



# The Voice of The Repressed in “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady”: Ecofeminism, Queer Theory, and Ecophobia

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## ABSTRACT

It is possible to examine “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” (1896) by Vernon Lee via the perspectives of ecofeminism, queer theory, and ecophobia. The protagonist of the tale is Prince Alberic, who falls in love with the snake lady after meeting her in the wilderness. Despite their affection, the patriarchal figure eventually kills the snake lady. The snake lady is portrayed in the tale as a strong, natural being who is ultimately destroyed by the male-dominated human society, which is a clear example of ecofeminism. The snake woman can be interpreted as a symbol of the natural environment and the ecofeminist idea that patriarchal institutions frequently oppress women and nature in ways that are similar to one another. The relationship between Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady challenges conventional ideas of gender and sexuality, hence queer theory can also be applied to the narrative. Existing outside of conventional gender boundaries, the Snake Lady questions the heteronormative ideals of their civilization through her romance with Prince Alberic. Finally, ecophobia is present in the story through the Prince's father's fear and hatred of the snake lady, which ultimately leads to her death. This apprehension of nature might be regarded as a reflection of broader cultural apprehensions about the unknowable and the Other.

**Keywords:** “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady”, Ecofeminism, Queer Theory, Ecophobia.

## 1. Introduction

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term used by academics of literature and culture to describe the interaction of culture, literature, and also the environment via investigating the environmental issues. In literature, ecocriticism examines the relationship among people and nature. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xvii). Glotfelty further explains that ecological critique is based on the idea that human culture is inextricably linked to the physical world (nature), both impacting and being influenced by it. The crucial theme of ecocriticism is the linkage among nature and culture. It has one foot in literature and the other on the ground as a critical position; as a conceptual framework, it connects the human and the nonhuman (xix). Commenting on the dichotomy of nature and culture, Peter Barry explains that nature does exist, beyond humans, and would not have to be ridiculed as an idea of containment, but rather is a genuine thing that influences us, and that we could affect, fatally, if we abuse or harm it (243). Thus, ecocriticism argues that mistreating or repressing nature could be deadly for humans. With the development of the ecocritic school of thought, new directions were included in the discussions regarding ecology.

Ecofeminism is one of the emerging ideas that merged feminism and ecology together. Ecofeminism is a twin concept encompassing both ecology and feminism. It is justified by saying that ecology or environment is closely associated with the female. Ecofeminism is a concept that combines women's empowerment and environmental conservation. The anthropocentric viewpoint and behavior are criticized by both schools of thought. The primary belief of ecofeminism is that the repression by patriarchy over women parallels the suppression of nature and that this mutual domination has led to environmental destruction by the controlling patriarchal society (Ottuh 168). On the other hand, sharing the same views of oppression is the theory of queer ecology. The concept of queer ecology corresponds to a transdisciplinary studies aimed at disrupting heteronormative discourse and systemic intonations of sexuality and nature, as well as reimagining ecological relations, and environmental ideology in light of queer theory in diverse manners. Catriona Sandilands defines the aim of queer ecology as establishing crucial linkages seen between material and cultural elements of ecological problems, and focusing on an articulatory practice in which sex and nature are interpreted in light of different pathways of control and materiality (n.p.). Finally, the concept of ecophobia is directly related to power and control. This controlling power is persistent in both ecofeminist and queer theories. Simon Estok describes ecophobia as an illogical and unfounded fear of nature that is as prevalent in our everyday lives and literature as homophobia, racism, and sexism (208). Ecophobia is all about power and control; it is what makes animal and nonanimal abuse and misuse feasible.

## 2. Method

This paper will seek to analyze and reread "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" by Vernon Lee, from the perspective of ecofeminism, and queer ecology, with some attributions to ecophobia. "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady", while drawing attention to a possible destruction caused by ecophobia, adopts a feminist and queer approach to nature in its narrative.

## 3. The Female Author and The Hybrid Creature

Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of the late Victorian British writer, Violet Paget. Her works were mainly in the genre of supernatural fiction. Paget was not the only woman that used a male pen name. In the Victorian Britain, well-educated women "were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men's 'natural' intellectual superiority" (n.p.) according to Kathryn Hughes. Thus, female writers such as Paget (who will be referred as Lee from now on) wrote secretly under male pen names. Consequently, the works that were produced by the female writers were often deeply influenced by feminism and the liberation of women. That is in fact the case in Lee's "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady", in which nature is associated with femininity and the destruction of the woman figure brings the end of the male dominated Red Palace. "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" tells the story of a young prince called Alberic, who lives with his grandfather, Duke Balthasar Maria in Duchy of Luna. The narrative uses the metaphor of a hybrid, half-snake, half-human lady caught in tapestry to analyze the control of women under Victorian patriarchy. The female is imprisoned within a mystical weaving as the hybrid body of a snake, and she seeks for a way out of confinement. Thanks to a storyteller, Alberic learns about the curse and the story behind the tapestry about a fairy that was wrongly sentenced to confinement in a hybrid form, and that his ancestor tried to lift the curse by kissing the snake and being faithful to her for ten years but failed to do so. Instead of being scared or repelled, Alberic adores the Snake Lady, eager to be the one to end her curse once and for all. Prince Alberic strives to succeed where his forefather failed, but he is defeated by his cunning grandpa, the Duke, who first banishes him from the Red Palace, then imprisons him in a prison cell when Alberic refuses to marry a wealthy princess. In the conclusion, Oriana, the Snake Lady is beheaded as it is thought to represent the devil, which brings the death of Prince Alberic, the Duke, and ultimately the Duchy of Luna.

## 4. Findings

First, it is essential to draw attention on the way how nature is described in the narrative. From the beginning of the story, the young prince learns about nature in a superficial way in the Red Palace. He observes nature through artistic representations. However, the most valuable of all for him becomes the tapestry that is hung in his nursery which is called Duke Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady:

For the boy it possessed an inexhaustible charm. It was quite full of things, and they were delightful. The sorely frayed borders consisted of wonderful garlands of leaves, and fruits, and flowers, tied at intervals with ribbons, although they seemed to all grow, like tall, narrow bushes ... There were curious live creatures of some sort – various birds, big and little, butterflies on the lilies, snails, squirrels, and mice, and rabbits. (Lee 291)

With this tapestry that the young Alberic meets and gets to know nature via his nurse, who teaches him the names of the animals and plants displayed in the tapestry. Alberic complains that he cannot see such natural beauties in the Red Palace, and attaches himself so deeply to the tapestry and hopes to see nature in real life when he grows up. As he grows older, he starts noticing more parts of the tapestry.

Among the spruce firs and pines, ... a knight had reined in his big white horse, and was putting one arm round the shoulder of a lady ... Alberic got to love the lady the most, although she was very pale and faded, and almost the color of the moonbeams through the palace windows in summer. ... The lower part of the beautiful pale lady with the gold thread hair was now exposed. But instead of a skirt, she ended off in a big snake's tail, with scales of still most vivid (the tapestry not having faded there) green and gold. (Lee 293-4)

As Alberic perceives these details, he gets curious about his heritage as he learns from his nurse the name of the tapestry, and his attention is drawn especially to the lady, who becomes associated with the moon, the snake figure, and overall nature itself in the story. However, the Snake Lady, Oriana, does not only represent nature but also culture, as she becomes the teacher for young Alberic, from his childhood via the tapestry, and through his young adult years by teaching him manners, how to read, and how to ride horses through the figure of the Godmother. When he is banished from the Red Palace by his grandfather and sent to the Castle of Sparkling Waters to live with simple villagers, he meets with nature for the first time which he has been yearning for. Alberic is surprised and overjoyed as he escapes from the parodied nature with statues and tapestries, and the symbolic patriarchy of the Red Palace, to liberate himself from the civilization. It is there, he meets the Snake Lady, Oriana, in her physical form, who becomes a mother figure for him. Mary Patricia Kane comments on the union of Alberic and Oriana as "the discovery of a matriarchal symbolic order configured in the uncanny image of a snake" (44), and therefore argues that "the totalizing symbolic order of patriarchy is interrupted by the chaotic, unruly and uncanny image of a woman who is also a snake ... placing Alberic on the margins of his grandfather's world of power and privilege" (Kane 45). Thus, for Alberic, nature becomes the teacher. With the help of Oriana, Alberic learns about the world, and also finds the courage to rebel against his patriarchal, ecophobic grandfather Duke Balthasar Maria. Commenting on this connection between Alberic and Oriana, Martha Vicinus mentions that "he [Alberic] owes all he knows to his beloved godmother. Nature, nurture, and maternal care" (98) connects him deeply to Oriana. Furthermore, Aurora Murga Aroca argues that;

Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady has the potential to subvert, or at least challenge, the ecophobic assumption that contact with the animal is detrimental for the subject. In fact, this narrative questions the meaning attached to certain symbols, such as the binary opposition of sun and moon, nature and civilization. Traditionally, the moon is associated with nature, and so, with irrationality and degeneration, whereas the sun is the symbol of masculinity and reason. Despite the Snake Lady being associated with the moon, and the Duke and his palace with the sun, the narrative challenges the meaning behind those symbols. (33)

The Duke's deeds are responsible for the Duchy of Luna's degradation and eventual demise. The murder of the Snake Lady does not imply that the threat has been dealt with. Rather, the Duke and Alberic's psychological deterioration and death are caused by the Snake Lady's execution, leaving the Duchy without a successor. In other words, the destruction of nature brings the end of the Duchy of Luna. The animal shaped fountains run out of water, the chapel of the Duke remains unfinished, and the death of the Duke with nobody to take the throne makes the house of Luna extinct, "the duchy lapsing to the Empire" (Lee 343). Kane puts forward the idea that The House of Luna is in fact a metaphorical figuration of the House of Patriarchy, and is doomed to crumble because of its suppression and control over what is feminine (58). Thus, the repression of the female brings the end to the House of Patriarchy.

## 5. Discussion

The major ecofeminist aspect in the narrative is that the animalistic female figure is brutally murdered due to her animality, her snake-like figure, and her hybridity. Murga Aroca argues that “Prince Alberic and The Snake Lady’ adopts a spectacle approach that subverts the established negative connotations surrounding animality” (29). The ecophobic connection of savagery with animality is complicated by Lee’s depiction of the hybrid Snake Lady. “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” challenges animal and human preconceptions, challenges their validity, and calls for a rethinking of identities. The Snake Lady’s hybrid look is not a representation of her internal animality or savagery, but rather that she was given those animalistic features as an unfair sentence by an unknown entity, just like the characteristics attributed to women by patriarchy, such as domestic or inferior. The metaphor of the punishment of the Snake Lady perfectly represents the women in Victorian Britain, who were seen as second class citizens. Ortiz-Robles explains that certain groups of people’s inferiority was graphically portrayed by connecting them with specific animals (11), and in this case, the woman figure is represented as a snake. Furthermore, Greta Gaard also argues that “ecofeminists have worked to show the linkages within the devalued category of the other, demonstrating how the association of qualities from one oppressed group with another serves to reinforce their subordination. The conceptual linkages between women and animals, women and the body, or women and nature, for example, all serve to emphasize the inferiority of these categories” (n.p.). The Snake Lady, accordingly, is a figure which carries the burden of being inferior because of her looks and her association to the nature. In order to explain the protest towards misogyny in the story, it is important to analyze the metaphors and symbols attributed to Oriana in the story. It is a fact that women have been identified with serpents as a tradition. In most civilizations, snakes are extremely significant creatures. Wilfred L. Guerin et al. mentions that the serpent/snake archetype is directly associated with “evil, corruption, sensuality, destruction, mystery” (160). Snakes, in particular, have long been used to speak to the sinuous beauty and terrible power that women may have on men, relying on Greek and Christian myths. The association of snakes with women is based on various claimed similarities between the nature of this animal and that of women. The loss of the snake’s skin is related to women’s menstrual cycle, and their snakelike movements to their intrinsic suggestiveness. There are several historical examples of snakes being connected with bad women, including Eve, and Lilith, Adam’s initial partner (Murga Aroca 43). The stereotype tradition of evil women represented as a snake is broken in Lee’s story. On this matter, Brontë Schiltz argues that Lee challenges the relationship of the serpent, subversive Oriana with Biblical evil, invoking Catholic symbolism while also questioning conventional Christian beliefs. Her story claims that nature, especially sexual nature, cannot be evil since it depicts both Alberic and Oriana as innocent victims of unjustified abuse (107). The snake woman is compassionately presented in this narrative, as a victim of unjustified cruelty and the target of Alberic’s real affection. However, Duke Balthasar Maria, wants total control. Even from the beginning of the narrative, the presumptuous Duke wants the tapestry to be removed as “he disliked snakes and was afraid of the devil” (Lee 290). Snake Lady’s sad death examines how the presumed otherness may be demonized and exploited to support the dominant narrative; the Snake Lady is slain for snakes are associated with evilness. The Snake Lady is a metaphor that exposes the Victorian female’s disfigured identity, as well as a reference for the feminine battle for emancipation against patriarchal domination.

Thus, it is safe to say that the downfall of the Duchy of Luna’s reason is the repression of both femininity and nature. Going back to the dichotomy of nature and culture, Barry’s notion of fatality by mistreating nature is seen in the narrative of “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady”: If we disrespect nature, it may have catastrophic consequences for humans. Nature cannot be reduced to a term that we conceptualize as part of our cultural practices (Barry 243). The misuse of nature is evident and persistent in the Red Palace as Alberic notes; “There were no live creatures there, except snails and toads, which the gardeners killed” (Lee 291), he was promised to see a rabbit once, but “he came to the kitchen too late, and saw it with its pretty fur pulled off, and looking so sad and naked” (Lee 291). While no animals are allowed in the Red Palace, carvings of life-size animals out of precious materials are surrounding the Court of Honour of the Red Palace. On special occasions, these fountains are turned on, creating a superficial natural environment, which Alberic looks down in disgust. Duke Balthasar Maria erects statues for his ancestors and for himself, which also makes Alberic hate the Red Palace and his grandfather even more. If the ecophobic Red Palace represents culture, it is safe to say that The Castle of Sparkling Water represents nature. Firstly, the names of both places are of great importance. While the color red represents “blood, sacrifice”, and the figure of the sun, “consciousness and the father principle”, water represents “purification and redemption; fertility and growth” (Guerin et al. 157-8). Oriana, whom Alberic meets in the Castle of Sparkling Water represents the Godmother figure which symbolizes “positive aspects of the Earth Mother: associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance (Guerin et al. 158). The ecophobic Duke seeks to send his grandson to exile, which he thinks to be a terrible place; the Castle of Sparkling Waters. Alberic discovers this castle in awe;

Some vines, quite loaded with grapes, rose on the strong cords of their fibrous wood from the ground to the very roof of the tower, exactly like those borders of leaves and fruit which Alberic had loved so much. ... Birds were singing all round... Moreover, other birds, wonderful white and gold creatures, some of them with brilliant tails and scarlet crests, were pecking and sturring and making curious noises in the yard. And- could it

be true?- a little way further up the hill, ... white creatures were running in and out- white creatures with pinkish lining on their ears, undoubtedly- as Alberic's nurse had taught him on the tapestry- undoubtedly rabbits. (Lee 300-1)

Even though the Duke regards the Castle of Sparkling Waters as an unpleasant place with simple peasants and which is deficient in luxury, Alberic runs from discovery to discovery as he is genuinely happy for the first time. Alberic feels like he is in the tapestry. Emily Anne Rabiner comments on the transition from the Red Palace and to the Castle of Sparkling Waters, mentioning that Alberic finds himself in a scene as lovely as his favorite tapestry. ... in this beautiful setting, the lines between art and life, past and present, are blurred (47). This blur creates a liminal space for Alberic to meet the hybrid Snake Lady, Oriana, who gives him motherly love and care. "The scene of reunion with the God/Mother suggests a ritual passage from one state of being to another ... where there is a primal recognition of the feminine in the masculine and the masculine in the feminine" (Kane 57). With the help of Oriana, he becomes a graceful and well-educated young adult.

In a liminal space, with a hybrid woman as a teacher and a mother figure, Lee depicts Alberic almost as a hybrid as well; of masculinity and femininity; "his figure was at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of movement. His long hair, the colour of floss silk, fell in wavy curls, which seemed to imply almost a woman's care and coquetry. His hands also, though powerful, were ... of princely form and whiteness" (Lee 307). According to the description, Alberic takes care of his appearance. Caitlin Ehman comments upon Alberic's appearance as "unquestionably effeminate and androgynous" (2); he tends and grooms himself in a way that alienates his expression of gender from rigid gender roles, and his looks reinforce Alberic's indifference in getting married. The prince accepts the blurring of the binaries and allows himself to be a part of that hybridity, whether male and female, nature and culture, or human and animal. The hybrid Snake Lady is different as she cannot be categorized, but Alberic thinks she is very familiar to him since she plays a key part in the Duchy of Luna's obscured past, because she represents his own suppressed urge to rebel against the Duke. "She is a symbolic figure of transgression and diversity that is a part of Alberic's heredity" (Kane 46). This familiarity of the Snake Lady is seen on the concept of queer ecology as well. Timothy Morton defines the non-human figures as strange strangers and adds that "strange strangers are uncanny, familiar and strange simultaneously. Their familiarity is strange, their strangeness familiar" (277). Accordingly, it is essential to comment on the queerness of the Snake Lady as well as the feminist aspects. "All life forms, along with the environments they compose and inhabit, defy boundaries between inside and outside at every level" (Morton 274) and the blending of the boundaries is very evident in the narrative of "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady". As mentioned priorly, Oriana does not fit into any category as she is neither human nor animal. Even the tapestry she is depicted in is a hybrid;

Tapestry operates as both a decorative inscription of the past and the site of supernatural or transhistorical communication with the past .... Simultaneously, it suggests both the familiar and the exotic. It is familiar because it has its earliest origins in the feminine, domestic craft of weaving, but it is also exotic because it was introduced into Europe from the Orient in the wake of the First Crusade (1096) when European contact with the Muslim world increased. (Kane 43)

According to Kane, the tapestry is a hybrid, of the feminine figure and the Orient, being both well-known and alien, both historical and supernatural at the same time. The tapestry becomes Alberic's main and only interest and desire throughout the narrative. His obsession starts at an early age and ends with his death. Declining marriage against all odds, his fascination to the hybrid tapestry, his effeminate look points to a fact that Alberic channels his queerness through art. The underlying queerness of Alberic can be observed from his early age, when he finally sees the lower body of the Snake Lady. While expecting to see a skirt, he sees the tail: "he loved the beautiful lady ... only more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake" (Lee 294-95). Brontë Schiltz mentions that "the queer implications of such a response to this phallic imagery are obvious" (106). Alberic becomes obsessed with the Snake Lady from that point forward; he becomes one with the tapestry as he learns about life from its perspective, refusing to acknowledge the opposite sex. He accesses an alternative version of his reality through art (the tapestry), one in which his aspirations and desires are acknowledged and honored. As Alberic repeatedly refuses to marry against his grandfather's pressures, it becomes obvious that he rejects normative sexuality because of his obsession with the Snake Lady, this attraction becomes a rebellion towards heteronormativity. The point where Alberic learns about the full story of the Snake Lady from a travelling storyteller, he becomes sick for days and cannot leave his chamber because of fever. Schiltz emphasizes that the description of this sickness could be associated with "the language typically used by religious bigots to condemn homosexuality" (112). A priest, who thinks Alberic is possessed with demons, is sent to care for him. When Alberic regains his strength, he regularly meets with Oriana/ his godmother and finally believes that he has achieved a type of freedom, thus, transgressive aspiration becomes a way of escaping from disease rather than as a sickness itself (Schiltz 113). Through the end of the story, after Alberic, Oriana, and the Duke dies, Lee concludes that no monuments remain complete but the tapestry of the Snake Lady still welcomes the tourists or visitors. The conclusion shows how futile it is to try to suppress queerness and nature. Despite the repeated attempts to destroy or remove the tapestry, it still exists and represents the narrative of the

Snake Lady; because of the controlling power of patriarchy, heteronormativity itself demolishes due to its excessive desire of domination.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the persistent ecophobia of Alberic's grandfather, the Duke, which brings the end of the Duchy of Luna. Two different approaches to the hybrid are embodied in the figures of Prince Alberic and Duke Bathasar Maria. As examined in the previous paragraphs, Alberic treats the Snake Lady with affection. However, the Duke has an ecophobic viewpoint. Duke's dislike of animals, especially serpents, and nature, as well as his dread of the evil, support this ecophobic viewpoint. For Duke Balthasar Maria, "nature becomes the hateful object in need of ... control" (Estok 210), however, as Estok writes, "the loathed and feared thing ... can only result in tragedy if left in control" (210). The Duke puts man in the center of the universe, thus decorates the Red Palace with an anthropocentric set of mind. He puts Twelve Caesar statues which could be seen from every window, in order to create a sophisticated ambiance in the palace as well as to cherish the western civilization. The gardens of the palace are excessively orderly and no animals are welcomed, creating the sense of superiority of humans over nature. The Duke's perspective brings about the bankruptcy of the Duchy, followed by the death of Snake Lady, Alberic, and The Duke himself, which brings destruction and death over the Duchy of Luna. His order to kill the snake/Oriana just because it represents evil is an illogical fear caused by his ecophobia. By punishing the anthropocentric Duke, Lee emphasizes how groundless it is to have biases towards nature and the nonhuman.

## 6. Conclusion

Vernon Lee's "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" is a rich work that can be analyzed using a variety of critical perspectives, such as ecofeminism, queer theory, and ecophobia: The text represents not only the suppression of nature, but also the feminine and the queer. The narrative doubts the effectiveness of animal and human stereotypes and advocates for a reconsideration of labels. All in all, "Prince Alberic and The Snake Lady" breaks free from the boundaries and dichotomies such as nature/culture, masculine/feminine, human/nonhuman, and also asserts that the repression of any of the categories would end up in tragedy as seen at the end of the story. The narrative emphasizes the harm that patriarchal and anthropocentric systems cause to the natural world and its inhabitants. All in all, the overall message of the narrative is; one should not try to control, or declare superiority over another category, since excessive control or suppression brings tragedy. Lee reconsiders the values attributed to civilization, nature, and heteronormativity, and condemns ecophobia as well as misogyny.

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