

PROLOGUE

The first scholars who tackled lesbianism as a serious topic of research decades ago provided us with an important and useful body of insights and paved the way at a time when women's studies started to flourish and gain legitimacy, at least in the United States. Many of them conceived of their work as a political gesture, a way of granting visibility to a sexuality—or a homoeroticism—relegated to the margins of society and even, up until then, of academia.¹ The present book in comparative literature, which was originally published in French,² comes in the wake of these various studies, but it wishes to address the subject from a different perspective, one situated at the crossroads of literature and history (two disciplines rarely addressed together), of fact and fiction, hence the term *representations* in my new title. It revolves around the notion of Decadence, a literary movement or, more precisely, a state of mind and an era, often referred to as *fin de siècle*,³ the golden age of the lesbian, so to speak. To embrace the scope and the numerous manifestations of the phenomenon, we must be ready for eclectic reading: besides the canonical or classic texts and artworks about which we know, we must also take into account the vast literary and nonliterary productions that many famous authors had in mind or at hand while writing their own masterpieces. Faithful to that principle, I have privileged primary sources and exhumed minor or overlooked novelists, diving into texts that were often published in newspapers or magazines, in order to draw a more accurate panorama of an era in which the lesbian was really born as a person and a character, as a threat and a fantasy, as a figure that could symbolize Decadence with a capital D. In 1888 André Lemoyne declared in a poem entitled “Papillons noirs / Black Butterflies” that sapphism is one of the symptoms of the end of civilization, akin to the decadence of the Roman Empire.⁴

Albert, Nicole G., *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France*

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Dozens of second-rate authors contributed to the development of a Decadent vision that constitutes, in many respects, the foundations of our modern representations of women's same-sex passion, even if most of them were concerned primarily with exploiting the topic. Among these works were also countless "lucrative editions"—in other words, books produced for a mass market—featuring self-proclaimed true stories "in the best taste" and other sensational exposés.⁵ Actually, the books concerned with female homosexuality encompassed a vast literary production of poetry, popular novels, sociological studies, and even pornographic texts. During the years when sexology was emerging as a scientific field, doctors also played a decisive role in the fascination with Sappho's disciples by analyzing their anatomy and their sexuality and, in so doing, granting these sexual outcasts an identity for the first time.⁶ This was no easy task, of course, and the contradictions were multiple. Yet their work, and its subsequent "translation" into public discourse as the century advanced, reveals a scale and variety of fantasmatic investment that few would guess today.

Novelists and protosociologists did not hesitate to draw on those scholarly studies, and they became deeply preoccupied themselves with defining the parameters of "vice," which often meant mapping its progress through the body of the city. In the Belle Époque, if we believe Miss Don Juan, the American heroine of a French novel published in 1904, "the lesbian vice [began] to seem totally natural," but this heroine lived in Paris, the mecca of lesbianism around 1900.⁷ Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, Gertrude Stein, and many other lesbians from English and American backgrounds led a freer life there, far from the puritanism and social constraints of their home countries. Djuna Barnes soon moved there, followed by other intellectuals.⁸ Some of these women were not satisfied just to live openly as lesbians; they also wrote about it in their work, traveling down these forbidden paths, as Sappho had done before them. Yet more often than not, they were written about—by men, who represented the vast majority of the authors who shaped the vision of sapphism in the late nineteenth century. They endowed the lesbian with a whole rhetoric about sexual deviance and tried to track her down in the urban landscape as well as in the underworld and in her most secretive places, to which they bragged about giving readers access. During these decades, the press

kept on feeding the public's curiosity with salacious tidbits. From *La Vie parisienne* to *Fantasio* and on to *Gil Blas illustré*, newspapers served up with relish "the latest scandal from Paris," involving some famous and other not-so-well-known lesbians of the time. Liane de Pougy; Colette, along with her lover, Missy; Émilienne d'Alençon, a music hall singer, courtesan, even a poet in her leisure time, and the last casual lover of Renée Vivien; Ève Lavallière, another famous actress: all rubbed shoulders in the columns of the newspapers, the lesser-known members of the chorus in the background, a bit like high-class prostitutes who fell into oblivion long ago.

Since the 1880s, the great figures of Paris-Lesbos had dared to flaunt themselves in certain areas of the city. Sapphists enjoyed absolute impunity, bemoaned Charles Virmaître: "If legislation were proposed to suppress this evil, which is a gangrene that eats away at us, infests us, and, in a short while, will corrupt all of society, people would protest this assault on individual liberty, because everyone has the right to take his pleasure where he finds it, and besides, women who have this kind of passion are not even guilty of a misdemeanor."⁹ Indeed, a lesbian adulterer would have escaped the clutches of the justice system, since the Napoleonic code tacitly permits all homosexual acts taking place in private between adults; no law—civil or criminal—penalized sapphic relations, as long as no allegations of sodomy were involved.¹⁰ A number of hateful writers called for legal restrictions on lesbian activities and took offense at the morals of fin-de-siècle Paris, where women dressed in men's clothing, and where "a marquise, in demanding pleasure, severed, in one bite, the tip of her tomboyish mistress' breast."¹¹ The experts on female homosexuality, sometimes sympathetic but more often enthusiastic voyeurs, were so numerous that they were accused of being "the great purveyors of Lesbos."¹²

Sapphism provoked such a torrent of writing that one could wonder what its actual visibility in the public space was. If it was discussed openly in the press and in literature, that was, first of all, because it reflected a disturbing view of women. Novels and short stories fluctuated between disapproval and dismay, for lesbians broke the ground rules of love and social relations; a marriage of convenience and even adultery seemed less reprehensible than female homosexuality (fig. P.1).¹³ The prolific Catulle Mendès, who



FIGURE P.1

"There are things . . . that the law tolerates . . .
that virtue bemoans." Marcel Châtelaine,
"Il est des choses . . .," in *Gil Blas illustré*,
January 27, 1899.

was himself torn between outright condemnation, indulgence, and fascination for it, swore that he could not blame “the sincere impudent lips of resolute Sapphos who lust after and threaten the innocence of virginity and the boredom of widowhood.”¹⁴

More than a social fact, yet even more perceptibly taking place then, sapphism was above all a rhetorical artifact in the discourse of journalists, novelists, poets, doctors, and even artists, who depicted the lesbian in numerous guises: young boarding school girls, married women, widows, not to mention prostitutes, courtesans, feminists, or bluestockings. Male homosexuality, being much more taboo, did not have the same popularity. In fin-de-siècle novels, the “pederast” (or gay man) was portrayed most often as an effete, ridiculous, and pathetic cross-dresser. Nevertheless, readers were introduced to both the male invert and the tribade primarily in the first medical texts on sexual inversion, where they were studied together.¹⁵ Subsequently, they would be united in some novels as brother and sister, sham spouses, or friends (fig. P.2).¹⁶

The *tribade* invaded literature around 1880, when the writers known as the Decadents, some descended from the earlier Symbolists, turned toward subjects that smacked of heresy.¹⁷ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, sapphism was hardly ever mentioned. Banished from public discourse by the cult of the family, which was imposed during the Napoleonic Empire, it was broached only in clandestine works. It made a brief appearance in 1834 and 1835 in three characters who, by the end of the century, were endlessly cited as progenitors: *La Fille aux yeux d'or* / *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* by Honoré de Balzac, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier, and *Gamiani*, supposedly written by Alfred de Musset.¹⁸ It may surprise some readers to learn that Alexandre Dumas's novel *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* / *The Count of Monte-Cristo* includes a subplot focusing on the “romantic friendship” (a term borrowed from Lillian Faderman's seminal work)¹⁹ between the rebellious and learned Eugénie Danglars and her “inseparable companion, Louise d'Armilly,” a friend from boarding school. Danglars, whose education and physiognomy “seemed to belong a little to another sex,” fled an unwanted marriage with her friend in an episode presented without a trace of negative judgment by the author.²⁰ Yet in 1850 Théodore de Banville still referred to sapphism very cautiously, ad-



FIGURE P.2

Cover for *Les Déséxués* by Odette Dulac
and Charles-Étienne (1923).

mitting that it was “a terrible and dreadful subject which only the strongest of us would dare touch.”²¹ This did not prevent Charles Baudelaire from celebrating “*femmes damnées*” in 1857, but Banville was right, since the poet would soon be hauled before the courts for that.

Sapphism entered the field of art thanks to Gustave Courbet. In 1864 he painted *Vénus poursuivant Psyché de sa jalousie* / *Venus Pursuing Psyche Out of Jealousy* (or *Venus and Psyche*), a conventional title that disguises a daring intimacy.²² The painting was rejected by the Salon, officially owing to an “administrative procedure.” It depicted a young naked woman asleep on a bed, next to whom a brunette Venus is kneeling, whose nudity is only partially hidden; she pulls back the sheets in order to contemplate her sleeping companion better. Courbet returned to this subject more explicitly in 1866 in *Paresse et Luxure* / *Luxury and Idleness*, more commonly known as *Le Sommeil* / *The Sleepers* or *Les Deux amies* / *The Two Friends*. Although he adopted the monumental format of mythological painting, he did not represent an episode from a legend.²³ For the first time, a modern painter dared to show two naked women intertwined who are neither goddesses nor simple allegorical figures; the scene leaves no doubt about the nature of their feelings, a point that the Goncourt brothers made clear when, not knowing or pretending not to know the official title of the painting, they labeled it “Two Tribades by Courbet.”²⁴ Certainly “friends” had already been depicted in the intimacy of a bedroom, but only in licentious engravings of a very modest size. Courbet’s painting, meant for display in a private home, rejected an intimate format in order to show the viewer the embrace of two sleeping lesbians, almost life-size.

It was the novelist Adolphe Belot, now forgotten, who brought this delicate subject out of the shadows with *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* / *Mademoiselle Giraud, My Wife*. Published in 1870 in serial form in *Le Figaro*, his novel provoked a torrent of indignant complaints from readers, but it became a great success when it was published as a book. Yet it proved rather tame compared to *Méphistophéla* (1890), in which Catulle Mendès gave the lesbian a quasi-epic dimension by making his heroine, Sophor, a character who could have joined the Pantheon of tragic feminine figures in literature if she had not, like her sisters, been doomed to Hell.

When it was reissued in 1903, the writer Rachilde herself gave it high praise in her review: "A work not simply perverse, but extremely authoritative regarding all the types of female emotional inversion, this novel is the father of almost all the novels of this kind, and if we cannot say that Mendès invented this genre, we could demonstrate that the newer writers of the time borrowed certain situations or dialogue from him."²⁵ More stereotypical, and above all more virulent, Joséphin Péladan decided to bear witness to the mores of his time in a series of books pompously entitled *La Décadence latine / The Latin Decadence* (1882–1900). This extravagant human comedy contains no fewer than fourteen volumes that purport to shed light on as many facets of fin-de-siècle perversion.

Sapphism was definitely an overwhelming, even obsessive, topic at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, the lesbian figure has too often been lost in the contingent of femmes fatales, about whom books and essays regularly come out, but she was not just merely one of them.²⁶ The heroine of novelists, the patient of psychiatrists, the target of moralists and caricaturists, the model of painters, and the muse of poets: this book invites the reader to discover the multiple metamorphoses of a figure who symbolizes the first echoes of feminism, of which the *garçonne*, as a figure in art and literature, is the ultimate avatar. The lesbian delineated the territory and the future of an Amazonian femininity for which Decadence attempted to define, with fascination and anguish, its shape in the present and its effects for the future. A new creature saw the light of day, born from the examination of her hybrid and sterile body—a body that is fundamentally unnatural; it was freed from the feminine-masculine divide—and from men. By studying the sexuality of this creature who challenged normative gender roles and crossed boundaries, this fin-de-siècle discourse was already raising issues still debated today. Above all, however, is the question: How did the lesbian, seductive or frightening, grandiose or pathetic, manage to be demonized and poeticized at the same time? That is what this book tries to answer.