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Victorian Sappho

Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 267. \$18.95 (pb).

Review by

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Scholarship on Sappho has been greatly enriched over the last five years by the appearance of several notable works on the elusive Lesbian poet, such as Ellen Greene's *Reading Sappho* and *Re-Reading Sappho* (1997), Germaine Greer's *Slipshod Sibyls* (1995) and Page DuBois' *Sappho Is Burning* (1995). Now Yopie Prins, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, has written an ambitious new book that seeks, among other things, to identify and deconstruct the Sappho we have come to know today by revealing the Sappho who was essentially created by the Victorians in late nineteenth-century England. Prins goes beyond an analysis of Sappho the poet and her works as they have come down to us via the Victorians, though she does a remarkable job of this difficult task as well; in the process of uncovering the Victorian Sappho, Prins also re-reads and revises Victorian literary history from the perspective of feminist and poststructuralist literary theory: "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. It is therefore not my interest to refute any particular reading of Sappho, but rather to spell out the implications of writing in the name of Sappho, in the last century and at the end of our own" (pp. 7-8). Prins sets out to achieve this ambitious goal by "declining" the name of Sappho to "develop an approach to reading lyric that is both rhetorically and historically inflected by gender" (p.21). Prins states that "Sappho is associated with the question of voice in a way that binds together gender and genre inextricably: through Sappho we can trace the gendering of lyric as a feminine genre, not because we assume she was the first poet to speak as a woman, but because the assumptions of voice in lyric reading produces Sappho as a feminine figure that does not speak" (p. 27).

In Chapter One, "Sappho's Broken Tongue," Prins begins with the dilemma that plagues all scholars of ancient texts: we as modern readers are distanced from Sappho's words twice over, first by the fact of the words on the page, written and therefore detached from Sappho's own voice, and then by the ravages of time that have fragmented and obliterated much of what was presumably Sappho's original poetic intent. Prins points out quite correctly that what is left to us is "no longer a living voice or even a body of writing, but an assortment of decomposing texts, dead letters in a dead language" (pp. 23-24). Nonetheless, we yearn to recapture the living voice and we proceed to do so by a form of "riddling": "we ask a question about voice that we answer by projecting voice

into the fragments in a circular conundrum” (p. 25). Prins demonstrates her theory with an adroit analysis of Sappho’s fragment 31, which has been imitated, interpreted and evoked by poets from Catullus down to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Chapter One ends with an examination of the impact of Dr. Henry Wharton’s 1885 edition of Sappho’s works, a text that crested the wave of the Sapphic revival for the Victorians. But Wharton’s edition, Prins posits, did less to revive Sappho’s own poetic voice than to establish Sappho’s “afterlife in translation”: “not the reclamation of Sappho’s voice but the breaking of that tongue in other tongues, recorded in a book that will therefore ‘beget other good books’” (p. 73).

From here Prins goes on to examine some of these “other tongues.” In her discussion of “Michael Field” (Chapter Two), the nom de plume of a rather unconventional aunt and niece, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who lived as a married couple and composed and published poetry together under this single masculine name, Prins uses fragment 2 as a “point of departure for reading a ‘lesbian’ topography in the[ir] lyrics” (p. 174). In Chapter Three, Prins offers a reading of fragment 130 to explicate the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, the “most Sapphic of Victorian poets” (p. 112).

In Chapter Four, “P.S. Sappho,” Prins moves beyond using Sapphic fragments as the basis for her analysis of Sappho’s translators and imitators and seeks to demonstrate “how a theory of lyric reading in which Sappho is continually declined also delineates a logic played out in literary history” (p. 174). In the 19th century the name “Sappho” denoted not only the ancient Lesbian poet but also a generic “Poetess” in England and America, the personification of a feminine poetic voice, with “feminine” meaning essentially “personal and sentimental.” Thus the declension of Sappho’s name that Prins has carried on through her discussion up to this point takes a literal turn in this chapter as the significance of Sappho’s name lessens, falls in importance: “Women poets seem to descend from Sappho, but decline the name only by falling — ‘from Sappho downwards’ — and ‘through all changes of sentiment’ — into namelessness” (p. 174). It is also in this chapter that the most trying aspect of this rigorous and intelligent book reaches its culmination, for this reader at least: Prins writes in a relentlessly and aggressively poststructuralist argot that sometimes seems deliberately obfuscating, such as the following:

The versing of Sappho in nineteenth-century women’s verse proves to be a complex rhetorical performance of historical consequence, precisely because the groundless figure of Sappho — forever falling — foregrounds the problem of reading this occasion as a singular historical event. Instead of transmitting a certain history, the repetition of the trope [for performing the infinitely repeatable loss of the ‘Poetess’] points to the entry of the Poetess into history as an always uncertain event. (pp. 175-176).

The sentences above present a complicated series of ideas and therefore perhaps require commensurably complicated language, but surely there is a more lucid and accessible way of expressing the basic notion that because Sappho represents a “phenomenon that never was” who vanishes upon closer scrutiny, the Victorian women

poets who “verse” Sappho (from *vertere*, to return to again and again) condemn themselves to disappear just as “Sappho” disappears, and therefore never amount to a real “historical event.” It may be impossible to separate the theoretical language from the application of the theory itself, but at many points in Prins’ narrative the reader frustration grows in the process of unpacking the jargon. Prins’ ideas are complex and her erudition is evident, but it is a shame that her obscurantist language will prevent many who would benefit from her learning from reading her book.

In her conclusion, Prins suggests provocatively that her book could be read and could have been written in reverse, therefore producing a “chronology of Victorian lyric through the figure of Sappho” (p.246) rather than the image of Sappho as it arises from the appropriation of her voice and persona by the Victorians. This fluidity and interconnectedness characterizes Prins’ entire book, which emerges as a complex study of how literary history itself can and probably should be reread and rewritten. Scholars of Sappho, critics of Victorian poetry and those interested in the construction of literary history will all find ample rewards in *Victorian Sappho*. It is a difficult, ambitious and imaginative text that will surely influence the way we “read” Sappho from now on, and Prins’ conclusions about Sappho will just as surely generate much debate for those who have the patience to unearth them.