



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
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Feminism in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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Aware that no one would read without disdain “a woman’s writing on art, history or aesthetics,” at age nineteen, Violet Paget changed her name to “Vernon Lee.” Lee was conscious of the sexual politics that held women inferior to men, and that few women wrote on “politics and abstract things,” the monopoly of men. While not focusing on gender, Lee addressed it.

In her *Miss Brown*, Vernon Lee challenged the conventions of male aggression and female passivity, declaring that women could change the “injustice [...] callousness, and evil” of the world had they the time and freedom to do so. She observed that society’s reformers and aesthetic-socio-political philosophy hindered women’s right to self-determination. She singularly broached the Woman Question in her essay “The Economic Dependence of Women” in 1902, admitting that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1898 *Woman and Economics* had made her a convert. Here she maintained that “men and women” are more “intimately and completely connected than serf and owner.” The solutions to woman questions, she argued, must be in relation to the “wasteful” economic constrictions and social restrictions on women’s mental abilities. That meant that women should vote, and that women workers in England who challenged traditional notions of femininity in order to work, unionize, and free themselves from masculine control were right.

Her argument in *Gospels and Anarchy*, that women were “over-sexed” meant they were mainly viewed as sexual beings, i.e., “first and foremost” as female in contrast to males who were identified as many things. Lee’s feminist philosophy was ever evolving, reaching the conclusion that sex was more a continuum than a dichotomy. In all, Lee considered the difference of sex to be a part of a person but less a part than the sameness of humanity, which was how she lived her life.

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