

Yopie Prins. *Victorian Sappho*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), xiii + 279pp.

“What we call Sappho” was “perhaps, never a woman at all,” as Yopie Prins points out in *Victorian Sappho* (8). Yet the “tenth muse” of antiquity, the figure who is to the lyric poetry what Homer is to epic, has been “transliterated, translated, transformed to produce yet another signature, in many languages over many centuries”(12). In this historically and rhetorically nuanced study, Prins places her own signature on the respective fields of Victorian and Sappho studies, justifying the superlatives on the back cover characterising *Victorian Sappho* in Isobel Armstrong’s words, as “one of the most scholarly and imaginative books on Victorian poetry to emerge in the past decade;” in Joseph Bristow’s, as “a brilliant discussion” of the “lyric shapes” of Sappho in Victorian culture. Much more than a reception study of the “*Nachleben* or afterlife” (13) of Sappho in England — and to a lesser extent, America — in the nineteenth century, *Victorian Sappho* contributes to the history and theory of lyric, studies of Victorian homoeroticism, analyses of both Classical and Victorian poetic technique, and ampler understandings of that contested Victorian cultural category, the “Poetess.” Prins rightly takes issue with one of the most influential recent studies of Sappho’s reception, Joan Dejean’s *Fictions of Sappho: 1546- 1937*, both for its assumption that the English reception of Sappho merely recapitulated the French, and for its relative neglect of the impact of Sappho on the “critical understanding of *lyric*” (14). Invoking “Victoria alongside Sappho” in her title in order to suggest how “figurations of femininity” led to the “feminization of Victorian culture” (15), Prins traces how Sappho becomes an “ideal lyric persona” (14) inflecting the “Victorian gendering of lyric as a genre simultaneously feminine and dead” (51). More originally, she “nominates” Sappho as a “point of departure for a lyric tradition . . . that does not locate the signature within the subject” (22). Through her treatments of Michael Field and Swinburne, Prins also explores the more indirect ways in which Sappho emerged as a figure for lesbian or homoerotic desire in

Victorian England. While the “association” of Sappho with “lesbian identity” is a “particularly Victorian” legacy, Prins emphasises the extent to which this identity must be mapped against the uneven and gradual “public articulation of lesbian as a social category in Victorian England” (94-5). Sappho may have circulated in the underground of Victorian pornography as a flagellating dominatrix (152-3). Yet many translators and scholars of her works either inscribed them within a matrix of heterosexual desire, or cast her as a chaste schoolmistress purely adored by her young female devotees. Thus, even though Dr. Henry Wharton retained the female pronouns for the objects of Sappho’s affections in his influential 1885 edition, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*, he nevertheless “describes Sappho’s circle . . . as if it were an English girls’ school or London ladies club” (59).

Since a principal feature of Prins’ deconstructive approach is denying the logic of originary figures and events, she deliberately avoids the chronological approach “that often shapes reception studies,” opting instead to proceed in a “series of differential repetitions” suggested by Jacques Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context” (15). The punning logic of her innovative structure is aptly modelled instead on the rhetorical and grammatical tropes that figure so prominently in her illuminating analyses of Sapphic texts and their translations. The four chapters of *Victorian Sappho* each propose “a variation on the name” of Sappho, “demonstrating how it is variously declined: the declension of a noun and its deviation from its origins, the improper bending of a proper name, a line of descent that is also a falling into decadence, the perpetual return of a name that is also a turning away from nomination” (13).

Chapter One, “Sappho’s Broken Tongue,” a *tour de force* of textual insight and historical imagination, uses Sapphic riddles and Prins’ own riddling logic to tease out the paradoxes of presence and absence, voice and silence, speech and writing, intense subjectivity and absence of agency in Sapphic fragment 31 (entitled the “Ode to Anactoria” in some translations). This is the lyric of burning desire often approached as Sappho’s signature poem, written in a

period that saw the “historical emergence of lyric subjectivity in archaic Greece” (28-9). Although Sappho and her contemporaries were “among the first to inhabit the first person singular,” according to some scholars, Prins shows how the syntactic dismemberments of fragment 31 *decenter* Sappho “at the centre of her being” to use Anne Carson’s terms (29, 31). Prins finds a similar dismemberment and annihilation of agency in the reading of fragment 31 by Longinus in his treatise on the sublime, which not only transmitted the poem for future generations but also helped define the “terms” of Sappho’s “afterlife” (28). She then turns to consider successive translations of the poem in English and American literary history, including Joseph Hall’s (1652), Ambrose Philips’ influential eighteenth-century translation (1711), Mary Hewitt’s mid-nineteenth-century American rendition (1845), and the multiple versions of fragment 31 in Wharton’s 1885 edition.

Within this tradition, the narrative of Ovid’s “Sappho to Phaon,” casting Sappho as a woman love-struck by a man and leaping to her death from the Leucadian cliffs (43), remained dominant from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Hewitt’s is thus “only one in an endless series of nineteenth-century Sapphic imitations that are written over the dead body of Sappho,” Prins observes, alluding to Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (51). In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s apostrophe to Sappho in “A Vision of Poets:” “O poet-woman! None foregoes / The leap, attaining the repose” (185-6) — although in her letters, as opposed to this poem, it should be noted, EBB focussed more on Sappho’s intensity and immortality than her deathful leap. The “decline” of Sappho traced by Prin reaches a decadent extreme in the edition published by Wharton — an amateur Classical scholar and medical doctor, who embroiders the fiction of Sappho’s voice and biographical identity as the originary Poetess only to decompose the corpus of her works into textual fragments anatomised with zeal of an anatomy student dissecting a corpse (68).

Chapter 2 of *Victorian Sappho*, incorporating articles that earlier appeared in *Victorian Poetry* and *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, considers how the “double signature” of “Michael Field” assumed by Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper in their volume of Sapphic lyrics, *Long Ago* (1889), both “exploits and explodes” generic assumptions about the lyric’s “single speaker” (75). Questioning Angela Leighton’s “biographical” approach to lesbian identity in the poetry of Bradley and Cooper — “as if the lesbian signature exists prior to writing rather than being produced by it”(104) — Prins emphasises the textuality of their eroticised exchange. Given that the “lyrics in *Long Ago* are self-consciously non-original, the textual copy of a voice not their own” (85), the “language of desire developed by Michael Field works against the recuperation of Sappho as unified lyric subject or lesbian identity” (89). This focus on textuality permits Prins to avoid grappling directly with an admittedly difficult question that a biographer or historian might see as central. Were Bradley and Cooper, the aunt and her niece, sexual lovers? (Prins does not address the implications of their manifesto to be “[p]oets and lovers evermore” in “It was deep April, and the morn.”) Instead she evasively, if circumspectly, describes their poetry as “implicitly if not explicitly lesbian” (102), arguing that “[r]ather than identifying with the ‘voice’ of Sappho and assuming a ‘lesbian’ identity, 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 part because it engages so directly with dimensions of the erotic body that remain largely textualised in Chapter Two, Chapter Three of *Victorian Sappho*, “Swinburne’s Sapphic Sublime,” presents a more compelling argument as well as a highly original reading of a Victorian poet who remains too often neglected. “For Swinburne, Sapphic eros is a structure of repetition that allows the body to emerge in the reiteration of its own undoing,” Prins contends, citing Sapphos fragment 130, and its representation of eros as the “loosener of limbs” (113). With her typical subtle paradox, however, she gives as much attention in this chapter to metrical bodies as to erotic bodies (both Sappho’s and Swinburne’s) by exploring the somatic dimensions of

poetic rhythm and the “corporeality of language” in Swinburne’s Sapphic imitations. Swinburne “attributed his metrical virtuosity” to his experience as a youth “when Classical meters were literally beaten into his body,” she points out (122), preparing the ground for a suggestive new reading of “Anactoria” as not only a perversely scandalous “imitation of Sapphic fragment 31, where the body is undone by eros, but also as a rhetorical expansion of fragment 30,” in which the “paces and pauses” of Anactoria’s “feet” form a rhythmical body (127). In the later poem “On the Cliffs,” Swinburne “envisions Sapphic rhythm on an even larger scale” moving from “scandalous rhetoric” to “metaphysical rhapsodies” (135), although the Sappho he “re-cites” is “no longer (if she ever was) a woman, poet, persona, or bird, but purely a recurring rhythm” (140). This rhythm is embodied with virtuoso skill in “Sapphics,” read by Prins as “a dazzling experiment in English ‘quantitative’ meter on a Classical model” (141) influenced by Victorian theories of meter such as Coventry Patmore’s 1857 “Essay on English Metrical Law” (149). Prins’ argument, in part on the basis of manuscript markings, that Swinburne’s flagellant verse embodies a further connection between “meter and masochism” in his poetry (155) is intriguing, if less completely developed. More persuasively, she unfolds a striking extended analogy between the reception of Swinburne’s poetical corpus and Sappho’s. Denounced by some Victorian critics as an “intellectual hermaphrodite” or “sexless maniac” for his transgressions of gender (138), Swinburne ultimately is applauded by Hardy and the Moderns for his metrical virtuosity. Like Sappho, he becomes read as “the very embodiment of lyric poetry” (156) — although for Hardy as for others he became “not a poet to be remembered” but rather one whose metrical body is almost automatically “memorized” (173).

In “P.S. Sappho,” her final chapter, Prins “interrogates the progressive politics of feminist criticism” by considering how the “decline of Sappho defines a succession of nineteenth-century women poets who are indeed mostly forgotten in the twentieth century.” This is an effacement “already predicted” in their own use of “Sappho as a trope” (174-6), given that “[t]he Sapphic script they follow is always

a postscript," she contends (209). Whereas Leighton and Margaret Reynolds stress the respects in which the "reclamation and revival of Sapphic voice" helped Victorian women poets develop agency and a female tradition (189), Prins underscores the morbid and contradictory dimensions of these Sapphic imitations. The "poetess is identified with the always already dead lyric persona of Sappho:" in effect, with a "non-persona" because the "self-replicating performance of Sappho's suicide in Victorian women's verse is a gesture of de-personification" or de-animation (179). Following to some degree the chronological order she has earlier eschewed, Prins unfolds this argument in analyses of Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* (1796); Landon's "Sappho" and *The Improvisatrice* (1824); two early poems on Sappho by Christina Rossetti; Caroline Norton's "The Picture of Sappho" (1840); Felicia Hemans' "The Last Song of Sappho" (1834); an "Ode to Sappho" published in 1848 by the American author, Elizabeth Oakes Smith; Mary Catherine Hume's "Sappho: A Poem" (1862); and the epic Sappho published by Catharine Amy Dawson [Scott] in 1889. Unlike Germaine Greer in *Slip-Shod Sybils*, Prins does not see the poets or works she treats as transparently sentimental (201-2). She draws out the complex rhetorical effects produced by "excessive affect, or 'sentiment'" in lyric (191), considers how Landon employs the "dead-end story" of Sappho's leap to explore "the ontology and epistemology of woman" (200), and develops some extraordinarily rich insights concerning the nature and function of apostrophe and personification in lyric and in representations of the Poetess as a figure of Sappho (215). These insights emerge with particular subtlety when she explores the connections between de-animating personifications of the Poetess and the "absence of personhood" in the political and legal spheres that Norton grappled with in her personal struggles and her pamphlets on English laws (213). Although Prins amply demonstrates the extent to which Sappho functions as an "over-determined" trope within the "recursive logic of sentimental lyric" (243), *Victorian Sappho* is not without its own over-determined inflections: most notable in the insistent deconstructive "declining" of Sapphic representations as morbid repetitions,

self-negating gestures, erasures of agency, dissolutions of identity, or de-animating personifications. Even when Prins acknowledges the self-conscious socially transformative, prophetic or epic uses of Sappho by writers such as Oakes Smith, Hume and Dawson to convey “a progressive ideal of womanhood that could be projected into the future” or Christina Rossetti’s Christian revision of Sappho’s ending (leaving Phaon for Christ, 207), she ends by underscoring the recuperation of the past and the “infinite regress” of the “dead-end story” (227). Where Prins sees “recursive logic” in such cases, another critic might just as legitimately see revisionary myth-making. The emphasis on the ways in which “Victorian women poets . . . predict their own forgetting” (244) in their representations of Sappho also raises certain questions about the causes of cultural forgetting. Are the Sappho poems Prins treats now “forgotten” because of their own reliance on a poetics of loss or abandonment, as her argument tends to imply? Or does the “recursive logic” in her own repeating exploration of their “recursive logic” draw attention away from social, political and ideological factors that may have contributed to their disappearance from literary history?

Other questions *Victorian Sappho* prompt have to do with the genre-gender nexus that Prins explores, and with her reiterated avoidance of a chronological approach because, as she argues, the “moment when a ‘history of reception’ becomes visible can itself be historicised as a recursive structure” (246). The argument in *Victorian Sappho* concerning “the gendering of lyric as a feminine genre” (3) is complex, multi-faceted and convincing, on its own terms. But “lyric” is a notoriously elastic and ambiguous term, and there are occasions when other generic classifications for the works she examines come to mind that might change the operative assumptions substantially. For example, the rhetorical figures of apostrophe, personification and prosopopoeia that Prins so skilfully analyses are also integral to Victorian dramatic monologues, and in fact, Prins not only alludes to scholars who treat Sappho as a dramatic speaker (32), but also refers (justifiably in my view) to several of the works brought under her lyric tent as dramatic monologues: Swinburne’s “Anactoria” (120,

## Reviews

128), Landon's *The Improvisatrice* (193), and Christina Rossetti's "What Sappho Would Have Said Had Her Leap Cured Her Instead of Killing Her" (205). How might one's conclusions about these poems change if the dramatic, as opposed to the lyric, dimensions within them were foregrounded? And on the "gender" side of the issue, questions arise about all of the uses if lyric forms made by male Victorian poets other than Swinburne (Tennyson, in particular, but also Browning, for example) — not all of which can easily be seen as "feminised." As for the chronology questions, the "series of differential repetitions" that Prins uses to structure her study may possibly obscure intriguing synchronicities left unexplored in *Victorian Sappho*: possible convergences, or contrasts, between Michael Field's *Long Ago* and Dawson's epic *Sappho*, for example, both published in 1889. A fuller engagement with chronological shifts might also uncover changing patterns of engaging with Sappho in the 1850s and '60s, as the Victorian women's movement made its impact on culture and society — including the more socially transformative uses of Sappho that Prins herself discusses in the 1850s, only to pull them back into the undertow of "decline." Prins is right to some degree in arguing that "when feminist literary critics recuperate a history of women poets through the figure of Sappho, they repeat the loss that such poetry anticipates" (244). One wonders, however, if her own erudite, illuminating and compelling study repeats that loss in another way through its insistence on the inescapable plots of the past, and the focus its title conveys on a single "Victorian Sappho" reiterated through "differential" repetitions, not a plurality of Victorian Sapphos.

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