

BOOK REVIEW

Lesbian Decadence: Representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France. By Nicole G. Albert. Translated by Nancy Erber and William Peniston (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016. xix plus 403 pp. \$40.00).

First published in 2005, the updated and translated edition of Nicole Albert's expansive *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France* brings a wealth of cultural context to an anglophone readership. The prologue of Albert's meticulously researched text poses the foundational question infused throughout her discussion of the literature, art, and material culture of the nineteenth-century: "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" (xix). Its reappearance more than a decade later feels especially timely; sweeping popular support for la Manif pour Tous, Ludovine de La Rochère's anti-marriage equality movement, coexisting alongside the mainstream mania for queer French pop culture icons like Christine and the Queens suggests that contemporary French culture remains deeply conflicted over its reckoning of lesbianism, and continues to hold this anxiety and fascination in tension.

The irresolution that marked the fin-de-siècle conception of lesbianism, Albert posits, is in part the outcome of nineteenth-century Hellenists grappling with the impropriety of Sappho's erotically-charged poetry. For these scholars, the *lacunae* throughout Sappho's work mirrored the gaps in her biography; this collective void offered no clear foundation to reconcile her literary brilliance with the scandal of lesbian vice. Albert notes that even as some critics opted to simply theorize two separate Sappho personae—the artist and the libertine—the lasting enigma of Sappho left space for an unresolved articulation of sapphism as both charming and sinister. This same space presented new topographies of desire throughout fin-de-siècle artistic representation. Just as Sappho became an overlay to depictions of French lesbians of the nineteenth century, Lesbos was mapped onto Paris, annexing women's clubs of Montmartre and the secluded corners of the Parc Monceau.

The book's most powerful chapter, "The Half-Women," charts the fin-de-siècle rationales that first posited female homosexuality as unnatural and then found a venue for such deviance in the rise of the Decadent aesthetic. It was inevitable that *la tribade* would win a place of honor in French Decadence,

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representing a rejection of the banality and bodily attrition associated with procreation. Albert astutely contrasts the familiar trope of the maiden, sexually pure and yet in transition to eventual motherhood, with the figure of the lesbian, which emerged as a subversion of the image: an inherently sexualized, but never-to-be-mother woman, eternally free of the debasements of coitus. The literature of the age introduced the notion of half-virginity, women “kept intact by means of sterile embraces that soiled the spirit but left the body apparently untouched by impure intercourse” (227). Here, the text mines real insight in the argument that the nineteenth-century lesbian body incarnates art—the antithesis of nature—and in so doing, creates a frustrating paradox for the male artist:

The lesbian body, in opposing the human race and man himself, tries to escape from the writer-analyst. What role can he play in a sexuality that is based on his negation, since it rejects the male principle, the law of the Logos and of quantifiable ecstasy, in order to put in its place an unrepresentable orgasm, with no beginning and no end, conceived as a kind of challenge to creation? Decadence, itself a literary movement without a future or offspring, was gazing at its own destruction when it contemplated sapphism, the cult of sterility, and the unnatural; secretly, it admired the eschatological stance of the lesbian (240).

Many of the most well-known nineteenth-century incarnations of lesbians are derived from French (male) authors: Verlaine, Baudelaire, Maupassant. Albert’s choice to limit her coverage of these writers makes room for a range of lesser-known sources, with welcome attention to the works of (female) authors such as Renée Vivien, Rachilde, and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus. The effect, it must be noted, is that what *Lesbian Decadence* enjoys in scope, it occasionally lacks in depth. While an authoritative presentation of collected cultural material, the text rarely shifts from a kind of curatorial discussion to the level of analysis; the wealth of research underpinning Albert’s volume is often pressed for a critical interpretation to ground it. As an example, I note the chapter, “The Birth of the Female Invert,” in which Albert inventories the proliferation of terms circulated in the second half of the nineteenth century where once only “tribade” stood. This impressive compendium of nineteenth-century synonyms, euphemisms, and slurs for lesbians (e.g., “garlic-seller,” “*clitoride*,” “to be in the national guard,” 87-91 *passim*) includes intriguing etymologies for the often perplexing expressions. Yet the chapter largely sidesteps opportunities to connect this linguistic explosion to its own earlier claim that the word “lesbianism” was shifting from a descriptor of behavior to a descriptor of identity. “What reality were these terms, borrowed from science or from slang, trying to capture? What fantasies were they meant to embody?” (96) asks Albert in the chapter’s last line. The question is apt, but the reader is left to hope that satisfactory conclusions might be deduced in the subsequent chapters.

Nonetheless, this curatorial approach has other merits that make *Lesbian Decadence* an engrossing read. Albert’s narrative style is at once cerebral and conversational, as conveyed in the conspiratorial enthusiasm of her occasional exclamation marks: “The chapter entitled ‘Sapho’ in Alexandre Dumas’s novel *Le Collier de la reine* / *The Queen’s Necklace* (1849-1850) reveals Madame de la Mothe, left alone in a luxurious mansion, masturbating in front of a large

mirror!" (263). With numerous black and white illustrations and sixteen opulent color plates, *Lesbian Decadence* showcases both highbrow and clandestine visual material, giving the volume an archival quality. For scholars of the fin-de-siècle, Albert brings new complexity to the often clichéd erotic preoccupations of French Decadence. For gender theorists, *Lesbian Decadence* presents an exceptional array of artistic and literary images of the lesbian body, each an iteration of the nineteenth-century French context in which it was wrought.

doi:10.1093/jsh/shy015

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