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Swinburne Reshapes His Grand Passion: A Version by “Ashford Owen”

Terry L. Meyers

That a blighted love lies at the heart of many of Swinburne's works has long impelled scholars and biographers to search for details as to the who, the where, and the when of the affair. The first candidate was nominated by Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise and was supposed to be a young miss, a Jane “Boo” Faulkner. Her candidacy, however, withered under the scrutiny of John Mayfield and Cecil Y. Lang, and a substitute was found: the poet's first cousin Mary Charlotte Julia Gordon Leith (1840-1926), a writer who married a military man, Col. Robert William Disney Leith, and whose suggestive correspondence with Swinburne flourished after her husband died in 1892.¹

All the fascinating letters between Mary Gordon Leith and Swinburne that have come to light will appear in the edition of Swinburne's correspondence that I am presently preparing. One other letter is also unusually intriguing—one among hundreds and hundreds of apparently insignificant letters addressed to Swinburne by friends and acquaintances and strangers. These were retained by the poet or by Theodore Watts-Dunton and dispersed after their deaths, in most cases probably by T. J. Wise, who acquired masses of paper, valuable and otherwise, from *The Pines*. Almost no one has had the patience to work through these frequently dull and trivial letters. The task has been worthwhile to me, however, in helping to identify people to whom Swinburne was writing, in dating Swinburne's letters, and often in clarifying allusions within them. From time to time, a gem appears.

The particular letter I am concerned with here is from one of Swinburne's frequent correspondents, Mary Louisa Molesworth (1839-1921), the Scottish writer known especially for her children's books. In 1885, Mrs. Molesworth wrote Swinburne a note inviting him to a luncheon with a mutual friend, another writer, Annie Charlotte Ogle (1832-1918), who wrote novels under the name “Ashford Owen.” The letter seems trivial,² but identifies one more depiction by Swinburne of his

seminal disappointment in love:

85, Lexham Gardens,
Kensington, W.
May 2nd [1885]

My dear Mr. Swinburne

I *was* in time for Miss Ogle—so my stupid mistake (not Yours) did no harm—Rather good! For I found Miss Ogle so “*very, very, very* anxious,” to see you, (*she* told me how to write the *very*'s) that she is staying a day later in town *on purpose*—Will you therefore come to luncheon on Tuesday—26th.—at 1.30? This is the day I have arranged with Miss Ogle— Please let me have one word by return to say you *will* come³— You don't know how glad I shall be to have been the means of procuring an hour or two's talk together for you & your old friend—so you *will* come, won't you? & my blundering will have been lucky— Miss Ogle told me to tell you she remembers *everything*—all the readings & consultations—she is working at her second novel *now*— & retaining your names—

Yours most truly
Louisa Molesworth

& “Mark”—the villain I think is one—

The details of Swinburne's connections to Annie Charlotte Ogle are vague. In a foreword, published in 1920, to her first novel, *A Lost Love*, Ogle provides a sketch of growing up in Northumberland, and of the friends the publication of *A Lost Love* in 1855 brought her—the Brownings, the Carlyles, the Thackerays, and, according to “A Personal Note” by Frances M. Charlton, Swinburne. That Swinburne and Ogle met at least once at the Northumberland home of Swinburne's patron Pauline, Lady Trevelyan, is recorded by Raleigh Trevelyan: “On August 17th [1858] Swinburne came [to Wallington] to stay for a few days. There was a large party in progress, of all ages and mostly family, including Laura [Capel Lofft] and a Northumbrian neighbor, Annie Ogle, who had written a novel much admired by the Brownings.” He appears also to have been at Wallington at the same time as Ogle in September 1865, only three months after Mary Gordon Leith's wedding on June 14.⁴ However, from Mrs. Molesworth's comments, we can deduce that Ogle and Swinburne met with some frequency, apparently a creative relationship with Swinburne offering advice, perhaps models, and certainly names for

a second novel: "She remembers *everything*—all the readings & consultations—she is working at her second novel *now*—& retaining your names," including that of the villain.

Ogle's second novel, *The Story of Catherine*, was published by Macmillan and Company in 1885. And it palpably manifests Swinburne's creative pressure. It realizes several paradigms central to his life and art, and includes one more version of his doomed attraction to Mary Gordon as well as a dim reflection of his erotic relationship with Adah Isaacs Menken (1839-68), the American actress.⁵ The novel is by no means a literal or full representation of what happened, but one can see in the characters and the situations Swinburne's several depictions of himself as cousin and lover and friend too slow to declare his love as well as a profligate drawn to adventurism. The novel also characterizes the heroine's marriage as unhappy, perhaps Swinburne's consoling fantasy, perhaps a reflection of Mary Gordon Leith's marriage.

The Story of Catherine has as its villain the profligate Captain Mark Avron, who, to recoup money he lost gambling, woos (with the aid of his sister Anne) the well-to-do Catherine Ormslie. His rival is Colonel Walter Johnstone, cousin to Catherine: "he had been alternately elder brother and playmate, counsellor and friend to Catherine . . . whom he loved better than he dared to say" (pp. 36-37). Catherine announces to Walter her intention to marry Mark, deeply wounding him: "He had come to Algiers to ask for his cousin Catherine, and her first words almost had been to tell him of her love for another man" (p. 44). After the marriage is cunningly contrived, in secret, in Scotland, Mark abuses Catherine's love, and flirts with the musically talented Coralie Flemming, whose mother was "a lady of Creole extraction" (p. 133) met by her father in New Orleans. When Catherine discovers Mark's deception, she leaves, without revealing her knowledge, and goes into a decline at her aunt's home in Provence; there comes Walter Johnstone, leaving the army, like everyone ignorant of the four-year old marriage of Catherine. When Mark's fraud leads to financial collapse, he is forced to approach Catherine for more money and the marriage is revealed; ever increasingly unhappy, Catherine has still no idea that Johnstone "could have one thought of lover's love towards her" (p. 208). In the end, the marriage is accepted by all and financed adequately; all drift in their unhappiness: "Coralie is still trying to find a wife for Walter Johnstone, her husband's friend—and Catherine, by the birth of her child, has given 'a hostage to fortune,' and is outwardly Mark Avron's contented wife" (p. 238).

A review of Owen's novel by G. Barnett Smith (such a distant acquaintance of Swinburne's that he probably did not know of Swinburne's involvement) draws attention to one further theme in the work, the ex-

traordinary self-abnegation of Catherine. One suspects that Swinburne's masochism in "The Triumph of Time" lies not far beneath her behavior:

The sacrifices which women make for the sterner sex have furnished a fruitful theme for the novelists. But probably few women have consented to obliterate themselves so utterly as the heroine in *The Story of Catherine* did for one who was completely beneath her. Captain Mark Avron, who so captivated Catherine Ormslie's imagination, is a wretched specimen of humanity, a "plunger" on the turf and the Stock Exchange, and altogether a mean-spirited cur. His sweetheart goes through a private marriage with him which is kept secret; and she calmly suffers numberless indignities, which will cause the reader some surprise. Even according to the Christian code she does almost more than could be expected of her, and rather glories in it than otherwise. When we catch the last glimpse of her she is still outwardly Mark Avron's contented wife.⁶

Though unlikely to endure as a work of high art, *The Story of Catherine* is an interesting document, one more sign of Swinburne's drive to impress his experience and his vision not only on his own material but on a friend's.

Notes

- 1 The most important of the many studies and essays that bear on this central, complex biographical question include John S. Mayfield, "Swinburne's Boo," *English Miscellany* 4 (1953): 161-178 (reprinted in Mayfield's *Swinburneiana* [Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1974]); Cecil Y. Lang, "Swinburne's Lost Love," *PMLA* 74 (1959): 123-130; Jean Overton Fuller, *Swinburne: A Critical Biography* (London, 1968); a series of articles by F.A.C. Wilson, of which "Swinburne's 'Dearest Cousin': The Character of Mary Gordon," *Literature and Psychology* 19 (1969): 89-99, is a good summary; T.A.J. Burnett, "Swinburne and Mary Gordon," *TLS*, January 23, 1969, p. 87; Philip Henderson, *Swinburne: Portrait of A Poet* (London, 1974); and James D. Birchfield, "New Light on the Swinburne-Leith Correspondence," *KRev* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 52-63. See also Robert Lougy's introduction to the collaborative story *Swinburne and Mary Gordon* published in 1864: *The Children of the Chapel* (Athens, Ohio, 1982). And for an intriguing query of orthodoxy, see Rikky Rooksby, "Swinburne's 'Boo' Rides Again," *RES* 44 (1993): 77-82. James Hepburn sustains an elaborate argument against Mary Gordon Leith's being the innominata, favoring instead Elizabeth Siddal (!) ("Swinburne Corrupted," *Critic into Anti-Critic* [Columbia, South Carolina, 1984], pp. 33-59). W. H. Mallock's memory of an evening with Swinburne at Benjamin Jowett's in the 1870s has not been much noted. Swinburne told Mallock of "three poems, he said, which beyond all the rest [in *Poems and Ballads* (1866)] were biographical. . . . 'The Triumph of Time' was a monument to the sole real love of his life—a love which had been the tragic destruction of all his faith in woman" (*Memoirs of Life and Literature* [New York, 1920], p. 76).
- 2 I quote the holograph in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin, with permission.

- 3 Swinburne tried, but was, in the end, unable to attend the luncheon (The Swinburne Letters, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. [New Haven, 1959-62], 5:111-112).
- 4 Raleigh Trevelyan, *A Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (London, 1978), pp. 141, 216-217; the date of Mary Gordon Leith's wedding is from Fuller, p. 143.
- 5 See Wolf Mankowitz, *Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves, and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken, A Biographical Quest* (New York, 1982).
- 6 G. Barnett Smith, "New Novels," *The Academy*, January 9, 1886, pp. 23-24.

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