malgré le temps mauvais, debout dans la défaite, / Me voici faisant face à l’orage [...]’ (R.V, 310) The familiar is both companion and muse, one who accompanies the poet in her lonely and isolated existence. Tama Lea Englelking writing in her article *Renée Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake*, states that: ‘The voice of the sorceress is also that of a poet, an actively creative and imaginative woman who stands in stark contrast to the Victorian ideal of passive womanhood.’⁹⁶ Susan Casteras’ study of the role of the Victorian vision of the female sage and sorceress reveals that sorcery and madness signified a form of *échappement* for the Victorian woman.⁹⁷ Indeed Casteras views the female magician as: ‘[...] an archetypal image of the artist who, with wand, pen, or brush, summons extraordinary creations through her divination and her imagination.’⁹⁸ The last line of this poem leaves the reader in no doubt that it is indeed Vivien who envisions herself as this witch, as she commands her familiar: ‘Et reconnais en moi ta Maître, le Poète.’ (R.V, 310) Yet what is most intriguing here is Vivien’s reference to herself in the masculine form, ‘[...] ta Maître, le Poète.’(R.V, 310) The witch’s

⁹⁵ Aside from flowers, Vivien often employs marine symbolism in her verse. The *goëmon* mentioned here is a type of seaweed, known in English as sea wrack. In this verse it refers to the texture of the witch’s ‘leathery’ wings but marine vegetation in Vivien’s poetry also represents that which is hidden, submerged; whereby life below the surface of water is a metaphor for an alternate universe. This will later be examined in the *Metamorphosis* chapter.

⁹⁶ Tama Lea Englelking, ‘Renée Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake’, *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 30 (2002), 363-80 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ncf.2002.0014>> p.370.

⁹⁷ Susan P. Casteras, ‘Malis Malificarum or The Witch’s Hammer: Victorian Visions of Female Sages and Sorceresses.’ *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*. Ed. Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers State University, 1990), pp. 142-70.

⁹⁸ Casteras *op.cit.*

supernatural powers not only set her aside from the rest of society, she now possesses the ability to transcend the semiotic limitations of gender.

I 2.2 Deathscapes and Nightvisions

In her poetry, Vivien creates dark and ominous worlds, shadowy reflections of reality, which can be classified as ‘deathscapes’ and ‘nightvisions’ and are the natural domains of the poet and the *femme fatale*. Reminiscent of Goya’s series of ‘Black Paintings’ these poems act as portals into a psychological wilderness within which the poet is allowed free rein to explore the darker recesses of her mind. In *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s fiction*, Annis Pratt identifies the ‘[...] green world of the woman hero... a place in which she sets forth and a memory to which she returns for renewal.’⁹⁹ Vivien’s world is the opposite in hue and purpose, and in line with the ‘dark feminine’ as registered by the Jungian analyst Sylvia Brinton Perara, is a form of artistic and psychological retreat wherein she mines the tenebrous aspects of the female imaginative experience.¹⁰⁰ Vivien’s poetry demonstrates all the traits of pathetic fallacy in her reifications of storms, inclement weather, moonlight and dusk. This extends to the realm of flower symbolism intrinsic to her verse, wherein flowers themselves become potent and deadly; and is also manifested in her avowed preference for winter over summer, shadow over sunlight and graveyards over verdant fields.

⁹⁹ Andrea Loewenstein and Mary Wyer with Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.17.

¹⁰⁰ Perara allegorizes woman’s need to break free from normative roles in her story of Innana-Ishtar, the Sumerian Goddess of Heaven and Earth, and her descent into the underworld domain of her ‘dark sister’ Ershkigal; in an attempt to demonstrate the progressive influence of the ‘dark feminine’ in women’s literature. For more see Sylvia Brinton Perara, *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1982).

For Vivien night is preferred over day for several reasons. Night is associated with lovers, especially those whose homosexual practice designate them as outsiders. It is a time of hiding, where under the veil of darkness one can remain unseen. It is also the realm of imagination and artistic production. Above all Vivien associates daylight with masculinity and nightlight with femininity. In *L'aurore triste* (*Évocations*, 1903) the poet derides the dawn as a herald of death as it ushers in hateful daylight.

L'aurore a la pâleur verdâtre d'une morte,
Elle semble une frêle et tremblante Alkestis
Qui, les pas vacillants, vient frapper à la porte
Où l'amour l'accueillait en souriant, jadis. (R.V, 79)

Similarly *Lamentation* from the same collection depicts dawn greedily leaching darkness from the night sky as Vivien laments summer's dominion over winter. The poet's vision of the natural world, where death is celebrated as integral to life, acts as a counter perspective to normative ideology. In this poem the poet presents summer and day as masculine entities both determined to destroy the feminine aspects contained in winter and night.

Le voile virginal des neiges sur les monts
Se déchire, et, là-bas, dans les forêts muettes,
Le soleil a pâli les pâles violettes,
Les narcisses tournant vers l'onde leurs yeux blonds. (R.V, 88)

'La voix des fleuves', the sound of thawed out swollen rivers as they cascade along the mountainside are heard as dirges rather than joyful hymns celebrating the fecundity of new life. The poet associates the frailty of winter-nature, as it is ruthlessly obliterated by summer, with the oppression of her kind by a ruthless patriarchy. Echoing John Keats' concept of negative capability, the poet also seeks to empathize with those aspects of nature forgotten or neglected, thereby transcending the ordinary and rendering extraordinary the seemingly banal and ignored aspects of life.

In *Hiver*, again from *Évocations*, winter with its ‘[...] vent qui jette au ciel ses révoltes d’airain,’ (R.V, 110) is chosen over ‘Les pampres du printemps et le vin d’automne’. (R.V, 110) The poet draws inspiration from isolation and desolation as she: ‘Comme Dante implorant la paix du monastère’ (R.V, 110), emulates the Florentine poet and his advocacy of monastic contemplation as a means to enlightenment. The poet sees her call to the ‘haleine chaste’ of winter as a noble one, stoical she spurns ‘la ferveur des amours de l’été’(R.V, 110) in favour of the ‘[...] noble infini du rêve solitaire’(R.V, 110) as encapsulated in her personal dreamscape of winter. Yet on closer examination winter, as represented here, is also the season of refuge and rest; a time for humanity and nature to hide and retreat. Vivien is drawing further away from the outside world becoming invisible, blending in and camouflaged, just as the hills of her poem are covered in a blanket of snow, ‘Je veux l’haleine chaste et le silence amer, / Les brumes et la glace et l’ombre de l’hiver.’ (R.V, 110) This winterscape, akin to her poetic renderings of nightvisions, represents a further attempt at drawing a distinct line of division between her and society. This setting-apart signifies retreat, and is motivated by fear and a need for self-preservation ‘Car la neige où la soif du blanc se désaltère / Seule éteindra l’ardeur de mon anxiété...’ (R.V, 111)

Comparing herself to Fra Diavolo¹⁰¹ in *La Nuit Latente* (*La Vénus des aveugles*, 1903) Vivien admits that she is ‘[...] la fervente disciple / De la mer et du soir’ (R.V, 134). Echoing elements of Gothic melodrama, the poet once again crosses the threshold between the living and the dead as she seeks out: ‘[...] ton lit de cadavre / Ainsi que le calme d’un havre, / Ô mon beau Désespoir !’ (R.V, 134) The night is *latente*, enigmatic

¹⁰¹ Fra Diavolo, literally translated from the Italian as ‘Brother Devil’, was the popular name given to Michele Pezza (1771-1806), the Neapolitan rebel leader who led a revolt against the French occupation of Naples. He also appears as a character in several of Dumas’ fictions, particularly the recently discovered *Le Chevalier de Sainte-Hermine*. See Alexandre Dumas ; texte établi préfacé et annoté par Claude Schopp., *Le Chevalier de Sainte-Hermine : Roman* (Paris: Phébus, 2005)

and dangerous, and Vivien's quest to traverse the netherworld is born out of her desire to experience the ultimate void, to become a true *femme fatale*:

Ah ! la froideur de tes mains jointes
Sous le marbre et le stuc
Et sous le poids des terres ointes
De parfum et de suc !
Mon âme, que l'angoisse exalte,
Vient, en pleurant, faire une halte
Devant ces parois de basalte
Aux bleus de viaduc.

Lorsque l'analyse compulse
Les nuits, gouffre béant,
Dans ma révolte se convulse
La fureur d'un géante.
Et, lasse de la beauté fourbe,
De la joie où l'esprit s'embourbe,
Je me détourne et je me courbe
Sur ton vitreux néant. (R.V, 134)

This is consistent with Cardonne-Arlyck's opinion that the poetry of Vivien is: [...] nourrie par une acquiescence à la perte de soi...¹⁰² The 'nightvisions' and 'deathscapes' of Vivien's imagination are creative sites for the poet. *Le Ténébreux Jardin* from the collection *À l'heure des mains jointes* (1906) describes a twilight scene set outside the boundaries of time and space wherein the poet, 'Solitaire, tandis que le temps coule et fuit', (R.V, 204), is granted sanctuary and space to muse upon 'La tristesse des autrefois et des jamais...' (R.V, 204) The importance of such seclusion, to be found only in the shadows, is imperfectly portrayed in verse alone:

Les poèmes ont des lignes trop régulières,
Les musiques, un son trop clair, trop cristallin...
Je frapperai bientôt aux portes du jardin
Qui s'ouvriront pour moi, larges et familières. (R.V, 204)

In this garden flowers and their heavy scent fill the nocturnal air. It is here in isolation, and enveloped by the dusky gloom, that the poet arrives at the conclusion that her desire

¹⁰² Cardonne-Arlyck, *op.cit.*, p.112.

for obscurity is fuelled by her longing for an understanding of the true significance of death, and her lack of fear in the face of same.

Peu m'importe aujourd'hui le caprice du sort...
La nuit s'ouvre pour moi comme un jardin de reine
Où je promènerai ma volupté sereine
Et mon indifférence à l'égard de la mort. (R.V, 205)

And yet, this comfort derived from darkness and solitude is unstable. When the poet suspends her belief in the utopian and time-defying essential nature of her nightvisions, she is immediately thrown into the cold reality of loneliness and exclusion as demonstrated in *Solitude Nocturne* and from the 1910 collection *Haillons*. In declining health, and nearing the end of her life, Vivien, stepping outside a metaphysical view of death begins to waver in the face of her own mortality:

Oh ! l'horreur d'être seule au profond de la nuit
Dans l'effroi du futur et de l'instant qui fuit !
Instant au front hagard ! Présence de la Nuit !

Voici que se réveille en mon cœur la rancœur,
La rancœur endormie au profond de mon cœur !
Je ne puis étouffer cette ancienne rancœur.

Et j'écoute le bruit monotone des flots
En y mêlant le bruit d'intérieurs sanglots.
La douleur de jadis pleure comme les flots. (R.V, 321)

Therefore, Vivien the woman and poet is a *femme fatale* in so much as she is unafraid to confront death, but demonstrates a touching humanity as she lapses into reality outside the comfort of her self-imposed exile from day and light. Envisioning herself as a *femme fatale*, Vivien also revises the original interpretation of the expression, assigning to it a new importance, with relevance to the female poet's obligation to an authentic exegesis of the role of death in literature. Vivien's *femmes fatales* transcend *fin-de-siècle* portrayals of women which were so extreme in their misogynistic bias that their

all-pervasive influence was damaging to women in general society. As Dottin-Orsini outlines, with particular regard to the precedent of the *femme fatale*:

Elle incarne une surenchère de la féminité, mystère insondable, chacun le sait pour elle-même autant que pour l'homme. Elle est enfin, tout simplement, la femme mauvaise, autrement dit vouée par essence à la méchanceté...C'est dire que l'expression de « femme fatale » ne tarde pas à valoir pour la femme en général, et que son étude rejoint l'interrogation sur ce qu'on appelle alors la *féminilité*.¹⁰³

Renée Vivien, rather than expostulate such an antagonistic view of the feminine, chose instead to re-engage the archetype, creating a powerful and potent symbol of womanhood. Appropriating the myth of Delilah, she portrays a maligned heroine whose actions are wholly justified. Accordingly, the *femme fatale* of Vivien's verse is indeed 'fatal' to hegemonic masculinity and an insistently blind heteronormative culture. Vivien also reclaims the female vampire of Symbolist, Decadent, Romantic and Gothic traditions, reinventing her as a metaphor for the resurrection of repressed female sexuality and as a symbol of the outsider, particularly the lesbian woman. Vivien's Banshee is the embodiment of death in life, while the succubus of her verse is the vengeful cursed, who along with the witch is determined to redeem her eminence and right to existence. The poet's 'deathscapes' and 'nightvisions' are the creative loci of Vivien's imagination, wherein the 'darker feminine' impulse of her verse is allowed to flourish. Renée Vivien's *femmes* challenge the norm and predict a fatal outcome for contemporary society, in their exposition of otherness through the paradigms of aberrance and deviance, consequent to the resurgence of Gothic interest in the paranormal in the late nineteenth century. By rewriting the myth of the *femme fatale*, Vivien most importantly negates the masculine tradition of 'writing' woman, and what she believed was their wrongful reproduction.

¹⁰³ Dottin-Orsini, *op.cit.*, p.18

Chapter 3: Death and the Poet

« La vie n'est qu'une longue perte de tout ce qu'on aime. »
Victor Hugo, extrait de *L'Homme qui rit*.

As a young child, Vivien (then Pauline Tarn) received much of her early formal education in Paris where she lived next door to the Shillito family, one of whose daughters, Violette, became a close companion to the fledgling writer. Their relationship turned from companionship to love, and though unconsummated, became one of the most significant of Vivien's short life, informing the young poet's philosophy on love and friendship, and the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood, as well as greatly influencing her literary corpus. In later years, as a friend both to Barney and Vivien, Violette was instrumental in introducing the couple to each other. Having temporarily abandoned her friend in the first flush of a love affair with Barney, Vivien was rendered distraught when Violette, having contracted typhoid fever, was given weeks to live. Vivien was faced with the decision whether to leave Barney and rejoin her friend, and to compound the issue, the young poet was in the middle of drafting her first publication of verse. Jean-Paul Goujon describes Vivien's mood at the time:

Brusquement, elle comprit toutes ses responsabilités. Ce remords ne la quittera plus désormais. Pourquoi avait-elle abandonné Violette Shillito ? Natalie Barney, après tout, n'était qu'une infidèle, une « collectionneuse » ... Se sentant mal à l'aise, Vivien se tournait à nouveau vers le passé et évoquait les moments d'enfance vécus en compagnie de la malade.¹⁰⁴

Violette felt betrayed by Vivien, and confided so to her sister. Vivien was to learn of this from Mary Shillito:

Pour comble, la sœur de Violette Shillito confia à Vivien toute la douleur ressentie par la malade de la liaison avec Natalie Barney : *Je viens d'apprendre*, confesse-t-elle à Charles Brun, *que ma liaison d'amour avec la Bien-Aimée l'a fait abominablement souffrir*. (24 mars, 1901)¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.163.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.164.

However, so attached was Vivien to Barney, that despite this revelation she was unwilling to end their affair. Later in her letter she confesses to Brun, '[...] *et je l'aime, voyez-vous, d'une passion si tenace et si terrible que RIEN ne peut me séparer d'elle [...]*' (24 mars 1901)¹⁰⁶

Shillito's subsequent death left Vivien with the burden of grief compounded by guilt, and she was to forever associate her first sexual affair with the demise of her first true love. This very personal encounter with death deeply affected a woman who already had begun to foster an obsession with mortality. With regards to the profound effect that Violette's death had on Vivien, Marie Perrin explains that:

S'accusant d'avoir délaissé son amie pour des amours charnelles, Pauline Tarn débute une lente descente aux enfers que rien n'entravera pas même la rencontre positive avec la baronne Hélène de Zuylen de Nyevelt. Cette lente agonie verra s'affirmer, par le biais des addictions, de la toxicomanie, de l'alcoolisme et de l'anorexie, l'une des personnalités les plus marquantes du paysage littéraire féminin français.¹⁰⁷

While this thesis avoids a biographical perspective, it must be noted that Violette's death not only coloured Vivien's philosophical outlook, it also was to have a significant impact on her writing both thematically and stylistically. When the poet writes of the duality of death and desire, and of her proto-feminist refashioning of the *femme fatale*, she does so mainly as a *fin-de-siècle* writer influenced by the Decadent and Symbolist traditions of that period. With regards to the literary movement to which Vivien could be said to belong, Perrin believes that:

Renée Vivien se situe à la jonction du symbolisme et de la décadence. Son œuvre en prose souscrit à un emploi systématique du symbole, tandis que ses poèmes comme ses nouvelles ou ses romans reprennent diverses images héritées de la décadence. Toutefois, au-delà de l'inspiration symboliste ou décadente, l'œuvre de Renée Vivien prend place dans un propos global profondément original, novateur et précurseur.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Goujon, *op.cit.*, Capitalization and ellipsis in original.

¹⁰⁷ Marie Perrin, *Renée Vivien, Le corps exsangue : De l'anorexie mentale à la création littéraire* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2003), p.16.

¹⁰⁸ Perrin *op.cit.*, p.309.

Jean-Paul Goujon classifies Vivien as a *Parnassienne*, an assertion disputed by Perrin.¹⁰⁹ As a *Parnassienne* Vivien's work would have been considered to have bridged the gap between Romanticism and Symbolism, and certainly the publication of her work by Alphonse Lemerre would suggest the same.¹¹⁰ Yet Vivien's poetry for the most part, when emotionally inspired, is distinct from the sentimental detachment for which the Parnassian school is known. To categorize Vivien as one or the other however, would be to commit a grave error of over-simplification, and as no art is created in a vacuum, neither is it entirely true that her work is *novateur* to the extent that it is without precedent. Instead, Vivien's writings owe much to the wide and varied external influences of her own life. She is as much a Victorian poet inspired by Swinburne as a Decadent *filles de Baudelaire*; an English expatriate writing in the French language; a lesbian woman writing in the patriarchal world of letters.

However when the poet speaks of the deeply personal experience of death, loss and grieving, and when confronted with the actuality of death rather than its metaphysical and metaphorical representation, her artistic response is more akin to the sensibilities of the Romantic tradition. Violette Shillito's death and its aftermath seem to send the poet into an artistic tailspin, and thus her poetry as an articulation of the processes of grief and mourning, corresponds closely to the characteristics associated with the Romantics. As a broad analysis Anne Green defines Romanticism as the lyrical expression of the themes of love, nature and despair often in light of personal experience.¹¹¹ Mario Praz writing in *The Romantic Agony* traces the erotic, pessimistic, sexually ambivalent and melancholic sensibilities of the Romantic-Decadents back to Sade and the Gothics.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Jean-Paul Goujon, 'Renée Vivien et le Parnasse', *Bulletin des études parnassiennes*, no. 7, 1985, pp. 41-56.

¹¹⁰ Alphonse Lemerre, editor and publisher of many of the Parnassian poets.

¹¹¹ Anne Green, 'Shakespeare and the French Romantics', in *Berlioz Society Bulletin*, 05.2011

¹¹² Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Vivien's poetics of grief traverse the aperture between nature and artifice, the Romantic and the Decadent. Where ordinarily her writing (in particular her prose) is led by the decadent philosophy described by Huysmans in *À Rebours* (1884)¹¹³ — wherein he proclaims the supremacy of man's genius in his perfect reproduction of nature — her artistic reaction to grief returns to the primitive, to the immediacy of emotional response. Mark Sandy in his work *Romanticism, Memory and Mourning* sketches the far reaching influence of Romantic poetry on grief as it speaks to 'those later decisive cultural moments embodied by Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek.'¹¹⁴ Sandy goes on to observe that:

Romantic poetry's treatment of mourning, memory, and grief dissolves generic boundaries and finds expression in disparate poetic forms. Such Romantic forms of grief and mourning manifest themselves both as the spirit of their age, rooted in precise historical conditions, and as powerfully proleptic and lasting transhistorical presences.¹¹⁵

The transition from Romanticism in the early part of the nineteenth century, to Decadence and Symbolism at the *fin de siècle*, witnessed the changing role of the artist from humble servant of nature to creative agent whose responsibility was to engender rather than transcribe. Yet artistic *responsibility* is the common denominator that binds them. While the artistic response *to* the sublime in nature is the Romantic's intent, the Decadent's can be classified as one of homage to human intellectual prowess; yet fundamentally the artist's responsibility is central to both.

The notion of responsibility is essential to Vivien's poetic response to grief and loss. The poet feels an obligation to respond to her grief, articulated through poetry. She also feels a certain responsibility for the death of Shillito which manifests as a form of guilt,

¹¹³ Joris Karl Huysmans and Pierre Waldner ed., *À Rebours* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1978).

¹¹⁴ Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory and Mourning* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013) p.1.

¹¹⁵ Sandy, *op.cit.*

while her position as survivor, as the one left behind and isolated in a world of despair, compels her to the role of eulogist. In *Épitaphe (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* she writes, ‘Doucement tu passas du sommeil à la mort, / De la nuit à la tombe et du rêve au silence.’ (R.V, 68) Furthermore, the poet envisions herself as the self-appointed guardian of the dead, as she trawls her imagination to recreate a space dedicated to the memory and the inclusion of the dead amongst the living.

I 3.1 Grief, Mourning, and the Romantic Tradition

In her idealization and almost sanctification of Shillito, Vivien ensures that no other woman can assume her place. Thus the poet commits herself to a sentimental hinterland, ensuring her seclusion from the rest of the world. This is captured in *À une Ombre aimée (Sillages, 1908)*, ‘Je ne puis oublier que je suis seule ici, / Que je suis triste et que je n’aime qu’une morte.’ (R.V, 258) This sense of seclusion along with an almost overwhelming melancholy caused by an ineradicable grief, contributes to the poet’s *malaise*, and unable to reconcile death in life, the artist eventually abandons herself to suicidal ideation in her verse, as articulated in *Cible* from the 1910 collection *Haillons*. ‘Mon cœur est vieux autant qu’un très ancien grimoire / Et, désespérément, j’appelle l’Heure Noire.’ (R.V, 320) Vivien’s grief is unique; she never attempts to find a parallel with other people’s reaction to death, if anything she believes herself to be completely alone and in direct opposition to the rest of the world and their conception of, and reaction to, death. Yet Vivien’s desire to articulate her grief is paramount, echoing the sentiment described by Derrida in his treatise on mourning, *Mémoires* :

pour Paul de Man, where he pronounces that ‘parler est impossible, mais se taire le serait aussi ou s’absenter ou refuser de partager sa tristesse.’¹¹⁶

In *Devant la mort d’une amie véritablement aimée (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* we find the poet distraught, in obvious despair, as she contemplates the death of her friend. The first three stanzas recount the direct words and thoughts of others, and their platitudinal responses, as they are framed by quotation marks. The poet is clearly at odds with the belief held by those who attempt to find solace and meaning in death, who foster the notion that the dead have found peace and have not truly departed:

Ils me disent, tandis que je sanglote encore :
« Dans l’ombre du sépulcre où sa grâce pâlit,
Elle goûte la paix passagère du lit,
Les ténèbres au front, et dans les yeux l’aurore. (R.V, 65)

The last two stanzas voice the poet’s own beliefs, emphasized by the definitive ‘Moi’ as she drowns in a melancholy now tinged with scepticism. Painfully aware of the finality of death, her grief propels her to reach down to the very pit of nature, at its very basest level, to the earth beneath her feet, as she senses its warmth rise upwards. ‘Moi, j’écoute parmi les temples de la mort / Et sens monter vers moi la chaleur de la terre.’ (R.V, 65) The poet finds the dead returned to the earth, and concludes that the deceased has moved out of life’s temporal space: ‘Je sais qu’elle n’est plus dans l’heure que j’êtreins,’ (R.V, 65). This poem contains the firm belief of the poet, *at that particular moment in time* that her dear friend is indeed forever departed, and envisions no hope of a reunion with her either in this life or another. Instead she concludes: ‘L’heure unique et certaine, et moi, je la crois morte.’ (R.V, 66) In many ways this verse from the 1902 collection *Cendres et poussières* represents the starting point for Vivien’s poetic corpus on grief, and specifically her mourning for Shillito. She begins her journey of grief in

¹¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires : pour Paul de Man* (Toulouse: Galilée, 1988), p.15.

Devant la mort d'une amie... in a psychological state of reluctant acceptance, and in opposition to those well-meaning advisers, she once again demonstrates her independence of vision, further establishing herself as the lonely artist, distinct from the rest of the world. This separateness is clearly drawn in the diction of the poem, where the ideas and feelings propounded by 'Ils' is held in bold contrast to the voice of the poet embodied by her 'Je'.

According to Maurice Shroder, Hugo considered the Romantic to be the 'complete poet' who followed the three visions of '...humanity, nature and the supernatural', all of which can also be traced in Vivien's verse.¹¹⁷ Hugo's *Demain, dès l'aube...* (1856) from *Les Contemplations* which records his heartfelt sorrow over the death of his daughter Léopoldine, is similar in tone to *Épitaphe (Cendres et poussières, 1902)*. Again in *Épitaphe* a sense of movement is expressed as the departed moves from sleep to death, and from night to the 'rêve au silence'. (R.V, 68) It is the poet who is left behind in the *crépuscule*, enshrouded by uncertainty and on the threshold of pain. While in Hugo's verse we see the poet firstly address his daughter, his intended journey is first unspecified. Initially we are led to believe that he is to meet her and to possibly join her in death:

Demain, dès l'aube à l'heure où blanchit la campagne,
Je partirai. Vois-tu, je sais que tu m'attends.
J'irai par la forêt, j'irai par la montagne
Je ne puis demeurer loin de toi plus longtemps.¹¹⁸

However, the journey that Hugo proposes to make is to his daughter's grave: 'Et quand j'arriverai, je mettrai sur ta tombe / Un bouquet de houx vert et de bruyère en fleur.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Maurice Z. Shroder, *Icarus: The Image of the Artist in French Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

¹¹⁸ Victor Hugo *Les Contemplations* (Québec : Librairie Générale Française, 1974).

¹¹⁹ Hugo, *op.cit.*

To journey to a loved one's graveside is to accept the very finality of their death, and as with Hugo, Vivien's epitaph acknowledges Shillito's burial both literally as well as in her own consciousness. This graveside recital is also a form of communication with the dead however, and the poet endeavours to find a way to commune with Violette through the medium of poetry. Moreover this communion represents an attempt at finding some rationale for the death itself. However a note of tension still remains, exemplified by the frustration contained in the phrase 'caresses muettes' (R.V, 68). Just as Hugo places a bouquet on his daughter's grave as he reaches out to her memory, a sliver of hope is also present in Vivien's poem with the appearance of the outcropping of violets (as they signify Violette) on Shillito's burial mound. We note a reversal of sorts here, the poet attempts to communicate with her dead friend but instead it is Shillito who sends a message to the living in the form of these unexpected blooms, and this development is early evidence of the future connections extended beyond the grave evidenced in the later poems.

Doucement tu passas du sommeil à la mort,
 De la nuit à la tombe et du rêve au silence.
 Comme s'évanouit le sanglot d'un accord
 Dans l'air d'un soir d'été qui meurt de somnolence
 Au fond du Crépuscule ou sombrent les couleurs,
 Où le monde pâlit sous les cendres du rêve,
 Tu sembles écouter le reflux de la sève
 Et l'avril musical qui fait chanter les fleurs.
 Le velours de la terre aux caresses muettes
 T'enserre, et sur ton front pleurent les violettes. (R.V, 68)

In *Violettes Blanches (Évocations, 1903)* we observe the slow process of Shillito's revival. Once again this figurative resurrection presents in the form of blossoms, but this time the rare and delicate white violet whose petals are symbolic of a gradual, subdued resurrection. Their frailty and muted colour, leached by the sun and soil are suggestive of a corpse's anaemic complexion, and their rarity in the botanical world is

metaphorical of the poet's exclusive love for Shillitto. This is further emphasized by the capitalization of 'Celle' in the second line, and we also note a new pattern emerging in Vivien's poetry of grief, as she increasingly makes unfavourable comparisons between her current mistress and Violette. 'Et moi, je les préfère aux lys...' (R.V, 90) Henceforth, Vivien continues to compare the violet with the lily, the rose and other flowers as the memory of her dead beloved haunts all living relationships. And yet these white violets are alive, indicating a sense of hope for the poet in mourning. 'Vierges entre toutes les fleurs' (R.V, 90) these white violets are also representative of Shillitto's pure and virginal state. Again, the subtle movements of the poem portray the gradual advancement of resurrection — whereby now the spirit is lifted not from the earth but from between the four planks of its coffin: 'Parez la nuit des mornes planches / De violettes blanches' (R.V,90). The deeper melancholy of the previous stanzas has lifted somewhat and though the poem ends on a sombre note, in which the poet avows that her loved one will not reflower, the presence of these violets indicate hope:

Ainsi fut Celle que j'aimais
 Qui ne refleurira jamais...
 Un peu de cendre et quatre planches,
 Des violettes blanches. (R.V, 90)

Such is Vivien's desire to commune with Shillitto that she resolves to cross the threshold to the realm of the dead in *Arums de Palestine (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)*. Herein the poet personifies death as her *maîtresse*, as she attempts to seduce her, armoured with the offering of an arum lily, as she attempts to breach the sanctity of the grave. The arum lily, black and odorous as 'chair de nuit' (R.V, 126), has long been associated with death, and used in ancient herbal remedies, it holds significant occultist and folkloric value. As previously noted, the lily in all its varieties is symbolic of Natalie Barney, and here we see the poet offering to sacrifice the opportunity of love in this world for

one in the world of the dead. The poem itself is written in the style of a requiem, opening and closing on the same verse:

Ô ma Maîtresse, je t'apporte,
Funèbres comme un requiem,
Lys noirs sur le front d'une morte,
Les arums de Jérusalem. (R.V, 127)

Richly symbolic, this poem owes more to the Symbolist school than the Romantic, and its highly stylized composition offers up some enigmatic metaphors. The expressions 'L'amour que l'aube détruit' (R.V, 126) as well as 'Étrange et stérile amoureuse' (R.V, 126) are coded references to lesbian sexuality, and the *Succubes* of the second stanza exist as priestesses of an alternative gynocentric religiosity. (R.V, 126) This change in style is indicative of a change in Vivien's approach to grief, where she begins to move from melancholic despair towards an attempt to communicate with Shillito by supernaturalistic means.

The further Vivien reaches into her subconscious memory in an attempt to revive Shillito, the more she begins to romanticize her. The past tense employed throughout *Nous nous sommes assises (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* recalls a cherished moment in time and the reflexive verb use of the title adds to the sense of unification between the two women.

Ma Douce, nous étions comme deux exilées,
Et nous portions en nous nos âmes désolées.

L'air de l'aurore était plus lancinant qu'un mal
Nul ne savait parler le langage natal...

Alors que nous errions parmi les étrangères,
Les odeurs du matin ne semblaient plus légères. (R.V, 205)

The friendship between the two young women is accentuated by their shared status of exiles. And the statement, '[...] nous étions comme deux exilées...' (R.V, 205-206) acts as a refrain. The eleventh couplet contains a pronouncement which the poet wishes had been made to Shillito before her death, 'Et je te dis, fermant tes paupières mi-closes: / « Les violettes sont plus belles que les roses. » (R.V, 206)

1 3.2 In the Garden of Remembrance

Moving from burial beneath the earth, upwards and over ground, and from flowers sprouting from the grave, the world is now a garden in which Vivien's idealized love for Shillito is enshrined. As *Le Monde est un jardin (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* is written in the present tense it is suggestive of the fact that this is a living memory of Shillito who walks like a shadowy presence beside the poet. Vivien uses the microcosm of the garden to illustrate a life of pleasure overshadowed by death:

Le monde est un jardin de plaisir et de mort
Où l'ombre sous les bleus feuillages semble attendre
Où la rose s'effeuille avec un bruit de cendre,
Où le parfum des lys est volontaire et fort. (R.V, 216)

The image of the garden as it figures in Vivien's poetry is emblematic of a closed, contained space where illicit love is allowed to flourish among the living and dying vegetation. Writing about the theme of the garden in the nineteenth-century French novel, Melanie Hawthorne asserts that 'female protagonists behave differently in the garden'¹²⁰ and while this is true of those characters contained within the pages of the novel, so it is also with the female poet and her lovers both dead and alive. Inspired by the floriography popularized by the various floral dictionaries prevalent in Victorian

¹²⁰ Melanie Claire Hawthorne, *To Whom does the Fruit Belong? The Theme of the Garden in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel*. Dissertation, (University of Michigan. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1987) (Publication No.8801328).

England, as well as in France and America, Vivien engages the iconography of the flower to symbolize the various women of her life. Focusing on the Victorian poet Marc André Raffolovich, whose homoerotic volume of poetry *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* was published in 1885, Ed Madden writes that:

While other writers of the 1880's and 1890's were attempting to "write" homosexuality through the cultural languages of sexology, decadent aestheticism, or classical literature, Raffolovich turned to the Victorian "language of flowers" — a language of romance and courtship codified in the floral dictionaries and gilt-bound gift books of the period — and he used this sentimental, heterosexual, and usually feminized language to portray homosexual love.¹²¹

Vivien also makes use of this codified language in her verse and in this poem we remark that amongst '[...] les lys nouveaux et les roses suprêmes', the '[...] sauges et les romarins...' the poet/speaker and her shadowy lover trail through the garden where '[...] tout meurt.' (R.V, 216) Vivien rewrites the traditional image of the garden as a site of growth and new life. This sacred space acts now as a reminder of death and mortality: 'Et nous nous promenons dans ce jardin, éprises / Et ferventes, sachant que nous devons mourir...' (R.V, 216) Alternatively read, this poem could also be addressed to a living being, as a pessimistic meditation on the demise of the affair:

Nous marchons lentement et notre ombre nous suit...
Le vent bruit avec un long frisson de traîne...
Nous qui ne parlons pas de notre mort certaine,
Avons-nous oublié l'approche de la nuit ?... (R.V, 216)¹²²

However whenever Vivien writes of garden walks and moonlit trysts the shadow of Violette Shillito is ever present. It is such a presence that threatens all matters of the poet's heart, perpetuating the sense of foreboding that fuels her poetics.

¹²¹ Ed Madden, 'Say it with Flowers: The poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich', *College Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Queer Utilities: Textual Studies, Theory, Pedagogy, Praxis (Feb, 1997) p.11.

¹²² Ellipsis in original.

The garden, site of beauty, of illicit love, amorous trysts and memories is the subject of the poet's deep anger in *Malédiction sur un jardin* (*Sillages*, 1908). How can, Vivien asks, such a place of splendour exist in symbiosis with death? Vivien wills the blossoms of the maligned garden to expire and rot:

Et que d'infâmes vers rongent le cœur des roses !
Que penchent les pavots et les pivoines closes !
Ô jardin, que le soir fasse mourir tes roses ! (R.V, 238)

Vivien has reached a stage of anger and desperation in her grief. She articulates her passionate outrage at the death of one so young while beauty — in the form of the fertile garden, bedecked by blooms which are reminiscent of other women — persists.

Jardin, pourquoi serais-tu beau jeune et charmant,
Toi qui ne reçois plus mes pas fiévreux d'amant
Et qui n'abrites plus son jeune corps charmant ? (R.V, 238)

Once again, and as evidenced in the last line, 'Fane-toi, beau jardin ! Elle m'aime plus !' (R.V, 238) this poem could be interpreted as the poet's sorrowful response to the loss of a mistress; however Vivien's guilt in her abandonment of Shillito in her hour of death is clearly felt. Moreover she also regarded the young woman's death as a form of abandonment in itself, a reaction to the denial of their pure love while the poet indulged herself in the throes of desire. The garden is also symbolic of the loss of innocence, as in the paradise of Eden, and Vivien's idealization of Shillito is greatly due to the fact that the young woman died in chastity, a virgin. Retrospectively Vivien romanticizes her love for Violette Shillito because it was *not* consummated, and as we have already seen, sexual desire and the consummation of such was a problematic issue for the poet, who feared the transitory and fickle nature of same.

Vivien mourns the loss of Shillito in her poetry while also mourning her own girlhood, manifesting in her grave fear of the advancement of old age. The poet's love for Shillito is embalmed and enshrined by death wherein she is sanctified. There is a certain irony to Vivien's grief as she bemoans the very fact that Shillito died so young, yet believes the young woman to be fortunate to have departed 'locked' in a state of eternal youth. As Vivien ages she feels herself moving further from the memory of Shillito, a memory which contains the kernel of her own youthful self. This is evidenced in *Vielllesse commençante* (*Haillons*, 1910) where Vivien fears not death but decline:

Hier, que m'importaient la lutte et l'effort rude !
 Mais aujourd'hui l'angoisse a fait taire ma voix.
 Je sens mourir en moi mon âme d'autrefois,
 Et c'est la sombre horreur de la décrépitude ! (R.V, 324)

Vivien's poetry tends to romanticize death to such an extent that she portrays it as the ultimate escape. *Victoire Funèbre* (*Évocations*, 1903) sees the poet rail against life, triumphant that Violette Shillito has been spared the trials and tribulations of mortal existence.

Dans le mystique soir d'avril j'ai triomphé
 J'ai crié d'une voix de victoire : Elle est morte,
 Et le tombeau sur Elle a refermé sa porte.
 La nuit garde l'écho de son râle étouffé.
 — Quel sourire de paix sur tes lèvres muettes,
 Ô sœur des violettes ! (R.V, 99)

I 3.3 Final Resting Places

In her various roles as the poet in mourning, the artist searching for transcendence, or the woman anatomizing death and desire, as well as revisioning female iconography at the *fin de siècle*; death is never far from Vivien's mind. She continually proposes novel ways of remembering and respecting the dead (and what she

imagines are their wishes) therefore treating them as a constant presence in this life. Vivien's disenchantment with society's manner of disposing of the dead in the figurative sense, and her cynicism regarding the often false nature of sentimentality, is reflective of the prevailing debate in the late nineteenth century as to the custom of burial and the placement of the deceased. Foucault traces the changing place of the cemetery in relation to nineteenth-century urbanization:

[...] it is only from that start of the nineteenth century that cemeteries began to be located at the outside border of cities. In correlation with the individualization of death and the bourgeois appropriation of the cemetery, there arises an obsession with death as an 'illness.' The dead, it is supposed, bring illnesses to the living, and it is the presence and proximity of the dead right beside the houses, next to the church, almost in the middle of the street, it is this proximity that propagates death itself.¹²³

Unhappy with, and discouraged by, increased social disconnection with the dead, Vivien's poetry strives to replace the dead amongst the living. The troubled and restless dead of *Morts inquiets* (*Études et préludes*, 1901) are ancient combatants and ghostly reminders of those forgotten warriors once living.

L'éclat de la fanfare et l'orgueil des cymbales,
Réveillant les échos, se prolongent là-bas,
Et, sous l'herbe sans fleurs des fosses martiales,
Les guerriers assoupis rêvent d'anciens combats. (R.V, 43)

Refusing to die and be forgotten, these restless souls, '[...] ne s'enivrent point des moiteurs de la terre' (R.V, 43). The vivid depictions of their past battles serve to emphasize their right to perpetuity and the promise of their resurrection reflects Vivien's philosophy that the dead deserve a place amongst the living.

Car leur sépulcre est plein de cris et de fumée
Et, devant leurs yeux clos en de pâles torpeurs,
Passe la vision de la plaine embrumée
D'haleines, de poussière et de rouges vapeurs. (R.V, 43)

¹²³ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', From: *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* October, 1984; Translated by Jay Miskowiec.

Society's disease was not brought about by the imagined contamination of a close proximity to death, rather Vivien's intrinsic belief was that individual and societal suffering would be brought about by a denial or peripheralization of the dead.

The title of *Let the dead bury their dead* (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902) is taken from the scriptures, notably the Gospel of Luke. As a direct instruction from Christ to his disciples, it is generally understood to indicate the belief that the fulfillment of spiritual responsibilities is of higher importance than the pursuit of worldly affairs. Vivien also proclaims her wish to carry out her spiritual responsibility in the burial of her remorse, carrying the precious memory of '[...] ton dernier regard' (R.V, 52). As the dead are to bury their own, the poet thus indicates that she herself is one dead amongst the living, existing in a purgatorial world of regret and sorrow in the aftermath of Shillito's demise.

Voici la nuit : je vais ensevelir mes morts,
Mes songes, mes désirs, mes douleurs, mes remords,
Tout le passé... Je vais ensevelir mes morts.

J'ensevelis, parmi les sombres violettes,
Tes yeux, tes mains, ton front et tes lèvres muettes,
Ô toi qui dors parmi les sombres violettes ! (R.V, 52)

The use of verbs associated with burial, such as *ensevelir* and *couvrir*, adds to her sense of purpose. However as the poem ends with a vision of her own death, we are led to realize that in this life, the only manner of seeking refuge from the memory of one dead for the poet, is in the oblivion of death itself:

Que se reflète, au fond de mon calme regard,
Un vaste crépuscule immobile et blafard !
Que diminue enfin l'ardeur de mon regard !

Mais que j'emporte aussi le souvenir des roses,
Lorsqu'on viendra poser sur mes paupières closes
Les lotus et les lys, les roses et les roses !... (R.V, 52)

In reference to Victor Hugo's *Post scriptum de ma vie* (1901) Michel Riffaterre claims that for Hugo:

Prisoner as he is within the boundaries of reality, the poet can find his escape towards the possible only through supernaturalism, "the part of nature that is beyond our senses". To reach it the poet must use observation, imagination and intuition. Here is a sensualistic theory of knowledge: nature is the object of imagination, imagination being the interiorization of the world perceived by the senses; mankind is the object of observation, but mankind is still nature, observed in man; "supernaturalism" is the object of intuition.'¹²⁴

Vivien also feels trapped within the boundaries of her reality, and seeks refuge in supernaturalism as demonstrated in *À une ombre aimée* (*Sillages*, 1908). Here we witness the poet/speaker prepare for the visit of a lover:

Voici l'heure où le mort goûte aux festins funèbres,
Et je t'ai préparé, comme hier, le repas.
Grâce aux flammes, grâce aux lampes, on ne sent pas
L'enveloppement fin et serré des ténèbres.

Voici mes voiles verts, voici mon front paré
Des bijoux et des fleurs qui conviennent aux fêtes.
Daigne entrer ! Comme hier, toutes choses sont prêtes.
Savoure le repas savamment préparé. (R.V, 258)

The air is stifling and suffused with the odour of death. The speaker of this verse almost seems to play the role of a spiritual medium assisting at a séance. The hostess in preparing for the visit of her mistress has wittingly opened her home and heart to a ghost. The last verse attests to the speaker's realization that she is alone in this world, and her only true love is dead, and because of this there is no room for any other lover at her table.

Pourtant un souffle froid entrebâille la porte,
Et dans mon corps glacé je sens mon cœur transi...
Je ne puis oublier que je suis seule ici,
Que je suis triste et que je n'aime qu'une morte. (R.V, 258)

¹²⁴ Michel Riffaterre, 'Victor Hugo's Poetic's, *The Romanic Review*, Vol. 93, Numbers 1-2, Columbia University, p.152.

Where the supernatural succeeds, at least in conjuring up almost tangible shadows, reality is a constant disappointment, and Vivien's versification resounds with unfavourable comparisons made between the possibility of love in the past and the actuality of love in the present. The 1910 collection *Dans un coin des violettes* is framed by two poems dedicated to Shillito. *Sous la protection des violettes* contains the poet's confession that no other love compares to her young friend and that she has become weary of those other lavish flowers, pretenders to the throne of violets:

Je suis lasse des lys, je suis lasse des roses,
De leur haute splendeur, de leurs fraîcheurs écloses,
De toute la beauté des grands lys et des roses. (R.V, 287)

The last poem of this collection, *Prière aux violettes* is the poet's irrefutable avowal of love; bowed in prayer, claiming the sanctuary and protection of the violets, Vivien has found her heart's resting place:

Vous me ferez alors oublier, Violettes !
Le long mal qui sévit dans le cœur des poètes...
Je dormirai dans la douceur des violettes ! (R.V, 302)

Romantically drawn closer to death rather than life, and therefore the dead over the living, this inclination threatens to overshadow all her 'living' relationships. Each current love affair is tainted by the memory of a dead woman, and the combination of guilt and sorrow compels the poet to disparage and dismiss those around her. This reluctance to engage with others also manifests as a deep-rooted fear of the end of the affair in the form of self-prophesied doom. In the poems *Sommeil* (*Études et préludes*, 1901) and *Attente* (*À l'heure des mains jointes*, 1906) we witness the poet's anguish in the midst of love, whereby the love chamber itself is pervaded by a suffocating dread:

‘Ton sommeil, m’épouvante, il est froid et profond... / [...] Et si ton lit d’amour n’est pas déjà la tombe.’ (R.V, 44)

En cette chambre où meurt un souvenir d’aveux,
L’odeur des nos jasmins d’hier s’est égarée...

...Des violettes et des algues vont pleuvoir
À travers le vitrail violet et vert tendre... (R.V, 211)

The poet, having attempted to commune with her departed loved one in vain, having railed against life and cursed death, now internalizes her grief-stricken agony nurturing a death wish that would finally unite her with Shillito. Speaking of the female death wish and representation of women’s suicides in nineteenth-century literature, Elisabeth Bronfen believes that ‘[...] the choice of death emerges as a feminine strategy within which writing the body is a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the feminine body.’¹²⁵ Thus denied subjectivity within a patriarchal context, suicide is a positive reaction of agency for women. Vivien’s real suicidal compulsion, both poetic and personal, is symptomatic of a general malaise which haunted her all her life, eventually culminating in her death, and is in part a reaction to the untimely death of Violet Shillito.

With *Lassitude (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* Vivien’s suicidal ideation takes the form of a fantasy derived directly from a literary example, as she imagines herself expiring amidst the heavy scent of flowers (in a scene once again reminiscent of Albine’s suicide by floral asphyxiation) and within the closed confines of her own home.

Je dormirai ce soir d’un large et doux sommeil.
Fermez les lourds rideaux, tenez les portes closes,
Surtout ne laissez pas pénétrer le soleil.
Mettez autour de moi le soir trempé de roses. (R.V, 65)

¹²⁵ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.142.

At times these suicidal notions inspire elaborate fantasies which involve the enticement of a mistress to join her, as portrayed in *La Rançon* (*Évocations*, 1903). The enigmatic title of this poem is open to many interpretations. The ransom of the title could be asked of the living or the dead, or as a closer reading of the poem suggests a playful yet mischievous tone, it could possibly be interpreted as the speaker's intention to hold a reluctant lover to ransom in her proposed suicide pact. The speaker entices her mistress to join her underwater (one of Vivien's favoured methods of dying is drowning) where the carnivorous crab lies in waiting.

Viens, nous pénétrons le secret du flot clair,
Et je t'adorerai, comme un noyé la mer.

Les crabes dont la faim se repaît de chair morte
Nous feront avec joie une amicale escorte. (R.V, 75)

The image of the crab is metaphorically intriguing. Vivien often employs marine-life imagery in her poetry, and these aquatic creatures often reviled, and not aesthetically pleasing, are emblematic of the marginalized, the poet's self-identified position. The crab, a creature which walks sideways along the ocean floor, is also representative of contra-normative behaviour, and its predilection for dead flesh evokes the notion of cadavers being entirely consumed by nature (just as grief consumes), and returning to nothingness. Vivien paints a ghostly, supernatural portrait of lost souls in the deep, floating between ancient shipwrecks: 'Reine, je t'élevai ce palais qui reluit, / Du débris d'un vaisseau naufrage dans la nuit...' (R.V, 75)

Not only does Vivien fantasize her own death, she recreates elaborate portraits of suicides as in *Les noyées* (*Évocations*, 1903). The macabre image of floating bodies captures the desolate loneliness of these abandoned and hopeless creatures who have

drowned intentionally. Perversely, the poet is seduced by these drowned bodies, who she imagines transformed by death into alluring otherworldly beings.¹²⁶

D'étranges fleurs de mer étrangement parées,
Elles ont de longs bras de pieuvres, et leur corps
Se meut selon le rythme indolent des marées ;
Les remous de la vague animent leurs yeux morts. (R.V, 115)

Journeying beyond fantasy, and approaching a form of reality, Vivien eventually imagines and attempts to precipitate her dying hour in *Glas* (*Sillages*, 1908). Imploring the death knell to ring, the poet wishes fervently to abandon herself to eternal silence as an end to life's suffering.

Dans la pourpre et dans l'or d'un silence hautain,
J'entends sonner d'ici sur mon destin.

Sa lamentation traverse la lumière,
Elle sonne en pleurant, exacte et régulière.

Avec la voix des sorts qui ne pardonnent pas,
Elle annonce, elle dit et redit : Tu mourras. (R.V, 263)

And so this desire, which reaches an apogee in *L'heure* (*Haillons*, 1910), has now become an obsession, as the poet is evidently hungry for the ending of life, 'Ah ! que la fin survienne !' (R.V, 319) The final hour of the poet's life now finally has taken shape and colour, it is 'l'Heure Noire' (R.V, 320) as described in *Cible* from the same collection. Now this death wish is shown to be influenced by outside forces other than Vivien's own internalized grief. This verse both targets her detractors while revealing her anguish at finding herself a targeted victim.

¹²⁶ These floating female bodies are redolent of Rachilde's drowned women of *La Tour d'amour* of which Robert Ziegler writes: 'The most taboo of perversions, necrophilia is often incorporated into Decadent fiction as a theme testifying to the strength of a passion that defies corruption and endures everlastingly. Rather than involving ghouliness or the desecration of graves, fin-de-siècle accounts of necrophilia tend to euphemize attachment to a corpse as an expression of pathological mourning.' Robert Ziegler, 'Necrophilia and Authorship in Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour*' *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 34 (2005) 134-145 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ncf.2005.0083>>

Pour les rires ailés je suis la large cible,
Car je vis dans le songe adorable et terrible.

Accourez vivement en chœur, vous ombres vertes,
Et riez en voyant ma face découverte.

Mon cœur est vieux autant qu'un ancien grimoire
Et, désespérément, j'appelle l'Heure Noire. (R.V, 320)

Published in 1910 the concluding poem from *Haillons, Épitaphe sur une Pierre tombale*, imparts the poet's final message on death. The epitaph, simply wrought, as delicate as the violets she adored, perfectly encapsulates her feelings on life and death.

Voici la porte d'où je sors...
Ô mes roses et mes épines !
Qu'importe l'autrefois ? Je dors
En songeant aux choses divines...

Voici donc mon âme ravie,
Car elle s'apaise et s'endort
Ayant, pour l'amour de la Mort,
Pardonné ce crime : la Vie. (R.V, 331)

This is Vivien's almost apothegmatic expression of longing for the end in the tentative hope of attaining some manner of peace and tranquillity, such tranquillity as depicted in the garden scene of *Fête d'automne (Flambeaux Éteints, 1907)*: 'Seule dans mon jardin fané je me couronne / De feuillages et de violettes d'automne...' ¹²⁷ (R.V, 233)

In fact *Épitaphe sur une Pierre tombale* is engraved on Vivien's tomb in the Parisian cemetery of Passy. Melanie Hawthorne writing of her experience of visiting Vivien's grave meditates on how such a visit provides an occasion for the visitor of *La ville des morts* to confront mortality, to merge with the dead, and to become reconciled with the often unfathomable reality of death. Vivien's poetics of grief are a form of discourse

¹²⁷ Ellipsis in original.

with the dead ensuring that the artist as well her audience is: '[...] à la fois hanteur et hanté.'¹²⁸ As Hawthorne elaborates:

Selon le dictionnaire Robert, à l'origine, le verbe « hanter » était synonyme de « habiter ». Hanter les cimetières, c'est donc y habiter, et si vous tenez à vivre dans la ville des morts, n'est-ce pas que vous aussi, vous êtes un petit peu fantôme ? Quand vous êtes ici, vous êtes à la fois hanteur et hanté. Le tombeau de Renée Vivien est un site de traumatisme, une folie à plusieurs. Non seulement parce que tous les cimetières rappellent la mortalité, non seulement parce que Vivien est une figure traumatique et traumatisée, mais parce que son tombeau est un lieu de rencontre qui annonce publiquement un trauma collectif.¹²⁹

The thematic significance of death in Vivien's poetry is extensive in purpose. Using death as a subject matter allows Vivien to analyze her personal struggle in reconciling desire with pleasure, against the backdrop of nineteenth-century censorial condemnation of homosexual love. Death as it exists alongside desire as 'l'extase cruelle' (R.V, 178) is the embodiment of the poet's own fear of pleasure, a fear which ensures her separation from society as it transforms into a form of self-denial that both characterizes and inspires her work. The poet's appropriation of the symbol of the *femme fatale* constitutes a positive reimagining of the misogynistic portrayal of woman in *fin-de-siècle* culture, resulting in a 'fatal' blow to the hubristic dominance of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. Vivien's poetic exploration of the theme of death, allows her to romanticize her grief in the wake of personal experience, and also gives rein to her exploration of the darker recesses of her imagination as she prefigures her own death. Most importantly however, the theme of death in Vivien's poetic universe does *not* represent conclusion. Death is the dismissal of the old and the ushering in of the new. In Vivien's poetics death constitutes a wiping clean of the slate precipitating the creation of a *tabula rasa* in preparation for the themes of rebirth.

¹²⁸ Melanie Hawthorne, 'Revenant de Passy' *Renée Vivien, une femme de lettres entre deux siècles (1877-1909)* Textes réunis par Nicole G. Albert et Brigitte Rollet (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2012) pp. 116-117.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Part II Rebirth

Chapter 1: Return to Mytilène

In the poetry of Renée Vivien, death is a theme that signifies desire for transcendence. The exploration of death is inherent to Vivien's meditation on mourning; while the alliance of death and desire reveal that each is commonly bound by the impulse to create and envision anew. To this end, Vivien's poetry bears witness to the cultural and sociological aspiration for regeneration prevalent at the *fin de siècle*, despite societal malaise in the wake of perceived degeneration. Vivien's preoccupation with the polysemic representations of death can be regarded as an analysis of the many possibilities that exist both metaphorically and literally beyond 'death', rather than regarding death as an end in itself. In Vivien's poetics, the literal exploration and exposition of death forms part of a complex pattern of positive involvement with the themes of death and desire, which then lead to her examination of the themes of rebirth and transformation. Vivien's work is also representative of the innovative spirit prevalent in women's writing at the cusp of the new century as observed by Lorna Sage:

While male artists, writers, politicians and scientists in the 1890's feared the degeneration of familiar structures and institutions, women writers had less to lose in the degeneration of old cultural forms and much to gain in the transformations of custom and authority. In the field of literature, the woman writer in the nineties, as Margaret Drabble observed in 1991 in her introduction to a London exhibition of 1890's fiction, was so 'enterprising, bold and unconventional,' that for women the decade was 'not an end but a beginning'. For the *fin de siècle* women, the rhetoric of the 'new' was much more significant than the risks of losing the old.¹³⁰

The 'rhetoric of the 'new'' also characterizes much of Vivien's poetry, which is all too often criticized for its inherent pessimism than for its visionary idealism.

¹³⁰Lorna Sage, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.243.

The theme of rebirth, as epitomized by the representation of regeneration, renewal and return is as significant as the death motif found in Vivien's poetry. Before the act of recreation or transformation comes the act of return, and Vivien's poetry attests to an artistic return to Classical Antiquity as a form of inspiration. In particular, and in synchronicity with many other writers and artists of the *fin de siècle* and *Belle Époque*, Vivien's poetics is both inspired by, and bears homage to, the lyrical legacy of the ancient Greek poet Psappha.¹³¹ Much has been written about Vivien and Psappha, she was after all given the title of 'Sappho 1900' by the critic André Billy.¹³² Her translations of the Greek poet's fragments, along with her publication of *Sappho* in 1903, and *Les Kitharèdes* in 1904, firmly established her as a devotee and scholar of the Sapphic tradition.¹³³ With the discovery of new fragments in the Nile Valley in the late nineteenth century, a resurgence of interest in the work of Psappha ensued.¹³⁴ Along with this new interest in her poetry, the sexuality of Psappha also came under particular

¹³¹ As will be explained in the following chapter, Vivien always referred to Sappho in the Aeolic form of her name Psappha. The nineteenth century saw a renewed interest in the poetry of Psappha and many poets such as Swinburne and Baudelaire wrote poetry featuring Psappha as a lesbian character. The Hellenist scholar Eva Palmer introduced Barney to Psappha's fragments and in turn, Vivien. For female writers such as Michael Field (the pseudonym of Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper) Marie-Madeleine, Amy Lowell and H.D., Psappha was a significant influence. Shari Benstock, *Women of The Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 281.

¹³² As outlined by Rachel Mesch: 'Firmly ensconced in the Tout Lesbos of the Belle Époque, Vivien later inspired the literary critic André Billy's expression "Sappho 1900, Sappho tout pour cent". Mesch *op.cit.*, p.59.

¹³³ *Sappho, Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec*, is Vivien's biography of Sappho with Sapphic fragments translated from Greek to French and with a cover designed by Lévy-Dhurmer. It was published in 1903 by Lemerre and is the first publication of the writer under the pseudonym Renée Vivien. *Les Kitharèdes*, which contained translated fragments from the anthology of Greek female poets accompanied by poems by the author, appeared in 1904, taking its title from an ancient Greek harp. The poems of these volumes are however not examined in this thesis which exclusively focuses on those collections published in the primary text published by ÉrosOnyx as outlined in the introduction to this thesis. As Nicole G. Albert writes in her *note de l'éditeur* from the aforementioned edition: ' [...] entre l'édition Lemerre et la nôtre, nous avons tenu à une autre différence fondamentale : pour rendre hommage à la fine et vibrante helléniste que fut Renée Vivien, facette trop oubliée de sa personnalité protéiforme, nous avons publié séparément du présent volume deux recueils, *Les Kitharèdes*, en 2008, et *Sappho*, en 2009. Pourquoi ? Parce qu'ils occupent une place à part dans l'œuvre poétique de Vivien. Tout d'abord, il vaut mieux à leur sujet parler d'œuvres que de recueils. Ils présentent en effet l'originalité de mêler fragments antiques authentifiés par des chercheurs et très méticuleusement retranscrits par Vivien [...]'. Therefore while Vivien's achievements in the field of Sapphic translation are exemplary, they deserve a wholly separate study.

¹³⁴ For more on this discovery in 1897, see David M. Robinson, *Sappho and Her Influence* (New York: Cooper Square, 1963) and Gretchen Schultz *Sapphic Fathers: Discourses of Same-sex Desire from Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

scrutiny, aided in no small way by the controversial publication of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* by Pierre Louÿs in 1894.¹³⁵ Vivien's commitment to Greek scholarship began after her reading of an English translation of Sappho's work by H.T Wharton. She was thus determined to learn Greek in order to read and translate the original texts, and on the advice of Natalie Barney engaged Charles-Brun as her tutor.¹³⁶ This was to be a fruitful education as most accounts indicate that after two years of study the young poet had as much mastery over the Greek language as her tutor.¹³⁷ Vivien and Barney were determined to appropriate Psappha's philosophy as a validation of their own, and to reclaim her as lesbian symbol when so many interpretations of her work abounded in other circles. Shari Benstock sums up the importance of the Sapphic literary tradition for female homosexual writers who hitherto had no literature of their own on which to draw:

Nineteenth-century male writers (many of them homosexual) had appropriated Sappho as a figure of concupiscence and equated Sapphic love with female decadence. In England, Swinburne's Sappho called for repudiation; in France, Baudelaire's required correction. The recovery of Sappho as a woman's poet whose writings celebrated female love and friendship constituted an important lesbian feminist enterprise toward the end of the nineteenth century. For women on both sides of the channel, Lesbos offered itself as a female utopia: efforts were made to create London and Paris equivalents of Mytilène.¹³⁸

The importance of Psappha's influence on Vivien can never be overestimated.

Throughout her life she remained not only a muse and symbol of female intellectual

¹³⁵ When in 1894 the young decadent writer Pierre Louÿs published a series of prose poems by *Bilitis*, a previously unknown Greek woman poet of the 6th century BC (posited as a contemporary and possible lover of Sappho), he claimed them to be translations of genuine fragments found on a tomb in Cyprus. It was eventually revealed however that *Bilitis* never existed, and that Louÿs was the true author. Most critics are agreed nevertheless that this in no way lessens their literary value, and that Louÿs was still a considerable Greek scholar, with a genuine love for the subject. He was also heralded as a sincere advocate for lesbian culture. *Bilitis* went on to become an important icon for lesbian sexuality and in the 1950s the first major lesbian lobby group in the US was named the Daughters of Bilitis. Pierre Louÿs was well known and admired by Vivien, and even after it was revealed that *Bilitis* was fictional, she and Barney continued to value his work and admired him along with Charles Brun, their tutor, for his Greek scholarship.

¹³⁶ Goujon *op.cit.*. Jean Charles-Brun was a founder of the La Fédération régionaliste Française founded in 1900. A Classics scholar, he was also a proponent of pan-Latinism.

¹³⁷ Jay *op.cit.*, p. 63.

¹³⁸ Benstock, *op.cit.*, p.281.

accomplishment, but also attained the status of goddess, the ‘Divine Hironnelle’ in Vivien’s poetic universe. Psappha allowed female writers such as Vivien to claim a literary precedent where so few existed, thus elevating female artistic involvement at a time when the role of women began to shift from that of subject and muse to one of ‘primary creator’.¹³⁹ The fact that very little of Sappho’s poetry (which was once said to have filled over nine volumes in the Alexandrian Library) remains, was in fact propitious rather than tragic, as it afforded authors an opportunity to project their own literary aspirations onto her classical heritage. Susan Gubar asserts that: ‘Precisely because so many of her original Greek texts were destroyed, the modern woman poet could write ‘for’ or ‘as’ Sappho and thereby invent a classical inheritance of her own.’¹⁴⁰ Aside from the obvious and pervasive influence of Sappho in Vivien’s poetics (where such influence exists in the form of homage, dedication, emulation of poetic technique and philosophical subjectivity), thematically the poet also turns to Psappha and the women of Mytilène as metaphors for the significant impressions that the past bears on the present and the future; as validation for the establishment of a lesbian literary utopia, and in the spirit of rebirth, as emblematic of the broken, yet resurrected tradition of feminine creativity.

II 1.1 Psappha Revit

‘Écoutez... Celles-là sont les Musiciennes.’ (R.V, 43) This imperative statement is the opening line from *Sonnet (Études et préludes, 1901)*. Here Vivien voices her determination to resurrect those female lyricists from Antiquity; heralding from a time

¹³⁹ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.61.

¹⁴⁰ Susan Gubar, ‘Sapphistries’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, (1984) 10 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/494113>> pp. 46-47.

when poetry was revered as a female art. The poet entreats her audience to hark the echo of their voices carried over time. Not only are these women artists, they are essential beings, marked by their purity and their harmonious co-existence with nature. ‘Et les voici passer, forms aériennes, / Se mêlant au silence harmonieux des bois’ (R.V, 43) they are also distinctly lesbian, their sexuality intrinsic to their art.

Écoutez... Celles-là sont les Musiciennes.
Leur présence est pareille à l'écho d'une voix,
Et leur souffle est dans l'air plein de légers émois,
Plein de très lents accords aux langueurs lesbiennes. (R.V, 43)

The sweetness of their ‘music’, described as slow and languorous chords, is for Vivien, reminiscent of the movement of the female form. The poet establishes her belief in the superiority of lesbian sexuality as she allies it to artistic creativity. To ignore the voices of the past would be to condemn them to further obscurity. It is the principal function of the poet, in this case Vivien, to heed their return:

Ces chœurs, se lamentant, pleurant au fond des nuits
Et mêlent des essors, des frissons et des bruits
Aux forêts de silence et d'ombre recouvertes.

Comme pour exhaler le chant ou le soupir
On les sent hésiter, les lèvres entr'ouvertes
Et le poète seul les entend revenir. (R.V, 43)

The symbolic import of return is emphasized in the significance attached to the reception and revival of female voices that have been silenced over time. The Greek legend of Echo is called to mind here (the wood nymph whose voice was taken by the gods), as an allegory for the silencing of women, both culturally and artistically, as the poet weaves the motif of echo throughout her work.

La Mort de Psappha (*Évocations*, 1903) described as a ‘Poème dramatique en un acte’ (R.V, 84) revisits Psappha’s followers as they gather in mourning after her death. The opening scene is set in:

L’école de poésie fondée par Psappha. Une statue de l’Aphrodite enguirlandée de roses. Par la porte ouverte, on voit l’Égée, les jardins et les maisons de Mytilène. Le soleil, pendant l’acte, décline et disparaît dans la mer. (R.V, 84)

The image of the setting sun, sinking into the sea recalls the death of Psappha as she was purported to have thrown herself from the cliffs of Leucadia. Gathered together to mark the passing of their beloved poet, are Éranne de Télôs, Damophyla, Atthis, Gorgô, Gurinnô and Dika. This community of women mirrors the contemporaneous community of ‘Tout Lesbos’ of Paris to which Vivien and her friends belonged. The motif of departures and haunting returns inherent to Vivien’s poetry of rebirth is encapsulated in Éranne De Télôs’ lament to the dead poet:

« Lasse du jardin où je me souviens d’elle,
J’écoute mon cœur oppressé d’un parfum.
Pourquoi m’obséder de ton vol importun,
Divine hirondelle ?

« Tu rôdes, ainsi qu’un désir obstiné,
Réveillant en moi l’éternelle amoureuse,
Douloureuse amante, épouse douloureuse,
Ô pâle Prokné. (R.V, 84)

Psappha’s spirit reappears, in the second scene unbeknownst to the women:

Psappha entre, voilée. Pendant tout l’acte, elle ne découvre point son visage. Elle s’arrête devant la statue de la Déesse, en une attitude de désespoir. (R.V, 86)

Examined closely the appearance and resurrection of Sappho’s spirit is significant. Vivien places her next to the statue of the Goddess as a metaphor for the poet’s own deification of Psappha. Psappha’s melancholic demeanour reflects the sorrow of her women, and yet is also caused by her disappointment with the fact that her followers cannot believe in the possibility of her life continuing beyond death. The sorrow of her

followers is articulated in Scene IV when Éranna once again cries out, ‘Sans espoir, sans désir de retour, / Elle atteint lentement le rocher de Leucade...’ (R.V, 87) Psappha’s return, almost Messianic in design and purpose, establishes Vivien’s theory of the transformative effect of death and the attainment of immortality through art. The appearance of the unnamed female stranger represents the rebirth of Psappha in the lives of future followers of her philosophy and foretells how her feminist quest would live on in the continuance of her work. In *Scène II* Damophyla asks of the *étrangère*: ‘Vierge, que cherches-tu parmi nous ?’ (R.V, 85) To which she replies:

La Beauté,
Je cherche la colère et la stupeur des lyres,
L’âpreté du mélòs, parmi la cruauté
Des regards sans éclairs et des mornes sourires. (R.V, 85)

The stranger, in the throes of despair is drawn to these women in the midst of their grief. Her status as *l’étrangère* mirrors that of Vivien herself, both as a foreigner and as lesbian *femme de lettres*. Like Christ’s apostles, Sappho’s followers being too close and attached to their leader, are unable to grasp the positive significance of her death. It is the stranger who utters the final prophetic note:

Ô compagnes, les pleurs sont de légères choses
Qui ne conviennent point au glorieux trépas...
Chantez ! Il faut remplir de rythmes et de roses
La maison du poète où le deuil n’entre pas ! (R.V, 88)

As she wills the company to sing, she is also commanding women to continue the Sapphic literary tradition into the future.

Vivien outlines her lesbian manifesto In *Psappha revit (À l’heure des mains jointes, 1906)* as she describes how Psappha lives on, both as muse and figurehead, to a community of women dedicated to living their lives according to her philosophies of love and art. Vivien describes how she and her community of women in their

‘resurrection’ of Psappha have elevated lesbian sexuality to an art form and to some degree a religious rite as well. In their adherence to this cult of Psappha, just as some religious devotees take oaths of chastity; these votaries have left behind the world of men: ‘Celles que nous aimons ont méprisé les hommes.’ (R.V, 166) The poet outlines the rites and rituals associated with worship, as these select few dedicate themselves to perpetuating the memory of their ‘goddess’:

... ¹⁴¹Certaines d’entre nous ont conservé les rites
 De ce brûlant Lesbos doré comme un autel,
 Nous savons que l’amour est puissant et cruel,
 Et nos amantes ont les pieds blancs de Kharites. ¹⁴²

Nos corps sont pour leur corps un fraternel miroir,
 Nos compagnes, aux seins de neige printanière,
 Savent de quelle étrange et suave manière
 Psappha pliait naguère Atthis à son vouloir.

Nous adorons avec des candeurs infinies,
 En l’émerveillement d’un enfant étonné
 A qui l’or éternel des mondes fut donné...
 Psappha revit, par la vertu des harmonies. (R.V, 166)

This poem reads as a re-enactment of the performances and rituals played out in honour of Psappha in the garden of Natalie Barney wherein she had erected a *Temple de l’Amitié*. Benstock explains how Barney’s ‘Sapphic Circle’ would gather together to engage in:

[...] theatricals, masquerades, ballets, and poetry readings [...] to encourage feminist dialogue and intellectual exchange. In addition, these performances were teaching devices in which the principles of Barney’s feminism were given public acknowledgement. She hoped to create a contemporary Sapphic circle, a proposal she had first shared with Renée Vivien. ¹⁴³

Part of this sanctification of Psappha entailed the glorification of female nudity. And, Vivien’s poetics attest to her belief that the female body, unchanged as it is by history, is the best example of the continuance of the legacy of Lesbos: ‘Nos corps sont pour

¹⁴¹ Ellipsis in original.

¹⁴² The *Kharites* or Graces, were the three goddesses of grace, beauty, adornment, mirth, festivity, dance and song, and were also attendants of the goddesses Hera and Aphrodite.

¹⁴³ Benstock, *op.cit.*, p.292.

leurs corps un fraternal miroir,' (R.V, 166) Indeed Jay believes that influenced by Leconte de Lisle and his poem *Hypatie* written in 1847, Vivien's:

[...] worship of the naked body was not merely part of an attempt to return to a pre-Christian liberation from physical and psychological restraint, as it may have been for others of their contemporaries who similarly praised the virtues of nudity. In some ways, making the unclothed female body a positive value was a symbolic gesture repudiating the misogyny of the world around them, which found in the naked female a source of shame. For Vivien and Leconte de Lisle, nudity was a part of beauty, the worship of which has survived Christianity.¹⁴⁴

Vivien portrays the strength and solidarity of a female community existing outside the paradigms of society; autonomous and self-regulating they are impervious to the derision of the outside world:

Psappha revit et règne en nos corps frémissants ;
Comme elle, nous avons écouté la sirène,
Comme elle encore, nous avons l'âme sereine,
Nous qui n'entendons point l'insulte des passants. (R.V, 167)

The poem opens with the rising of the moon, that heavenly body long affiliated with women, and as worshippers of Sappho and Aphrodite they are creatures of the night, the time Vivien most associates with lesbian sexuality. Their prayer therefore, '« Que la nuit soit doublée [...] »' (R.V, 167) echoes the sentiment in *Prolonge la nuit* (*Évocations*, 1903) which is prefaced by this quote from Libanios: 'S'il fut permis à Psappha de Lesbos de demander dans ses prières « que la nuit soit doublée pour elle », qu'à mon tour j'ose implorer une faveur pareille...' (R.V, 73) Like Libanios¹⁴⁵ Vivien's request for the doubling of the night is rife with metaphor, it further establishes her female community as one existing by night and to this end is a way of signifying their status outside the boundaries of convention. The concept of 'doubling' signifies the sameness of the homosexual body; as well as denoting the physical, and therefore by extension, ideological connection to the great women of antiquity.

¹⁴⁴Jay, *op.cit.*,p.58.

¹⁴⁵Libanios or Libanius (A.D 314c-393) was a Greek rhetorician and Sophist who remains a significant historical source for scholars of Antiquity.

Ainsi, nous les chantons, l'âme sonore et pleine,
Nos jours sans impudeur, sans crainte ni remords,
Se déroulent, ainsi que de larges accords,
Et nous aimons, comme on aimait à Mytilène. (R. V, 167)

The female body traditionally associated with birth and fertility is imbued with a sense of freedom, joy and plenitude in *Danses sacrées* of the same collection. Vivien detested the physical state of maternity as we have already shown, and considered childbirth along with conventional marriage to be a form of captivity for women. Instead she celebrates the beauty and fluidity of the female form, unshackled by obligations to children and men.¹⁴⁶ Vivien reveals an alternative version of womanhood, one based in Hellenic antiquity, which is presented as a model for women of the present. Here, as fully autonomous and creative beings these women are depicted to be in absolute control of their own destinies, existing together in a state of harmonious solidarity.

De leurs tendres pieds les femmes de la Crète
Ont pressé la fleur de l'herbe du printemps...
Je les vis livrer à la brise inquiète
Leurs cheveux flottants.

Leurs robes avaient l'ondoiement des marées.
Elles ont mêlé leurs chants de clairs appels
En rythmant le rire et les danses sacrées
Autour des autels. (R.V, 105)

Vivien petitions Psappha in *Invocation*, the opening poem of the collection *Cendres et poussières* from 1902. Written in the form of a prayer, this psalm-like verse sees the poet seek to be reborn under the influence of Psappha. The religious symbolism associated with rebirth and baptism: 'Comme on verse le nard et le baume et la myrrhe,' (R.V, 51) alludes to the redemptive and sacred power of Psappha's poetry.

Les yeux tournés sans fin vers les splendeurs éteintes,

¹⁴⁶As Albert elaborates: 'Son homosexualité, sa condamnation du mariage, son dédain de la famille et son refus sans appel de la maternité la distinguent de ses contemporaines, telles Anna de Noailles ou, dans une moindre mesure, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, plus enclines à cultiver l'image policée que l'on attendait d'elles en célébrant le mâle, la nature et en se ralliant à la veine vitaliste alors en vogue.' Nicole G. Albert, 'Renée Vivien, d'un siècle à l'autre' *Diogenes* 4/2009 (No 228), pp. 146-50.

Nous évoquons l'effroi, l'angoisse et le tourment
 De tes baisers, plus doux que le miel d'hyacinthes,
 Amante qui versas impérieusement,
 Comme on verse le nard et le baume et la myrrhe,
 Devant l'Aphrodita, Maitresse de l'Eros,
 L'orage et l'éclair de ta lyre,
 Ô Psappha de Lesbôs ! (R.V, 51)

In *La Mort de Psappha* the music of the lyres is described in terms of '[...] la colère et la stupeur [...]' (R.V, 85). Again in *Invocation*, rather than portray the music of the lyres as sweet and languorous, it is rendered as a potent and powerful force, 'L'orage et l'éclair de ta lyre.' (R.V, 51) The lyre is revealed as an instrument of power, and its music echoed through history heralds the return of the female voice. The poet speaks universally for those women who seek to be inspired by Psappha.

Ô parfum de Paphôs ! ô Poète ! ô Prêtresse !
 Apprends-nous le secret des divines douleurs,
 Apprends-nous les soupirs, l'implacable caresse
 Où pleure le plaisir, flétri parmi les fleurs !
 Ô langueurs de Lesbôs ! Charme de Mytilène !
 Apprends-nous le vers d'or que ton râle étouffa,
 De ton harmonieuse haleine
 Inspire-nous Psappha ! (R.V, 51)

This is a poem about knowledge and learning, as emphasized by the repetition of 'Apprends-nous' in the last stanza. This poem performs as a testament to the invaluable influence Psappha holds over the work of Vivien, and as the poet's acknowledgement of the powerful link between the past and the present. As followers of Psappha, Vivien and her companions have carved out a rewarding but solitary life for themselves, and in the spirit of many traditional religions, the poet views their fate as that of a 'chosen people', a select few. In *Les Solitaires (Évocations, 1903)* Vivien depicts their way of life from the perspective of an observer, as she explains how their distinct acuity of vision grants them the ability to transcend the physical and sensory boundaries of the conventional world. Written in praise of a solitary life, for those who choose to live alone, this verse can also be read as a celebration of independent vision.

Ceux-là dont les manteaux ont des plis de linceuls
Goutent la volupté divine d'être seuls,

Leur sagesse a pitié de l'ivresse des couples,
De l'étreinte des mains, des pas aux rythmes souples.

Ceux dont le front se cache en l'ombre des linceuls
Savent la volupté divine d'être seuls.

Ils contemplent l'aurore et l'aspect de la vie
Sans horreur, et plus d'un qui les plaint les envie.

Ceux qui cherchent la paix du soir et des linceuls
Connaissent la terrible ivresse d'être seuls.

Ce sont les bien-aimés du soir et du mystère.
Ils écoutent germer les roses sous la terre

Et perçoivent l'écho des couleurs, le reflet
Des sons... Leur atmosphère est d'un gris violet.

Ils goutent la saveur du vent et des ténèbres,
Et leurs yeux sont plus beaux que des torches funèbres. (R.V, 72)

Those who follow the unconventional path are quite literally reborn both spiritually and supernaturally. They also seem to possess the ability to breathe new life into the deadest of matter, drawing from the past and its ruins in order to recreate as does the mysterious *Fée of Elle habite les Ruines* from the same collection. Charmingly gothic, this seemingly simple poem is deserving of several interpretations but the image of this beguiling *Princesse*, tripping lightly over the ruins 'Où s'attardent les mortes' (R.V, 104) and surrounded by the sounds of screeching owls, signifies a resurrection of sorts as well as the spiritual embodiment of the future rising from the ashes of the past.

Elle va, toujours lente et toujours solitaire,
Se voilant de mystère.

Elle a l'accablement des lys qui vont mourir,
Les yeux du souvenir.

Doucement, elle frappe aux somnolentes portes
Où s'attardent les mortes. (R.V, 104)

II 1.2 Mytilène and other Utopian Returns

In 1904 Vivien and Barney travelled together to Mytilène on the island of Lesbos, via Constantinople. They set out with the intention of finding Psappha's native land and with the hopes of establishing a twentieth-century school of lesbian poets based on their beloved lyricist's community of Antiquity. However, the reality of modern Greece left them dismayed. In spite of this, they bought two villas there, and Vivien was to return to Mytilène on several occasions, although the dream of the establishment of a modern day Sapphic community was never realized.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless Mytilène was to remain a place of great importance to Vivien as it is represented in her writing as the site of a visionary, utopian, female-centred universe. Writing about utopia and the Sapphic body in Vivien's poetry, Diana Holmes details how for Vivien, Mytilène is a '[...] utopia unthreatened by external forces.'¹⁴⁸ Holmes continues to explore how this utopia shapes Vivien's poetry:

This Lesbos, despite the island's geographical reality, is a true 'no-place' that refuses the laws of time and is thus freed from history [...] In the poems [...] time is denied as the Sapphic community of ancient Greece, and that of the poet's own time, come together in an idyllic existence to which reality poses no threat. It is these poems which most openly celebrate a feminine eroticism based on pleasure in the erasure of boundaries between self and other. The landscape of happiness in Vivien's poetry is that of Lesbos, depicted as a warm, fragrant island lapped by gentle waves under an azure sky. In her poems, it becomes a utopian space in which women lovers can live openly and freely, in a community that extends not only across the island but also back in time to the days of Sappho, and by implication forward to the present.¹⁴⁹

Vivien's immense emotional and psychological attachment to Mytilène, this idealized space where the poet imagines full realization of her artistic and psychosexual self, is contained in the opening stanza of *En débarquant à Mytilène (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)*.

¹⁴⁷ Goujon, *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁸ Diana Holmes, 'The poetry of Renée Vivien: utopia and the Sapphic body', in *The Impossible Space: Explorations of Utopia in French Writing*, edited with an introduction by Angela Kershaw, Pamela Moores and Hélène Stafford (Glasgow: Department of Modern Languages, University of Strathclyde, 2004), p.92.

¹⁴⁹ Holmes, *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

Du fond de mon passé, je retourne vers toi,
Mytilène, à travers les siècles disparates,
T'apportant ma ferveur, ma jeunesse et ma foi,
Et mon amour, ainsi qu'un présent d'aromates...
Mytilène, à travers les siècles disparates,
Du fond de mon passé, je retourne vers toi. (R.V, 181)

The extremely emotive first line seems initially addressed to a lover, yet it becomes immediately clear that it is addressed to the actual city itself, and the framing of the stanza with the repetition of those first lines at the end (as continued as a refrain throughout all of the seven stanzas), symbolizes again the theme of return. The poet goes on to portray, in great and evocative detail, the physical landscape of this paradisiacal universe which appears to have remained suspended in time, unblemished and unchanged since the days of Psappha:

Je retrouve tes flots, tes oliviers, tes vignes,
Et ton azur où je me fonds et me dissous,
Tes barques, et tes monts avec leurs nobles lignes,
Tes cigales aux cris exaspérés et fous...
Sous ton azur, ou je me fonds et me dissous,
Je retrouve tes flots, tes oliviers, tes vignes.

Reçois dans tes vergers un couple féminin,
Île mélodieuse et propice aux caresses...
Parmi l'asiatique odeur du lourd jasmin,
Tu n'as point oublié Psappha ni ses maîtresses...
Île mélodieuse et propice aux caresses,
Reçois dans tes vergers un couple féminin... (R.V, 181-182)

Again the motif of echo is evoked, 'Toi qui garde l'écho des lyres et des voix,' (R.V, 182) as the music of Antiquity evolves into the poetry of the poet's present day. As this is the poet's spiritual home, it is also the place that she chooses for the blessing of her union with her lover.

Mytilène, parure et splendeur de la mer,
Comme elle versatile et comme elle éternelle,
Sois l'autel aujourd'hui des ivresses d'hier...
Puisque Psappha couchait avec une Immortelle,
Accueille-nous avec bonté, pour l'amour d'elle,
Mytilène, parure et splendeur de la mer ! (R.V, 182)

Remarking on the significance of Mytilène for Vivien, both creatively and personally,

Marie-Ange Bartholomot-Bessou notes that for the poet:

[...] le verger mytilénien est imaginé comme un havre de liberté dans lequel peuvent se déployer de nouvelles attentes existentielles. Exploré à travers la démarche artistique, imaginé, réinventé, théâtralisé, il est le support d'un processus de recréation psychique.

Renée Vivien en tire substance pour sa propre création. C'est le détour qui l'aide à inventer une traduction du monde selon son rêve. Le temps reparcouru, la répétition du passé accomplie, le jardin primordial de la poésie de la féminité peut être réactualisé.¹⁵⁰

Vivien's compulsion to depart from everyday reality and to journey to the more seductive unknown is indicative of more than dissatisfaction with contemporary society, but a desire to find better, to be reborn in another place in time. Unlike her death poetry, *Départ (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* describes a need to leave in order never to return, but here instead of yearning for the finality of death, the poet is reaching for a new shore in an effort to be reborn. Seemingly bleak in tone, this poem in fact epitomizes Vivien's continual longing for a new world wherein she envisages a more optimistic future, as she boldly ventures into the unknown leaving aside any possibility of regret.

La lampe des longs soirs projette un rayon d'ambre
Sur les cadres dont elle estompe les vieux ors.
L'heure de mon départ a sonné dans la chambre...
La nuit est noire et je ne vois rien au dehors.

Je ne reconnais plus le visage des choses
Qui furent les témoins des jours bons et mauvais...
Voici que meurt l'odeur familière des roses...
La nuit est noire, et je ne sais pas où je vais.

Devrais-je regretter cet autrefois ?... Peut-être...
Mais je n'appartiens point aux regrets superflus...
Je marche devant moi, l'avenir est mon maître.
Et, quel que soit mon sort, je ne reviendrai plus. (R.V, 206-207)

In their introduction to *Aller(s)-Retour(s), Nineteenth Century France in Motion*, the editors Loïc Guyon and Andrew Watts note that: 'The relentless movement which characterized nineteenth-century French society was symptomatic of a desire for

¹⁵⁰ Marie-Ange Bartholomot-Bessou, 'Renée Vivien, Sappho et le verger lesbien' dans *Renée Vivien, une femme de lettres entre deux siècles 1877-1909. Actes du colloque*, Textes réunis par Nicole G. Albert et Brigitte Rollet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012), pp.16-17.

individual and collective freedom.¹⁵¹ On a microcosmic level, the ebb and flow of movement which characterizes Vivien's poetry of rebirth is evidence of her desire for change and her need to free herself from the confines of heteronormative actuality. To this end, without having to even leave her room, Vivien invites the reader to envisage such change as she embarks on imaginative voyages which promise the reward of artistic and ideological emancipation, on the banks of her figurative harbours. These invitations act as a challenge to both herself and her audience: whatever the consequences this movement towards new beginnings must be undertaken.

Returning to Mytilène is far more than an ideological or artistic imperative for Vivien. She returns in an attempt to save herself from the harsh realities of contemporary society wherein she feels she is held in contempt as described in the allegorical *After Glow* (*La Vénus des aveugles*, 1903). A poem written in ten couplets and divided into two, the first part details Vivien's persecution as she intends to depart '[...] vers le havre inconnu.' (R.V, 128) Tormented by 'Les Femmes de Désir, (R.V, 128) who have plucked out her '[...] prunelles trop claires' (R.V, 128) in the style of true Greek tragedy, she finds refuge in the arms of 'Les Femmes de Douceur'. (R.V, 128)

Returning, again in order to depart, the poet finds solace:

Je sens mourir en moi la tristesse et la haine,
En écoutant leur voix murmurante et lointaine.

Voyant planer sur moi l'azur des jours meilleurs,
Je les suivrai, j'irai selon leurs vœux, ailleurs. (R.V, 128)

Vivien's speaker assumes the role of Psappha, the teacher and leader, as she now invites a lover to join her as they depart for a new world in *Vers Lesbos*. The tone is authoritative, assured and sometimes ludic, as the poet-speaker, now a seasoned

¹⁵¹ *Aller(s)-Retour(s): Nineteenth-Century France in Motion* ed. by Loïc Guyon and Andrew Watts (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 1.

‘voyager’ appears at times to take some amusement in her lover’s possible trepidation. The speaker assures her mistress that; ‘Tu viendras, les yeux pleins du soir et de l’hier...’ (R.V, 208) She pre-empts her mistress’s possible interrogations as a way of intercepting any potential uncertainties:

Levant tes yeux surprise, tu me demanderas :
« Dans quel lit inconnu dormirai-je en tes bras ? »

Des oiseaux chanteront, cachés parmi les voiles.
Nous verrons se lever les premières étoiles.

Tu me diras : « Les flots se courbent sous ma main...
Et quel est ce pays où nous vivrons demain ? » (R.V, 208)

This is Vivien’s *Shangri La*, a land of promise, one to which she always aspires. As Vivien’s poetry is characterized by a constant movement between departures and returns, from the known to the unknown and from the future to the past and back again, Mytilène epitomizes the one constant destination, the enigmatic space denoted here simply as *là-bas*:

Je te dirai, fermant tes lèvres d’un baiser :
« Le bonheur est là-bas... Car il faut tout oser...
« Là-bas, nous entendrons la suprême musique...
Et vois, nous abordons à l’île chimérique... » (R.V, 209)

Although Lesbos is an actual place, and the island upon which Mytilène is found, it becomes for the poet an imaginative space upon which she projects her particular desires. In order to escape the *mauvais destin* of their fate as outsiders in contemporary society, the lovers must journey to shores where, she believes, the spirit of Psappha still reigns.

II 1.3 Ressouvenirs

The joy that Vivien envisages in the future, and in the promise of rebirth in a new world as described in *Vers Lesbos*, is also found in the resurrection of memory as

the poet returns in order to reflect in *Ressouvenir*, from the 1910 collection *Dans un coin des violettes*. Here the poet/speaker finds that joy is to be found in the most unlikely of places, even in retrospective meditation on sorrow and pain.

Ô passé des chants doux ! ô l'autrefois des fleurs !...
Je chante ici le chant des anciennes douleurs.

Je le chante, sans pleurs et sans haine, à voix basse,
Comme on se bercerait d'une musique lasse... (R.V, 290)

Once again the power of the imagination is celebrated, and just as physical space can be refashioned to fit the poet's dreams, so too can memory. It is the abiding purpose of Vivien's poetry of rebirth to reclaim and recreate joy and to instil a sense of purpose for the lives of herself and her community of women, while acting as a validation for their lifestyle. Such is the message contained within the jubilant stanzas of *Aurore sur la Mer* (*Études et préludes*, 1901). Here the poet defiantly turns her back on suffering and pain, 'Je te méprise enfin, souffrance passagère !' (R.V, 28) energized by the influence of Psapha, she prefaces the poem with the latter's words:

...quant à mon sanglot : et que les vents
Orageux l'emportent pour les souffrances ! (R.V, 28)

Vivien always finds happiness by the sea, buoyed upon the waves ready to depart on a voyage, carried along by the strong winds she is literally and artistically transported by the elements.

Aujourd'hui je souris à l'aube qui nous blesse.
Ô vent des vastes mers, qui sans parfum de fleurs,
D'une âcre odeur de sel ranime ma faiblesse,
Ô vent du large ! emporte à jamais des douleurs ! (R.V, 28)

Surrounded by the evocative sea imagery, which with its smells of sea brine and sounds of blustering winds conjures up a portrait of the speaker as intrepid voyager, bolstered by her self-belief and happiness, is determined in her effort to deny the negative forces which threaten her. However movement, whether as transport to the future, or in the

form of departures and returns from the present and back again to the past, can also lead to another form of rebirth, that of the resurrection of the irrepressible imprint of pain. In *Chanson (Études et préludes, 1901)* Vivien painfully explores the dilemma of memory which frequently underpins her work, one whereby she expresses her belief that it is often necessary to forget in order to remember, and in turn remember in order to revive (even those most painful of souvenirs). The question at the heart of this poem is whether any particular moment in time, any memory, and fundamentally any dream or desire can be trusted when the object of that dream turns out to be false. The very diction of this short but emotionally charged poem with its employment of the verbs *oublier*, *retrouver*, *revivre* and *rêver* emphasizes the existential confusion and conflicting sentiments of the speaker, while revealing the problematic and complicated role of memory loss and retrieval:

Comment oublier le pli lourd
De tes belles hanches sereines,
L'ivoire de ta chair où court
Un frémissement bleu de veines ?

N'as-tu pas senti qu'un moment,
Ivre de ses angoisses vaines,
Mon âme allait éperdument
Vers tes chères lèvres lointaine ?

Et comment jamais retrouver
L'identique extase farouche,
T'oublier, revivre et rêver
Comme j'ai rêvé sur ta bouche ? (R.V, 35)

The lover's body is still felt as a physical imprint of memory. The speaker questions how such ardent desire is not reciprocated in the memory of her mistress. In the act of remembrance Vivien recreates their love just as she recreates the island of Lesbos to fulfil her dream of a feminine utopia. In her author's note to *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig writes:

We already have our islets, our islands, we are already in the process of living in a culture that befits us. The Amazons are women who live amongst themselves, by themselves and for themselves, at all the generally accepted levels: fictional, symbolic, actual. Because we are illusionary for traditional male culture we make no distinction between the three levels. Our

reality is the fictional as it is socially accepted, our symbols deny the traditional symbols and are fictional for traditional male culture, and we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us.¹⁵²

Though written some seventy years after the death of Renée Vivien, Wittig's theory which reveals the significance, in terms of feminist writing, of rebirth or re-creation within fiction, roundly captures the incentive behind Vivien's creation of a figurative Mytilène. Renée Vivien '[...] se retranche dans un monde personnel et idéal, où l'antiquité hellène occupe une large place [...]'¹⁵³ and returns to the universe of Psappa, prefiguring Wittig's ideology, in a valiant attempt to create a figurative literary island as a method to encourage and to cultivate the rebirth of feminine creativity. Just as the poet returns to her utopian island, she also uses memory as a manner of returning to the place of desire and as a means to transcend reality in order to recapture or recreate such desire. Mytilène also represents the poet's intense will to escape and to transcend the confines of contemporary society, from this perspective, and in the words of Diana Holmes:

In the utopia of Mytilène, spatially and temporally far away from Vivien's lived experience, perfect happiness is envisaged in terms of the blissful renunciation of the pain of singularity, within a women-only community held together equally by the ebb and flow of desire and by a mutual identification that transcends the division into self and other [...]¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* (London: Peter Owen, 1975), pp. 9-10.

¹⁵³ Albert, *op.cit.*

¹⁵⁴ Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

Chapter 2: To name and rename

The act of naming and renaming is a vital and recurring motif in the poetry of Vivien. The poet's personal preoccupation with naming and the revision of such begins with her own name changes over time, as they demonstrate a desire for rebirth and re-identification. Born Pauline Tarn, known as 'Sapho 1900', and 'La Muse aux Violettes', Vivien originally wrote under the pseudonym R. Vivien, before becoming Renée Vivien and eventually Paule Riversdale. Mesch describes the:

[...] complex history of Vivien's careful attention to her literary identity and her attempts to separate it from her personal life. [...] Vivien continued to be addressed as Pauline by her friends, even as she gained notice under her pseudonym.¹⁵⁵

Vivien's first publication with Alphonse Lemerre, *Études et préludes* (1901) was written under the *nom de plume*, R. Vivien, and was:

[...] distributed to the press with a card that read "René Vivien"... By 1903, Pauline was signing her third book as Renée Vivien, and the fact that it was a pseudonym was officially exposed by the influential literary critic and right-wing politician Charles Maurras.¹⁵⁶

From the public to the private, from characterization to the semiotic, Vivien recognizes the potential for reinvention which naming and renaming affords. In addition, her poetics thematize the importance of naming in relation to identity (that of self and others) and the delineation of abstractions and emotions such as love.

¹⁵⁵ Mesch, *op. cit.*, p.60.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60. Charles Maurras (1868-1952) author, critic and poet, who led the political movement known as *Action Française*, whose right-wing, monarchist-nationalist policies influenced the philosophy of *nationalisme intégral*. His controversial essay on Renée Vivien, published as part of his work *Le Romantisme féminin*, (Paris: Cité des livres, 1905) places Vivien's work within the Romantic and Decadent tradition, whereby she is compared favourably by the critic to Baudelaire. However his critique has been censured most notably by Elaine Marks for the distinct gender bias inherent in his assessment of Vivien's talent. For more see Elaine Marks, *art.cit.*

Vivien's interest in the process of renaming also points to a desire to break the patriarchal custom of naming for the father, as she reclaims the power and authority to rename in reaction to the universal and continuous renaming of women through time. Vivien also took great exception to the 'bourgeois denigration' of Sappho, preferring the Aeolic Psappha.¹⁵⁷ Through her poetics she remaps her very own history, metaphorically assigning herself alternative places of origin and birth. In fact Karla Jay opines that, 'The power to name or to rename, was one of Vivien's most potent tools, as it has been for other feminist authors.'¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Jay calls attention to the fact that Vivien's predilection for naming and renaming antedates by some seventy years Mary Daly's declaration in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a philosophy of Women's Liberation*, that '[...] women have had the power of naming stolen from us.'¹⁵⁹ The crucial importance of the role of revision, and renaming in the context of feminist poetics is summed up by Adrienne Rich in her essay *When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, where she claims that for the female writer:

[...] if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is renaming.¹⁶⁰

Naming and renaming takes place throughout Vivien's writing, but is most poignant when it refers to lovers past and present. Vivien's acts of naming can be attributed to her attempts to reshape memories and present realities. Specific name changes, such as Loreley, as an alternative, literary representation of Natalie Barney, demonstrate the poet's attempt to claim her authority in the retelling of a lover's story, or even a personal

¹⁵⁷ Karla Jay, *op.cit.*, p.70.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁵⁹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p.8.

¹⁶⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.60.

re-portrayal as seen through the poetic lens. As Vivien attempts to assume the role of Psappha in her poetics she claims the identity of the Greek poet in order to recreate Psappha's community in contemporary Paris.

II 2.1 Sappho 1900

Believing herself to be the reincarnation of one of Psappha's disciples and even at times Psappha herself (as demonstrated by André Billy's labelling of Vivien as 'Sapho 1900').¹⁶¹ Vivien sought to engage in a 'fantastic collaboration' with the Greek poet according to Gubar.¹⁶² Through this collaboration, therefore, Vivien claims the right to continue the Sapphic heritage and to be reincarnated as the poet herself. Seeing herself as Psappha, Vivien in turn designated Barney, the unfaithful lover, as Atthis who according to legend betrayed and abandoned the Greek poet. Through the sensuous medium of a kiss, the poet/speaker as Psappha in *Ressouvenir (Évocations, 1903)* summons the memory of a loving moment between herself and Atthis, as a tangible reality ready to be moulded in the present. Revival through memory becomes a sort of classification or naming of love, reborn as an extant emotive experience. And by naming herself as Psappha, and her lover as Atthis, the poet/speaker manages at once to project their story onto their own.

J'ai bu le vin brûlant de tes lèvres, Atthis...
Ah ! l'enveloppement tenace des étreintes,
Et la complicité des lumières éteintes,
Les rougeurs de la rose et les langueurs du lys ! (R.V., 117)

The poet assigns herself as Psappha's future emissary in *Pour une (La Vénus des aveugles 1903)*. In this instance, the omission of a name renders the identification of the woman of the title more significant. Psappha in conversation with Atthis, imagines a

¹⁶¹ André Billy, *L'Époque 1900* (Paris : Tallandier, 1951), p.227.

¹⁶² Gubar, *op.cit.*, p.47.

woman who will carry on her distinct heritage, proving herself worthy as a Sapphic disciple.

Dans l'avenir gris comme une aube incertaine,
Quelqu'un, je le crois, se souviendra de nous,
En voyant brûler sur l'ambre de la plaine
L'automne aux yeux roux. (R.V., 151)

The poem is exclusively dedicated to this woman, whom the reader will immediately identify as the poet herself, '[...] ayant à son front le mystère / Violent et doux' (R.V, 152) and she alone will bear witness to, as well as live true to '[...] l'amour sacré des vierges,' (R.V, 152). Gubar wrote of Vivien's unique relationship with Psappha that:

Sappho's pre-eminence provides Vivien and H.D. with evidence that the woman who is poet need not experience herself as a contradiction in terms, that the woman who achieves the confessional lyricism of Sappho will take her place apart from but also aside a poet like Homer. Through the dynamics of their collaboration with Sappho, feminist modernists like Renée Vivien and H.D. present themselves as breaking not only with patriarchal literary tradition, but also with nineteenth-century female literary history...The fantastic collaborations Vivien and H.D enact through their reinventions of Sappho's verse are not unrelated to the eroticized female relationships that quite literally empowered them to write. By recovering a female precursor of classical stature, moreover, Vivien and H.D. could mythologize the primacy of women's literary language.¹⁶³

Memory and its affiliated regret is the theme of *Les Oliviers (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)* as attested by Psappha's pithy epigraph: 'Et je regrette et je cherche...' (R.V, 143). Regret summons memory, and after a period of reflection allows for a true meditation on the nature of love and those beloved. Therefore, Psappha's retrospective meditations induce her to name her true lover as 'Atthis, la moins fervente, Atthis la plus aimée...' (R.V, 144) Here the olive branch, a classical symbol of peace and traditional adornment of brides and virgins, represents both femininity and the tranquil nature of reconciliation that memory affords.

¹⁶³ Gubar, *art.cit.*, p.47.

II 2.2 'The love that dare not speak its name'

Throughout literary and cultural history many attempts have been made to classify, define and name homosexuality. From the derogatory to the defamatory, the euphemistic and symbolic, many writers from Simone de Beauvoir to Lord Alfred Douglas, attempted to crystallize the homosexual experience in literary terms.¹⁶⁴ Douglas' famous line, 'The love that dare not speak its name', from his poem *Two Loves*, addressed to Oscar Wilde and written in 1894 still reverberates.¹⁶⁵ For Vivien, lesbian sexuality is encapsulated in the physical parallels she portrays throughout her poetry and in which she believes the true beauty of same sex desire lies. Desire is born, and reborn in an infinite loop, as one lover sees her own identity and physicality mirrored in the other. Vivien quantifies this love, names it as such, for its 'sameness' as illustrated in *Les lèvres pareilles* (*La Vénus des aveugles*, 1903).

L'odeur des frézias s'enfuit
Vers les cyprès aux noirs murmures...
La brune amoureuse et la nuit
Ont confondu leurs chevelures.

J'ai vu se mêler, lorsque luit
Le datura baigné de lune,
Les cheveux sombres de la nuit
Aux cheveux pâles de la brune. (R.V, 148)

In Vivien's poetry lesbian identity is reborn and resurrected from the mire of scorn in which it has for so long lingered. Vivien's work serves as an unapologetic reclassification of lesbian sexuality, and her community of women, as expressed in *Sans fleurs à votre front* (*À l'heure des mains jointes*, 1906): '[...] n'aurons ni honte ni tristesse

¹⁶⁴ Beauvoir's ambivalence (despite having indulged in many lesbian affairs herself) towards female homosexuality is encapsulated in her chapter devoted to the Lesbian in *Le Deuxième Sexe* wherein she classified female homosexuality as a choice rather than an innate orientation. She attributed female homosexuality to a form of narcissism and to an unresolved maternal instinct. Simone De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: H.Champion, 2004).

¹⁶⁵ For further reading see: Caspar Wintermans, *Alfred Douglas: A Poet's Life and his finest work* (London: Peter Owen, 2007).

/ De voir nous mépriser ceux que nous méprisons...' (R.V, 188) The poet counters the derogations of lesbianism prevalent at the turn of the century where expressions such as *gynandre* and *tribade* were deliberately offensive terms.¹⁶⁶ Vivien's efforts to solemnize homosexual desire between women, within a social context where '[...] the attitudes of a parent culture that despised evidence of sexual difference, defining it as a perversion [...]'¹⁶⁷ is nothing short of a triumph. Vivien manages to celebrate both sameness and otherness in *Nous nous sommes assises (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)*. The lesbian body is a redoubled one, emphasized by the use of the self-reflexive verb, and the beauty of the lovers lies in their similarity to each other, as well as in their 'difference' which sets them apart from the rest of humanity.

Ma Douce, nous étions comme deux exilées,
Et nous portions en nous nos âmes désolées...

... C'était l'apaisement, le repos, le retour...
Et je te dis : « Voici le comble de l'amour... » (R.V., 205-206)

For Vivien lesbian sexuality is timeless, immortal, and sacred, as portrayed in *Union (Sillages, 1908)*. The lover's bodies are so precisely mirrored that the speaker observes, 'Parfois même il nous semble être de même race' (R.V, 268) and this oneness is shown to be the very essence of their sensuality. Here Vivien offers an alternative to the myth of the sacred androgyne central to many mythologies. According to this myth the male and female spirit, prior to a cosmic split, existed as one body, and since that time both the male and female spirit strive to reunite.¹⁶⁸ This myth contributes to the notion of twin souls, but here in Vivien's *Union* the twin souls are both female:

¹⁶⁶ The British sexologist, Havelock Ellis, in collaboration with J.A Symonds, employed the term *gynandre* to denote a particularly masculine woman considered a threat to traditional notions of femininity in their 1897 publication *Sexual Inversion*. See: Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

¹⁶⁷ Benstock, *op.cit.*, p.11.

¹⁶⁸ Androgyny in Vivien's poetry will be examined in a later chapter.

Notre cœur est semblable en notre sein de femme,
Très chère ! Notre corps est pareillement fait.
Un même destin lourd a pesé sur notre âme,
Nous nous aimons et nous sommes l'hymne parfait. (R.V, 268)

The two women combine to become the perfect being. Their sexual embrace transcends time and space: 'Notre amour participe aux choses infinies, / Absolu comme sont la mort et la beauté...' (R.V, 268) Thus Vivien not only challenges the contemporaneous belief in the aberrant nature of lesbianism, she advocates and in a sense renames it as the most natural and perfect form of sexuality.

II 2.3 Friends and lovers; named, renamed and unnamed

Vivien rarely addresses her lovers by name in her verse, yet she frequently refers to Natalie Barney as Lorély.¹⁶⁹ In fact Vivien's autobiographical novel, *Une femme m'apparut*, features the character Lorély as the principal love interest, and who is generally accepted to be representative of Barney. Vivien published two editions of the novel, one in 1904 and again in 1905, where:

Rather than rework stylistic or literary flaws, in the second version she replaces Vally, the character based on Natalie Barney in the first version, with Lorély, who also represents Barney. Lorély, however is at the romantic centre rather than Eva, who was based on Hélène van Zuylen. This second version was Vivien's attempt to reimagine her romantic past and thus elides some of the polemic surrounding the profession of the woman writer that flavors the first.¹⁷⁰

Thus, it can be said that to a certain extent, Vivien 'reimagines' her and Barney's personal history using a name change as catalyst. 'Il est, au cœur de la vallée, un étang que on l'on nomme l'Étang Mystérieux.' (R.V, 180) This epigraph to the 1906 *Je connais un étang* (*À l'heure des mains jointes*) also refers to the process of naming,

¹⁶⁹ In her poetic works Lorély frequently changes to Loreley.

¹⁷⁰ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p.61.

while in the ninth couplet we witness the poet/speaker address her lover directly by name, as she invites her to abandon life in this world for oblivion in another. The alliterative use of 'l' evokes the sense of gliding into an abyss, 'Les lotus léthéens lèvent leur front pâli... / Ma Loreley, glissons lentement vers l'oubli.' (R.V, 181)

The name Loreley, which undergoes many changes, as it oscillates at times to Lorély, is also indicative of Vivien's belief in the transformative value of a name. Such is the poet's engagement with language and its intrinsic power, that the name itself is a playful invention based on symbolic terminology. Loreley is related to the word lore, the term given to the passing down of myths, customs, and stories, more often through an oral tradition, and is also derived from the verb 'lure' as it signifies a force of temptation. According to German folklore, *Lorelei* is the name given to the beautiful water sprite of the Rhine, famous for bewitching men and luring them to a watery doom.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Lorély becomes 'lovely' upon the removal of 'R' and replacing it with 'V', with both those letters being the poet's initials and R.V. her first *nom de plume*.

While Vivien is fully aware of the importance of naming and dedication in her work, she is equally conscious of the significance involved in the deliberate omission of a name. Writing, as she did, for a closed circle of friends, any veiled references would have been easily deciphered. *Je pleure sur toi* from the 1906 collection *À l'heure des mains jointes* is dedicated 'À Madame M...' Goujon reveals that this poem is dedicated to Madame Mardrus otherwise known as Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, the famous writer and artist and erstwhile lover of Natalie Barney (amongst many other women), and married

¹⁷¹ The 1801 German ballad composed by Clemens Brentano, *Zu Bacharach am Rheine*, tells the story of the beautiful Lore Lay who bewitched men and as punishment is banished to live her days in a nunnery. This ballad was later translated and adapted by Guillaume Apollinaire as *La Loreley*, in 1902.

to the orientalist Jean-Charles Mardrus.¹⁷² As a lament, the poem decries Lucie's temporary abandonment of her lesbian lifestyle for marriage to a man.¹⁷³ For Vivien, this is the highest betrayal, a denial of precious 'virginity', and thus the dedication, with its direct reference to Lucie's marital status, is a barely concealed attempt to wound.

L'orage et l'infini qui te charmaient naguère
N'étaient-ils point parfaits, et ne valaient-ils pas
Le calme conjugal de l'âtre et du repas
Et la sécurité près de l'époux vulgaire ? (R.V, 189)

The poet continues in the last stanza, to remind her friend of what she has left behind:

N'écoute plus la voix de la mer, entendue
Comme en songe à travers le soir aux voiles d'or...
Car le soir et la mer te parleraient encor [sic]
De ta virginité glorieuse et perdue. (R.V, 190)

From the tears shed over the fate of a friend in the last poem, to the poet's cries of regret in *Ils pleurent vers le soir* (from the same collection), memory proves a recurring source of torment for Vivien. 'Le jardin et le calme et la lumière basse, / Et tous mes souvenirs qui pleurent vers le soir...', (R.V, 194). Each of these memories remain as empathic companions of the poet lost in sorrow. Yet this is a form of self-indulgent melancholy as Vivien delves deep into her store of memories, purposefully resurrecting a painful past.

Parmi les frondaisons rôdent d'anciens soupirs,
Et le bonheur lui-même est incertain et tremble.
Je suis une qui se recueille et je rassemble
Mes souvenirs, mes souvenirs, mes souvenirs... (R.V, 194)

¹⁷² Also known as J. C Mardrus, he is famous for his translation of from the original Arabic into French. *Les mille et une nuits* (1898-1904).

¹⁷³ The complex and intricate personal and literary relationship formed between Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Renée Vivien is explored in depth in Anne-Marie Van Bockstaele's essay 'Renée Vivien et Lucie Delarue-Mardrus' included in the publication *Renée Vivien, une femme entre deux siècles (1877-1909)* textes réunis par Nicole G. Albert et Brigitte Rollet. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012). Herein Bockstaele concludes that: 'Tout comme Renée Vivien, qui cherche à faire vivre Sapho en la traduisant, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus se pose en successeur de l'héritage littéraire des poètes maudits... Le désir d'immortalité est ainsi gravé dans les recueils de ces deux femmes auteurs.' p. 41.

A deep sense of desolation is conveyed, as Vivien admits how alone and unloved she feels, reaching as far as her childhood for memories that serve only as taunts.

... Plus légers qu'un oiseau, plus frêles qu'un hochet,
Voici les souvenirs lointains de mon enfance.
Ils courent, leurs rubans sont couleur d'espérance,
Leurs jupes ont encore une odeur de sachet. (R.V, 195)

Crucially, she names but one lover, Loreley, in the eighth stanza, whose very image: 'S'évanouit ainsi qu'une blonde fumée'. (R.V, 195) There is little trace of the fantastical here, and no retreat into the realm of the symbolic, adding to the definitive, almost finalistic nature of these verses, rendered as stated fact, admissions and resignations. None more momentous than the last line of this stanza which states of Loreley: 'Et je sens aujourd'hui que je ne l'aime plus.' (R.V, 195) And yet, one fleeting memory arises, one which offers some light in darkness, 'Puis, un souvenir rit, et son rire chevrote...' (R.V, 195) Vivien's poetics frequently demonstrate the instability of memory, where those echoes of past loves are fluid and in a constant state of rebirth and reinvention.

Later in this collection, Vivien seems to retract her declaration of non-love for Loreley in *Mensonge du Soir*, wherein she identifies two mistresses. Lorely is referred to directly by name, while the second remains enigmatically unidentified. The *mensonge* of the title is particularly resonant, and leads to many interpretations. One is led to question whether the poet/speaker is to be trusted and the truth behind her meditations is marked by ambivalence. The title's rhetorical significance indicates that the very essence of a lie is a reinvention of the truth. The poet/speaker's reference, in the first line of the first stanza, to her vocation as a poet, intimates uncertainty and a possible lack of self-belief.

Or, par un soir pareil, je crus être poète...
J'avais rêvé, dans le silence trop exquis,
De soleils possédés et de lauriers conquis...

Et ma vie est semblable aux lendemains de fête.

Tout me fait mal, l'été, le rayon d'un fanal
Rouge sur l'eau nocturne, et le rythme des rames,
Les rosiers d'un jardin et les cheveux des femmes
Et leur regard, tout me fait mal, tout me fait mal. (R.V., 207)

The poet/speaker suggests that all the beauty of this world is particularly deceptive and cruel, and in contrast to the last poem, impugns the integrity of memory, preferring the promises offered by the future. Yet similarly to *Ils pleurent vers le soir*, this is a deeply personal poem, as emphasized by the repetition of 'Tout me fait mal', (R.V, 207) echoing the lugubrious line of the former 'Mes souvenirs, mes souvenirs, mes souvenirs.' (R.V, 194)

The tone changes however in the third stanza, with the poet/speaker calling to her side her two loves: 'Venez à moi, mes deux amours, mes bien-aimées...' (R.V, 207) In the following stanza she declares of these 'deux amours':

Vous fûtes ma splendeur et ma gloire et mon chant,
Toi, Loreley, clair de la lune, rire d'opale,
Et toi dont la présence est calme et vespérale,
Et l'amour plus pensif que le soleil couchant. (R.V, 207)

Both women are juxtaposed, one is named while the other remains a mystery, and for Vivien, as previously shown, un-naming is as meaningful as naming. Loreley represents vitality and transparency, 'Claire de lune, rire d'opale,' (R.V, 207) while the other woman is praised for her composure and serenity, 'Et toi dont la présence est calme et vespérale,' (R.V, 207). Loreley epitomizes the past, 'Toi que j'aimais hier,' (R.V, 207) while the other mistress signifies the present, 'Toi que j'aime aujourd'hui,' (R.V, 207). In the final stanza Loreley is renamed as Atthis and the unnamed lover is 'Comme Dika'. (R.V, 207) Considering Vivien's identification with Psappha, the role of both these

women (one being Psappha's lover and the other a beloved student), is of great significance and is perhaps an intimation of their identity.¹⁷⁴ However, while both women represent the past and present, when united together with the poet/speaker they are destined for a common future, 'Allons ainsi jusqu'au futur, ô mes amantes !/ Sachant que nous avons vécu nos plus beaux jours.' (R.V, 208) Ever in search of pastures anew, the implication here is that despite the fact that their best days are behind them, the future holds the promise of new beginnings, of rebirth.¹⁷⁵

Loreley is many things to Vivien, the contemporary personification of the perfidious Atthis, and equally the brave and beloved Amazon; and she is described vividly and heterogeneously throughout her œuvre. Again, from the 1906 collection *À l'heure des mains jointes*, she is portrayed in *Les souvenirs sont des grappes* as '[...] ma Lorely, ma fleur de lune.' (R.V, 212) Memories are described as grapes to be plucked from the vine at will, tempted by the siren call of night and 'l'heure amoureuse' (R.V, 212). Vivien aptly sketches within this verse the fluid and ephemeral nature of memory, its power to transform and remould history and the past. For Vivien, the poet's power lies in her ability to reconcile the past and present and acknowledge any pain incurred or resurrected.

¹⁷⁴ With regards to Atthis, Virginie Sanders states: 'Après Sappho, Atthis est le personnage le plus souvent évoqué du monde hellénique. Elle est uniquement présentée dans sa qualité d'amante ou d'ancienne amante de la poétesse de Mytilène. Aussi, dès son introduction dans *Évocations*, la distribution des références à Atthis se développe à peu près parallèlement à celle de Sappho.' Sanders, *op.cit.*, p.348. Vivien frequently aligns Natalie Barney with Atthis, as Karla Jay outlines: 'Because of Barney's infidelities, Vivien would come to see her more as the Atthis who eventually "betrayed" Sappho, rather than as Sappho herself. Vivien usually reserved this role for herself in her own work, although she casts herself as Atthis in *Atthis délaissée* (Atthis Abandoned). Barney could also identify herself as Atthis.' Jay *op.cit.*, p.65. Dika is considered to have been a student of Psappha, for whom she wrote the lines: 'But you, Dika, plait with your delicate fingers a wreath of sprigs / of Anise /upon your lovely hair; for very sure it is that the blessed Graces / are inclined to look / with favour / on anything decked with pretty flowers / and to turn away all that come to them / ungarlanded.' See Nancy Freedman, *Sappho: The Tenth Muse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014).

¹⁷⁵ An alternative reading of this poem will be examined in a later chapter which suggests that the second unnamed mistress is poetry itself.

Je sais combien sont faux les baisers que tu donnes,
Ô chère ! mais je sais que les larmes sont bonnes.

Le passé rare est un trésor enseveli...
Parfois je ne crains rien au monde sauf l'oubli. (R.V, 213)

Reconciliation also forms part of the pattern of revision and return throughout Vivien's poetics. While this notion of return is indicative of rebirth, it is also emblematic of lesbian sexuality; the concept of infinity reflected in the doubling of the female form as examined earlier. Furthermore, this complies with Vivien's perspective of love as an eternal experience, one which in spite of any breach of physical union in the present, can be recalled and reignited through memory. Such is the theme of *Réconciliées* (*Sillages*, 1908) which describes the blissful reunion of two lovers, whilst also illustrating the poet/speaker's self-reconciliation with her sexuality. However, a closer reading of this poem reveals the true motive behind the lover's reunion (at least from the perspective of the speaker) as a means of revindicating lost love.

Mon éternel amour, te voici revenue.
Voici, contre ma chair, ta chair brûlante et nue.

Et je t'aime, et j'ai tout pardonné, tout compris ;
Tu m'as enfin rendu ce que tu m'avais pris. (R.V., 261)

While the speaker vows to forgive all past transgressions, the validity of this promise is compromised by her retelling of her lover's betrayal. It is here, once more, that naming, or more specifically non-naming constitutes a damning accusation:

J'oublie en tes doux bras qu'il fut des jours haïs,
Que tu m'abandonnas et que tu me trahis.

Qu'importe si jadis le caprice des heures
Sut t'entraîner vers des amours inférieures ?

Qu'importe un être vil ? Son nom soit effacé ?
Je ne me souviens plus de ce mauvais passé. (R.V, 262)

Vivien hereby demonstrates how love renewed is not unchanged. Rather, through the process of experience and time it is reborn, re-named and more often, adulterated.

II 2.4 Identity / Self (re)-incarnations

Vivien's decision to change her name forms part of a complex pattern of self-reinvention which includes her desire to recreate her own past and heritage. This can be viewed as an attempt to regain control of her own life's narrative during a time when both literal and actual female history was written and effectuated by men. To this end, Vivien recreates her own origins in her poetry, re-imagining her birth provenance. As an Anglo-American lesbian poet, living in France and writing through French, Vivien uses the medium of poetry to explore her complex relationship with identity. Her belief (as expressed through her poetics) that self reinvention is a universal possibility, implies that this possibility for rebirth is not merely applicable to herself, as her poetry extends this message to her readership. The poet sees herself as 'une fille du nord', borne along the North winds from Scandinavia, as much as a Hellenic priestess of Mytilène. In *Toi, notre Père Odin (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)*, she entreats the gods of the north to awaken and listen to her, '[...] la fille de vos Skaldes vénérables [...]' (R.V, 219):

Mes Dieux du Nord, hardis et blonds, réveillez-vous
De votre long sommeil dans les neiges hautaines,
Et faites retentir vos appels sur les plaines
Où se prolonge au soir le hurlement des loups !

Venez, mes Dieux du Nord aux faces aguerries,
Toi notre père Odin, toi dont les cheveux d'or,
Freya, sont pleins d'odeurs, et toi, valeureux Thor,
Toi, Fricka volontaire, et vous mes Valkyries !

Écoutez-moi, mes Dieux, pareils aux clairs matins !
Je suis la fille de vos Skaldes vénérables,
De ceux qui vous louaient, debout auprès des tables
Où les héros buvaient l'hydromel des festins. (R.V, 218-219)

Craving the glacial purity of the North, with its romantic and boundless landscapes, conducive to limitless creativity and allied to her love of darkness, semi-light and night-vision, the poet announces in *La Fourrure (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)*:

Car je suis de ceux-là que la froideur enivre.
Mon enfance riait aux lumières du givre.
Je triomphe dans l'air, j'exulte dans le vent,
Et j'aime à contempler l'ouragan face à face,
Je suis la fille du Nord et des Neiges, – souvent
J'ai rêvé de dormir sous un linceul de glace. (R.V, 126)

Just as Vivien reinvents her identity as a woman of the North, she also finds a spiritual home in Italian landscapes, in particular the city of Venice. Italy, the home of Dante, birthplace of the Renaissance, and the site of so many temples to Venus and Aphrodite, is a place of special significance in the poetry of Vivien. In Venice, the city built on water, the poet is lured by the hypnotic charm of its canals, and her contemplation of the watery depths precipitates an ominous suicidal desire. Envisioning herself becoming one with the flowing water of the lagoon as it reaches out to sea, the poet/speaker allies her fate with that of the beautiful *Dogaresse (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)* from her short lyrical play of the same name.

LA DOGARESSE.
J'ai trop contemplé les lagunes,
J'ai trop aimé leurs eaux sans remous, leurs eaux brunes ;
Elles m'attirent comme un désastreux appel...
Je ne défaille plus sous le charme cruel
Des accords et des chants... L'eau morte a pris mon âme. (R.V, 155)

The dead water, reminiscent of the watery grave of Vivien's perverse Ophelia (which we will examine in the following chapter) mesmerizes the Dogaresse. Many of Vivien's heroines succumb to drowning, and the Dogaresse here is no exception, as the short play ends with her throwing herself into the lagoon. Denying the call of life in this

world, represented by the background sounds of the lute, she has made the choice to embrace oblivion in the water's deep.

J'ai fait taire les luths... Le silence des eaux
A plus de volupté que les sons le plus beaux...
Ah ! silence éternel où s'enlise mon âme !... ¹⁷⁶ (R.V, 155)

And yet, though the lagoon in which the Dogaresse chooses to drown is described as 'l'eau morte' and therefore seemingly symbolic of vast emptiness, it is not truly oblivion that she craves. In Vivien's poetics water is always emblematic of new life, and rebirth. The Dogaresse seeks to transcend this world for a new existence. However this 'new existence' is not defined by traditional conceptions of a spiritual afterlife. In Vivien's poetry death is a mystery to be solved, 'L'onde nocturne m'a dévoilé ce mystère : / Une mort amoureuse et pourtant solitaire,' (R.V, 156). Moments before her death, Viola one of her female attendants, who along with Gemma had experienced a deep sense of foreboding, suddenly declares 'Au fond de ma tristesse il sommeille une joie.' (R.V, 157) Viola's dormant joy alludes to a change of mood, which in turn presages a death that may not be so tragic. Vivien's drowning heroines are almost presented as intrepid and brave explorers of the *néant*. For Vivien, death guarantees immortality, in its creation of a martyr and in the perpetuation of one's name. In the immediate aftermath of her death, Gemma confesses her love of the Dogaresse, a love that possibly could not be named aloud when her mistress was alive:

GEMMA
Comme elle, qui s'en va vers la mer, j'agonise...
L'eau replie en rampant ses mille anneaux d'azur
Sur celle que j'aimais... (R.V, 157)

¹⁷⁶ Ellipsis in original.

Vivien's ode to the 'The Floating City', *À Venise (Évocations, 1903)*, portrays her spiritual affinity with Venice, where just as the rivers Po and Piave join together as they flow into the Adriatic, the speaker of this verse seeks to 'marry the sea' in an attempt to merge with its spirit.¹⁷⁷

Ainsi, laissant flotter mon corps à la dérive,
Je mêlerai mon âme à l'âme de la mer,
Je mêlerai mon souffle, à la brise furtive.
Se dissolvant, légère et fluide, ma chair
Ne sera plus qu'un peu d'écume fugitive.
Dans la pourpre du soir j'épouserai la mer. (R.V, 121)

Transcending suicidal ideation, the poet expresses her profound yearning to return to nature and to dissolve into the sea, to become something or someone new, as if baptised and reborn. Certain places hold a deep spiritual value for Vivien, and Venice, a city emerging from the watery depths is viewed as a portal to another incarnation. Strongly influenced by Eastern mysticism, Vivien is drawn to the concept of reincarnation, and there are many examples of this throughout her work.¹⁷⁸ Particularly inspired by writers such as Shakespeare and Dante, she sees herself as related to them in some way, united in spiritual and literary kinship, one that binds them together through time and creativity. *Sous la rafale (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* finds the poet/speaker join King Lear and Dante at the centre of a violent tempest, one reminiscent of the storm scene in Shakespeare's play. Feeling abandoned and isolated from her family and friends, 'Et ceux de ma famille et ceux de mes amis / M'ont repoussée avec des outrages vomis' (R.V, 188), she forms her own alliance with both the king and poet.

Mon père, le roi fou, mon frère, le poète,
Voyez mes yeux et ma chevelure défaite.

¹⁷⁷ In her detailed analysis of Vivien's poetry, Virginie Sanders remarks that: 'Dans l'ensemble, il y a 17 occurrences relatives à l'Italie, distribuées sur 14 poèmes: deux dans *Évocations*, quatre dans *La Vénus des aveugles*, six dans *À l'Heure des mains jointes*, deux dans *Les Kitharèdes*. Dans la plupart des cas, la rêverie est située dans un décor vénitien. Ces évocations, intrinsèquement liées aux personnages du Doge et de la Dogaresse prennent progressivement des accents de plus en plus funèbres.' Sanders *op.cit.*, p.331.

¹⁷⁸ An aspect explored further in *Seeking the Divine*.

Des gens du peuple, en nous apercevant tous trois,
Se signeront avec d'inconscients effrois. (R.V, 189)

Vivien finds congruence in shared experience, valuing it over blood relationships. She compares herself at once to Lear, 'Ô vieux Lear, comme toi je suis errante et folle' (R.V, 188) and also Dante, 'Comme toi, Dante, épris d'une douleur hautaine, / Je suis une exilée au cœur gonflé de haine.' (R.V, 188) Reinventing her past allows her to disengage with her original identity, and in response to societal condemnation of lesbianism (and her family's dismay in the face of her sexuality)¹⁷⁹ Vivien succeeds in recreating a literary 'family' of her own, in this instance with Dante and Shakespeare's Lear as she also does with Psappha and the women of Mytilène.

Echoing Oscar Wilde's famous line that: 'There is only one thing worse in the world than being talked about, and that is not being talked about',¹⁸⁰ from his 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Vivien opens her Shakespearean-inspired *Sonnet irrégulier II* (*Sillages*, 1908) with the line, 'Il vaut mieux être vil que d'être estimé vil'. (R.V, 281) Wilde's seminal Decadent novel satirizes Victorian society, its mores and institutions, through verbal witticisms and *double entendres*; whilst exploring the complexities of self-identity. In this instance Vivien's verse exposes the cowardice of anonymity as she posits those 'unnamed' as the real villains.

Quels sont ces espions en effet ? Que faut-il
Faire pour contenter ceux-là ? Quelle pâture
Leur jeter ? Quels sont-ils ? et de quelle nature,
Ceux-là qui m'ont jugé, disant que je suis vil ?

Pour moi je ne connais ni leurs noms ni leurs faces,
Mais je les sais petits et trompeurs et voraces
Et n'ayant que l'amour des gloires et du bien. (R.V., 281)

¹⁷⁹ See Goujon, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003), p.10.

Vivien's poetics attest to the fact that she believed that one's identity should be self-made and this is particularly evident in her parabolic poem *Le Bloc de marbre* (*Évocations*, 1903). Here a block of marble hewn from the mountainside, personified, bemoans its undesired removal from its dormant state. It is sculpted into a statue, Pygmalion-like, by a faceless and nameless *créateur*, only to be exhibited to a cold and critical public, much like those revealed in the former sonnet.

Je devins la Statue au front las, et la foule
 Insulte d'un regard imbécile et cruel
 Ma froide identité sans geste et sans appel,
 Pâture du regard passager de la foule. (R.V., 117)

Pâture as it signifies fodder for the baying masses is mentioned in both poems, highlighting the poet's profound disdain for a public she viewed as alienating and unsympathetic. The poet views the unshaped, unborn state of the marble as preferable to its moulding into a shape fit for public consumption and in accordance with the needs of its 'creator'. This is both a protest against patrilineality and the belief in a masculine deity. Freedom, as defined therefore by Vivien, exists when individuality is given free reign. Above all, she reveals the belief that such freedom is obtained in the empowerment and control gained through self invention.

Je te hais, créateur dont la pensée austère
 A fait jaillir mon corps en de fiévreux instants,
 Et dont je garde au cœur les rêves sanglotants...
 Je connais les douleurs profondes de la terre,

Moi qui suis la victime orgueilleuse du temps. (R.V, 117)

Metempsychically the poet sees herself as previously incarnated in the soul of a lovelorn page in *Je fus un page épris* (*À l'heure des mains jointes*, 1906). For Vivien, the medieval figure of the page was one she emulated, going so far as to dress and pose as one as she and Barney:

[...] identified with the pages/suitors, on their knees, supplicant and yearning before the women who, ideally, remained forever slightly out of reach. As in the courtly romances, the posture is a fixed one, and the appropriate attitude is one of devotion, humiliation, and unquestioning subservience.¹⁸¹

This characterization corresponds with Vivien's self-identification with the mournful lover, androgynous and perennially ensnared in an unrequited romance.¹⁸² Like Woolf's *Orlando*,¹⁸³ Vivien's changes of identity symbolize her desire for sexual and spiritual fluidity, powerfully encapsulated in her short stories most notably *Le Prince charmant*, from the 1904 publication of *La Dame à la louve*.¹⁸⁴ In *Je fus un page épris*, the speaker re-imagines herself as well as her lover in another time and place.

C'est l'heure où le désir implore et persuade...
Le monde est amoureux comme une sérénade,
Et l'air nocturne a des langueurs de sérénade.

Les ouvriers du soir, tes magiques amis,
Ont tissé d'or léger ta robe de samis
Et semé d'iris bleus la trame du samis.

Il me semble que nous venons l'une vers l'autre
Du fond d'un autrefois inconnu qui fut nôtre,
D'un pompeux et tragique autrefois qui fut nôtre.

Sur mes lèvres persiste un souvenir charmant.
Qui peut savoir ? Je fus peut-être ton amant...
Ô ma splendeur ! Je fus peut-être ton amant...

Une ombre de chagrin un peu cruel s'obstine,
Amenuisant encor [sic] ta bouche florentine...
Ah ! ton sourire aigu de Dame florentine !

Mon souvenir est plus tenace qu'un espoir...
L'âme d'un page épris revit en moi ce soir,
D'un page qui chantait sous ton balcon, le soir... (R.V, 202-203)

¹⁸¹ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.89.

¹⁸² Vivien's revision of the Courtly Love tradition is examined later in Re-transformations.

¹⁸³ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁸⁴ In Vivien's tale, *Le Prince Charmant (La Dame à la louve, 1904)*, the plot consists of a complicated love triangle between the beautiful heroine Sarolta and the brother and sister Bela and Terka, and is reminiscent of that in Shakespeare's *As You Like it*. Sarolta, who pines for the brother Bela, eventually marries him, finding in him an exceptionally gentle suitor. On their wedding night, upon discovering that Bela is in fact his sister Terka in disguise, Sarolta is in no way unhappy, and they both live the rest of their lives in loving contentment.

Possibly the most significant incarnation of Vivien, particularly in terms of naming, (and one which will be further explored in the subsequent chapter) is that of the enchantress Viviane, one of the various Vivian(e)/Vivien literary characters she named herself for.¹⁸⁵ Just as Renée directly symbolizes her rebirth, Vivien from the Latin *vivus* meaning alive, further emphasizes this desire.¹⁸⁶ Viviane, the fairy of Arthurian legend, is famously known for her enchantment of Merlin, who she entraps and magically binds inside an oak tree for all eternity in the mystical forest of Brocéliande.¹⁸⁷ Viviane appeals to the poet on myriad levels; principally she symbolizes feminine strength and power, a worthy adversary of man. She is exceptionally enigmatic, a mistress of disguise and reinvention, known under several names, among them The Lady of the Lake, Elaine, Niniane and Evienne. Engelking informs us that:

Drowning women such as Ophelia and fatal women such as Vivien of the Lake represent two sides of a feminine gender dynamic that was shifting during the late nineteenth century: the self-sacrificing way women were expected to behave, and the possibilities of breaking that pattern as women began taking control of their own (sexual/creative/linguistic?) destinies.¹⁸⁸

Vivien dedicates several poems to Viviane; however the verse that best portrays the inherent traits of the enchantress, (notably her fluid sense of identity) is once again to be found in the 1903 volume, *À l'heure des mains jointes*. Vivien is intrigued by the binary

¹⁸⁵ Bartholomot Bessou attributes Vivien's choice of pseudonym to several sources. She suggests that one of these sources may be Vivien the knight, nephew of William of Orange, whose exploits are retold in the *chanson de geste*, *Chanson de Guillaume*, a medieval epic poem dating as far back as the 11th century. The other source, and one generally accepted by various critics, is that of the enchantress Vivien of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, his retelling of the Arthurian legend based on Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Bessou also asserts along with Jeanne Manning, that the similarity between Vivien's pseudonym and that of the politician René Viviani is beyond coincidence. If her name choice was indeed in part inspired by Viviani (1863-1952) who as leader of the socialist party was also a champion of women's rights, (and a letter written by Vivien to Charles Brun in 1905 does imply a connection) then the choice itself could be seen to have a feminist political motivation. See Bessou, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-57.

¹⁸⁶ Suzanne Rodriguez interprets her name as re-née followed by vie-viens. Rodriguez, *Wild Heart, a Life: Natalie Clifford Barney's Journey from Victorian America to Belle Époque Paris* (New York: Ecco, 2002), p.108.

¹⁸⁷ For further reading see: Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge: The Cambridge Companions to Literature, 2009).

¹⁸⁸ Tama Lea Engelking, 'Renée Vivien and The Ladies of the Lake', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies art.cit.*, p.364.

oppositions which govern life, thus her heroine hovers between evil and good, dark and light:

À minuit, la plus belle étoile la couronne ;
Parfois elle est cruelle et parfois elle est bonne.

Et Viviane est plus puissante que le sort ;
Elle porte en ses mains le sommeil et la mort. (R.V, 196)

‘Son pouvoir féminin’ (R.V, 196) is such that her might eclipses all others, even Merlin, the greatest of wizards, ‘Les plus grands enchanteurs sont des enfants près d'elle.’ (R.V, 196) However, her most distinguishing talent is that of her ability to transform at will, she is reborn, reincarnated each day:

Ses cheveux sont défaits et le soleil les dore.
Chaque matin, elle est plus blonde que l'aurore.

Ondoyante, elle sait promettre et décevoir.
Vers le couchant, elle est rousse comme le soir.

À l'heure vaque où le regret se dissimule,
Elle a les yeux lointains et gris du crépuscule.

Lorsque le fil ambré du croissant tremble et luit
Sur les chênes, elle est brune comme la nuit.

Des rois ont partagé son palais et son table,
Mais nul n'a jamais vu sa face véritable.

Elle renaît, elle est plus belle chaque jour,
Et ses illusions trompent le simple amour. (R.V, 196-197)

Engelking believes that this particular Viviane (as opposed to other portrayals found in Vivien’s poetry) is the one to which the poet most relates to, as:

Vivien’s choice of the verb “renaître,” which recalls the past participle “renée” can be read along with the verse “Les violettes ont salué Viviane,” to suggest that this is the “Viviane” with whom the poet most closely identifies. Renée Vivien was known as “La Muse aux violettes,” a symbol she adopted after the death of her dear friend Violette Shillito. She had the purple flowers printed on her calling cards, and posed with a bouquet of violets in several portraits including the famous Lévy-Dhrumer pastel. The color is also a reference to her principal muse, Sappho. Vivien beacons her readers in this poem, “Ecoutez . . . Nulle voix n’est pareille à sa voix.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Engelking, ‘Renée Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake’, *art.cit.*, p.370.

Vivien channels her voice through that of Viviane just as she did with Psappa. By speaking 'under the name' of these women she resurrects a female literary tradition as a challenge to the patriarchal world of letters. Vivien's naming, renaming and un-naming of those women in her life, attest to her authorial control as well as her desire to remould memory. As uttered by Juliet, Shakespeare's timeless question 'What's in a name...?'¹⁹⁰ points to the significance of a title, one which in the context of his play, had the potential to determine whether one lived or died, as well as exposing the paradoxical nature of arbitrary labels. Vivien's preoccupation with the significance of naming and renaming in her verse avows to its potential for both artistic and personal rebirth.

¹⁹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), p.59.

Chapter 3: New Women from Old

The emergence, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, of the socially divisive phenomenon of the New Woman, was coincident with significant cultural and social upheaval; such as the rise in socialism, an increasingly organised labour movement, the introduction of secondary and higher level education for women, as well as the sinister threat of *dénatalité* in France.¹⁹¹ Largely a cultural prototype, the '[...] belief in the emergence of a 'new woman' owed much of its currency to contemporary literature [...].'¹⁹² According to the Edwardian caricaturist and critic Max Beerbohm, the New Woman 'sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain.'¹⁹³ Thus the literary world presented opposing female archetypes in the form of Ibsen's Nora and Shaw's Mrs. Warren on the one hand, with Zola's sexually decadent Nana and Flaubert's tragic Emma Bovary on the other. Rachel Mesch notes that:

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, French male authors repeatedly imagined the dangers of female sexuality, creating characters whose unbridled sexual energy reached pathological proportions as they fuelled the fictions that framed them.¹⁹⁴

The image of the New Woman was synonymous with sexual liberation; she was, as defined by Sally Ledger:

[...] variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet, she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement...The New Woman was very much a fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and new journalism, she was part of that concatenation of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880's and 1890's.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ L.H, 'Evolution de la fécondité en France au XIXe siècle' *Population (French Edition)*, 30 (1975) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1530490>.

¹⁹² James F. Mc Millan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.142.

¹⁹³ For further reading see: John Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁹⁴ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p.25.

¹⁹⁵ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.1.

While it is true that for the most part women's lives were unchanged by this newly imagined emancipation, it is certain that the notion of a New Woman was for some commentators a disturbing one. Female sexual liberation became associated with the fear of the spectre of homosexual practice amongst women, with the novelist Marcel Prévost identifying in his work the existence of a certain:

[...] female type which he classified as *demi-vierges*, young women in fashionable Parisian society who reputedly flouted all the genteel conventions to which modest, well-brought-up young girls were expected to adhere.¹⁹⁶

Mary Louise Roberts claims that the model of the New Woman in France was for the whole an Anglo-American import, personified by such notable types as Alice B. Toklas, Hilda Doolittle (H.D) and Gertrude Stein.¹⁹⁷ Possibly one of the earliest French examples of the New Woman was the actress Sarah Bernhardt, whose very public profile and artistic success epitomized the modern, free spirited and independent female. Amidst the fear of sexual degeneracy, literature also responded by branding the New Woman as a symptom of decadence. Sally Ledger notes that:

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897, was very much a response to the New Woman: there are a number of explicit references to her in the text...Lucy Westenra is bitten in her sleep by Count Dracula, and thereafter develops appetites of a more wanton kind: she is transformed from a blonde-haired innocent into an oversexed vampire, who has to be massacred in the most appalling way by the brave young English men of the piece in order to be removed as a threat to the British 'race'. What this analysis reveals is that whilst the mainstream women's movement of the *fin de siècle* was busy distancing itself from the sexual excesses associated with Wildean decadence and concentrating instead on civic and constitutional rights for women, the popular fictional press often insisted on representing the New Woman as a sexual decadent.¹⁹⁸

The New Woman as a symbol of decadence and sexual dissolution appeared obliquely in poetry as well. Swinburne's *Anactoria* begins with a verse voice by Sappho as she remembers her lover and their sexual union, 'Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on

¹⁹⁶ McMillan, *op.cit.*, p.142.

¹⁹⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *op.cit.*

¹⁹⁸ Sally Ledger, 'The New Woman and the crisis of Victorianism' in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 30.

flower/ Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour.’¹⁹⁹ However, as with Baudelaire’s *Femme Damnées*, this archetype of New Woman is vilified for her blatant display of sexual voracity and, ‘[...] by depicting lesbianism as violent and unfulfilling (Sappho pines alone), Swinburne ultimately reinforces the common association of same-sex desire with aberrancy and dysfunctionality.’²⁰⁰

While Vivien did not overtly subscribe to any philosophical or political manifesto of feminism, her work connotes an understanding of the significant shifts in gender relations of the period. Karla Jay notes of both Vivien and Barney that:

Vivien was similarly disinterested in the systematic development of feminist theory, she preferred the allusiveness of Symbolist imagery in both her verse and prose. Nevertheless, as a close analysis of the fictional works of both these writers indicates, their prose, like their poetry, arose out of deeply held and coherent convictions about the centrality of women and of women's values, the relative superiority of women, and the necessity to reclaim heroic female figures from their burial places in patriarchal history.²⁰¹

Thus, in Vivien’s poetry an original paradigm of the New Woman appears in the form of these ‘heroic female figures’, wrought from classical, biblical, folkloric and other historical sources. These women shine through Vivien’s verse as exemplars, and prove the existence of female strength and resilience throughout history, and long before the term New Woman emerged at the *fin de siècle*.

II 3.1 Mythological and Hellenic New Women

Vivien explores the rich heritage of Classical Antiquity for evidence of her ideological New Women. The Bacchante or Maenad of Greek and Roman mythology was invariably a priestess or follower of Dionysus and Bacchus. These women were noted for their frenzied and intoxicated practices which involved flesh eating and

¹⁹⁹ Algernon Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, *Poems and Ballads* (Chatto: London, 1904), p.57.

²⁰⁰ Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decadence and aestheticism’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.35.

²⁰¹ Karla Jay, *op.cit.*, p.36.

orgiastic dance rituals as part of the Bacchanalia, and their name literally translates as ‘the raving ones’.²⁰² In Vivien's poetry the *bacchante* is foregrounded as a lone figure amidst the frenzied madness, while the male figure of Bacchus is notably absent. In *L'odeur des vignes (Études et préludes, 1901)* a sense of imminent change is evoked as ‘La pesante douceur des vendanges oppresse / La paix, la longue paix des automnes sereins.’ (R.V, 36) As the ‘[...] spectre de Bacchante erre parmi les treilles’ (R.V, 36) she heralds the end of one season and the beginning of another. Vivien presages the demise of heteronormativity under the crushing force of the symbolic *pressoir*:

Les baisers sans amour sur les lèvres stupides,
 Les regards vacillants dans le fond des yeux vides
 Sortiront, enfiévrés, de l'effort du pressoir,
 L'air se peuple déjà de visions profanes,
 De festins où fleurit le front des courtisanes...
 Les effluves du vin futur troublent le soir... (R.V, 37)

La Satyresse (Évocations, 1903) is a fierce, untamed creature existing in an all-female universe, devoid of men and significantly her male counterpart, the Satyr. Her very presence acts as a counterpoint to classical artistic depictions of the Satyr typically surrounded by a female entourage, and as such suggests the emergence of a singular feminine archetype.²⁰³ In the gynocentric world that she inhabits she is a threat to young virgins, described as ‘Êtres de solitude avides d'infini’ (R.V, 105) as she, the huntress ‘[...] attend pour emporter sa proie, / Les seins inviolés, les fronts et les yeux purs,’ (R.V, 105) And yet, although she is pictured as a wild and ruthless *chasseuse*, Vivien wishes for her to be regarded as a true creature of nature, merely following her fundamental instincts. As we have already seen, in the quest for sexual parity, the

²⁰² For further reading see Ernest L. Abel, *Encyclopaedia of Intoxication in Mythology: A Worldwide Dictionary of Gods, Rites, Intoxicants and Places* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2006). Bacchantes, also known as Maenads, feature frequently in 19th century literature and art, most notably Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) in the famous portrait *Bacchante* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau in 1894, and in Turgenev's novella *First Love*, 1860.

²⁰³ The Satyr as an ithyphallic male consort of Dionysus is a traditional symbol of male fertility and potency, normally surrounded by a subservient coterie of female nymphs as depicted in Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873.

women who populate the all-female universe of Vivien's poetry are at once fierce and animalistic as they are pure and divine. *La Satyresse*, as an example of the poet's New Woman, could not exist in any world where the feminine impulse is denied. An embodiment of ruthless female strength, she is dangerous, a herald of death, and above all sexually potent:

Qu'elle aime et qu'elle immole à l'excès de sa joie,
Qu'elle imprègne à jamais de ses désirs obscurs.
Son passage flétrit la fraîcheur des fontaines,
Son haleine corrompt les songes d'infini
Et verse le regret des luxures hautaines
Au rêve que l'odeur des baisers a terni. (R.V, 105)

Vivien's admiration for these untamed creatures is affirmed in *La Faunesse* (*Évocations*, 1903). Here the *faunesse* of the title (an alternative appellation of satyress) is again portrayed as a wild woman, given to wanton desires:

Ses lèvres ont ravagé les grappes meurtries
Et bu le baiser rouge et cruel du Désir.
Elle ne connaît point les blanches rêveries,
Ni l'amour que les bras ne sauraient point saisir. (R.V, 114)

She signifies a reversal of the patriarchal order, as it is she who wields power over the male deities, 'Éros l'agite, et Pan la sert et la protège.' (R.V, 114) Following her own path, it is the *faunesse* who carves out her own destiny, and her pursuance of a 'douce chasteté' symbolizes her lesbian identity:

Parfois, elle s'éloigne, et, lasse de l'Été,
Elle appelle les vents sans parfum et la Neige
Qui promet l'impossible et douce chasteté. (R.V, 114)

Closely identifying with the lone *bacchante* of *Bacchante triste* (*Études et préludes*, 1901), the poet's exposition of *différence* in this poem underscores the importance of maintaining one's sense of individuality, even within a world that has set itself apart from orthodoxy. The poet portrays a colony of unfettered, female bacchanalian spirits living freely and independently outside any conventional universe. However there exists

one in their midst who appears wary of their revelry, possibly fearing that being unmoored from civilisation is itself a trap; society's way of exiling those unwanted. Unlike her female companions, she is not distracted by the lure of intoxication, 'Tout en elle est lassé des fausses allégresses.' (R.V, 24) Haunted with presentiment she is 'Celle qui voit toujours avec mélancolie / Au fond des soirs d'orgie agoniser les fleurs.' (R.V, 24) For Vivien, cautious apprehension and the cultivation of mistrust in the face of illusory liberty, is an essential attribute of her New Woman.

Free-spirited and independent, Psappha is emblematic of all those women revered and resurrected in Vivien's poetry and upheld as an exemplar for womankind. Psappha, in her role as teacher of women, and leader of an all-female community, exudes confidence and autonomy. Vivien reveals her to be resolute and determined, and here in her verse *Gorgô* (*Évocations*, 1903) she stands firm against her rival, one who has also been banished from her heart:²⁰⁴

Pourquoi revenir, les seins encore avides,
 Tournant vers mon seuil tes pas irrésolus ?
 Pourquoi m'implorer, Gorgô ? J'ai les mains vides
 Et je n'aime plus. (R.V, 97)

Vivien's re-visioning of Psappha's life, positing her as a pioneer of lesbian enlightenment, not only provided the poet and her circle (as previously noted) with a precedent for their way of living and writing, but her story also gave the poet and her female audience a framework around which they could construct a discourse on the higher calling of female and lesbian sexuality.

²⁰⁴ In his chapter entitled 'Sappho's Group: An Initiation into Womanhood', Claude Calame informs us that 'Sappho was not the only woman at the end of the seventh century to have a circle of young girls about her. She had two rivals in the persons of Andromeda and Gorgo. A fragment of commentary on papyrus tells us that the same relations existed between Gorgo and her companions as between Sappho and her pupils.' *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, ed. Ellen Greene (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996), p.115.

Vivien's New Women are often presented as cruel and impervious, and as such fulfil many of the Decadent and Symbolist criteria in her portrayal of a seemingly malevolent feminine archetype. However, their capacity for cruelty is more indicative of their fortitude, as demonstrated by Vivien's representations of Aphrodite, a goddess whom Barney and Vivien believed to be symbolic of '[...] that higher, pure, asexual gynandrous level...'²⁰⁵ Indeed, Aphrodite acting as Psappa's personal deity (she is the primary goddess mentioned in Psappa's fragments) is shown to be as cruel as she is kind to the Greek poet. In Vivien's dramatic poem *La Mort de Psappa* (*Évocations*, 1903) Aphrodite is delineated as a force to be reckoned with:

Aphrodita changeante, implacable Immortelle,
 Tu jaillis de la mer, périlleuse comme elle.
 La vague sous tes pas se brisait en sanglots.
 Amère, tu surgis des profondeurs amères,
 Apportant dans tes mains l'angoisse et les chimères,
 Ondoyante, insondable et perfide. Et les flots
 Désirèrent tes pieds, plus pâles que l'écume. (R.V, 86)

And yet, this depiction of Aphrodite does not subscribe to the negative image of female strength and sexuality prevalent at the *fin de siècle*, rather, and as Jay opines:

Barney and Vivien's Aphrodite must be absolutely and unquestionably followed. She is never wrong, even when she is unreasoning, perverse and cruel. If Aphrodite torments her lovers, it is because love itself is cruel: She herself must never be blamed.²⁰⁶

As the goddess of the religion of love, she mirrors the invulnerable nature of male deities in patriarchal religions, and as such corresponds to Vivien's concept of an all-female universe. Vivien's Hellenic women are all-powerful, omnipotent and majestic. They are goddesses and poets, keepers of a sacred female literary tradition. Such is the case of Korinna of Athens, to whom Vivien dedicates her laudatory verse *Korinna*

²⁰⁵ K. Jay, *op.cit.*, p.79.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78.

trionphante (*Évocations*, 1903). Korinna, who hailed from Tanagra in Boeotia in the sixth century B.C., was a contemporary and teacher of Pindar, who she infamously outrivaled in a poetry competition, after which ‘[...] a monument was subsequently erected in her honour. Aelian says that she actually defeated Pindar five times and that he bitterly called her a sow.’²⁰⁷ Thus Korinna serves as an historical precedent for Vivien and other *femmes-auteurs* in her capacity as a female writer derided for her talent. In Vivien’s verse, her poetic aptitude is revealed in a litany of praise:

Ivre du vin des chants ainsi qu'une Bacchante,
Elle a loué la terre et les Dieux tour à tour,
La femme aux yeux d'amant, Korinna triomphante. (R.V, 113)

Vivien lists Korinna’s triumphs in the past tense, as historical substantiation of female literary prowess, yet she is *eternally* triumphant, an indelible example of feminine lyrical accomplishment throughout time.

[...] Elle a chanté l'Hadès où languissent les fleurs,
Elle a chanté l'effroi des êtres et des choses
Devant l'Aphrodita qui verse les douleurs
Et mêle le poison au cœur simple des roses,
L'Aphrodita, multiple ainsi que l'arc en ciel,
Vers qui monte l'essor des lyres inquiètes...

[...] La Femme aux yeux d'amant, Korinna triomphante. (R.V, 113)

Vivien’s poetic treatment of the Amazons, female warriors known for their transgression of traditional gender archetypes (possessing at once feminine traits and following a masculine role), is examined in *Les Amazonnes* (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902). The figure of the Amazon was employed as a derisory lampoon of female suffrage and intellectualism in the nineteenth century, caricatured in satirical publications such as *l'Assiette au beurre*.²⁰⁸ Such images fed into societal fear of

²⁰⁷ David Sacks and Oswyn Murray, *Encyclopaedia of the Ancient Greek World* (New York: InfoBase Publishing, 2005),p.90.

²⁰⁸ James Mc Millan notes that ‘In journals such as *Le Grelot* and *L'Assiette au Beurre*, a leading anti-clerical and left-leaning illustrated organ of the pre-war period, feminists and ‘new women’ were ridiculed as eccentrics and sexual misfits. Grandjouan one of the principal artists for *L'Assiette au Beurre*,

feminine insurgence and a dulling of masculine virility, spurred on by the writings and illustrations of those apprehensive of female authorship such as the highly respected artist and caricaturist Honoré Daumier.²⁰⁹ Mesch outlines that: ‘These phallic women, armed with pens, are described as amazons, but their physical threat comes purely from intellectual muscle.’²¹⁰ Mesch defines Vivien, as a *fille publique*, and a manifestation of the New woman, ‘[...] that illustrious female rebel who consumed the French imagination in the 1890's and early 1900's.’²¹¹ As a ‘new woman’ Vivien's writing could be considered to constitute a ‘disruptive act’²¹² according to the distinction made by Roberts, as an expression of ‘[...] resistance to patriarchal structures [...]’.²¹³ The poet’s Amazonian women represent a direct challenge to the traditions of domestic and matrimonial obligation prescribed for women. Proud and fearsome, under the tutelage of Artemis, they stand united in their rejection of heteronormativity:

Elles gardent une âme éclatante et sonore
 Où le rêve s'émousse, où l'amour s'abolit,
 Et ressentent, dans l'air affranchi de l'aurore,
 Le mépris du baiser et le dédain du lit.
 Leur chasteté tragique et sans faiblesse abhorre
 Les époux de hasard que le rut avilit. (R.V, 53)

specialised in antifeminist caricatures which portrayed women’s emancipation as a recipe for havoc in both the private and the public spheres.’ Mc Millan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p. 143.

²⁰⁹ Véronique Chagnon-Burke writes that: ‘Honoré Daumier's series on the *bas-bleus* (bluestockings) popularized the image of the woman of ideas. This series, for which Daumier contributed the lithographs but not the captions, was published in the satirical magazine *Le Charivari* in 1844. The caricatural images embody the accepted idea that the *femme-auteur* (woman author) or the *amazone littéraire* (literary amazon) is against the natural order of things and thus a danger to society. The targeted women appear either as unattractive and old or incapable of carrying on their domestic duties.’ ‘Women art critics and the Parisian Cultural World’, *Women Art Critics in Nineteenth-Century France: Vanishing Acts*, ed. Wendelin Guetner (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2013), p.98.

²¹⁰ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p.19.

²¹¹ *Idem*, p.42.

²¹² Roberts, *op.cit.*

²¹³ Mesch, *op.cit.*,p.42.

II 3.2 Rebellion

Hypothetically the paradigm of the New Woman is one who straddles the temporal threshold between the death of old definitions of womanhood and the birth of a new standard. Delilah, as previously noted, epitomizes Vivien's interpretation of the *femme fatale*, in that she defies patriarchal entitlement over the female body. She also typifies the poet's representations of the Amazon, as an indomitable heroine, much maligned throughout literary history as a fallen woman and sinner. Vivien's revitalized New Women from old act as paragons for the modern woman, in that they provide durable examples of feminine fortitude and potential. Moreover, and in an effort to right the wrongs of historical narrative prejudice, the poet assigns herself the role as their advocate through verse. In providing an alternative interpretation of the Samson and Delilah story, we are offered a rare insight into the mind of the righteously vengeful woman, a voice for those universally marginalized. Thus, in *l'Éternelle vengeance* (*Études et préludes*, 1901), Delilah the abused prostitute, defiled by many, is doubly defiled by Samson who despite having fallen in love with her, hypocritically refuses to offer her the one thing that she desires, equality:

Elle le supplia sur la couche d'ivoire :
« Astre sanglant, dis-moi le secret de ta gloire. »

Mais l'amant de ses nuits sans amour lui mentit. (R.V, 32)

To a certain extent, the message contained in Vivien's verse acts a vindication for male fear of female revolt; as they imagined a legion of New Women motivated by revenge, threatening to usurp established domestic and cultural frameworks. This of course is the poet's intention, as her poem is designed to threaten the patriarchal system and to reclaim women's right to power.

Vivien's New Women are angry and rebellious. They threaten and menace. They are loud and outspoken, and they engage in 'disruptive acts' in order to agitate and discompose the equilibrium. The *Gêllo* from the eponymous poem published in *Évocations* (1903) is a female demon associated with infertility.²¹⁴ In Vivien's verse she is reborn as a saviour of young virgins. Those fortunate (according to Vivien) to be visited by the *Gêllo* are released from the bonds of matrimony and pregnancy. Thus the poet disrupts the negative image of the demon as a threat to fertility by inferring that this threat is in fact a surety and promise, marked by the analogy that those women visited by the *Gêllo* will be granted a life of eternal spring (maidenhood) without knowing summer (motherhood):

Bacchante de la Mort ivre de chasteté,
Elle te parera de violettes blanches,
Des jeunes frondaisons et des premières branches.
Elle t'entourera d'un printemps sans été...
Tu ne connaîtras point les réveils de l'Épouse,
Ô vierge ! car voici Gêllo pâle et jalouse... (R.V, 92)

Thus Vivien envisages alternative lifestyles for the modern woman while drawing on such examples, and this sentiment, as an alternative to prescribed maternity, resonates in a time where reproductive rights and advocacy for contraception and abortion were campaigned for by prominent women's rights activists like Madeleine Pelletier and Nelly Roussel.²¹⁵

II 3.3 Perversion and Transgression

The concept and portrayal of perversion is an important and frequent leitmotif in Vivien's œuvre, as it pertains to the transgression of cultural and sexual normative

²¹⁴ Cited in Aramaic and medieval Christian manuscripts, the *Gêllo* is a demon in feminine form associated with the spiritual possession of women, resulting in miscarriage and infant mortality. For further reading see Shaul Shaked and Joseph Naveh, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1987).

²¹⁵ See Holmes and Tarr, *op.cit.*, p.13.

practices and beliefs. The poet's New Women are often perversions of their documented selves, as the poet attempts to subvert the narratives that frame them. However Vivien, instead of revising their historical representations as fallen women, prostitutes, the marginalized and subaltern, seeks to extol their 'perversity'. Their marginalized status and their alliance with the notion of sin, not only sets them apart, but 'perversely' allows them to acknowledge themselves as sinners with a certain sense of pride, and furthermore designates them as women reborn outside the parameters of society. In *Péché des musiques (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)*, the poet/speaker places herself as sinner, as she documents a list of her trespasses in a tone that suggests gratification and delight in her accomplishments.

J'ai fui, devant un reptile couché,
Devant les sinueux discours des philosophes.
Mais, ô ma conscience obscure ! j'ai péché. (R.V, 131)

In this confessional the speaker lays bare her soul, revealing to the world the imperfect conscience of a woman. In doing so she manages to demythologize the sacred image of woman as pure, submissive and pious. Here we witness the speaker indulging in decadent debauchery, as she moves in metaphorical journey from Lupanar, the infamous brothel of Pompeii, passing through a distinctly oriental landscape towards Babylon, where assuming the role of male violator, she lifts the veil of Vashti, before finally alighting in Mytilène.

Je voyais s'empourprer les murs de Babylone
Et mes mains soulevaient le voile de Vashti.
Éranna de Télôs m'a vanté Mytilène.
Comme un blond corps de femme indolemment couché,
L'Île imprégnait la mer de sa divine haleine...
Voici, ma conscience obscure ! j'ai péché... (R.V, 131)

This is a luxuriant verse, evocative of a sandalwood-scented dream. The poet lures the reader to join in her lesbian gaze of woman, where the spectacle of female desire is rendered transparent as the de-veiled Vashti. Vashti, ancient Queen of Persia, belongs to

Vivien's iconographic gallery of New Women as her story also bears the hallmarks of a proto-feminist struggle against male domination. According to Hebrew Biblical tradition, Vashti is featured in the Tanakh as the first wife of Ahasuerus, King of Persia. Vashti's story is found in the Book of Esther, the reading of which is central to the ritual of the Jewish holiday of Purim. Legend has it that Ahasuerus while banqueting with his noblemen summoned Vashti from her private chambers to parade herself unveiled before the men. Vashti refuses, and her king is humiliated by her insubordination in the presence of his guests. As the men fear that Vashti's defiance could incite similar seditious behaviour in their women, they advise the king to replace Vashti with another wife. Thus Ahasuerus following their counsel dismisses Vashti, and Esther becomes his new queen. Vashti represents first wives replaced by a second, and one whose narrative has been erased in favour of a more submissive woman. Feminist scholars have long interpreted Vashti's actions as one of the first examples of a demand for women's rights. And while she is succeeded by the much admired Esther, a feminist icon in her own right,²¹⁶ the fact that the latter replaces her in biblical narrative, signifies how she epitomizes the banished female in literary tradition. The poet/speaker's mimetically masculine gesture in the unveiling of Vashti implies that only women have the right to reveal another woman's story and to assimilate and benefit from same.

Perhaps the most contentious representation of the New Woman in Vivien's poetry takes the form of Ophelia as depicted in *À la perverse Ophélie (La Vénus des aveugles*, 1903). Shakespeare's Ophelia is the epitome of the fragile, doomed and silenced female, a victim of male hubris. As a character Ophelia is rendered supremely tragic because of

²¹⁶ While Vashti's story is marked by her defiance of the king, her replacement Esther is known for her docility. Modern commentators however point to the fact that Esther sought to disrupt the status quo through passive aggression, working within the order of rule to change that very order. For further reading see: Dianne Tidball, *Esther a True First Lady: A Post-Feminist Icon in a Secular World* (Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 2001).

the fact that she is completely dependent upon others, particularly men, and her story is one that unfolds through the accounts given by those who know her rather than through her own words. She is thus a ‘ventriloquized’²¹⁷ personage, voiceless and powerless. Ophelia's tragedy is that she is a woman forced to live in a man's world, evidenced by the inequity inherent in her relationships with men, who dictate to her their conditions for her very existence. However, Ophelia's decision to take her own life (the only independent choice that she can make), contrasts notably with Hamlet's indecision. While Hamlet dithers, Ophelia acts. Traditional nineteenth-century artistic portrayals of Ophelia focus on her dead body, thus perpetuating her status as tragic, impassive and ineffectual.²¹⁸ Gazing upon her decomposing, battered corpse, the speaker of *À la perverse Ophélie* questions her own possible involvement in Ophelia's demise, thus initiating a debate into society's responsibility in the condemnation of women in general, and its inherent tragic implications. Ophelia's body is therefore transformed from its former position as a focal point for misogynistic Pre-Raphaelite and Decadent female iconography, to one of a powerful emblem of female martyrdom.

L'eau morte a, dans la nuit, les langueurs des lagunes,
Et voici, dispensant l'agonie et l'amour,
L'automne aux cheveux roux mêlés de feuilles brunes.

L'ombre suit lentement le lent départ du jour.
Comme un ressouvenir d'antiques infortunes,
Le vent râle, et la nuit prépare son retour,

Je sonde le néant de ma froide folie.
T'ai je noyée hier dans le marais stagnant
Où flotte ton regard, ô perverse Ophélie ? (R.V, 132)

In Shakespeare's drama Ophelia's death is brought about by her descent into madness, and the resurgence of interest in her as a feminine aesthetic prototype in nineteenth-

²¹⁷ See: Janet L. Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

²¹⁸ Perhaps the most famous artistic portrayal of Ophelia is the painting by Sir John Everett Millais (1852). Herein Ophelia is depicted floating towards her death (according to the image depicted by Gertrude, Hamlet's mother). The painting has become synonymous with popular 19th-century portrayals of passive and tragic femininity.

century culture points to a negative association with women and mental infirmity. Elaine Showalter observes that, 'Whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature's purest form.'²¹⁹ However it is the poet speaker of this verse who questions her own sanity, as she wonders, whether through a temporary lapse of reason, if it is she who has murdered the young woman:

Ai-je erré, vers le soir, douloureuse, et ceignant
D'iris bleus ton silence et mélancolie,
Tandis que les échos raillent en s'éloignant ? (R.V, 132)

Therefore, it is the speaker who dons the cloak of Hamlet as the metaphysical/cultural embodiment of societal cruelty against women. It is the speaker who has been rendered mad rather than evil. This reversal of fate, along with the depiction of Ophelia as a corrupting cadaver amidst stagnant surroundings, both pervert the traditional archetype. Ophelia is perverse, because she is a woman of flesh and blood, not a polished effigy of passive femininity. Moreover, Vivien's designation of her as a 'perverse Ophélie' underscores the character's position within the Decadent literary heritage, a movement accused of textual perversity in its exposition of unnatural sexuality and effeminate subjectivity.²²⁰ Cassandra Laity details how Modernist perceptions and rejections of Decadent Romanticism centred on the presence of a '[...] perverse "or "unmanly" sexuality and "unhealthy" textuality.'²²¹ A perception, therefore, which suggests that Decadent writing is feminine writing outside of the negative connotation. However Laity, along with Lillian Faderman, asserts that Vivien in her writings has fallen prey to

²¹⁹ Elaine Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,' in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985), p.83.

²²⁰ Gubar asserts that Vivien '[...] subversively implies, moreover, that the lesbian is the epitome of the decadent and that decadence is fundamentally a lesbian literary tradition.' Susan Gubar 'Sapphistries' in Ellen Greene, *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission, Vol.3*, ed. by Ellen Greene (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p.205.

²²¹ Cassandra Laity, 'H.D and A.C Swinburne: Decadence and Modernist Women's Writing.' *Feminist Studies, Vol. 15, No. 3, Feminist Reinterpretations/Reinterpretations of Feminism* (Autumn, 1989), p.469.

the '[...] darker side of the Decadent poetic.'²²² Their rationale is based on the belief that Vivien lived her art through her life, and that her self-destructive behaviour and subsequent early death can be attributed to: '[...] her identification with Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*, among other Decadent sado-masochistic images of the "doomed lesbian.'²²³ This assertion, however, is wholly unfair and untrue. The poet's art must be examined independently from the poet's life, and a thorough analysis of Vivien's œuvre uncovers the sagacity of purpose and adroitly cadenced symbolism inherent to her writing. Furthermore, it must be noted that *Lesbia Brandon* was published posthumously; therefore as Swinburne died in the same year as Vivien, this is the one piece of work of his with which she would not have been acquainted. Instead Vivien's Ophelia holds true to Elaine Showalter's conviction that: 'There is no 'true' Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts.'²²⁴

Rather, Vivien's Ophelia is another of the poet's heroines, a manifestation of the New Woman denied. She is a victim of a misogynistic society composed of men and women alike, represented by the speaker of this verse. Arianna Marmo believes that Vivien's fascination with Ophelia (in both her poetry and fiction) is due to the fact that the poet is captivated '[...] by the heroine's negative forces and internalizes Ophelia's self-destructive behaviour as a way of reacting against a rigid patriarchal order through her madness and suicide.'²²⁵ Marmo also states however that: 'The drowning, though, represents neither a rite of purification nor an act of redemption, for the surface of the water on which Ophelia's corpse floats is dead and silent ("l'eau morte"; "l'eau

²²² Laity, *art.cit.*, p.464.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Showalter, *Ibid.*, p.93.

²²⁵ Marmo, *art.cit.*, p.65.

calme”).²²⁶ Notwithstanding, the stagnant marsh in which the body floats is perceived through the eye of the speaker, and as such is a reflection of her anxieties and fears. This marsh also symbolizes societal malaise in the reception and treatment of women who attempt to live outside of the patriarchal order. In Vivien’s poetry water is always emblematic of transformation, whether it is a brackish swamp, open sea, or tranquil lake. And here Ophelia’s death is not in vain, the poet wishes to stir the stagnant emotions, initiating a meditation on a universal responsibility in female suppression.

II 3.4 Souveraines

Without contention Vivien's overwhelming avant-gardist manifesto for the resurrection of historical female icons in the quest for the establishment of a New Woman, is contained in *Souveraines (Évocations, 1903)*. Karla Jay outlines that Vivien:

[...] expresses the conviction that women are sufficient unto themselves, for they can provide for each other all necessary connections; sister, mother, lover, friend, and child. This sense of identification led Vivien in particular to re-examine the historical record for female figures with whom she could find communality. She paid as careful attention to those conventionally deemed evil as to the usual heroines, for she felt that these figures contained all women within themselves.²²⁷

The title alone, *Souveraines*, firmly ratifies each woman's status as historical heroines for the modern age. Vivien devotes an octave to each *souveraine*, who range from Lilith to Lady Jane Grey. The poem opens with a stanza dedicated to Lilith, the first woman, and in her role as such is arguably the mother of all of Vivien’s heroines. She declares the significance of the rejected first woman of Genesis in *Litanie de la haine (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)* ‘Le souffle ténébreux de Lilith est en nous.’ (R.V, 150) Lilith, according to Biblical legend is Adam’s first wife, often demonized and much less

²²⁶ Marmo, *art.cit.*, p.69.

²²⁷ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.39.

documented than Eve. As such she fulfils the criteria of the forgotten, maligned heroine, much favoured in Vivien's writings. According to Semitic folklore, unlike Eve, Lilith was created independent of Adam and therefore equal to him, but was banished from the Garden of Eden when she refused to become subservient to the first man and was subsequently replaced by Eve, a woman created by God from the rib of Adam. In this poem, Vivien goes so far as to pit Lilith against Jehovah, God Himself. As Sanders observes, 'Dans le poème "Souveraines", Lilith s'attribue le rôle de principe créateur opposé au Dieu de la genèse de l'Ancien Testament.'²²⁸ Her story is likened to that of Vashti, as a woman who refused to bow to the unreasonable dictates of a man, supposedly ordained by a higher power to reign as her superior. Because of her insubordination Lilith is said to have entered the realm of demons, forever haunting the Earth.

D'ombres et de démons je peuplai l'univers.
 Avant Ève, je fus la lumière du monde
 Et j'aimai le Serpent tentateur et pervers.
 Je conçus l'Irréel dans mon âme profonde.
 La Terre s'inclina devant ma royauté.
 Jéhovah fit éclore à mon front d'amoureuse
 L'astre fatal de la Beauté
 Je ne fus pas heureuse. (R.V, 93)

Moreover as sovereign of the *irréel*, she represents the feminine imagination, the supreme muse of female creativity.

Vivien devotes the next stanza to Cassiopée (Cassiopeia) of Greek mythology. Cassiopeia as wife of King Cepheus of Ethiopia, and mother of the famed beauty Andromeda, was said to have incurred the wrath of the gods in her boastful proclamation of her beauty. In turn the gods demanded her daughter to be sacrificed. Andromeda survives the sea-monster Cetus, saved by the hero Perseus, however

²²⁸ Sanders, *op.cit.*, p. 361.

Cassiopeia's vanity does not go unpunished and she is banished to the heavens eternally tied to a chair of torture. The constellation Cassiopeia exists as a perpetual reminder of her outspoken vanity.²²⁹ Again, she epitomizes for Vivien, not sinful vanity, but a woman who boldly challenges the androcentric order.

Psappha wrote of her and named her Doricha, and Rhodopis (whose name literally translates as rosy-cheeked) was one of the Greek hetaerae of the 6th century B.C.²³⁰ Most accounts of Rhodopis, claim that she was a friend and possible lover of Aesop the fable-teller, and that both were slaves of the same master, before she was sold to another, Xanthes, and transported to Egypt. Here she met Charaxus, brother of Psappha, who having fallen in love with her paid highly for her freedom. Psappha is said to have written a fragment chastizing them both for flagrant expenditure. Where Rhodopis' story becomes most interesting is in the revelation of the historical claim (by Pliny the Elder) that having risen in the ranks of the wealthy in Egypt after her liberation, she was responsible for the building of the third pyramid.²³¹ In Vivien's verse this story is corroborated, and the voice of Rhodopis acknowledges how privileged she is to have been mentioned in the writings of Psappha, regardless of the context:

Mon visage de rose ardente triompha,
Moins glorieux d'avoir créé les Pyramides
Que d'avoir attiré les lèvres de Psappha. (R.V, 93)

The pyramid legend has long since been dismissed; however Vivien's acknowledgement of the Rhodopis tale acts as a reminder of the possibility of female achievement and the injustice in the dismissal of same.

²²⁹ For further reading see: Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition* (London: Penguin, 2011).

²³⁰ The hetaerae were educated and highly prized courtesans in Ancient Greece.

²³¹ For more see Roger Lancelyn Green, *Tales of Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 1995).

Bethsabée (Bathsheba) is the subject of the fourth octave, another Biblical heroine perennially associated with the spiritual downfall of a Biblical hero, in this case King David. 'De mon corps s'exhalaiient le nard et le santal. / La splendeur d'Israël éclairait mon visage.' (R.V, 94) Legend has it that David spying Bathsheba bathing on the roof of his palace, falls instantly in love with her, and wishing to take her as his wife sends her husband to the front line of battle where he is summarily killed. Bathsheba and David marry, but the king's actions bring great displeasure to God and the couple are blighted by tragedy. Bathsheba's faultless sin is her beauty; as such she is the victim of male concupiscence.

Similarly Campaspe is an historical martyr to masculine lust and hubris. Mistress of Alexander the Great, he is said to have commissioned a portrait of her by the renowned artist of antiquity, Apelles. Seeing her beauty so faithfully rendered by the great artist, Alexander realises Apelles' love for his subject and duly offers her to the painter as a prize.

Alexandre, frappé de l'orgueil de ma chair,
Voua mes seins de flamme a la gloire d'Apelle,
Afin que mon été ne connut point l'hiver
Et que l'Art me vetit de candeur solennelle.
L'Astarté consacra ma jeune royauté
L'Astarté fit brûler a mon front d'amoureuse
L'astre fatal de la Beaute.
Je ne fus pas heureuse. (R.V, 94)

Cléopâtre, the subject of the sixth octave is another of history's defamed women. Powerful as well as beautiful she proclaims, 'Je rayonnai. Je fus le sourire d'Isis, / Insondable, illusoire et terrible comme elle.' (R.V, 94) Cleopatra's reign as the last pharaoh of Egypt and her union with Julius Caesar is eclipsed by her alliance with Mark Antony and her much documented suicide. She joins the ranks of authoritative women, feared for their potency and strength.

Paulina of the seventh octave, as Empress of Rome and wife of Caligula for a short period in 38 A.D., was famed for her beauty and ostentatious wearing of precious jewels, ‘Les perles ondoyaient parmi ma chevelure,’ (R.V, 94). She suffered as a political martyr when she became a rival to Caligula’s sister, Agrippina the Younger. Sentenced to death for alleged sorcery and consultation with astrologers, Paulina was made to commit suicide under the order of her sister-in-law.

Mystery shrouds the true fate of Poppée (Poppaea Sabina, 30-65 A.D.) the heroine of the eighth octave. Second wife of the Roman Emperor Nero (her third marriage) Poppée was said to have been a scheming beauty who used her feminine wiles to gain the throne. However, modern scholarship indicates that she was a deeply religious woman who campaigned for justice for her people and that she was secretly a practising Jew. She died shortly before the birth of her second child, according to some sources at the brutal hand of her husband.²³²

Vivien dedicates the ninth octave to one of France’s most powerful women of royal blood, Éléonore de Guyenne (Eleanor of Aquitaine, 1122-1204). ‘Sous mes pas sanglotaient les luths et les violes. / Les troubadours chantaient ma douce royauté’ (R.V, 95). Duchess of Aquitaine from a young age, Éléonore went on to become wife of Louis VII and mother of his daughters. After the annulment of their marriage she married Henry II of England for whom she bore eight children. She was imprisoned between 1173 and 1189 for supporting her son Richard I’s revolt against the king. She died in

²³² For further reading see: Gérard Minaud, *Les vies de 12 Femmes d'Empereur Romain: Devoirs Intrigues et Voluptés* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

1204 after having lived through the reigns of several kings of England and France; mother and wife to the highest nobility of both nations.²³³

The tenth and eleventh octaves are devoted to Élisabeth Woodville (Elizabeth Woodville, 1437-1492) and Lady Jane Grey respectively. The former was a woman of low nobility who controversially became wife to King Edward IV of England between 1464 until his death in 1483.

Mon regard fut plus frais que la lune du Nord,
D'un vert froid et voilé comme les mers anglaises.
J'appris le goût, l'odeur, le désir de la Mort,

La fuite, l'exil gris sur les grises falaises.
La défaite insulta ma pâle royauté. (R.V, 95)

As Vivien's verse suggests, Élisabeth was no stranger to exile and death, as after the death of her husband a power struggle ensued which resulted in her sons being imprisoned in the Tower of London (the famous princes in the tower) and she was stripped of her titles and lands. Lady Jane Grey (1537-1554), or the Nine Days Queen, reigned over England and Ireland from the 10th to the 19th of July 1553. She was also imprisoned in the Tower of London, falsely accused of treason and beheaded.²³⁴ 'Mon sourire d'enfant éclaira l'échafaud. Sur ma douleur pesa l'accablante couronne. / J'expiai dans le sang l'heure de royauté.' (R.V, 95)

Aside from demonstrating a scholarly knowledge of history, particularly rooted in Classicism, Vivien's *Souveraines* works as a condensed chronicle of famous, yet often overlooked female icons. However, the significance of the moral contained in this work is made apparent in the final couplet of each verse: 'L'astre fatal de la Beauté. / Je ne fus

²³³ Régine Pernoud, *Aliénor d'Aquitaine* (Paris: Hachette, 1983).

²³⁴ Alison Plowden, *Lady Jane Grey and the House of Suffolk* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985). Vivien felt a particular affinity with Jane Grey, famously dressing as her for a *tableau vivant* as described by Colette. See Colette *op.cit.*, pp.83-84.

pas heureuse.’ (R.V, 93-95) The poet wishes to connect all of these women, hence the repetition of the last couplet, but also to elucidate the fact, that despite their accomplishments, each one suffered a grievous fate. That fate was not only brought about by the deception they endured at the hands of men, whereby each was manipulated, sexually, politically, morally and spiritually on the basis of their gender. Rather, more importantly for Vivien, misfortune is the universal fate of all women, as they are persistently disregarded and defamed. The reader is also reminded that despite their renown, each of these women is overshadowed by the men in their lives, their history precarious when compared to those of the opposite sex. The poet thus throws down the gauntlet for modern women, those potential ‘New Women’, to regain happiness in the true fulfilment of their fate, a possibility which proved so elusive through the ages.

The extent to which the concept of the New Woman was such a divisive, and certainly considered by many as an inauspicious aspect of changing gender relations at the *fin-de-siècle*, is summed up by Richardson and Willis:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline.²³⁵

Thus the New Woman was defined not only by her desire for equality with men, but principally by her *perverse* sexuality which in turn led to her portrayal as a degenerate and dangerous archetype of womanhood. Vivien, recognising this fact, demonstrates in her poetry that while drawing on parallels from historical fact and fiction this archetype could be re-visioned, and reborn. We may well question why images of the Satyresse,

²³⁵ Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis eds., from their introduction to *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.xii.

the Amazon, and resurrected heroines of history would have any commonality with the turn-of-the century caricature of the bloomer-wearing, bicycle-riding New Woman; and the answer is that they were brought to life in Vivien's poetics at a time when shifting gender relations and identities resulted in an anti-feminist backlash. Vivien's resurrections of female sovereigns of Antiquity, and the true-historical past, serve as an example of how feminine authority can be achieved and yet undermined. Vivien's poetry reveals her belief that the success of the New Woman is dependent on her capacity to transcend the boundaries of a patriarchal society in which they are contained in order to attain true fulfilment. As women continued to be maligned for their natural desire for greatness, the punishment for a society resistant and uncompromising in the face of necessary change, is the death of 'Woman' (new and old), embodied in the floating, murdered corpse of Ophelia.

Part III Transformation

Chapter 1: Metamorphosis

The poetry of Renée Vivien, when analyzed from the perspective of the three major themes of death, rebirth and transformation, sees these themes form part of a continuum where death marks beginnings, moving transitionally forwards towards rebirth and eventually (but not finally) to transformation, a significant site of artistic endeavour for the poet. This continuum however does not operate on a linear plane; rather it exists in circularity, and in the aforementioned thematic motifs as they present throughout the poet's œuvre. Transformation as a theme in Vivien's verse begins with the poet's preoccupation with subjective and objective metamorphosis, the evolution of the artist, and the philosophy of change and transition which imbues her work. Metamorphosis, as the literal and perceptual process which sees the elemental change of one thing into another, has always been a familiar paradigm in literature. It exists within the narrative heart of the *Bildungsroman*, and achieves universality within the realm of the fairytale; the lowly housemaid who becomes a princess, the ugly duckling transformed into a swan.²³⁶ Within Vivien's poetry, metamorphosis presents symbolically in the form of supernatural creatures such as mermaids, watery beings whose very physical nature (half human, half fish) embody the notion of transition. For Vivien, the bifurcated body of the mermaid represents society's distorted vision of the lesbian as perverse and grotesque; her life underwater epitomizes the submerged feminine, while physically she embodies the diverse potential of female endeavour in that she has the ability to live both above and below sea level. And yet paradoxically her

²³⁶ No study of metamorphosis in any form of literature would be complete without mention of one of the most seminal works on this theme, namely Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* published in 1915 some six years after Vivien's death. Herein we find many thematic similarities to Vivien's work, particularly in the exploration of transformation, alienation and the disconnection between mind and body. Following the Hellenistic tradition of the poetry of metamorphosis enshrined in the epic tales of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is considered the most inspirational works of this genre.

dismemberment exemplifies the restricted feminine, the possession of a tail rather than legs engendering paralysis. Furthermore the mermaid fulfils the archetypal dichotomy of woman as either good or evil. Along with this, Vivien's anthropomorphic characterizations of herself and others underpins her seemingly Heraclitean inspired philosophy that the natural world, the spiritual and metaphysical are fluid, in a constant state of flux, uncovering a hidden domain where all beings exist in symbiosis.²³⁷ The lyrical expression of flow is omnipresent in Vivien's work, from the ebbing seas, the sweeping winds, the seagull on the wing, to the movement of time, and the birth of dreams, the flow of inspiration. Metamorphosis is also symbolic of Vivien's belief in the artistic imperative of change, whereby the ultimate goal of the artist is to personally evolve and change through art, the antithesis of which is artistic and philosophical stasis, the poet's very definition of the absence of freedom.

III 1.1 The Siren Call

For Vivien, the lure of the sea represents a powerful urge for escape and spontaneity. The poet repeatedly expresses a desire to merge with the strongest elements of the natural world, seeing them as portals to those emotions she associates with love, desire and artistic inspiration. In *Chanson (Cendres et poussières, 1902)*, the sea is portrayed as an unstoppable force, continuous and ever flowing, a natural form of lyricism akin to that of music:

La mer murmure une musique
Aux gémisséments continus ;
Le sable met, sous les pieds nus,
Son tapis de velours magique. (R.V, 57)

²³⁷ The Heraclitean philosophy of Flux (by which the philosopher opined that all nature was subject to the law of change, famously claiming that one cannot step into the same river twice), is hypothetically applied here to Vivien's poetics, where transformation and change exist as vital motifs.

The soft sibilants of ‘gémissements’ evoke the soothing sounds of the ocean, a hypnotic music which inspires as it seduces. Upon regarding the sea, the poet allows her thoughts and imagination to wander, allowing her to see mermaids in the depths, the green flowing algae reminiscent of the hair of sirens.

Et les algues, sœurs des coraux,
Semblent, à demi découvertes,
D'étranges chevelures vertes
De sirènes au fond des eaux. (R.V, 57)

This is a poem of transformation and about transformation. Just as the poet envisages mermaids transformed in the ordinary seascape, suddenly the sea wind blows hostile, thus offering no solace to her bruised heart. The scene is suddenly transformed to one of bitter memories: ‘Le vent rude des mers rugueuses / Ne souffle point la guérison...’ (R.V, 58) The alluring tresses of the sirens, are now metamorphosed into the tangled mess of her lover’s hair, as the poet uncovers the true heart of her mistress, veiled beneath the artifice of ‘Des attitudes et du fard’ (R.V, 58). Just as a tranquil seascape can be transformed in an instant, so too can the capricious heart of another, once as alluring as the sea, but now revealed to have ‘[...] le regard / De l'éternelle Tentatrice.’ (R.V, 58)

La mer murmure une musique
Aux gémissements continus ;
Le sable met, sous les pieds nus,
Son tapis de velours magique.

Et les algues, sœurs des coraux,
Semblent, à demi découvertes,
D'étranges chevelures vertes
De sirènes au fond des eaux.

Le vent rude des mers rugueuses
Ne souffle point la guérison...
Ah ! le parfum... ah ! le poison
De tes lèvres, fleurs vénéneuses !

Tu viens troubler les fiers desseins
Par des effluves des caresses
Et l'enchevêtrement des tresses
Sur les frissons ailés des seins

Ta beauté veut l'attrait factice
Des attitudes et du fard :
Tes yeux recèlent le regard
De l'éternelle Tentatrice. (R.V, 58)

The 'vague desire' expressed in *Velléité* (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902), is once again a wish to be transported and transformed. The poet/speaker of this verse wishes to disentangle herself from the suffocating arms of her mistress and to deliver herself to the freedom of solitude, a sense of liberation encapsulated in the depths of the sea where:

Loin des langueurs du lit, de l'ombre et l'alcôve,
J'aspirerai le sel du vent et l'âcreté
Des algues, et j'irai vers la profondeur fauve,
Pâle de solitude, ivre de chasteté ! (R.V, 61)

Chastity here, rather than signifying the purity which Vivien associated with homosexual desire, implies instead the freedom gained through the ending of an ill-fated affair. However just as the poet is transformed by the release conveyed in the last line, a certain tension is intimated as the poet replaces one passion with another. Pamela J. Annas writes that:

[...] though the poem's end celebrates solitude, it also, in the phrase "drunk with chastity," looks back to the feverish arms of the opening line and to the title's suggestion of an inability to let go. It doubles back upon itself and remains entangled in its own contradictions.²³⁸

The poet's flights of fancy often incorporate a desire for transformation into another state of being, a need for transcendence and escape from current reality. This desire for transcendence, as previously noted, illustrates Vivien's attempt to make sense of the human experience, one which she hoped extended beyond the physical sphere wherein she felt an outsider.²³⁹

²³⁸ Pamela J. Annas, "'Drunk with Chastity": The Poetry of Renée Vivien', *Women's Studies*, 13 (1986), 11-22 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1986.9978649> , p.16.

²³⁹ In reference to Vivien and Barney's status as outsiders, which Christopher Robinson defines as 'lesbian separatism', he observes that: 'The positive side of alienation is the impetus that it gives the writer to redefine woman. Both Barney and Vivien place great emphasis on the female body, female

In *Vers les sirènes* (*Évocations*, 1903) Vivien recalls the Odyssean tale of how Ulysses, having heeded Circe's warnings still yearns to hear the bewitching chant of the winged Sirens.²⁴⁰ Ulysses instructs his sailors to tie him to the mast of the ship, to ignore his entreaties upon hearing the siren's call which would lead to his temporary insanity, whilst they, having plugged their ears with wax, were to continue on-course regardless. Later the Sirens, distraught at the sailor's rejection of their song, throw themselves into the sea to be metamorphosed as rocks. For Vivien, the action of the men represents the selective deafening of mankind as they choose to deliberately ignore the voice of women. In order to be heard, women must transform into the fantastical, must supplant the 'real', exemplifying the Bakhtinian 'grotesque' of the monstrous feminine.²⁴¹ The female body *talis qualis* is simply inconsequential. Vivien derides the 'compagnons d'Ulysse' (R.V, 111) for their cowardice. In their refusal to listen to the song of the Sirens they are turning their back on the mystical lure of desire, 'Vous craignez le désir [...]' (R.V, 111) in favour of the artificial and comfortable appeal of '[...] des foyers qui recueillent l'exil' (R.V, 111). By correlating '[...] la fraude et l'artifice' (R.V, 111) with the sailor's dream of returning to shore, Vivien confirms her preference for the appeal of the supernatural over the mundane. She declares emphatically:

[...] Moi seul, ô compagnons d'Ulysse,
 Moi seul ai dédaigné la fraude et l'artifice,
 Moi seul ose l'amour et le divin péril. (R.V, 111)

power, female unity and female creativity. The common element underlying their treatment of all these is the rejection of opposition and confrontation which they perceived as a male category of thought, and its replacement by an emphasis on similarity and synthesis [...]' Christopher Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Cassell, 1995), p.180.

²⁴⁰ In this text following the example of Vivien the Greek hero Odysseus is referred to by his Latin appellation, Ulysses, whilst some references from secondary sources use his Greek name.

²⁴¹ For a comprehensive view of the 'monstrous feminine' in popular culture see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and also Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 1995).

In her work *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences and Narrators in the Odyssey*, Lillian Eileen Doherty believes that the attitude of Ulysses, as well as of the tale of the *Odyssey*, is one of ambivalence towards women. Ulysses, bound by the framework of his own epic, honours those female characters that support his narrative; however those dangerous female narrators who attempt to assert themselves into the story are seen as disruptive and evil and are subsequently dishonoured and relegated to the margins as treacherous and malevolent beings.²⁴²

Once again, the poet is posited as the solitary figure, it is she alone who is willing to abandon herself to the Sirens. It is she alone who dares to receive the message of the emancipated voice of the feminine. For Judith Peraino, in the *Odyssey*:

Women and slave's bodies were analogous in that they both could signify the containment of truth and its potential revelation. In this sense it might be said Odysseus becomes both slave and woman, forced by bondage on an inward search for truth that his body encases – a truth that is paradoxically not sustainable. The ropes that bind him mark the meeting of two seemingly opposed forces, the psychosexual reach of the Siren's song and the psychosocial magnet of homeland and family. The Siren's song exposes the porous nature of mind, body and humanly determined boundaries, calling into question the desire to remain bound by these. Odysseus knows beforehand the dangers of listening: these include the rupture of social order, as when a crew must tie a captain to the mast and not heed his orders; also the contamination of identity; as when his motives are indistinguishable from Kirke's; and still further, the threat of regression in his own awareness, when the boundary between knowing and forgetting collapses in listening to the Siren's song.²⁴³

Vivien clearly wishes to forsake the lure of homeland and security, wishing instead to transgress that boundary between knowing (the transcendence of truth) and forgetting (the renunciation of the ordinary) contained in the Siren's chant. 'J'accepte le silence où le néant demeure, / Le silence où périt la mémoire du chant...' (R.V, 111)

²⁴² Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995)

²⁴³ Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), p.18.

The underwater domain of the mermaids also separates them from conventional society, composed of people who live their lives on *terra firma*. These other-worldly beings inhabit a fresh, metamorphosed universe of infinite possibility. These mermaids possess the magical ability to resurrect the dead, as mentioned in the previous poem, the potency of their song is such that it can bring tears to ‘[...] les yeux des morts...’ (R.V, 111) In *Sonnet (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* the phosphorescent sea floor is fused with the brilliant celestial sky, imagery evocative of the beginning of time or the birth of a new planet.

Les algues entr’ouvraient leurs âpres cassolettes
D’où montait une odeur de phosphore et de sel,
Et, jetant leurs reflets empourprés vers le ciel,
Semblaient, au fond des eaux, un lit de violettes. (R.V, 55)

New life springs from death and herein all the major hallmarks of Vivien’s poetry are present; love, death, rebirth, transformation, along with friendship, as evidenced by the bed of violets on the ocean floor.²⁴⁴ The myth of the sirens and their association with death, also ties in with another of the poet’s predominant themes, specifically death and desire as a prelude to transformation. In the third stanza of *Sonnet (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* the poet describes:

Les flots très purs brillaient d’un reflet de miroir...
La Sirène aux cheveux rouges comme le soir
Chantait la volupté d’une mort amoureuse (R.V, 55)²⁴⁵

The mermaid who sings of love and softens the heart in preparation for desire is however a sometimes unwelcome figure in the lonely world of the poet. In *Les souvenirs sont des grappes (À l’heure des mains jointes, 1906)* the call of the Siren

²⁴⁴ A direct reference to Violette Shillito, as well as to Psappha who is traditionally associated with violets.

²⁴⁵ Though Vivien here refers to ‘une mort amoureuse’ – the phrase is reflective of the title of Gautier’s short story *La Morte Amoureuse* (1836) wherein the themes of possessive desire, fatal passion, monstrosity and vampirism are echoed in Vivien’s poetics.

transports the poet speaker back to a time of forgotten love, distorting memories, 'Quand je rêve, le passé me semble plus beau.' (R.V, 212)

That the mermaids are of such inspiration to Vivien is because they are harbingers of change. The figurative change that they promise is one that the poet cannot and will not ignore as it forms part of her ideology of transcendence, whereby she seeks to look beyond, to peel away the layers of superficial existence. The transformative effect of such metamorphosis is not an end in itself, rather an ongoing process resultant in intermittent periods of enlightenment, much akin to the philosophies of eastern mysticism admired by Vivien.²⁴⁶ To embrace such change involves a certain amount of bravery, for it uncovers the darker corners of metaphysical existence as well as the brighter. As such these supernatural entities are analogous with the witches as portrayed in *Les fleurs de Séléné (Cendres et poussières, 1902)* 'Possédant le secret des philtres et des charmes,' (R.V, 60). As Karla Jay outlines:

But it was not simply as victims of patriarchal power that the witches appealed to Barney and Vivien. To them, as to Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the witches had a transformational power, the power to alter substance through magic arising out of their willingness to evoke the dark side of the human psyche.²⁴⁷

The ability to self-transform or to transform one thing into another is an abstract ability highly valued by the poet. Nonetheless Vivien resists any outside influence which attempts to transform *her* according to the prevalent dictates of societal norms. In this regard she is akin to the witches of *Fleurs de Séléné* whose predominant attribute is their possession of a 'solitary soul':

²⁴⁶ Nicholas Berger notes that: 'On connaît le gout de Vivien pour les cultes d'Extrême-Orient, qui se manifesta notamment par sa célèbre collection de bouddhas, dont certains font aujourd'hui partie de la collection du Musée Cernuschi. Michel Maucuer, conservateur en chef du musée, a clairement montré que cette attirance relevait plus d'un syncrétisme esthétique que d'une réelle quête spirituelle.' Nicholas Berger, 'Une quête mystique', in *Renée Vivien à rebours: études pour un centenaire* (Paris : Orizons, 2009) p.93 and Michel Maucuer, 'Renée Vivien dans son sanctuaire d'Asie', *Images de l'étranger* (Limoges : PULIM, 2003) p.275.

²⁴⁷ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.77.

Elles viennent charmer leur âme solitaire
De l'ensorcellement des sombres chastetés,
De l'haleine des cieux, des souffles de la terre.
Nul parfum n'a troublé leur âme solitaire.
L'ivoire des hivers, la pourpre des étés
Ne les effleurent point des reflets de la terre :
Elles gardent l'amour des sombres chastetés. (R.V, 59)

Like the followers of Séléné, *Viviane (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* the Lady of the Lake is marked by her capacity to transform at will, 'Elle a changé de nom, de voix et de visage ;' (R.V, 197) and is a hybrid of both good and evil, 'Parfois elle est cruelle et parfois elle est bonne.' (R.V, 196) Possessing the talent to transform allows these women to blend in rather than stand out from their surroundings thus aiding their powers of observation. Like the poet they are non-conformist. Vivien, in her yearning for change refuses to return to a life of submission. The poet, the observer of life, highly receptive to change, ironically will not be moved: '[...] Mais moi / Pourtant, dans l'univers mouvant, reste immobile.' (R.V, 280)

III 1.2 Anthropomorphism, shape-shifting and the transformative effect of Sapphic sensuality

Sometimes the lowliest of nature's organisms can, from their singular vantage point, offer the best perspectives. Vivien, in her anthropomorphic incarnation as a conch shell, becomes the silent eyewitness of an undiscovered universe, *La conque (Évocations, 1903)*. The conch, considered one of the earliest musical instruments, is also one of Buddhism's eight auspicious symbols, signifying strength and truthful speech. Appearing in the 'Puja', the Hindu tradition of prayer, it was also often depicted as the instrument and weapon of choice of mythological mermaids and mermen, looking up to the magnitude of waves across the ocean.²⁴⁸ Vivien's *conque*,

²⁴⁸ For more see: James Hornell, *Turbinella Pyrum and its Relation to Indian Life and Religion* (Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2012).

lying on the ocean floor, watches the world float by. A chronicler of subterranean history, the conch's tale is unfolded as it moves rhythmically to the pace of the passing shadows of clouds above.

Passant, je me souviens du crépuscule vert
Où glissent lentement les ombres sous-marines,
Où les algues, offrant leur calice entr'ouvert,
Étreignant de leurs bras fluides les ruines (R.V, 81)

The conch recalls the memory of large merchant ships of Antiquity, loaded with precious cargoes of gold and ivory, the majestic colour of subaqueous coral gardens, and the sinister, dismembered cadavers of lovers drowned, still wearing the remnants of slavery's chains:

J'ai pleuré les beaux yeux et les cheveux éteints
Et les membres meurtris des amantes noyées
Gardant encore au bras un bracelet de fer. (R.V, 82)

While underwater the conch was alive; and all life, the greater world, existed around it. Above water, an inanimate being, it contains the world of the sea in the interior of its shell, 'Dans mon cœur chante encor la musique illusoire / De l'Océan.'(R.V, 82) It is thus for the poet a perfect example of a creature of diversity, adapting through metamorphosis.

Vivien's veneration of the beauty of certain creatures of the wild highlights her envy of their lives led in uncultivated freedom, and her heartfelt desire to commune with them. This is evident in *Vers le Nord (Évocations, 1903)* where Vivien describes the majestic flight of the seagulls towards the lands of the north.

Elles vont vers le rêve et le charme des cieux
Déliçats et changeants comme une âme d'opale...
Ah ! les lointains voilés, la neige virginale
Qui réfléchit l'azur atténué des cieux ! (R.V, 98)

The unsullied barren landscape of snow and sky are metaphors for the purity of the ‘chastity’ of lesbian sexuality and the infinite scope of artistic inspiration. With *La mouette qui s’éleva* (*Le vent des vaisseaux*, 1910) we see the realization of this longing for departure as here the poet is indeed transformed into a seagull in full flight, pleading with the winds to transport her, as they have done before, to great skyward heights:

Vent qui fais s’élever en moi mes larges ailes,
Vent qui sais dominer les vagues infidèles,
Viens vers moi ! Porte-moi, comme tu fis souvent,
Toi qui sais dominer la mer immense, ô vent ! (R.V, 316)

Transformed as a seagull, the poet embarks on a wild voyage buoyed again by the ‘[...] beaux vents fidèles !’ (R.V, 308), and this time she hopes to be doubly transformed by the departure itself as described in *Essor d’une mouette* (*Le vent des vaisseaux*, 1910).

Je ne sais où j’irai, ni quel souffle m’emporte...
Mais je ne reviendrai que triomphante ou morte,
Je n’obéis qu’à vous, à votre étrange loi.
Me voici prête pour la fuite... Portez-moi ! (R.V, 308)

Vivien’s appreciation for the glorious autonomy enjoyed by these seabirds is again underscored in the next poem from this same collection published in 1910, *Aux mouettes*.

Je vous envie autant que je vous aime, oiseaux
Qui traversez sans moi tout l’infini des eaux.

Vous qui passez battant tout l’infini des ailes,
Rendez-moi, rendez-moi comme vous, infidèles ! (R.V, 308)

The poet/speaker’s entreaty is accentuated by the simplicity of language employed; leaving no doubt that this is an expression of true desire, as she expresses her envy for the undisciplined, uncensored life of the *mouette*. The last couplet uncovers the poet/speaker’s true anxiety, and reveals her urgency in seeking to be transported from reality: ‘Mais mon sort est parmi les choses méprisées, / Et pourtant ! Et pourtant ! – Ô mes ailes brisées !’ (R.V, 308) The repetition of ‘Et pourtant !’ mirrors that of ‘Rendez-

moi' in the earlier couplet, serving to emphasize the pressing nature of the poet's need. The sentiment, that she and her kind are among those despised on earth, is not unique, and forms part of the essential belief of her earlier poetry, as exemplified in *Les solitaires* (*Évocations*, 1903): 'Ceux qui cherchent la paix du soir et des linceuls / Connaissent la terrible ivresse d'être seuls.' (R.V, 72)²⁴⁹

These majestic birds are governed only by their own free will and the capricious, powerful winds, a state of being preferable to an ordinary life of censure and reproach. Indeed, like the sea, the wind is an all-important natural element in Vivien's poetry as evidenced by the title of this collection, *Le vent des vaisseaux*. The winds are an elemental force, metamorphosed into god-like entities and derisive of the pettiness of humanity as in *Le rire des vents*, the second poem of this collection:

Et comme l'on soufflette en la force des mains,
Comme l'on rit en chœur, comme l'on chante et danse,
Les quatre Vents ont ri de savoir leur puissance
Sur le troupeau soumis et triste des humains. (R.V, 305)

Vivien aspires to a life of freedom; one which she feels can only be achieved through complete transformation of body and soul, a metamorphosis she seeks through the conduit of her artistic imagination. However, it is not only personal liberty that is attained through the transformative process of an invented fantastical universe. Amongst Vivien's most notable love poetry and in particular her erotic writing, a

²⁴⁹ The imagined voyages of Vivien's verse are reminiscent of Baudelaire's *voyages rêvés* of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The great winged Albatross of *L'albatros* in *Spleen et l'ideal* is compared to a poet, distinct from the human race, mocked, scorned and misunderstood, his large wings which inhibit him from walking, both mark him out as superior to the pedestrian crowd and are symbolic of his ability to rise above humanity. 'Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées / Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer ; / Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées, / Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.' With *Élévation* the poet speaker sees his spirit rise above the worldly atmosphere, ascending great heights, 'Avec une indicible et mâle volupté.' Charles Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, pp. 191-192. In Vivien's poetics the male principle is replaced by the female, as she portrays the potentiality of the female spirit. For both poets, however, these voyages represent a profound desire for escape and transcendence (achievable through the power of imagination). As Loïc Guyon observes (in respect to Baudelaire), 'Le seul véritable voyage capable d'extraire le poète de sa triste condition humaine est finalement le voyage vers l'au-delà.' Loïc Guyon, 'Charles Baudelaire : le voyage rêvé' in *TDC : Le Voyage Imaginaire* (Amiens : Canopé Éditions, 2014), pp. 36-37.

penchant for escapism in the form of role-play becomes apparent, mirroring hers and Barney's passion for masquerade and *tableaux vivants*.²⁵⁰ Just as the liminal spaces of the deathscapes and nightvisions constituted the realm of Vivien's feminist archetype of the *femme fatale*, the fantasy lands of the poet's erotic imagination are sites of complete abandonment and detachment from all reality. Heather Love observes that:

The emergence of lesbianism as a social identity and of a tradition of lesbian fiction in the early twentieth century did not entirely dispel the sense of unreality associated with this form of desire. Instead, the confluence of French decadent representations of the lesbian, the legacy of the female friendship tradition, and new medical and psychoanalytic discourses led to an image of the lesbian as a strangely composite creature: part woman, part man; part reality, part fantasy; part cipher, part "case history"; part idealized friend, part *femme fatale*; a haunting fiction and a social fact. Even as the lesbian emerges in the early twentieth century as a new social actor, lesbianism itself remains elusive, bound up with traditions that mark it as fantastic or impossible.²⁵¹

In many respects the lesbian erotica of Vivien's poetics, performing as they do in the realm of the fantastic, conform to the tradition that marks them out as aberrant or 'unreal'. However, Vivien also plays on this distinction as it corresponds to her belief in the supremacy of lesbian sexuality and its outsider status, characterized by its access to the realm of fantasy, which she decrees further substantiates its aloof sovereignty.

In *Bonheur crépusculaire (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* we are invited to observe two lovers on the verge of surrender to a dream-like state, one in which they will be faced with the intensity of their passion, and where happiness in its purest form exists unadulterated and removed from the influence of the outside world:

Accueillons le songe, donneur
D'enchantements et de fées...
Mêlons nos âmes attendries
Et parlons de notre bonheur. (R.V, 198)

²⁵⁰ In accordance with the fashion of the time, Vivien, Barney and friends liked to dress up and perform for small audiences, often playing roles in *tableaux vivants*. A famous account of one such performance is given by Colette in *Le Pur et l'impur*, where she recalls Vivien's dramatic collapse after assuming the role of Lady Jane Grey for which, in order to fully inhabit the role, she drastically fasted for ten days in order to lose weight.

²⁵¹ Heather Love, 'Lesbian Fiction 1900-1950', *A Companion to the American Novel 1900-1950*, ed. John T. Matthews (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 392-413.

While with *Nuit Mauresque* from the same collection Vivien's speaker creates an exotic setting in which to tempt her lover, inviting them both to assume completely new identities in keeping with their oriental surroundings:²⁵²

Viens dans ces murs, où ton caprice me céda,
Ma maîtresse de tous les temps, Zoraïda ! (R.V, 211)

Vivien perceives transformation as a vital component and corollary of love-making, and the induction of her lover into her fantasy demands the kind of commitment that she finds so lacking in the ordinariness of everyday relationships. It is in that precise moment, moving from reality to fantasy, that true erotic desire is fulfilled: 'Ma maîtresse ! Tandis que l'instant se prolonge, / Errons, les doigts unis, dans l'Alhambra du songe.' (R.V, 211) The transformative effect of sexual union corresponds also to the poet's personal belief in the superiority and almost divine nature of lesbian sexuality. Although much of her love poetry demonstrates a frustration in passion unfulfilled and in insatiate desire, those poems which are dedicated to sensual contentment allow us a glimpse into the poet's psyche, wherein she has created an altered universe following rare moments of bliss. In *Les roses sont entrées (Flambeaux éteints, 1907)* we find the poet/speaker basking in a sensual afterglow during which the physical world of her bedchamber and the natural world of her garden and the night sky fuse, melding together into a fantastical cosmos which acts as a spiritual backdrop to the lover's joy:

Délaissant leur jardin, les roses m'ont suivie...
Je bois leur souffle bref, je respire leur vie.
Toutes, elles sont là.

C'est le miracle... Les étoiles sont entrées,
Hâtives, à travers les vitres éventrées
Dont l'or fondu coula.

Maintenant, parmi les roses et les étoiles,
Te voici dans ma chambre, abandonnant tes voiles,
Et ta nudité luit.

Sur mes yeux s'est posé ton regard indicible...

²⁵² The reference to Zoraïda is possibly derived from the 1822 opera *Zoraïda di Granata* by Donizetti.

Sans astres et sans fleurs, je rêve l'impossible
Dans le froid de la nuit. (R.V, 225)

The delirious vision dissipates however, as sombrely registered in the last stanza, and the poet is now forced to confront the reality that absolute ecstasy must be achieved in perfect union.

In the poetry of Vivien, the power and ability to change is represented as a positive move towards enlightenment. She reserves harsh judgement for those whose intractable nature impedes them from pursuing the path of self-transformation. Addressing a deceitful lover in *Terreur du mensonge* (*Dans un coin des violettes*, 1910) she exclaims: 'Comme un lilas ne peut devenir asphodèle, / Jamais tu ne seras ni franche ni fidèle.' (R.V, 297) Similarly, the true character of other women is exposed when the poet strips them of their human disguise, as in the instance of the cruel mistress depicted in *Aigues-marines* (*Évocations*, 1903).

Des gouttes d'eau – de l'eau de mer
Mêlent leur lumière fluide,
Glauque et pareille aux flots d'hiver,
À tes longs doigts d'Océanide.

Comment décrire le secret
De leurs pâleurs froides et fines ?
Ton regard vert semble un reflet
Des cruelles aigues-marines.

Ton corps a l'imprécis contour
Des flots souples aux remous vagues,
Et tes attitudes d'amour
Se déroulent, comme les vagues... (R.V, 103)

Those favoured friends and lovers, on the other hand, are distinguished by the poet as she metamorphoses them into certain flora and fauna chosen especially for their symbolic import. Therefore, Barney is usually represented as a lily, pure and possessing of a lofty beauty, while her childhood companion Violette Shillito is the perennial bloom for which she is named. The unnamed woman addressed in *Les*

Chardons (*Évocations*, 1903) is ironically identified as the eponymous thistle, a flower or weed not considered for its beauty. However these ‘[...] mystiques chardons dédaignés du profane’ (R.V, 89) are esteemed by the poet for their hardiness, their resistance to predatory forces. In biblical allegory the thistle is emblematic of the fall of mankind from the grace of God, and the subsequent suffering of humankind thereafter. According to the book of Genesis, as Adam is punished for listening to Eve, they and their generations to come are cursed with having to toil fields of thistles and thorny plants. For Vivien however, disdainful of the calumny of womanhood inherent to the early books of the Bible, they represent the chaste woman untouched by man, resolute and enduring, despite the bleakness of the landscape they inhabit. The thistle is in essence an armoured flower disguised as a weed, and is not only symbolic of the poet’s friend but of the poet herself and all her ‘[...] rigide beauté.’ (R.V, 89) As the poem progresses it becomes apparent that the thistle is the perfect metaphor for the anti-heteronormative life espoused by Vivien, ‘Droite dans la raideur de ta virginité’, she explains, ‘Tu ne seras jamais la fiévreuse captive’. (R.V, 89)

Not only do clothes transform the wearer but in Vivien’s world clothes take on the life and essence of their owner. In *Vêtue* (*Sillages*, 1908) the poet describes how the dress of her lover is imbued with her spirit: ‘Ton cœur intime vit dans les plis de ta robe’. (R.V, 241) Cardonne-Arlyck remarks that Vivien’s frequent mentioning of the dress of the lover in her poetry anchors the body to a concrete temporality which at the same time, however, is in a constant state of renewal just as fashion itself. The long pleated flowing dresses featured in the verse of Renée Vivien owes much to the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones as to the sartorial fashion of the *fin de siècle*. Amongst other motifs they represent fluidity in texture and movement, as well as circularity – a major

characteristic of Vivien's poetry. Besides fabric, this frisson or trembling of flesh is quite often mentioned and Cardonne-Arlyck notes that:

Le frisson, ce mouvement de l'épiderme, cette animation de la surface, terme essentiel de la thématique de la poétique de Vivien, signale le passage invisible d'une force, qui peut s'avérer terrible, de transformation : du vent dans le feuillage, de la chaleur dans l'eau, de la volupté, du froid ou de la fièvre dans le corps.²⁵³

This is evident in the poem *À la Florentine (La Vénus des aveugles 1904)*: 'Et ta robe au tissu mélodieux nodule / Ainsi qu'une eau perfide où chantent les remous.' (R.V, 145)

The fluid, water-like nature of dress indicates the same absence of solidity and permanence. That which is material dissolves in the movement of melody, acknowledging the seamless fusion of the physical and metaphysical.

III 1.3 Metamorphosis as artistic imperative

Vivien's adherence to the theme of self-transformation extends to her firmly held belief that metamorphosis as a path to transcendence is not only a personal, but also an artistic imperative. Again, one of literature's main objectives is to act as an agent of change, and in the case of the artist, that metamorphosis must begin with the person holding the pen. Much of Vivien's writing acts as testament to the power of the imagination and the absolute dominion of the writer in the exploitation of that power in the creation of something new. The process of writing itself is one of transformation, whereby inner knowledge, emotions and visionary thought are translated into word. Furthermore, the dialogic relationship between the writer and the reader is an extension of this metamorphosis. Kristeva theorises that: 'To describe the signifying operation of poetic language is to describe the mechanism of conjunction within a potential

²⁵³ Cardonne-Arlyck, *op.cit.*, p.111.

infinity'²⁵⁴ As such, for Vivien, the poet is god-like in their ability to perceive and conceive. The natural world is to be admired, but it is a paler version of the world as constructed in art, further cementing Vivien's affinity with the Symbolist ideological assertion that all art should disclose absolute truths that can only be described in abstraction.²⁵⁵ Vivien envisages boundless possibilities in the transcendence of the quotidian. When she speaks of how 'Le charme douloureux des ébauches m'attire,' (R.V, 96) it is not only in reference to the beauty of ancient ruins, to the illimitable designs of the intellect, but also to the alluring nature of that which has been left unsaid, unmade or erased by time. The magical chasm between intent and conception is examined here in *Les ébauches (Évocations, 1903)*:

Ces visages fuyants, ces fragiles contours,
S'estompant sur la toile irréal du rêve,
Ne laissent au regard qu'une vision brève
Dont la divinité se dérobe toujours, (R.V, 96)

The role of the artist is to fill in the gaps, to create and transform and to be inspired by the past while at the same time project into the future.

On sent l'accablement du vouloir entravé
Dans la ténuité morbide de l'esquisse
Dont la grâce furtive, où le regret se glisse,
A l'infini du vague et de l'inachevé. (R.V, 97)

The melancholic tone of the last stanza serves as a caution to the poet herself, as a caveat to the importance of her continued pursuit of artistic creation.

The poet's love of solitude and unrushed contemplation, and their role as sustenance to inspiration, is captured in *Hymne à la lenteur (Sillages, 1908)*. In these slowed down moments of reflection the mind is allowed to wander and above all to dream, for to

²⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Towards a Semiology of Paragrams', eds. French and Lack, *The Tel Quel Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 29.

²⁵⁵ The character of San Giovanni in *Une femme m'apparut* famously declares that '[...] s'éloigner le plus possible de la Nature, là est la fin véritable de l'Art.' Renée Vivien, *op.cit.*, p.54.

dream is to refashion, transform and recreate. In the poetry of Vivien, *le songe* is one of the most frequently quoted nouns, and often signals moments of great change. In this instance, the relaxed mind is the cradle of inspiration, where: ‘[...] le songe parfait naquit dans la paresse.’ (R.V, 261) Out of such dreams great visions are wrought and none more so than Vivien’s *La fusée* (*Évocations*, 1903). In complete metamorphosis the poet-speaker of this verse is transformed into a firecracker, and in a supremely phallic fashion penetrates the night sky as an ode to inspiration and creative fulfilment:

Vertigineusement j’allais vers les Étoiles...
 Mon orgueil savourait le triomphe des dieux,
 Et mon vol déchirait, nuptial et joyeux,
 Les ténèbres d’été, comme des légers voiles... (R.V, 103)

The fact that this poem is written in the past tense, ‘Dans un fuyant baiser d’hymen, je fus l’amant / De la nuit...’ also suggests that this is an allusion to her own genesis as an artist, and in typical Vivien fashion, the explicit phallic references imply that the poet is both Father and Mother to herself, a self-created being. The firework is an unstoppable force, proud and formidable in beauty, once it has exploded across the celestial sky, it changes it irrevocably. It is a symbol of victorious transformation, in the light of adversity:

J’étais l’éclair éteint et le rêve détruit...
 Ayant connu l’ardeur et l’effort de la lutte,
 La victoire et l’effroi monstrueux de la chute,
 J’étais l’astre tombé qui sombre dans la nuit. (R.V, 103)

Heeding the call of the Sirens, Vivien embarks on a journey of transformation which sees her validate art and lesbian existence as metamorphic paths to transcendence. The mind open to the art of *poïesis*, is one which accepts the essentiality of transformation.²⁵⁶ From the symbolism of flow and flight, to the mythical figure of the Siren whose song is one of release from reality, metamorphosis is a fixture of

²⁵⁶ *Poïesis* from the ancient Greek, meaning ‘to make’ and as the root of the modern word ‘poetry’ also symbolizes the art of transformation.

Vivien's poetry as it forms part of the continuum of change and ideological revolution inherent to death and rebirth.

Chapter 2 : Seeking the Divine

*Je crois en la divinité de Christ aussi fermement qu'en celle de Bouddha.*²⁵⁷

Renée Vivien's quest for transcendence, as expressed through the poetic themes of transformation, manifests patently in her exploration of religious symbolism, rite and ritual. Drawn to esoteric spirituality, Vivien displayed, according to Jean-Paul Goujon '[...] un profond intérêt pour les choses mystiques. Préoccupation vague, d'ailleurs, faite de sentiments bien plus que d'idées et qui exprime davantage une certaine religiosité [...]'²⁵⁸ This mysticism permeates Vivien's writings; in her treatment of multifarious creeds and beliefs, from the Hellenistic religions to Paganism, Christianity and Judaism to the poet's own attempts to establish a new form of spirituality based on her belief in the supremacy of women and drawing from Sapphic tradition. Much has been written of the deathbed conversion of Vivien to Catholicism; Le Dantec condescendingly regarded this conversion as the salvation of a soul formerly damned through transgression, in his work *Renée Vivien, femme damnée, femme sauvée* published in 1930.²⁵⁹ Tracing the evolutionary progression of faith in Vivien's life, from repressed Protestant to nascent Pagan and devotee of Eastern mysticism to her final conversion to Catholicism, Goujon points to two women who influenced her spirituality, her childhood friend Violette Shillito who herself converted in 1901, and Mlle Gjertz, a young Norwegian woman who gave piano lessons to the poet in her latter years, as she, towards the end of the poet's life attempted '[...] par de longues conversations, de pousser Vivien vers le catholicisme.'²⁶⁰ However, while the tropes of religious discourse change throughout her work, their significance remains the same: as metaphors for a crusade towards

²⁵⁷ Renée Vivien, *L'Album de Sylvestre* (Paris : E. Sansot, 1908) p.25 entry no. XI.

²⁵⁸ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.408.

²⁵⁹ Yves-Gérard Le Dantec, *Renée Vivien, femme damnée, femme sauvée* (Aix-en-Provence : Éditions du Feu, 1930).

²⁶⁰ Goujon, *op.cit.*, pp. 407-412.

spiritual enlightenment.²⁶¹ When seeking the divine in Vivien's verse, the question of who or what the poet worshipped and to which church she subscribed is entirely overruled by the importance of the pervasive nature of religion in her work.

This desire for spiritual enlightenment is informed by Vivien's devotion to the process of transformation; one that encompassed among other changes, the ideological conversion of an androcentric culture into a gynocentric one, while it also articulates the poet's belief in the transformative value of lesbian sexuality. In all, Vivien seeks a higher power, a divinity in correspondence with her vision of alterity. This divinity transcends traditional notions of good and evil, and exists as a demon, or succubus just as a Goddess or Madonna. 'Dans nos yeux le regard des Succubes fermente.' (R.V, 135) 'Apparaissez encore en l'honneur de Marie !' (R.V, 289) Vivien's poetry attests to a polyvalent divine spirit operating on many planes; as a source of inspiration, as supreme sentinel of womanhood, or as woman herself, and always revelatory of truth. Vivien's syncretistic approach to religion, as succinctly conveyed in the opening citation taken

²⁶¹ The late nineteenth century saw a considerable number of writers convert to Catholicism, with some critics pointing to '[...] a link between the aesthetics of the Church and sexual dissidence.' Alex Murray 'Recusant Poetics: Rereading Catholicism at the Fin de Siècle' *English Literature in Transition*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2013, p.355. Claire Masurel-Murray examines this literary heritage informing us that: 'During the last decade of the 19th century, a number of English writers converted to Roman Catholicism: the "Decadent" poets John Gray, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson joined the Church in 1890 and 1891, while Oscar Wilde flirted with the Catholic faith during his college years at Oxford, and received the last sacraments on his deathbed in 1900. These writers all inherited from Walter Pater a taste for the splendours of religious rite. They were also influenced by their Pre-Raphaelite predecessors' interest in the Catholic Middle Ages as well as by their emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of religious experience, and claimed their kinship with the art for art's sake creed of French Parnassians and Symbolists (Gray, in particular, translated several of Verlaine's Catholic poems). The Decadent converts were also marked by another major, but less obvious, imprint, that left by John Henry Newman. The Tractarian theologian's religion may at first sight have little in common with the aesthetic religion of the fin de siècle poets, and yet his view of the act of faith as founded on the senses, the emotions and the imagination was certainly an element that they were keen to appropriate, and his focus on the human conscience as the centre of religious experience is implicitly present in the solitary and highly subjective piety that emerges in the works of Gray, Johnson and Dowson.' Claire Masurel-Murray, 'Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers: A Spiritual and Literary Genealogy' *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, vol. 76, Automne, 2012, pp. 105-125.

from her *L'Album de Sylvestre*, contributes to her personal vision and to the theme of transformation in her poetic works.

III 2.1 Revision of Pagan, Abrahamic, Marian and Christian Divinity

The publication in 1890 of *The Golden Bough* by Sir George James Frazer heralded a new way for the study of religion, as viewed from an anthropological rather than a theological perspective, and its impact on modern literature was momentous. Considered by Theodor Gaster as ‘a milestone in the understanding of man’s cultural past, and a profoundly significant contribution to the history of ideas,’²⁶² its influence on modern literature is extensive and is acknowledged by such notable poets as Eliot and Yeats.²⁶³ This was coincident with a revival of interest in spiritualism across the Victorian age, with an emphasis on the Occult and various alternative esoteric religious interests.²⁶⁴ The emergence of the Theosophical movement in England and America, as co-founded by Helena Blavatsky, who fostered a belief in the ‘Universal Divine Principle’ in the late nineteenth century, also attracted much public and literary attention.²⁶⁵ Traditional religion was being challenged and alternative paths to

²⁶² Theodor H. Gaster, introduction to *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. v.

²⁶³ Yeats’ belief in the ‘cyclical theory of history and human development’ as revealed in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1928) corresponds closely to Frazer’s theories of ‘the turning wheel of myth and nature.’ John B. Vickery *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.199. T.S Eliot in his notes to *The Wasteland* acknowledges his great debt to *The Golden Bough*: ‘To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have used especially the two volumes *Attis Adonis Osiris*. Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognise in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.’ T.S Eliot *The Wasteland* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).

²⁶⁴ For further reading see Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn eds. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

²⁶⁵ Founded in New York in 1875, by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott and William Quan Judge, The Theosophical Society, according to Antoine Faivre, strove to extol the primacy of the mystic, gain access to supreme worlds and dedicated themselves to the devotion of the trinity of the divine, the human world and the natural realm. For more see Antoine Faivre *Philosophie de la nature (physique sacrée et théosophie, XVIII^e - XIX^e siècles)* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1996). For a fascinating insight on the conjunction of the Theosophical movement and the emerging Feminist movement in late 19th century England see Joy Dixon’s *Divine Feminine, Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

spirituality were under consideration. There is no anecdotal evidence that Renée Vivien read *The Golden Bough*, however Jay notes that:

Barney and Vivien were developing their ideas about feminine religion at about the same time that the worship of the primordial goddess was becoming a topic of considerable intellectual interest, partly as a result of the publication of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in 1890. Frazer's work was the object of particular controversy because of the parallels it drew between details of the story of Christ and elements of the worship of the Great Goddess as well as because of its identification of the Virgin Mary with aspects of the ancient Moon Goddess. Whether Barney and Vivien had direct knowledge of Frazer's monumental study or whether they had become aware of its contents through articles and reviews is unclear, but certainly their work demonstrates a familiarity with the figure and with the details of the worship of the Mother Goddess. Both Barney and Vivien often refer to her simply as "the goddess". Vivien dreamed of restoring her cult.²⁶⁶

The Hesperides of Greek mythology, as the daughters of Hesperus, are the Goddesses of the evening and represent the dying light of sunset. *To the Sunset Goddess (Évocations, 1903)* is a hymn not only to the beauty of the expiring light of day but to any struggle against the cessation of existence, not unlike the sentiment behind Dylan Thomas' *Do not go gentle into that good night*, published some fifty years later.²⁶⁷ For Vivien, the worship of this Sun Goddess and more frequently the female deities of the moon signify her belief in the infinite connection between mind, body, spirit and nature. The fate of the forgotten Hellenistic and pagan religions and their astrotheological traditions, echo the denial of the sacred feminine and the rise of patriarchy. Here the sunset goddess, decked out in all her fiery finery, is doused in blood – a timeless symbol of womanhood:

Tes cheveux sont pareils aux feuillages d'automne,
Déesse du couchant, des ruines, du soir !
Le sang du crépuscule est ta rouge couronne,
Tu choisis les marais stagnants pour ton miroir. (R.V, 113)

The familiar motifs of desire in the presence of death, rebirth, and transformation are all present in this poem which also alludes to Frazer's exposition of the universal worship

²⁶⁶ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.74.

²⁶⁷ Dylan Thomas, *In Country Sleep and other Poems* (New York: New Directions Books, 1952).

of the dying and rising god.²⁶⁸ For just as the sunset goddess expires, she is fated to repeat the same process again the next day *ad infinitum*. The goddess' death and rebirth recalls the crucifixion of Christ on Mount Calvary, against the backdrop of a red and bleeding sky.

Tu ressembles à tout ce qui penche et décline.
Passive, et comprimant la douleur sans appel
Dont ton corps a gardé l'attitude divine,
Tu parais te mouvoir dans un souffle irréal. (R.V, 114)

The very moment of death is described in deliberately sensual if not rapturous tones as a celestial *petite mort*.

Ah ! l'ardeur brisée, ah ! la savante agonie
De ton être expirant dans l'amour, ah ! l'effort
De tes râles ! – Au fond de la joie infinie,
Je savoure le goût violent de la mort... (R.V, 114)

Vivien's astrolatry primarily focuses on moon worship over that of the sun. For the poet, the moon and its cycles of change signify the power of transformation. Besides the stars the moon is the heavenly body most associated with night, a time of great inspirational value for the nocturnal poet. The moon also, most importantly, represented the divine feminine and though primitive worshippers celebrated the connection between the lunar cycles and female fertility, Vivien shunned this aspect, preferring instead the association between the mystical nature of the moon and feminine intuition and magical propensity. The poet is the sole witness to the dying of the moon, 'Seule, je sais la mort de Madonna la Lune' (R.V, 227) in *La Lune s'est noyée (Flambeaux éteints, 1907)*. The moon is personified, she of '[...] cheveux si blonds et si légers' (R.V, 227) and is seen sinking, in a distinctly sexual reference '[...] avec un si doux frisson

²⁶⁸ A recurring religious motif as explored by Frazer as it forms a fundamental tenet of belief in numerous world religions. Also referred to as the death-rebirth-deity.

dans la brune.’ (R.V, 227) The moon’s waning light is once again indicative of the dissolution of the worship of female deities in the wake of a masculine monotheistic tradition. Positing herself as the lone witness, the poet is once more alone, the last worshipper on earth, and she bemoans the moon’s drowning in ‘[...] l’étang noir’ (R.V, 228) as she acknowledges its profound influence as her poetic muse, ‘Quel lit recueillera mon frileux désespoir, / Mon désespoir d’amant fidèle et de poète ?’ (R.V, 228) Referring to the moon as ‘Madone’ and ‘Ma Dame’ Vivien claims her as a personal deity, as she alone will mourn her passing, ‘Je vais pleurant la mort de la Lune, ma Dame, / De ma Dame qui gît au fond des nénuphars.’ (R.V, 228)

Sonnet pour la lune (*Sillages*, 1908) bears homage to the moon as ‘Protectrice de ce qui s’effare et qui fuit,’ (R.V, 239). It shines on those maligned, misunderstood, captive and for whom the moon’s ‘[...] regard froid et mystique traduit / Le pâle amour de nos âmes contemplatives’ (R.V, 239). Thus the sacred moon, ‘l’étoile la plus vierge’ (R.V, 239) – a designation revealing its association for the poet with lesbian sexuality – is a symbol of alterity, and a constant reminder to those who live their lives in sunlight that the night hosts a transformed universe, one far removed from day. The theme of day and night existing as oppositional forces is resumed in *Invocation à la lune* (*Dans un coin des violettes*, 1910) wherein the moon is described as the ‘victorieuse adversaire du jour’ (R.V, 290). Here the ‘[...] Lune chasserresse aux flèches très légères’ (R.V, 290) is emblematic of Artemis, Goddess of the hunt, as the poet implores her to destroy, with bow and arrow, all of her false lovers and to spare her from the pain of love. While the day is traditionally affiliated with truth, the analogy of ‘the cold light of day’ is subverted here, whereby the night is cited as the time of transparency, all deceit unveiled under this lunar effulgence.

Ô Lune, toi qui sais disperser les mensonges,
Éloigne le troupeau serré des mauvais songes !
Et, daignant aiguïser l'arc d'argent bleu qui luit,
Accorde-moi l'espoir d'un rayon dans la nuit ! (R.V, 290)

For Vivien, the moon offers solace and consolation. She follows it like a pilgrim seeking miraculous intervention. The moon is the manifestation of the poet's belief in the thaumaturgical potential of nature, and the sacred interaction between a hidden, enigmatic divinity and a schismatic community to whom she feels she belongs. She praises the wondrous and healing properties of the moon in *La Lune consolatrice (Dans un Coin des Violettes, 1910)*:

Et voici que mon cœur s'épanouit et rit...
Moi qui longtemps souffris, me voici consolée
Par ce noir violet d'une nuit étoilée,
Moi qui ne savais point que la lune guérit ! (R.V, 295)

Vivien's pagan poetics lead her to venture towards the creation of her own form of religion, one which incorporates her belief in the supremacy of the feminine as divine, and as a counter to, and critique of, religious patriarchy. Engelking remarks that Vivien '[...] had a mission, and poetry was the powerful tool with which she hoped to undo the hierarchy of the engendered canon.'²⁶⁹ To this end she endeavours '[...] to rewrite the fictions of patriarchy and tip the gender balance in favor of the feminine by placing women and "the feminine" at the center of her own poetic universe.'²⁷⁰ She was extremely conscious that in order to redress such an imbalance she would have to strike at the very heart of institutional patriarchy, as particularly enshrined in, and sustained by, traditional religious belief. Vivien rewrites the story of Genesis in *La Genèse profane* from *Brumes de Fjords* published in 1902. Herein, writes Engleking:

²⁶⁹ Tama Lea Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin" ' *Modern Language Studies*, 23 (1993), p.84.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.84.

[she] describes creation in terms of a poetic universe that breaks down into two opposing forces. On the one hand there is Jehovah and his creations - man, light, animals, violence, Homer and Epic poetry; on the other there is Satan and all he created - woman, night, flowers, caresses, Sappho and lyric poetry. Vivien writes Adam and Eve out of the creation story, and by focusing instead on an opposing pair of poets who are more or less equals, she bypasses the formation of Eve from Adam's rib and the myth of women's sexual and linguistic inferiority. What Vivien does in her "Profane Genesis" then, is to provide another way of thinking about gender difference with poetry as its basis [...]²⁷¹

Vivien's 1903 collection *La Vénus des Aveugles* is dedicated to 'À mon amie H.L.C.B.' (R.V, 123)²⁷² and opens with an epigram derived from the Gospel of Luke, 'For those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death'. (R.V, 123) The quote in its entirety reads: 'To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'²⁷³ Vivien's deliberate elimination of 'To give light' articulates the inception of an alternative religion, one concerned with the sublimation of light into darkness and thus reiterating her philosophical assertion that light is representative of the masculine, and darkness as that of the divine feminine. The collection is framed by two poems; *Incipit Liber Veneris Cæcorum* and *Explicit Liber Veneris Cæcorum*, with the former depicting a form of heterodoxical ritual, a sacred moment of worship, to Venus, goddess of the blind.

Le feuillage s'écarte en des plis de rideaux
Devant la Vénus des Aveugles, noire
Sous la majesté de ses noirs bandeaux.
Le temple a des murs d'ébène et d'ivoire
Et le sanctuaire est la nuit des nuits.
Il n'est plus d'odeurs, il n'est plus de bruits
Autour de cet autel dans la nuit la plus noire. (R.V, 125)

Vivien paints a portrait of a temple in utter darkness; it is a sensory vacuum, soundless and odourless. These 'blind' devotees are not ignorant, they are spiritually enlightened and as such their senses are honed in reverence of this *Déesse* of whom 'Nul n'ose

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.84.

²⁷² Baroness Hélène Van Zuylen, Vivien's lover and collaborator from 1902 and 1907. The initials H.L.C.B refer to her first names.

²⁷³ Luke 1:79, *Holy Bible*, King James Version (Collins: Glasgow, 2011).

imaginer le visage inconnu'. (R.V, 125) In her detailed analysis of this poem, Sanders believes that this Venus is the goddess of love in her most formidable persona. She states that:

La narratrice insiste sur la terreur que Vénus, la déesse de l'amour, répand autour d'elle et sur l'intimidation qui émane d'elle. Tant par la dépersonnalisation que par la formule négative, la périphrase "Rien de vivant" souligne la distance qui existe entre elle et les croyants. De même la majuscule du pronom indique que l'énonciatrice subit elle-même l'ascendant terrible de la divinité. L'isolement de l'immortelle est total.²⁷⁴

As with the blind of Baudelaire's *Les Aveugles* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857) whose eyes '[...] restent levés / Au ciel [...]' and Hugo's *À un poète aveugle* (*Les Contemplations*, 1856) who again '[...] voit dans l'ombre un monde de clarté', these 'blind' need not see in order to believe. Achieving metaphysical transcendence they have reached '[...] cette extase où meurt le désir,' (R.V, 125). They belong to an alien world where the physical laws of nature as we know them do not apply, 'Dans un temple vaste autant que les cieux' (R.V, 125).

This is not the goddess of the Roman Pantheon, but rather the *Vénus Noire* of the Grimoire, *Le Petit livre de la Vénus noire*, otherwise known as the *Libellus Veneri Nigro Sacer*, a sacred occultist text used in the practice of black magic.²⁷⁵ Again Vivien's pagan beliefs come to the fore, and her description of this esoteric worship scrutinizes and satirizes traditional forms of religious veneration, particularly those integral to Christian rituals. The ceremony depicted is a subversive one for a number of reasons, primarily because it represents blind devotion to a transcendent goddess rather than to a masculine divinity, and also because it presents a universe far removed from our own, a heterotopic space engulfed in darkness, wherein such darkness is sacrosanct.

²⁷⁴ Sanders, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

²⁷⁵ For further reading on the history and origins of Grimoires see Owen Davies *Grimoires: a History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

No living being, 'rien de vivant' (R.V, 125) can approach or equal this *Déesse Noire* because she is not of this world or of any known empyrean realm, thus delineating her as a goddess of Vivien's fantastical cosmos, one which places woman at its very heart:

Nul n'ose imaginer le visage inconnu.
La Déesse règne en l'ombre éternelle
Où les murs sont nus, où l'autel est nu,
Où rien de vivant ne s'approche d'Elle.
Dans un temple vaste autant que les cieux
La Déesse Noire, interdite aux yeux,
Se retire et se plaît dans la nuit éternelle.

Les Aveugles se sont traînés à ses genoux
Pourtant, et levant leur paupière rouge,
Semblant adorer un dieu sans courroux,
Et nul ne gémit et nulle ne bouge,
Mais, dans cette extase où meurt le désir,
Où la main se tend et n'ose saisir,
Une larme a coulé sous la paupière rouge. (R.V, 125)

The sacred temple of the Black Venus can be contrasted with the abandoned temple of Venus of *Naples* from this same collection. Here the poet contemplates the ancient temple of Baia, long neglected since its halcyon days, when once frequented by those faithful to the goddess. The temple in ruins symbolizes the lost cults of female deities such as 'la Vénus latine' (R.V, 138), the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite, the much favoured goddess of Vivien and Psappa.

Le temple abandonné de la Vénus latine
Se recule et s'estompe à travers les embruns,
Et le déroulement rituel des parfums
Ne tourbillonne plus vers l'Image Divine. (R.V, 138)

The mysterious and otherworldly temple of the Black Venus, may be devoid of any life known to humanity, however it still pulsates with energy in the existence of the supreme being and this is contrasted with the tragedy of a deserted place of worship where: 'Le souffle violent de la Vénus latine / Ne traversera plus les soirs en frémissant.' (R.V,

138) And yet, the final stanza attests to the continued existence in nature of this imperishable goddess, omnipotent and poised for resurrection:

De ses yeux éternels, la Déesse illumine,
Comme autrefois, la terre et l'infini des flots.
La mer salue encor de chants et de sanglots
Le temple abandonné de la Vénus latine. (R.V, 139)

The goddess spirituality of Vivien's poetry precedes modern definitions of thealogy as expounded by such modern commentators as Carol P. Christ, Valerie Saiving and Patricia Iolana.²⁷⁶ Iolana outlines the fundamental differences between Theology and Thealogy:

While seemingly inclusive in scope, theology often has a focal handicap - it is monotheistic in its thinking, examining God from a narrow and often monocular lens often concretised by its own dogma, and often exclusivist and hampered by truth claims. Thealogy, on the other hand, is pluralistic, syncretistic and inclusive. It is fluid and comprehensive, able to contain many different belief systems and ways of being. Thealogy does not stand in opposition to, but as a complement to, Theology as a branch of religious study.²⁷⁷

Vivien's poetry assimilates aspects of traditional theology as she draws on familiar Judeo-Christian tropes (Old Testament heroines as previously explored in earlier chapters, and the cult of Mary and Christ as will be soon examined) and not so familiar, in particular the belief in Biblical demonology. Her representation of demons in her poetry develops the concept initiated in *La Genèse Profane* wherein Vivien ascribes the creation of man to Jehovah, and woman to Satan:

²⁷⁶The study of Thealogy, as it reflects on the purpose and existence of the Goddess (*Thea*) over the study of God (*Theo*) forms a significant area of scholarship in feminist discourses of spirituality. Melissa Raphael overviews its historiography: 'The origins of Goddess feminism can be traced through a history of modern, emancipatory ideas and movements. From the late seventeenth century through to the early nineteenth century, Enlightenment and Romantic criticism of governmental institutions like the Church and monarchy was to inform egalitarian, anti-authoritarian arguments for the independence of human reason from faith and, among the radical forefathers of Goddess feminists, for the essential equality and dignity of persons regardless of race, gender, property and class. In the nineteenth century Christian feminism was also to pave the way for contemporary religious feminism by challenging the prevailing ideology of femininity that kept women out of the public religious sphere.' Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) p. 15.

²⁷⁷ Patricia Iolana, 'Divine Immanence: A psychodynamic study in Women's experience of the Goddess', *Claremont Journal of Religion*, Volume 1. P. 90.

XIII. — Jéhovah pétrit de l'argile. Et, de cette argile, il fit l'homme.

XIV. — De l'essence même de cette chair fleurit, idéalisée, la chair de la Femme, œuvre de Satan.

XV. — Jéhovah courba l'homme et la femme sous la violence et l'étreinte.²⁷⁸

Thus men and women are fated to eternal conflict, and women as the creation of Satan are protected by demons, his angels of darkness. In *Cérès Éleusine* again from *La Vénus des Aveugles* we witness a black mass performed by followers of Ashtaroth²⁷⁹ consisting of 'Les nonnes et les courtisanes' (R.V, 136) (a typical dichotomous image of lesbians for the poet) who defy the 'Deus Sabaoth' (R.V, 136) with a perversion of the sacred Christian hymn *Te Deum* and the psalm *De Profundis*. Sanders describes this as Vivien's 'révolte métaphysique' and notes how it:

[...] se concentre dans le volume *La Vénus des Aveugles*. Elle est dirigée notamment contre le Dieu de l'Ancien Testament. Les diables évoqués dans cet ouvrage : Ashtaroth, Bélial, Moloch, Belzébuth appartiennent à la tradition antérieure au Nouveau Testament. Dans "Cérès Eleusine", les lesbiennes qui célèbrent une messe noire sont désignées comme 'les servantes d'Ashtaroth'.²⁸⁰

Vivien's envisioning of a celestial war of the sexes encompasses the battle between heterosexuality and homosexuality which she also imagines executed on a spiritual plane. Wreaking revenge for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (the ancient cities destroyed by divine intervention for their unrepentant sinning and indulgence in sexual perversity, notably homosexual practices) the demons Ashtaroth, Belzébuth, Bélial and Moloch²⁸¹ terrorize the citizens of Suburra.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Renée Vivien, *Brumes de Fjords* (Paris : Lemerre, 1902) p.117.

²⁷⁹ Canaanite goddess of love, fertility and war, worship of her was extremely prohibited in the Bible.

²⁸⁰ Sanders, *op.cit.*, p.360.

²⁸¹ Each a fallen angel residing in hell; Belzébuth is second in command to Satan and also known as Lord of the Flies. Bélial or 'The Worthless One' was the uncontested ruler of hell before the reign of the Devil. Moloch or Baal is the demon warrior known for his love of child sacrifice. For further reading see: Karel Van der Toorn, Pieter W. Van der Horst and Dr. Bob Becking eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 1998).

²⁸² A district in ancient Rome; an area known for its brothels and the site of Julius Caesar's childhood home.

Ashtaroth, Belzébuth, Bélial et Moloch
Fendent la nuit d'hiver, massive comme un roc,
De leurs ailes et de leur souffle de fournaise,
Et, sur les murs lépreux de Subarra, Moloch
De son pouce sanglant trace le nombre : treize. (R.V, 137)

The title of this poem, *Treize (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)* refers to both Strabo's assertion in his *Geographica*²⁸³ that Sodom was the metropolis around which thirteen cities existed, including Gomorrah, all destroyed by God's anger; and also to the numerological significance of thirteen as an inauspicious number associated with demonology and witchcraft. The demon's mission is to desecrate all that is connected with heterosexuality and fertility, and their vengeful wrath is described in vivid and violent imagery:

Ils ont paré le front de l'Épouse niaise...
Archange ennemi des naissances, Bélial
Sur les ventres féconds trace le nombre : treize. (R.V, 138)

Finally balance is restored in Vivien's homosexual utopia with the rebellious marriage of two women under Lot's offended watch, and retribution is gained in the rebirth of the condemned cities.

Car Bélial, Moloch, Belzébuth, Ashtaroth
Font surgir, sous les yeux scandalisés de Loth,
Les marbres de Sodome et les fleurs de Gomorrhe,
Et, mariant l'amante à la vierge, Ashtaroth
Ressuscite les nuits qui font haïr l'aurore.

Car Bélial, Moloch, Belzébuth, Ashtaroth
Font triompher Sodome et claironner Gomorrhe. (R.V, 138)

Vivien's anti-heteronormative religion is enshrined in a personal catechism outlined in the poems *Litanie de la haine*, again from *La Vénus des aveugles, Profession de Foi*

²⁸³ Strabo the geographer, historian and philosopher who lived sometime between 63 B.C and A.D 24 was a Roman citizen of Greek descent. His *Geographica* is an account of contemporaneous people and places uncovered in his extensive travels and remain a valuable historical source today. For further reading see Daniela Dueck, *Strabo of Amasia: Greek Man of Letters in Augustan Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

(*Sillages*, 1908) and *Ainsi je parlerai (À l'heure des mains jointes*, 1906). The poet's litany forms a deconsecrated prayer in which she and her unnamed female cohorts, infused by 'Le souffle ténébreux de Lilith' (R.V, 150) and the '[...] baiser d'Éblis' (R.V, 150), profess their hatred for the world of man. Again Vivien defines her opposition to orthodoxy in the juxtaposition of love and hate as formally demonstrated with the binary oppositions of night and day, light and dark.

La Haine nous unit, plus forte que l'Amour
 Nous haïssons le rire et le rythme du jour,
 Le regard du printemps au néfaste retour.

Nous haïssons la face agressive des mâles.
 Nos cœurs ont recueilli les regrets et les râles
 Des Femmes aux fronts lourds, des femmes aux fronts pâles. (R.V, 150)

'J'aime l'avril et l'eau, l'arc-en-ciel et la lune,' (R.V, 272) reads the ironic first line of Vivien's *Profession de Foi* (*Sillages*, 1908) with the poet deriding traditional paradigms of femininity or what Cixous describes as '[...] the classic representations of women (as sensitive – intuitive – dreamy, etc.)'²⁸⁴ This is countered however by the profession contained in the last line of this stanza, 'Et je mens car je suis la fille de la nuit.' (R.V, 272) The night is Vivien's goddess, she who represents this alternative religion of women struggling against the forces of light. In reference to Englelking's statement that Vivien's poetry acts as an attempt to 'undo the hierarchy of the engendered cannon', Vivien, counterbalancing the phallogocentric nature of language, establishes a new linguistic site for herself and her community of women, challenging traditional concepts of right and wrong, good and evil. If man is ruled by God she reasons, a God of light and goodness, then women must side with darkness and out of darkness find a goddess

²⁸⁴ Cixous, *op.cit.*, p. 878.

worthy of their faith. Thus Vivien's use of language, as a subversion of the symbolic order, acts to '[...] surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.'²⁸⁵

Given an opportunity to address the God of man, Vivien imagines an audience with Christ in *Ainsi je parlerai (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)*.

Si le Seigneur penchait son front sur mon trépas,
Je lui dirais : « Ô Christ, je ne te connais pas.

« Seigneur, ta stricte loi ne fut jamais la mienne,
Et je vécus ainsi qu'une simple païenne. (R.V, 167)

This is presented as an unapologetic confession, a final confrontation on an imagined judgement day, wherein Vivien avows her unrepentant lesbianism, 'Le soleil me ceignait de ses plus vives flammes / Et l'amour m'inclina vers la beauté des femmes.' (R.V, 168) She forsakes the '[...] cantiques des anges' (R.V, 168) over the songs of Lesbos and the promise of heaven for the shores of Mytilène. Notwithstanding, this mute Christ addressed by the poet is an *acknowledged* deity. Although Goujon claims that with this poem Vivien '[...] renia même le Christ, affirmant son paganisme [...]'²⁸⁶ she nevertheless does not go so far as to deny his existence. Vivien's speech is not only an act of defiance but is also symptomatic of her frustration in the face of a godhead she feels has been wrongly annexed as a symbol of the androcentric order, and whose essential message has been diluted and distorted in an effort to suppress those marginalised for whom he once stood. The Christ with whom Vivien aligns herself is the *anarchiste* revolutionary figure of her prose work *Le Christ, l'Aphrodite et M. Pépin* published by Edward Sansot in 1907. Here, as the socialist leader of a 'mystico-

²⁸⁵ Cixous, *op.cit.*, p.883.

²⁸⁶ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.408.

révolutionnaire'²⁸⁷ movement, he is condemned and derided as a danger to 'la sécurité publique'.²⁸⁸ Christ is one of the only male figures featured in Vivien's poetry, and she identifies with his position as an isolated and misunderstood herald of truth. And yet Jay notes that 'Vivien's identification with Christ was far from complete. It is the alienation which attracted her, not the spirit of forgiveness.'²⁸⁹ Drawn to his status as rejected outsider, Vivien empathises with his suffering, which she saw as akin to her own. Unlike Christ, however, she is not willing to turn the other cheek, and remains constant in her contemptuous disdain for those who scorn her:

Pendant longtemps, je fus clouée au pilori,
Et des femmes, voyant que je souffrais, ont ri.

Puis, des hommes ont pris dans leurs mains une boue
Qui vint éclabousser mes tempes et ma joue.

Les pleurs montaient en moi, houleux comme des flots,
Mais mon orgueil me fit refouler mes sanglots. (R.V, 214)

Imagining herself as a Messianic figure nailed to a cross as here in *Le Pilori (À l'heure des mains jointes)*, 1906) Vivien learns not to forgive but to hate, this in return for the hatred she imagines is shown to her by women and men alike: 'J'ai senti la colère et l'horreur m'envahir./ Silencieusement, j'appris à les haïr.' (R.V, 214) Vivien's identification with Christ is further problematised by the fact that her identification with his suffering and death serves her desire to be transformed into a martyr a transformation which she fantasizes will constitute an act of vengeance worthy of Old Testament standards – standards to which she is ordinarily opposed. Conversely, Vivien's worship of the Virgin Mary is more successful in its assimilation of a Christian symbol of womanhood into her own idealization of a feminist religion rooted in the

²⁸⁷ Renée Vivien, *Le Christ, l'Aphrodite et M. Pépin* (Paris : E. Sansot, 1907), pp. 14-34.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.84.

paradoxical veneration of chastity (as it pertains to the abstinence of heterosexual practice) and fertility (where such fertility stands for female creativity and productivity).

Vivien's Madonna owes more to her concept of a universal transcendent Earth Goddess, to which the scriptural version itself is indebted, than to the quiescent, serene, and passive mother of God. She belongs, like Psappha, to a feminist literary tradition through which, according to Ruth Vanita, Mariology '[...] helps constitute a space in which alternatives for women in pre-modern Europe developed.'²⁹⁰ For the poet, Mary is a symbol of female autonomy, she conceives without recourse to sexual intercourse with a man, and yet in Vivien's poetic universe she is not without sin. For sin and impurity are the overriding characteristics of this *Madone aux Lys* (*La Vénus des Aveugles*, 1903). Herein, Vivien finds the face of the Madonna in the image of her lover, as the 'Lys de Jérusalem' (R.V, 142) she is the flesh and blood Jewish woman of history, as emphasized again in *Virgo Hebraïca* from the same collection, rather than the white-skinned and white-clad Western icon. In fact Vivien's Mary is at times more decadently perverse than pure, as she presides over pestilence and fever in *Notre-Dame des Fièvres*, a poem recited by the character San Giovanni of *Une Femme m'apparut*:

Ton haleine fétide a corrompu la ville...
Un vert de gangrène, un vert de poison
Grouille, et la rampe ainsi qu'un reptile.
La foule redit en chœur l'oraison,
Délire fervent qui brûle les lèvres,
Frisson glacial parmi les sueurs,
Vers ta lividité, Notre-Dame des Fièvres !²⁹¹

This Madonna is the complete antithesis to the traditional queen of peace, and by reclaiming her as a symbol of alterity she literally belongs as *Notre Dame* to Vivien and her community. Vivien's Marian goddess as a *volte face* of the Christian saint is likened

²⁹⁰ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-sex love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) p.14.

²⁹¹ Renée Vivien, *Une Femme m'apparut* (1905) *op.cit.*, p. 158.

to the Indian goddess Kali, who, as the deity of chaos and darkness, annihilates the ego as it represents the artificial centre of reality, and exists as the reverse aspect of the gentler Parvati.

However *Marie* as she appears in *Une Chapelle (Le Vent des Vaisseaux, 1910)* though associated with the chaos of ungovernable nature, assumes her familiar role as comforter as she provides succour to her flock. ‘Et voici ce que fut la chapelle où l’on prie, / Celle où pieusement on célèbre Marie.’ (R.V, 307) Herein the Virgin is implored but remains either indifferent or ineffective in the face of ‘Le grand vent de la mer [...]’ (R.V, 307) Like Vivien’s vision of Aphrodite she is an emblem of feminine autonomy and fortitude in her capacity for comfort and cruelty. She is also associated with gynandrim, in her ‘immaculate conception’ as illustrated in *Les Sept Lys de Marie (Dans un Coin des Violettes, 1910)* where the self-pollinating lily described in overtly sexual tones, is possessed of both a stamen and a pistil, and symbolizes ‘[...] les fleurs de Saint-Amour !’ (R.V, 288)

Les Sept Lys ont fleuri devant l’antique porche.
Chacun d’eux est plus long et plus droit qu’une torche,
Leurs pistils sont pareils à des flammes de torche. (R.V, 288)

III 2:2 Sacred Androgyny

From Balzac’s *Séraphîta*²⁹² to De Banville’s *Hermaphrodite*,²⁹³ the nineteenth-century archetype of the androgyne appears as a symbol for a pure, unadulterated, unified universe. A universe governed in equal measure by the masculine and feminine,

²⁹²Honoré de Balzac, *Séraphîta* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1995) First published in *La Revue de Paris* in 1834, Balzac’s tale is inspired by the Neoplatonic doctrines of the Swedish philosopher and theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) who preached that original man was created by God as an androgynous being.

²⁹³ Théodore de Banville, *Les Exilés* (Paris : Éditions de la différence, 1991).

while also representing the primordial quest for artistic harmony in the union of both gender traits. Frédéric Monneyron states that the classical myth of the androgyne acts as a symbol for: ‘l’unité originelle du monde’²⁹⁴ and explains how the splitting of this unity caused the destruction of a sacred state, resulting in the duality of the sexes. The origins of the cult of the androgyne lie not only in primitive polytheistic mythology but are also found:

[...] dans les religions complexes et évoluées – par exemple, chez les anciens Germains, dans le Proche-Orient antique, en Iran, dans l’Inde, en Chine, en Indonésie, etc. – que chez les peuples de culture archaïque, en Afrique, en Amérique, en Mélanésie, en Australie et en Polynésie.²⁹⁵

Bram Dijkstra writing of ‘The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature’, claims that the concept of the androgyne for many writers of the period was formulated in reaction to bourgeois values and entrenched sexual stereotypes, and that:

[...] the artists of the fin de siècle, the generation of Huysmans, turned the androgyne, the embodiment of the concept of the integrated soul, into the central symbol of their revolt against the bourgeoisie, and against the society of exchange values and polar oppositions which the bourgeoisie had fostered.²⁹⁶

Vivien’s portrayal of the androgyne, in both her poetry and prose, is manifested partly in reaction to the polarization of gender roles, but primarily traces its literary origins to the notion of the divine androgyne as expounded by Plato in his *Symposium*, where he philosophized that primordial man was a bisexual being, as such a paragon of perfection in unity, and mirroring the image of the divine.²⁹⁷ Vivien, however, favoured the female androgyne over the male, as Monneyron contends in his reading of *Une femme*

²⁹⁴ Frédéric Monneyron, *L’androgyne romantique, du mythe au mythe littéraire* (Grenoble : ELLUG, Université Stendhal, 1994), p. 7

²⁹⁵ Mircea Eliade *Méphistophélès et l’androgyne*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1962) p.136.

²⁹⁶ Bram Dijkstra, ‘The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature’ *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter, 1974), pp. 62-73.

²⁹⁷ Plato, *Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

m'apparut, where the androgynous San Giovanni (directly inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's painting of Saint John the Baptist, a recurring model for androgyny in the Romantic and Decadent periods) asserts that male epebes are: 'inférieurs à la femme dont ils n'ont ni la grâce d'attitude ni les harmonieux contours.'²⁹⁸ Drawing on the sexual ambiguity inherent to many Shakespearean characters and the recurrent motif of androgyny present throughout the plays, Vivien praises the androgynous beauty of her lover in *Sonnet (Évocations, 1903)* described as 'Grave comme Hamlet, pâle comme Ophélie.' (R.V, 76)

Ta royale jeunesse a la mélancolie
Du Nord où le brouillard efface les couleurs.
Tu mêles la discorde et le désir aux pleurs,
Grave comme Hamlet, pâle comme Ophélie. (R.V, 76)

The enigmatic Northern landscape, so familiar to Vivien's poetics, is a site of transformation, where the fog-blurred, colourless terrain denotes the ambiguous ungendered being, again further emphasized by the use of the verb 'mêler' and the immediate juxtaposition of 'discorde' and 'désir'. For the poet, the androgynous nature of her lover is embodied in beloved contradictions, as they represent a resistance to convention thus doubling her beauty, and increasing her desirability, 'Ton être double attire ainsi qu'un double aimant,/ Et ta chair brûle avec l'ardeur froide d'un cierge.'(R.V, 76) *Twilight* from the same collection also represents that ephemeral time of day most loved by the poet. Like the Northern landscape it is a locus of liminality, a metaphysical crossroads where the dualities of 'Les clartés de la nuit' (R.V, 100) and 'les ténèbres du jour' (R.V, 100) meet. Vivien captures the essence of androgyny in the semantic interchange of these seemingly oxymoronic duplicities throughout each couplet.

²⁹⁸ Renée Vivien, *op.cit.*, p.150.

Ô mes rêves, voici l'heure équivoque et tendre
Du crépuscule, éclos telle une fleur de cendre.

Les clartés de la nuit, les ténèbres du jour,
Ont la complexité de mon étrange amour.

Sous le charme pervers de la lumière double,
Le regard de mon âme interroge et se trouble.

Je contemple, tandis que l'énigme me fuit,
Les ténèbres du jour, les clartés de la nuit...

L'ambigu de ton corps s'alambique et s'affine
Dans son ardeur stérile et sa grâce androgyne.

Les clartés de la nuit, les ténèbres du jour,
Ont la complexité de mon étrange amour... (R.V, 100)

It is the inscrutable nature of the androgyne that appeals most strongly to Vivien, possessing the power to seduce both women and men alike, thus subverting established gender norms and destabilizing fixed paradigms of attraction as demonstrated with Gautier's transgendered protagonist of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835),²⁹⁹ who succeeds in tempting both Albert and Rosette. The sphinx-like 'virgin' of *La Vierge au tapis* (*La Vénus des Aveugles*, 1903) is portrayed as a religious icon 'Pâle et mélancolique ainsi qu'une malade, / Un tapis fondu languit sous tes pieds,' (R.V, 141). Her otherworldliness is emphasized by her inhabiting a space 'Plus majestueux qu'un temple de jade' (R.V, 141) while she remains suspended, hovering on a magical carpet, poised for flight. Unfathomable, the poet is bowed in veneration before her mystery, as it is her androgyny which defines her proximity to divinity. And both women are emblematic characterizations of Da Vinci's most cryptic portraits, representing feminine enigma and androgyny alike: 'Monna Lisa souriant à San Giovanni.' (R.V, 141)

²⁹⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Paris : Gallimard, 1973).

The tone employed in *Pèlerinage* (*Haillons*, 1910) suggests that this ungendered state is one to which the poet has long aspired, having reached the pinnacle of her spiritual voyage:

Il me semble n'avoir plus de sexe ni d'âge,
Tant les chagrins me sont brusquement survenus,
Les Temps se sont tissés...Et me voici pieds nus,
Achevant le terrible et long pèlerinage... (R.V, 329)

The concept of a pilgrimage, as it implies a journey of divine transformation, a journey shared by a community of female pilgrims, confirms Vivien's belief in the androgynous as divine.

Et la procession lente et triste défile
De ces implorateurs que lasse le chemin.
Parfois on me relève, une me tend la main,
Et tous nous implorons le Divin Soir tranquille ! (R.V, 329)

III 2.3 Lesbian sexuality as religious experience:

Dante in his *Paradiso* reaches a fateful epiphany when upon seeing Beatrice in the terrestrial paradise he realizes that through his love for her he has achieved his love for God. Pamela Williams describes this revelation as a transformation, explaining how 'He is transformed by divine love through human love.'³⁰⁰ This seminal literary parousia would have made a significant impression on Vivien the Dantean scholar and translator.³⁰¹ In her many poetic descriptions of lesbian sexuality she attempts to describe Sapphic love as a beatifying experience, through which each lover accedes to a sense of the divine. This elevation of Sapphic sensuality serves to validate Vivien's ideological distinction between heterosexuality, 'le désir qui profane l'Épouse' (R.V,

³⁰⁰ Pamela Williams, *Through Human Love to God: Essays on Dante and Petrarch* (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2007), p.41.

³⁰¹ For a fascinating account of the influence of Dante on Vivien see Francesco Arru '« Que j'aime ce Dante-Là ! » Renée Vivien lectrice et traductrice de Dante' from *Renée Vivien à rebours, op.cit.*, pp.77-91.

92) and female homosexuality ‘[...] l’amour sacré des vierges’ (R.V, 152) which she regarded as a vocation. By classifying the sexual experience as sacred the poet also manages to separate the corporeal from the spiritual, disembodiment of the physical act. Filled with desire for her mistress, the speaker pauses before her naked beauty in *Nudité* (*Études et Préludes*, 1901) only to question her own physical desire as a form of irreverence in the face of such beauty, ‘J’eus soudain le mépris de ma lèvre grossière’ (R.V, 34). This is also a moment of epiphany for the speaker, as she embarks on a love affair, not only with this mistress before her, but with this self-evolved religion of Sapphic love, to which she will forever remain devout. Here the human mistress of the verse is immortalized under the gaze of the poet/speaker, and their sexual union will lead them to the threshold of divinity:

Dédaignant l’univers que le désir enchaîne,
 Tu gardas froidement ton sourire immortel
 Car la Beauté demeure étrange et surhumaine
 Et veut l’éloignement splendide de l’autel.

Éparse autour de toi pleurait la tubéreuse,
 Tes seins se dressaient fiers de leur virginité...
 Dans mes regards brûlait l’extase douloureuse
 Qui nous étreint au seuil de la divinité. (R.V, 34)

Believing herself to be rendered divine by her sexuality, Vivien, echoing the Biblical proclamation that as humans we are created in the image of God, sees her divinity mirrored in the body and mind of her lover. ‘Le regard clair et la voix limpide, j’entame / Un hymne triomphal à ma Divinité,’ (R.V, 270). *Pareilles* (*Sillages*, 1908) sees Vivien rejoice in the fact that she is a woman, ‘Car, en ce jour, je me réjouis d’être femme !’ (R.V, 270) She reasons that in sharing the same gender as her mistress, she is consequently empathetically incapable of inflicting pain upon her.

Et loué soit le sort en ses obscurs desseins
 De ceci : que nos cœurs sont pareils, ma maîtresse !
 Car nous aimons la grâce et la délicatesse,
 Et ma possession ne meurtrit pas tes seins... (R.V, 270)

Their physical sameness magnifies their godliness, further validating the essential sanctity of their union. The sense of the sacred is further accentuated by Vivien's discreet reference to Catholic prayer, 'Je crois n'avoir pu te blesser, ainsi / T'aimant, ni dans ton cœur ni même en mes pensées, (R.V, 270) as this echoes the phrasing of the Confiteor – 'in my thoughts and in my words.'

As previously noted the ecstatic mood of *La Fusée (Évocations, 1903)* is suggestive of sexual climax, and additionally it evokes the euphoric rapture experienced by religious mystics in communion with a higher power. Herein Vivien's *quête mystique* reaches a crescendo, her disembodied spirit soars through space towards heaven, mimicking Dante's trajectory in the *Paradiso* and akin to the shamanistic 'soul flight' or the *Mi'rāj*, the 'night flight' of Islamic tradition. However having just arrived on the margins of heaven, Vivien's soul is rent asunder and in shattered fragments falls like rain returning to earth.

Et je voyais plus haut la divine Pléiade...
Je montais... J'atteignais le Silence Éternel...
Lorsque je me brisai, comme un fauve arc-en-ciel,
Jetant des lueurs d'or et d'onyx et de jade... (R.V, 103)

Thus Vivien flaunts her ability to commune with divinity, but chooses at the last moment to return to her earthly paradise, reiterating the sentiment enshrined in *Ainsi je parlerai* where she rejects the heavenly realm as promised by Christ in favour of a Sapphic paradise on earth. As such Vivien challenges God's sovereignty, positing her lesbian utopia as a parallel to his universe, again further establishing '[...] son propre système mythique'³⁰² which as Berger emphasizes '[...] est, comme de juste,

³⁰² Nicholas Berger, *op.cit.*, p.94.

gynocentrique, syncrétiste, et uniquement voué à la célébration des amours féminines.³⁰³

Vivien uses religious terminology to praise her lover in *Pour le Lys (Dans un coin des violettes, 1910)* relishing the blasphemous defiance of an androcentric God by replacing him at the table of the Last Supper with a woman who is described as, ‘Très chère qu’on ne peut approcher qu’à genoux/ ...Et que le repas soit comme la Sainte Table’ (R.V, 299), and once again reminiscent of Da Vinci’s famous painting. Titles of honour and salvation normally reserved for Christian worship are conferred upon her beloved; she is ‘irréprochable’, ‘l’image divine’ and ‘puissance’ (R.V, 299). And her movements, as she rises slowly before the poet, recall the resurrection, while she is enshrouded in the colours purple and gold traditionally associated with Christ.

Ô Toi, Femme que j’aime ! Ô Lys irréprochable !
Très chère qu’on ne peut approcher qu’à genoux,
Lève sur moi tes yeux si doux et ton front doux !
Et que le repas soit comme la Sainte Table.

Réveille, avec ta voix, mes rêves somnolents.
Voyant mon front fiévreux, accablé par les rêves,
Toute droite, dans la pourpre et l’or tu te lèves,
Toujours silencieuse, avec tes gestes lents.

Ô l’Image divine ! Ô la Femme que j’aime !
Qui fais que je m’éveille avec la face au jour
Et qui, par le pouvoir immense de l’amour,
As fait que le matin m’est apparu moins blême.

Ô puissance ! ô beauté de la femme que j’aime ! (R.V, 299)

This same veneration and elevation of her lover to divine status occurs in *Essentielle* from the same collection where as twin souls the lovers are ‘[...] unie a l’empyrée !’ (R.V, 296) Again this woman who for the poet ‘[...] m’a fait partager [son] essence divine...’ (R.V 296) is described in sanctified tones as ‘l’Être Essentiel’ and ‘Toute

³⁰³ Berger, *art.cit.*,p.94.

Adorée', her importance and divine nature emphasized in the use of reverential capitalizations. The symbolic references to the sea, 'Devant l'autel des mers...' (R.V, 296) and 'La mer était en nous...' (R.V, 296) reinforce this sense of fundamental essentialism, as both women are joined together since the dawn of nature, the very beginning of time likened to the description of twin flames given by Aristophanes again from Plato's *Symposium*.³⁰⁴

Valuing the transformative power of spirituality, Vivien, through the medium of poetry undertakes a religious journey characterized by subversion, perversion and conversion. She subverts the familiar paradigms of Abrahamic faith in an attempt to place woman, and in particular the lesbian woman, in a position of authority. The centrality of women is validated in her syncretistic religiosity as it is inspired by Sapphic and Hellenistic tradition. The sacred aspect of the androgyne symbolizes a primordial quest for transcendence, reverting back to a time of sexless equanimity.

³⁰⁴ Plato, *op.cit.*

Chapter 3: Re-transformations

Transformation in the poetic universe of Vivien manifests as a quest for transcendence. This takes the form of transcendence of religious conventions in the search for a divine alternative in correspondence with the poet's ideological expectations for a gynocentric spirituality. Transcending heterodoxy, Vivien symbolizes female homosexuality and artistic creativity in the form of metamorphosis. A thematic analysis of Vivien's poetry reveals a circularity of movement; periodically she indulges in moments of introspection and retrospection, allowing her to consider the essential purpose and effect of such a journey of transformation. This reflection assumes the form of *re*-transformation, whereby Vivien, as she retraces her steps, pauses to examine her role as a poet and as a woman attempting to reshape the discourse which confines rather than defines her in the first place.

'Every day is a journey and each step is a journey home'³⁰⁵ wrote the Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Basho, and in the poetry of Renée Vivien each step of her poetic journey brings her closer to a figurative home. Home for Vivien signifies many things; the comfort to be found in love, her beloved island of Lesbos, but also the interior home of the intellect. Often morose or depressed, these periods of reflection allow a glimpse of the poet's uncertainties as she contemplates her fate as a writer, or painfully scrutinizes her growing disenchantment with love. However at times she portrays a certainty of purpose and sense of pride in her sexuality and in her art such that these become moments of true illumination, one in which retransformed, she is determined to continue. Much of Vivien's anxiety surrounding her role as a writer stemmed from a deep-seated fear of criticism and a profound lack of faith in her own ability. Vivien was

³⁰⁵ Matsuo Basho, *Basho's Narrow Road: Spring and Autumn Passages* (Albany: Stone Bridge Press, 1998), p. 34.

a notoriously private person, particularly sensitive to any criticism of her writing, and in 1907 made the drastic decision to remove her work from general circulation.³⁰⁶ Elaine Showalter writing about the particular pressures experienced by women authors of the nineteenth century notes that:

The continual pressure to prove themselves, a pressure more internalized than manifest, kept them desperately sensitive to criticism. They nonetheless resorted to positively masochistic metaphors in describing their artistic self-discipline: "Hit again, right sharply," Charlotte Brontë told a critic; George Eliot spoke of her writing as "fasting and scourging oneself."³⁰⁷

In the case of Vivien, this pressure, certainly internalized, also becomes externalized and manifests greatly in her work, at times leading her to believe that after her death her writings would fade into obscurity. This self doubt is plainly evident in the poem *Par les Soirs futurs (À l'Heure des Mains Jointes)*, 1906) where the poet, contemplating a distant future believes 'Nul ne saura mon nom et nulle d'entre vous / Ne redira mes vers [...]’ (R.V, 213) In the *Avertissement* to the 1910 publication of Vivien’s poetry *Dans un coin des Violettes*, Paul Flat includes some letters that the poet wrote to her editor Edward Sansot towards the end of her life, in which her misgivings regarding her validity as an author and indeed her apologies regarding the same are clearly expressed:

Cette abondance littéraire me cause un dégoût profond ! mais (*sic*) je n’y peux rien. Espérons que bientôt adviendra une période bénie de sécheresse ! Enfin voici toujours des vers, puis qu’on ne peut vivre sans être illogique.³⁰⁸

Later again she writes :

Si c’est n’est pas de la « bonne ouvrage » comme disent les couturières, vous me le direz n’est ce pas ? J’ai tellement peur du ridicule. Et cette surabondance en est un, hélas ! – Je suis un peu malade et ne peux sortir (toujours cet estomac !) et toute l’énergie qui me reste se concentre en choses littéraires. Pardon !³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Sanders, *op.cit.*, pp. 134-153.

³⁰⁷ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1999), p. 46.

³⁰⁸ Renée Vivien, *Dans un coin des violettes* (Paris : E. Sansot, 1910), p.8.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Besides being moved by the very poignant and tragic nature of this correspondence (particularly in light of Vivien's eventual death) one is struck by some very telling use of language in these letters; particularly in Vivien's confession that she wrote in spite of herself, and was compelled to write, as most authors profess, yet wished for a period of drought, which she describes in terms of sterility (as already noted a familiar motif in Vivien's philosophical model of homosexuality). Additionally her likening of the writing process to that of a dressmaker or *couturière* is especially remarkable. We previously examined the importance of dress in Vivien's poetry as representative of transformation, and equally, Vivien in her attempt to find validation in her work, resorts to a method of stripping down, of disrobing or *re-transformation* which exists as a poetics of self-reflection. Thus the poet transformed as described in *La Fusée*, 'Vertigineusement, j'allais vers les étoiles...' (R.V, 103) is equally the poet who returns back to herself as she questions not only her position as a poet but her very existence in *Dura Lex, Sed Lex*, 'Je sens trop, vers le soir, cette horreur d'être née' (R.V, 325)

III 3.1 Self-reflection and Authorship « Puisqu'on ne peut vivre sans être illogique. »

Female authorship, from the beginning of the nineteenth century through to the *fin de siècle*, was subject to such a degree of public scorn that it was readily equated with mental degeneracy and hysteria. Mesch reminds us that:

In the 1889 preface to the French edition of Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, Maurice Barrès introduces the author as a young woman suffering from "la maladie du siècle" (the disease of the century). He describes the novel as a symptom of its author's disease, claiming that the book will be of interest to doctors and psychologists. Barrès thus likens his friend Rachilde (with her permission, of course) to a hysteric herself. In Renée Vivien's autobiographical novel *Une femme m'apparut*, the female protagonist objects to a letter addressed to "Mademoiselle Willoughby, femme de lettres." She demands: "Mettrait-on à la poste une enveloppe libellée de la sorte : *Mademoiselle Maximillienne de Château-Fleuri, Prositituée ?*" (Would you mail an

envelope labeled *Mademoiselle Maximillienne de Château-Fleuri, Prostituée?* since the public has for both professions, “le même indulgent mépris” (the same indulgent scorn).³¹⁰

Mesch continues to illustrate the contempt in which female authors were held, both publicly and privately, and as much within as without the profession itself, by citing a male character of Marcelle Tinayre’s 1912 publication of *Madeleine au miroir, journal d’une femme*, who in his advice to women about to embark as writers claims:

Même avec du talent, vous pourrez connaître le gêne...Si le talent vous manque, vous ne serez pas une artiste pauvre ; vous serez une déclassée pitoyable et quasi ridicule.³¹¹

In recognition of the inferior status of the woman writer, Tinayre and Vivien cast a sardonic if not humorous eye on the figure of the *femme de lettres*, yet this ‘tongue in cheek’ approach belies the true anxieties experienced in the pursuit of their profession. And yet Tinayre and Vivien continued to write, both prolifically, in the face of such adversity. In fact as female authors, they demonstrate a profound desire to articulate this anxiety, in the only way they know, through writing itself.³¹² In the case of Vivien, this anxiety is internalized (within those letters to her editor writing is described as a form of disease and indeed is mentioned in the same context as a genuine malady – ‘toujours cet estomac’) and then externalized as evident in her poetry which alternates between moments of hopeful and dispirited self-reflection.

Vivien’s 1906 collection *À l’Heure des Mains jointes* can almost be classified in its entirety as a meditation on the *illogique* which she felt was inherent to the writing

³¹⁰ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

³¹¹ Marcelle Tinayre, *Madeleine au miroir, journal d’une femme* (Paris : Calmann Lévy, 1912), p.212.

³¹² Tinayre and Vivien were well known to each other, and along with Colette Tinayre offers us an insight into Vivien’s life and her home, see Marcelle Tinayre, ‘Trois images de Renée Vivien’, *Schéhérazade*, 5 mars 1901, p.v.

process. With *Mensonge du Soir...*³¹³ she portrays, in the opening stanzas, the oftentimes lonely and unrewarding life of the poet:

Or, par un soir pareil, je crus être poète...
J'avais rêvé, dans le silence trop exquis,
De soleils possédés et de lauriers conquis...
Et ma vie est semblable aux lendemains de fête.

Tout me fait mal, l'été, le rayon d'un fanal
Rouge sur l'eau nocturne, et le rythme des rames,
Les rosiers d'un jardin et les cheveux des femmes
Et leur regard, tout me fait mal, tout me fait mal. (R.V, 207)

Vivien admits that she envisaged another life for herself as a poet, one steeped in the joy of recognition, 'De soleils possédés et de lauriers conquis...' (R.V, 207) when the reality, however, is more anti-climatic: '[...] ma vie est semblable aux lendemains de fête.' (R.V, 207) Victor Hugo asserted that 'La mélancolie, c'est le bonheur d'être triste'³¹⁴ and in the case of Vivien, she recognises, as many poets do, that melancholy is not only a symptom of writing, but its very impetus as well. The poet addresses two loves in this poem, 'mes deux amours' (R.V, 207) and in an earlier chapter we examined her treatment of these 'loves' in terms of naming. We surmised that the lover named as Loreley was Barney, as she is often named in Vivien's work, and that the other lover, '[...] toi dont la présence est calme et vespérale' (R.V, 207) is purposefully unnamed, emphasizing her enigmatic status. However, within the context of this poem, this other *amour* may well be a reference to her vocation as poet, as she, personified 'Comme Dika' (R.V,207) joins Vivien as they walk '[...] sur les routes moroses / Qui n'ont point su garder l'empreinte de nos pieds.' (R.V, 207)

In *Vaincue*, again from the same collection, the poet reaches out to the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis:

³¹³ Ellipsis in original.

³¹⁴ Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer, Volume II 'La cloche du port'* (Paris : Librairie internationale A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven, et Cie, 1866), p.154.

Isis, fais-moi rejoindre, au fond des plaines nues,
Les poètes obscurs qui savent les affronts
Et qui passent, chantant leurs strophes inconnues
Dans le soir éternel qui pèse sur leurs fronts... (R.V, 215)

It is hard to separate irony from sincerity here. On the one hand, Vivien composes with a degree of skill, a carefully crafted work of poetry in *Vaincue*, while indulging in an almost masochistic ‘happiness in sorrow’ – as per Hugo’s phrase – in the deprecation of her art. As she reflects on her work as a poet, she sees little to suggest that her work will endure, ‘Mes vers n’ont pas atteint à la calme excellence, / Je l’ai compris, et nul ne les lira jamais...’ (R.V, 215) But yet her life is inextricably bound to poetry, not only in terms of writing but in the art of living itself. She opines that at least ‘[...] j’aurai connu la splendeur sans limite’ (R.V, 215) and that, ‘J’aurai vécu ma vie ainsi que l’on récite / Un poème, avec art et tendresse et lenteur.’ (R.V, 215)

Despite her fear in the face of an uncertain future, Vivien demonstrates a sincere hope that her poetry will be read, and that it will serve as inspiration for women to come. This is further validation of the fact that Vivien wrote rhetorically, and in the hope of influencing future audiences, this hope is enshrined in *Vous pour qui j’écrivis*:

Vous pour qui j’écrivis, ô belles jeunes femmes !
Vous que, seules, j’aimais, relirez-vous mes vers
Par les futurs matins neigeant sur l’univers,
Et par les soirs futurs de roses et de flammes ?

Songerez-vous, parmi le désordre charmant
De vos cheveux épars, de vos robes défaites :
« Cette femme, à travers les sanglots et les fêtes,
A porté ses regards et ses lèvres d’amant. »

Pales et respirant votre chair embaumée,
Dans l’évocation magique de la nuit,
Direz-vous : « Cette femme eut l’ardeur qui me fuit...
Que n’est-elle vivante ! Elle m’aurait aimée... » (R.V, 213)

This hopeful yearning is immediately overturned in the following verse in this collection, one whose title, *Par les Soirs futurs*, derives directly from its precedent.

Herein, and in answer to her own question, Vivien concludes: ‘Nul ne saura mon nom et nulle d’entre vous / Ne redira mes vers, ô belles jeunes femmes !’(R.V, 213)³¹⁵ Vivien, internalizing the pain of her current invisibility as a female and moreover lesbian poet, is understandably sceptical of any future reception of her work. This belief leads her to imagine a bleak future for women, one where the bittersweet charm of love between women would cease to exist.

Nulle de vous n’aura le caprice charmant
De regretter l’amour d’une impossible amie,
Et d’appeler tout bas, désireuse et blémie,
L’impérieux baiser de mes lèvres d’amant. (R.V, 214)

The poet has begun to envisage her own demise, and as universally experienced, is unable to conceive of a world where she herself is absent. However, these are not purely egotistical thoughts, whereby Vivien imagines that the Sapphic tradition she worked so hard to revive and perpetuate would perish without her. Rather they represent Vivien’s articulation of her disillusionment in the words of Diana Holmes ‘[...] before a world perceived as hostile and uncomprehending.’³¹⁶

Vivien’s aspiration for the continuance of this Sapphic tradition extends to an exclusively female audience. Karla Jay notes how such exclusivity of audience prefigures future generations of feminist thinkers, particularly the later work of Adrienne Rich, as she believes that:

One would have difficulty finding another woman poet of Vivien’s generation, or indeed of any generation until the 1970’s, who would admit to an imagined audience exclusively comprised of women, to do so would seem to most women artists to be condemning themselves either to triviality or marginality. In this regard, Vivien clearly anticipates the commitment of much Lesbian/feminist poetry of the present moment.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ This also mirrors Psappha’s yearning for the perpetuation of her verse for future readers, see Greene, *op.cit.*

³¹⁶ Diana Holmes, *French Women’s Writing 1848-1994, op.cit.*, p.90.

³¹⁷ Jay, *op.cit.*, p. 37-38. In her footnotes to this chapter titled ‘Gynocentricity’ Jay elaborates: ‘This shift to an imagined female audience is noticeable in the later work of Adrienne Rich, for example, as well as made overt by the inscription “For women only” which appears on the covers of some Lesbian/feminist collections of poetry.’ p.130.

The self-reflective nature of these poems, however, is not all steeped in pessimism. Vivien still manages to express a degree of self-confidence and optimism in the validity of her work and her life's purpose, as she celebrates the joy she finds in sisterhood. In *Voici ce que je chanterai* (*Flambeaux éteints*, 1907) she addresses the female friends from whom she derives great affection and support, as they are designated as both her audience and appraisers. The despair evoked in these lines from *Vaincue*, 'Le couchant est semblable à la mort d'un poète / Ah ! pesanteur des ans et des songes vécus !' (R.V, 215) is immediately contrasted with the optimism enshrined in this couplet from *Voici ce que je chanterai*: 'Je vous le dis, à vous qui m'avez couronnée ; / « Qu'importent les demains ? Cette nuit m'est donnée !' (R.V, 224) And, in admission to her sometimes wavering self-confidence she professes in the final couplet: 'Et, d'une voix parfois troublée et parfois claire, / Ô femmes ! j'ai chanté dans l'espoir de vous plaire.' (R.V, 225)

In response to society's marginalization of women, and specifically the peripheralization of lesbian culture, Vivien assumes the role of protector of women, and imagines a new world to where she would shepherd her community. A world, which as a bolder and braver version of this one, she imagines would be characterized by its devotion to art and populated by poets in emulation of Lesbos. Holmes writes that 'The exclusion of a society perceived as censorious and cruel is a condition of happiness in Vivien's poetry.'³¹⁸ And this is certainly manifested in *Nous irons vers les Poètes* (*À l'Heure des mains jointes*, 1906). Here the speaker of this verse poses as a guardian in whose arms the woman she loves is sheltered and transported away from this world, which '[...] a été toujours cruel aux femmes.' (R.V, 171) Her *amante* is depicted as frail and childlike, while the speaker is assured and powerful. The dynamic of the strong

³¹⁸ Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

woman nurturing the weak is informed as much by Vivien's impersonation of Psappha and her pupils, as by a paradigm of courtly love, to which both Barney and Vivien subscribed.³¹⁹ The chivalric tradition of *amour courtois*, which stemmed from the Middle Ages, still resonated in nineteenth-century art and literature, thematized by the Pre-Raphaelites and portrayed in the paintings of Edmund Blair Leighton and in poetry such as Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Writing on the legacy of the courtly tradition in the nineteenth century, Jennifer G. Wolloch remarks that,

Much of the focus on courtly love in the nineteenth century was centred on masculine desire and its frustration, with courtly lovers being seen as desperate beings and the ladies they loved becoming remote, impassive, inanimate, cruel, or for other reasons unattainable.³²⁰

Many of the defining elements of courtly love would have appealed to Vivien, particularly the paradoxes inherent to its tradition as described by F.X. Newman, who maintained that '[...] courtly love is a doctrine of paradoxes, a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent.'³²¹ However, the model of *amour courtois* is re-transformed in Vivien's poetics in her portrayal of a lesbian couple, replacing the original paradigm of a male knight and his lady.

L'ombre nous semble une ennemie en embuscade...
Viens, je t'emporterai comme une enfant malade,
Comme une enfant plaintive et craintive et malade.

³¹⁹ Jay asserts that: 'Closely associated with Catholic imagery as a source for inspiration was the courtly love tradition. It provided Vivien's and Barney's creations with a literary tradition in which the female figure was a central object of worship and with a series of costumes, postures and attitudes which satisfied their demand that theory be made actual wherever possible. It was almost inevitable that Barney and Vivien should turn to the tradition of courtly love as a model, for it occupied the same ground that they were attempting to stake out for women: a territory where the distinction between the sacred and the profane disappears in a deliberate confusion of the physical world with the realm of transcendent spirituality. Moreover the courtly love tradition wholly overturned the ordinary sexual hierarchy operating in the real world – the lady may be, indeed, is required to be, as fully autocratic, demanding, and as unreasonable as any lord or husband.' Jay, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

³²⁰ Jennifer G. Wolloch, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Portsmouth NH: Praeger, 2011), p.236.

³²¹ F.X. Newman, *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1968), p.vii.

Entre mes bras nerveux j'étréins ton corps léger.
Tu verras que je sais guérir et protéger,
Et que mes bras sont forts pour mieux te protéger. (R.V, 170)

However, aside from the images of Psappha and pupil, or courtly knight and lady, the most obvious analogy is that of a mother and child. This is surprising, as maternity is an almost taboo subject in the poetry of Vivien. Her revolt in the face of maternity is explicitly expressed in her novel *Une femme m'apparut* in the words of the narrator, who, commenting on the marriage of a friend, conveys her disgust at her eventual fate as a wife and a mother, as a fulfilment of bourgeois expectations: 'Le jour de son mariage, je m'attristai sur cette grâce virginale barbarement immolée. La maternité hideuse déformerait donc ce corps insexué.'³²² This move towards a more nurturing role (albeit between two women rather than a mother and child) denotes a form of re-transformation for the poet and a progression towards maturation and above all, a heightened level of self recognition. These women, having now outgrown this world, where even the consolation of pagan aesthetics has lost its value, 'Les bois sacrés n'ont plus d'efficaces dictames' (R.V, 171) must now journey together to a universe of vast and limitless dimensions where, 'Sous un ciel plus clément, plus doux, nous oublierons...' (R.V, 171)

Nous souvenant qu'il est de plus larges planètes,
Nous entrerons dans le royaume des poètes,
Ce merveilleux royaume où chantent les poètes. (R.V, 171)

Her self-belief sometimes shaken, Vivien for the most part however, succeeds in transcending the confines of the androcentric culture that threatens to suppress her, and she does this through her own voice. It is this voice which articulates defiantly in *Ainsi je parlerai*, from the same collection, a voice that will not be silenced. This poem is as

³²² Vivien, *op.cit.*, p.141.

much about how she *does* speak in the present as to how she *would* speak. Again, the rhetoric contained is one of defence of her sexuality, and the exposition of an alternative, superior universe modelled on Psappa's Lesbos:

« Laisse-moi, me hâtant vers le soir bienvenu,
Rejoindre celles-là qui ne t'ont point connu !

« Psappa, les doigts errants sur la lyre endormie,
S'étonnerait de la beauté de mon amie, (R.V, 169)

III 3.2 Journey and Flight

Journeys feature prominently in Vivien's work, from the flight of the seagull to the lands of the North, to the many voyages over waterways and canals and particularly over the sea. This desire for travel epitomizes her desire for transcendence, for departures and eventual returns. The poet, like a wearied traveller, having journeyed, wishes to return to a metaphysical home, where she can finally take the time to contemplate all that she has learnt and experienced along the way. Such desire is thematized in both *Départ* and *Dans le Havre* (again from *À l'Heure des mains jointes*). In *Départ* the speaker, again disillusioned with this world (despair described in terms of both loss of light and sight) even within the night where she normally finds most comfort, 'La nuit est noire et je ne vois rien au dehors.' (R.V, 206) feels compelled to depart for an unknown destination. 'Je ne reconnais plus le visage des choses... / La nuit est noire, et je ne sais pas où je vais.' (R.V, 206) However, the self-assuredness of the previous poems is still present, for though the speaker must depart, it is an act of volition, one she is determined not to regret, and now the future is something to be welcomed, rather than feared.

Devrais-je regretter cet autrefois ? ... Peut être...
Mais je n'appartiens point aux regrets superflus...
Je marche devant moi, l'avenir est mon maître,
Et, quel que soit mon sort, je ne reviendrai plus. (R.V, 207)

The image of the harbour as a place of refuge and safe return, symbolizes the poet's return to herself, and evokes a sense of completion and achievement. The impression of having reached a peaceful shore is portrayed in images of serenity and calm, and in the gently swaying sails of a moored ship: 'Lasse comme les flots, lasse comme les voiles, / J'entre dans le doux port plein d'embruns et d'étoiles. (R.V, 201) The notion of re-transformation, as a manner of return to oneself, is emphasized by the use of the verb *revenir*, 'Donc, je reviens trouver la bonne paix. Ici, / Le soleil est moins vif, le ciel s'est adouci.' (R.V, 201) This place, denoted enigmatically as *Ici*, is not a geographical one, but instead resides within the very heart of the poet. 'Dans le doux havre, où se reflètent les étoiles, / Je verrai sans regret partir les autres voiles.'(R.V, 201)

III 3.3 Surviving Love: Amatory and Ideological conclusions

In the spirit of self-reflection and re-transformation, Vivien revisits her life and love affairs in an effort to both publicly validate her experience and status as a lesbian poet, and in turn to gain a personal understanding of such experience. In such a manner, we are invited into the intimate world of the poet, affording us a privileged and unique perspective on how she lived and loved as a homosexual woman at the *fin de siècle*. Vivien's portrayal of her life, through her poetry, evades the spirit of voyeuristic representations of lesbian sexuality associated with male literary efforts of the time. Her work presents as an unapologetic homage to lesbian culture, as Perrin states:

Renée Vivien a dû, en un siècle particulièrement misogyne, trouver la force de dire son amour des autres femmes, briser le silence que masquait le goût fin de siècle pour l'homosexualité féminine. Echappant au voyeurisme de son époque, Renée Vivien a créé une œuvre sans égale et a dû, pour ce faire, se réappropriier un territoire jusque-là monopolisé par les hommes.³²³

³²³ Perrin, *op.cit.*, p.11.

In the first chapter we explored Vivien's frequent anxiety in relation to love and desire, and how, while engaged in a love affair, whether due to an internalization of external resistance to lesbian sexuality or any attempts to articulate the same, this anxiety manifests in the poet's association of desire with death. However, as she meditates the very essence of love, Vivien regains subjectivity, allowing for a more sanguine and introspective study of the experience. This approach reveals a confidence in her sexuality which presents at times as unapologetic and devoid of shame. Thus Vivien counters the prevalent discourse which defined the practice of lesbian sexuality as deviant and corrupt, or even worse, as some passing phase.³²⁴ As a result, Vivien not only transcends the heterosexual norm, but also succeeds in re-appropriating the spectacle of the lesbian as object of scorn and male titillation as portrayed, for example, in the works of Belot and Baudelaire. Faderman, in reference to Barney's support for the circle of lesbians who frequented her literary salons, notes that such collaboration permitted them '[...] to create a self-image which literature and society had denied them'³²⁵, and it is such a self-image that is reflected in Vivien's poetics.

The speaker of *Victoire* (*Études et Préludes*, 1901) is triumphantly elated in the wake of sexual conquest. She describes her love-making in distinctly rapacious terms, the speaker is a violator, and she preys on her lover in a frenzy of desire.

Donne-moi tes baisers amers comme des larmes,
Le soir, quand les oiseaux s'attardent dans leurs vols.
Nos longs accouplements sans amour ont les charmes
Des rapines, l'attrait farouche des viols. (R.V, 30)

³²⁴ Contemporaneous views of lesbian sexuality sometimes centred on the 'non-sexual', insinuating that it was an invented or imagined mode of behaviour. See: Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Un choix sans équivoque. Recherches historiques sur les relations amoureuses entre les femmes. XVIe-XXe siècle* (Paris : Denoël, 1981).

³²⁵ Lillian Faderman, *op.cit.*, p.369.

Initially it would seem that Vivien's descriptions perpetuate, rather than suppress the misogynistic model of lesbianism. The lover's kisses are bitter as she resists the speaker's advances, and their 'accouplements sans amour' which hold the paradoxical charm of 'Des rapines, l'attrait farouche des viols' are more than suggestive of a brutal sexual assault. The following two stanzas continue to describe this unsettling sexual *victoire* over her persecuted lover.

Tes yeux ont reflété la splendeur de l'orage...
Exhale ton mépris jusqu'en ta pamoison,
O très chère ! – Ouvre-moi tes lèvres avec rage
J'en boirai lentement le fiel et le poison.

J'ai l'émoi du pilleur devant un butin rare,
Pendant la nuit de fièvre ou ton regard pâlit...
L'âme du conquérant, éclatante et barbare,
Chante dans mon triomphe au sortir de ton lit ! (R.V, 30)

The portrayal of a lustful, voracious and predatory lesbian and a fearful, reluctant lover mirrors very closely Baudelaire's illustration of Delphine and Hippolyte from *Les Femmes Damnées* particularly in tone, context and diction.

À la pâle clarté des lampes languissantes,
Sur de profonds coussins tout imprégnés d'odeur
Hippolyte rêvait aux caresses puissantes
Qui levaient le rideau de sa jeune candeur.

Elle cherchait, d'un œil troublé par la tempête,
De sa naïveté le ciel déjà lointain,
Ainsi qu'un voyageur qui retourne la tête
Vers les horizons bleus dépassés le matin.³²⁶

In Baudelaire's poem, one of his three verses depicting lesbianism, the more experienced Delphine attempts to seduce the uninitiated Hippolyte, equally eager but described in essentially submissive terms:

Elle cherchait dans l'œil de sa pâle victime
Le cantique muet que chante le plaisir,
Et cette gratitude infinie et sublime
Qui sort de la paupière ainsi qu'un long soupir.

³²⁶ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, pp.304-307.

— « Hippolyte, cher cœur, que dis-tu de ces choses ?
Comprends-tu maintenant qu'il ne faut pas offrir
L'holocauste sacré de tes premières roses
Aux souffles violents qui pourraient les flétrir ?³²⁷

Delphine scorns heterosexual love and warns Hippolyte against succumbing to a male lover:

Va, si tu veux, chercher un fiancé stupide;
Cours offrir un cœur vierge à ses cruels baisers ;
Et, pleine de remords et d'horreur, et livide,
Tu me rapporteras tes seins stigmatisés...

Claude Pichois explains how 'l'amour lesbien répond [...] chez Baudelaire à son opposition morale et théologique à la nature, à la fécondation : Lesbos est la patrie de la contre-nature et de la stérilité.'³²⁸ Thus Vivien's pretext for the rejection of heterosexuality closely corresponds to Baudelaire's. However, the threat of damnation, contained in the last stanzas of *Les Femmes Damnées*, as punishment for their fantasized acts of lesbian vice, acts as a demarcation in the expectation of lesbian sexuality between the two poets.

A close reading of both works however, reveals startling similarities. Delphine in delighted response to Hippolyte's reciprocated ardour '[...] humait voluptueusement / Le vin de son triomphe,' while the speaker of *Victoire* would drink from her lover's lips '[...] le fiel et le poison.'(R.V, 30) Vivien's reference to '[...] accouplements sans amour', as symbolic of society's dismissal of same-sex love, and such love's association with barrenness, corresponds to Baudelaire's phraseology with 'l'âpre stérilité'. Both poems contain metaphorical allusions to war, pillage and plunder; Hippolyte fears the '[...] noirs bataillons de fantômes épars' and speaks of Delphine as a possible '[...] embûche dressée / Et le commencement de ma perdition !' While Vivien's

³²⁷*Ibid.*

³²⁸Claude Pichois, *Charles Baudelaire, Œuvres complètes*, éd. Claude Pichois (Paris : Gallimard, coll. 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1975-1976), p. 1016.

speaker explains that in her conquest ‘J’ai l’émou du pilleur devant un butin rare,’ (R.V, 30) and how ‘L’âme des conquérants, éclatante et barbare, / Chante dans mon triomphe au sortir de ton lit !’ (R.V, 30) The decadent parallels and the apparently negative treatment in both works portraying love between two women (and indeed the similarities drawn between other male-scripted literary depictions of lesbians of the period) have led commentators to accuse Vivien of perpetuating an anti-feminist if not anti-lesbian sentiment. However, if we examine Vivien’s lesbian couple alongside Baudelaire’s again, we note a very different fate befall both. Delphine and Hippolyte do not consummate their relationship; instead the speaker’s voice intervenes:

— Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes,
 Descendez le chemin de l’enfer éternel !
 Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes
 Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,

Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d’orage.
 Ombres folles, courez au bout de vos désirs :
 Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage,
 Et votre châtement naîtra de vos plaisirs.³²⁹

Vivien’s lovers on the other hand *do* consummate their union, and whereas the story of Baudelaire’s damned women ends with their banishment; the lesbian couple of *Victoire* having succumbed to each other ‘Pendant la nuit de fièvre [...]’ (R.V, 30) remain as defiant examples of their sexuality. The similarities between both poems could lead one to believe that Vivien’s operates as a dialogic response to Baudelaire’s. Vivien, in essence, is reclaiming the lesbian lyric for lesbians alone. In an era where codified language was used to describe homosexual intimacies, Vivien by employing candid descriptions of lesbian desire, decodifies the rhetoric in her subtext. From this perspective the shocking descriptions of bitter kisses and rape become an ironic response to contemporaneous depictions of female homosexual practices, and their

³²⁹ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, pp. 304-307.

implied meaning can be read in reverse. Thus the *double entendre* contained in the line ‘Ouvre-moi tes lèvres avec rage’ (R.V, 30) also suggests a provocative resistance to external condemnation of their desires. Marc Angenot observes that within social and literary discourse of the Belle Époque, rape was often used as hyperbolic expression of desire.³³⁰ In the third stanza the speaker addresses her lover as ‘[...] très chère !’ further attesting to a strong degree of affection between them both. Although Baudelaire’s lesbian poetry marks, for some, a positive engagement with a hitherto ignored or maligned subject,³³¹ it is nonetheless written from a male standpoint. And while it is not an example, as are many works of the period such as Henri Cantel’s *Les Tribades* (1869),³³² of the voyeuristic male gaze, it nevertheless posits female homosexuality as ill-fated. Vivien’s *Victoire* is literally a victory in that it presents lesbian sexuality from an authentic viewpoint. This is an excellent example of how, in the words of Engelking, Vivien ‘[...] used familiar decadent conventions to reveal the underlying gender biases of the genre.’³³³ Furthermore, even if we are to read Vivien’s verse as an articulation of a violent lesbian sexual fantasy, it is her fantasy as a lesbian woman to reveal (over that of the male perspective). After all, as we have reiterated, in the all-female universe of Vivien’s poetics, women are not innocuous, they are part of a gynocentric parallel universe of the heteronormative society which they attempt to transcend, in that they are as good as they are evil, as pure as they are tainted. As *Victoire* figures in her earliest

³³⁰ Marc Angenot, *Le cru et le faisandé : sexe, discours social et littérature à la Belle Époque* (Paris : Labor, 1986).

³³¹ David Evans claims that ‘[...] Baudelaire’s lesbians are objects neither of excited curiosity or cheap fantasy, whereas his representation of heterosexual woman, the satanic temptress, invites this sort of reading.’ David Evans ‘Baudelaire Lesbian Poet? A Place for Women in *Les Fleurs du Mal*’ eds. Wendy Michallat and Renate Gunther, *Lesbian Inscriptions in Francophone Society and Culture* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2007), p. 9.

³³² An example of one of the more misogynistic verses of the 19th century in its treatment of lesbianism, Cantel’s speaker is a man spying upon ‘Les filles de Lesbos’ in their lovemaking, who declares, ‘Mais je ne suis qu’un homme et, je pleure a genoux :/ Sur elles, pour tromper ma flamme inapaisée, / Mon désir verse à flots sa brulante rosée.’ Henri Cantel *Amours et priapées* (Vijon: Lampsaque, 1869).

³³³ Engelking, ‘Renée Vivien’s Une femme m’apparut’, *A ‘Belle Époque’?: Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*, eds. Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), p. 228.

published collection *Études et préludes* (1901) it prefigures her later reflections on lesbian life and love in that it represents the poet's initial attempts to reclaim nineteenth-century poetic treatments of the lesbian subject from men.

Written some years later, the eponymous opening poem, again from the 1906 collection *À l'heure des mains jointes*, finds the speaker in a more contemplative and reflective mood as she describes the peaceful and innocent calm attained through love. Now that the fever has dissipated, 'La fièvre disparue...' (R.V, 165) Vivien no longer feels the need to resort to provocative rhetoric or to take a defensive stance in her exposition of same-sex desire. The love portrayed is one of innocence, enchantment, silence and child-like simplicity.

J'ai puérisé mon cœur dans l'innocence
De notre amour, éveil de calice enchanté
Dans les jardins où se parfume le silence,
Où le rire fêlé retrouve l'innocence,
Ma Douce ! je t'adore avec simplicité. (R.V, 165)

Vivien speaks about the security she finds in love as a form of contentment, and in terms of refuge, having reached a spiritual home. This home figures as a place of healing, where the poet, after a metaphorical period of convalescence, is finally restored to health. 'J'abrite ainsi mon cœur de malade guérie / Sous le toit amical de la bonne maison.' (R.V, 165) The equation of love and home is an unsurprising one for an exile such as Vivien. Vivien's exile sensibility is shaped by many factors; as an expatriate, as a woman, as a lesbian and as a *femme de lettres*. Charles Bernheimer describes the exile of the lesbian subject in nineteenth-century France as '[...] a roving soul in search of a body'³³⁴ and in the case of Vivien's love poetry that body is found in the body and soul

³³⁴ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 73.

of another, to which she attaches herself, and from which place of sanctuary she feels free to express: 'Je te dirai comment, lasse de la mer rude / Je bénis l'ancre au port ou s'amarre l'esquif.' (R.V, 165) The themes of simplicity and essentialism are accentuated by the unadorned diction of the poem, and in the admission in the third stanza that the poet has 'plucked away' the rich stylistic conventions of Symbolism and Decadence: 'J'ai dépouillé la crainte et le furtif soupçon / Et l'artificiel et la bizarrerie' (R.V, 165)

Diana Holmes highlights the fact that Vivien's love poetry, in particular the urban poems, are set indoors, behind closed doors and shut out from humanity. She notes that:

The urban love poems represent mutual desire and tenderness not as emotions which light up the surrounding world, but as treasures to be defended against hostile others. They are indoor poems, contained within defensive walls and boundaries, expressing a consistent preference for twilight, evening and seclusion from the outside world [...]³³⁵

Holmes quotes, amongst other poems, both *Intérieur (À l'heure des mains jointes, 1906)* and *Paroles à l'amie* from the same collection, as examples of how the poet typifies '[...] representations of love as refuge from the outside world.'³³⁶ In the latter we find the speaker address her lover/friend as a sympathetic soul, one who understands her, and through that understanding the speaker gains self-knowledge.

Tu me comprends : je suis un être médiocre,
Ni bon, ni très mauvais, paisible, un peu sournois.
Je hais les lourds parfums et les éclats de voix,
Et le gris m'est plus cher que l'écarlate ou l'ocre. (R.V, 172)

The poet's preference for interior settings, described here in the haven-like room where the two women are secluded as the day wanes outside, attests also to her need to retreat inwardly in the spirit of introspection.

J'aime le jour mourant qui s'éteint par degrés,
Le feu, l'intimité claustrale d'une chambre
Ou les lampes, voilant leurs transparences d'ambre

³³⁵ Holmes, *op.cit.*, p.87.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.86.

Rougissent le vieux bronze et bleussent le grès. (R.V, 172)

As the poem progresses we note that the speaker addresses herself as much as her *amie*, and this becomes a sort of self-inventory, whereby having reached the age ‘[...] où la vierge abandonne sa main’ (R.V, 172) she reaches some essential conclusions on how her life has evolved thus far. This soul-searching becomes at times self-critical, she states ‘Je suis femme, je n’ai point droit à la beauté. / On m’avait condamnée aux laideurs masculines.’ (R.V, 172) However she also looks outward, denouncing a harsh and hostile society, judgemental of her sexuality: ‘On m’a montrée au doigt en un geste irrité, / Parce-que mon regard cherchait ton regard tendre...’ (R.V, 172) Citing the critical masses she announces, with an obvious allusion to Baudelaire: ‘Et l’on a dit : « Quelle est cette femme damnée / Que ronge sourdement la flamme de l’enfer ? »’ (R.V, 173) She concludes on a positive note, and this positivity is reflected in a desire to transcend her self-imposed confinement:

Nous irons voir le clair d’étoiles sur les monts...
Que nous importe, à nous le jugement des hommes ?
Et qu’avons-nous à redouter, puisque nous sommes
Pures devant la vie et que nous nous aimons ?... (R.V, 173)

Self knowledge, the flowering of the creative soul, and love itself, are all nurtured in sheltered spaces as described in *Intérieur*. ‘Dans mon âme a fleuri le miracle des roses / Pour le mettre à l’abri, tenons les portes closes.’(R.V, 216) By shutting out the clamour and noise of the outside world, Vivien defends herself against external influences and attempts to ignore the voices of dissent. And yet, she cannot rid herself of these entirely, the very acknowledgment of their existence acts as an articulation of her anxiety. Hence, her urgent insistence in keeping the doors closed, repeated throughout the couplets, ‘Pour garder cette paix faite de leurs roses, / O ma Sérénité ! tenons les portes closes.’ (R.V, 217) Sequestered, the speaker now having succeeded in achieving an

existence of ‘calme’, ‘refuge’ and ‘oubli’ is no longer bothered by public scorn, ‘Je ne sais plus si l’on médit de nous, ni si / L’on parle encor... Les mots ne font plus mal ici.’ (R.V, 217) She now can recreate the universe to her liking, she has lost all need of the outside world, because here, as she explains to her lover: ‘Ta robe verte a des frissons d’herbes sauvages, / Mon amie, et tes yeux sont pleins de paysages.’(R.V, 217)

In *Le Dédain de Psappha (La Vénus des aveugles, 1903)* the poet speaks through the voice of Psappha where once more the importance of remaining steadfast in the face of adversity is expressed. Proud and unapologetic, Psappha faces her detractors and proclaims that ‘Vous qui me jugez, vous n’êtes rien pour moi.’ (R.V, 145) Once again, this resolution of spirit is marked by an inner calm, ‘J’ai l’âme sereine.’ (R.V, 146) Psappha remains unwavering, by distinguishing herself from the crowd, statue-like she is immortalized through her convictions, and this image evokes the picture of a milling swarm of people flowing past her as she endures, unmoved.

Rien ne souillera les fronts éblouissants
Que frôlent mes chants brisés et mon haleine
Comme une Statue au milieu des passants,
J’ai l’âme sereine. (R.V, 146)

Just as Vivien defends her position as a lesbian woman, she also attempts to verbalize the immense significance of writing, particularly poetry in her life. This however is expressed less as a defence, and more as an apologia. Earlier we looked at the manner in which she describes her compulsion to write, as something which disgusts as much as it consumes her: ‘Cette abondance littéraire me cause un dégoût profond !’³³⁷ In *Domination du Poème (Le vent des vaisseaux, 1910)* Vivien explains how poetry is a dictatorial force, one which outrivals her desire for her lover and to which she must submit in complete servility.

³³⁷ Vivien, *op.cit.*

Je subis tout mon sort... L'impérieux poème
Me domine à l'égal de la femme qu'on aime.

Amèrement jaloux, despotique et méchant,
Voici que vient régner, sur mon âme, le chant.

Servilement je sers l'impérieux poème,
Mille fois plus aimé que la femme qu'on aime.

Qu'il soit méchant, qu'il soit tyrannique et jaloux,
On ne l'en sert que plus promptement, à genoux !... (R.V, 312)

Vivien defends her sexuality with pride, her dismissal of the critical masses is met with serenity and calm and expressed in the same content and composed manner, yet when she reflects on her role as a poet she does so almost in shame. She claims to be dominated by the need to write, poetry is imperious, jealous and tyrannical. Therefore, her internalization of contemporaneous misogynistic discourse in relation to women's writing is more manipulative than that of the prevalent criticism of lesbian sexuality. And yet, this poem which follows the previous from the same collection, *Orgueil du Poète*, outlines her pride as a writer. And, although this pride is still portrayed in distinctly deprecatory terms, it is something she is unwilling to forego. Again we note that this is a solitary position, distinguishing her from 'la foule' (R.V, 312) as '[...] celui qui chante dans l'exil...'³³⁸ (R.V, 312).

Je voile avec dédain le trésor qui me reste...
Mon orgueil de poète est en moi comme un mal
Tenace, suraigu, dominant, animal...
Car l'orgueil du poète est terrible et funeste...

Quand la foule amassait la farine et le mil,
Mon orgueil m'enjoignit de m'astreindre et me taire,
Inexorable autant que le lointain tonnerre
Et l'orgueil de celui qui chante dans l'exil...

Qu'ailleurs l'aube de gloire irradie et rougeoie !
Que m'importe le vent qui disperse mes vers
Dans les replis obscurs de l'obscurs univers,
Puisque je n'ai chanté que pour ma seule joie ? (R.V, 312)

³³⁸ Ellipsis in original.

Re-transformation in Vivien's poetry is thematized in her exploration of her role as both a lesbian and poet, writing against and within the male tradition. Her overtly lesbian poetry performs as a defence of her sexuality, and as reclamation of a Sapphic tradition she felt was misappropriated by male authors, while also articulating her joy and pride in the love she shared with other women. As the poet reflects on her life, she also undertakes an important evaluation of her role as a writer, wherein she exhibits the anxieties common to all *femme de lettres* of the period, as they struggle to validate their existence. Written in 1901, and published in the collection *Étude et Préludes*, the first stanza of *Elle écarte en passant* reads as a metaphorical portrait of the young artist about to embark on a literary journey. A journey that will serve like-minded women of the future as much as it will cause suffering to the poet in the present:

Elle écarte en passant les ronces du chemin.
Au geste langoureux et frôleur de sa main
Eclosent blanchement les frêles églantines...
Mais sa chair s'est blessée à tant d'âpres épines !
J'ai vu saigner ses pieds aux buissons du chemin. (R.V, 37)

Conclusion

After a long battle with anorexia, drug and alcohol addiction, Renée Vivien reached the final gateway to transcendence when she died at the tragically young age of thirty-two. Goujon informs us that ‘Le 18 novembre 1909, à six heures quarante-cinq du matin, Vivien s’éteignit.’³³⁹ She left behind her a considerable body of work, including ‘[...] over thirty volumes of poetry, short stories, a novel, and translations of Sappho’s fragments into French.’³⁴⁰

After her death, Vivien’s manuscripts remained with her publisher, Lemerre, where Eugène Vallée undertook the great task of organizing her many works, preparing some for publication. Vallée would eventually edit her first complete anthology of poetry, *Poésies complètes de Renée Vivien*, published in 1934. After the First World War, Salomon Reinach, upon discovering the work of Vivien for the first time, made it his crusade to compile and curate all of her personal correspondence and documentation, depositing them with the Bibliothèque Nationale, with the request that they remain sealed until fifteen years ago. André Germain’s biography, *Renée Vivien*, was published in 1917. Due to the fact that many of Vivien’s contemporaries were still alive, it relied heavily on allusion and as Goujon illustrates it was an ‘Étude biographique et littéraire assez complète, très documentée, mais souvent trop voilée [...]’³⁴¹

The years following the Great War were not favourable to the reception of Vivien’s work as Goujon again demonstrates, ‘La guerre de 1914-1918 relégua en effet Vivien, tout comme Lemerre et Sansot, dans un passé presque antédiluvien.’³⁴² Symbolism had been supplanted by Surrealism and Dadaism and subsequently Vivien’s work fell into

³³⁹ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.428.

³⁴⁰ Mesch, *op.cit.*, p.59.

³⁴¹ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.432.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

relative obscurity. As Goujon also declares, the Second World War with the advent of existentialism and, ‘[...] le nouveau roman, tout cela est si loin de Vivien !’³⁴³ Natalie Barney’s *Souvenirs indiscrets*, was later published in 1960, (she died in 1972) and along with other publications of the period, such as Jeanette Foster’s *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, the world of ‘Paris tout Lesbos’ was resurrected for a new reading public. Karla Jay, who devoted her research from the mid seventies to Barney and Vivien, outlines the significance of such a study, as a means to reveal these writer’s concerns for ‘[...] the invention of new models and myths for women [...]’ she outlines how they ‘[...] anticipated some of the concerns of contemporary French and feminist writers.’³⁴⁴ Such a resurgence of interest focused on a central examination of the strategies employed by late nineteenth-century women authors, writing in a wholly male domain. Modern feminist criticism, as Benstock states, ‘[...] testified to female experience in the social and intellectual settings of modern history’ while examining ‘[...] the modes of entrapment, betrayal and exclusion suffered by women in the first decades of the twentieth century.’³⁴⁵ Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* focused on the Victorian literary aesthetic of woman as either angel or monster, and how female writers responded to such a dichotomy in their writing; while Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* explored the manner in which women writers from 1840 onwards developed a separate literary subculture which evolved from common feminine experience. While feminist literary theory developed, Vivien’s writing was being re-read and re-evaluated. Goujon’s biography, published in 1986, paved the way for new critical analysis of Vivien in France, which unfortunately led to the publication of articles which still focused solely on Vivien’s hedonism, only serving to ‘nourrir la

³⁴³ Goujon, *op.cit.*, p.433.

³⁴⁴ Jay, *op.cit.*, p.xiv.

³⁴⁵ Benstock, *op.cit.*, p.6.

mythographie' surrounding the poet.³⁴⁶ However new readings also brought about new interpretations and new debate, and as modern lesbian/feminist scholars sought to establish a literary lineage with *fin-de-siècle* writers such as Vivien, some erroneously attempted to apply a modern feminist philosophy to an author who was clearly on the outskirts of contemporary definitions of such ideology. As such, Lillian Faderman's reading of Vivien's poetry resulted in her assertion that: 'While Vivien apparently chose to devote herself to women at least partly because of her strong feminist consciousness, her poetry shows little of her feminism.'³⁴⁷ Reading Vivien's poetry through the filter of Colette's vignette of the poet's lifestyle, Faderman concurs with Colette's opinion that '[...] the basis of lesbian love is not "bitter ecstasy" or indiscriminate promiscuity but a bond that goes deeper than fleeting sexual passions.'³⁴⁸ Such assertions however, made outside of a thorough and comprehensive reading of Vivien's poetics, are not only damaging to Vivien's work, but are also dismissive of the complexities of female homosexuality which Vivien herself addressed in her œuvre. For Vivien, the lesbian aesthetic, though not a reflection of the heterosexual one, is as marked by desire, passion fulfilled and unfulfilled, ecstasy and agony as any form of relationship outside of the gendered order. The bond, or kinship that Vivien finds, is not only with female lovers, but with those women of the past such as Psappha with whom she shares a passion for a lesbian literary tradition, and with those women of the future, for whom she wished her writing would resonate.

In the introduction to this thesis, we posed some important questions. The first of these was, to what extent does a study of the thematic elements of death, rebirth, and

³⁴⁶ Sanders, *op.cit.*, p.235. Sanders is referring to Henri Rival's 'La Brocante Vivienienne' in *Renée Vivien et ses Masques* (Gouy : À l'Écart, 1980), pp. 51-53 ; Geneviève Brisac's article 'Renée Vivien l'héroïne 1900' published in *Le Monde des livres*, 19 December 1986 and Pierre Kyria's 'Fièvres et meurtrissures de Renée Vivien' in *Magazine littéraire*, March 1987.

³⁴⁷ Faderman, *op.cit.*, p.362.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.363.

transformation contribute to a further understanding and appreciation of the poetry of Renée Vivien? In our exploration of the many thematic elements of death in Vivien's poetics, we revealed how the poet merged the dichotomous symbols of death and desire as a first-hand revelation of female homosexuality and also how working within the decadent aesthetic she employed this dichotomy to challenge societal and cultural preconceptions and constructions of lesbian desire. Moreover, Vivien's revision of the *femme fatale* trope offers an alternative perspective, and the exposition of a *femme vitale*, disrupting contemporaneous vituperation of female sexuality and power. Vivien's poetics of mourning, contributes to the debate on nineteenth-century attitudes to death and the deceased, also shedding light on subjective experience in the wake of personal tragedy.

In our analysis of the themes of rebirth, we gained further understanding of the nascent optimism at the heart of Vivien's poetics, an aspect so often overlooked. Vivien's vision of a Sapphic utopia, and her self-identification with Psappha, prefigure modern feminist/lesbian sensibilities, whereby such vision proposes an all-female universe, founded exclusively on a matriarchal culture, far removed from patriarchy. We learned that the theme of rebirth is reflected in the motifs of returns, departures and the resurrection of memory. This theme is further uncovered in Vivien's preoccupation with naming and renaming in her verse, as a re-creation of narrative; and in her revision of the archetype of the 'New Woman', as she resurrects historical female figures as prototypes of feminine potential.

The theme of transformation in Vivien's poetics is embodied in her poetic treatment of the siren and other metamorphic incarnations which reflect the poet's desire for renewal and reform. Transformation, we also saw, is born out of the sacred aspects of lesbian sexuality which Vivien celebrated as a divine connection, placing it above

heterosexuality in a bold and innovative challenge to orthodoxy. And finally, the motif of re-transformation as revealed in Vivien's self-reflective poetics, offers invaluable insight into the psychological influence of a male-dominated literary domain on a female poet of her generation. Vivien's dialogical response to the prevalent misogynistic discourse which aimed to represent lesbian sexuality as doomed and dysfunctional culminates in a poetics characterized by rebellion and honesty, lifting the image of the lesbian from the margins as a symbol of defiance.

As to how these themes manifest as Vivien's quest for transcendence, the answer is clear. Vivien's quest for transcendence is reflected in the theme of death as she transcends traditional concepts of death and dying; as she subverts the heteronormative ideology which equates same-sex desire with degeneracy and in her transgression of the gender divide which fostered the creation of anti-feminist stereotypes such as the nineteenth-century image of the *femme fatale*. Transcendence and rebirth are synonymous in Vivien's poetry as paths to a new future which foretell the erosion of the patriarchal order in favour of gynocentrism. Vivien transcends the 'lesbian' poetics of writers such as Baudelaire and Cantel, transforming their aesthetic of the lesbian as erotic spectacle to one of autonomous agency.

We are thus left with the final question: whether the poetry of Renée Vivien deserves to be studied independently from certain aspects of her life? The answer to that question, as conveyed in this thesis, is most certainly a resounding yes. However let us leave the *mot juste* with the poet herself:

Et quelle tristesse dans les détails biographiques, livrés à l'avidité des générations : Browning, épris de titres autant que le valet de chambre d'un comte romain, Baudelaire, prétentieux et poseur ! Le seul Shakespeare. Sa vie obscure est un chef-d'œuvre.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁹ Renée Vivien, *op.cit.*, p.57. Entry XXVII (1908).

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