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Review of Harriette Andreadis, Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550-1714.

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Harriette Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550-1714*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 254 pp. ISBN 0206020096 (paper).

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Harriette Andreadis's book, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550-1714*, takes on with determination and resourcefulness what is still one of the thorniest of methodological and theoretical problems for any literary critic or historian, but particularly for those who want to understand the transgressive, the silenced, or the repressed: how do we interpret what is never explicitly said, the white space between the lines? No one familiar with the study of gender, sexuality, or the writings of culturally marginalized groups would defend the positivist dismissal of what is left unsaid as inaccessible to interpretation, but we must also acknowledge that attempts to make sense of such silences are rife with the temptation to read our own preoccupations into the historically or ideologically distant representations of others. In her study of female same-sex erotics in the early modern period, Andreadis posits a historical strategy she calls an "erotics of unnaming," a habit of "erotic ellipsis," by which seventeenth-century women recognized and expressed feelings for one another that were "sensuous," "intense," but not necessarily identified as sexual in the terms through which they understood sexuality. Andreadis disavows the extension of Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum" into remote historical periods, arguing sensibly, if not unprecedentedly, that contemporary identity politics have little to do with the experience of early modern women. She hopes to ground her own methodology for interpreting silence firmly in the discursive habits and ideological presuppositions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and for the most part she succeeds, offering if not an exhaustive historical argument then certainly a plausible and suggestive model.

Sappho in Early Modern England opens with a theoretical chapter, then turns to representations of Sappho and readings of women poets from about 1650 until the first decades of the eighteenth century in England, and concludes with a fascinating reading of early modern and particularly Restoration interpretations of the Ovidian Calisto myth and their after-history at the court of Queen Anne. The grand argument of Andreadis's book is a historical one that tries to account for an unmistakable shift: in the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries there is very little writing by women or men discussing women's relationships with one another, but by around 1700 there is a lively "vernacular discourse of same-sex female erotics" by women. This discourse, Andreadis argues, includes the veiled erotics of female pastoral friendship poetry, the explicit naming of transgressive behavior by writers such as Delarivier Manley and Aphra Behn, and also descriptions of relations that "are explicit but do not name"—that avoid, for example, the language of tribadism inherited from such classical writers as Ovid.

It is much easier to posit a content for what has been silenced, indeed to posit silencing in the first place, if an example exists elsewhere of what could have been said, and Andreadis is entirely convincing in delineating all of this late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century writing as a coherent conversation, with shared terms and presuppositions and an overriding common interest in the erotics of women's relations with one another. But to understand what gave rise to this discourse she also wants to interpret silences earlier in the period, before clues to female erotics had become so available in print, and to do this she

proposes a suggestive historical narrative. In the early Renaissance there is a discourse of tribadism, alternately salacious and moralistic, available to men who can read Latin through the new editions of classical literature. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries female same-sex erotics also enters the vernacular through such genres as travel narratives, medical textbooks, and marital advice books. This vernacularization, combined with the expansion of the book trade, makes ideas about female same-sex erotics much more available to less educated or elite readers, among them, of course, women. As a consequence, Andreadis posits, there is an "inhibition" of discourse about female same-sex erotics in literature, so that "what had been tacit sexual knowledge was becoming more available for discussion, yet simultaneously being unnamed" (xii). (This construction would seem to owe a debt to Foucault's *Introduction to the History of Sexuality*, though oddly Foucault is nowhere cited). As an example, Andreadis discusses the literary fortunes of Sappho, who in the sixteenth century is firmly identified as both a poet and a tribade but by the mid-seventeenth century is treated much more ambivalently, sometimes "rescued" from her transgressive sexuality so that she can serve as a poetic model and at other times inspiring confusion and outright contradiction among the male writers who attempt to adapt her story.

Andreadis chooses as about 1650 her date for the consolidation of this unnaming, and she does so largely because of the work of Katherine Philips, in many ways the hero of her study. Andreadis devotes an entire chapter to Philips, whose life and work she describes as of "singular importance" to her narrative. She gives a useful overview of the discourse of male-male friendship in the seventeenth century, reminds us that women were thought by their nature to be excluded from this noble passion, and then suggests that through her life and poetry Philips was more or less single-handedly responsible for opening the gates to the literary discussion of erotic friendship among women. She was able to do so, Andreadis argues, because she adapted literary forms such as the pastoral poem and the metaphysical conceits of Donne in order to conceive of herself and her relations with other women in ways that did not engage definitions of transgressive female desire, because through her adaptations she employed an "erotic ellipsis" by which she expressed erotic feelings without explicitly acknowledging them as transgressive or even sexual. In the culture at large these feelings that Philips had finally given voice to came to be understood as increasingly problematic, and Philips's model thus opened the way both for such openly transgressive writers as Manley, Behn, Margaret Cavendish, and later Mary Leapor and also for the veiled same-sex erotics of "Ephelia," Lady Mary Chudleigh, Anne Killigrew, Anne Finch, and Jane Barker.

Andreadis's historical narrative is for the most part plausible, but because it is so pioneering it opens the way for further work that will test and refine it. Philips bears a dangerous amount of historical weight, and there are other literary and social contexts that might make her innovations more explicable. As is well known, she was an avid reader of narrative romance, for example, which in both French and English incarnations is extremely interested in friendship. (An unaccountable omission from Andreadis's book is any mention of Mary Wroth; in both parts of her romance *Urania*, two to three decades before Philips, she gives great attention to friendship between women, and she explicitly rewrites Sappho's suicidal jump off the Leucadian cliffs in her story of Urania's own restorative leap in Leucadia in Part I.) Philips was also, as Andreadis mentions, a friend of the Boyle family, two of the brothers of which (Robert and Roger) wrote romances, one extremely well-known in mid-century England, and a sister of which (Lady

Ranelegh) was a famously astute literary audience. It is more difficult to know for Philips than it is, for example, for the later Anne Finch whether the awareness of potential transgression is being elided or whether instead there is simply little precedent for understanding passionate friendship between women as problematic. If the latter is true, Philips might still serve in the ways Andreadis describes as the model for future poets, but we would have to adjust Andreadis's readings of particular poems and her understanding of Philips's innovations. These questions and others would be addressed, and the book's overall thesis complicated, by more sustained consideration of how poets such as Philips fit into their cultural and historical contexts—much recent scholarship, for example, refutes the idea that royalist culture is "escapist," and work on royalist secrecy and silence by Lois Potter, David Loewenstein, or Michael Wilcher might profitably be put in conversation with Andreadis's notion of erotic ellipsis. Andreadis treats questions of textual circulation and availability for the writers she discusses with great care, but if we are to confirm her argument about the effects of the vernacularization of same-sex female erotics we need a clearer sense of who read the extraliterary texts she cites and we need to do more work to understand both the content and the circulation of popular literature, particularly narrative.

Curiously, in her readings not only of Philips but of several other women poets, Andreadis attempts to isolate passionate emotion from rhetoric. She claims that biography is indispensable in bringing erotic ellipsis to light, which may be true: but it seems a leap to conclude that our knowledge through letters (which are themselves rhetorical productions) of Philips's passionate attachments to other women allows us to assume that therefore her "poetic intimacies were genuinely felt representations of actual experience" (18). Such an assumption leads Andreadis to read the "extreme distress" of the real Philips, or her "yearning" or "desperation" or "frustrated passion," as "unmistakable" in her poetry. The object of erotic ellipsis, Andreadis has argued, is the explicit acknowledgement of transgression, but frequently in her readings what is brought to light as the real secret is the "covert, innate rebelliousness" of genuine same-sex erotic passion (73-4). This result is symptomatic of Andreadis's occasional reluctance to read rhetorically. In a telling example, she quotes a small, 1654 almost-treatise (he calls it a letter, and addresses it to Philips) by Francis Finch, entitled "Friendship," in which he argues that some of his contemporaries have so glorified the passion of love that they have allowed it to "swallow up" other passions that should properly be distinct and that in their extremes are "vitious" (vicious). Andreadis argues that Finch "struggles here to avoid naming the passions that he describes as 'vitious,'" which she understands as "presumably lustful" and specifically as homoerotic. But she gives little evidence for her assumption, and in fact if she had gone to Finch's treatise itself, rather than quoting it from a secondary source, she would have seen that his next move is to name his vicious-tending passions, which turn out to be covetousness of money and ambition for glory. Andreadis may ultimately be right that Finch is cautioning his friend Philips against tribadism, but her inattention to rhetorical detail and specific context weaken her large argument that Finch "situates Philips in a historical moment during which cultural change"—that is, the naming of erotic friendship between women as problematic—"is about to take place but has not yet become a reality" (77). Andreadis's resolve to read between the lines of discourse about women's relations with other women is admirable and often productive, but it cannot be done at the expense of careful attention to what is already there, and without a recognition that the expression of even the most deeply felt passion is implicated in, indeed depends on, rhetorical convention.

These objections should not obscure Andreadis's substantial achievement in *Sappho in Early Modern England*. As she notes, neither identity politics nor queer theory has given much attention to the "complex historical situatedness" of ideas about sexuality before about 1850. And although the book appears in an important series at the University of Chicago Press, her company in the field is still sparse—Katharine Park, Patricia Simons, Valerie Traub—and scholars still suffer from a dearth of information about early modern female same-sex erotic relations much more severe than that about male-male sexuality. To take on the subject of female same-sex erotics in the seventeenth century is itself groundbreaking, and Andreadis's combination of historical narrative with close reading will be a model for those who follow her. Her readings of same-sex desire in Restoration women poets in particular are often supple and suggestive, and her willingness to think aloud, as it were, in the book—for example, the almost parenthetical speculation during an examination of Jane Barker's poetry that perhaps it is not so much the transgressiveness but the permissibility of love between women that opens space for the expression of erotic feeling (142)—will ensure that her work is a source of ideas for years to come.