

Larson on Albert (2016)

 ncfs-journal.org

Albert, Nicole. *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France*. Translated by Nancy Erber and William A. Peniston, Harrington Park Press, 2016, pp. 403, ISBN 9781939594075

Sharon Larson, Christopher Newport University

Since 2005, when Nicole Albert first published her seminal study of the lesbian in works of the French Decadent movement, there has been a surge in interdisciplinary scholarship dedicated to turn-of-the-century transgressive female sexuality. It is therefore timely that a new English edition of Albert's book be made available across academic fields. *Lesbian Decadence*, however, is much more than a translation: it is supplemented with passages and notes that offer up-to-date reflections and references to relevant studies from the last decade. Indeed, French-reading specialists may prefer this new edition to the original French for its updated vision of a theme that continues to spark the interest of students and specialists in French Studies, Comparative Literature, LGBT and Gender Studies, History, and Art History. Albert's extensively researched inventory of "the golden age of the lesbian" (xii) extends beyond the canonical Charles Baudelaire and Jean Lorrain and considers lesser-known popular fiction authors—both male and female—that deserve attention. In addition, her discussion of poetry, short stories, and novels is enhanced by a selection of images that appeared in the visual arts throughout the nineteenth century, including sixteen stunning color plates.

The work is divided into three parts: "At this time, Sappho was reborn in Paris," "Her Traits, Her Vices, and Her Sexual Aberrations," and "Damned Women or Exquisite Creatures?" Albert's first chapter, "Sappho: The Resurrection of a Myth," provides historical and cultural background about the mythical icon's popularity in the nineteenth century, discussed in detail in the following two chapters. In chapter two, "The Poets' Muse," the author examines Sappho's increasing presence in literary works from mid-century (Baudelaire and Swinburne) to her apogee at the fin de siècle (Pierre Louÿs and Renée Vivien). Chapter three considers the legendary "Lesbos; or The Topography of Vice" and its prominent place in the Decadent imagination. Albert demonstrates that while some writers and artists depicted pilgrimages to Sappho's homeland, others transposed the allegorical location to the French capital, where Paris-Lesbos flourished.

In part two, Albert turns to sexology and the scientific constructions of lesbianism. Chapter four traces "The Birth of the Female Invert" and the terms used to designate female homosexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lexicon that Albert examines includes a wide range of neologisms and slang from clinical and popular milieus alike, from "tribade" and "sapphist" to "garlic seller" and "lentil shucker" (terms that must have been especially challenging for the translators!). In the next chapter, "A Vice or an Illness?" the author studies

the discursive conflation of the lesbian with the prostitute. These pages also unpack various dichotomies used for classifying lesbianism in literary and medical writings: active/passive, congenital/acquired and vice/illness.

Similarly, chapter six (“A Heroine at the Crossroads of Medicine and Literature”) examines the intersections of fin-de-siècle literature and science and documents how clinical and fictional writers influenced one another in constructing myths of common lesbian behaviors and physiognomic signifiers. As Albert reveals, novelists drew from case studies to make their depictions and moral denunciations of lesbian characters more credible. In turn, many doctors cited sensational portrayals in contemporary fiction to support their scientific theories. In awkwardly blurring the genres of clinical and fictional writing, doctors and novelists jointly promoted the propagation of a fantasy figure across disciplines. The next chapter, “When the Third Sex Comes Out,” considers the origin of a term (“third sex”) that dates to the early decades of the nineteenth century. Here, Albert also examines how lesbianism was often conflated with a momentous feminist movement, as well as with modern women cyclists who were more frequently navigating urban streets. In the last chapter of this section, “Madame Don Juan, Arlequine, and Others,” Albert discusses the hybrid figure of the hermaphrodite in Decadent literature. With a focus on the cross-dressing woman who seeks to usurp masculinity, she links the modernization of the Greek myth to the Decadent preoccupation with moral decay and the collapse of civilization.

In part three’s “Deadly Pleasures,” Albert examines the Decadent lesbian as a damned figure (à la Baudelaire) whose insatiable and (self-)destructive sexual appetite is continually linked to drugs, vampirism and homicide in both male and lesbian writers’ imagination. These dangerous women recall “The Half-Women” of chapter ten, whose refusal of motherhood threatens both the stability of the family and the future of the French race. According to Albert, these unnatural, self-sterilized or “half-virgins”—lesbians whose spirit was contaminated but whose body remained intact—are symptomatic of the Decadents’ self-conscious reflections on their own artistic deterioration.

In the final two chapters, Albert shifts her focus to an iconography that finds meaningful aesthetic value in the lesbian. Entitled “Female Narcissus,” chapter eleven considers the trope of the lesbian double in the form of a sisterly lover or an eroticized self-reflection (narcissism and sapphism were often linked). The final chapter of Albert’s work, “Female Spaces, Male Gaze,” addresses the paradoxical presence of the male author or protagonist in spaces designated as exclusively female. The last pages in this chapter address the parallels between the lesbian’s disavowal of “natural” laws and the Decadent celebration of the artificial. While these final reflections offer a compelling explanation for the fin de siècle’s aesthetic obsession with lesbianism, they might have been placed earlier in the study, perhaps in an introductory section. Overall, though parts of this study could have been expanded (for example, how lesbian writers resisted male-authored constructions of female sexuality), it offers an impressive breadth of material that will surely continue to inspire additional scholarship in various disciplines.

