



Lesbian Decadence: representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France. NICOLE G. ALBERT. Trans. NANCY ERBER & WILLIAM PENISTON

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BOOK REVIEW

Lesbian Decadence: representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France, Nicole G. Albert, trans. Nancy Erber and William Peniston, New York, Harrington Park Press, 2016, 380pp. US\$85.00, ISBN 9781939594075

In 1986 Catherine van Casselaer published a ground-breaking book, *Lot's Wife: lesbian Paris, 1890–1914*, the first study of 'Paris–Lesbos'. Strangely, both book and author appear to have vanished away, being listed neither by Amazon nor by ABE when consulted in April 2016; and it must be the only relevant book not mentioned by Nicole Albert in the bibliography of her remarkably learned and dispassionate work on the same subject. Her approach, however, differs from that of van Casselaer, for whereas the latter's was chiefly a narrative account of prominent lesbian women, Dr Albert is more interested in the intellectual climate in which lesbian women were celebrated, as her well-argued prologue makes clear. Not that 'celebrated' is exactly the *mot juste*, for at this period, lesbians in literature were rarely, very rarely, portrayed by other lesbians, but were mediated by men whose interest ranged from the prurient to the voyeuristic, from Willy to Proust.

The construction of 'the lesbian' was in fact a male phenomenon. In addition to the gaze, which is well covered in chapter XII, 'Female Spaces, Male Gaze', being turned upon lesbian women for the delectation of other men, it was men who wrote the dictionaries and the medical textbooks, to which Dr Albert devotes considerable attention. It can hardly have been helpful, let alone pleasant, for a lesbian woman to read in a dictionary that a 'tribade', to use the term that was succeeded in this period by 'lesbian', was 'a woman who engages in unnatural relations with persons of her own sex' (*Nouveau Larousse Illustré*, 1898, cited p. 81). 'Unnatural' at once predicates a moral judgement that the new pseudo-science of sexology reinforced, with its programme of pathologising even the most ordinary human behaviour. Nicole Albert explores the terminology in detail, from the classically referenced Sapphic, Lesbian and tribade to the argot of the day, the latter running to over three pages of more or less scabrous terms. It would be interesting to know how many of these survive, and what new ones are current.

The Greek origins of the nomenclature allow an extended treatment (chapters 1 to 3) of the Greek origins of the practice. Alongside the curiosity about Sapphism was a literature devoted to the historical Sappho and her poetry, a fascinating subject in its own right. This too was appropriated by writers such as Pierre Louÿs, whose 'Chansons de Bilitis' were an important influence. Louÿs, for a time a friend of Oscar Wilde's (Wilde dedicated *Salomé* to him), became more and more an erotomane as the years went by, and his *The Young Girl's Handbook of Good Manners for Use in Educational Establishments* would not have been recommended reading at Girton, Somerville or Vassar. This touches on another, and not unexpected, feature of imagined lesbianism, the mise-en-scène of boarding schools and convents. By drawing on some of the conventions of Gothic literature, even including vampirism, such books aligned lesbian literature, and of course lesbianism itself, with the tropes of *fin-de-siècle* decadence; and one does not need to turn many pages of Nicole Albert's book before coming across Félicien Rops, Jean Lorrain, Léon Taxil, Joséphin Péladan and other familiar figures.

I must not, however, give the impression that this book is simply about men's views of lesbian women. Colette, Nathalie Clifford Barney and most of all Renée Vivien are centre stage, although this is matched by some surprising absences: Dolly Wilde, Romaine Brooks,

the princesse de Polignac, the duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre chief among them. These openly gay women were the precursors of the ‘lipstick lesbians’ of our own day, but the connection with decadence has long been uncoupled, so removing some of the *frisson* that this book documents.

The translation by two well-known authorities on the period, Nancy Erber and William Peniston, is fluent without being slangy, though the translation of Albert’s original title—*Saphisme et Décadence dans Paris fin-de-siècle* (Editions de La Martinière, 2005)—as *Lesbian Decadence: representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France* has overridden the more accurate possibility of *Representations of Lesbians in the Art and Literature of fin-de-siècle France*, which is really what the book is about. ‘Lesbian Decadence’ also fixes lesbian to decadence: but not all lesbians were decadent. There is also a self-imposed limitation here—discussion of why it was Paris rather than, say, Brussels, Berlin or Vienna, that became what Catherine van Casselaer called ‘the undisputed capital’ of ‘world lesbianism’ and the conflict that this set up within the ‘moral republic’—but this limitation is a small absence in this wide-ranging and lavishly illustrated study, which also is part of the growing literature on Parisian communities.

The French edition is no longer listed on its publisher’s website, and the Amazon price is an astonishing €293.95, so Harrington Park Press is to be congratulated on publishing this translation, which has also permitted Nicole Albert to make revisions and introduce new material. As for Larousse, my *Nouveau Petit Larousse* of 1969 has dropped tribade entirely.

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