

Victorian Sappho. By Yopie Prins. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999. 256 pp. \$55.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Recorders ages hence?

Come, I will take you down underneath this impassive exterior,—

I will tell you what to say of me:

Publish my name, and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover.

Thus Edward Dowden invokes Walt Whitman in his discussion of Shakespeare's sonnets. What's in these names? Who is W. H.? For even Whitman's *Song of Myself* is "dramatic"; even Whitman's Calamus poems, however revealing, also conceal: "Here I shade and hide my thoughts."¹ Cultured Victorians would not have imagined that an "I" in a lyric poem belonged to a unified or autobiographical self; never mind Tennyson's dramatic monologues (including *In Memoriam*)² or Arnold's melancholy personas, even Wordsworth's prosaic poetry was instantly revealed as "literary" by Coleridge in the *Biographia*. So why is it so interesting to ask—as Yopie Prins repeatedly does in her remarkable book—who is the "I" in this poem?

It is interesting because ideas of selves, personifications, and authors remain fluid, even contradictory. Prins willingly stands at a complex crossroads of identity theories, where one no longer speaks, for example, of "intentionalism" but of "performances." Thus the performance of a sentimental lyric can still outflank and out-know a disparaging critic who fails to take into account the vexed absences and displacements inherent in the history of Sapphic personification. Prins's superb ability to mobilize theoretical perspective together with historical context and detailed interpretive reading comes through spectacularly in her analysis of Caroline Norton (209–25), in which she not only shows convincingly that Norton's rather normal-looking poetry in fact "interrogates the Sapphic persona" but also links this lyric rhetoric to aspects of Norton's public, political prose. Victorian writers had various compelling ways to understand selves, and Prins does, too.

Victorian Sappho is one of the most successful books on Victorian poetry that I have read, and it deserves attention from students of both lyric theory and gender issues. Although Prins constantly questions form, she structures

¹ Dowden, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London, 1892), 402.

² Of *In Memoriam* Tennyson famously wrote that "I" is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him." "Seldom is Tennyson more dramatic than when he is most lyrical" (E. S. Dallas, "The Lyric," in *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry* [London, 1852], 146).

her argument with great care: from a classicist's introductory chapter on Sappho's name and fragments, we are brought to Sappho's afterlife in Victorian texts such as Henry Thornton Wharton's *Sappho* (1887) and Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), to conclude with brilliant readings of Sappho in Swinburne and then in a variety of Victorian women poets. Prins has always her eye on Sappho's republished name, as well as on the various portraits. She works through interrogation, and suddenly renders even minor-looking poems important enough to ask questions of.

The critical methodology here depends on a difficult alliance—an “uncanny coupling,” writes Prins—of deconstruction and feminism. Prins quotes Barbara Johnson, who wondered “whether there is a *simple* incompatibility between the depersonalization of deconstruction and the repersonalization of feminism, or whether each is not in reality haunted by the ghost of the other” (21). Or, as Prins herself formulates it: “I argue that the transfer of personhood to rhetorical entities—especially as performed in lyric—is not the elimination of sexual difference but another way to articulate the historical effects of gender” (21). The conventional, presenced other of deconstruction is metaphysical Platonism. To me, the “discovery” that a historicized sexuality is somehow a ghostly companion to de Man (in lyric above all?) seems more like a professional accident (gender studies following on deconstruction) than an authentic insight amid de Man's blindness. (Beauvoir's gendering of Sartre's existentialist ontology provides a narrative of feminist progress that, it would appear, neither Johnson nor Prins would care to inhabit.) Stylistically, the deconstructive ghost has apparently scared much of the affect out of the criticism; I recall only one outright case of “appreciation” (Catharine Amy Dawson's *Sappho* is “quite an extraordinary performance” [239]). There is, then, the usual problem that attends deconstruction: de Man and Derrida tell us that the author vanishes and that the text self-deconstructs, and these authors then perform their absent selves, in styles that are their own, almost irrespective of what the text is. There is always a problem about authorial representation in deconstructive writing, one that I (always) take to be an absence of admission as much as austere blindness. How much of what Prins has to say here, for instance, can be generalized to other lyrics? How much is simply contingent on the rather peculiar texts with which she is working? Does learning from the poetry of Michael Field—which is written by two women and plays off quotes from Sappho—extend outward to other lyrics? Does the history of Sappho resemble the history of all poetic origins? For there is utter fragmentation at the source of this story. When a text that uses Sapphic fragments deconstructs, does it do so in a different way than a text that draws on Homer or Shakespeare?

The name of Sappho itself is repeatedly foregrounded, analyzed, caused to vanish, yet there are three other proper names that are not, per-

haps, treated sufficiently in relation to hers. Theoretically and generally, the problem is: given such a relentlessly deconstructed, fragmented subject, which seems barely to hold together on its own, how can relationships with others be conceptualized?

1. Alcaeus. Alcaeus is a contemporary Lesbian poet, and in literary histories often mentioned in connection with Sappho. Prins reproduces Alma-Tadema's painting *Sappho and Alcaeus* (1881), where he plays the lyre and she listens. Is her history not haunted by his? I wonder how Prins would discuss James S. Easby-Smith's *Songs of Alcaeus*. Easby-Smith's project is to attempt "what has not yet been done for Alcaeus, and what Mr. Wharton so ably did for Sappho."³ Crucial to Prins's argument, "Wharton's book simultaneously composes a portrait of the woman poet and presents her as a decomposing text" (4). Aren't these same things true of Easby-Smith's book on Alcaeus, published in America in 1901? If "Wharton envisions Sappho according to the Victorian cult of ideal womanhood" (Prins, 59), then Easby-Smith envisions Alcaeus according to the Victorian cult of ideal manhood, the "strong, impulsive, manly, warrior-poet" (22). How are Sappho's heterogeneous fragments different from the fragments of Alcaeus? Prins early on notes that she cannot comment on each and every Victorian Sappho—there are too many—but comparative asides on a few Sapphos that won't quite fit would be helpful. What about, for instance, Frederick Tennyson's *Isles of Greece: Sappho and Alcaeus* (1890)—which generates extended poems from fragments of the two associated Lesbians, a project that overlaps with the end-of-century writing of Michael Field (generating lyrics from Sapphic fragments) and Dawson (generating an epic); the relationship of his textual strategies to theirs, even very briefly characterized, would be most illuminating.

2. Phaon. Now it is certainly not the case that Prins omits Phaon—the obsessive cause of Sappho's suicide in Ovid—as he merits frequent notice, particularly in chapter 4, which tells of Sappho's repeated Leucadian leap in the work of various Victorian poetesses. Yet the existence of Phaon is a bit awkward, embarrassing, I think, since he represents heterosexual passion, and in carefully composed Latin (not fragments of Greek). In this literary history, indeed, prior to Wharton's 1885 edition, the "popular reception of Sappho is primarily mediated by Ovid's 'Sappho to Phaon'" (17). It seems to me that Prins underestimates the presence of Phaon in Michael Field's *Long Ago*; she writes that "he haunts the margins of *Long Ago* as a figure for the ravages of heterosexual desire. Early in the volume Phaon is a prominent figure, but gradually he is banished from the other lyrics expressing desire of, for, and between women in a different idiom" (107). But simply listing

³ Easby-Smith, *The Songs of Alcaeus: Memoir and Text with Literal and Verse Translations and Notes* (Washington, D.C.: Lowdermilk, 1901), vii.

the lyrics in which he appears by name—2, 4, 5, 11, 19, 24, 51, 55, 56—suggests that this “gradual banishment” from the fifty-eight poems requires a more detailed description.⁴ Perhaps a more substantial question, however, is raised by the literary-historical fact of Ovid’s Sappho as an origin; that is, as Dwight Culler showed thirty years ago in a very important article, Ovid’s *Heroides* serve as a source and model for that curious genre (still insufficiently understood) called Victorian monologue.⁵ Prins talks a good deal about the complex “I” of the lyric, yet scarcely at all about the “I” of the dramatic monologue.⁶

3. Victoria. Prins calls “Victorian Sappho” a “double-personification” (14); “I invoke Victoria alongside Sappho, in order to name the second half of the nineteenth century as a time when feminine figures and figurations of femininity contribute in complex ways to the formation of aesthetic categories, and more generally to the feminization of Victorian culture” (15). Perhaps it is just one of the many built-in oddnesses of deconstruction, but it seems strange to pry apart and dismember each lyric “I” as soon as it appears and still manage to say “Victorian” at all. I cannot, the author suggests, generalize about the subject of this poem, but I can about fifty or seventy years of cultural history? In the most explicit definition of “Victorian”—in the passage above—the word doubles up awkwardly as both meaning and time period (i.e., “I take the Victorian time to imply the feminization of Victorian culture”). Normally Prins uses “Victorian” to mark time (she could interchangeably say “late Victorian” or “late nineteenth century”), but there are instances in which she unnecessarily depends on clichés or essences of “Victorianism.” Queen Victoria draws a “very Victorian Sappho” (188); Wharton’s edition is “distinctly Victorian” (4). To try to personify Sappho as a woman with a voice is a “Victorian yearning” (6), which we can replicate in the present century (presumably by a sentimental mistake). Again, while the

⁴ Phaon and Alcaeus both have significant roles in Catharine Amy Dawson’s unread epic *Sappho*, yet Prins mentions neither. Prins says the poem is “written on the model of *Aurora Leigh*” (239), but stylistically the poem seems closer to Tennyson of the *Idylls*, and if there is a four-book model for this classical allegory (with contemporary political implications), one might first venture R. H. Horne’s *Orion* (1843), relatively well known in those days.

⁵ Culler, “Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue,” *PMLA* 90 (1973): 366–85.

⁶ Swinburne’s “Anactoria” and L. E. L.’s *Improvisatrice* are each called dramatic monologues, but the generic naming does not invite theories of dramatic monologue, nor does it distract attention from the focus on lyric and the lyric subject. Is an already displaced (in some degree), nonnatural, nonautobiographical speaker of dramatic monologue not so interesting as a lyric subject that then finds itself “dispersed,” “evacuated,” or “dispossessed”? Or would the rhetorical analysis be conducted exactly the same, whether we call the poem a lyric or a monologue?

generalizations around "Victorian" look odd compared to the infinite complexities around the "I," it must be granted that Prins rarely makes the generalizations. Still, I would prefer an already split or fragmented sense of "Victorian," as Morse Peckham proposed many years ago, and I would certainly expect it in this book. In fact, despite the title, the book takes place mostly in the last third of the Victorian period (Swinburne and after); chapter 4 alone extends throughout the nineteenth century, beginning with Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* (1798) and working eventually on to several American poetesses. Victorian, then, whenever that was.

Yet whoever wrote this book should be warmly congratulated for gathering together these exemplary interpretations, and whoever reads this book will be amply rewarded.

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