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SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL:
A STUDY OF SWINBURNE'S
WILLIAM BLAKE AND ATALANTA IN CALYDON

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

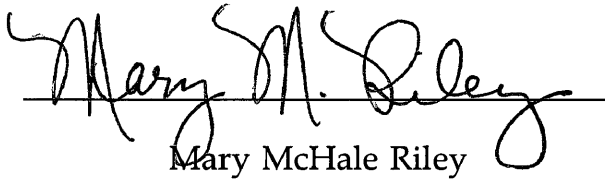
Mary McHale Riley

1994


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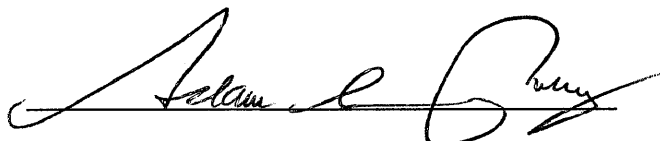
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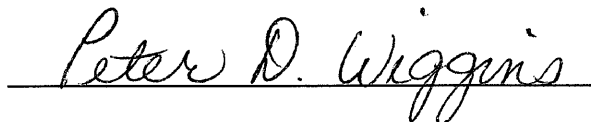
MASTER OF ARTS


Mary McHale Riley

Approved, July 1994


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ABSTRACT

After his meeting with Joseph Mazzini in 1867 and his wholehearted acceptance of republicanism, Algernon Charles Swinburne expressed a change in his ideas about the purpose of art. Whereas he had once rejected art with a moral purpose, Swinburne proclaims in Songs Before Sunrise (1871) that his poems are dedicated to Mazzini and the republican cause. The shift in Swinburne's thinking, however, was not as sudden as it would appear, for, even as he espoused his Art for Art's sake philosophy, the poet was not only politically engaged but was also using his works to voice his beliefs. Swinburne had acquired a copy of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty (1859) during the year that it was first published and later acknowledged that from that time forward Mill's book formed the basis of his "creed as to public morals and political faith" (Lang, SL 2: 293); moreover, an examination of Swinburne's William Blake: A Critical Essay (1868 but drafted for the most part in late 1863 and early 1864) and Atalanta in Calydon (1865) demonstrates that the poet was producing major works in the mid 1860s that embraced this liberal "creed" and that did indeed have a moral purpose.

SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL:
A STUDY OF SWINBURNE'S
WILLIAM BLAKE AND ATALANTA IN CALYDON

Algernon Charles Swinburne proclaims in his "Prelude" to Songs Before Sunrise (1871) that he has begun a new, more serious era in his life. "Prelude" tells the story of Youth who left behind his life of passions and delights. In place of these, he "bound for sandals on his feet / Knowledge and patience of what must / And what things may be" (24-26); moreover, "his spirit's meat / Was freedom, and his staff was wrought / Of strength, and his cloak woven of thought" (28-30). The speaker maintains that those who see clearly have no need for Youth's passionate and intemperate way of life. Men cry out to him: "Yet between death and life are hours / To flush with love and hide in flowers; / What profit save in these?" (81-83). The speaker tells these men to continue their lives full of singing and playing, but, for himself, he has chosen to repudiate his former pointless life of dissipation. He will not follow shifting passions and pleasures; instead, he will follow his soul which is steadfast as a star. He is determined to try to do something of worth, to perform "such good works or such ill / As loose the bonds or make them strong / Wherein all manhood suffers wrong" (182-184).

His meeting with Joseph Mazzini in 1867 helped to bring about this new era in Swinburne's life. Indeed, after this meeting, he became a zealous supporter of the cause of republicanism and dedicated his Songs Before Sunrise to the revolutionary. In this dedication, Swinburne tells Mazzini that

his "handful of songs" (12) grew from "the seed of your sowing" (2). Though he recognizes that his poems may be "feeble" (21), Swinburne offers his poems to Mazzini as "the sword of a song" (19). This sword expresses his "spirit's desire" (20), and he lays it at Mazzini's feet. Swinburne declares that his poems will be "witness . . . / That I knew her, the world's banner-bearer, / Who shall cry the republican cry" (34-36).

Swinburne displays in Songs Before Sunrise an attitude about art that is directly opposed to the Art for Art's sake philosophy that he espoused in the mid 1860s. Whereas with Songs Before Sunrise he wished to accomplish something worthwhile by writing what he called "my volume of national or political lyrics" (Lang, SL 2: 118), Swinburne had averred in his essay on William Blake that there is no place for moral purpose in artistic work (91). Furthermore, in response to the harsh criticism of the first publication of Poems and Ballads, Swinburne had written Notes on Poems and Reviews (1866) in which he rejects the moral responsibility that some Victorians insisted an author take on. He resents the idea that to publish a book is "equivalent to thrusting it with violence into the hands of every mother and nurse in the kingdom as fit and necessary food for female infancy" (333) and is contemptuous of the "moral milkmen" (333) who pander to the public. He declares: "Let those read who will, and let those who will abstain from reading. Caveat emptor" (333).

The shift in Swinburne's thinking, however, was not as sudden as it would appear, for, even before his meeting with Mazzini, the poet was

politically engaged. Swinburne owned a copy of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty (1859) in which was inscribed: "A.C. Swinburne, Ball. Coll. 1859" (Woolford 298). He acquired his copy of the book, then, during the year that it was first published, and, in a letter written to John Morley on March 28, [1874], he acknowledges the impact that this book had on him beginning with its publication: "I never had the honour to meet [Mill], but ever since his Liberty came out it has been the text-book of my creed as to public morals and political faith" (Lang, SL 2: 293). The question of Swinburne's "public morals and political faith" is an unusually interesting one because even as he ardently proclaimed his Art for Art's sake philosophy in the mid 1860s, he was writing major works that demonstrate the political engagement that he admits in his letter to Morley. This thesis will examine Swinburne's intense interest in William Blake culminating in his William Blake: A Critical Essay (1868 but drafted for the most part in late 1863 and early 1864), Swinburne's play Atalanta in Calydon (1865), and their links with each other and with the liberal thought of Mill.

In On Liberty, Mill considers among other ideas the importance of individuality, and his ideas on this subject are central to Swinburne's work. Mill maintains that society must allow for not only divergent opinions but also divergent choices of lifestyle. Rebellious against Victorian society's conformist attitudes, he speaks out for the individual's right to make his own decisions: "It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way" (64).

If the individual conforms to custom simply because it is custom, Mill continues, he "does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being" (65). In order to develop his "faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference" (65), he must make his own choices.

Mill adds that it is desirable not only that the human being make his own decisions but also that the desires and impulses that guide his decisions be his own. He rejects the idea that strong impulses, what Mill also labels energy, are evil. Though "energy may be turned to bad uses" (67), "more good may always be made of an energetic nature, than of an indolent and impassive one" (67). Mill laments the loss of energetic character in his society; where there once were people with strong impulses and desires he sees people who "by dint of not following their own nature . . . have no nature to follow" (68).

Mill also laments the strong Calvinistic influence in Victorian England that urges obedience to the will of God and thereby robs the human being of his impulses, his desires, indeed his individuality. Mill declares:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation. (70)

The narrow ideas of Calvinism will not improve society; instead, they will produce weak beings with no ability to add anything of worth to their society. Mill contends that "in proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being

more valuable to others" (70). Society, then, should allow the individual to make his own decisions and to live his own life. Only by doing this does a society progress and ultimately make itself great.

Mill examines Victorian England and concludes that it is losing the "diversity of character and culture" (80) that made it and the rest of Europe progressive rather than stationary. He feels an increasingly powerful threat to this diversity because of "the despotism of custom" (78) and fears that England might succumb to this threat. Reacting against the move toward a homogenous and ineffectual society, he stresses the urgent need for a changed attitude in England. If Victorian England continues to focus on the importance of custom and conformity, Mill warns, it will fall into a state of mediocrity. Only if Victorian England recognizes the desirability of diversity and individuality will the country continue to move forward.

Swinburne shared Mill's beliefs about the value of originality of thought and action. In the inimitable William Blake, for example, he saw genius rather than lunacy. While many of his contemporaries considered Blake a marginally skilled artist and a certifiably insane human being, Swinburne saw him as one of the most insightful and talented men of his age. Deborah Dorfman explains that "Swinburne set out to present and discuss Blake's works apart from questions of individual idiosyncrasy; he meant to be a critic of Blake's art and not a personal apologist" (92). Swinburne did not write his essay in order to concentrate on Blake's mental state or his personal life; instead, he wished to bring Blake's writing the recognition he thought it

deserved. In the first part of his essay, he does examine Blake's personal life; Swinburne notes "the existence and legitimacy of `artistic personality' in Blake" (Dorfman 92). When Blake's personality is his subject, however, Swinburne claims that Blake was not insane; rather, he discerns in Blake a "sensuous . . . receptive . . . passionate" (37) nature that allowed him to create great art. He sees in Blake's eccentricity not something to be looked down upon but something to be heralded as true inspiration just as Mill had heralded eccentricity in On Liberty.

In his work, Mill sees eccentricity as a means of battling a restrictive society; moreover, he maintains that "eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained" (74-75). Mill urges people to be eccentric, to refuse "to bend the knee to custom" (74). He expresses astonishment at the ease with which someone who is eccentric may be declared insane. Anything in a person's life that "bears an appearance unlike absolute commonplace" (76) may be used as evidence of insanity. Those who break from the norm of society should be praised not persecuted, Mill argues, and it is obvious that Swinburne embraces this idea in his study of Blake and his works.

Samuel Chew asserts that Swinburne was drawn to Blake in the first place because of Blake's willingness to defy the status quo. Chew explains that Blake's "advocacy of self-expression and joy as opposed to asceticism and

abstinence supported the liberal continental ethic which Swinburne set up against the rigid Victorian code" (254). Though he had praise for most aspects of Blake's life and works, he focused his essay on and reserved his highest praise for those aspects that were most rebellious. Thus, as Ian Fletcher explains, Swinburne's "Blake is of course made in Swinburne's image" (49). Dorfman posits that in creating his picture of Blake's life, for example, Swinburne "relishes Blake's attacks on conventional society" (99) but dismisses his ethical idealism as innocent and obscure (99). Furthermore, Swinburne used the essay as a vehicle to expound upon his own ideas and theories. Dorfman notes that during the years that he was writing the essay, he "broadened his Art for Art's Sake position to embrace all libertarian causes. Almost all his central preoccupations are reflected in his one book on Blake" (91). His work, then, becomes important not only for its criticism of Blake's works but also for the insight it gives into Swinburne's liberal frame of mind while writing in the mid 1860s.

Thus, that he would reserve his highest praise for one of Blake's most unconventional works, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, illuminates his liberal leanings even more clearly. He asks Seymour Kirkup in a letter circa July 1864:

Did you ever read his great prose-poem, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell? For profound humour and subtle imagination, not less than for lyrical splendour and fervour of thought, it seems to me the greatest work of its century. We all envy you the privilege of having known a man so great in so many ways. (Lang, SL 1: 102)

In William Blake: A Critical Essay, Swinburne again praises the work: "In

1790 Blake produced the greatest of all his books; a work indeed which we rank as about the greatest produced by the eighteenth century in the line of high poetry and spiritual speculation" (204).

Like Mill's On Liberty, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell stresses the importance of thinking for oneself. Blake challenges convention and even that which is considered sacred, and Swinburne revels in his ideology of nonconformity. Indeed, Blake overturns what he believes "the religious call Good & Evil" (xvi). He refuses to accept that "good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy" (xvi). Blake trusts human nature and suggests that the human's natural tendencies will lead to righteousness.

Blake adds that the human need not rely on any outside force to shape his life, for he has the qualities necessary to guide his own life. God, Blake posits, does not live outside of the human; rather, "all deities reside in the human breast" (xx). The human, then, should not surrender passively to any guiding force outside of himself; he should act upon his own impulses. Thus, Blake's work affirms individuality and urges humans to defy those oppressive institutions that attempt to impose restrictions upon them.

Blake recognizes, however, that these restrictive institutions, like "the despotism of custom" in Mill's work, may have an insidious power over some individuals. One of the "Proverbs of Hell" warns, "As the catterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (xix). The priest, as an instrument of an oppressive institution, acts as a

parasite who will feed on the joys of the individual. The individual must not yield to the power of this parasitic representative of the establishment. In fact, the proverbs show little sympathy for those who do not persevere in the face of repression. The human must continue to act upon his impulses and to follow his desires and passions. If he does not, he will become a worthless slave of the establishment. The proverbs insist upon action; indeed, one of the proverbs states, "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" (xviii). The individual must break out of his prison which is "built with stones of Law" (xviii) and live as he deems righteous. If he realizes that his passions should be trusted, and "if he soars with his own wings" (xviii), he will achieve great things. Blake urges the individual to cast off the ideas of passivity found in the tenets of controlling institutions in order to celebrate and act upon his innate desires.

The "Voice of the Devil" avers that "those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained" (xvi); the ideal individual, on the other hand, allows his passions their full scope and lets no law restrain them. The devil in "A Memorable Fancy" depicts Jesus Christ as a human being who followed not laws but his own passions. The devil rejects the angel's idea that Jesus has "given his sanction to the law of ten commandments" (xxvi); rather, he explains, Jesus broke the ten commandments in order to live righteously. The devil asks:

Did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbath's God?
murder those who were murder'd because of him? turn away
the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of

others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate? covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them?" (xxvi-xxvii)

Furthermore, the devil maintains that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules" (xxvii). Thus, those who wish to be virtuous as Jesus was virtuous must not accept the belief, perpetuated by established religion, that one should be passively obedient but must follow Jesus' example and act from impulse.

Like Mill, then, Blake lauds the impulses and passions of the human being and calls into question the customs of society. Swinburne explains in William Blake: A Critical Essay that the realities that Blake reveals in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell "will reverse appearance and overthrow tradition: hell will appear as heaven, and heaven as hell" (220). In Blake, he found a man who demonstrated the genius of which Mill wrote, a true individual who perceived the truth that was obscured by tradition.

Swinburne focuses his comments in the section of the essay dealing with The Marriage of Heaven and Hell on what Chew labeled Blake's "advocacy of self-expression and joy." He explains that "the book swarms with heresies and eccentricities" (205), and he praises rather than condemns these. He asserts that "those who try to clip or melt themselves down to the standard of current feeling, to sauce and spice their natural fruits of mind with such condiments as may take the palate of common opinion, deserve to disgust themselves and others alike" (206). He respects Blake who, through his

work, was able "to challenge misconception, conscious as he was of power to grapple with it: to blow dust in their eyes who were already sandblind, to strew thorns under their feet who were already lame" (205). Swinburne proclaims that Blake possessed a "high clear spirit and stainless intellect" (208). Through these statements of admiration, Swinburne demonstrates his conviction that Blake was right to battle the orthodox and, in his opinion, mistaken beliefs of his society.

Swinburne summarizes what he calls "a chief tenet" (206) in Blake's prologue:

Once the ways of good and evil were clear, not yet confused by laws and religions; then humility and benevolence, the endurance of peril and the fruitful labour of love, were the just man's proper apanage; behind his feet the desert blossomed; by his toil and danger, by his sweat and blood, the desolate places were made rich and the dead bones clothed with flesh as the flesh of Adam. (206-207)

Swinburne sees in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell an exaltation of the natural human who, like Adam, does not have to grapple with laws and religions which serve only to stifle his natural goodness. Blake, as Swinburne interprets him, thinks that "all form and all instinct is sacred, but no invention or device of man's" (208). The human being, therefore, should reject all invention or device, for his instincts are naturally virtuous. Swinburne believes that to Blake "that a man should be born cruel and false is barely imaginable" (208). Chew asserts that "the essence of [Swinburne's] exegesis is contained in his statement: 'The very root or kernel of [Blake's] creed is not the assumed humanity of God, but the achieved divinity of man; not

incarnation from without, but development from within; not a miraculous passage into flesh, but a natural growth into godhead" (256). Thus, Swinburne, according to Chew, understands Blake as one who perceives each human being as divine and whose attitudes can be understood with this in mind.

Fletcher maintains, "His William Blake is . . . essential for an understanding of Swinburne's work in the 1860s" (49). Certainly, understanding the liberal frame of mind that Swinburne reveals in his essay on Blake is essential for an understanding of Atalanta in Calydon, for, according to his correspondence, Swinburne was working on his play and William Blake: A Critical Essay during the same period. On December 31, 1863, he wrote to Alice Swinburne, ". . . I have done some more of my Atalanta which will be among my great doings if it keeps up with its own last scenes throughout" (Lang, SL 1: 93). A month later, on January 31, 1864, Swinburne wrote to William Michael Rossetti about the progress of his work on Blake.

Not only was Swinburne analyzing Blake's work and working on his play during the same period, but he also seems to have thought of Atalanta in Calydon in the same terms as he thought about Blake's writing. Swinburne recognized the rebellious nature of his play, and he was convinced that his play, in the company of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, would be rejected by most Victorian critics. Swinburne felt that the conventional and established poets, those whom he calls "the masters," would not accept his rebellious

themes, and he was prepared to hear the criticism. Adopting the persona of a boy being flogged by the masters at his school, he wrote to Lord Houghton circa April 20, 1865 regarding the criticism that his play had received: "The moral and religious question I give up at once. I let down my breeches, pull up my shirt, and kneel down (for the hundredth time) on the flogging block, without a word" (Lang, SL 1: 121). He continues: "If you apply a rod soaked in brine for that offence I deserve it. I did shirk Chapel. I did take to profane swearing instead of singing in the choir" (121). Although he does not expect criticism on his "quantities and metre and rule of rhythm and rhyme" (121) -- for Tennyson, "the head master" (121), sent him a note of approval on those aspects of his poetry¹ -- Swinburne is convinced that many of his Victorian contemporaries will be shocked by some of the unorthodox suggestions of his play, just as they are shocked by the suggestions of Blake's work. He explains to Houghton, "Twice I have been swished in private, and twice in public before the whole school -- for `irreverence'" (122), and he indicates that he will not be surprised if Houghton also partakes in the criticism.²

Certainly, Swinburne was correct to put his own play in the same category as Blake's work, for in Atalanta in Calydon Swinburne shows the same rejection of the establishment that he saw so clearly in Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Even the choice of the Greek setting may have been in part an expression of his rebellious attitude at the time. As Linda Dowling notes, Victorian liberal Hellenism came "to represent all the dimensions of human experience denied under the Calvinist dispensation of

religious fundamentalism or starved under the materialist regime of industrial modernity" (35). Dowling maintains that Victorian liberals such as Mill saw in Hellenism "alternate values" that seemed "to promise the hope of cultural transformation" (35-36). Indeed, Mill called for "a new ideal of individuality and diversity, for a modern-day Hellenism encompassing such elements as 'pagan self-assertion,' 'nonconformity,' 'freedom,' and 'variety of situations'" (Dowling 61).

While his Greek setting carries with it implications of liberal thought, the depiction of Swinburne's characters clearly reveals his liberal frame of mind. He represents those characters who reject convention, Atalanta and Meleager, in a favorable light, and he represents those who attempt to stifle individuality, Althaea and Toxeus and Plexippus, in a condemning light. These characters struggle for victory, and Swinburne thereby depicts the battle between good and evil just as Blake had done in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

In Atalanta in Calydon, Swinburne's characters, Atalanta and Meleager, strive to assert their individuality as Blake's Jesus did. Swinburne portrays both characters, members of a new order striving to assert itself under the oppression of the establishment, as noble heroes. As rebellious but nonetheless virtuous characters, they might have represented ideal individuals from the perspectives of Mill, Blake, and Swinburne, but they certainly did not fit with Victorian society's esteem for time-honored values. These characters do not "try to clip or melt themselves down to the standard of current feeling,

to sauce and spice their natural fruits of mind with such condiments as may take the palate of common opinion." Rather, they, like the natural and Adam-like human being, see the differences between good and evil. They are not "confused by laws and religions," for they follow their impulses just as Mill and Blake urged human beings to do.

Atalanta, for example, does not allow her society to dictate what she will do with her life. She will live as she deems virtuous, and she has decided that the virtuous thing to do is to serve Artemis. She is not concerned with the rewards of this world; she desires only to please the gods by living righteously. She explains to Toxeus and Plexippus: "I am not mighty-minded, nor desire / Crowns, nor the spoil of slain things nor the fame; / Feed ye on these" (445; 1008-1011). She assures the brothers that she does not want the things that they want nor does she pose a threat to their positions in society. Because of her detachment from the prejudices of society, she wonders at their resentment of her: "What thing is this for you to shout me down, / What, for a man to grudge me this my life / As it were envious of all yours, and I / A thief of reputations" (445; 1019-1022). Atalanta wants only to continue to serve Artemis in a way that her society may scorn but that she knows is righteous. If she does wrong, she says, "Let the gods witness and their wrath" (444; 954-955). She will not accept, however, the condemnation of mortals. Referring to Toxeus and Plexippus, she declares that they should "cast no word against me" (444; 955). The gods will let her know directly whether or not she follows the right path. Like Blake, she demonstrates a confidence in the individual's

ability to determine, without the interference of others, a course of life that will be pleasing to the gods.

Swinburne does not ignore the oppressive forces of society that Blake and Mill warned may oppose an individual like Atalanta. Althaea, a representative of a restrictive society, sees Atalanta as a threat and attempts to discredit her. She voices a tirade against Atalanta and all women who reject their prescribed gender roles:

A woman armed makes war upon herself,
Unwomanlike, and treads down use and wont
And the sweet common honour that she hath,
Love, and the cry of children, and the hand
Trothlight and mutual mouth of marriages,
This doth she, being unloved. (432; 477-482)

She scorns the woman who would reject her prescribed role, follow an unconventional and worthless path, and jeopardize not only her own honor but also perhaps that of all women.

So too Toxeus and Plexippus fear and attempt to stifle those who reject the norms of society. Unlike their sister, however, they are "stupid and simpleminded" (Wymer 6). Thomas L. Wymer sees them as "typical of the worst of the Philistines who reacted violently and angrily against any public deviation from moral norms, especially sexual ones, many of which were based on appeals to the natural order but had no real basis other than use and wont" (11). These two characters, then, symbolize the most ignorant and oppressive side of society. They deny the worth of any woman who does not act according to society's expectations, and they are especially critical of any

woman who would presume to act the role of warrior, a role that should be reserved for men. Toxeus asks, "Except she give her blood before the gods, / What profit shall a maid be among men?" (443; 932-933). Plexippus agrees that the only acceptable role that a female virgin may serve is as sacrifice to the gods. They fear that if Atalanta continues to reject her prescribed gender role, the order of society will be destroyed: "Then shall the heifer and her mate lock horns / And the bride overbear the groom, and men / Gods; for no less division sunders these" (443; 941-943). Indeed, Plexippus argues, "All things made are seasonable in time, / But if one alter unseasonable are all" (443; 944-945).

Atalanta withstands this assault made upon her by the oppressive forces of her society. She survives at the end of the play with her convictions intact. Meleager, on the other hand, does not survive; his mother, the figure of orthodoxy, decides that it is her duty to kill her son who is in essence a heretic. The victory, however, does not belong to Althaea. Swinburne subtly hands the victory to Meleager whose independent, unconventional way of thinking reflects the ideals set up by Mill and Blake and accepted by the author.

From the beginning of the play, Swinburne portrays Meleager as an attractive figure. He enjoys life, and he holds hopes for a positive future. He looks forward to a new day and prays: "Come forth a child, born with clear sound and light, / With laughter and swift limbs and prosperous looks" (428; 365-366). In his optimism, he awaits the day that he believes will be full of

success. He hopes that the outcome of the hunt "may leave thee [the day] memorable and us well sped" (428; 368).

Oeneus defines his son as one who is "fain to undo things done" (435; 627). As he argues with his mother, Meleager demonstrates that he does believe that it is acceptable "to undo things done" if one feels that this is the virtuous course to take. He thinks that all people, if they look carefully, can see the difference between right and wrong and that they should act upon their beliefs. Wymer explains that "Meleager is interested in a creative kind of law" (5); he favors a change in the law where the individual sees the need for change. Meleager rebels against a blind acceptance of the law that his mother advocates. He thinks that Zeus applauds new ways of thinking. He claims that Zeus "hath fear and custom under foot" (431; 457). Zeus, Meleager proposes, does not fear change or allow custom to govern his decisions. Meleager tells his mother that Zeus "is not less himself than his own law" (431; 459). This god, as Meleager perceives him, reveres himself as much as his law, for he made the law. He is his own law, and, because of this, he "remoulds and discreates" (431;461) as he wishes.

Meleager hopes to live his life as Zeus Lives his. He wants to live as he sees fit; in this way, he hopes not only to live his life but also to excel, to "lighten and lift up higher" (431; 463). With characteristic optimism, he proclaims that "great things done endure" (431; 465). Meleager lives as Mill and Blake would have all human beings live; indeed, he embraces the idea that success comes to the individual "if he soars with his own wings." He

believes in his ability to do great things, because he believes in his ability to discern what is right. He will love and honor Atalanta, for example, even though his family urges him to reject her, because he knows that she deserves his love and honor.

Althaea discourages his free thinking, but Meleager will not conform even at his mother's bidding. Meleager tells his mother that he respects her words, but he asserts his ability to make his own decisions in love and in all matters. He declares, "I too, doing justly and reverencing the gods, / Shall not want wit to see what things be right. / For whom they love and whom reject, being gods, / There is no man but seeth, and in good time / Submits himself, refraining all his heart" (434; 578-582). He lets his mother know that all people have the capacity to see the wishes of the gods; thus, he knows as well as his mother what is right and will make his own decisions based on his knowledge. After his mother reminds him of her overwhelming love for him, he shows his high regard for her: "This thy breast / And thy fair eyes I worship, and am bound / Toward thee in spirit and love thee in all my soul. / For there is nothing terribler to men / Than the sweet face of mothers, And the might" (437; 707-711). He reminds her, however, that "what shall be let be" (437; 712).

As in Atalanta's case, Swinburne recognizes the presence of figures who may attempt to suppress the individual. Oeneus, who saw Meleager as one "fain to undo things done," sees Althaea as one who is "swift to esteem them overmuch" (435, 628). Indeed, Althaea believes that one should always revere

the time-honored ways of living, and that one must suppress all threats to traditions of society. One must not forge new paths but follow those which society determines the gods have deemed acceptable. Wymer explains that Althaea's "greatest service to the young, she seems to think, is to communicate the fruit of her experience, primarily a set of forbidding warning" (5). She advocates, he maintains, "things as they are" (5) and warns that deviation from the norm will lead to disaster.

Althaea urges her son to follow the laws of the gods: "Love thou the law and cleave to things ordained" (431; 454). She believes in the established order of things and maintains that the gods also believe in the establishment. She asks her son, "What god applauds new things?" (431; 456). While Meleager believes that Zeus approves change and independent thinking, Althaea believes that Zeus "loves not laws thrown down and lives awry" (431; 458). Althaea warns Meleager that "pride breaks itself, and too much gained is gone" (431; 464). She fears Meleager's independent thoughts and advises him to be careful. Meleager, however, retains his convictions, so Althaea continues: "Be man at one with equal-minded gods, / So shall he prosper; not through laws torn up, / Violated rule and a new face of things" (432; 474-476). She attempts to convince her son that he will prosper only if he conforms.

Swinburne rejects Althaea's conservative perspective; indeed, he presents her not as a hero but as one of those parasitic figures who feed on the individual. From the beginning of the play, Swinburne portrays her as an unappealing character. In contrast to Meleager, Althaea not only dwells upon

the bleakest aspects of life but also wants to smother the joy of others. She mixes thoughts of the new day with thoughts of the coming night. In her pessimism, she laments: "Night, a black hound, follows the white fawn day" (421; 125). Moreover, Althaea complains "I know / Spring shall be ruined with the rain, and storm / Eat up like fire the ashen autumn days" (421; 130-132). She does not enjoy life, for her thoughts revolve around not those things that could cause her joy but those things that would ruin her joy if she possessed it. Meleager prays that day may approach quickly so that he may experience success and fruitfulness, while Althaea asks the chorus, "Will ye pray back the night with any prayers?" (421; 127). He eagerly awaits the day to approach; Althaea realizes that there is no way to prevent night's approach and attempt to smother other people's joy with her despair.

So too Althaea combines thoughts of love and destruction. She complains that Artemis sent a deadly curse, love; moreover, she wishes that Atalanta, the servant of Artemis, had never come to her land. Meleager, Althaea perceives, loves Atalanta, and she mourns this because she believes that "love is one thing, an evil thing, and turns / Choice words and wisdom into fire and air" (424, 209-210). Althaea remembers when she smothered Meleager with her love, and she seems to long for that time when she controlled him, when she "kissed and hid him with my hands, / And covered under arms and hair" (425, 258). Because he loves another woman, Meleager is no longer solely under her control. Althaea fears this loss and resents Atalanta who has caused it.

Meleager's mother desires to convince him that he must live by the law and that, by loving Atalanta who defies established gender roles, he breaks the law and angers the gods. She gives him yet another caveat:

Be not filled with evil dreams
 Nor with desire of these things; for with time
 Blind love burns out; but if one feed it full
 Till some discolouring stain dyes all his life,
 He shall keep nothing praiseworthy, not die
 The sweet wise death of old men honourable,
 Who have lived out all the length of all their years
 Blameless, and seen well-pleased the face of gods. (432; 487-494)

Althaea, paralleling the priest of Blake's poem, tries to restrain Meleager's natural joys and passions. She does not respect his desires; instead, she attempts to persuade him that they are evil and they will lead him to a tragic end. Love will bring not happiness but despair, she posits; in fact, "from the light and fiery dreams of love / Spring heavy sorrows and a sleepless life" (433; 527-528). She urges that he remain chaste; she impels him to live a life of "divine deeds and abstinence divine" (433; 539). Through her words about the dangers of this unconventional love, she wants Meleager to see Atalanta as "a sharp-toothed curse thou too shalt overcome" (434; 559).

Meleager ignores his mother's warnings about loving Atalanta. He continues to show her the respect that she deserves, and, when she shows her courage and skill in the battle against the wild boar, he honors her with the body of the slain beast. Toxeus and Plexippus, of course, are incensed because they feel "despoiled by this one girl" (459; 1538). They must take this honor away from her and thereby restore their ascendance over her. When Meleager

prevents them, they decide that their nephew must die in order that they might regain their pride.

Althaea is as determined as her brothers to maintain the "natural" order of things, and, even though she knows that Meleager killed her brothers in self defense, she focuses on the fact that Meleager shamed her brothers by giving the spoils of battle to a woman. Furthermore, she determines that her son has brought shame to her by his actions against members of his own family. She dwells on the way in which her sister and even her dead mother will react to the dishonor that Meleager has caused. Meleager, she realizes with outrage, defied her advice; he did not choose to live with the reverence for "the old sweet years nor all venerable things" (463; 1689) that she tried to instill in him before the hunt. The chorus exclaims, "The house is broken, is broken; it shall not stand" (466; 1806), and Althaea plans to wreak revenge upon "him that breaketh" (466; 1807) her once honorable house. Wymer maintains that murdering her son "is an appropriate act for her to perform, for she embodies the kind of life-denying force which Swinburne sometimes seemed to surrender to, but just as often set himself against" (12).

Wymer sums up the characters of Althaea and Meleager as Swinburne's attempt to portray "the conservative and progressive personalities" (6).

Althaea, he asserts, demonstrates "the despair of life, the dependence on law and custom as established, the association of change with destruction, the fear of any stepping out of line which might expose one to danger--an essentially defensive posture" (6). Wymer sees Meleager, on the other hand, as a

character with a "lust for life, for freedom and creativity, the scorn for fear or any other bonds, the association of change with growth -- an offensive, challenging, and hopeful posture" (6).

John Jordan agrees that the play is a story of rebellion against the establishment, but he concentrates his interpretation on the psychology and dynamics of the family in the play. He believes that "the play focuses specifically on Meleager's quest for identity and his efforts to liberate the brand, a symbol of erotic and creative powers, from his mother's control" (101). Jordan suggests that, at the beginning of the play, Meleager's "attachment to Althaea remains strong, but it is offset by a growing desire for independence and by an instinctive fear lest she permanently cripple his own capacity to love. What Meleager seeks is the right to grow up, to escape from the domination of his mother and the restrictive definition of self imposed by his family" (103). Thus, his interpretation explores the struggle in the family but deals only briefly with the implications of this struggle in the society beyond the home. Fletcher, however, identifies implications within and beyond the family. He thinks that in Swinburne's play, "he arrives at the notion of 'the death of the family'; the contention that the institution is by nature oppressive and must be superseded by more flexible forms" (3). Notwithstanding their differences, both critics see the attempt by the individual to forge an identity, apart from any outside force, as an important part of the play.

That the play deals with a conflict between the individual and the establishment is undeniable, but a central question remains debatable: Who

wins the battle? The establishment figure, Althaea, does succeed in ridding the world of one of the threats to its order, Meleager. Jordan believes, in fact, that she is the victor in the play. He points to the lines in which Meleager refers to "the sweet face of mothers, and the might" (437; 711). Swinburne, he states, shows through his play that "the sweet mother is also the terrible mother, the mother of might" (108). The brand symbolizes Meleager's masculinity and power, and, because Althaea has always maintained possession of the brand, she has caused her son's "emasculat[i]on which haunts Meleager from the time of his birth" (110). Meleager does not have the power to overcome his mother, to retrieve the brand and his manhood, and, with his death, he loses the chance to love freely. Furthermore, Jordan believes that "the conclusion to Atalanta represents a triumph for the sweet face of mothers, for the powerful maternal principle" (113). For Meleager, then, "there is no transcendence, no escape . . . except in death, from the terrible ambiguities which govern his existence" (113).

The end of the play, however, does offer evidence that Althaea is not the victor in this battle. Her last words demonstrate not triumph but despair. She cries, "I am severed from myself, my name is gone, / My name that was a healing, it is changed, / My name is a consuming" (471; 1943-1945).³ She persuaded herself that Meleager had to die because he did not respect the "venerable things," but, after she puts the brand into the fire, she dwells not on the prospect of restored order but on her ties to her son. Her natural passions take over, and she remembers her "first-born, fairest" (470; 1926). She may

retain the idea that she did what she had to do to avenge her brothers' deaths; she begins to feel, however, the unnatural and vile nature of her act. She loses the self assurance that she displays at the beginning of the play and despairs: "All my life turns round on me" (471; 1942).

Meleager, on the other hand, demonstrates confidence in himself even as he prepares to die. He proclaims, "With clean heart I die and faultless hand, / Not shamefully" (479; 2188-2189). With magnanimity, he forgives his mother for what she has done. He reserves his final words, however, for Atalanta, whom he still loves. He asks her to guard his reputation, and, as his last request, he asks her to kiss him. Wymer suggests that "the two are at least symbolically making love on Meleager's deathbed. And it is hard to imagine a more effective rejection of Althaea's notion, echoed by the chorus, that love is only a curse" (15).

Whether or not they do indeed make love, "at least symbolically," remains questionable, but the ideas of the value of freedom and individuality do prevail. In addition to Meleager's speech that is in many ways triumphant, there is the triumph of Atalanta. This woman, the surviving symbol of uncompromising individuality, leaves and presumably will continue to lead her life as she deems righteous. Wymer believes that the play reflects "Swinburne's own struggles to be free by revealing his unique awareness and careful analysis of the major forces that have always denied man's inner freedom. And the play concludes with a tragically affirmative and dramatically convincing triumph over those forces" (15).

In a letter to Pauline, Lady Trevelyan of March 15, 1865, Swinburne states his opinion, at that early point in his career, of Atalanta in Calydon; he informs her, "I think it is the best executed and sustained of my larger poems" (Lang, SL 1: 115). Perhaps he thought it so great because, in his play, he successfully portrays his liberal beliefs about individuality without sacrificing form. He knew that these liberal beliefs would not be praised as his form was praised, but this did not seem to bother him. He seemed satisfied with the praise of form that he did get from such men as Tennyson, and perhaps he was equally satisfied that, like Blake, he had attempted "to challenge misconception . . . to blow dust in their eyes who were already sandblind."

Jerome McGann's character George E. Woodberry, in Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism, puts forth the idea that "Blake and Swinburne were both determined that art should not commit the recurrent error of religion, that of making men subject rather than free" (55). He further posits that "Blake's greatness as an artist lay precisely in his attempts to develop an art form which would not smother others with its own powerful integrity but, on the contrary, would generate new life and infinite vision in others. Following Blake, Swinburne did not wish to make disciples but men" (54). McGann's character avers that Blake "came to break all laws and ways of seeing reality except those which every individual can discover in himself" (57). So too Swinburne, by giving victory to the characters who believe that a human being can make his own decisions without the interference of any outside force, seems to advocate the self-sufficiency of the human. Blake's speaker in The

Marriage of Heaven and Hell rebukes Swedenborg for writing "all the old falshoods" (xxvi), for all people must strive to create original ideas and recognize their personal truths. McGann's character asserts that "Blake's belief that man was God anticipates Swinburne's, just as both men had a horror of moralizing and rationalistic art" (56).

Both authors do present man as a God-like being who should be free to live his life without interference from an oppressive society, and Swinburne did show a lasting aversion to art with an overriding moral purpose and to artists who play the role of "moral milkmen." Indeed, even after his meeting with Mazzini, Swinburne wrote to Dante Gabriel Rossetti on February 19, [1870] expressing the hope that the politically charged poems of Songs Before Sunrise were "pure of any prosaic or didactic taint, any touch of metrical stump-oratory or spread-eagleism" (Lang, SL 2: 97). Just as he did not totally abandon his Art for Art's sake philosophy in his writing after he met Mazzini, Swinburne did not totally ignore his political convictions in his writing in the mid 1860s. His "horror of moralizing and rationalistic art" was not as strong as statements of his aesthetic theories suggest, for, even in his most rebellious themes, even in his essay on Blake and Atalanta in Calydon, there is evidence of a moral purpose.

NOTES

1. The letter to which Swinburne refers is dated March 1865 and, despite some reservations about the efficacy of the chorus, is extremely congratulatory. Tennyson wrote: "Altogether it is many a day since I have read anything so fine -- for it is not only carefully written, but has both strength and splendour, and shows moreover that you have a fine metrical invention which I envy you" (Lang, TL 395).

2. Contrary to Swinburne's own expectations, early reviewers almost ignored the "irreverence" of Atalanta in Calydon presumably because they did not discern it. They dealt, for the most part, with the beauty of its poetry, the promise of the young poet, and the degree to which Swinburne had emulated successfully the Greek form (Hyder 16-17). Clyde Hyder explains that The London Review did note the unorthodox philosophy of the play but attributed it to the author's attempt to recreate faithfully the attitudes of Greek society. The reviewer observes: "To the modern Christian, this view of the Divine nature is shocking and incomprehensible; but there can be no doubt that the conception of a Deity without conscience and without pity was widely spread through the religious and philosophical systems of the Greeks" (17). According to Hyder, then, this reviewer "passes over the danger point of the play" (17) by assuming that Swinburne does not necessarily share the shocking views expressed by some of his Greek characters. Lord Houghton, the author of the review in The Edinburgh Review, also praises the poetry of the play, but he alone disapproves of the poem's "defective moral tone" and "the bitter and angry anti-theism" (20). Hyder posits that Houghton "dwells upon what the other critics would have objected to strenuously if they had been so clear sighted" (19). Most of these early reviewers, as Hyder explains, "overlooked the fact that in Atalanta Swinburne had expressed an outlook on life which was deeply antagonistic to contemporary notions" (18).

Later reviews of the play reflect a more hostile attitude toward Swinburne's work. With the publication of the more overtly rebellious Poems and Ballads and with the news of Swinburne's scandalous private life, reviews became less laudatory (Hyder 150-151). Hyder avers that "between 1867 and 1870 the accusations of indecency and atheism steadily recur. Atalanta, in particular, is bitterly denounced for its blasphemy. Swinburne's prose is received with suspicion, not merely for its rhapsodical extravagance, but for its embodiment of obnoxious opinions, as in William Blake" (150-151).

3. Althaea means "'marsh mallow' (i.e. the bushy shrub which is noted for its healing powers. The Greek word derives from the verb 'to heal')" (Dunkling 11).

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VITA

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