



Victorian Sappho by Yopie Prins. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii + 279. \$18.95 paper.

Over the past five years there has been a resurgence of interest in the Greek lyricist, Sappho, evident in a cluster of intriguing publications, some of the most notable being *Sappho Is Burning* by Page duBois (1995); *Sappho's Immortal Daughters* by Margaret Williamson (1995); *Sappho and the Virgin Mary* by Ruth Vanita (1996); and *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* by Jane Snyder (1997). Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* is not only the latest intervention in this debate, but also the self-reflective critical voice that asks what it is about the fragmentary corpus of Sappho that inspires such sporadic returns to what was also a late-Victorian obsession. Prins's answer, subtle and compelling, will fascinate any scholar invested in lyric theory, Victorian Hellenism, gender studies, or better still, an intersection of all these fields.

One of Prins's prime interests is to bring to the study of Sappho both a theoretical and historical consideration of the way we read lyric and how this might account for the recurrent turns and returns to Sappho as "an exemplary, engendering figure" (7) for that reading process. In the course of her introduction, Prins reminds us of the premise developed in the 1980s by theorists such as Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man that lyric voice is a rhetorical figure—a cause—that brings a persona into being while creating the illusion that it is an effect, a spontaneous utterance from that persona as a preexisting individual subject (19–20). According to this model, Sappho becomes the name for an emptiness that is declined over the centuries, both in the grammatical sense of shifting its rhetorical position within accounts of lyric, and in the material sense of a poetic corpus that has been lost. Prins then gives another turn to the screw of interpretation by refusing the effacement of historical inflections (such as the issue of gender) that de Man's theory of lyric performs. Instead, she accepts the greater challenge of reading Victorian renderings (or declensions) of Sappho as they are inflected both historically by gender and formally by the treatment of rhetoric.

What follows is not a chronological account of Sappho's reception in Victorian England, but a simultaneous performance and description of the metaleptic logic at work in numerous lyrical appropriations of the name of Sappho. "Metalepsis" is a form of metonymy in which causes and effects are interchanged and sometimes doubled. It prevails in the dynamic that characterizes Victorian rewritings of Sappho, specifically as she is represented in Ovid's *Heroides*, leaping from the Leucadian Cliff after her putative betrayal by the young ferryman, Phaon. In this context, to turn back to Sappho is not simply to return to the origin of the Western lyric tradition as a feminized mode

and counterpart to the manly Homeric epic, but to repeat a rhetorical position in which the lyric voice at the moment of utterance is both silenced in death and also leaps into an afterlife, a future echo or rewriting. In other words, the Sapphic lyric refuses the chronological unfolding of time and instead endlessly repeats the activity of looking back to the past even as it predicts its own future rewriting.

The discursive structure of *Victorian Sappho* itself consciously repeats this temporal oscillation, refusing to be a simple chronicle of Sappho's reception from the early to late Victorian period. After setting the rhetorical framework in place with a playful introductory meditation on the process of declension ("Declining a Name"), Prins begins Chapter 1 ("Sappho's Broken Tongue") with a detailed study of the much-translated fragment 31 ("He seems to me equal to the gods . . .") reproduced in its many English versions by Dr. Henry Thornton Wharton in his 1885 publication, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*. Prins shows how Wharton's presentation of Sappho as "the pure and unmediated voice of a woman poet who is the perfection of lyric song" (16) is predicated on a Victorian view of lyric as solitary, feelingful speech, fortuitously overheard (75). Erasing the nuances of same-sex eros that surround the Sapphic myth, Wharton views Sappho "according to the Victorian cult of ideal womanhood, and in accordance with nineteenth-century Classical scholars who sought to purify Sappho's reputation by construing her as a schoolmistress for young women" (59). In this chapter in particular, Prins's training in the Classics and her reproduction of the Sapphic fragments with her own parallel English translations give her discussion a vivacity and attention to detail that makes for deeply satisfying reading.

The second chapter ("Sappho Doubled: Michael Field") explores the Sapphic imitations collected in the anthology *Long Ago* (1889) and published under the pseudonym "Michael Field" used by Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. This aunt and niece, who regarded themselves as a married couple, collaborated to produce lyrics that are less the representation of the unmediated single voice Victorian poetics anticipated in lyric than a poetic field mediating between the two lovers. Instead of reading Field's Sappho as the paradigm of a new language of dissident desire originating from a lesbian identity, Prins argues that Bradley and Cooper "use Sappho's fragmentary text to turn writing into a homoerotic topography: a graphic field rather than a sublimated figure" (99). In so doing, Prins foregoes the force of an overtly political argument—for instance, that Bradley and Cooper write lyrics identifying Lesbian Sappho as lesbian Sappho—and argues more subtly that they pursue the exploration of a discursive field and enjoy the mutual pleasure to be had from collaborative lyric play.

Chapter 3, "Swinburne's Sapphic Sublime," marshalls Longinus's treatise on the sublime to read the Sapphic imitations of Algernon Charles Swinburne

as a display of rhythms whose memorization by the poet was mediated through the floggings he received in his schooldays at Eton. Once again, Prins's Classical erudition gives rigor and substance to her argument. Pointing to the way Greek metrical terms are drawn from bodily names ("Greek colometry described different kinds of meter by measuring poetry into body parts such as *kola* [legs], *podēs* [feet], *daktyloi* [fingers]" 114), she shows how Swinburne's Sappho is undone by the rhythms of "love, the loosener of limbs" (*eros lusimeles*) even as she, Sappho, uses those rhythms to fragment and dismember her cruel lover, Anactoria.

In later poems, such as "On the Cliffs," Swinburne performs a metalepsis of "Anactoria," a "revision and self-reversal" (135) characteristic of his later verse, presenting an abstract meditation on Sappho's capacity to induce sublime transport in the speaker. Following Isobel Armstrong's observation that Swinburne's poetry tends toward a radical materialism, Prins argues that his later lyrics refuse the organic reading of meter presented by Coventry Patmore and offer another account that "makes the body legible only through the counting of marks and the measuring of intervals between: a formal abstraction" (121).

The fourth and final chapter, "P. S. Sappho," traces the tradition of nineteenth-century women poets who return to the Ovidian Sappho, flinging herself from the Leucadian Cliff, and use this as the image of suffering woman—the image bequeathed to the "Poetess" in Victorian England. In this chapter, Prins is at her very best when she combines subtle theoretical insights with Classical and cultural expertise to demonstrate what is politically at stake in particular rhetorical choices. An especially forceful instance of this occurs towards the end of the chapter, when she complicates Mary Poovey's strategy of reading Caroline Norton's "Defense" (*English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*) according to the model of a melodrama. Prins suggests that

Norton's circulation in the public sphere depends even more on a lyric model, precisely because sentimental lyric is the genre for personifying the poetess as "private sufferer of private wrongs." Without presenting herself in "explicitly political terms," the poetess has the implicitly political function of representing public concerns as if they were private, demonstrating the ideological work of lyric as well as the ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England. To become "an articulate spokesperson in the public sphere," Norton is transformed not *from* but *into* "the private sufferer," a lyric persona that complicates the politics of voice in Poovey's account. (223)

Admittedly, the reader who is not invested in the theory of lyric may find that occasionally there are moments in this book when Prins's fascination with the

paradoxes of rhetoric stalls the momentum of her argument so that her own rhetoric takes on the quality of an incantatory declension. For instance, the concluding pages of her final chapter are devoted to showing how the narrative of progress that circulates around the name of Sappho is “also an infinite regress, a falling back through history toward a moment in the (future) past, when Sappho is yet again lost” (227). Such logical oscillation may be intriguing, but precisely what the ideological stakes are in repeatedly following this dynamic is less certain.

Victorian Sappho is no light read; the demands it makes on its reader are the effect of Prins’s determination not to compromise her study of Sapphic lyricism by simply polarizing the various interpretive discourses she brings to bear on this field. Instead of earning the easy dividends of polemic by setting a formal, rhetorical argument against historical interpretation, or privileging a political debate over attention to its aesthetic representation, she chooses to weave together a wider range of interpretive threads giving this work rare intensity and substance. One might say that Prins’s *Sappho* stands as testimony to the interpretive subtlety that can be achieved when seemingly incompatible critical discourses are held together in a finely calibrated and mutually informing alliance.

Julia F. Saville
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus by Susannah Heschel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. 336. \$48.00 cloth; \$19.00 paper.

In this illuminating study, Susannah Heschel sheds new light on the figure of Abraham Geiger, a leading rabbi of Reform Judaism and brilliant scholar of philology, history, and theology. Heschel’s book reveals the complexity of Geiger’s position within German theological circles. While Geiger was marginalized within the academic community as an independent scholar, the boldness of his work commanded the attention of mainstream Christian theologians and landed him squarely in the center of the leading theological debates of his era. Through a careful and comprehensive analysis of Geiger’s work and its reception, Heschel gains access to the larger issues of Jewish-Christian relations in Geiger’s day, laying bare the implications of scholarly debates for Jewish and Christian self-understanding. Heschel overturns the prevailing image of nineteenth-century Jewish historiography as apologetic, casting Geiger as a pioneering Jewish scholar who aimed at nothing short of a fundamental reevaluation of the role of Judaism in the development of Western civilization.