Open Inquiry Archive

ISSN 2167-8812
http://openinquiryarchive.net
Volume 3, No. 1 (2014)

"Isolated from any village"
Vernon Lee's Florence and Villa il Palmerino

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Villa il Palmerino, a fifteenth-century property on the hillside above Florence, was inhabited by the British author Vernon Lee (pseudonym of Violet Paget) from 1889 until her death in 1935. Lee's relationship to the villa is primarily remembered for the air of Florentine cosmopolitanism that the author created at her home and the synergies that she established within the community of foreigners in the city. The recreation of this network typically relies primarily upon correspondence between Vernon Lee, her family, her friends, and visitors to the Palmerino. Particular attention will be given here instead to Lee's correspondence with Florentines, her facilitation of cultural exchange with authors such as Edith Wharton and Mario Praz, and her initiatives to preserve historic buildings in Florence from city-organized demolition as expressed in a letter to the editor of *The Times* of London. Even though the author had sought out a property like the Palmerino because of its distance from the populated centers that were suffering waves of cholera at the end of the nineteenth century, the villa was never culturally isolated from its Florentine environment. Under Lee's guidance, rather, the opposite occurred and the Palmerino became a participant in the changing socio-cultural dynamics of Florence in the period, often in a way that reflected the socio-economic tensions of class struggles in Lee's own life. Where other foreigners may have remained isolated from their host culture out of a sense of financial or cultural

superiority, the letters discussed here suggest immersion, connection, and circulation between Florentines, Italians, and the English and American expatriates in the nineteenth century. Thanks to a shared love for their "second" homeland, Lee's correspondence with Italian and Anglo-American members of her intellectual circle of frequent visitors to the villa shows the lasting effects of this community on Florence and Florentines.

From its beginnings the Villa il Palmerino maintained strong connections with cultural hubs in the center of Florence, in spite of its distance from the city. One of the earliest published accounts of the property appears in a note in a nineteenth-century critical edition of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568). The annotation highlights the early connection between the villa and Florentine cultural patrimony. Gaetano Milanesi, in his commentary on the "Life of Luca Della Robbia," provides a brief biography of the brothers Antonio and Attaviano di Duccio to correct Vasari's erroneous claim that the two artisans were brothers of Della Robbia. While Antonio has gained more critical notoriety for his sculptures, Attaviano is directly connected to the Palmerino:

> Ottaviano [*sic*], his brother, born in 1422, was a goldsmith by trade. From the administrative books of the Commune of Florence, one learns that he built for the canteen of the Signoria in 1478 two gold basins; he burnished two confectionery boxes and two coolers; he reconditioned a box for spices, two saltcellars, the cover for a confectionery box, a bowl, four forks and a spoon, two saltcellars [sic], and a candlestick. For the chapel of the *palazzo* [Palazzo della Signoria] he brightened up a censer. He possessed a farm that was later called the Palmerino and lately Villa Pier-Uccioni located near the Affrico stream. At his death it passed to his nieces Lorenza and Margherita, daughters of his brother Agostino, the first married to Leonardo Nelli, and the other to Bernardo Palmerini.
>
> ("*Ottaviano suo fratello, nato nel 1422, fu di professione orefice. Dai libri d'amministrazione del Comune di Firenze si cava che egli lavorò per la mensa della Signoria nel 1478 due bacini d'argento, brunì due confettiere e due rinfrescatoi, riattò un bossolo da spezie, due saliere, il coperchio d'una confettiera, un piattello tondo, quattro forchette e un*

> *cucchiajo, due saliere,* [*sic*] *un candeliere; e per la cappella di palazzo rischiarò un turibolo. Egli possedè un podere che fu detto poi il Palmerino ed ultimamente Villa Pier-Uccioni posta presso il torrente Affrico, che alla sua morte passò alle sue nipoti Lorenza e Margherita figliuole d'Agostino suo fratello, la prima sposata a Leonardo Nelli, e l'altra a Bernardo Palmerini*"). (Vasari, II.178)

Even from its earliest known inhabitants the villa, originally a farm, was tied to the rich Renaissance production of artisanal pieces, both quotidian and unique, that came to shape the image of the Medici family's cultural dominance in Florence.

These links to the artistic and economic success of the city continued when the property passed into the control of the *Ordine di Santo Stefano*, an organization that many have argued was a primary shaper of a new Florentine aristocracy in the early modern period (Angiolini 1-12). When the Order was suspended, the Palmerino became property of the *Frati Minori Conventuali di Santa Croce* in Florence, itself a central organization in the religious life of the city (Baroni 59-60). With the passage of the *legge eversive*, the laws in the mid-nineteenth century that suppressed religious orders in Italy, the property passed to the state and was subsequently sold at auction to Count Pier Luigi Uguccioni, then sold again to Count Pio Resse, the owner when Lee's family began to rent the villa in 1889 (ASF 59). While there is no evidence to suggest that the Count or Countess Resse lived at the Palmerino, the American-born countess was almost always engaged in civic activities related to Florentine and Roman social concerns, setting an important precedent for the area. In addition, for his many restoration projects, including the Palmerino, Count Resse hired local architect Corinto Corinti, himself involved in documenting the historical quarters that were eventually demolished by the *ristrutturazione* of the late-nineteenth century against which Vernon Lee was so outspoken. After the Resse family's sudden departure from Florence, the Palmerino was sold at auction to Oreste Loni, and Loni in turn sold the property to Lee in 1906 (ACP Contratti 876). The inhabitants of the Palmerino and the city of Florence, then, were continuously connected to one another already via the vicissitudes of the city's culture before Lee's circle of visitors embraced, and also departed from, those ties with the city in ways that reflect a complex encounter of cultural assumptions (Campbell 69-103).

The fact that Lee had purchased the former property of several generations of Italian aristocracy, land physically removed from the cultural and economic hub of the city, and land originally intended to generate income for its lords through peasant labor, would suggest continued distance between owner and residents, but Lee approached the Palmerino with a different purpose. Lee's own background reflects a perceived permeability of social classes, though her family always sought

to maintain a genteel lifestyle. Violet Paget was born to a mother whose familial estate had long been in litigation and to a father who had questionable ties to the *ancien régime* but earned a living as a tutor, employed most recently by none other than her mother before their marriage (Colby 4). As the family moved through France on her mother's income, Violet, soon to become Vernon Lee, was exposed to a lifestyle on the margins of wealthy aristocracy and the working class, an experience that likely shaped her immersion in Italian culture upon her arrival at the Palmerino.

Lee's reasons for seeking a villa were originally related to the frequent outbreaks of cholera in Italy in those years, and so her priority was to find an isolated location to avoid contagion, much as Boccaccio's noble storytellers had done in the same area five hundred years prior. As early as 1884, Lee wrote to her mother with the following advice: "It would be prudent… to enquire immediately about a villa or part of one… The more isolated the villa the better. Bellosguardo is too much of a town & the panicstricken [*sic*] Florentines would run up there at once. The ground floor of the Gamberaia at Settignano would strike me as the best, if not, try for villas on the strada Bolognese or near Careggi. The thing is to be isolated from any village" (CC 203.203a-b). Later, in one of her earliest letters that discussed the move to the Palmerino, five years after the search for a more permanent residence in Florence began, Lee expressed her dismay at the difficulties of moving into what she called "this little half villa, half farm" (Hove, June 15, 1889). She went on to describe the villa and elaborated upon her reasons for moving there:

> This little house is old, awfully old. It has a…loggia, two projecting windows with gratings…a pine & an oleander. For the rest an infinite variety of levels, + just room for ourselves + two guests. It is about a mile from town, on a slope of the Fiesole hill, among cornfields + vineyards; a rather half English lane leads to it, with a winding brook, oaks + roses; and close by is the Champs de Mars [Campo di Marte], where one can gallop if one's horse will consent to gallop – mine was bought 2 months ago out of a milk cart, and varies between rearing + going at a foots pace. I like it very much. There is a tiny garden with nothing growing in it except pumpkins, + for which I am going to buy seeds of all my English friends. There are also lilies, + nightingales, + now a cicala, vying with the maid's sewing machine.

> We have moved here mainly for my brother, who c[oul]d neither stand the summer in Florence nor a railway journey, having got much worse. Also, for mine, for I have become almost unable to walk + well nigh incapable of seeing visitors, so that the town was intolerable to me. I can neither read nor write (the article in the preset Contemporary made me relapse) – I can ride a little, garden a little, + be awful depressed about my brother, who doesn't improve under Charcot's orders, + myself, who seems now a confirmed sick woman (Hove, June 15, 1889).

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One contemporary description highlights this characteristic of inclusion that separated Villa il Palmerino from many of the economically and culturally exclusive surrounding properties. In his autobiography, *The House of Life*, Mario Praz (1896-1982) credited Vernon Lee with introducing him to the Anglo-Saxon literary world as a young man (225). After describing the first letter he received from Vernon Lee in which she invited him to her home, Praz wrote:

> And so began the conversations, for me so important, at the Villa del Palmerino near San Gervasio. It was a whole new world that opened out before me, and this was the first villa inhabited by English people in the neighbourhood of Florence that I visited. So often, on my bicycle, I had passed these villas, set apart amongst trees like temples in sacred groves and inhabited by a race of lordly people who descended from time to time in mortal guise to the elegant shops of the Via Tornabuoni, and then went up again to where their existences might be imagined as resembling those of the gods described in Tennyson's *Lotus Eaters*. (226)

Based on the testimony of Praz, who cites a lengthy correspondence with Lee that often makes reference to the Palmerino, an image of Lee and her home as

inviting and connected to the local community emerges from the air of perceived isolation of the numerous English-owned villas outside the city center and their "race of lordly people." Praz recognized Lee's rejection of social class as a barrier between communication and exchange, a characteristic that would create friction with Lee's social peers later in her career.

Vernon Lee's use of the property to establish a lively Anglophone-Italophile cultural environment is most often presented by historians and literary scholars through the lens of the famous British and American artists who visited Lee, but the contact with Italy and Italians, specifically Florence and Florentines, is an important aspect of that dynamic often overlooked in scholarship. The relationships between Lee and Florence can best be differentiated in three categories: those generated by satisfying the intellectual interests of the family, by the care for the property itself, and by engaging directly with contemporary Florence. Through these interactions the villa became the site of theatrical performances, poetry readings, and literary salons. In 1896, when writing to her brother to discuss finances, Lee expressed her awareness of, and deep commitment to, the sense that the villa was intended for more than just meeting her own needs: "And for all I can see the Palmerino, which is the only thing I care for in the world, will cost me, if I am in the least to make it useful to others, from £400-£450…You see, I know what Maria's house has been to her in Rome, that the Palmerino might represent great pleasure & profit to people poorer than myself. That is one reason why I cling to it" (Gagel 573-75). Lee's goals, after only seven years of staying at the Palmerino, were therefore far more social and connected to her surroundings than finding a home "isolated from any village" as she may have previously intended. Lee's sensitivity to class distinctions, what she identifies as an obligation to benefit "people poorer" than herself, permeates her correspondence such that one is able to identify the social opposite of Praz's "race of lordly people" that stood apart from society. Examining the different circles of Florentines, British, and Americans at the villa in this way allows for a presentation of the exchange network upon which many of their interactions initially rested.

Through her efforts as a writer, Lee was able to effect this sharing of ideas on a broader scale, beyond the scope of Florence, with many of the visitors to her home. Though sparse, the visits to the Palmerino by Edith Wharton have been previously documented by historians and literary scholars (Colby 184-89). Lee's influence on Wharton, who in turn wrote extensively about Italy for an appreciative English-speaking audience, represents yet another way that Lee was able to connect her host culture with the Anglo-American community. Most notable was Lee's involvement in Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), in which the author clearly states her debt to Lee in the dedication. In her autobiography Wharton provides a more detailed description of the social context in which this research

assistance occurred: "Vernon Lee's long familiarity with the Italian countryside, and the wide circle of her Italian friendships, made it easy for her to guide me to the right places, and put me in relation with people who could enable me to visit them. She herself took me to nearly all the villas I wished to visit near Florence" (134). Precisely because of Lee's immersion in a "wide" Italian culture and her network within Florentine society she was able to facilitate this exchange between the Anglo-American and Italian communities. Lee also was directly involved in trying to bring Wharton to an Italian audience, writing reviews in *La cultura* for Wharton's first long novel *The Valley of Decision* (1902) and also composing an introduction for the Italian translation of the same, a project that was never completed (Wharton 133).

The case of Edith Wharton and Vernon Lee's attempts to disseminate her work to an Italian audience finds parallels in the work of another guest in Florence. The Palmerino also hosted the American feminist and sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman for a brief period at the end of 1903 or early 1904. The visit was likely the result of Lee's Italian introduction to the Italian translation of Gilman's *Women and Economics* (*La Donna e L'Economia sociale*, 1902) and the favorable reviews of the work that she wrote in Italian and published in Italian journals (Pulham 35). Lee's involvement in a project devoted to social concerns for lower economical classes developed alongside her literary endeavors related to the intellectual canon.

Lee's role as cultural mediator extended beyond her Anglo-American friends. The list of Italian intellectuals with whom Vernon Lee regularly corresponded is long: the Macchiaiolo artist Telemaco Signorini (1835-1901), the historian and politician Pasquale Villari (1827-1917), the writer Carlo Placci (1861-1941), the Count and Countess Pasolini dell'Onda, the philosopher Mario Calderoni (1879-1914), the president of the *Federazione Femminile Toscana* and the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane* Elena Cini French (1844-1922), the historian and politician Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1957), the writer Count Angelo de Gubernatis (1840-1913), the author Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938), the poet and literary critic Enrico Nencioni (1837-1896), the teacher and author Mario Pratesi (1842-1921), and the musician Giuseppe Buonamici (1846-1914) are but a few. The visits of these artists and intellectuals at the Palmerino were not solely for the benefit of Lee and her English guests. For instance, the experience that Salvemini had at the Palmerino in 1896 as he finished his degree at the *Università di Firenze* proved to be so foundational that he wrote to Lee in 1906 to recall their discussion of the socio-economic *questione siciliana* as he embarked on his political career in southern Italy (Somerville 1906).

The motivation for a cultural exchange was not merely social, but extended into the Italian literary sphere as well. In a short letter from 12 October 1884 Lee announced to the editor Francesco Protonotari her idea for a new article to appear

in his journal *Nuova Antologia*: "I would like to put together several notes on four novelists from contemporary Italy, that is: Serao, Verga, d'Annunzio, and Pratesi" ("*desiderei mettere insieme alcuni appunti su Quattro romanzieri dell'Italia attuale, cioè: la Serao, Verga, d'Annunzio e Pratesi*") (BNCF C.V. 141.90). She went on to specify that this would be writing "without pretensions, but that could have for the Italians the same interest that I, for example, would feel from the opinions, true or false, of an Italian writer about three or four notable English authors" ("*senza pretensioni, ma che può avere per gl'Italiani l'interesse che io, per esempio senitirei…dalle opinioni, vere o false, di uno scrittore italiano su tre o Quattro cospicui scrittori inglesi*") (C.V.141.90). Whether or not the excerpt from this letter to Protonotari is humble posturing so that her own contribution seems less of a cultural critique, or whether it is a genuine expression of desire for this input, the fact remains that Lee hoped this expression would carry some weight with its reader. This statement could simply be rhetorical, but the environment at the Palmerino suggests that this was exactly the type of dialogue that Lee hoped to foster among colleagues and friends, Italians, Americans and British alike.

Her attention to arranging these sorts of meetings and exchanges is perhaps most notable in the existing correspondence that she sent to Telemaco Signorini and Enrico Nencioni, primarily held at the *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*. This includes a letter of introduction to a certain Mr. MacLean that speaks highly of Signorini's work (BNCF C.V.471, 23). Moreover, Lee was very insistent that Signorini visit her so that he might meet John Singer Sargent (Balloni 80-87). This phenomenon seems also to occur at Sargent's request (BNCF C.V.471, 24-27). In addition, she wrote several inquiries over a period of years to arrange visits to the artist's studio in order that her friends, English, American, and other internationals living in Florence, might view his work and buy certain pieces (BNCF C.V.471, 25). With an insistence that has been noted by historians, she wrote to her friend Nencioni about the importance of these meetings (Nardi 175). In one instance she writes with urgency: "Dear Nencioni, Henry James is coming to our place Friday night, and it will be, perhaps, the last chance for you to see him. Try to come" ("*Caro Nencioni, Henry James viene da noi Venerdì sera, e sarà forse per Lei l'ultima occasione di vederlo. Cerchi … di venire*") (BNCF C.V.70.149). These efforts to expand the circles of artistic and literary influence beyond the consumption of Italian products by English and American visitors suggests an imperative to create meaningful encounters between the artists themselves.

Lee's efforts to facilitate networking and establish connections between Florentines and the Anglophone community were not always intellectual pursuits, but often civic. A letter to Countess Angelica Pasolini reveals the often intimate, yet common nature of this networking. In September of 1890, Lee wrote to her close friend and neighbor about quotidian matters, to inquire about the health of the

countess' family, and also to ask that the countess speak with a friend about a potential opportunity for the Italian children in their social circle: "Miss Wimbush is setting up some classes next winter for five or six boys and girls from 8 to 12 years. She is bringing out with her a first rate Cambridge woman to help. She is so wise in all her ideas of what children ought to be taught and how, and particularly what they ought not to be taught, and she has such a charming, delicate, human feeling of respect for everything you say, that I am sure her classes would be a pleasure as much as an immense advantage" (ACM 1890.9.25). Lee concluded with a gentle request: "So if you know of any parents who might want such a thing, do mention it" (ACM 1890.9.25). The structure of the letter suggests that the request was not extraordinary, located as it is among other niceties of the correspondence between these two neighbors.

Other letters reveal that this contact and involvement with the Florentine community could come at a high social price. Lee's commitment to certain social causes in Florence was also the source of tension with her friends, one in particular that risked dissolving her ties with Linda Villari, wife of the Minister of Education, Pasquale Villari. In an undated letter from 1890 Lee wrote again to her friend and neighbor Countess Angelica Pasolini dell'Onda, to express her frustration at Mrs. Villari's reaction to Lee's requests for charitable donations to improve services at a local Florentine hospital. The passage from the letter is worth quoting at length to hear the emotion behind both Lee's commitment and her surprise at the reaction of Villari:

> The worst has been Mme. Villari. It's dreadfully sad, but I fear that her extraordinary behavior and perhaps my too great indignation at it has put an end to our old friendship. Quite gratuitously, and merely because I begged her to let me know what she intended giving (she had promised) she wrote me 8 sides of abuse, warning me not to become one of those women who 'flourish subscription lists in one's face' (mind this is the first time in my life that I ask her for a penny) recommending me to give up keeping a horse since I think that such charities might be supported out of cash savings, and finally saying that Italian people might look after their hospitals themselves. I felt so indignant at the thought of this coming at once from an Englishwoman and an Englishwoman whose position is due to her marriage with an Italian, that I told her I couldn't stand it. And I begged her to keep the money which she offered to give 'out of love for me' in such a beastly way. *Avrò fatto male*? [Was I

> in the wrong?] But really it was not possible to accept money given, thrown at one in that way, was it? (ACM 1890.9.25)

This fundraising dispute with Linda Villari raises several key issues related to these cross-cultural encounters. Villari's suggestion that "Italian people might look after their hospitals themselves" begs the question of what level of impact was appropriate for the Anglo-Americans to have on their host city. Lee's indignation at hearing the sentiment expressed by a fellow Englishwoman reflects deeper concerns of cultural identity, both for its recognition and its maintenance. Moreover, given the role of marriage in establishing social position, one can hear Lee's outrage at using socio-economic distinctions as a barrier to immersion. Nearly ten years later, in a letter from 2 April 1899, Lee was still on such tenuous speaking terms with Villari that she used count Giovanni Gigliucci as an intermediary to donate to the Villaris' latest charity fund. She enclosed two checks that she asked Gigliucci to deposit anonymously because the two women had not reconciled after nine years' distance from Lee's involvement in the hospital fundraising (BNCF C.V. 483.78).

Early in this endeavor Vernon Lee likely also crossed paths with Amy Turton, another visitor to the Palmerino, an English nurse who was directly involved in developments in urban healthcare in Florence and later in Rome. In February of 1895 Turton visited the Palmerino to tend to Eugene Lee Hamilton, Lee's half-brother who struggled throughout his life with illnesses, and it appears she also enjoyed riding Lee's horse (Gagel 468). Beyond this immediate need for the healthcare of Eugene, the women would have likely had much to discuss given Lee's fundraising efforts for new medical services and Turton's establishment of a sanatorium in Florence (Turton 124).

In addition to her philanthropic work and concerns for the education and well-being of children, Lee was also an active member of the Society for the Preservation of Old Florence (*Associazione per la difesa di Firenze antica*) (Maxwell 212). In December of 1898 she wrote a letter to *The Times* of London that laid bare the cultural assumptions, attempts at intellectual exchange, and difficulties of conversations between the communities that had only been subtle parts of this network thus far. A series of letters denouncing a new wave of proposed construction in the medieval district of Florence began appearing in the paper on 30 November 1898 (Vernon 7). The controversial topic prompted many responses on both sides (Colyin 10). In a nearly full-page article Lee's letter to the editors accompanied a translated letter from the mayor of Florence, the Marquis Pietro Torrigiani. Lee's intervention attempted to defend both the previous mayor, Corsini, and Torrigiani from accusations that they were ultimately responsible for what many criticized as vandalism of the historic center of the city in an attempt to

make it a healthier place for residents: the *Risanamento* project that began in 1885. As Lee described the situation, the destruction of the Jewish quarter and several medieval buildings was not the goal of city officials who were trying to preserve the edifices and successfully modernize living conditions in the neighborhood of what is now *Piazza della Repubblica*:

> Unfortunately, the public opinion of the townsfolk was not sufficiently enlightened for such a task; and the authorities elected by them were unable either to enlighten or restrain it sufficiently. The archeological commission of the municipality remonstrated in vain; several of the town councillors came into permanent conflict with the majority; and at last Prince Corsini resigned office, feeling himself unable (as universal opinion represents the fact) to cope with a spirit of destruction which he refused to countenance" (Torrigiani and "Lee" 8).

According to Lee's presentation, the center was destroyed due to uneducated popular opinion, not cautiously modernized with better drainage, ventilation, and cleared spaces between buildings as officials would have preferred. The comment certainly has tones of elitist presumptions, but throughout the letter Lee made clear that the situation was far more complex than an impasse created by opposing classes. The sensitivity to class struggles revealed in Lee's correspondence with her peers invites a softer reading of these seemingly harsh comments.

Lee proposed a plan of action that revealed the subtleties of the successful program to modernize the historic center without destroying its *genius loci*, a concept central to many of her treatises and fictional works (Colby 225-69). Her argument was not simply that the spirit of Florence needed to be preserved for its own sake, but for the value that it had to the Anglo-American tourists in the city. She proposed a multi-faceted educational campaign:

> It is therefore urgent that, if what still remains of Old Florence is not, sooner or later, to share the fate of the 'Centre,' an active crusade should be initiated, not to act upon the municipal authorities, but to enlighten the townsfolk sufficiently to prevent the present or any future town council being forced into or abetted in projects of useless destruction. With this object in view, every means should be taken to educate the taste and historic spirit of the small *bourgeoisie* and working people by lectures, newspaper articles, tracts, pamphlets, and such public events as the proposed congress of art history. (8)

Rather than advocate for a heavy-handed authprity to direct the city according to what might be considered more educated tastes, Lee suggested what otherwise might seem like a grassroots campaign, if only it had been initiated by the townsfolk themselves. She made this point at the same time that she offered a warning if the approach was not successful:

> Moreover, it ought, by every similar method to be made clear to the hotel and shop keepers, to the owners of lodgings, to jobmasters and cabowners, and to every class directly or indirectly interested in the presence of foreigners that one of the chief attractions of this city is its well preserved medieval character, an attraction in which it already has very dangerous rivals in Siena and Perugia, while as regards museums many other cities are its equals, and as to climate it has long been superseded by the Riviera. (8)

Lee was forthright about the importance of Florentine history for its continued economic success: tourists wanted the sense of visiting a medieval city and would travel to find that quality in a city. The question of making a healthier center was therefore not simply a matter of providing drainage and air circulation, but of establishing a healthy international commerce.

Curiously, Lee's message appeared in a letter to English readers, not in a venue intended for Florentine administrative officials or widely accessible to the townsfolk in question, so the warning that Siena or Perugia might overtake Florence as an Anglo-American tourist destination reached a readership composed of those very tourists that would abandon the mutilated city. When seen through this lens, it becomes clear that Lee's subsequent call to awaken within the city a protective and preservationist instinct that she felt confident already existed among the people who inhabited the spaces impacted by the construction was in fact a quest to awaken that same spirit in the English readers of *The Times*:

> A crusade to stir up public interest in the preservation of Old Florence would certainly be successful if conducted with tact, energy, and continuity. The Florentines have suffered heavily by the exodus of foreigners consequent on the riots of last spring; they have keen artistic sense; and they take a pride in local history which must be extremely gratified by the splendid array of Florentine names, comprising all that survives from Florence's most illustrious past, from the Gherardescas to the Strozzis,

> which is displayed on the list of the Society for the Protection of Old Florence. (8)

The rhetorical importance of Lee's introduction of the solution was now clear: by joining the side of indignation at the destruction of the historic center of Florence, one joined the ranks of the noblest families of Florence. Indeed, Lee did then immediately call for messages to be sent to Florence from the readers of *The Times* to express outrage at the proposed changes. The direct impact of Lee's initiative is unclear, though no new projects related to the *risanamento* of the historic center were undertaken after this period.

The letter would seem then as much a condemnation of ill-informed destruction in the medieval district as it would be a call to the inner Florentine in all Englishmen. Here, then, is another clue to Lee's surprise at Linda Villari's distancing from the hospital fundraising, the sense that a basic connection to place existed in each person. Whether as a result of Lee's rhetoric in the editorial, or simply as a perceived connection, this example of demolition in Florence was recalled in later letters to *The Times* by citizens trying to save the Bargate at Southampton (Poynter 4). While Lee's letter pointed to social class hierarchies in tension in her own identity and within her social circles, it also embraced the commonalities between Florentines and the British.

Elsewhere in the letter Lee described the extent of her active interrogation of the current state of construction plans in Florence in her capacity as member of the Society for the Preservation of Old Florence. In light of her connections in the Florentine intellectual circle, Lee's self-proclaimed access to the information related to the modernization projects is not surprising:

> The municipal authorities are after all only the representatives of the public opinion of the moment, and they cannot, as was proved by the case of Prince Corsini, go against the wishes and the fads, however unwise, of the townsfolk who elect them. I am entirely confirmed in this opinion by my long interview with the present Syndic of Florence. Nothing could exceed the kindness and courtesy of Marchese Torrigiani in placing before me the plans of new streets and the photographs of the Old Centre and in answering my long and tiresome interrogations. (8)

While Lee's involvement was not with the antagonists of her vision for the historic center of the city, she still purported to be aggressive in her pursuit of information about the proposed changes. Her sympathies for Torrigiani might seem

to be the result of social allegiances, but Lee was also critical of what she had learned from her investigations. She related to readers a message from the mayor about the latest proposal:

> He desired me to inform the readers of *The Times* that for the moment such works have been suspended, and the attention of the municipality has been engaged in a more urgent alteration on the left bank of the Arno. I was in hopes of hearing that this was the building of decent accommodation for the poorer classes who, particularly since the destruction of the 'Centre,' have been frightfully crowded in the unhealthy little houses of the quarter of San Frediano. (8)

Lee's sympathy for the working class, seen elsewhere in her correspondence, is clearly indicated here. Her criticism also went on to include recounting that the mayor's knowledge of the limited scheduled destruction in Borgo San Jacopo was in fact misunderstood. Lee's engagement with the question of the future of Florence went beyond an uncritical support of her social peers. Rather, this little-studied document from *The Times* offers a unique opportunity to see the values associated with the tensions and the collaborations that existed between the Anglo-American community and Florence.

A final word is in order about the Florentines who worked at the villa. Lee's staff at the house typically consisted of a married couple that attended to domestic duties such as cooking and the groundskeeper who was also a driver (Colby 318). The extent of Lee's relationship to those who worked at the Palmerino, and of her fondness for the place itself, was best expressed by a letter written shortly after her return to Florence at the conclusion of World War I. In a letter now in the British Library, she described to Doctor and Mrs. Gardiner in London in November of 1919:

> the perfect happiness of finding myself once more in my own clean house & with my own friendly old servants, let alone the inexpressible restful loneliness of my surroundings…My servants (helped by the impossibility of running up bills when nothing can be bought, not even rice and oil!) are really reformed characters; but my dear old Carlo, as a result of bad food & worry over his soldier sons, has suddenly had a return of the lump trouble out of which we fought him nearly twenty years ago; but that I trust will pass with care. (Gagel 708)

After spending the war years in London, Lee wanted nothing more than to return to the villa, more home to her than any other place. She spoke with affection of the staff there, noting even the extensive care taken with Carlo's health. Apparently not all visitors to the Palmerino appreciated the servants to such an extent, as the testimony of Miranda Seymour suggested when describing Lady Ottoline Cavendish-Bentinck's stay at the property: "The food was a disagreeable change…Vernon's cook specialized in tongue stewed in chocolate and birds claw omelettes, but Ottoline never cared what she ate. She feasted instead on the afternoon symposiums" (Colby 176). It is clear that while Villa il Palmerino offered a sanctuary to Lee and her family, Lee's own intellectual and civic concerns insisted that the property was never truly isolated from Florence or Florentines.

The Villa il Palmerino's intellectual and artistic legacy carries on to this day. After Vernon Lee's death in 1935, her executor Irene Cooper-Willis engaged a London firm to sell the property, which still had tenants in the main villa. Federigo Angeli and Carola (Lola) Costa, the purchasers, established their own intellectual circle with Anglo-American connections there (ACP Archivio Angeli). Angeli was a painter and art restorer who worked in an agency with his brothers in Florence for a clientele throughout Europe and the United States. Particularly during the years prior to and during World War II the Palmerino once again became a place of intensified cultural markers, again because of its presumed isolation. In part because the previous tenants had left the property under Swiss protection in the hopes of preserving it from requisitions by either side, and partly because during the early years of the war, even Anglo-Italians such as the Costa family had to avoid identifying themselves as English speakers for fear of the same outcome, the Palmerino became a refuge from bombardments for those Italians who remained. These ambiguous cultural markers did not stop the occupying American forces from recognizing the value of the location for a school for the children of their officers, and once again the international exchanges with the city center and the Palmerino were re-established. This work of bringing Florence to the Palmerino and sharing the Palmerino with Florence continues presently with the cultural activities organized by the Associazione Culturale Il Palmerino, founded and managed by descendants of Costa and Angeli.

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