



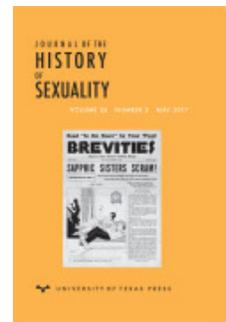
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*Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of
Fin-de-Siècle France* by Nicole G. Albert (review)

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Book Reviews

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, 2016. Pp. xix, 403. \$85.00 (cloth); \$40.00 (paper).

This is, in the first instance, a richly erudite work that asks to be read as a work of literary history, simply requiring literature to be understood in its broadest sense: “I have privileged primary sources and exhumed minor or overlooked novelists, diving into texts that were often published in papers or magazines,” writes Albert in her prologue (xii). By plunging into such archives she has produced an invaluable collection of representations, verbal and pictorial, of what was understood in late nineteenth-century France by sapphism (or Lesbos). The richness of the collection is, however, unconstrained to the point of being somewhat disorderly, as the author struggles to give a properly analytical shape to the whole. The book becomes in effect a compendium of material loosely gathered under topical headings.

An example of the problem is Albert’s description of the lesbian’s glance: “We could go on with examples showing the unhealthy, even inhuman essence of the lesbian that is concentrated in her burning glance” (121). It would indeed be easy for the author to “go on,” given the wealth of representations she has at her disposal, but just why and how that kind of glance might be a particular quality of the lesbian is hardly considered. Another topic among many is “an entire stock of suggestive imagery us[ing] the tandem bicycle to associate cycling with sapphism” (157). The claim itself is convincing, given the archival evidence adduced, but the author fails to discuss the kind of thematic “association” that might be involved here or the actual propositions that might be “suggested” by the images. Almost no analytical work is undertaken to show how the burning glance or the tandem bicycle or a dozen other topics might together constitute a thematically organized set of qualities. Each part of the collection is simply

put forward as an object of interest. More demanding historians of sexuality might be moved to ask what they will actually learn, if anything, by reading this book. The answer is that, while it may seem to them that much interpretive work is still to be done, they will at the very least be confronted by a pile of literary material showing how extensive, indeed how intensive, the theme of sapphism was in published texts of the time. Beyond that, they will largely be left to do their own rummaging.

The central difficulty for demanding readers is that the book appears not to be shaped by a precise set of research questions. In the prologue, a potentially far-reaching question is formulated: "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). Unfortunately, there is little evidence of any sustained interpretive "trying" in that regard. Interesting questions may arise from time to time, but they do so more or less incidentally. The author refers to novels of the time, including those of Jean-Louis Dubut de Laforest, as "collages of sorts, pasting together layers of dedications, epigraphs, prefaces and postscripts, appendices and supplementary material, footnotes and inserts" (127). That is eminently true of Dubut's writing and of many other texts produced in the same milieu, but one can only consider it unfortunate that Albert's essay itself often appears to participate mimetically in the same aesthetic and in the same loose organization of thought.

Precisely because she is surrounded by a profusion of authentic material, the author is able to provide what might be called a performance of cultural context. She cannot fail to be aware, for example, of the complicated relationship existing at the time between medical and literary texts. But while the essay does indeed resound with echoes from the first kind of writing to the second, the author hardly begins to reflect on substantive questions raised by the circulation of themes across such a wide range of texts. Her initial statement about the matter is that "sexologists had an enormous effect on fin-de-siècle literature, thanks to the popularization of their work" (120). At this point, fiction is said to follow science, just as twenty-first-century readers might have expected: "Doctors led the way and novelists followed" (120). But passing commentary a few pages later introduces a tension that remains unresolved in the book. An eminent medical figure, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, offers as proof that "sexual inversion cannot be rare" the fact that "it is a frequent subject in novels" (132). Here, at the very least, fictional representation offers a stimulus, if not a lead, to medical science, and in the pages that follow the novels of Gautier, Zola, and Balzac are given primacy for the manner in which they helped to shape the thinking and writing of medical people. Psychiatrists, we are told, "often adopted dramatic devices . . . and their literary style sometimes mimicked that of popular fiction" (133). Important questions of genre that are of direct interest to scholars of literary studies ought to

have arisen at this point, but they are not asked. Discussing the work of influential popular novelist Armand Dubarry, the author notes Dubarry's generic characterization of his texts as "passionate psychological novels," adding parenthetically, "whatever that meant" (126). While it may not be the task of a serious literary historian to admire the novels of Dubarry, which have been deservedly disparaged in recent critical writing in English that is not cited in this book, it surely is to make some attempt to understand the discursive context in which the "passionate psychological novel" could rehearse conventional stereotypes while also laying claim to psychosexual insight. It ought to have been the author's job to tell us, or at least to attempt to tell us, "whatever that meant."

In sum, *Lesbian Decadence* is unlikely to satisfy professionally committed historians of sexuality, but it will almost certainly introduce them to a great deal of textual and pictorial material that they are unlikely to have found elsewhere. One can only hope that it will provoke further studies of a period that deserves close historical attention.

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