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Review of Joan De Jean's Fictions of Sappho

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BOOK REVIEWS

Joan DeJean: *Fictions of Sappho: 1546-1937*
Women in Culture and Society
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990

"Saphon, Sappho, Sapho, Sappho, Sappho, Psappha. Sappho is a figment of the modern imagination." So begins *Fictions of Sappho: 1546-1937* by Joan DeJean, in which the author traces the (mis) representations of Sappho in French fiction. Implicit in her study is the question of why Sappho has always been of such vital interest, exerting a fascination on the many who portray her, whether as heterosexual, homosexual, virgin, or whore. While classicists will not find the nuances of the French versions of Sappho compelling, there is much of interest along the way.

DeJean traces early translations of Sappho and various traditions of scholarship. Her account of the distorted "chastity school" of Sapphic scholarship shows how the foibles of classicists may appear to those outside the field. (DeJean is a professor of French at the University of Pennsylvania.) While Wilamowitz is the mainstay of the chastity school, DeJean finds that Page unwittingly supports it, desexualizing Sappho through his emphasis on the control, wit, and detachment of her poetry.

In discussing Sappho's poetry DeJean limits herself to a small number of poems and a small but well-chosen number of scholarly references. She has a good discussion of the questions surrounding *ethelouisa* in Sappho 1 (Ode to Aphrodite). And she makes the provocative suggestion that Sappho is deliberately evasive about sexual orientation, which explains why the relevant identification comes late in both Sappho 1 and Sappho 31.

Probably the most important line of thought is DeJean's political analysis of how male authors—among them Catullus, Ovid, Racine, and Baudelaire—have attempted to rake over Sappho's voice. DeJean offers the vision of the foundation of the sociocultural order as seen by Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Ingaray: "a band of young men shapes itself into an ordered assembly through the formulation of rules to govern the exchange of women." (43) And then she cites the literary parallel, seeing it as a sort of rite of initiation: "a band of aspiring literary figures came of age when they devised rules to govern not the exchange of women but the sharing of a fiction of female desire." (44)

Though she seems to relish Sappho's woman-centeredness, DeJean is agnostic when it comes to conclusions. She agrees (ruefully?) with Dover that the evidence for Sappho's homosexuality is fragile and ambiguous. And though she clearly finds Wilamowitz and the "chastity school" dead wrong, she does not offer us the comforting idea that we have finally gotten Sappho right. Her remarks are sobering and apply to all areas of classical scholarship: "Four centuries of erudition make it apparent that each change in scholarly dynasties means only that Sappho is read through the grill of a new set of national prejudices.... No critical reading is prejudice-free. The most we can hope for is that an awareness of the history of prejudices past can serve as a warning to pay more attention to the inevitable distortion caused by our own prejudices." (311)

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