

Fall 1993

Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's 'Sonnet féminin

Tama L. Engelking

Cleveland State University, t.engelking@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clmlang_facpub

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Tama L. Engelking. (1993). Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's 'Sonnet féminin.' *Modern Language Studies*, 23(4), 79-92.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Modern Language Studies

Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin"

Author(s): Tama Lea Engelking

Source: *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 79-92

Published by: [Modern Language Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195207>

Accessed: 29/05/2013 14:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Language Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Modern Language Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin"

Tama Lea Engelking

At the turn of the century, a young aspiring poet named Pauline Tarn (1877-1909) left her native England to live in Paris where she fell in love with a woman, changed her name to Renée Vivien, learned Greek so she could translate Sappho into French, took lessons in French prosody, and began writing lesbian poetry in French using conventional forms, including the most conventional of fixed poetic forms—the sonnet. For those critics investigating the complexities of Vivien's life and work, this curious set of events has led them first to Paris-Lesbos and Vivien's role in reviving Sappho as a powerful female precursor, while questions relating to the more formal aspects of her poetry are still waiting to be explored.¹ Contemporary feminists admire Vivien as one of the first women to write openly lesbian poetry, and yet her reputation as the Sappho of 1900 makes it more difficult to understand why she wrote in a language much more gender-marked than her native English, and why she sometimes framed her woman-centered verses within the restrictive framework of the sonnet, a form exemplifying what Gertrude Stein referred to as "Patriarchal Poetry."² Using Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin" (*Cendres et poussières* 1902, OPC 87)³ as my principal example, I will examine the insights offered by her unusual alliance of gender and genre in light of some recent theories, as well as Vivien's own experiences with gender. Significantly, Vivien's "Sonnet féminin" coincides with a period of intense "sapphic" activity as she translated Sappho's fragments into French in an attempt to reclaim the poet from Lesbos as a lesbian poet. In "Sonnet féminin," her translations and related works, Vivien highlights and valorizes feminine difference from within established male-dominated poetic conventions in order to critique the "engendered" canon and the sexual hierarchy that underlies the French literary tradition and language.

1.

Although the twelve books of poetry Vivien produced during her short but prolific career contain only two dozen sonnets, they represent an unusual choice for a woman poet, not only because of the sonnet's exalted position in a male-dominated French literary tradition where it is perhaps the most respected and enduring of poetic forms, but also because of its inherent difficulty.⁴ Given that she wrote in a foreign language, Vivien's sonneteering is all the more remarkable, but what makes her sonnets stand out is how her level of technical poetic prowess compares to what critics called "la poésie féminine," a spontaneous and sensual lyricism practiced by Vivien's contemporaries such as Anna de

Noailles, whose poems were believed to be more a product of “feminine” instinct than intellect.⁵

The literary critic Charles Maurras referred to fin-de-siècle feminine poetry as “le Romantisme féminin,” and although in his eyes the romantic label signaled the inherent inferiority of women’s poetry as Elaine Marks has demonstrated, in respect to form, the name seemed to fit (Marks “Sapho 1900”). The Feminine Romantics shared a distaste for the sonnet with their Romantic precursors who found the sonnet’s restrictions too stifling for their abundant lyricism. According to Henri Morier, Romantic poets “n’aiment pas les petites fenêtres: . . . ils aiment trop l’écoulement d’une inspiration ici fluviale, là torrentueuse pour ne pas mépriser le cadre étroit et les règles strictes—qu’ils jugent mesquines—du sonnet” (983). Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, one of the few canonized women poets from the Romantic era, shyed away from the sonnet which she called a “brilliant shackle” belonging “to men only.”

Charles Maurras includes Vivien among the Feminine Romantics, and yet, Vivien distinguished herself from her sister poets by her considerable technical expertise which she showcased within the “brilliant shackle” of sonnet form. In spite of the controversial content of her lesbian poetry, Vivien earned the respect and attention of some of the most noted literary critics of her day. Paul Flat, for example, cites Vivien’s poems as being among the most technically perfect verses in the French language, and he particularly commends “son souci de la perfection” which he finds at odds with “une époque où la folie de la vitesse commande jusqu’à la production littéraire” (16). No one knew Vivien’s work habits better than her tutor and literary assistant, Charles-Brun, and he claimed that her premature death at age thirty-two was a direct result of her quest for perfection. The frequent letters Vivien exchanged with her assistant and editors concerning minute details of her poems—some of which were literally written from her death bed—suggest how meticulous she was.⁶

2.

The sonnet was one of the first poetic forms practiced by Pauline/Renée, who at age sixteen had already decided on poetry as her vocation, and French as her literary language of choice. Her facility with the language was the result of being educated at French boarding schools where she immersed herself in poetry, particularly the works of Ronsard and the French Romantics. She also read Dante and the great sonneteer Petrarch in the original Italian, and was particularly fond of Shakespeare’s sonnets which she imitated in the last six of her published sonnets (*Sillages* 1908, OPC 368–371). The only woman writer Jean-Paul Goujon mentions in his survey of Vivien’s early reading habits is George Sand; the few French women poets one would expect to find in her library, like Louise Labé and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, are conspicuously missing (85–92).⁷ Moreover, since nearly all of the poets she admired in her youth addressed their poems to the female muses who inspired them—Ronsard to Hélène, Dante to Béatrice, and Petrarch to Laura—

Pauline/Renée must have been struck by how a masculine perspective dominated the western literary tradition. As we will see, Vivien's discovery of Sappho in 1900 cast even more light on the gender biases she may have first encountered in the sonnets of Ronsard, Dante and Petrarch.

It was thanks to an inheritance she received in 1900, that Pauline Tarn became financially independent and was able to move to Paris where she was reborn (re-née) as the poet Renée Vivien. Once in Paris, Vivien began seriously studying French prosody with Charles-Brun who also taught her Greek, and eventually became her literary assistant. Natalie Clifford Barney, another expatriate lesbian writer and Vivien's first lover, shared these lessons with her, but Barney was less serious about perfecting French versification, and her flirtation with the sonnet was short-lived. For Barney, writing was always connected to life—her love life in particular—and she insisted that her own chef-d'oeuvre was her life. It was the famous literary salon she hosted for nearly fifty years at 20, rue Jacob, and not her literary career, that earned Natalie Barney a prominent place in the Parisian world of letters.

With the help of Charles-Brun, Natalie Barney developed enough expertise to produce several volumes of poetry in French, the first was a collection of love sonnets titled *Quelques Portraits-sonnets de femmes* (1900). These early poems are nearly forgotten today, but they are worth mentioning here for several reasons. First, they were written during the formative period of Barney and Vivien's mutual lessons in French prosody, which also corresponds to the beginning of their short-lived but passionate relationship. In fact, Vivien inspired several of Barney's sonnet-portraits, and Vivien, in turn, filled her first two volumes with poems to Barney. Secondly, although Barney's biographer George Wickes dismisses the poems in *Quelques Portraits-sonnets* as facile, derivative, and the work of an eager student struggling to please a demanding schoolmaster (45–46), feminist critics such as Karla Jay and Shari Benstock have recognized the “radical sentiment” (Benstock 282) at the heart of her superficially conventional poems, a sentiment that Vivien shared.

Barney dedicated her sonnets “Aux Petrarches sans Laure” and had the volume illustrated with portraits of her various women lovers, some of them painted by her mother. As her dedication indicates, Barney was drawn to the sonnet because of its association with the Petrarchan tradition, a tradition of love lyrics in which women are typically idealized and objectified by a series of clichéd comparisons known as the Petrarchan Blason (Vickers 265–79; Jones 135–53). The sonnets of unrequited love that Petrarch addressed to his cold-hearted muse Laura, became the basis of a convention that Barney tried to subvert by taking the role of poet-lover for herself. Inspired by “real” women, her sonnet-portraits invite a comparison with the more artificial love poems produced by male sonneteers, those “Petrarches sans Laure” whose idealized and fragmented lovers she imagines as mere figments of their poetic imaginations.

Barney's outraged father destroyed the printing plates and all available copies of *Quelques Portraits-sonnets de femmes*, but Barney was relatively undisturbed because her preference for life over literature meant that she did not count on ensuring her own immortality through her works. Renée Vivien, on the other hand, was deeply concerned with carrying on the sapphic tradition through her own poems and translations, and at the time of her death was preparing new editions of her complete works and translations. According to Jean-Paul Goujon, "la seule véritable continuité de la vie de Renée Vivien, ce fut sans doute le travail littéraire et sa volonté de laisser une oeuvre" (Préface, OPC 10).

3.

From the time she began publishing, Vivien was extremely conscious of how gender might affect the reception and future of her work. In addition to any aesthetic considerations, Vivien's distrust of the public and her need to have her work taken seriously, probably influenced her decision to use conventional verse forms, and to publish her work with a very traditional publishing house, Alphonse Lemerre. Perfecting the sonnet form may have been one step more toward earning the "gloire" she sought as a serious poet, who relied on her skills as a writer to compensate for the perceived weakness of her sex. She even went so far as to hide her gender by having her first two books, including the collection in which "Sonnet féminin" appears, printed with "R. Vivien" as the author. She signed the cards included in those copies destined for critics with the masculine form of her name, "René Vivien." Edmond Rocher tried to get around the poet's disguise in his review of *Etudes et préludes* (1900).

Jamais aucun vers, durant tout le volume, ne révèle si l'amant est masculin ou féminin. Le vers est solidement fait, par là se révélerait l'homme, mais les caresses sont trop ambiguës pour que tienne l'hypothèse. Admettons, pour contenter tout le monde, que ce soit hermaphrodite. (Qtd. in Goujon 171)

Like Rocher, Vivien's readers were confused by her unconventional combination of gender and genre, and some of them wrongly assumed that the love poems inspired by Natalie Barney were written by a man to his mistress. The two women actually attended a public "misreading" of Vivien's poetry incognito, and according to Barney's account, were forced to stifle their giggles at the lecturer's mistake. Conditioned by conventional gender roles, her readers' reactions may have seemed funny and even complimentary to Vivien at first, but it eventually became a real concern for the increasingly paranoid and depressed poet. 1906 was a pivotal year in her career where the initial optimism of her prolific sapphic phase (1900-1906) became so overshadowed by feelings of rejection that she finally withdrew her books from circulation for fear they would fall into "les mains sales aux ongles noirs" of what she called

the ugly public (qtd. in Goujon 379). Vivien's "fall" is most evident in *A l'heure des mains jointes*, a transitional volume published in 1906, which alternates between uplifting poems like "Psappha revit," and darker poems such as "Le Pilon," "Voici mon Mal," "Vaincue," and "Sans Fleurs à votre front" where she writes "Je ne suis point de ceux que la foule renomme, / Mais de ceux qu'elle hait . . . Car j'osai concevoir / Qu'une vierge amoureuse est plus belle qu'un homme" (OPC 274).

The standards imposed by what Michael Danahy refers to as the "en-gendered" canon, fueled Vivien's fears for the reception and future of her work. In recent years, canon formation has been criticized as canon de-formation when it comes to women writers, and as the product of a "gentlemen's agreement" (Robinson 106). Critics have become increasingly sensitive to what Nancy K. Miller calls the "politics of poetics" behind the Great Tradition which are largely responsible for setting up and reinforcing repressive practices that have made it easier for women writers to produce prose than poetry (Miller 4). According to Danahy, the designation of poetry as a "masculine" genre, in comparison to a "feminine" genre such as the novel which women writers have traditionally dominated, implies "a literary hierarchy that systematically reproduces the sexual hierarchy" (130). Danahy argues that in the en-gendered canon, "genre labels inscribe a consistent, systematic polarity of opposites that are based on sexual analogy and that codify and regulate literary inspiration on behalf of men" (133).

By bringing together feminine and feminist sensibilities in a masculine poetic form, Vivien was practicing a sort of "explosive assimilation" that Ann Rosalind Jones first identified in relation to the Renaissance female sonneteer Louise Labé. Like Labé's love sonnets which both imitated and undermined her male models, Vivien's poetry upset the polarity of opposites upon which both grammatical and sexual gender is based. Rocher tried to characterize her subversive role reversal as hermaphroditic, but Vivien was convinced that the equal joining of masculine and feminine in a sort of androgynous or hermaphroditic writing was an impossibility in gendered languages that constantly play the feminine off against the masculine. Well before feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous formulated her analysis of western patriarchal thought based on hierarchical binary oppositions, or Monique Wittig described gender as "the linguistic index of political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women" (64), Vivien imagined her world in terms of a struggle between the masculine and feminine and sought to rearrange the sexual hierarchy in woman's favor.

Vivien's translations of Sappho and her own sapphic poetry clearly illustrate the woman-centered bent of her writing. Generations of Greek scholars had created Sapphic fictions that Vivien countered with a fiction of her own that virtually erased all traces of men from Sappho's life and work. In the "Biographie de Psappha" which prefaces Vivien's translation, she states her firm conviction that Sappho spoke as a woman to women: "nous ne pouvons que l'entrevoir, la deviner à travers les

strophes et les vers qui nous restent d'elle. Et nous n'y trouvons point le moindre frisson tendre de son être vers un homme" (x).⁸

Vivien's gender-based theory of the universe found in her autobiographic novel, *Une femme m'apparut* (1904), helps explain Sappho's key role in her strategy to engender a separate feminine world symbolized by the island of Lesbos in her poetry.⁹ Vivien describes the universe in terms of two principles that are constantly warring against each other—the Male principle and the Female principle. The novel's narrator acknowledges that only one will triumph in the end, and expresses her hope for the decisive victory of the Female principle (5–6). In 1902, the same year she wrote "Sonnet féminin," Vivien rewrote the creation story using a variation of this theme. "La Genèse profane," (*Brumes de fjords* 115–18) describes creation in terms of a poetic universe that breaks down into two opposing forces. On the one hand there is Jehovah and his creations—man, light, animals, violence, Homer and Epic poetry; on the other there is Satan and all he created—woman, night, flowers, caresses, Sappho and lyric poetry. Vivien writes Adam and Eve out of the creation story, and by focusing instead on an opposing pair of poets who are more or less equals, she bypasses the formation of Eve from Adam's rib and the myth of women's sexual and linguistic inferiority. What Vivien does in her "Profane Genesis" then, is to provide another way of thinking about gender difference with poetry as its basis, that relies in part on Sappho's status to erase the stigma of the feminine.

Both "La Genèse profane" and "Sonnet féminin" belong to the idealistic, optimistic and particularly motivated "sapphic" period of Vivien's career when she was busy translating Sappho's poems, writing her own, and making plans with Natalie Barney to establish a colony for women poets on the island of Lesbos in imitation of Sappho's school.¹⁰ In other words, Vivien had a mission, and poetry was the powerful tool with which she hoped to undo the hierarchy of the engendered canon. Several years earlier, she had written in her personal diary: "Un noble vers peut inspirer une noble action, et toujours une noble pensée . . . Elle [la poésie] peut élever, elle peut inspirer, elle peut encourager, elle peut montrer le vrai et dénoncer le faux . . . Elle a un grand rôle à jouer dans l'Univers" (qtd in Goujon 64). True to this ideal, Vivien struggled at first to rewrite the fictions of patriarchy and tip the gender balance in favor of the feminine by placing women and "the feminine" at the center of her own poetic universe. "Sonnet féminin" represents a microcosm of Vivien's feminist strategies.

4.

SONNET FEMININ

Ta voix a la langueur des lyres lesbiennes,
L'anxiété des chants et des odes saphiques,
Et tu sais le secret d'accablantes musiques
Où pleure le soupir d'unions anciennes.

Les Aèdes fervents et les Musiciennes
T'enseignèrent l'ampleur des strophes érotiques

Et la gravité des lapidaires distiques.
Jadis, tu contemplas les nudités païennes.

Tu sembles écouter l'écho des harmonies
Mortes; bleus de ce bleu des clartés infinies,
Tes yeux ont le reflet du ciel de Mytilène.

Les fleurs ont parfumé tes étranges mains creuses;
De ton corps monte, ainsi qu'une légère haleine,
La blanche volupté des vierges amoureuses.

(*Cendres et poussières*, OPC 87)

In his edition of Vivien's complete works of poetry, Jean-Paul Goujon overlooks the significance of this poem by simply noting, "*Sonnet féminin*. Ainsi nommé à cause des rimes, toutes féminines" (488). He is referring to Vivien's violation of one of the most important rules of French versification—the rule of alternating masculine and feminine rhyme, which, according to Jean Mazaleyrat, "est suivie comme un dogme en poésie régulière, et les entorses qui y sont faites doivent être considérées comme recherches conscientes d'effets particuliers" (205). "Sonnet féminin" is the only one of Vivien's sonnets to deviate from this important rule. By using all feminine rhymes, she not only calls attention to the artifice of this particular convention, but also to the mark of difference which separates masculine and feminine rhyme—the mute "e."

As the name implies, the mute or silent "e" is usually not pronounced in spoken French, although it once was centuries ago. French prosody not only retains this archaic feature of the language which originated with the Old French system of stressed and unstressed syllables based on Latin, but emphasizes it by requiring that the mute "e" be pronounced and scanned as a separate metric foot unless it falls before a vowel or at the end of a line. To appreciate Vivien's manipulation of these rather complicated rules, let us recall that it is only the mute "e" that distinguishes feminine rhyme from masculine, and not the grammatical gender of the word. Vivien, however, has taken advantage of the fact that the mute "e" is also the most common feminine suffix in French—the letter separating the male René from the female Renée, for example—to create a doubly feminine rhyme scheme built around words that are grammatically feminine and represent women as well.

Linguistic theories of gender differentiation often describe the masculine form of nouns and adjectives as the standard or base from which the feminine is derived by the addition of a feminine suffix. Feminine suffixes common to French and English include -ess(e) and -ette, both of which imply a diminutive or inferior status of the feminine as illustrated by the examples of major/majorette; poet/poetess. In *Grammar and Gender*, Dennis Baron quotes linguistic studies which refer to the feminine suffix as a "suffixing rib," and to the differentiation of the feminine from the masculine as the "mark of Eve," a reminder that not only was Adam created first, but he was given the power to name everything before his female helpmate joined him in the Garden of Eden (1–27). Underlying these theories about grammatical gender are assump-

tions about differences between the sexes that have become encoded in language, and that come into play even within the seemingly benign framework of a sonnet where the rules of regular French versification place an unusual emphasis on the mute “e.” Vivien found that conventional fixed forms like the sonnet were an ideal showcase for her feminist deviations because French prosody provided a means of linking grammatical and sexual gender by allowing, or rather demanding, that the usually silent mark of feminine difference—the mute “e”—speak.

Vivien loads “Sonnet féminin” with a disproportionate number of grammatically feminine words, using twice as many feminine nouns as masculine nouns, and four times more feminine adjectives. With the exception of *distique* in line seven, the fourteen lines of “Sonnet féminin” all end with feminine nouns and adjectives. Her sentences are dominated by nouns and descriptive adjectives, with only a handful of verbs and prepositions to hold the four stanzas together. Vivien relies heavily on adjectives to highlight the gender imbalance she sets up in this sonnet, which reinforces the initial “feminine” effect created by the rhyme scheme because she uses adjectives whose feminine forms all end in a mute “e.” Although at first this imbalance in favor of the feminine seems to be based on rhyme, a purely phonetic distinction between words ending in consonants and those ending in vowels, and then on grammatically feminine words whose gender is not necessarily related to sexual gender, Vivien encourages her readers to make the connection between grammatical and sexual or “natural” gender by using feminine adjectives that double as substantives. *Lesbiennes*, in the first line is the most striking example, but *anciennes* (line 4), *païennes* (line 8), *Mortes* (line 10) and *amoureuses* (line 14) also invite the reader to confuse the qualities described by these adjectives with the women they can also represent. Vivien places these words conspicuously at either at the end or the beginning of a line. By breaking “harmonies / Mortes” into two lines, for example, she capitalizes “Mortes” so that it can more easily be misread as “dead women.”

Such a woman-centered interpretation may not be a misreading at all, but a reading consistent with the dictates of the sonnet’s opening line which asks us to “lyres/*lire* lesbiennes” or to read lesbian. Whether we interpret “ta voix” as the voice of the poet, the person reading the poem, or the voice of the sonnet personified, we hear the sonnet both speaking and spoken with a distinctly feminine voice. The numerous references to music and sound throughout the poem, remind the reader of the lyric origins of poetry which was intended to be sung or performed aloud. Although Paul Oppenheimer recently argued that the sonnet was meant to be read silently (27–40), most literary historians believe that the word “sonnet,” the diminutive of the Old French “son” or song, from the Latin for sound, reflects the form’s musical origins. If we consider that the mute “e” constitutes a feminine little sound, a sort of “sonnet féminin” in its own right, then the poem’s title takes on a new meaning that focuses our attention on this mark of feminine difference.

Vivien translates what might be dismissed as a phonetic or grammatical difference into a physical difference. As the sonnet takes

shape, following the usual arrangement of two quatrains and two tercets, so does her body as Vivien writes her “Sonnet féminin” into a “Sonnet-femme.” At first “ta voix” does not seem to be connected to a particular person, but to a rich poetic heritage referred to in the second stanza. In the third stanza, the “tu” becomes more completely personified as she takes possession of her senses. “Tu sembles écouter” and “Tes yeux ont le reflet” endow the feminine voice with the faculties for listening and seeing. In the final stanza, the poet describes the woman as having hands (the capacity to write?), “tes étranges mains creuses,” and finally, in a line reminiscent of Baudelaire’s “Lesbos,” the physical presence of her body is revealed (the potential for loving women?): “De ton corps monte, ainsi qu’une légère haleine, / La blanche volupté des vierges amoureuses.”

Although there is only one “tu” addressed in the poem, her voice is by no means isolated and unique because it represents a multitude of sources and influences. These influences become a choir of voices, an orchestra of lesbian lyres, a plurality of sounds, forms, and influences: “chants,” “odes,” “sourir,” “echos.” Vivien’s poetry reverberates with the multiple voices of both a masculine and feminine tradition whose echoes bounce off of each other like two cliffs across a deep ravine—a sort of gender gap—to become “l’écho des harmonies / Mortes” that Vivien speaks of in lines nine and ten. The poet may be referring to aspects of the French literary tradition that she absorbed and incorporated into her own poetic practice, but the line connecting Vivien to her male precursors is obviously not a straight one because she makes a serious detour from the male-dominated tradition via Sappho.

Without mentioning Sappho directly, Vivien attributes the poem’s feminine voice with qualities reminiscent of the Lesbian. Hers is the dominant voice echoing throughout the poem, as the “harmonies / Mortes” of her words are taken up and repeated by generations of poets after her including the many male poets who imitated her, as well as the Sappho of 1900, Vivien herself. The “lyres lesbiennes” in the opening line recall Sappho’s reputation as one of the earliest and greatest of all lyric poets, and yet it is not a past voice, but a voice very much alive in the present that dominates the poem. This is especially true if we read this line as “lire lesbiennes.” Rather than make a direct comparison between female sexuality and her poem’s grammatically feminine features, Vivien uses suggestive combinations of words that we can “read lesbian.” “Le soupir d’unions anciennes,” and “strophes érotiques” represent lesbian eroticism in that they refer to the verses of the poem itself, organized around the “union” of like to like, feminine rhyme coupled with feminine rhyme, or woman with woman.

5.

Natalie Barney’s preface to *Quelques portraits* provides a context that supports this reading of Vivien’s “Sonnet féminin,” because it records her reaction to their mutual lessons in French prosody. Barney was annoyed by the “rigueur tyranniquement impériale” of French

versification, and particularly the restrictions governing French rhyme. She rebelled against seeing “un mot charmant comme *lèvre* obligé de subir ces lois qui veulent qu’il s’accouple indissolublement avec *chèvre*, *fièvre*, ou *sèvre*” (ix), and flaunted her deviance by coupling a masculine and feminine rhyme in “un vers androgyne.” She was initially delighted by the French practice of “coupling” feminine rhymes, but then describes “cette minutie de règles appliquées à la poésie” as a frankly humiliating experience, and resolves to “me consacrer aux vers réguliers quitte à me libérer par la suite . . . mais en connaissance de cause” (*Nos secrètes amours* 102).

Barney’s reaction is insightful because she relates the differences between masculine and feminine rhyme to sexuality, an analogy that forms the basis of a love sonnet she wrote using only feminine rhymes. “La Belle aux désirs dormants,” from *Quelques Portraits-sonnets de femmes* was very likely composed for Vivien:

Fleur parmi les fleurs, belle entre les belles,
Je voudrais te dire un sonnet d’étoiles,
Et couvrir les mots chastement de voiles
Légers comme toi, naïve cruelle.

Je veux élider les rimes charnelles
Qui pourraient blesser ton âme d’opale
Par l’opacité de leurs ardeurs mâles,
Je voudrais t’aimer sans briser tes ailes.

As these two stanzas illustrate, Barney prefers feminine rhymes over the “ardeurs mâles” of masculine rhymes whose crudeness she contrasts with the delicate and vulnerable sensibility of the woman she addresses. She attributes masculine rhyme with characteristics of male sexual behavior, and not unlike Vivien, rejects both to turn her sonnet into a celebration of female sexuality.

Poets like Barney and Vivien who have strayed from the straight and narrow path of alternating masculine and feminine rhyme are often consciously linking grammatical and sexual gender, a technique also used by male poets such as Theodore de Banville, whose famous *Petit traité de poésie française* (1872) they most certainly studied. His ode “Erinna” is a well-known example of feminine rhyme:

Et j’ai rimé cette ode en rimes féminines
Pour que l’impression en restât plus poignante,
Et, pour le souvenir des chastes héroïnes,
Laissât dans plus d’un coeur sa blessure saignante. (“Erinna” 146).

The linguist Maurice Grammont quotes portions of “Erinna” to illustrate the phonetic differences between masculine rhyme, characterized by “quelque chose de net, de bien arrêté, qui n’aurait pas du tout convenu à la mélancolie, à l’indécision,” and feminine rhymes, “prolongées par les consonnes qui suivent la voyelle accentuée, comme une corde qui vibre et retentit encore après que l’archet l’a quittée, et en résulte une impression plus molle, plus douce et en même temps, plus durable.

(105). Grammont and Banville apply traditional masculine and feminine characteristics to both grammatical and sexual gender. The heroines in Banville's "Erinna," for example, bear a strong resemblance to the cold-hearted women idealized in Petrarchan sonnets by "wounded" male poets. In other words, he uses feminine rhyme to create a "feminine" effect that merely duplicates the clichés men have perpetuated about women for centuries, manipulating and putting down the feminine for the benefit of the masculine. Vivien's strategy in "Sonnet féminin" is similar in that she uses grammatical gender to comment on sexual difference, but with an important twist—she valorizes the feminine whereas Banville and Grammont use it to reinforce negative sexual stereotypes. Although the first line of Vivien's "Sonnet féminin" reads like a perfect textbook example of the feminine effect Grammont describes, from the mute "e's" and liquid "l's" to the lyre strings themselves, her verses impress the reader by a powerful and positive female presence.

Unfortunately, Vivien's "Sonnet féminin" lost much of its poignancy because turn-of-the-century readers were not prepared to "read lesbian." Even Charles-Brun down-played her lesbianism by calling it purely literary, and one of Vivien's most fervent admirers, Salomon Reinach, took it upon himself to collect many of her personal papers which he sealed in the Bibliothèque Nationale until the year 2000. As he explained in a letter to Natalie Barney, "On a ses vers divins, cela suffit . . . L'étude de son style et de ce qu'on peut appeler sa philosophie de la vie est très légitime et n'exige ni des regards indiscrets sur sa correspondance, ni la connaissance de ses nombreuses pérégrinations" (*Aventures* 200). In his efforts to cover up her sexual orientation and neutralize the impact of her feminism, Reinach overlooked the fact that Vivien charged her "divine verses" with a serious critique of exactly the kind of gender biases he used as an excuse to censor her. J. Ernest-Charles was one of the few early twentieth-century critics to catch a glimmer of what we can now recognize as Vivien's subversive manipulation of gender and genre when he wrote:

Et d'abord, s'il faut dire la vérité, l'amour étant un substantif masculin au singulier et féminin au pluriel, Renée Vivien l'a fait féminin toutes manières et d'autant plus singulier. (413)

Rather than destroy gender altogether, Vivien saw a way of working within the conventions of a male-dominated tradition to make the mark of gender a mark of distinction.

Cleveland State University

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the community of women known as Paris-Lesbos and Vivien's place there, see Shari Benstock *Women of the Left Bank*, especially

- her chapter on Natalie Barney (268–307), and Colette’s famous portrait of Vivien in *Le Pur et l’impur*, (Paris: Hachette, 1971), 88–108. Important studies of Sappho as a literary model include Elaine Marks, “Lesbian Intertextuality” and Susan Gubar, “Sapphistries.”
2. Stein inserted a sonnet into the middle of “Patriarchal Poetry” (from *Bee Time Vine*, 1927) following the lines “Patriarchal she said what it is I know . . . She was right. It was that” (*Yale Gertrude Stein* 124). In “Gertrude Stein and the Transposition of Gender,” *Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (NY: Columbia UP, 1986), 1–18, Catharine R. Stimpson calls “Patriarchal Poetry” “one of Stein’s most intellectually ambitious meditative poems” and suggests that Stein uses the sonnet as “an example of one of patriarchal poetry’s great formal achievements” (14).
 3. All citations of Vivien’s poems are from Jean-Paul Goujon’s edition *Oeuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien* which will be cited in the text as OPC along with the name and year of the original volume. His annotated edition, which also includes a preface and a section called “Poèmes retrouvés,” is based on the 1934 collection of Vivien’s poems. It is more complete than the reprint of the 1924 edition of *Poèmes de Renée Vivien* published in 1975 as Part of the Arno Series on Homosexuality.
 4. The sonnet experienced a brief revival during the Parnassian period, but at the beginning of the twentieth century began losing popularity in favor of more experimental poetic forms. However, the publication of several important studies of the French sonnet nearly coincided with Vivien’s “Sonnet féminin”: H. Vaganay, *Le sonnet en Italie et en France au XVI^e siècle* (Lyon, 1902–03); Max Jasinski, *Histoire du sonnet en France* (Douai, 1903); J. Viancy, “Les Origines du sonnet regulier,” *Revue de la renaissance* (1903): 74–93. In a recent article on the origins of the sonnet, Francois Rigolot refers to these three fin-de-siècle scholars as “grands pionniers de l’exploration du sonnet” (4).
 5. Jean Héritier’s description is typical of the vocabulary and patronizing tone critics adopted in regard to “la poésie féminine.” Héritier finds fin-de-siècle “féminine” poetry marked by “un génie naturel, délicat, harmonieux, bien féminin, fruits de l’instinct qui s’élance plus que de l’intelligence qui mesure. La littérature en est absente. Lyrisme spontané, cette poésie est sentiment avant que d’être pensée, action avant que sentiment. Elle obéit au rythme de la nature et de l’univers. Elle en est l’expression la moins déformée” (296).
 6. Simone Burgues is preparing a critical edition of the almost 500 letters Vivien wrote to Charles-Brun whom she began addressing as “Suzanne.” See Burgues’ article “Renée Vivien et Charles-Brun ou les lettres à Suzanne,” *Le Centenaire de Renée Vivien*, spec. issue of *Bulletin du bibliophile* (Paris 1977): 125–38.
 7. Jean-Paul Goujon’s biography of Vivien is the most complete to date and includes numerous selections from her correspondance. Vivien’s letters to Amédée Moullé, for example, dated March 1894 to July 1896, contain detailed commentaries on the various works she was reading during that period.
 8. Joan DeJean chronicles the “fictions of Sappho” in French literary tradition where the Greek poet has appeared as virgin, whore, mother, goddess, heterosexual, and less frequently, lesbian. She calls Vivien’s translation “the most radical revision of the poet in the two and a half centuries since her biography and her corpus had become the object of modern speculation” (249), and also notes how French translators of Sappho virtually ignored

Vivien's translations (251). In fact, Vivien's efforts to resurrect a lesbian Sappho coincided with a move by some Greek scholars in France to make a case for Sappho's chastity. The leader of this movement was the most respected Greek scholar of his day, Theodore Reinach, whose father, Salomon Reinach, was a fervent admirer of Vivien's poems and self-proclaimed protector of her reputation (DeJean 251–4). This is only one of the many respects in which Vivien's fate as "Sappho 1900" paralleled that of her model.

9. Elyse Blankley analyzes the importance of Mytilene (the principal city of Lesbos) in Vivien's poetry where it becomes a "visionary female city, . . . not merely a female refuge, but an imaginative attempt to formulate major cultural revisions" (51). She argues that if Vivien seemed to turn her back on her own female community in Paris, it was "because her feminism and lesbianism guided her toward a vision of complete female isolation on Lesbos" (51).
10. Vivien and Barney actually made a trip to Lesbos together in 1904. Although they never realized their dream of establishing a women's academy there, Vivien bought a villa on the island which she visited several times each year. See Jean-Paul Goujon, *Renée Vivien à Mytilène*, (Reims: A l'Écart, 1978).

WORKS CITED

- Banville, Théodore de. *Petit Traité de poésie française*. Paris: Fasquelle, 1872.
- Barney, Natalie Clifford. *Aventures de l'esprit*. 1929. Paris: Personna, 1982.
- . "Nos secrètes amours." MS. Bibliothèque Doucet, Paris.
- . *Quelques Portraits-sonnets de femmes*. Paris: Société d'Éditions littéraires, 1900.
- Baron, Dennis. *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven: YUP, 1986.
- Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.
- Blankley, Elyse. "Returning to Mytilene: Renée Vivien and the City of Women." *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Susan Merrill Squier. Knoxville, U of Tennessee P, 1984. 45–67.
- Danahy, Michael. "Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and the Engendered Canon." *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 129–147.
- DeJean, Joan. *Fictions of Sappho: 1546–1937*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Ernest-Charles, J. "Poétesses." *Les Samedis Littéraires* 2nd ser. (1904): 408–18.
- Flat, Paul. "Préface. *Dans un coin de violettes*. By Renée Vivien. Paris: Sansot, 1908. 15–26.
- Goujon, Jean-Paul. *Tes Blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses: Vie de Renée Vivien*. Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986.
- Grammont, Maurice. *Petit Traité de versification française*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1965.
- Gubar, Susan. "Sapphistries." *Signs* 10.1 (Autumn 1984): 43–62.
- Héritier, Jean. "Le Lyrisme féminin." *Essais de critique contemporaine*. Paris: Sansot, 1923. 203–311.
- Jay, Karla. *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien*. Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1988.
- Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Assimilation with a Difference: Renaissance Women Poets and Literary Influence." *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 135–53.

- Marks, Elaine. "Lesbian Intertextuality." *Homosexualities in French Literature*. Eds. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks. Ithaca New York: Cornell UP, 1979. 353–77.
- . "'Sappho 1900': Imaginary Renée Vivien and the Rear of the *belle époque*." *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 175–89.
- Mazaleyrat, Jean. *Eléments de métrique française*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1974.
- Maurras, Charles. "Le Romantisme féminin." 1903. Rpt. in *L'Avenir de l'Intelligence*. Paris: Flammarion, 1927. 115–234.
- Miller, Nancy K and Joan DeJean. "Editor's Preface." *The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature*. Spec. issue of 75 (1988): 1–6.
- Morier, Henri. *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique*. Paris: PUF, 1961.
- Oppenheimer, Paul. *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet*. NY: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Rigolot, François. "Qu'est-ce qu'un sonnet? Perspectives sur les origines d'une forme poétique." *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 84 (1984): 3–18.
- Robinson, Lillian. "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. NY: Pantheon Books, 1985. 105–21.
- Slama, Béatrice. "De 'littérature féminine' à 'l'écrire-femme': Différence et institution." *Littérature* 44 (déc. 1981): 51–71.
- Vickers, Nancy J. "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme." *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Spec. issue of *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (Winter 1981): 265–279.
- Vivien, Renée. *Brumes de Fjords*. Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1902.
- . *Oeuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien: 1877–1909*. Ed. and Preface Jean-Paul Goujon. Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986.
- . *Sappho*. Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec. Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1903.
- . *Une femme m'apparut*. 1904. Paris: Régine Deforges, 1977.
- Wicks, George. *The Amazon of Letters: The Life and Loves of Natalie Barney*. NY: Putnam's, 1976.
- Wittig, Monique. "The Mark of Gender." *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. NY: Columbia UP, 1986. 63–73.