



Represented by Association of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Issues in Counseling/Division of the American Counseling Association (AGLBTIC)

Hi Mr William Cohen
Your account



Journal
Women's Studies >
An inter-disciplinary journal
Volume 46, 2017 - Issue 5

Enter keywords, authors, DOI €

This Journal



Advanced search

3
Views

0
CrossRef citations

0
Altmetric

Book Reviews

Full access

Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France, by Nicole G. Albert

James Smalls

Pages 515-519 | Published online: 24 May 2017

Download citation <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2017.1325669>



Full Article

Figures & data

Citations

Metrics

Reprints & Permissions



Click to increase image size

WOMEN'S STUDIES
2017, VOL. 46, NO. 5, 515–519

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

Nicole G. Albert. *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France*, translated by Nancy Erber and William Peniston. Harrington Park, 2016.

Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France is Nicole G. Albert's concentrated study of a complex subject and phenomenon—that of the lesbian and sapphism as social, sexual, and aesthetic constructs in French Decadent literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book is an updated and revised translation by Nancy Erber and William Peniston from the 2005 original French version (a reworking of the author's doctoral dissertation) titled *Sapphisme et Décadence dans Paris Fin-de-Siècle*. The subject revolves around Decadence, a late nineteenth-century literary movement and aesthetic state of mind in Western Europe and the United States that valued artifice and subjective experience.

Although mainly Franco-centric, *Lesbian Decadence* attempts to engage an eclectic array of European and American Decadent literature, fin-de-siècle history, and visual representation which focus on the lesbian and sapphism. Albert examines canonical literary texts and images, as well as “nonliterary” or popular productions from newspapers, magazines, poetry, popular novels, sociological studies, and pornographic texts. The author's stated goal is “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” (xii). The book is concerned with the establishment of a lesbian identity through the literary and visual arts as this came into consciousness and weighed on the popular mind in the late nineteenth century.

Lesbian Decadence is divided into three thematic parts. Part I focuses primarily on the person, poetry, and literary influence of the ancient poet Sappho, who Plato dubbed “the Tenth Muse.” Part II considers the literary and visual strategies that medicalize and pathologize the lesbian as a social and aesthetic type. Part III concentrates on the development of the lesbian as a significant textual metaphor reflective of complex gender, sexual, and aesthetic concerns within the context of Decadent literature as a creative genre and enterprise.

The study commences with a pithy discussion of the ancient poet Sappho and the responses, dating from antiquity to the early twentieth century, to her poetry and her sexuality. The book is filled with valuable information about this poetess and her influence in developing sapphism as a literary theme. Albert takes considerable time to ponder the content and meaning of Sappho's poetry and provides information on nineteenth-century writers who attempted to salvage her reputation. Albert's command and authority in the literary history of Sappho and its narrative connections to subsequent writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain, Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pierre Louÿs, and Algernon Swinburne (just to name a few) is impressive. Through various stories from novels, newspapers, magazines, articles, and so on, penned by those fascinated with “the cult of Lesbos” and recounted in Albert's book, the lesbian and Sapphic love evolved into metaphoric emblems of contemporary concerns over crime, urban pathology, warnings of annihilation and/or societal decline. The lesbian became a figure of fascination as well as a symbolic threat to the cohesion of the social fabric, a theme developed in increments throughout the book. The sheer

Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France is Nicole G. Albert's concentrated study of a complex subject and phenomenon—that of the lesbian and sapphism as social, sexual, and aesthetic constructs in French Decadent literature of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book is an updated and revised translation by Nancy Erber and William Peniston from the 2005 original French version (a reworking of the author's doctoral dissertation) titled *Sapphisme et Décadence dans Paris Fin-de-Siècle*. The subject revolves around Decadence, a late nineteenth-century literary movement and aesthetic state of mind in Western Europe and the United States that valued artifice and subjective experience.

Although mainly Franco-centric, *Lesbian Decadence* attempts to engage an eclectic array of European and American Decadent literature, fin-de-siècle history, and visual representation which focus on the lesbian and sapphism. Albert examines canonical literary texts and images, as well as "nonliterary" or popular productions from newspapers, magazines, poetry, popular novels, sociological studies, and pornographic texts. The author's stated goal is "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" (xii). The book is concerned with the establishment of a lesbian identity through the literary and visual arts as this came into consciousness and weighed on the popular mind in the late nineteenth century.

Lesbian Decadence is divided into three thematic parts. Part I focuses primarily on the person, poetry, and literary influence of the ancient poet Sappho, who Plato dubbed "the Tenth Muse." Part II considers the literary and visual strategies that medicalize and pathologize the lesbian as a social and aesthetic type. Part III concentrates on the development of the lesbian as a significant textual

metaphor reflective of complex gender, sexual, and aesthetic concerns within the context of Decadent literature as a creative genre and enterprise.

The study commences with a pithy discussion of the ancient poet Sappho and the responses, dating from antiquity to the early twentieth century, to her poetry and her sexuality. The book is filled with valuable information about this poetess and her influence in developing sapphism as a literary theme. Albert takes considerable time to ponder the content and meaning of Sappho's poetry and provides information on nineteenth-century writers who attempted to salvage her reputation. Albert's command and authority in the literary history of Sappho and its narrative connections to subsequent writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain, Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pierre Louÿs, and Algernon Swinburne (just to name a few) is impressive. Through various stories from novels, newspapers, magazines, articles, and so on, penned by those fascinated with "the cult of Lesbos" and recounted in Albert's book, the lesbian and Sapphic love evolved into metaphoric emblems of contemporary concerns over crime, urban pathology, warnings of annihilation and/or societal decline. The lesbian became a figure of fascination as well as a symbolic threat to the cohesion of the social fabric, a theme developed in increments throughout the book. The sheer amount of extant visual imagery and literary works of the period are used to provide evidence that lesbianism "saturated public and fictional spaces" (75).

Part II of *Lesbian Decadence* begins with a discussion of the origins and development of a vocabulary for labeling

the lesbian and female homosexuality that was mostly drawn from the growing field of sexology. Fin-de-siècle writings expanded the terminologies and a potpourri of words and slang terms were drawn from the medical profession and from popular culture. Much of the Decadent literature that focused on the lesbian and Sapphic love also expressed interest in the classification and hierarchizing of different sexual behaviors and alternate identities. In this context, the reader is given a short yet fascinating history in the employment of popular terms mined from contemporary dictionaries of slang and exploited in decadent novels. A dual vocabulary developed in both medicine (pathological) and slang (popular) to categorize the lesbian. Here, the author underscores the fact that the richness of language of the period was exploited by different writers to varied effects. An attempt is made to determine the motivations for the invention of all these terms for female homosexuality by considering the impact of the writings of Ambroise Tardieu and Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, the former in the context of the criminal justice system and the latter within the domain of prostitution. Of course, the sensational aspects of these studies became of interest to many writers of the period. Thus, medical texts were vital to an understanding of the literary and visual fascination with homosexuality in general and with female homosexuality in particular.

Lesbian Decadence provides many textual examples from Decadent novels penned by known and obscure writers to support the fact that prostitution and sapphism were related phenomena. In them, the former was characterized as an automatic initiation into the latter. Parent-Duchâtelet's writings, in particular, fortified the

association of lesbianism with pathology and prostitution. On the visual side, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's connection to Parisian brothels and his paintings of sapphism are mentioned, as well as images of lesbian prostitutes by the illustrator Félicien Rops. Unfortunately, the author fails to analyze these visuals in any critical depth. Despite this, Albert is astute to note that the merger of the prostitute and the lesbian corresponded to their "double marginalization" (99) in that the prostitute was criminalized, whereas the lesbian was pathologized. Both were associated with excessive sexual activity, and both became popular subjects for novelists and artists.

Building on the discussion of the relationship between lesbianism and prostitution, Albert spends some time focusing on the fiction of the playwright and novelist Adolphe Belot, whose writings were linked to the works of Carl Westphal, a German psychiatrist who classified sexual inversion as a mental illness. Westphal's writings were important for the creation of a new theme in sexology that would heavily influence Decadent literature—that is, the theory that a lesbian was endowed with "a masculine psychosexual mentality" because her "masculine appetites" (108) contrasted with her sexual organs. The works of other sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, underscored this belief. The result was an increase in vivid descriptions of "mannish women" (108) that sprung up in novels, newspapers, and visual imagery.

Lesbian Decadence affirms that the influence of sexology on turn-of-the-century literature was significant, in particular with the lesbian as subject. This kind of literature drew sustenance from the abundant discourse

about the lesbian in scientific studies and combined it with fantasies about sexual deviance. It was out of this combination that the lesbian became a type utilized for a diversity of themes.

Albert further demonstrates sexology's influence in her investigation of the ways in which the lesbian as a sexual hybrid stirred both fear and fascination that paralleled the "changes in women's lives at the end of the nineteenth century as they fought for women's rights, engaged in new activities, and called for different, more practical wardrobes" (137). Here, the question of clothing and fashion becomes important for women's social and sexual identity. Sexual deviation (in)vested in the figure of the female cross-dresser became a prominent theme, fueling gender anxieties and representations inspired by the confusion. The cross-dressing lesbian came to signify "the bankruptcy of sexual difference" (137-38) as well as the bankruptcy of Decadent expression itself.

Cross-dressing in public space constitutes a major theme in Decadent literature. The phenomenon was an intimate part of the change in women's wardrobes and their participation in certain outdoor leisure and sporting activities such as cycling, boating, and automobile driving. For these activities, more and more women began wearing trousers in public, making women's attire more androgynous. The changes in women's clothing, as well as hairstyles, underscored a mannish look that further forced an association with sapphism. This fashion trend among women in general, but among lesbians specifically, was noted by several journalists, writers, and illustrators of the period. Albert recounts passages from some of these narratives to underscore the point that

turn-of-the-century women's fashions "blurred the sexual identity of certain pioneering urban women" (161) and it was lesbians who became the scapegoats for wearing "disturbing and scandalous fashions" (166) that were said to demonstrate flagrantly their contempt for men.

Building further on these themes, Albert uses cross-dressing as a point of departure to discuss the linkage between sapphism and feminism. In the early twentieth century, women's voices on the subject of clothing as a mode of confounding the distinction between the social classes became more forcefully heard via the feminist movement. This movement called both for the freedom of movement afforded by more comfortable attire, and also urged for the liberation of speech and thought. The lesbian, who was believed to have willingly chosen and preferred to wear men's clothes in public, became the ultimate symbol of the threat to male prerogatives. Indeed, and especially in the popular imagination reflected in much of the literature of the period, feminism and homosexuality were linked and seen as forcing a shared agenda. Here, Albert provides several detailed examples of short stories and novels that parallel the connection between feminism and sapphism at the turn of the century not only in France, but in England, the United States, and Germany. It is through the author's exploration of this theme that we begin to see a sustained critical perspective on gender politics linked with the significance of the lesbian as a threatening yet fascinating social type and pervasive phenomenon in both French society and Decadent literature. The lesbian as a menacing third sex and hybrid creature descended from the myth of the androgyne developed into a gender category that "literary Decadence detected in its infancy,

but [that] was also a product of writers' own imagination" (167).

Chapter 9, titled "Deadly Pleasures," tackles another significant theme for understanding the proliferation of sapphism in Decadent literature—that is, the association made during the period between lesbians and drugs/drug addiction. In a fair amount of Decadent literature, drug use and illicit sexual activity were often associated. Lesbians were portrayed as insatiable in their lust for both, so much so that the characterization became cliché. Albert provides examples from an array of novels and poems of this sort. Some of the writers of this material were, in a sense, forced to emphasize the lurid and excessive aspects of Sapphic love in order to get published and attract an audience. Here, Albert takes the realities of the nineteenth-century literary market into consideration. The more sensational the story and the more tragic and self-immolating the Sapphic protagonist(s), the greater the chances that the novel would not only get published, but that the author would sell well and acquire notoriety as a creative storyteller.

A subtheme that also helped boost sales was that of seeking of pleasure through pain as well as the co-mingling of blood and lust—a theme that likened the Sapphic genre to vampirism. Albert contextualizes the literary history of these themes by informing the reader that they are not only heavily rooted in a Decadent aesthetic, but also incorporate elements from earlier romantic and gothic literature. For example, many Decadent writers mined Charles Baudelaire's work to create modern archetypes of the *femme damnée*. Metaphors of "pits, abysses, a fall, a descent into hell"

(219); the idea of immersing oneself in vice, succumbing to evil—all were used in Decadent literature to describe sapphism and the lesbian as a stereotype and archetype of social evil and decline. In Albert's own words, "as a marginal and denigrated figure, the lesbian became, in the late nineteenth century, a frightening incarnation of the modern human condition" (219).

From all that has been said so far, it is clear that there was an overwhelming presence of lesbians in turn-of-the-century literature that may have also corresponded to a rising feminist movement in which the lesbian became a symbol of women attempting to take back control of their bodies and self-determining when and if to procreate. Related to this was the metaphor of lesbian sterility, something that preoccupied the writings of several Decadent novelists. The focus on this literary theme, not surprisingly, coincided with an increase in the number of ovariectomies performed from mid-to-late nineteenth-century France that worried some observers. For the Decadent movement, "the sterile female womb" became "a metaphor for the void," in turn inspiring "despairing flights of lyrical prose" (230). In consequence, the lesbian's vagina was envisioned, both literally and metaphorically, as an abyss and predatory devouring mouth. This too is a theme that finds expression in a host of Decadent narratives that Albert considers.

In part III of *Lesbian Decadence*, Albert embarks on a foray into ways in which the lesbian challenges the Decadent novel as a literary genre and creative structure. It is at this late point in the book that the *raison d'être* of the lesbian and sapphism are most successfully articulated and demonstrated. In this context, the lesbian couple became

an aesthetic device exploited to contemplate various kinds of feminine beauty. Here, the author highlights details from selected narratives that focus on complementary or contrasting physical features such as hair color, complexion, and the physical build of lesbian couples. We are reminded that Decadent artists and writers took their focus on symmetry and identity beyond physical similarities and devised all sorts of symbols for “incestuous twinning” (253) and linking of Sapphic love with ideas of sisterhood. The twinning theme, or “cult of similarity” (253), was dramatized in the Decadent writings and visual images produced by both women and men, and prefigured the idea of a united lesbian community.

The author ends her study by acknowledging the ambiguous relationship that the Decadent movement had with the lesbian and sapphism as unattainable ideals. The lesbian became a complexly layered metaphor for a fin-de-siècle literature. She engages not only gender, but social and aesthetic concerns related to art and society. Through the lesbian as symbol and metaphor of a modern world gone awry, “Decadent authors gazed at their reflections in a mirror, admiring themselves and their authorial self-referentiality” (304–05). The lesbian as a type and sapphism as a discourse allowed women and men to construct their respective obsessive and problematic relation to the female sex, as well as attempting to establish a sought-after direction for poetic and aesthetic definition and exploration.

A noteworthy strength of *Lesbian Decadence* is that it exposes the extent to which lesbian and sapphism as terms, concepts, and identities, proliferated and were exploited in the literary and visual culture of fin-de-siècle

France. Albert clearly demonstrates a breadth of knowledge of the vast amount of literature from this period in which the lesbian as a type and sapphism as a phenomenon are either the main focus or are alluded to. The literary material is thoroughly researched and the scope of the project is comprehensive.

The merits of *Lesbian Decadence* are many, while its weaknesses are reflected primarily in what initially appears as a curious organization of literary themes. We are, from the start, barraged and buried under an avalanche of narrative and visual details that—although impressive in terms of quantity and breadth—initially seem to lack a contextualizing base of the history of the Decadent movement and gender politics from which to draw coherent conclusions. However, the further along we read, the clearer those gender politics within a social context become in accordance with the historical circumstances. Another shortcoming is that the amazing visual imagery accompanying the text tends to get relegated to background illustration for an overwhelming literary or journalistic focus. The book contains numerous black-and-white images and fifteen color plates, most of which are drawings or illustrations that accompanied various texts of the period and contain Sapphic themes. In more than one instance, artwork is presented by both known and obscure artists, most of whom are men, but never critically analyzed or adequately contextualized.

Overall, *Lesbian Decadence* is an uneven study of a fascinating subject revealed through sporadic instances in which the author critically deconstructs a specific text, while in other examples, superficially recounts the plot line without any substantive analysis. In both instances,

however, the intended significance of the text is eventually integrated—in varying degrees of success—into larger literary or representational themes by the book's end. In sum, the book takes an authoritative approach and uncovers a vast amount of literature with Sapphic themes produced during the Decadent movement in France. It is full of interesting insights and does provide a foundation, albeit belated, for understanding modern lesbian identity.

Browse journals by subject

[Back to top](#) ^

Area Studies	Earth Sciences	Health and Social Care	Museum and Heritage Studies
Arts	Economics, Finance, Business & Industry	Humanities	Physical Sciences
Behavioral Sciences	Education	Information Science	Politics & International Relations
Bioscience	Engineering & Technology	Language & Literature	Social Sciences
Built Environment	Environment & Agriculture	Law	Sports and Leisure
Communication Studies	Environment and Sustainability	Mathematics & Statistics	Tourism, Hospitality and Events
Computer Science	Food Science & Technology	Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing & Allied Health	Urban Studies
Development Studies	Geography		
Information for	Open access	Help and info	Connect with Taylor & Francis
Authors	Overview	Help	  
Editors	Open journals	FAQs	 
Librarians	Open Select	Press releases	
Societies	Cogent OA	Contact us	
		Commercial services	

Copyright © 2017 Informa UK Limited [Privacy policy & cookies](#) [Terms & conditions](#) [Accessibility](#)Registered in England & Wales No. 3099067
5 Howick Place | London | SW1P 1WG