

Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999. 256 pp. Cloth \$55.00, Paper \$18.95.

This book provokes a mixture of gratitude and exasperation, delight and outrage. It is intelligent, informed, often illuminating, finely illustrated, and beautifully written; it is also bizarrely organized, and, in the end, painfully predictable. Yet it is an important work and may become influential.

Victorian Sappho offers “a deconstructive critique of lyric” coupled with a mode of gender criticism which Prins describes as feminist (p. 20), but a great deal of the strength of the book lies in Prins’s ability to deploy a variety of critical approaches. For one thing, this critic is knowledgeable about Greek literature and can deal with it in the original, an ability too often lacking in students of Victorian hellenism. Within each of the first three chapters, an analysis of a fragment by Sappho is used as the basis for an argument about poetics, usually informed and enriched by an interpretation of specific Victorian poems. Chapter 1 provides much of the theoretical basis for Prins’s argument, as she examines fragment 31—both the Greek text and a wide variety of translations—in order to question “the assumption of lyric voice” (p. 174); Chapter 2, on Michael Field, uses fragment 2 as a point of departure for examining selected texts from *Long Ago* which expose the monolithic concept of lyric identity as problematic. Chapter 3, on Swinburne, turns fragment 130 into an instrument by which Swinburne’s Sapphic poems and poetics can be read as achievements in deconstruction. Chapter 4 examines the Romantic and Victorian tradition of poems on Sappho by women; Prins discusses works by Mary Robinson, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Christina Rossetti, Caroline Norton, Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Mary Catherine Hume, and Catherine Amy Dawson. The critic argues that in these texts, which respond to the Ovidian legend of Sappho’s suicide—her leap off the Leucadian cliffs, for love of Phaon—Sappho is presented as a figure for Woman, but that the ideas of Woman and of the poetess are deconstructed to the point of vacuity; the poems become “written evidence of being NON-EXISTENT” (p. 225, Prins’s emphasis). Finally, in a conclusion appropriately entitled “Epitaph,” Prins interprets Sappho’s fragment 55 to deconstruct the reader—a gloomy if tidy ending.

The quality of individual close readings in this volume is often very high. Most satisfying is Chapter 2, on Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper—the extraordinary aunt and niece who signed their work “Michael Field”; their collaboration was, of course, in itself a challenge to the concept of lyric as the utterance of a single private voice. Prins illuminates Bradley and Cooper’s aesthetic of intimacy by quotations from their pub-

lished and unpublished journals, and by analysis of images (the deliberate parallelism, for instance, between a miniature portrait of Cooper and a similar image on the front cover of *Long Ago*). Most crucially, Prins analyzes specific texts from *Long Ago* itself, weaving into the commentary the Sapphic and Fieldian tropes of garlanding and knotting. Even in the wedding poems which seem to reinforce a heterosexual norm, the critic teases out “Field”’s delicately subversive techniques; in Poem 42, for instance, the groom “exists only to be invoked, and the very structure of invocation renders him absent. . . . Here the Victorian ideology of marriage—as a complementary relationship between husband and wife, with her defined only in relation to him—is reversed: he is defined only in relation to her” (p. 90). And, as we might expect, Prins has a field day with Poem 52, on Tiresias—“a poem written by two women (Bradley and Cooper) writing as a man (Michael Field) writing as a woman (Sappho) who writes about a man (Tiresias) who was once a woman” (p. 92).

The chapter on Swinburne was perhaps bound to please me less; one is always crankier and more difficult to please in relation to one’s special field. Generally, however, it did seem that Prins writes with discrimination and brilliance where what Swinburne says fits in with her argument; but where what he says contradicts her thesis, her argumentation becomes slippery and evasive. As I have repeatedly remarked in reviewing Swinburne criticism, year by year, in these pages, deconstructionism is an effective tool for engaging with Swinburne’s early lyric work, but it works poorly with most of his later poetry; luckily for Prins, “Anactoria” and “Sapphics” are early texts, but “On the Cliffs” is not, and her analysis of “On the Cliffs” fails despite making some useful points. If Prins had read those works of Swinburne criticism which challenge her assumptions as carefully as she has read those espousing a deconstructionist perspective, she would have found in Meredith B. Raymond’s fine volume *Swinburne’s Poetics: Theory and Practice* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) an analysis of the various kinds of memory within the poem (pp. 52-74) which might have saved her from serious errors of interpretation.

Prins’s analysis of the early poems is generally more convincing, particularly on the ways in which loosening limbs, dissolution, and the loss of self in the sea become figures for “pure rhythm” (p. 119); yet even here she is often carried away by her own ingenuity. For instance, among the many illustrations is a reproduction of one page from a draft of Swinburne’s “Anactoria” (fig. 7), which is, as Prins justly says, “an extraordinary visual spectacle”; it brings forcibly to mind the heartfelt appeal of Swinburne’s sister Isabel: “Oh, Clara, if you would but teach dear Algernon how to type, how delightful *that* would be!” (Clara Watts-Dunton, *The Home Life of Swinburne* [London: A. M. Philpot, 1922], p. 220). However, Prins goes

much too far in declaring that this draft

puts the text on display like a *corps morcelé*. . . . Line 9, for example, disintegrates under the pressure of Swinburne's revisions: "<Severed the> <Divided> *Severed the* bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves." What is severed, divided, and severed again is the "body" of language itself, disarticulated in the assertion of its own severing. (p. 117; italics Prins's)

In fact, what we have on this sheet is a draft which Swinburne never intended to put on display; line 9 is not disintegrating but being polished to take its place and perform its function in the poem—to articulate as fully as possible a fantasy of the lovers' destruction. If this draft severs and divides "the 'body' of language itself," one must assume that any kind of thorough revision leaving traces on the page would do the same—a statement which would be patently absurd.

The most disturbing feature of the Swinburne chapter is to me Prins's insistence on the idea that flagellation "proves a necessary initiation rite for poets" (p. 151)—that, because Swinburne does frequently connect the rhythm of flogging with the rhythms of verse, the former is needful for the production of the latter. Prins makes this point repeatedly: "through rhythmic beating Swinburne learns to internalize the beat of poetry"; "these cuts and scars also account for Swinburne's metrical virtuosity"; "it is precisely by submitting to [the rule of the birch] that he has a 'gift' for verse—not freely given, but strictly imposed by the headmaster at school" (pp. 122, 151). This is manifestly ridiculous, whether we are meant to attribute these bizarre views to Swinburne alone or to Prins as well. One is tempted to inquire why other much-beaten Victorian schoolboys failed to become metrical virtuosi of Swinburne's type, or whether a Swinburne not exposed to corporal punishment might not have learned to write poetry anyway. To do Prins justice, her reading of Swinburne's rhythms has a basis in Swinburne's own writing. In *The Flogging Block* he does say: "Most the Nurslings of the Muse require / The Lash that sets their lyric Blood on Fire, . . . / Till Heart & Head the rhythmic Lesson learn" (quoted p. 152). These lines, however, appear in a set of pornographic mock-pastoral eclogues; they are meant to arouse the reader and to be funny. To take them as expressing a central principle of Swinburne poetics shows a failure to appreciate the poet's mischievous sense of humor. Nowhere in his serious work does he make so absurd an assertion, although the connection Prins makes between his undoubted algolagnia and the cultural force of the Longinian sublime (p. 122) is luminous as well as provocative.

The chapter on the Sappho tradition in Romantic and Victorian women's poetry is perhaps, overall, the least convincing in the book, yet it contains much that is valuable. Having explained how the "history of Sappho's reception is determined—indeed, predetermined—by [the]

Ovidian narrative” of her heterosexual passion and her suicide, Prins goes on to suggest that “nineteenth-century women poets . . . adopt the Ovidian model . . . in order to reflect on the rhetorical predicament of the Victorian Poetess who is expected to write *as a woman*” (pp. 178, 179; italics Prins’s). Prins offers a fine analysis of “Sappho’s Song” from Landon’s *The Improvisatrice* (pp. 193-195), and a thoughtful defense of sentimental lyric: often criticized for lacking “an authentic lyric subject,” poems by Landon and Rossetti provide instead a “canny inscription of literary convention as itself a subject for reflection” (p. 203). We are also shown how Caroline Norton (employing the male pseudonym of Pearce Stevenson) ingeniously presents herself “simultaneously as female victim (Mrs. Norton) and male defender (Pearce Stevenson) in ‘A Plain Letter’” (p. 222); the section on Norton (pp. 210-225) is one of the most exciting and persuasive passages in *Victorian Sappho*, demonstrating how the disempowered and seemingly disempowering position of the sentimental heroine could be an effective weapon in the struggle for legal identity. Further, Prins’s account of the Sappho texts by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Mary Catherine Hume, and Catherine Amy Dawson is highly interesting; I confess that all three of these authors were unknown to me before I read this book. Particularly striking are Hume’s 1862 attack on the sentimental construction of Sappho, and Dawson’s epic poem *Sappho* (1889), in which the Greek poet appears as a visionary looking forward to the liberation of woman and to general social justice.

Yet it is just at this point that Prins’s somber bias becomes so painfully obvious as to undermine her general argument. Increasingly, as the book proceeds, we find that every text, every reading and revision of Sappho, every work of art analyzed—in short, virtually every phenomenon which falls within the purview of this wide-ranging work—is always interpreted in the same way: it illuminates a fragmentation, a collapse, a decline. Repeatedly Prins tortures a text to force it to generate this predetermined meaning. Wharton’s practical decision to place the most nearly complete works by Sappho (those most important for their influence, and most attractive to the reader) at the beginning of his edition, and save the most fragmentary for the end, is made to suggest the “disintegration of the textual whole,” decomposing “the Sapphic corpus into a body of dead letters” (pp. 68, 72). Swinburne’s declaration that Sappho is “the very greatest poet that ever lived . . . judging *even* from the mutilated fragments” (italics mine) is twisted to suggest that, “according to Swinburne’s sacrificial logic, Sappho is ‘nothing less’ and ‘nothing more’ than the greatest poet *precisely because* nothing survives, other than ‘mutilated fragments’” (p. 115; italics mine). Prins in her next sentence acknowledges the existence of the phrase “judging even . . .,” “yet unjustifiably turns it to mean the opposite of what it seems to

imply: this phrase, she claims, “is hardly concessive here, for it defines the necessary condition of Sappho’s afterlife” (p. 115). This is surely not Swinburne’s intended meaning. Again, Prins suggests that Sappho’s very “self-inscription” in line 183 of Ovid’s *Heroides* implies that “even before leaping from the cliff, Sappho has fallen as silent as her lyre”: how can she be “silent” when she is making a prediction? how annihilate her own “Sapphic voice” when she is announcing a self-inscription (p. 177)? I could mention many more examples. At any rate, by the time I reached Prins’s discussion of Dawson, I found myself aware—even as I read how Dawson evokes “the trumpet of Sappho’s feminist prophecy” (p. 241)—that the poem would ultimately be forced willy-nilly to serve Prins’s aesthetic of discontinuity and collapse, her central trope of the suicidal fall. Sure enough, on page 243 appeared all the old familiar spectres of ontological doubt, all the old tropes of “falling backward and lapsing into forgetfulness.” Clearly, mere evidence must not be allowed to interfere with Prins’s thesis.

Prins has erudition, eloquence, and a fine eye for detail. Yet she has inadvertently undermined her own main argument, by overstating her case, and by failing to grapple honestly with real differences of perspective, where they occurred in the texts she discusses. The book’s insistence that “the repetition of a loss or failure” can be “the very means of . . . literary transmission” (p. 245) has some value, but is heavily overworked; the argument that Victorian women poets “predict their own forgetting” and that their success depends on having been forgotten (so they may be recovered and history may be “re-versed”) confusedly identifies what has been as what must be (pp. 245, 243). Christina Rossetti, inconveniently, has not been forgotten—a fact which Prins elides—and this perhaps accounts for the weakness of the section on this particular poet, who contumaciously fails to conform to the imperative of failure and oblivion (“nothing succeeds like failure,” Prins avers [p. 245]).

Luckily in this book the parts are greater than the whole (appropriately enough). The seemingly arbitrary structure of the study contributes to this effect. Chronologically, of course, it would have been suitable to begin with the chapter on the Romantic and Victorian Sappho tradition, go on to Swinburne, and then examine the work of Michael Field, informed as it is by (and resistant as it is to) Landon, Rossetti, and especially Swinburne. Prins declares in her conclusion that she has avoided this approach because she wishes to suggest “an alternate model for literary history and reception studies,” one which “complicates the assumption of historical progress” (p. 246); I would have thought myself that any academic reader nowadays is probably theoretically sophisticated enough to question the “assumption of historical progress,” no matter how linear the argument presented by a critical work. By her eager avoidance of the fiction of “linear progression” (p. 246),

Prins has left some interesting lacunae and omitted to capitalize on opportunities which she herself had created. If the women writers in Chapter 4 present, as she suggests, a significantly gendered approach to Sappho, surely Prins might have reinforced that point by contrasting some of their lyrics with texts by a male—say, Swinburne; but although he appears in the preceding chapter, there are no explicit connections, no significant contrasts drawn between his vision of Sappho and the Sapphic figures offered by Robinson, Landon, et al. Similarly, having juxtaposed chapters on Swinburne and Field, Prins had a splendid opportunity to compare these writers' very different representations of women's love for women; but although the issue of lesbianism arises in both chapters, she makes no such comparison.

Ironically, Prins's work is greatly strengthened by her ability to deal with the historical dimensions of particular issues. For example, in her fine analysis of English translations of fragment 31, from John Hall's in 1652 to the various translations included in Henry Wharton's important volume of 1885, Prins does not merely provide a close reading of each translation and its traductions; she also considers the reception and availability of particular translations, pointing out that Ambrose Philips' 1711 version "is widely read in nineteenth-century anthologies such as *The Household Book of Poetry* . . . and the broad appeal of fragment 31 to women poets in particular leads Byron to ask, 'Is not Philips' translation of it in the mouths of all your women?'" (p. 47). Again, Prins observes that Wharton's *Sappho* "went into broad circulation, reprinted in 1887, 1895, 1898, and 1907," and became "the most popular English edition of the Sapphic fragments by the turn of the century" (p. 52). (In her chapter on Bradley and Cooper, Prins does not neglect to quote their preface describing *Long Ago* as an "attempt to express in English the passionate pleasure Dr. Wharton's book had brought" [Michael Field, quoted p. 92].) An analysis of Swinburne's "Sapphics" is placed within the context of the Victorian debate over accentual-syllabic versus quantitative models for prosody (pp. 146-147). Nor is Victorian etymology ignored: Symons' comments on Swinburne's "natural" rhythms are related to "a nineteenth-century assumption that the word *rhythm* is connected to the regular movement of the waves of the sea"—though Prins goes on to criticize Symons' etymology along with his poetics, arguing against "a tradition of aesthetic idealism that would unify humans and nature . . . by projecting rhythm into nature" (p. 166).

If Prins had given more emphasis to this kind of specificity, this attention to the Victorian context, and had placed somewhat less stress on her central trope of dissolution, *Victorian Sappho* would have been an impressive work indeed. As it is, the book should be a powerful and valuable stimulus (and irritant) to many scholars, and it is certainly a treasure-house

of information and of exciting insights. The indices are thoughtfully arranged (there is one listing references to the Sapphic fragments, and a General Index including topics, tropes, and genres as well as personal names); typos are few, and I have corrected them in a private letter to the author (although I cannot forbear mentioning that women are delightfully and aptly, if inadvertently, described as “midunderstood,” on p. 243). The thirteen illustrations should prove useful teaching tools; it was pleasant to find an etching of Sappho by Queen Victoria herself (fig. 11). Altogether, it is a book which everyone interested in Sappho, Swinburne, Victorian women writers, and the Decadence should read—cautiously.

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The Poems of A. E. Housman. Edited by Archie Burnett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. lx + 580 pp. \$150.00.

The header above might suggest that there are far more poems composed by Housman than readers have known. An extended look into the volume, however, reveals that the poems themselves occupy pages 1-292, and that pages 294-313 contain “Accidental Variants,” followed by 253 pages of “Commentary,” i.e., explanatory notes to the poems, with a nine-page index to close the book. Such blocks of material might seem outrageously disproportionate until one takes into consideration the 100 years of vicissitudes connected with Housman’s publications in verse. Archie Burnett’s devoted labors to the cause of a solid edition should satisfy those long-gone vigilantes of Housman’s texts, Tom Burns Haber and, opposing him at every turn of the road (or page or manuscript leaf), John Carter and John Sparrow. Their interchanges enlivened many columns in *TLS* years ago.

In light of Housman’s caveats as regarded printers’ mishandlings of his work, along with the famous reticences and obscurities in his personal life and poetic practices that have long tantalized Housmanians, Burnett’s excellences in treating texts and in creating useful notes ought not to go unremarked nor unapplauded. He has achieved high summits in both areas. Housman’s own role as an obscurantist anent his poetry is well known. He deliberately destroyed the manuscript of the poem (*A Shropshire Lad* LXIII) to which he alluded during his Leslie Stephen Lecture on *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, a talk prepared only reluctantly and within which he put forth seemingly most unfashionable thoughts concerning poetry and poetics. His will opened the way for his brother and executor, Laurence Housman, to leave available—if in mangled forms—manuscript versions of the poems that, had Housman’s dictates been obeyed, would have been