

Marta Sofía López. 2012. *Ginealogías sáficas: de Katherine Philips a Jeanette Winterson*. Bern: Peter Lang. 167 pp. ISBN: 978-3-0343-1125-0.

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Marta Sofía López's *Ginealogías sáficas: de Katherine Philips a Jeanette Winterson*, published in the Peter Lang collection "Spanish Perspectives on English and American Literature, Communication and Culture," constitutes a remarkable example of feminist scholarship. Its aim is to trace the long-lasting influence of the poet Sappho on the biography and literary imagination of a number of English-speaking women writers from the Early Modern period to our own times. López's project is not to write a history of women's writing, or even a history of lesbian writing. Instead, she tracks down the elusive symbolic presence of Sappho through the ages, explaining how, although taking different forms, it has consistently functioned as a blueprint for female authorship, against which women writers either measured themselves or were measured by others. The book starts by rehearsing what little is known of the writer from Lesbos, quoting her most renowned (though fragmented) poems in their Spanish translation, as well as discussing the way critics have either neglected or overemphasized her sexual orientation. Undoubtedly, Sappho is one of the mothers of women's literary tradition, indeed the very origin of the "g(y)nealogy" López constructs in her book, as her poems were the first to dwell on some of the most recurrent chronotopes in western women's literature (the garden, the female body, the sea, etc.). However, in López's argument, Sappho is above all "a complex constructed text" (12), and it is to the way this fascinating text slowly surfaces and acquires shape and weight that López directs her efforts, moving seamlessly through several centuries and often crossing languages (all quotes from English and French are translated into Spanish by the author herself), as well as countries, making detours whenever necessary in hot pursuit of her subject and forging productive connections across constricting borders of time and space.

After this appraisal of the historical Sappho, the book is organised into four chapters that analyse her impact in chronological order, from the Renaissance to our own times.¹ "Early Modern Sapphos" starts in France, where the poet is mentioned by both Christine de Pisan and Mme. de Scudéry, then crosses the channel to find Sappho lurking behind the figures of Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn. Although,

¹ All chapter titles are my translation from the Spanish original.

strictly speaking, Sappho only features in one text by Aphra Behn, López discusses at some length how the notion of a women's society, so closely linked to the Greek poet, applies to all these writers. In Katherine Philips, this takes the shape of the literary clique known as "the society of friendship," in which several women played a prominent role, while in Margaret Cavendish it stands out as the main plot of her play *The Convent of Pleasure*, which (like *The Female Academy* by the same author) addresses the possibility of women walking out of a patriarchal society and setting up a separatist community, an idea that Mary Astell would return to only a few years later. López's commentary follows authoritative interpretations, such as those of Faderman (1981) and Andreadis (2001), which pick up on the woman-loving-woman subtext. However, it neglects the ways in which these women writers were also engaging in the partisan politics of their place and time. In the following chapter, the book turns to "Romantic and Victorian Sapphos," among whom Mary Robinson embraces her literary foremother in a series of sonnets that convey the workings of passion and desire (*Sappho and Phaon*, 1796). However, López expresses her dismay at finding that the tragic image of a suicidal Sappho highlighted by Ovid obtained major currency by way of Alexander Pope in the nineteenth century, and this was the side of Sappho taken up in the works of three Victorian poets: Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth London, and Christina Rossetti. For López, these outstanding poets embody the strong contradictions between their exceptional talents and the constricting patterns of femininity they were forced to live within, a pattern that, as López remarks, would inspire Virginia Woolf's often quoted words on the tragic fate of women authors decades later in *A Room of One's Own*.

In the next section, "Sappho at the Turn of the Century," the tragic Sappho trope has happily run its course, and under their pen-name Michael Field, Katherine Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Cooper joyously celebrate her legacy, having re-encountered Sappho in Henry Wharton's 1885 translation. Like them, US writer Nathalie Barney and her Anglo-American partner Renée Vivien felt so galvanized by Sappho's example that they moved to the island of Lesbos for a while, and later, in 1920s-Paris, set up a Women's Academy with the purpose of promoting and circulating women's writing. The last two chapters dwell on Sappho's rich legacy throughout the twentieth century, following on from this fruitful beginning. "Sappho's Modernist Sisters" focuses on three compelling authors, Amy Lowell, H.D. and Virginia Woolf. Lowell felt a close connection with Sappho and recreated the trope of the garden as a *locus amoenus* for the meeting of (women) lovers, and she also valued poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, with whom she felt sisterhood. Following Rachel Du Plessis and other feminist critics, López stresses the importance of H.D. for the modernist movement and comments on the fascination that Sappho and other early Greek writers like Homer exerted over the poet. The chapter ends with a discussion of Virginia Woolf's well-known essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, and of the short story "A Society." López outlines the writer's thoughts on the problems of female authorship and citizenship in the earlier books, while sketching the irony and humour with which Woolf critiques the views of

male scholars on Sappho, who happen to be more interested in the issue of her chastity (or lack of it) than in her writings.

Moving still closer to our times, “Postmodernist Sapphos” brings together a final group of authors (Monique Wittig, Olga Broumas and Jeanette Winterson), all of whom have redrawn the boundaries of the female body and lesbian identity. In Wittig and Zeig’s *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* (1980), Sappho’s entry was a blank, signalling the historical invisibility of lesbianism that these writers had started to address in the 1970s. Consequently, lesbian desire is newly scripted and acknowledged, hand in hand with the problematization of the female body and the maternal that López also links to the writings of Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Grosz. Last but not least, the book turns to Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies* (1994), closing a circle, since this book started López on her journey of discovery and exploration of women’s writing and queer identity (153). If, for Winterson, Sappho represents “the union of language and desire” (155), then for López she has probably meant even more, fifteen years of voyaging into self-knowledge, meditating on the related topics of women’s writing, literary mothering and genealogies, lesbian desire and the spaces and voices of queer identity; all of them honestly and relentlessly explored in her book.

While there is a real wealth of information in its pages for those newly arriving at the subject, *Ginealogías sáficas* does not aspire to be an exhaustive text. As mentioned above, the author makes no claim to rewriting literary history, and the book does not try in any way to establish an alternative canon, or force the issue of the lesbian presence in literary history. Rather, it deploys the figure of Sappho to open up the canon and to look at connections thus far neglected, framing new questions. This is particularly the case with the selection of writers and texts that López brings together, which on the one hand is undoubtedly singular (conveying the author’s personal investment and transmitting her literary *jouissance*) and on the other, follows an innovative approach in transcending borders in order to set up a trans-Atlantic paradigm, as scholars such as Kate Chedgzoy (2007) have recently also started to do.

In my opinion, it is in the final two chapters on twentieth-century writing that López excels, as she most capably interweaves the concerns that have shaped the books discussed throughout with the feminist theorists that first brought many of them to public attention. In contrast, the first chapter, “Early Modern Sapphos,” suggests a comparative lack of enthusiasm. While it is a necessary starting point for López’s project, it provides only a superficial account of the writers, which might have been made more interesting with the help of Emma Donoghue’s groundbreaking essay *Passions Between Women* (1993).

In conclusion, *Ginealogías sáficas* goes beyond general expectations in the field of literary criticism because its author is not afraid to question the sexual politics of her subject and thus to engage us imaginatively in what has been and continues to be, after all, one of the most complex debates in feminist thought. But most of all, it invites us to (re) visit some of the most perceptive and delightful women writers in the English language,

and to ponder with them, yet again, the contradictions of the position that women have so far occupied as authors in western culture.

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