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Seductive Snakes and Asexual Angels: Queer Undercurrents in Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Desert Sands"

H.J.E. Champion

- 1 First published in *The Amber Gods and Other Stories* in 1863, Harriet Prescott Spofford's short story "Desert Sands" is narrated by the self-righteous Sydney, an artist in constant search of "greatness."¹ In anticipation of his inevitable great masterpiece, and in confident expectation of its resulting "pompous parade, its triumphal march from town to town, ... its throng of lovers, ... its world-wide fame" (214), Sydney draws Romantic inspiration from nature, poetry, and women. His search for an ideal muse begins with "Eos," a young girl he plucks from her family to follow him on his travels as his wife. Sydney "names" Eos as if he had brought her into being himself in a deific act of creation ("Eos, I called her," 176) and the reader is only ever aware of the name given to her as Sydney's muse, a role that he implies she perfectly embodies: "I needed her, she must be about me, she must, in fact, give all and receive nothing" (179).
- 2 Pious, conventional and quiet, Eos is described as a "pale phantom of a woman" (191) who follows her husband faithfully. Dutiful in her marital roles, she embodies traditional femininity. Yet when Sydney is seemingly seduced by the exotic Vespasia, a rich art collector, he positions his two muses against each other, relishing what he understands as an ongoing competition for his affections between both women, a fight that comes to a dramatic finale as Vespasia jealously attacks Eos in the desert, losing her own life instead. She is defeated by Alain, Eos's cousin and a French soldier in an Algerian regiment, who provides Eos with unwavering protection throughout the story but who cannot protect her from her own sharp decline after Vespasia dies. Even as Sydney laments melodramatically at how his weak wife is ailing he concurrently does not attempt to care for her. His greatest love is his own painting, a depiction of the

desert sands. Yet the story finishes with a dramatic slap of irony when Sydney is struck blind.

- 3 It seems that Sydney's narration acts almost as a painting itself. Infused with colorful descriptions and artistic terminology, his words are carefully composed to create a text that does not go deeper than surface brushstrokes. Characterization is established only through Sydney's narration, and Eos and Vespasia are mere objects of focalization, nothing but muses described for their aesthetic qualities only. The substantial references to vision, light and sight throughout the text suggest the dangers of gazing, of seeing too much, or indeed, of not seeing at all. One could evoke Birgit Spengler's "cultural regimes of seeing" when exploring the scopic relations between Spofford's characters and how each individual "positions him- or herself in relation to the world and in social relations, a process that involves negotiations of knowledge, power, and desire" (6). One could then go on to ask whether the blindness of Sydney's first-person narration results in an unreliability that ultimately undermines it.² An analysis of Spofford's visual language could uncover subtle clues that Spofford has strewn for the reader throughout the short story—whether consciously or unconsciously—and that allow for an alternative interpretation of events. Indeed, a careful application of turpentine to Sydney's overlying painted narrative uncovers the instability of his narration and the possibility of a more versatile approach. This paper evokes the possibility of a "queered" palimpsestic reading of the alternative story that can be found between and behind Sydney's initial canvas of words.³ A deconstruction of Sydney's binary understanding of both women—and thus their position as mere muses in Sydney's artistic gaze—allows the reader to explore Eos's burgeoning sexual desires, perhaps provoked by Vespasia's consistent deviations from essentialist and traditional gendered roles. Similarly, underlining the confusion of gender roles in the story could in turn suggest a complication of Sydney's own desires and the many overlapping love triangles in the story. Following an analysis of these implications, this paper will go on to propose an alternative reading of the battle scene and the ultimate death of Eos.

1. The Angel and the Ghoul

- 4 One must look first at the surface level of the text, identifying how Sydney contrasts both women along binaries of angel/monster, asexual/sexual, light/dark, pious/heathen and domestic/exotic. Eos is positioned as the ideal feminine wife using nineteenth-century notions of the "Angel in the House," while Vespasia is positioned as monstrously *unangelic* through an Orientalization of her body. The strictures of nineteenth-century feminine normative identity for white upper-class women are well established. These women were traditionally represented as pure, chaste and nurturing "Angels in the House," described by Barbara Welter as having "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (21). Eos is "bright," "delicate" and "lovely" (176), appearing to be typically angelic as she selflessly gives up any shred of autonomy in order to satisfy her husband's demands. For Sydney she is a "bright and morning star," with the purity of "the lilies of eternal peace" (176).⁴ She never bears Sydney a child, her virginal chasteness again typical of Puritan expectations for white upper-class women, expectations which spurned sexual desire and agency for the notion of a pure ideal. Indeed, for Sydney, Eos is not there to be loved, rather to be admired: "I did not know if I loved her, if, certainly, I ever loved her" (176).

- 5 Welter describes the “Angel in the House” as a “hostage in the home” (21), and certainly Sydney revels in his ability to control and manipulate his wife both physically and emotionally. When he tells her to follow him, she does; he tells her to marry him, so she does; he tells her to stop painting for pleasure, so again she does, instead completing her “little household chores” (185) while her husband fulfils his artistic destiny. When Sydney wants her, he has her: “She was singing in some upper room, but came down at my demand, and sang to me” (176); “You must go with me Eos. So Eos went with me” (177); “She was always there, she never swerved from following me” (179).⁵ Sydney seems to have established himself as a central point, the axis of Eos’s movements. As “pale and patient as a satellite” (197), she “always ... came circling back to [Sydney], like the moth to its flame” (178).
- 6 Eos’s weakness is predestined: “it became necessary to regard her as a confirmed invalid. That is the case with all American women, I said” (213), as opposed to Vespasia, who is frankly un-American, “East Indian by birth,” and positioned by Sydney as an exotically racialized other (187). While Eos is as a “moth to its flame,” Vespasia is described as the flame itself: an “Oriental creature of fire and strength” (190). Her opulent eroticism would not go amiss in a painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and, like Ingres, Sydney identifies her with the mysteries of the Orient and the romanticism of the desert landscape, the “old Eastern dream of [his] youth” (191). In this way, he extends his power over Vespasia, constructing her “otherliness” from a position of hegemony.⁶ Vespasia is consistently described as monstrous. With her “sinister” eyes (186, 205, 211), she is an “enchantress,” a “beautiful ghoul ... genie and great fairy” (199). She is inhuman, associated with snakes, with “serpentine grace,” “ophidian extremities” (199) and “hissing” silks (190). Yet while this animalistic vision of Vespasia aims to undermine her threatening authority over Sydney, it simultaneously underlines her power to the reader. She is considered predatory: a “savage thing panting with restraint” (199) and a “desert-creature” with “feline instincts” (199). She is a disturbing “vision of Lamia” (190), the mythological Queen who devoured children, her “flash of white teeth” (189) symbolizing her voracious appetite. This voraciousness is vampiric (“all your gold is coined from her heart’s blood,” 195), Vespasia’s predatory lust a threat to Sydney. The words “rapture” and “ravished” evoke Vespasia’s sexual power that plays with images of rape: “I recognized her will, her magic, ... I submitted to her ordination, to the influx of foreign force” (192). Perhaps most relevant to the visual nature of the text is her “envenomed gaze” (212) and “eyes like broken bottle-glass” (198), a clear intertextual reference to Medusa.⁷
- 7 In a sharp contrast to faithful Eos who is, at first glance, both literally and figuratively confined within interior space, Vespasia’s foreignness reverses and destabilizes traditional American femininities. When she leaves America for “the East” (198), her savagery is again noted: “[i]t is better ... to have every object fulfil its destiny; hers was not in civilization” (199). It is clear that Vespasia resists containment and relegation to the angelic domestic sphere. As well as taking up space bodily—being “imposing” in her “proportion” (187)—Vespasia moves freely, “careering” (211) through exterior space. This gendered autonomy reaches a climax with a moment of cross-dressing in the desert, a defining point in “Desert Sands” for Vespasia’s clear shedding of feminine signifiers. Her ability and confidence as a soldier is evident: “our enemy [Vespasia] exceeded us thrice; I can only imagine that their certainty of victory already dashed us

with defeat" (210). Vespasia is an "adventuress" (211), a female warrior, and an Amazon,⁸ her name possibly inspired by the Roman Emperor Vespasianus, a man known for his military prowess.⁹

- 8 This bodily gender transgression is extended further by her appearance. In comparison with the femininity of the "white and radiant" Eos (193), Vespasia's skin evokes masculinity in its "soft and smooth gold-brown of the beurré" (186). R.J. Ellis points out the gendered signification of skin color in the nineteenth century, when white skin was considered an implication of the suitable domestic sphere for the feminine gendered body—a result of being indoors, or under a carefully arranged parasol—while masculine skin was marked from being outside, under the sun (Ellis 265). Indeed, as Eos is carried through the desert "pillowed and canopied aloft on her mattress" (204), Vespasia is a "lithe figure ... leaning on one stirrup from the saddle" (211), wearing a turban and burnous, the uniform of the Maghreb. Such gender transgression cannot go unpunished, and it certainly seems that Vespasia has been punished for her own transgression of traditionally pure and angelic roles, and by no less than God Himself: "Their defeat is no less than a miracle of God, a blow for charging in mad noon at command of a woman! Dogs, and sons of dogs! God willed it; she lies there dead!" (211).

10

- 9 If one takes into consideration the etymology of "monster" (from the latin "monere" meaning "to warn," or an "evil omen," and later meaning "to show something") one can wonder what this "something" is that Vespasia is intended to show. Vespasia's very monstrosity could indeed function as a clue to her potential signifying role in the text. Emma Donoghue describes monstrosity as a "cultural shadow" that "overlaps" with the queer (108), while Terry Castle sees the ghoul in particular as metaphorically useful:

The spectral figure is a perfect vehicle for conveying what must be called—though without a doubt paradoxically—that 'recognition through negation' which has taken place with regard to female homosexuality in Western culture since the Enlightenment. Over the past three hundred years ... the metaphor has functioned as the necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying—and ultimately embracing—that which otherwise could not be acknowledged. (60)

- 10 It could thus be argued that Vespasia's "ghouliness" (199) implicitly points the reader towards a hidden subtext to the story. What can one make of the (also spectral) figure of Eos (a "pale phantom," 191), and the ambiguous connection between the two women? The fact that Vespasia is first introduced to Eos through one of the latter's paintings gives the reader a starting point for an analysis of their relationship. Unlike Sydney, who sees what he expects (or desires) to see, Vespasia is not only able to see Eos's hidden feelings, but to point them out to the reader. It certainly seems that before meeting Vespasia Eos, like Sydney, can only imagine such desires within the context of the canvas, although she is only able to paint when Sydney is not at home. As an artist, she reverses her role as traditional muse, enabling the reader to comprehend not just how Sydney sees Eos, but how she sees herself.

2. Yonic Landscapes and Seducing Graces

- 11 Sydney's strict control over Eos extends to her creative pursuits, so it is perhaps unsurprising that she waits for him to leave before indulging in a moment of artistic expression. This move from "muse" to "artist" or indeed "creator" is also foreshadowed by her first moment of autonomy in the narrative. She refuses Sydney's

demand to travel, preferring to stay at home with her cousin Alain. In a bid to establish his authority, Sydney states: “Eos at home away from me? But you are my wife, you know, and to-morrow we will go” ‘No,’ she said, lifting her head, ‘to-morrow I shall not go. I wish to stay a day longer”’ (180). Sydney pretends to find this dissent amusing, waving it off as a quirk: “Eos with a will of her own? ... I have half the mind to indulge it, and see where the caprice ends” (181). Yet while Sydney scoffs, he overlooks, or ignores, what is a telling assertion of autonomy on Eos’s behalf. While Sydney is gone Eos paints a landscape of her own, in which

a cliff, yet blue in heavy night shadows, was rent apart, and in the rift a brook—a thread of limpid water—crept down and curled from reach to reach to lose itself in dimness; a tuft of long bearded grass, half-guessed, bent forward and shook its awns in a wind; a young birch shivered with the tremors of its perpetual joy. (182)

- 12 This lush image depicting a river gushing through a cliff crevice may be identified as inherently yonic,¹¹ a sumptuous rendering of female sexual pleasure, which could indicate underlying homosexual erotic desires within Eos. Her personified trees shake in orgasmic “tremors” of joy, the grass suggestive of loosened hair. The landscape is very similar to Sappho’s fragment 2:

And here cold water murmurs through the branches / Of apples, and with roses all the place / Is shadowed, and from the rustling leaves / Deep sleep descends / And here the meadow where horses graze blooms / With spring flowers, and breezes / Breathe sweetly [...] (Prins 96-97)

- 13 Yopie Prins suggests that this fragment invites its reader into a homoerotic topography (99), in which the “multiple pleasures of woman’s *jouissance*” are celebrated (98). In painting such an overtly sexual image Eos has created a representation of forbidden thoughts, the feminine *jouissance* she is denied through her role as Sydney’s muse. As an artist, she reverses her role as traditional muse, enabling the reader to comprehend not just how Sydney sees Eos, but how she sees herself. Perhaps aware of its transgressive potential as representative of female desire, Sydney forbids the painting to be shown in public, hiding it behind a curtain in his studio. Eos is humiliated by his reaction, hiding her blushing face and pleading her husband for forgiveness, a guilt reminiscent of Butler’s implication that normalization is socially imposed: “‘coherent identification’ has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and ... the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame” (Kotz 88). This painting could also enable the reader to delve into alternative desires that are firmly embedded into the story. Sydney’s disgusted reaction could in fact be a result of his own hidden shame. What does he have to hide? Certainly, his relationship with Alain, Eos’s cousin, is highly ambiguous:

As I looked at his now, I acknowledged that his was the most faultless face I had ever seen; had I been a figure painter, I could have asked no greater boon than perpetual companionship with such beauty; as it was, to have seen him once was to have seen him too often ...; this man, with his seducing graces, could win a saint from heaven Then I became aware that I was possessed of jealousy. I had hoped that such a possibility was over, and could scarcely remember the time in which I had been so utterly displeased with myself I strangled it with a death-grip. (181)

- 14 Sydney seems clearly attracted to the soldier’s “faultless face” and “seducing graces,” his jealousy bringing him feelings of shame (that, interestingly, he seems to have had to fight before). Sydney seems uneasily aware of his own underlying forbidden desires as he confesses to the reader “I am one of those who have no right to marriage vows” (177). Similarly, Alain’s militaristic masculinity serves to underline Sydney’s

androgyny, particularly in the desert where he enjoys wearing the burnous, “in all gay shades, effeminate and light as wrappings of air” (203). Finally, Alain’s presence introduces another of many overlapping love triangles in the text. Indeed, one must not only consider the relationship between Sydney, Eos and Vespasia but also that between Sydney, Eos and Alain. The relationship between the three characters is notably strained. Sydney notes that Alain, who seems to despise him, has a “brother’s freedom” with Eos (180). One could question who he is actually jealous of. In *Between Men*, Sedgwick writes that the “love triangle” acts as a “sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment” (27). Much like Vespasia’s significance for Eos, Alain could also serve to point out Sydney’s own gender ambiguity and sexual desires. Eos’s painting therefore acts as the first clue to Eos’s destabilized angelic identity within Sydney’s narrative, as well as pointing out Sydney’s own ambiguous identity. Yet it has another role to play, that of foreshadowing Vespasia.

- 15 In his description of the painting, Sydney describes a sky “of dark and tender twilight” in which “the morning star hung” (182). Anna Clark uses the image of twilight in her analysis of same-sex behavior in nineteenth-century literature: “Just as one can see only vague shapes in the dim light of the dusk, twilight words conveyed sexual desires and practices that were only half-understood” (140).¹² Eos, the Greek goddess of the dawn, is represented by the morning star, and as she “hangs” in the twilight she is perhaps united with Vespasia (from “vespers”?) in a “dark and tender” embrace. The two women are coupled from the moment Vespasia appears. As the art collector sweeps into Sydney’s studio to buy a painting she instead finds his wife’s canvas tucked out of sight behind a gold sheet. The “eager and tremulous” purple flowers reflect her own “violet draperies” (188, 186)¹³ and she cries “my heart is set upon it” (188). When Sydney refuses to sell the painting Vespasia coquettishly replies: “I shall see that wife, Mr. Sydney, never fear, and arrange her good services on my behalf. In what seclusion she is cloistered Do you keep a seraglio?” (189).¹⁴ Her casual reference to an Ottoman harem could be understood in two ways, either as an implication that Eos is a prisoner of heterosexual pleasure, merely an object of male consumption, or indeed as a nod towards the emergence of transgressive bonds between women within a female space, an exotic erotic that does not correspond to Puritan values of monogamy. This sentence also allows Vespasia to clearly state her objective—to “see” Eos, and thus free her from her confinement—and in doing so she places Eos in the role of imprisoned maiden, undertaking to rescue her. Robin Riley Fast argues that Vespasia wants to rescue Eos from her role as “Angel in the House”:

Virginia Woolf writes of the woman writer’s need to kill the angel in the house. Spofford, I believe, anticipates Woolf’s argument and broadens it: the woman who would live as a powerful, sexual, independent being must kill the image of femininity designed and imposed by man to minister to his needs. Vespasia attacks the angel in the house and she attacks the female muse whose only relation to art is as a passive intermediary. Her attack, however, is not only on Eos; it is also on the man who so oppressively depends on her services as angel and muse. (44)

- 16 Yet perhaps not only does Vespasia want to rescue Eos; she also aims to ride off into the horizon with her on the back of her steed.

3. Eos and Vespasia

- 17 When Vespasia is unable to buy Eos's painting and declares that she shall "do [herself] the honor of calling upon Mrs. Sydney, shortly" (189) and Sydney responds in turn that Eos does not receive calls, Vespasia merely laughs at his reply. The text continues without further mention of this meeting, yet such an unexplained gap in the narrative does not necessarily imply that it did not take place, rather Sydney's lack of knowledge about whether or not this event ever occurs. It is indeed curious that later that day—after Sydney returns from an evening walk in which he moons over Vespasia's charm—he finds Eos asleep in front of the fire. Not only does the fire evoke Vespasia, an "Oriental creature of fire" (190), but a copy of *Arabian Nights* has slipped from Eos's hand—a striking image that begs the question of what has happened in his absence.
- 18 It is also possible that Sydney continues to misinterpret Eos in the days to come. He states: "she made me feel her sweetness more," yet this use of "made me" is again suspicious. Could it possibly indicate Eos's persistent effort to continue her ongoing performance of "wife" in order to conceal her burgeoning relationship with Vespasia (191)? Eos's behavior certainly seems to be that of one in the first stages of romance. She sings "constantly," surrounding herself with freshly picked flowers that remind Sydney of Vespasia (191). Sydney concludes that she does so to capture his attention, declaring "It was all in vain" (191) and assuming that Eos and Vespasia are "antagonists" (192), jealously fighting for his affection. Yet a subtle connection between the two women is apparent in their shared gaze. When both women are seated opposite each other at the opera, Vespasia "furtive[ly] glance[s]" towards Eos (193), whose "glittering eyes" reflect her own (189, 193). Eos's rare appearance in public is abruptly ended when she is firmly escorted back by her husband, who holds her closely in his arms, "cheek to cheek" (195). This reaction is ambiguous. Who is jealous of who? Is Eos jealous of Sydney and Vespasia, or indeed, is Sydney jealous of the fact that he is unable to retain Vespasia's attention as she looks "furtively" at his wife? Why does Sydney feel the necessity to firmly remove his wife from the scene? Much like Sydney is jealous of Eos's relationship with Alain, Eos may also be jealous at Sydney's ability to appear in public with Vespasia.
- 19 This ambiguous mesh of jealousies can be found again after Sydney escorts Eos home, when she reappears later that evening outside Vespasia's house, watching the party from the street outside: "There was a woman with her shawl wrapped closely about her, leaning against the lamp-post, her white face bent upward and covering the window with such a gaze as that with which a tigress protects her young; she had no significance for me" (194). Sydney's surprising statement "she had no significance for me" could be interpreted in various ways. Is he incapable of recognizing her, or indeed, does Eos consider him insignificant? Is Eos standing outside Vespasia's house as a betrayed wife, or as a jealous lover? There certainly seems to be a clear connection between both women. Eos as "tigress" (194) reflects the "feline" Vespasia (199), and her protective gaze marks the first time there is any hint of any real feeling on the part of any character. The focus on Eos's eyes, described earlier by Sydney as "bluer than the violet planet" (176), again mirror Vespasia and her own violet garments. Inside, Vespasia does not seem to be interested in Sydney, asking him: "Do you remember ... how the Fay Vivien bound Merlin?" (194). The fact that Vespasia is reminding Sydney of the Lady of the Lake who, tired of Merlin's advances, decides to trap him under a

rock, seems a subtle indication of her overall weariness of him. Sydney meanwhile “too involved in the enjoyment of delicious fancy” (194) decides to ignore her completely.

- 20 When Eos becomes seriously ill after her bitter evening outside, Sydney assumes that she is suffering from a “broken heart” (195) caused by his own affection for Vespasia. Yet if one uses this love triangle framework to shift the focus toward Vespasia, it becomes clear that Eos’s decline also parallels Vespasia’s departure for the Orient, while her recovery seems reliant on her successful manipulation of Sydney to take her there. It seems that Eos, determined to persuade her husband to travel to the Orient, uses every method of manipulation in her power to plant the idea in Sydney’s mind. Sydney notes how Eos sings him a “Song of Sand” and reads Oriental texts to him such as *Eothen* and *Vathek*¹⁵ (196). When Sydney expresses his desire to journey East, Eos simply utters: “I thought you would” (201). When she asks Sydney firmly “can I go?” (201) and he replies frankly “you were thinking of Vespasia” (202) the subtext seems to play with the reader, and it could be argued that Eos’s plan to “elope” has fallen into place.
- 21 Even though Eos is not suited for the heat (“I nearly dissolved in Florida,” she says, 202), she is stoic in the desert, happiest when night falls, when she “[becomes] refreshed and enlivened, and [appears], once more, airy and light-hearted as when in youth” (204). The desert landscape at night—with “stars that hung great and glowing from their vaults of crystalline darkness, in the gloom, the coolness, the shelter of tamarisk-thicket and breath of rose-laurel”—evokes the lushness of her painting (204). The desert, a landscape in constant flux with its “restless sand” and “hot exhalations” (204), becomes a metaphor for Eos’s fervent emotions, as she is waiting for Vespasia to appear.

4. A Desert Battle

- 22 When Vespasia eventually appears, her flashing “emerald eyes” temporarily blind Sydney: “I can scarcely see, I am dazzled [I]t would not be very pleasant to be left in the dark, you know” (206).¹⁶ Sydney is both literally and metaphorically “left in the dark” when Eos wraps his head with a wet cloth and he sleeps. This results in another gap in the narrative, in which the reader is unaware of Eos’s actions. What does she do while he sleeps? Is the implication that Eos has once again gone to meet Vespasia and, as a result, has she been informed of the impending attack?
- 23 The night before, Eos is suspiciously excited about something: “she slipped, at length, from my grasp and walked beside me and grew gay; now she ran a few paces in advance, now came back ... twittering and chirping ... like a bird at dawn” (207).¹⁷ The comparison with a bird is telling, and, with her liberation in sight, Eos cannot control herself when Sydney mentions their upcoming departure from the desert. She bursts into tears, crying “Don’t speak of home! Don’t speak of home! ...; where you are is my home always. I am sorry I have been so naughty—a hindering little thing. A weak and silly little wife!” (208) In this association of home with negativity and of Sydney with home, one can recognize the moment of Eos’s valediction, as she proceeds in her act to leave her husband and, consequently, her traditional role as his wife and muse, one which she now considers to be “weak and silly.” Finally, in a gesture that recalls her painting, Eos then goes on to point out the omen in the sky that portends the following day of bloodshed: “Eos pointed with her white finger at one star, just above the

horizon, red as a drop of blood ready to fall" (208). Her identification of the star not only points out her potential knowledge of the upcoming battle for her (sexual) freedom but also her own autonomous path towards Vespasia, with this image referencing their "tender embrace" in her painting. The pre-planned attempt is later confirmed by the leader of Sydney's group, the Sheik Ibrahim, who "had suspected it for two or three days" (209).

- 24 And so it goes that the next day, wandering dreamily behind the caravan, Sydney is unwittingly led into battle by his wife. As the attackers are approaching, Eos remains undaunted, seeming rather to enter into a state of sexual ecstasy: "Far from terror, I found Eos exhilarated and trembling with excitement; her hand lay in mine like ice, and her eyes were fixed on a distant and increasing point. My glance followed hers."¹⁸ Tellingly, Sydney is attacked first and Vespasia appears as a "lithe figure that flashe[s] to and fro, mercurial and savage, among the swords." The closer Vespasia is, the more excited Eos becomes, until she is "replete with spirit" and "[grasps] a rusty old yataghan" (210), her upheld dagger reflecting Vespasia's "uplifted sword blade" (211). She stands behind Sydney, with one hand clutching a dagger and the other on his shoulder, an ambiguous gesture that seems more menacing than protective. Indeed Sydney is a continuous target in the battle, with Eos only under attack when she is standing near him: "I had but time to fling Eos behind me when the blow descended and sheared a portion of her dress" (211). Vespasia's violent gesture is not only a symbolic move that could be interpreted as a rejection of the phallus and heterosexual codes of lovemaking or indeed an attempt at castration; it simultaneously serves to literally undress Eos. Vespasia's command of a "tribe" (211) further references queer desire between women if we consider the similarity between the word "tribe" and "tribadism," meaning "lesbian" from 1600 onwards and implying "lesbian sexual activity" from the 1800s onwards. The connection between Eos and Vespasia, and the fact that the brunt of the attack is firmly directed towards Sydney, suggests that this attack in the desert is, rather, a rescue attempt. Yet it is a rescue attempt that comes to no avail.
- 25 As the French soldiers—led by her cousin Alain (coincidentally?)—arrive to protect the caravan, Eos screams out in what could be a cry of joy at being rescued or indeed a screech of terror at the inevitability of defeat (210). Vespasia's tribe is no match for these soldiers and she is killed in battle. With Vespasia's dead body lying before him, and in an attempt to restore some semblance of (heteronormative) order, Alain tells Eos to put her heel on Vespasia's head. Her distress is evident, and she "[flings] him a glance like the blue light shed from the swallow's wing" (211)—just as Vespasia flung her spear at Sydney—in a last act of autonomous liberation, a liberation that now soars like a swallow beyond her grasp.
- 26 The aftermath of the attack results in Eos's mental and physical collapse. Without Vespasia, Eos reverts back into an infant, "motionless" (213) and unable to move autonomously: "I took her in my arms,—she was lighter than any child,—laid her head on my shoulder" (215). Sydney once more manipulates Eos's body, yet it seems that it is no longer possible for her to return to her earlier angelic role, performing her "unfailing services" (213) as Sydney's "weak and silly wife." Every night she dreams of Vespasia and "the sight of those jewel-eyes ... —frequently she seemed fascinated and forced to seek for them" (212). Eventually she is unable to sleep at all. One day she declares: "You know the wick flashes up when the flame is extinguished" (214), but she

is unable to “flash up,” the extinguishing of the flame that was Vespasia resulting in Eos’s emotional and physical decline that inevitably ends in her death. She dies, forgotten, symbolically hidden behind a screen just as Sydney finishes his masterpiece. As he lays down his brush after daubing the final details of a perfect depiction of the desert, he feels a pain in his eyes: “a spear ... leapt across my vision, then murk darkness” (215). The artist has become a victim of his own hubris; he has painted the desert—a symbol in the story of female otherness and a queer space of gender liberation—without being able to truly see it, and it has thus symbolically destroyed his own ability to see. In a stroke of irony, the last thing he will ever perceive is the desert “forever and forever stretched before [his] eyes” (215).

- 27 It is unlikely to be coincidental that his blindness comes in the form of a spear. It seems that Vespasia’s attempt to destroy Sydney has finally succeeded and, in a reminder of Medusa’s gaze that destroys her male adversaries, the artist has been castrated by his muse, undermining hegemonic discourses in the process. But Vespasia is not the only muse who has her retribution. When Sydney realizes his loss of sight he calls out to Eos, who does not answer: “Night had fallen at noon. I was blind, and Eos was dead” (216). Sydney’s blindness and Eos’s “death” are thus implicitly interconnected. It is not only the woman who is dead, but the muse that Sydney has named Eos. The “heavy night shadows” (182) that evoke Eos’s painted sexual desires have enveloped him and Eos is free from his possessive gaze. Death is often used symbolically in Spofford’s writing. After Yone dies in “The Amber Gods” she exclaims: “How clear the space is! How free I am! So I passed out of the room” (65). Death equals freedom and a release from traditional domestic categorization, with death in “Desert Sands” a similar act of liberation, Sydney’s wife shedding her identity as the muse “Eos” as a snake would shed its skin.

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NOTES

1. Sydney is preoccupied with this idea of greatness, repeating the word "great" no less than twenty-one times throughout the story.
2. Indeed, as he repeatedly boasts of Eos's unwavering loyalty, Spofford's choice of words simultaneously casts this loyalty into doubt. Sydney declares that his acts of affection "thrilled [Eos] with a timid joy" (180), yet the fact that this is followed with the hesitant "I think" exposes Sydney's uncertainty and insecurity to the reader.
3. David Halperin positions "queerness" in "oppositional relation to the norm" as "by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62). Queerness can thus be used as a theoretical tool to expose the discourse of oppositional binaries such as hetero/homosexuality and masculinity/femininity to be in a state of flux, this fluidity destabilizing them and creating space for new meanings and possibilities.
4. Does Spofford's unexpected inclusion of the conjunction "and" here highlight the contradiction between "bright" and "morning/mourning"? This association of a beautiful woman with death turns Sydney into a Poesque narrator and foreshadows the ending of the story. The image of death is furthered with Eos' connection to "lilies of eternal peace" (176).
5. The word "swerved" is analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar in their description of women writers from the nineteenth century: "Such writers ... both participated in and—to use one of Harold Bloom's key terms—'swerved' from the central sequences of male literary history, enacting a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition that necessarily caused them to seem 'odd'"

(Gilbert and Gubar 73). Under Sydney's gaze Eos certainly seems to be personifying an image of the ideal wife; yet when we look in-between the lines of this narrative we can begin to detect an undercurrent of queered "swerving" or resistance, as discussed in the second section of this paper.

6. Here one must consider Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in which he examines how Western scholars have exoticised the East as wild and superstitious through an artificial opposition with the rational, dominant West. This Orientalist discourse of power positions the East as inferior, thus legitimizing colonization and imperialism, and Sydney himself seems to place his own relationship to Vespasia with such a narrative, as something to be "taken," just as Alain, a French soldier, would "take the Arabia" (196).

7. Vespasia's constant association with snakes evokes her intertextual connection to Medusa, whose gaze petrifies her enemies.

8. The word "amazon" has been used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to indicate female transgression. The most famous example is perhaps Natalie Clifford Barney, who was named "l'Amazone" by French poet Rémy de Gourmont. Her adoption of the legend in her literary salon and writings further imbued this title with queer meaning.

9. Sydney proposes that Vespasia has Roman origins as "some creature of the old Latin reign" (190), later musing "I fancied there had been Roman women like her" (199).

10. Butler is clear on the punishment accorded to bodies that do not perform their gender or social position correctly: "As a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (178).

11. The word "yonic" brings to mind Spofford's highly ambiguous protagonist Yone in "The Amber Gods." Rita Bode's article "Amber Gods Revisited" illustrates how Spofford's stories hide further levels of meaning that unsettle traditional representations of Victorian women.

12. Similarly, Lillian Faderman describes relationships between women as "twilight lovers" in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers—A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*.

13. Violets have a long history as symbols of desire between women. They were used by Sappho in her poem "I have not had one word from her" to represent her (female) lost lover who had worn garlands of the flower. English women in the sixteenth century pinned the violet to their lapel to indicate their proud unmarried status (Weiss 2) and women in the early 1900s would give violets to their female lovers. Violets were also a symbol of Natalie Barney's salon, with her lover the poet Renée Vivien known as the "Muse of the Violets."

14. Her role as a knight in shining armor foreshadows her later actions in the desert.

15. In *Vathek, An Arabian Tale* written by William Beckford in 1782, the protagonist has a fatal look and is addicted to sexual pleasure. Alexander William Kinglake's *Eothen; or Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East* was published in 1844.

16. The story contains several moments in which Sydney seems to be preempting his later blindness.

17. Both women are referred to as "gay" within the story (192, 207) and even though the term did not have its full contemporary meaning in Spofford's time, according to the *OED* it was already being used to mean "lewd" or "lascivious," or as revealing an "overt and often offensive sexual desire."

18. Sydney follows Eos's gaze, a detail that could underline her upcoming autonomy from his.

ABSTRACTS

Harriet Prescott Spofford's 1863 short story "Desert Sands" recounts, at first glance, the jealous rivalry between an artist's two muses. Yet when one applies a thin layer of turpentine to the top layer of the canvas that makes up the narrative of "Desert Sands," it becomes clear that there is another, much more unusual, image underneath. This article proposes a palimpsestic reading of the short story, one which attempts to underline the queer nature of the relationship between the muses Eos and Vespasia and goes on to pose questions about gender roles, deviant sexuality and transgression as related to women in the nineteenth century.

INDEX

Keywords: Harriet Prescott Spofford, Queer theory, homosexuality, gender, Orientalism, Angel in the House, the gaze

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