broader argument, but for the engaged reader they diminish the pleasure of what is otherwise a very fine book.

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YOPIE PRINS, *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Pp. xiv + 279. $55 cloth; $18.95 paper.

The publication date of *Victorian Sappho* allows your reviewer to declare, at admittedly discounted risk, that Yopie Prins has written the century's last best book on Victorian poetry. At the heart of the volume are a hundred pages of finely observant and imaginative criticism divided between the (already divided, seamed, and recombinant) geniuses we know as A. C. Swinburne and Michael Field (the pen name of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper). On the book's mind, where scholarly duty chaperones critical pleasure, are less cogent but still smart framing chapters about, first, the mainly masculine Victorian custody of the Sapphic textual fragments and, second, the makeover of those fragments within a tradition of women poets who found in the ur-Lesbian's cliffhanger plunge a lyric topos that refused to die. On the book's shoulder, alas, is some oppressive self-promotion that bids fair to co-opt the reviewer, obliging me to post a dour warning over what is to be a happier office of praise.

In all the ways that matter most, *Victorian Sappho* scorns complacency, pushing itself into unpredicted interpretive after-effects that sharpen even incisive first impressions. The book also, however, pushes itself in a sales sense, one that can leave it hoarse with claim inflation. Prins repeatedly intimates a comprehensive theoretical understanding of gender, genre, and period that I am never quite able to get hold of. Nor is this intimation always a whisper; it can sound like the sort of jacket copy that, evidently, even the best academic publishers will now tolerate and may even encourage. Item: "By demonstrating how sexual politics determine the production of Victorian poetry as well as its reception, *Victorian Sappho* offers a revisionary history of Victorian poetry and places contemporary lyric theory within that history" (p. 7). Too many spots can be found at which the insertion of "some" or "in part" would bring this puffy sentence closer to the truth. The absence of qualifiers here epitomizes the book's self-descriptive manner, which either promises more than Prins can de-

liver or, by means of a distracting equivocation, blunts the precision of literary history and theory, and thereby deepens our already disheartening confusion about what to expect from them. It is up to us to adjust the volume.

Once we make the adjustment, however, there remains a great deal in the book to admire and commend. For one thing, in a delicious fin-de-siècle gender-bend, Prins has taken charge of more Greek, and more classical scholarship, than anybody now active in the field is likely to boast. She reads Sappho's fragments in the original with diligence and courage, as well as with a distinctly verbal respect for textuality—in trace and lacuna, as presence and absence—from which much may be learned. The gimlet eye that Prins trains on the text makes her quick to detect the nineteenth century's perfervid supplementation of the scrappily contingent Sapphic verses by compensatory, opportunistic, and culture-bound fantasies of a timeless, passional intensity. Since there's so little Sappho there, "Sappho" becomes what we make of her; and when we were Victorians we made her a love-lorn chanteuse, a melodious surrender, a fiery pang, a Lesbian hot spot—whatever we liked, and back then we liked a lot. The wholesale prosopopoeia that scholars, editors, and minor poets indulged in put the best available face on a textual corpus that was in fact radically, irremediably dismembered. Sappho's better translators and imitators, however, re-membered this dismemberment more wisely, by cleaving to the signifier and so keeping faith with the vital disjection of their great original.

Sappho is famous, of course, for going to pieces. Prins argues that she was already doing so with great lyric address in ancient Greek, no matter what fate awaited her frail manuscripts across the centuries. In a series of virtuoso readings Prins explains how, even in the longer lyric fragments that survive, Sappho remains pronominally and syntactically "neither subject nor object," a standing invitation (or a declining one, and that nice grammatical pun is Prins's) to "the performance of subjectivity" (p. 31). Lesser writers rose to the invitation by filling in the textual gaps, and the filler that lay to hand was Victorian stuff whose inventory—memorably warehoused in Henry Wharton's 1885 *Sappho*—provides a veritable attic of overdetermined upholstery. In the writing that resulted "textual mediation is sublimated into an organic figure" (p. 6), endowed with a life, a love, and a death that are patent Victorian projections. Greater writers like Swinburne, Michael Field, and the extraordinarily effective translator J. A. Symonds—sexual dissidents all, please note—resisted this organic embodiment of the Sapphic figurine. They contrived to get a

life otherwise, by producing Sappho in their homages and renderings as "a graphic field rather than a sublimated figure" (p. 99). The best Victorian writing in this lyric tradition is also the most faithful to the tactics of its original: "What seems dead yet 'speaks'—what speaks of death—is the language itself, simultaneously articulating and disarticulating a lyric subject" (p. 33).

The language itself. It has been a while since "the language itself" had its day in the critical sun, rather than those political or historical referents that literary language has lately—and rather simply—been taken to stand for. So it is refreshing to find Prins upholding textuality as she does, even citing Paul de Man into the bargain. She not only dusts off a deconstructive idiom whose supersession often seems more presumed in contemporary practice than demonstrated, but also finds the patient interpretive practice of that idiom rewarded with second-order cultural correlates of the kind that deconstructive criticism in its heyday ruled out. These cultural correlates pertain less to poetic contents than to poetic forms as instances of historical, political performance. Thus the deferral of "the figure of voice" in Michael Field's *Long Ago* lets Bradley and Cooper double their pleasure in a "textual bilingualism" that speaks unnameable lesbianism with eloquent indirection (pp. 84–85). Similarly, when Swinburne's metric marks time in a limb-loosening, ego-dissolving sublimity—and when does it not?—this formal throb in the signifier shakes things up in the public arena at least as much as his blasphemous, pornographic signifieds do. Prins's scrutiny of the formal causes of cultural effects is exemplary. Like her classical scholarship, it reminds us of much that we have nearly lost, and also of much that awaits us, if we have but the will and the skill for it, in the renewed study of Victorian aesthetic performance.

Getting the performative inside-story of culture right means getting the form right first, which Prins nearly always does. Here and there, to be sure, her examples awaken in her reader a certain improving emulation. At one point her description of Michael Field's very interesting *Long Ago* frontispiece identifies as "sigma, alpha, pi" (p. 110) what looks like regulation *S*, *A*, *P* to me—an alphabetic distinction with a difference, given Prins's interests in translation and in the name of Sappho as such. Later on, Prins's close reading of Swinburne's "Sapphics" will be vitiated, for prosodists like me who remain stone-deaf infidels in the matter of "quantitative" verse, by the repeated if scare-quote-protected reference to that adjective, and even more by the decision to scan the end words *marvel*, *passion*, and *thunder* as spondees, not trochees (p. 144). This decision seems odd in view of Prins's

omission elsewhere (p. 86) to note how the five-syllable short line used in the invocation to *Long Ago* metrically quotes the Sapphic form and, as it were, englishes that "choric measure" into an accentual-syllabic idiom—which is also what Swinburne's "Sapphics" (and after that Hardy's and Pound's) did. One more reviewer's tributary mite: Prins's strong-minded appreciation of the breathtaking "Anactoria" encourages me to observe—as she does not, and as I never did before reading her chapter (p. 127)—that the extraordinary line "Áh swéet, and swéet agaín, and séven tímes swéet" is seven times stressed, the caesural cut falling right on the English word that signals repetition.

At further range, and with a view to that promised if undelivered "revisionary history of Victorian poetry," the book delivers numerous applications to poetry and poetics located closer to the Victorian mainstream than Prins ordinarily strays. She makes highly selective use of the most canonical period poets, passing over the soi-disant Hellene Matthew Arnold altogether and, in the transatlantic final chapter, making Emily Dickinson's idiosyncratic but searing Sapphism conspicuous by its absence. Yet the training provided by *Victorian Sappho* lets us read the canon with new ears. In Robert Browning's "A Grammarian's Funeral," for instance, should we catch in the alternate pentasyllabic lines a Sapphic echo, we can then, thanks to Prins's review of the Victorian scholarship on Sappho, listen for the way Browning's irony makes a Renaissance humanist zeal for manuscript construal resonate with its contemporary analogue, the Victorian yen for building textuality up into personhood. As for Tennyson, the always tricky relation between a scatter of ingredients and their recuperation into phantasmic organic wholeness is the very theme of those most canonical Victorian works *In Memoriam* and *Idylls of the King*; so it is worth pondering how the Sapphic problematics upon which Prins enlarges may bear on even the largest of Victorian poetic concerns, the business of epic.

To say such things is to credit *Victorian Sappho* with generating a greater momentum than it can contain, and so to challenge future laborers in the field, somewhat as follows: subdivide and conquer as we will, let's nevertheless not forget to reconvene and take stock now and then. What we are severally gathering about neglected women's or dialect or working-class poetry deserves to come home to what we all generally know about the period's major poetry (however we settle or change our collective mind about just what that is). The new findings have a responsibility to engage the old, not least because they possess consequences for the old: they ought to make not just an addition to our common wealth but a difference. A Michael Field revival is already nudging the center of Victorian-poetry study ahead toward the 1890s

and over toward queer poetics, and in time this shift will alter our angle of vision on Tennyson's absorption of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, on both Brownings, on Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." It remains a puzzle why the perennially minoritized Swinburne has not been a more central presence in our working literary history; if you believe that the day of his songs before sunrise still lies ahead, then Prins's chapter brings a consoling hope that it will someday irradiate prosodic practice clear across the century.

Having faulted Prins for drafting into her book a review of itself, I don't mean to blame her now for not enumerating the ways in which other Victorianists should put it to use. That's my job, I suppose, the book review being an early forum in which newly specific readings and the repository of the generally read ought to take each other's measure. As I see it, then, the longest, strongest current of Prins's book runs deeper than the identity politics of subculture or affinity that have lately seemed to displace the generally shared compact that grounds Victorian studies, not to say literary studies. With respect to Field and Swinburne, and the lesbian and sadomasochistic formations thanks to which these poets' notoriety will periodically leap out (and flutter, and flag), Prins is most illuminating when she inquires into something more fundamental. *Victorian Sappho* has primarily to do with issues in the constitution of written subjectivity: a topic historically more pervasive and theoretically more subversive than identity formation—which may be, Prins teaches us to suspect, an "organic" sublimation that compensates and covers for the profound scandal of textuality itself. How to write the Victorian history of that scandal, and to articulate its cultural situation, is an unfinished job toward which *Victorian Sappho* takes large, fresh, and cheering strides.

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SUSAN ZLOTNICK, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Pp. x + 325. $39.95.

The problem with British culture, according to Susan Zlotnick, is that the "entrepreneurial ideal" was never permitted to achieve hegemonic status in the nineteenth century. One direct result of this problem, she tells us, is that Britain has become a nation "renowned for revering traditions," a country that has repeat-