

VICTORIAN SAPPHO. By Yopie Prins. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 278 p.

This book can be characterized as a De Manian account of the reception of Sappho. Quoting one of De Man's essays on Wordsworth where he remarks that "death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament," Prins states that "Sappho is another name for that displacement in nineteenth-century sentimental lyric" (p. 191). Prins distinguishes her project from those reception studies that assume there was an original to be received. She suggests in passing that a person named Sappho may never have existed at all; the name may have been "merely a fictional persona circulating in archaic Greek lyric" (p. 8). However, whether or not she existed is irrelevant to Prins's project, which is concerned with the circulation of the texts, especially of the fragments, in later periods and in translation. This process of circulation, which the circulators saw as evidence of the immortality of Sappho and her writings, Prins sees as one of violent fragmentation, mutilation and decomposition.

According to Prins, this murderous process becomes particularly acute in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, when editors and translators imprint the texts' fragmentation on the putative author's mythical leap to her death, but she sees it occurring even as early as the third-century treatise *On the Sublime* attributed to Longinus. This treatise, which quotes and praises part of a poem by Sappho as a prime example of the lyrical sublime, is one of our major sources for Sappho's writing. As far as we know, in Longinus's time, the fragment was not a fragment; he was quoting from a text that was available. Describing this as Longinus's "commentary on fragment 31" (p. 37), Prins deconstructs his reading to arrive at the conclusion that "He reads the fragment as a living body, only to mutilate that bodily figure; he incorporates part of the Sapphic corpus, only to present us with an already dismembered corpse" (p. 39).

Prins's repeated use of metaphors such as "autopsy," "dissection," "mutilation," "killing," "dismembering," "disintegrating," and "decomposing" to figure the work performed by readers, translators, and editors of Sappho's writings is probably not to be read as value-laden. She no doubt sees herself as performing the same operations both on Sappho's writings and on the writings of others she quotes and deconstructs. Furthermore, she recognizes that it is precisely this process, one that not just Sappho's poems but most other canonical texts suffer, that makes possible both what she calls the "after-life" of the text and also its begetting of other texts. In her reading of the lyrics in the Greek, she even suggests that the text performs its own brokenness.

Yet, as a reader, it becomes difficult to avoid the association of some pejorative value with these destructive-sounding activities she repeatedly ascribes to male commentators and compilers, particularly when they occur in the context of the tradition Prins traces of Victorian women poets who identify their own suffering with the figure of the mythological suicidal Sappho. At times, her insistence on the mutilating process leads to amusing excesses, as when she reproduces a page from the handwritten manuscript draft of Swinburne's Sapphic poem "Anactoria" and claims that his excisions and revisions "put the text on display like a corps morcele with its disjointed limbs scattered across the page, severed and splayed in every direction . . . reveal[ing] how the composition of a lyric figure depends on the recomposition of many decomposing parts" (p. 117). Exactly the same could be said of innumerable manuscripts of poems by other poets (Shelley, for example), where decomposition, revisions, excision, interpolation, and "tortured writing along the margins" (p. 117) all occur in the heat of composition. The advent of computers and of deconstruction have perhaps led us to forget the embodied experience of writing with a pencil or a pen.

As has been demonstrated by Joan DeJean, Emma Donoghue and Lawrence Lipking, among others, one history of Sappho's reception is determined by the Ovidian myth of

her suicide for love of a man. Prins examines the lives and writings of nineteenth-century English and American women poets who appropriated the persona of Sappho, signing their poems, written in the genre of the female complaint or lament, in her name. She also shows how Sappho was identified by Victorian feminists with the cause of suffering women, serving simultaneously as model and as exemplary victim. By repeating her imagined suffering and fall in their writings, Victorian women poets ensure both their own forgetting and their own remembering. Contra feminist critics like Angela Leighton, Prins refuses the teleological narrative that represents women writers as breaking silence and achieving expression by imitating illustrious forebears like Sappho. She follows Tricia Lootens to argue instead that female poets who imitate or are associated with Sappho fall into "the abyss of female authorship where the Poetess proves to be the personification of an empty figure" (p. 184). This fall, according to Prins, is the necessary condition of the formation of a female canon which is repetitively lost and recovered.

In the two chapters most interesting to this reader, Prins examines the relationship to Sappho of Michael Field and of Swinburne. In an extended study of the written as well as the visual aspects of the book *Long Ago* (1889) by Michael Field (the joint pseudonym of two women lovers, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Prins demonstrates how these women, who derive their philhellenism from the discourse of homosexual desire developed by such writers as Pater and Wilde, proceed to lesbianize the male Greek eros. As scholars of Greek, a language not available to most women, they approach Sappho from a perspective somewhat different from that of such minor poets as Mary Robinson and Letitia Landon. Prins shows that in *Long Ago* Bradley and Cooper turn Sappho's writing into "a homoerotic topography" (p. 99) by placing a series of their own poems inspired by Sappho's texts in a complex relationship to those texts. Prins makes the important point that Bradley and Cooper choose to foreground not the famous fragment 31, which had come to be constructed as a lament, but fragment 2, which dwells on reciprocal eroticism and happiness in a feminized landscape. Although she objects to the ascribing of a lesbian identity to Bradley and Cooper, Prins uses the term "lesbian" as an adjective to qualify their poetic enterprise, in such phrases as "lesbian landscape" (p. 103) and "lesbian figure" (p. 104).

In the chapter entitled "Swinburne's Sapphic Sublime," Prins studies Swinburne's life-long obsession and self-identification with Sappho whom he constructed as both a dominatrix and a suffering victim. Prins performs an interesting reading of Swinburne's metrical virtuosity as a disciplinary exercise wherein the aesthetic pleasure of learning and memorizing poetry is inseparable from the pain of punishment, a pain he initially experienced when, as a schoolboy, he was beaten by his masters. Reviewers and critics paid Swinburne the compliment of identifying him with Sappho and praising his talent as Sapphic. Following Thais Morgan, Prins argues that Swinburne's Sappho is explicitly lesbian, and that through her he constructs "a male lesbian body" (p. 112). To this Prins adds that the reception of Swinburne, like that of Sappho, fragments and scatters him, repeating the "self-scattering rhythm" of his work. Reviewers and critics who abused him as emasculated also repeated his work of constructing figures of abuse, ensuring the life of his corpus precisely as they castigated it.

In accordance with the Foucauldian paradigm of the invention of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, Prins attributes to Michael Field the "conversion of Sappho of Lesbos into a lesbian Sappho" (p. 246). In so doing, she does not take account of much earlier constructions of Sappho as a lover of women, for example, John Donne's in his poem "Sappho to Philaenis." Donne's Sappho says she prefers the woman Philaenis to the man Phaon, and goes on to argue for the superior pleasures of love between women. Similarly, the term "lesbian" has carried the meaning of a woman who loves women much longer than Foucauldians would have us believe. Bernadette Brooten has found a

tenth-century example of the use of “lesbian” as a noun to refer to women who practice same-sex love.

Donne’s poem is an example, too, of a type of reception of Sappho, arguably equally influential, which constructs her not as a figure for death but as a figure for an abundance of life. In his early sixteenth-century epic romance, Ariosto lists Sappho among other women achievers, but does not associate her fame with death: “Sappho and Corinna, in whom genius flamed/In splendour shine and are for ever famed”(Canto XX, stanza 1).¹ That this tradition of representation persisted into the nineteenth century is evidenced by Emily Dickinson’s poem “A precious - mouldering pleasure - ’tis - ,” in which she imagines Sappho not as dying, lamenting or falling, but as a living person who comes to life each time her writings are read, as do many other authors male and female: “When Plato - was a Certainty -/And Sophocles - a Man -/When Sappho - was a living Girl.”²

Longinus, who Prins sees as mutilating and fragmenting Sappho’s text (partly because he quotes part of a poem instead of the whole), emphasizes not only the text’s life but also its relation to living lovers. “All this of course happens to people in love,” he says, praising Sappho’s representation of the intensity of desire. The work that this representation might perform for a reader experiencing love, especially a love that has come to be stigmatized, is necessarily unimportant in a deconstructive reading. However, since Prins claims at the outset that “what we now call Sappho is, in many ways, an artifact of Victorian poetics,” (p. 3) it is worth mentioning that today the sign “Sappho” signifies to most people not Ovid’s lamenting woman leaping to her death for love of Phaon, but a poet who wrote about female same-sex love. To that extent, Donne’s and Field’s reading of Sappho has displaced the dominant Victorian reading, and the history of Sappho’s reception by lesbian poets, traced by Judy Grahn in *The Highest Apple*, is arguably as important as that of her reception by Victorian writers of female complaints.

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THE BURDEN OF MODERNITY: THE RHETORIC OF CULTURAL DISCOURSE IN SPANISH AMERICA. By Carlos J. Alonso. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. x, 227 p.

Deconstructionists are known to favor the dismantling of texts and discursive systems, but in the field of Spanish American literary and cultural criticism it is precisely among the followers of Derrida et al. that one encounters some of the current moment’s most ambitious and gifted system-builders. Such is the case of Carlos J. Alonso, who in *The Burden of Modernity: The Rhetoric of Cultural Discourse in Spanish America* further develops the bold and comprehensive reading of the Spanish American literary and cultural tradition first outlined in his earlier book *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony* (1990). In a maneuver that reveals the roots of his thinking in the school of deconstruction, Alonso argues that this discourse is characterized by a set of unbridgeable contradictions. At the same time, in a manner that reflects the more historical orien-

¹ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 2 vols., trans. Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 1:612.

² *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960), 176.