



### Clair-obscur: Shadows, Light, and Agency in the Lesbian Poetry of Renée Vivien

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During her brief yet prolific career, the British poet of French expression Renée Vivien had many names.<sup>1</sup> Although she signed her personal letters Pauline M. Tarn, to the Parisian literary world in the early twentieth century, she was also R. Vivien, René Vivien (masculine spelling), Paule Riversdale, and, most frequently, Renée Vivien (feminine spelling). Her readers and critics nicknamed her “Sapho 1900” for both her poetry’s lesbian themes and her frequent allusions to ancient Greece. Despite being critically acclaimed in her time, since her death in 1909, Vivien’s life and works have remained largely in the shadows. By focusing on the recurring themes of shadow and light in Vivien’s writing, this present study will demonstrate how she constructed her national and sexual identities as a response to the lack of agency she experienced throughout her life due to her being a woman and a lesbian. While an analysis of her entire poetic production is far outside the scope of our work, we instead offer close readings of a selection of emblematic poems around this theme. Additionally, since most of her poetic production, including most of the poems in this study, have never been translated before, we offer them here for analysis as a way to bring her work further into scholarly light. Ultimately, we argue, poetry became a space of freedom for Vivien to defy the heteronormative mores of her day. Somewhat ironically, Vivien’s use of classical poetic forms, which could have been restrictive, helped her attain great critical success and liberated her poetry. From within these self-selected poetic norms, she challenged the status quo by de-centering and coopting the masculine gaze to relate sensual, romantic encounters between female speakers and other women.

Both literally and metaphorically, Renée Vivien shied away from light. In May 1909, in a letter to her sister, Toinette, Vivien explicitly mentions her extreme discomfort in sunlight, deploring “[the] horror of light and air (which were so fearfully impressed upon me in my childhood, - I am afraid I must have been an imp of darkness!)” (Albert and Rollet 140). Vivien’s death notice in *Le Figaro* on November 21, 1909 described her home where she died as “dans l’obscurité profonde à peine rompue par la lueur de quelques cierges” (Goujon 10).<sup>2</sup> Her timidity surrounding the public mirrored her sensitivity to daylight. According to Natalie Barney, the American author and salon hostess who lived in Paris and was romantically linked to Vivien for

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<sup>1</sup> In her eight-year writing career, she published twelve collections of poetry (Gene and Stuart 13).

<sup>2</sup> “in profound darkness barely broken by the glow of a few candles” (all translations are ours, unless otherwise noted.)

a few years, Vivien “feared being invaded” by people who continued asking her for interviews, so she sent “a governess of an aspect as anti-poetic as possible” to impersonate her so that she would not be asked again (66). Vivien felt more comfortable interacting with the public through her writing than through in-person interactions. In other words, she took care that the spotlight stayed on her work instead of on her. Besides shyness, there are certainly other reasons she feared the public discovering her identity. Her poetic persona, Renée Vivien, only existed on the page, after all, and any public portrayal of her would seem inauthentic or break her poetic mystique. Perhaps she was afraid to be discovered as Pauline Mary Tarn, a timid and light-sensitive young woman who was not, as her pen name suggested, French.<sup>3</sup>

Born in London, England on June 11, 1877, to an American mother and an English father whose family had grown wealthy as traders in London, Vivien spent most of her childhood in Paris. There she became close friends with her American neighbor Violet Shilitto. Four years after her father died unexpectedly when she was nine years old, the family returned to London at the insistence of their new male guardian, William Tarn (Goujon 56). This move devastated Vivien, who loved Paris and hated London; to her, it was a horrible, sad, dark, and smoke-filled city – nothing like the City of Lights (Goujon 58). But, did young Pauline not prefer darkness to light, as she wrote to her sister? Much like the fixed and restrictive classical poetic models she embraced, perhaps she resented the darkness of London because it was not a darkness she chose. Rather, it was one that represented the power wielded over her by the patriarchal society she lived in.

One of the reasons Vivien remains in such obscurity is because it has been difficult to place her in a literary canon due to her complex national identity. She rejected not only the city of London, but also any claims she had to an English identity. Even though her father was English, she was born in London, and she spent formative years there, Vivien did not see herself as English. In 1894, she wrote, “Mon père était anglais, ce n’est pas une raison pour que je sois anglaise!” (Goujon 73).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, even if she had wanted to, she could not have claimed an American nationality due to the laws regarding nationality in both England and France at the time. As Melanie C. Hawthorne explains in her book *Women, Citizenship, and Sexuality: the Transnational Lives of Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, and Natalie Barney*, “it mattered that it was Vivien’s mother and not her father who was American, for this meant she did not have a clear and direct claim to American nationality in the eyes of the law” (47). How, then, did she perceive her national identity? Vivien, who spent the happiest part of her childhood in Paris and, after moving to London, only found joy again when she was allowed to return to France for vacation and eventually boarding school. She loved France so much that she wished she were French (Goujon 59, 41). Once her family’s guardian was dead and she reached adulthood, Vivien moved back to Paris using her portion of her father’s inheritance.

While she started writing poetry at the age of fifteen after discovering the work of Victor Hugo on a summer trip to France, it was not until 1901 that Pauline Tarn adopted the symbolically important French pen name Renée Vivien (Goujon 60, 13). “Renée” means rebirth in French, the language Vivien chose to write in. This choice represents the start of a new life for Vivien and represents her embrace of Frenchness. Indeed, scholars have suggested that her pen name represented an explicit rejection of her Englishness. As Tama Lea Engelking explains in her article “Renée Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake,” “[Vivien’s] decision to write under a French name is further evidence of the distance she sought from her fatherland, father’s name and mother tongue” (365). Her strong emotional connection to France alongside her rejection of her parents’ countries of origin suggests that Vivien was not only casting off an identity that never fit her, but

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of clarity, we will continue to use her self-selected name, Renée Vivien, throughout this study.

<sup>4</sup> “My father was English, that’s no reason for me to be English!”

she was also assuming an identity she created of her own agency. Her new identity, especially given that she was publishing in Paris, ultimately brought her closer to the country and literary tradition she embraced. Her new name, along with the language of her writing, helped her escape the shadows of London for the City of Light.

Her efforts to cast off her English identity was mirrored by her early efforts to conceal her feminine identity in her professional life. On her path to becoming Renée Vivien (feminine spelling), she first published as R. Vivien (gender-ambiguous, and many critics assumed she was a man) and printed business cards with the name René Vivien (masculine spelling) (Engelking 364; Goujon 162). As her career was just taking off, she presented herself as a man to the Parisian literary world. This meant that while her verse – often about her love of women – was decidedly sapphic, readers and critics assumed it was from a straight male perspective. This was almost certainly a strategic decision given the sociocultural norms and heteronormativity of the day. Additionally, being initially perceived as a man would have helped her get her footing in the male-dominated literary traditions she was stepping into. Engelking takes this one step further, writing, “Renée Vivien’s attempts to write both within and against masculine traditions such as Decadence, Symbolism, and Pre-Raphaelitism are one case in point that is also demonstrated by her name” (373). She goes on to explain, “Pauline/Paule and Renée are all variations of the male form of the names Paul and René. The added letters convey the feminine form without changing the masculine root of the name, which remains intact” (373). Even as Vivien later adopted (and succeeded under) feminine pen names, they still retained traces of their masculine forms. Vivien appears to be undertaking a conscious process of self-fashioning, to use Stephen Greenblatt’s term, whereby she created or “fashioned” herself in response to power structures, finding liberating agency through the subtle subterfuge of the dominant heteronormative and misogynist discourses of the day.

Even though many of Vivien's choices countered the male-centered qualities of the society she grew up in, Vivien’s poems have at times been accused of propagating patriarchal ideas. Engelking writes, “many of the words she speaks, the voices she uses, and some of the masks she wore – including the *Lady of the Lake* – ultimately served to reinforce patriarchal definitions of femininity” (374). Indeed, in her own feminine poetry, Vivien tended to promote misogynistic conceptions of the ideal woman, at least superficially. A key example of this is her 1909 poem “Sois Femme,” reproduced below.

**Sois Femme...** (from *Flambeaux Éteints*, p. 312 of *Poésies Complètes*)

**Sois Femme...**

Très chère, sois plus femme encore, si tu veux  
Me plaire davantage et sois faible et sois tendre,  
Mêle avec art les fleurs qui parent tes cheveux,  
Et sache t'incliner au balcon pour attendre.

Ce qu'il est de plus grave en un monde futile,  
C'est d'être belle et c'est de plaire aux yeux surpris,  
D'être la cime pure, et l'oasis, et l'île,  
Et la vague musique au langage incompris.

Qu'un changeant univers se transforme en ta face,  
Que ta robe l'allie à la couleur du jour,  
Et choisis tes parfums avec un art sagace,  
Puisqu'un léger parfum sait attirer l'amour.

Immobile au milieu des jours, sois attentive  
Comme si tu suivais les méandres d'un chant,  
Allonge ta paresse à l'ombre d'une rive,  
Être sous le cyprès à l'ombre du couchant.

Sois lointaine, sois la Présence des ruines  
Dans les palais détruits où frissonne l'hiver,  
Dans les temples croulants aux ombres sibyllines,  
Et souffre de la mort du soleil sur la mer.

Comme une dont on hait la race et qu'on exile,  
Sois faible et parle bas, et marche avec lenteur.  
Expire chaque soir avec le jour fébrile,  
Agonise d'un bruit et meurs d'une senteur.

Etant ainsi ce que mon rêve t'aurait faite,  
Reçois de mon amour un hommage fervent,  
O toi qui sais combien le ciel est décevant  
Aux curiosités fébriles du poète !

Et je retrouverai dans ton unique voix,  
Dans le rayonnement de ton visage unique,  
Toute l'ancienne pompe et l'ancienne musique  
Et le tragique amour des reines d'autrefois.

Tes beaux cheveux seront mon royal diadème,  
Mes sirènes d'hier chanteront dans ta voix.  
Tu seras tout ce que j'adorais autrefois,  
Toi seule incarneras l'amour divers que j'aime.

**Be Woman...**

Dearest, be more woman still, if you wish  
To please me more—and be tender, be weak,  
Artfully mix the flowers in your hair,  
And lean against the balcony to wait.

What's most important in a futile world  
Is to be beautiful and please astonished eyes,  
To be the pure peak, the oasis, the isle,  
And the indistinct song of misunderstood cries.

Let a changing universe transform on your face,  
Let your dress tie it into the color of day,  
And select your scents with a clever art,  
Since a subtle scent knows how to draw love's gaze.

Immobile amid the days, be attentive  
As though following a meandering call,  
Lay your idleness down in the shade of a bank,  
Being beneath the cypress in the shade of the sun's fall.

Be distant, be the Presence of ruins  
In palaces destroyed where winters freeze,  
In temples crumbling in obscure shadows,  
And suffer the death of the sun on the sea.

Like a woman exiled, hated for her race,  
Be weak and speak low, and walk with slow steps.  
Expire each night with the feverish day,  
Succumb with a sound and die with a scent.

So, being what my dream would have made you,  
Receive from my love a most fervent respect,  
Oh, you who knows how the sky can deceive  
The restless curiosities of the poet!

And I will find, within your unique voice,  
Within your unique face's shining glow,  
All the ancient pomp, the ancient song,  
And the tragic love of queens from long ago.

Your beautiful hair will be my royal diadem,  
Yesterday's sirens will sing through your voice.  
You will be all that I loved long ago,  
You alone will incarnate the varied love I like.

In the first stanza, the speaker associates womanhood with weakness and tenderness, commanding the woman to behave that way to please her. Then, at the start of stanza two, the speaker declares that a woman's purpose should be to make herself beautiful for the pleasure of others. The consistent use of the second person informal form of the imperative in the title and throughout the rest of the poem firstly suggests a certain intimacy with the other person, and secondly emphasizes that these are not simply the speaker's preferences or requests, but rather

orders. For instance, the speaker commands, “be more woman still,” “be tender, be weak”, “be attentive”, “be weak and speak low, and walk with slow steps.” This type of language is surprising from a woman poet who traverses linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries. While we might expect a feminist poem or an alternative view of femininity, here we see clear gender-normative conceptions of femininity. Of course, it could be argued that Vivien’s poetic voice is being ironic, essentially mocking heteronormative standards of beauty. As enticing as such a counter textual reading is, we detect no irony.

The ironic masculine gaze of her poem is further reinforced by the text’s references to day and night and light and dark. Stanza 4, for example, contains a shift from daytime to sunset where the poetic voice commands the woman to lie down in the shadow at dusk, saying “Lay your idleness down in the shade of a bank, / Being beneath the cypress in the shade of the sun’s fall.” Similar sentiments of succumbing to shadow or nighttime follow in stanza 5 “suffer the death of the sun on the sea” and stanza 6 “Expire each night with the feverish day, / Succumb with a sound and die with a scent.” In all these instances, falling asleep is associated with death—an eternal sleep. This succumbing to natural forces echoes how the speaker expects the woman to submit to her in following her commands. The innuendo to “la petite mort,” or the “little death,” a poetic allusion to sexual climax, is quite clear. In such a reading, the poetic voice subtly brags of his or her sexual prowess, again highlighting Vivien’s manipulation and reappropriation of the heteronormative and masculinist nature of her poem. Moreover, this call for the desired woman to seize the day before the eternal sleep is reminiscent of the sixteenth-century Pléiade poets, especially Pierre de Ronsard’s 1552 *Les Amours de Cassandre*. Through this imitation, Vivien again claims her place among the most talented poets of French literature.

The domineering, confident, and misogynistic tone of a poem like “Sois femme,” contrasts greatly with Vivien’s actual lived experience as a poet. She was shy about work, even as she was relatively comfortable with her sexuality. The fact that Renée Vivien was even a poet—a prolific one at that—remained a mystery to many people she knew personally (Hawthorne 60). Even those who knew she wrote poetry claimed she seldom spoke about it. As her friend and fellow writer Colette wrote about Vivien in “Le pur et l’impur,” “je rencontrai chez Renée une parfaite pudeur de métier, un silence de bonne compagnie. Ses livres, qu’elle me donnait, elle les cachait chaque fois sous un bouquet de violettes, un panier de fruits” (599).<sup>5</sup> For someone who published over a dozen poetry collections during her lifetime, Vivien acted unexpectedly shy about her passion for words. Colette’s comment is reminiscent of Barney’s story in which Vivien avoided being interviewed about her poetry. Sylvie Croguennoc, in her article “Renée Vivien ou la religion de la musique”, provides an insightful analysis of Vivien’s reservedness regarding her career: “Retiré en lui-même, il semble que le poète<sup>6</sup> n’accomplisse que dans la solitude l’acte poétique, comme si le poème était l’accomplissement d’un Mystère, possible seulement en un lieu clos, et loin de toute présence profane.” (97).<sup>7</sup> As Croguennoc suggests, Vivien kept her poetic identity separate from her social identity because solitude was a necessary condition for her to channel her writing persona. In many ways, “Renée Vivien” could not exist when others were present. It is also possible that Pauline Tarn saw Renée Vivien as a threat to her relationships. Her intense focus on her first poetry collection, *Études et Préludes*, contributed to her not being very present in her friend Violet Shilitto’s life leading up to her death in 1901 (Goujon 166). In letters to her family

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<sup>5</sup> “I encountered in Renée a perfect reticence of career, a silence of good company. Her books, which she gave me, she hid them every time under a bouquet of violets, a basket of fruit.”

<sup>6</sup> Though you may notice *le poète* is a masculine noun here, considering the year the article was published, we believe this only reflects the word’s grammatical gender and does not refer to the gender of the poet.

<sup>7</sup> “Tucked away in themselves, it seems that the poet only accomplishes the poetic act in solitude, as though the poem were the completion of a Mystery, possible only in a closed-off place, and far from any profane presence.”

members and friends, Vivien signed her name as Pauline and not Renée. Though they were both her to an extent, her identities remained separate and distinct.

If shadows are often the space of poetic expressions of her sexuality, they also remain ambivalent markers of personal pain. Shortly after the start of Vivien's writing career, her best friend Violet Shilitto fell ill and died of typhoid fever – the same illness that killed Vivien's father. In a letter to the partner of her literary assistant and confidant Charles-Brun, Vivien expresses the impact of Violet's untimely death on the rest of her life; she writes, "Je le sais, moi, car la mort de cette amie dont je vous ai parlé a jeté une ombre sur toute ma vie. Je suis devenue autre : plus vieille, plus grave mais aussi plus compréhensive devant la souffrance" (Albert and Rollet 152).<sup>8</sup> Vivien felt that Violet's passing aged her – simultaneously making her wiser and bringing her closer to death. Her choice of the word "ombre" to convey how Violet's death altered her life is a key to understanding many of her later poems; the themes of shadows and darkness appear consistently in her poetry collections, especially following the tragic event.

While it is impossible to know definitively whether Vivien's poems are about her and her own experiences, many of her poems gesture toward autobiographical elements. Her 1904 poem "Chanson pour mon Ombre," is no exception.

### Chanson pour mon Ombre (from *La Vénus des Aveugles*, p. 191 of *Poésies Complètes*)

#### Chanson pour mon Ombre

Droite et longue comme un cyprès,  
Mon ombre suit, à pas de louve,  
Mes pas que l'aube désapprouve.  
Mon ombre marche à pas de louve,  
Droite et longue comme un cyprès.

Elle me suit, comme un reproche,  
Dans la lumière du matin.  
Je vois en elle mon destin  
Qui se resserre et se rapproche.  
A travers champs, par les matins,  
Mon ombre suit, comme un reproche.

Mon ombre suit, comme un remords,  
La trace de mes pas sur l'herbe  
Lorsque je vais, portant ma gerbe,  
Vers l'allée où gisent les morts.  
Mon ombre suit mes pas sur l'herbe,  
Implacable comme un remords.

#### Song for my Shadow

Straight and long like a cypress,  
My shadow stalks without a sound  
My steps which dawn does not condone.  
My shadow walks without a sound  
Straight and long like a cypress.

It follows me, like a reproach,  
In the morning's light  
I see in it my destiny,  
Which sharpens and draws close.  
Through fields, through morning light,  
My shadow follows, like a reproach.

My shadow follows, like remorse,  
My footprints in the grass  
As I approach, holding my sheaf,  
The path the dead call home.  
My shadow follows my steps in the grass,  
Relentless as remorse.

In the first verse of the poem the speaker compares her shadow to a cypress tree. In Greek mythology, which heavily influenced Vivien's writing, the cypress tree represents grief and mourning. With this in mind, the poet's shadow mirrors Vivien's own grief stemming from the loss of her friend. Another component of the poem that lends itself to this biographical analysis is the final stanza, where the speaker describes her shadow as remorse that follows her to "the path the dead call home." This evocation of remorse echoes the guilt Vivien might have felt for not spending much time with her childhood friend in the weeks leading up to Violet's death. The shadow in this poem is persistent– it "stalks her" silently as a "female wolf" (*louve*) as we read in

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<sup>8</sup> "I know it, for the death of that friend I spoke to you about cast a shadow on my entire life. I became other: older, more serious but also more understanding when faced with suffering."

the original and never leaves the speaker alone. The French idiomatic expression “à pas de loup” means “walking without a sound” – so why did Vivien specify a female wolf? A simple answer could be that it rhymed with “désapprouve.” However, Vivien’s choice of the word “louve” also links the shadow to a feminine figure – which becomes even more interesting given that her deceased friend was a woman, and Vivien said in a personal letter that her death “a jeté une ombre sur toute ma vie” (Albert and Rollet 152).<sup>9</sup> If every day Vivien lived, her friend’s absence reminded her of her own mortality, every step might seem to bring her closer to death. This brings us to one of the poem’s big questions: by “the path the dead call home”, does the speaker mean a visit to a graveyard, or is she referring to her own death in the future? Perhaps Vivien intended for that line to mean either, or both. After all, once the speaker dies, she will likely end up in a graveyard. Additionally, if she is mourning every day before she dies, she could be either physically or mentally visiting a grave. Indeed, we hear this ambiguity in the verb “suit” which is “follow,” but also a homophone for “I am.” So, using poetic license, “Mon ombre me suit,” could mean both, “My shadow follows me” and “my shadow is me,” implying that her shadow is not only following, but consuming her.

In the previous poem, shadows represent a manifestation of the speaker’s grief that follows her wherever she goes. However, in other poems, darkness and shadows appear more positive and desirable to the speaker. Vivien dedicated her 1908 collection *Sillages* to Hélène de Zuylen, her partner at the time. In the poem “Devant l’Été”, which is from that collection, the speaker expresses her dislike for the brightness and long days of summer.

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<sup>9</sup> “threw a shadow on my entire life”

**Devant l'Été** (from *Sillages*, p. 345 of *Poésies Complètes*)

**Devant l'Été**

Voici l'été... Les jours sont trop longs, mon amie,  
L'ombre tarde... On attend l'heure du grand repos,  
Des lys plus odorants, de la cloche endormie,  
De la grande fraîcheur des feuilles et des eaux.

Je m'attriste de la clarté qui se prolonge.  
Mon cœur est l'ennemi des midis éclatants,  
Et malgré que les jours soient beaux comme un beau  
songe,  
Cette heure qui me plaît, je l'attends trop longtemps.

Je le sais, le beau jour dore ta chevelure  
Large et blonde et qui se réjouit du soleil,  
Mais je préfère à tout cette tristesse pure  
Et cet ennui final qui mènent au sommeil.

J'adore ton visage et je préfère l'ombre  
Mystérieuse où je ne puis que l'entrevoir...  
Je préfère à ton clair regard ton regard sombre.  
Belle, tu m'apparais plus belle vers le soir.

Dans l'espoir de cette heure où tout désir s'émousse,  
Oublions la splendeur dure des jours trop longs.  
Dans le désir et le regret de la nuit douce  
Par ces longs soirs d'été trop lumineux, allons...

Moi, je me baignerai dans cette ombre illusoire  
De tes cheveux et de tes seins et de tes bras  
En songeant à la paix, la douceur et la gloire  
D'un beau soir violet qui ne s'achève pas.

**Before Summer**

Here is summer... The days are too long, my friend,  
The shadow is late... We await the hour of great rest,  
Of the sleeping bell, of the lilies more fragrant,  
Of the leaves' and the waters' great freshness.

I grow sad because of the lingering rays.  
My heart is the enemy of brilliant noons,  
And despite the beauty of the dream-like days,  
I've awaited the hour I like for too long.

I know, the beautiful day gilds your vast  
Blond hair that delights in the sun,  
But to everything, I prefer that pure sadness  
And that final boredom which lead to slumber.

I adore your face and I prefer the mysterious  
Shadow where I can just barely see it...  
To your bright gaze, I prefer your somber gaze.  
Beautiful, you appear more beautiful in the evening.

In the hope of that hour where all desire dulls,  
Let's forget the too-long days' harsh splendor.  
Into the soft night's desire and regret, let us go  
By way of the long, too-bright evenings of summer...

Me, I will bathe in that illusory shadow  
Of your hair and your breasts and your arms, while I  
dream  
Of the peace, the softness, and the glory  
Of a beautiful, never-ending violet eve.

The speaker wearily awaits the evening and the soothing shadows of nightfall. Though she is able to recognize the beauty of the day, she much prefers the type of beauty the night presents. Although it may be, "somber," and dreamlike, or "illusory," she would rather spend time with her lover in the evenings when the light has left. This becomes evident when she speaks of "the soft night's desire" as preferable to the "too-long days' harsh splendor". The speaker's sentiments in this poem expand upon Vivien's lifelong sensitivity to light by linking it to the way the speaker prefers to see her romantic partner. This is most evident in the line, "Beautiful, you appear more beautiful in the evening." The shadows, along with the "pure sadness and that final boredom" that precede sleep, provide the speaker with a more comfortable, relaxing romantic environment than the harsh sunlight of a summer's day. Additionally, at the time Vivien was writing, erotic love between two women could only really happen in the dark, in secret, and not in the full light of summer. What the poem seems to long for is a radical social change, symbolized by "the peace, the softness, and the glory / Of a beautiful, never-ending violet eve." As such, shadows represent both melancholy as well as romantic and sexual freedom, creating a palpable tension in the poem.

Vivien explores this tension further in her poem “Les Êtres de la Nuit”, published in 1907. This poem clearly reveals the speaker’s inner conflict regarding her identity; she is unsure whether she belongs more to the beings of day or the beings of night.

**Les Êtres de la Nuit** (from *Flambeaux Éteints*, p. 318 of *Poésies Complètes*)

**Les Êtres de la Nuit**

Les êtres de la nuit et les êtres du jour  
Ont longtemps partagé mon âme, tour à tour.  
Les êtres de la nuit m’ont fait craindre le jour.

Car les êtres du jour sont triomphants et libres,  
Nulle secrète horreur ne fait vibrer leurs fibres,  
Ils ont le regard clair de ceux qui naissent libres.

Les êtres de la nuit sont lents, passifs et doux,  
Leur âme est comme un fleuve obscur et sans remous,  
Leurs gestes sont furtifs et leurs rires sont doux.

Mais les êtres du jour ont des prunelles claires,  
De ce bleu qui voient seuls les aigles dans leurs aires.  
Le jour fait resplendir ces prunelles trop claires.

Ce sont les yeux aigus des héros et des rois  
Du Nord qu’on entend rire au fond des palais froids,  
Et des reines dont l’âme a dominé les rois.

Les êtres de la nuit sont craintifs, -- mais dans l’ombre  
Un phosphore inconnu luit en leur regard sombre :  
Les êtres de la nuit ne vivent que par l’ombre.

Les êtres de la nuit sont faibles et charmants :  
Ils trompent, et ce sont les fugitifs amants,  
Les amantes aux cœurs perfides et charmants.

Ils détournent, dans le baiser, leur froide bouche,  
Et leur pas se dérobe ainsi qu’un vol farouche.  
On ne boit qu’un baiser décevant sur leur bouche.

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

**Beings of Night**

The beings of night and the beings of day  
Have taken turns sharing my soul for some time.  
The beings of night made me scared of the day.

For the beings of day are triumphant and free,  
No secret horrors make them tremble,  
They have the clear gaze of those born free.

The beings of night are slow, passive, and sweet,  
Their soul like a river that’s murky and still,  
Their gestures are furtive, and their laughs are sweet.

But the beings of day have clear, bright eyes,  
Of that blue that sees only the eagles in flight.  
The day brings a sparkle to those too-bright eyes.

It’s the keen, piercing eyes of the heroes and kings  
Of the North we hear laughing in cold palaces,  
And the queens whose souls now rule over the kings.

The beings of night are fearful, -- but in the shade  
An unknown phosphor glows in their somber gaze:  
The beings of night live only by shade.

The beings of night are weak and charming:  
They deceive, and are lovers who flee,  
Lovers whose hearts are devious and charming.

They turn away mid-kiss with their cold lips,  
And their footsteps retreat like a creature in flight.  
Only disappointing kisses are drawn from their lips.

One must fear the pull of the beings of night,  
For their supple bodies slip through arms and flee,  
And their love is nothing but a lie of the night.

As the poem suggests, she knows that she cannot trust either night or day beings, and on some level, she fears both day and night. The reader understands this through the repetition of the word “craindre” in the first and last stanza. She fears the day while also fearing the “pull” of the night. Though they share her soul, the beings of night and day must “take turns;” therefore, they cannot be present at the same time. This echoes how Vivien’s personal and writerly identities work; they are both her, but she has difficulty embodying both Renée and Pauline simultaneously. It is tempting to read the “beings of day” in this poem as a stand-in for Pauline Tarn, and the “beings of night,” as Renée Vivien. The persona she assumed with her family and friends was Pauline Tarn; in her personal letters to her sister and her mentor alike, she signed her

name Pauline. On the other hand, her literary identity, Renée Vivien, was reserved for her readers and critics, who often did not know her in real life. In a way, readers and critics resemble the “beings of night” from the poem who are “lovers who flee” in that their attention to her writing is unpredictable. Their kiss is “decevant,” whose meaning is ambiguous as it can mean both disappointing and deceiving. As such, the ambivalence in this poem also runs parallel to her national identity, language use, and to some extent gender presentation in the literary sphere. Pauline and Renée, English and French, feminine and masculine—each of these conflicting identities coexisted uncomfortably within Vivien.

If metaphorical shadows continue to haunt Vivien’s work, her sapphic legacy has slowly emerged from the shadows thanks to the efforts of both French and English speakers. In the decades following her death, lesbian literary circles in the U.S. brought Renée Vivien back from the brink of obscurity. In the 1950s, the lesbian community in the United States discovered Vivien and began translating some of her poems from French to English. The first time an English translation of Vivien’s poetry appeared in print was in 1959 in *The Ladder*, a journal published by the lesbian activist group The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), when Barbara Stephens translated three poems alongside a biographical column about Vivien authored by Barbara Grier under the pseudonyms Gene Damon and Lee Stuart (Valentine 155). Coincidentally, the organization was named for “Les chansons de Bilitis,” a poem by Pierre Louÿs, an acquaintance, contemporary, and influence of Vivien (Valentine 147). In the column, Grier called for people to translate Vivien’s works into English, saying “Without doubt a qualified person ought to translate her work into English that we all might share the beauty of her words” (Damon and Stuart 13). Ten years later, Gabrielle L’Autre (a pseudonym of Margaret Porter) began answering this call, publishing 24 English translations of Vivien’s poems in a 1969 issue of *The Ladder*, of which Barbara Grier was then the editor. At the time, this was the most English translations of Vivien’s work ever to have been published in one place. Margaret Porter, who also translated Natalie Barney’s essay on Vivien into English, proved instrumental in bringing Vivien into the light in U.S. lesbian circles.

Although DOB, and subsequently *The Ladder*, went defunct by the early 1970s, Barbara Grier and other lesbian activists continued to build the lesbian publishing sphere. In 1973, Grier and her partner, Donna McBride, co-founded Naiad Press, a small press centered on lesbian literature. Three years later, Naiad Press published *A Woman Appeared to Me*, Jeannette Foster’s English translation of Vivien’s autobiographical novel *Une femme m’apparut*. Then, in 1977, Naiad Press published the first ever book-length selection of Vivien’s poems in English translation: *The Muse of the Violets*, translated by none other than Margaret Porter (the same person whose translations appeared in *The Ladder* in 1969) and Catherine Kroger. The third piece of Naiad Press’ pioneering trio of English versions of Vivien’s work appeared in 1979 as *At the Sweet Hour of Hand in Hand*, translated by Sandia Belgrade. Fast forward to 2015, and Naiad Press has been out of business for just over a decade. However, it paved the way for other lesbian publishing houses like Headmistress Press, which in 2015 published *A Crown of Violets*, a book of Vivien’s poems selected and translated into English by Samantha Pious.

If Vivien remains relatively obscure to scholars today, it is not from a lack of effort. In the 1980s and 90s, literary scholars began publishing their research related to Vivien. Virginie Sanders, in her 1991 biography of Vivien entitled *Vertigineusement j’allais vers les étoiles*, credits biographer Jean-Paul Goujon with facilitating a revival of Vivien’s work: “Goujon a ouvert la voie à une redécouverte de Vivien et de son œuvre” (Sanders 231).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Goujon contributed greatly to vivienian studies by publishing his comprehensive biography of Vivien, *Tes blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses*, alongside a collection of Vivien’s complete poetic works, in 1986

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<sup>10</sup> “Goujon opened the path to a rediscovery of Vivien and her works.”

through the publishing house Régine Deforges. The same year, he also contributed to a *France Culture* radio segment about the rediscovery of Renée Vivien (Combis). Unfortunately, today, both books are out of print and are therefore not easily accessible to the public. In an article in 2009, French scholar Nicole G. Albert declared that thanks to the work done by Goujon and others, Vivien seems to have escaped her “purgatory”: “Renée Vivien, après une longue éclipse, semble sortie de son purgatoire grâce à des travaux universitaires et aux rééditions diverses qui ont vu le jour depuis une vingtaine d’années” (Albert 148).<sup>11</sup> While the scholarship on Vivien is encouraging, it is debatable whether Albert’s assessment of Vivien’s visibility still holds true today, as Vivien remains a relatively unknown poet in relation to many of her contemporaries. This is unfortunate because her work provides a rare example of explicitly lesbian poetry from the early twentieth century by a French-speaking writer.

Thanks to Vivien’s biographers, we have a clearer idea of how Vivien’s personal life intersected with key moments in her writing career. However, as Goujon states at the start of his book, many of Vivien’s personal papers were not accessible to anyone at the time he was writing *Tes blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses*. This was because shortly after Vivien’s death, the critic Salomon Reinach (an admirer of Vivien’s work) brought Vivien’s papers to the Bibliothèque nationale de France and had them locked away until the year 2000 (Goujon 18). Luckily for contemporary scholars, these papers—including handwritten drafts of some of her poems—are now available in a digital format on the Bibliothèque nationale de France website. Since then, in the 2010s and 2020s, Albert has been at the forefront of several efforts to make Vivien’s texts more accessible to the French-speaking public. It is now more possible than ever for Vivien’s literary legacy to reemerge from the shadows.

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<sup>11</sup> “Renée Vivien, after a long eclipse, seems to have left her purgatory thanks to university work and to various reeditions which have been out for some twenty years.”

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