

*Sexuality and the Victorians:
Recent Studies*

Denise Walen

Richard Dellamora, ed. *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. viii + 330 pp. \$50.00 cloth/\$20.00 paper.

Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 282 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

Yopie Prins. *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. 256 pp. \$18.95 paper.

Laurence Senelick. *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1894-1925*. New York: Routledge, 1999. 216 pp. \$23.99 paper.

Sexuality, as a category of analysis, has added greatly to critical studies in the past decade. Several recent books demonstrate the importance of this analysis for nineteenth century studies. Taken individually, each book provides a significant insight into the ways sexuality influenced various individuals and art forms during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The presentation and reception of one of the century's greatest actresses, the work of modernist playwrights, the effect of Hellenistic and specifically Sapphic studies on lyric poetry—and literature in general, as well as dance and painting—were all coloured by an awareness of sexuality which diverged from the norms accepted by society.

Lisa Merrill is not the first scholar to write a biography of Charlotte Cushman, but hers is the first book-length biography to discuss Cushman's sexuality openly and use it as a key to analysing her acting choices and reception. Merrill's work is an extremely important addition to nineteenth-century theatre studies, demonstrating the unique

significance sexuality occupies as a category of critical analysis. Emerging from her pioneering dissertation on Cushman, Merrill's *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* does not follow a chronological approach to biography, nor does it pretend to account for all of Cushman's artistic achievements. Readers interested in Cushman's artistic life would be better served by Joseph Leach's *Bright Particular Star*. Adding to this earlier, quite thorough biography, Merrill provides a refreshing, astute evaluation of a great actress and a remarkable woman. Taking as her focus Cushman's personal life, Merrill fills in the abundant gaps left by previous biographers; she expertly demonstrates that there is more than one way to write biography.

Merrill begins her book *in medias res*, with Cushman's 1844 voyage to Great Britain. Throughout the work the author picks up different strands of Cushman's life, but shrewdly questions the distance between myth and fact in many details of the actress's background. For example, the assertion that Cushman began acting solely to support her family, abandoned by a negligent and economically ineffective father, is interrogated as a moral justification for Cushman's acquisition of a disreputable profession. Merrill devotes separate chapters to analysing Cushman's most popular female and male roles, using a large portion of chapter five to examine her celebrated portrayal of Romeo and the variant critical receptions of that role. Victorian tropes of masculinity, contemporary interpretations of the character, socially acceptable manifestations of erotic love, and Cushman's own sexuality combined to make her the most well-known and critically-acclaimed Romeo of the age. The latter half of Merrill's book is given to an exhaustive and illuminating discussion of Cushman's romantic and erotic connections.

This work has much to recommend it: the reclamation of an abandoned icon, the non-chronological approach, the challenge to long-accepted historical assertions, the focus on personal life and sexuality over artistic career. What makes this book essential reading, however, is the extensive use of Cushman's personal letters. These letters, carefully collected by Emma Crow, the young woman to whom Cushman was erotically attracted during the last twenty years of her life, introduce a complex woman of enormous insight and abundant generosity. Merrill uses them carefully to interpret Cushman's later years. She reveals the

complicated relationships between Cushman, Crow (who would marry Cushman's adopted son Ned and so become Cushman's daughter-in-law), and Emma Stebbins, Cushman's life companion during the period in which she knew Crow. With the insight of these letters, Merrill constructs a biography that uses sexuality as a central category determining her subject's behaviour and choices, as friend, lover, performer, and businesswoman.

Merrill concludes that although Stebbins shared Cushman's life for nearly twenty years, their emotional connection was somehow less erotic than the one Cushman enjoyed with Crow. To Stebbins, Cushman was a protector; to Crow, she was a lover. Merrill acknowledges that such a conclusion is reliant on correspondence from only one participant, correspondence which may have been slanted to discount Cushman's attachment to Stebbins. Such caution is, I think, well founded: although the letters present Crow as more erotically joined to Cushman than was Stebbins, without letter or diary entries or other documentation illustrating the nature of Cushman's relationship with Stebbins, a full assessment of this *ménage à trois* is impossible.

Merrill concludes her study by analysing the shift in reception to which Cushman's memory would be subject. Throughout her life Cushman carefully ordered the narratives which defined her public personality, reconfiguring her identity as social conventions changed, to construct a persona both ordinarily (and respectably) bourgeois and artistically extraordinary. After her death, however, others would control the presentation of her character. In fact, certain characteristics, which Cushman highly prized for their economy in maintaining her reputation, would themselves contribute to her decline. For example, her staunch avoidance of relationships with men, despite her erotic interest in women, had been useful to Cushman, helping her to avoid common negative stereotypes of the sexually disreputable actress. But the behaviours that established her respectability—lack of heterosexual complications, her encouragement of other women, even her androgyny—would become the features marking Cushman as deviant when conventional attitudes toward gender and sexuality changed markedly as the twentieth century began. As homosexual desires were condemned, and a homosexual identity was both identified and quickly denounced, Cushman's reputation declined and her achievements were

ignored; her then suspect personal life made for too much discomfort. Merrill is to be congratulated for sweeping away the legacy of whispered objections and prurient agitation surrounding Cushman, and presenting her life in an objective, unapologetic, and important study.

Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1894-1925, expertly edited by Laurence Senelick, represents indisputable proof that continued investigation in literature will reveal new material containing homoerotic themes. The six plays included in this volume, all written by men, come from the U.S., Britain, Germany, France and Russia. They represent such diverse aesthetic genres as comedy of manners, problem drama in the style of Ibsen, symbolist tragedy, and poetic fable. Curiously, blackmail, both of and by the homosexual, represents a common theme running through several of the plays. As would be expected, the works present homosexual love and desire carefully coded in the actions and dialogue of the characters. Innuendo and suggestion rather than bold physical expressions mark the erotics of the texts; however, homoerotic passion is no less tangible for such liminality. In fact, the level of homoerotic representation in certain plays, such as *At Saint Judas's*, is surprising given the date of these scripts. Unfortunately, only one play, *Ania and Esther*, represents an erotic attraction between two women. Despite the limited representation of lesbian characters and themes, the anthology presents a variety of dramatic styles and thematic approaches to homosexuality.

Senelick provides an extremely useful general introduction to the volume as well as detailed introductions for each play. He sketches biographical histories for the sometimes unknown playwrights who created these scripts, but the individual introductions are especially intriguing for references to additional plays presenting same-sex love. These introductions include a wealth of information for further study, and one is surprised that Senelick did not supply an appendix listing the texts he uncovered in his extensive research of the topic. Clearly there is much new material for researchers in this field. The plays are helpfully contextualised: a collection of documents follows each script, including reviews of productions (if the play had any), or diary entries discussing the play or playwright. Senelick's careful analysis of the contradictions and debate facing emergent homosexual themes in drama makes the volume's introduction widely useful to scholars in the field. Although

he explains the centrality of blackmail in these plays, Senelick carefully clarifies the different approaches to homosexuality through blackmail, paying particular attention to nationality and geography. For example, German plays, presenting the homosexual as a sensitive victim, seem influenced by Magnus Hirschfeld's call for legal reform and acceptance of homosexuality; other plays present the homosexual as dangerous, criminal and uncaring, as one who ignores, ridicules and/or manipulates the conventions of his society. Only one play in Senelick's anthology, from Russia, offers a lighthearted and whimsical depiction of same-sex love.

More typical is Herbert Hirschberg's three act drama *Mistakes*, which introduces an earnest victim of his own misguided passions. Edmund, a promising young banker, marries a wealthy young woman to save his father's business—all this despite his homosexuality and careless affair with his male servant. When the servant attempts to blackmail his wife, Edmund commits suicide as his only honourable course of action. The play is a didactic *pièce à thèse* pitting allegations of mental depravity against assertions of normalcy. In the awkward and often heavy-handed presentation of ideas (Edmund's wife reads Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* for clues to her husband's behaviour), Edmund's pathetic suicide seems a call for compassion. The passionate and somewhat overwrought *At Saint Judas's*, by Henry Blake Fuller, is a short symbolist dialogue between two gentlemen officers in a church sacristy waiting for the marriage of one. The bridegroom recounts adversities overcome to attain his bride: attempts to have him sent back to active military service, aspersions cast on his economic status as well as his character as an officer and a heterosexual male. When the bride finally arrives, the best man reveals his jealousy and confesses his responsibility for all the delays. He has loved the bridegroom and cannot bear to see him married. The dialogue is interrupted or punctuated by symbolist imagery moving in the stained glass windows. The play is intriguing for its style, the moral ambiguity with which it presents the best man, and not least its clear representation of the best man's erotic attraction for his friend.

Both *Mistakes* and *At Saint Judas's* offer the possibility of reading the homosexual character with compassion, as a person caught in a society unaccepting of his love. In comparison, *The Blackmailers*, by John Gray and Marc-André Raffalovich, and *The Gentleman of the*

Chrysanthemums, by Carle Dauriac, present unapologetic decadents who use the society around them to their own advantage. The homosexual characters are unscrupulous aesthetes who pervert their society either through blackmail or by imposing their dissolute taste on others. As an alternative to these two extremes, the tender *Ania and Esther* of Klaus Mann represents multiple sexualities caught in adolescent desire and confusion, where love is neither tragic nor perverse, but capricious and painful. Happily, Senelick's collection also contains the remarkable Russian fantasy of Mikhail Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*. Set in the seventeenth century, Kuzmin uses mistaken identity to present a tale of misdirected attraction. The extremely short piece ends with the prince's ecstatic call for a celebration upon discovering the supposed female Dorita is actually the male Floridal. The script is infused with an innocence that questions assumptions of homosexual panic.

Richard Dellamora, whose earlier contributions to the study of Victorian sexuality include *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, has collected an impressive range of authors to contribute to his anthology *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*. The twelve articles—by prominent scholars like Martha Vicinus, Yopie Prins, Regenia Gagnier, and Christopher Lane—cover diverse topics ranging from literature and literary criticism to the visual arts, dance, and economics. Many of the articles, influenced no doubt by Dellamora as editor, focus their discussion on a late Victorian aestheticism and sexuality in discord with normative Victorian ideals, as well on the impact of Hellenistic studies on the lives and writings of certain authors. The articles, all relying heavily on theory, present the reader with energetic analyses of known authors and their work.

For example, Oliver S. Buckton's article "'Desire Without Limit': Dissident Confession in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*" questions the assertion that Wilde used the letter penitentially, attaining self-knowledge through his admission of moral degeneracy. Buckton believes the letter represents an attack on Lord Alfred Douglas, an attempt to elicit from him some acknowledgment of his responsibility for the actions both men shared. *De Profundis* then becomes, according to Buckton, Wilde's final resistance to the bourgeois sexual ideology constraining Victorian society, rather than his submission to conventional morality.

In “The Romance of Boys Bathing: Poetic Precedents and Respondents to the Paintings of Henry Scott Tuke,” Julia F. Saville reads paintings and poems of adolescent male bathers as a tightly combined discourse of homoerotic attraction. Tuke’s paintings are both inspired by and alternately inspire poems by other homosexuals in late Victorian Britain. The main section of Saville’s article, her reading of Tuke’s paintings *August Blue* and *Ruby, Gold, and Malachite*, provides the strongest point of the essay. There she uses the discourse of romance to explain how Tuke’s paintings of boys bathing *en plein air*, while flirtatiously suggesting and evoking homoerotic attractions, were also viewed as exemplary Victorian models of athleticism, reliant on the appreciation of rough working-class lifestyles and behaviour.

Dellamora’s collection provides analyses not only of literary texts, but also of criticism—a key source for contemporary discussions of sexuality. “Victorian Effeminacies,” by Thaïs E. Morgan, critiques the literary analysis of Robert Buchanan, especially his 1872 book *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*. Morgan’s thoughtfully written article examines Buchanan’s masculinist reactions to contemporary poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and William Morris. Morgan is careful not to conflate Buchanan’s attack on effeminacy with attacks on homosexuality, but demonstrates how Buchanan’s use of the term supported the still dominant “heterosexual ideology of civic masculinity.” Morgan astutely demonstrates the shifting connotations of effeminacy and its relation to sexual dissidence.

The majority of articles in Dellamora’s anthology presume homosexuality as the prevalent or only form of sexual dissidence. Yopie Prins, however, reminds her readers that such a presumption asserts a binary of hetero/homosexual authority during a time that experienced sexuality more fluidly. Her article looks to the impact Greek studies had on the articulation of feminine desires for the first women working at Newnham College Cambridge. Some of her material may be familiar to readers: although Prins places Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper within the bacchic tradition central to her argument, the homoerotic relationship between this couple is well known. Prins’ discussion of Jane Ellen Harrison does support her broadening of the dissident lens, for, although Harrison was emotionally connected to women, in Prins’s reading she represents *asexuality*.

Prins's book, *Victorian Sappho*, is the least concerned with issues of homoerotics; however, given its focus on Sappho's poetry and its effect on late nineteenth century writing, homosexual desire is never far from the discussion. Prins' book, like her article, is a vigorous study of the sexual politics emerging from Victorian Hellenism. She uses Sappho's poetry and the flurry of interest in Sappho during the century as her point of departure for analysing the production and reception of sapphic lyric poetry, especially that produced by Michael Field and Algernon Charles Swinburne. In the first third of the volume, Prins variously explores the impossibility of knowing or reading Sappho, compares classical philology with Victorian poetics (in a section displaying her virtuosity with the Greek language that I unfortunately found tedious), and identifies the nineteenth century as a watershed for Sappho studies—in many regards, the Sappho we know is a product of Victorian culture. Separate chapters examine the lesbian poetics of Field and Swinburne as influenced by Sapphic studies, elucidating the extremely divergent tone in these respectively female and male poets. In the final chapter she reads specific poems by lesser known female poets writing of Sappho to explain the loss of these works and their authors. As Sappho became synonymous with both "poet" and "woman," her leap from the Leucadian promontory pre-figured the effacement of most female poetry of the nineteenth century. The themes of these poems, according to Prins, "predict their own forgetting." The Sappho figure created by the Victorians offered a very problematic image of the female artist.

The influence of homosexuality on the lives and work of various authors and artists provides the central theme linking these books together. Cultural definitions and images of sexuality would shape not only the writing and performances of authors and artists, but also the critical reception of their work. Taken collectively, these studies demonstrate the far-reaching effects of homosexual desire on writing and other arts during the century. They also suggest that while all the materials needed to inform our understanding of homosexuality in the Victorian era are yet to be discovered, the material we have on hand awaits further scrutiny and interpretation.

Vassar College