

COMPLICATING SWINBURNE'S HEROINES

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Abstract

The temporary resurgence in Swinburne's popularity in the late sixties and early seventies manifested itself predominantly as explorations into what forms the poet's peculiar sexuality and painful romantic history took in his work. This thesis turns the focus of Swinburnian criticism to his texts, specifically to the heroines in two of his works whom I believe have gone largely underappreciated: Atalanta of *Atalanta in Calydon*, and Chthonia of *Erechtheus*.

First, this thesis shifts focus from Swinburne's biography to the heroines' mythical Greek constructions, while at the same time complicating that classical context by presenting evidence that Swinburne, though he revered classical Greece, was not attempting to mimic the traditional Greek style. Then, this thesis explores *Erechtheus* and *Atalanta in Calydon* individually in order to show how the heroines of each piece exhibit significantly more agency over, and responsibility for, the course of events surrounding them than has previously been appreciated. In positions of power over the courses of events in which they are involved, their seeming *dispassion* is more generative when it is viewed as resolve, indicative of consciousness and feeling underneath a visage that has accepted what must be, and refuses to suffer for what cannot be.

This thesis is dedicated to:

Greg, Judy, Sheila, Katie, Mary Catherine, and Izzy.

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Introduction

When *Poems and Ballads* was published in 1865, a year after *Atalanta in Calydon* won Algernon Charles Swinburne significant if mixed acclaim as an up-and-coming young artist, the collection came under a deluge of criticism for its wickedness, criticism which implied that such wickedness originated in the poet himself. Robert Buchanan, for the *Athenaeum*, accuses Swinburne of being “unclean for the sake of uncleanness” and affirms that “in the face of many pages of brilliant writing ... such a man is either no poet at all, or a poet degraded from his high estate” (*Critical Heritage* 31). John Morley, for the *Saturday Review*, states that to criticize Swinburne for his immoral poetry “is simply to beg him to be something different from Mr. Swinburne,” who is no better than the “libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs” (*Critical Heritage* 29). Morley continues to accuse Swinburne of being the crucial fault in *Poems and Ballads*, acknowledging that the poet’s inherent skill exists in spades while lamenting that “never have such bountifulness of imagination, such mastery of the music of verse, been yoked with such thinness of contemplation and such poverty of genuinely impassioned thought” (*Critical Heritage* 26). As Hyder notes in his treatment of Swinburne’s *Literary Career*, the common disapproving perspective of the poet’s values laid like a watermark underneath his words the rest of his life (40).

Swinburne earned the treatment honestly; he worked to create “art [that was] for the sake of art” (“On Choice of Subjects” 146), not for the sake of reaffirming social ideals or stoking the pride his countrymen felt for their shared nationality. His art was

irreconcilable with either politics or morality—he would “give many patriots for one artist,” and he held as well that “however commendable ... verse may be for the doctrine delivered and the duty inculcated upon all good citizens, [virtue] is of less than no value to art” (“On Choice of Subjects” 147). His aesthetics ran contrary to the moralistic nationalism that defined his era, which opened him up to public criticism of his values even as his most vehement detractors admitted that he was, mechanically, a great talent. The angle of critical attack targeted his person, not his poetry.

Historical perspective has affirmed the nineteenth century critics’ instincts to read what is portrayed in Swinburne’s work as indicative of what persists within his person. Swinburne wrote about himself even when his subjects were explicitly otherwise. Atalanta’s cold rejection of Meleager’s advances mirrors the cold rejection Swinburne himself suffered for love of his cousin, Mary Gordon. F. A. C. Wilson builds on this well-treaded argument with his article, “Swinburne’s Victorian Huntress: Autobiographical Traces in *Atalanta in Calydon*,” in which he concludes, “if Swinburne had not ... embarked on a relationship with Mary, he would never have found the vision or the technique to support him in [writing *Atalanta in Calydon*]” (124). Subsequent treatment of Swinburne’s other powerful female characters have built upon Wilson’s arguments, finding a bit of Mary Gordon in the poet’s Rosamund, his Mary Queen of Scots, and his Persephone. Marilyn Fisch is acknowledging the critical inclination toward reading Swinburne’s powerful female characters as avatars of the poet’s frustrated history with women when she writes that the mere “mention of Swinburne’s name is likely to summon to the imagination scenarios of *algolagnia*, featuring a dominatrix as the medium

of punishment and even death” (3).

I would not deviate from the practice of examining Swinburne’s texts in light of his sexual perversity¹ and romantic frustrations if it did not continually draw attention away from the individual richness of his female characters. My study will build upon Antony Harrison’s attempts, in “The Swinburnian Woman,” to separate critical perspective of Swinburne’s heroines from biographical understanding of the man. Harrison argues that the “Swinburnian woman in her various forms is not merely a sinister *belle dame sans merci*” (100), effectively divorcing Swinburne’s female figures from the critical perspective of them as conceived out of the author’s bitter regard for women. I agree with Harrison that there is richness in their individuality that has so far been overshadowed by their likeness and the ease with which critics can categorize them. Over the course of this thesis, I will be exploring two such characters—Atalanta of *Atalanta in Calydon*, and Chthonia of *Erechtheus*—in order to illustrate their agency over and emotional involvement in the events unfolding around them, stressing their right to be considered the heroines of the stories that contain them. Tangentially, I will also be addressing one aspect of Harrison’s treatment with which I struggle. Because he perceives “Swinburne’s systematic philosophy of human passion [as requiring]

¹ John Cassidy devotes a section of his book to the “harm” done by one Lord Houghton, who “intensified [Swinburne’s] abnormal sexuality” (70). Cassidy is referring to Swinburne’s taste for flagellation, about which Houghton and the poet had an extended, documented correspondence. Swinburne’s sexual aberrance, like his romantic frustrations, continues to guide critical discourse on his work. Jonathan Alexander, in his article “Sex, Violence and Identity: A. C. Swinburne and Uses of Sadomasochism,” notes the parallels between Swinburne’s academic introduction to flagellation and the corporeal punishment of students in the poet’s incomplete novel, *Lesbia Brandon*. Marilyn Fisch’s “Swinburne’s Divine Bitches” assumes his romantic and sadomasochistic peculiarities worked concurrently when he devised his more destructive/seductive female figures.

similarities to subsume ... differences” (90), Harrison organizes the various forms of Swinburne’s women into three categories. Chthonia and Atalanta are both examples of Swinburne’s mythical woman, whom Harrison defines as “sensuous, timeless and dispassionate,” drawing down “to death all men who love [her]” (90-91). While both women seem on the surface to be *timeless* and *dispassionate*, I mean to show how they are the opposite: very conscious of their moment in time and passionate about it as well. Drawn from mythology to be reworked into new myths, they are nonetheless emotionally invested in the people around them.

Before I address the subject of Swinburne’s work directly, I would like to lay a foundational context concerning Atalanta’s and Chthonia’s classical constructions as a replacement for the biographical context that has so far dominated critical treatment of his work. The mid to late eighteenth centuries found the classics providing Swinburne and other English writers with a rich pool of aberrant, strongly realized female figures who otherwise rarely existed in the devotionally mannered environment of Victorian sensibility. Destructive yet sympathetic, timeless yet emotional, these women from whom Swinburne drew for his own heroines/villainesses are complex as well as destructive. Also, despite how vividly Medea was not, as Bram Dijkstra lovingly describes the Victorian feminine ideal, a “priestess of virtuous inanity” (4), she and her sister emissaries from woman’s more boundless past earned popular and scholarly attention due, respectively, to the rise in popular taste for sensationalism in the mid-eighteenth centuries, and to the persistent scholarly regard of these figures as belonging to academic canon.

The mythical Greek context is useful for my thesis because it provides for all of the qualities that make Atalanta and Chthonia strong and deviant (from Victorian context) while simultaneously allowing for those qualities to be studied as if they belonged to the women rather than to any era, culture, or author. As I will show, despite the fact that Swinburne drew these figures from their Greek mythical constructions and refashioned them for a Victorian readership, neither Atalanta nor Chthonia necessarily belongs to their Greek or their Victorian constructions. Greek mythology was a means for Victorian artists to create outside what was morally acceptable, and, debatably, the popularity of aberrant Greek female figures in Victorian England helped to redefine the Victorian feminine ideal. Swinburne tapped into that same potential, but elevated his art above agenda, homage, or pastiche, writing “art for the sake of art.” So, while Atalanta and Chthonia are Greek mythical figures given new life by a Victorian poet, it should be possible, at least occasionally, to read them as originating from nothing outside of their own stories—neither beholden to the context of their author, nor to the context of his period, nor to the period of their origin, nor to the cultures or moral structures of either period, but to their stories alone. In such an environment, the heretofore overlooked complexities of their characters stand out more strikingly, and, I believe, exhibit a richness that is important to future study of Swinburne.

Chapter 1:
Victorian Allowances Made
for the
Classically Aberrant Woman

The Intellectual Classical Aesthetic

Swinburne did not have to get his heart broken to learn how women could be mean. However, there is still some question, given the fictional female normative of the Victorian period, just where his aberrant female characters come from. I believe that, as much as they may come from Swinburne's past, they obviously come from Greece's past as well.

Despite how deeply and effectively Victorians mined the narratives they found morally acceptable, the spectrum of drama that originates from nineteenth-century England's relatively mannered aestheticism is narrow, especially in regards to aberrant female characters, who do not arise in original Victorian storylines except as exceptions to the greater rule of societal reaffirmation. For the most part the laudable female character of the Victorian era, even when exhibiting a streak of independence at some point, is by the end of her story ready to assume her subordinate place in a world of men—metamorphosing into the so-called Angel in the House, the poet Patmore's ideal-turned-critical-concept of Victorian female joy in servitude.

Heaped upon the constraints of societal reaffirmation were the subtle bonds of taste, which enforced a more diaphanous notion of what sorts of scenes might be too

gratuitous or vulgar to be portrayed, even if the character engaged in the vulgarity gets her just desserts. Cannibalism, infanticide, and incest are rarely referred to obliquely in Victorian storylines, but appear multitudinous in the works of the great tragedians and chroniclers of antiquity. As dangerous as her bitterness proves to be for Mr. Tulkinghorn, Hortense of *Bleak House* does not murder her own children, as does Medea; no matter how vivacious and ungovernable she is around men, Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair* never has sexual relations with her father, as does Myrrha; and regardless of how furious and despairing Tess of the D'Urbervilles is for how the men of her life have violently misused her, she does not feed her own son to his father as punishment for the man's history of, and the boy's potential for, sexual abuse, as does Procne.

In nineteenth century England savagery was for savages, *a la* Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. Serious moral transgressions were acceptable for aesthetic consumption only if the perpetrators were shown to exist, or originate from, somewhere beyond the sacrosanct moral structure that was the house of good English Society.

Within the self-conscious calm of Victorian England, evil resulted from invasive, alien forces corrupting the pure social idyll. London, the heart of "ever-broadening England ... that knows not her greatness," was portrayed by the likes of Tennyson and other morally upright aesthetes as a kind of secular city on the hill, to be protected from any external threats upon the national morality. Shared aesthetic served as ideological armor, and it wrapped protectively around that which celebrated national morality as if morality itself had become a kind of religion.

Which it had.

The popularity of the classics, then, could be said to be somewhat anomalous. Swinburne's sources for *Atalanta* and *Erechtheus*, in addition to arising from and set within lands of significant geographical distance from London, developed two thousand years before anyone ever first looked upon Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Such vivid foreignness produced a seriously divided response from Victorian writers and readership, relative to which Swinburne, university schooled, fell peculiarly in between—for he neither reshaped the old myths to reaffirm the ideals of his contemporaries, nor did he attempt to come as close to a perfect mimicry of the old myths as possible.

Many in the former camp felt conflicted concerning the Classics' perfect indifference to traditional Christo-Victorian values, often even

reframing [classical mythology] to suit Victorian tastes. Novelists seem to have been [especially] unwilling to represent a pagan hero or heroine without allowing for a conversion to Christianity at some point ... Most historical novels about the ancient world are set in the first five centuries after the birth of Christ, the decline of pagan religions and the rise of Christianity ... The genre proved fertile for those who wished to represent a fictionalized yet easily recognizable sectarian argument about the validity of particular practices within the nineteenth-century church.

(Hurst 38)

The general discomfort of Victorian readership with the vividly inappropriate situation of Oedipus, for instance, is understandable considering how taboo even the subjects of

incest and patricide were. However, the Victorian moral treatment of classical mythology, meant to turn ancient storylines into lessons on “Christian conduct” while at the same time educating readers about the “Greeks and Romans” (Hurst 42), was not usually produced by graduates of Oxford or Cambridge.

At university the onus was to engage the classics in the original Greek or Latin, emphasizing fidelity of passage recollection, translation, and incorporation either into conversation or into pieces of literary criticism (Hurst 15). A large confederacy of intellectuals and aristocrats were taught to view the Classics as the high water mark of aestheticism, and so it was *chic* among the educated community to revere Classical Greece especially as the “yardstick against which the modern world was measured and found wanting” (Jenkyns 239). Because of this reverence, the classics provided a great deal of the “furniture with which [the] educated person’s mind was equipped” (Jenkyns 231), which in turn created an audience for literary expression in the form of homage, retellings, transpositions, and translations of Classical works. However, because of the privileged position of the Classics among the learned, scribed attempts at revisiting the styles of the Mediterranean masters—when they weren’t completely reshaped to suit the Victorian idyll (and often then they weren’t fit to offend anybody)—were evaluated critically concerning how nearly the script imitated the original Greek. A kind of asymptotic challenge—to get as near to established perfection as possible.

A peculiarity perhaps of the intellectual aesthetic of the period was its compulsion to judge how well a piece *re-created* a vaunted style or *reaffirmed* an established set of values. As a former student of Oxford, Swinburne studied in an environment that

produced many a Classical aesthetic idolater—such as Matthew Arnold—but Swinburne did not cleave absolutely to the style of the Classics he emulated.

He writes in an article for the *Fortnightly Review* (quoting in places from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's attack on transpositions of the Classics found in *Aurora Leigh*),

Vain as is the warning of certain critics to beware of the present and abstain from its immediate vulgarities and realities, not less vain, however nobly meant or nobly worded, is the counter admonition to 'mistrust the poet' who 'trundles back his soul' some centuries to sing of chiefs and ladies 'as dead as must be, for the greater part, the poems made on their heroic bones'; for if he be a poet indeed, these will at once be [re-clothed] with instant flesh and [re-inspired] with immediate breath, as present and as true, as palpable and as precious, as anything most near and real. ("On Choice of Subjects" 150-151)

In the same article, he argues that "the rule of art is not the rule of morals" (147) and that the writer who draws from antiquity may be endlessly successful if he is "able to fill the old types of art with new blood and breath" (150). Swinburne rejects both established-as-safe means of retelling old myths—that of integrity of re-creation and that of social-morality reaffirmation—in order to fulfill his standard of "art for art's sake" (146), his work's compass its only pole star, disregarding the expectations of academic and non-academic readers.

Atalanta in Calydon, now regarded as one of Swinburne's greatest works, does

not faithfully cleave to a style of Ancient Greece nor does it reshape the myth according to Victorian values, and we can see in it how Swinburne initially failed to receive universal acclaim from either the popular or the scholarly spheres. Matthew Arnold writes that *Atalanta* contains “too much beauty” (qtd. in Nicolson 89) to be Greek, and others who cared little for Greek-ness found offensive the text’s “bitter attack upon [God’s] treatment of man” (Hargreaves 607), which is itself an element lifted—and then exaggerated—from traditional Greek form. The clearly delineated if sometimes misleadingly complex social value system of Victorian England was most strenuously a force for excluding what did not belong in certain cultural spheres, and to both the intellectually aesthetic and casually aesthetic spheres of Victorian readership it seemed *Atalanta* flaunts its intentions to be, in Swinburne’s own words, “something original in English which might in some degree reproduce for English readers the likeness of a Greek tragedy,” (qtd. in Nicolson 89). In the ecstatic words of Swinburne biographer Harold Nicolson, *Atalanta* is “something more than a mere *pastiche*; while retaining the ancient form and atmosphere ... [Swinburne] had the wisdom and the courage to widen the scope of his drama by including the experiences of a later age” (90). The courage Nicolson speaks of, about which Swinburne is more modest, is the courage to face the hot criticism directed at the *foreign* by creating art which belongs neither to the time from which it draws nor to the time in which it was written.

Perhaps it is this same courage that makes the work so successful today, but the pressure upon Swinburne in his time was otherwise. Years after he published *Atalanta*, before finishing *Erechtheus*, he confided to William Michael Rossetti that he was “at

work on a companion poem to *Atalanta* which [he hoped would] turn out a more perfect original example of Greek tragedy than that was” (qtd. in Overton-Fuller 214).

Swinburne succeeded in this endeavor to a point, but of course he could not excise what makes me now so interested in these works, what inspires this thesis. Those “unspeakable differences” separating his world from mythological Greece, so described by the anonymous writer of the *Saturday Review*’s article on *Atalanta and Calydon*, could not be totally bridged, even when Swinburne consulted a professor in order to make *Erechtheus* impregnable to such criticism he received for *Atalanta* (Overton-Fuller 218). Both plays draw the strong independence of their heroines from their classical Greek predecessors, but pitch those heroines’ passions into dramas that do not evacuate all English-ness, nor all Victorian female compassion, and so the foreign with the domestic spheres intermix—and that simultaneously vital and vulnerable hub of the British Empire, the domestic sphere and the fixed-role woman like the axle around which it rotated, are exposed to the alien violence of idolized female strength independent of man, sometimes in spite of man.

The Autonomously Aberrant Woman

What is most important may not necessarily be the classical aberrance of Swinburne’s mythical women; rather, the fact that they retain the agency of their Classical originals makes their aberrance utterly their own. Dracula does not have to bite Medea to turn her into a monster—that quality is an inherent aspect of her character. Likewise, Artemis and Athena compel neither *Atalanta* nor *Chthonia* to do their bidding; both mortal women see their duties to her through because that is what they choose, and

the choice, in each case, is difficult to make.

Majority aesthetic treatment of woman during the Victorian era emphasizes perfect lassitude of body and spirit, idealizing the concept of woman as a passionless vessel awaiting fulfillment by male essence—evidence of which can be seen in the visual art of the period, in which a preponderance of heavy, semi- or unconscious women are depicted reclining in different orientations as if none of them has a care, or a muscle, in the world (Dijkstra 66).² Depicted Victorian females often do not behave indecently because they are bad but because their vulnerable morality has been infected by some external force. The female's predilection for evil, passed down from Eve, was not seated in some inborn tendency to be devious, but rather arose from her weak convictions, which were subject to tampering by Satan, or other tempters.

The pressure upon narrative to seek out the external/foreign/male origins of female aberrance was one example of Victorian obsession with the problem of female agency. Predisposed to believe women incapable of very much at all, much less deliberate aberrance, the pressure fell on narrative to suss out the Satan-figure, the tempter to sin, the carrier of infectious corruption, in instances of women behaving badly.

Karen Halttunen's intensive study of the trial of Lucretia Chapman—who was accused of being complicit in the murder of her husband in 1831—exhibits the defense's and the prosecution's acrobatic caricaturizations of Mrs. Chapman's behavior, each cleaving to the common understanding of the female as inherently irresponsible. For instance, both the defense and the prosecution began by accusing Lino, her lover-

² See Albert Moore's *Yellow Margueritas*, William Reynolds Stephens's *Summer*, and Konstantin Somov's *Sleeping Woman*; consult cited Dijkstra for more examples.

become-husband already found guilty of the murder, of being the initial corrupting force who led Chapman to sin. Seemingly counter to contemporary ideas of how a prosecution should proceed to prove culpability for a crime, Mrs. Chapman's prosecutors constructed a narrative for the murder that granted Lino, whom they referred to as the *tempter*, the powers of a "fairy-tale magician" who systematically disarmed Mrs. Chapman's moral defenses until she was willing to renege upon her *sacred obligations* to her husband (45). The key to the prosecution's argument was to endow Mrs. Chapman with just enough agency for her to be regarded somewhat accountable for the death of her husband—but they had to work from, and ultimately against, the jury's sentimental assumption that she was led to be so. Despite the "great quantity of circumstantial evidence" and "strong witness testimony" leveled against Mrs. Chapman, Halttunen leads us to understand that the prosecution was fighting an uphill battle against deeply seated cultural assumptions that women did not enjoy sex and were rarely ever violent—that they were in fact psychologically and physically unable to act completely of their own accord; If they did any wrong at all (or any good, as I will show is the case with Chthonia) they may be somewhat absolvable of responsibility for being so naturally weak in character. Of course, the strategy of the defense was to exaggerate Mrs. Chapman's "feminine frailty," and, frailty being the keystone of femininity, "make a case for Lucretia Chapman's fulfillment of the sentimental ideal of true womanhood ... mother of five children ... whose dependency now provided her with her *sole motivation to live*" (51-52, my emphasis). The defense eventually succeeded in acquitting Mrs. Chapman of all charges, likely because "the jurors' masculine protectionism was aroused by the defense's

representation of Lucretia Chapman as a helpless female victim” (57), which the moral structure of English Society inclined them toward believing anyway.

It is similarly tempting for critics to read *Erechtheus*'s heroines, Chthonia and Praxithea, as agentless. Many critics believe the heroines of Swinburne's last verse drama, similar to his heroines from other works, lack real emotional depth; Chthonia and Praxithea have the added disadvantage of seeming traditionally feminine in their eagerness to submit to the prevailing male agenda. Critics like Richard McGhee regard their sacrifices as being out of their control—“Submission to the natural order ... is the only option for a human being trapped by her sexuality” (McGhee 89)—and such critics as Adam Roberts, who strains to establish intertextual context for Chthonia's and Praxithea's sacrifices, similarly concludes that “a woman is useful, [Toxeus and Plexipus] say, only inasmuch as she can benefit the state as a sacrifice” (Roberts 765). McGhee's and Robert's treatments are both indicative of how easy it is to miss the strength in *Erechtheus*'s heroines. They *submit* themselves with extraordinarily little fuss, chattering excessively about how much of an honor it is for a woman to die for her country, while Erechtheus and the old men of the Chorus show themselves to be men of action, who “lack not hands to speak with [nor] swords to plead” (*Erechtheus* 656), as they go forth to protect Athens from a destruction likened in language to the rape of a maiden:

Bruise her dear brow discrowned, nor snaffle or goad

Wound her free mouth or stain her sanguine side ...

Gnash teeth that could not fasten on her flesh,

And foam his life out in dark froth of blood
 Vain as a wind's waif of the loud-mouthed sea
 Torn from the wave's edge whitening. (719-728)

The repetition of the words *mouth* and *teeth*, compressed in space with images of sensualized body parts—the city's *brow*, her *sanguine side*, her *flesh*—make the violence imaged here disturbingly oral, as if the usurping army is destroying the city's body with unwanted kisses. Clearly, the Chorus believes that the “woman” needs to be protected, and it is this perspective that allows them to be goaded into battle, unnecessarily, by the Herald of Eumolpes, who accuses them of being “tongue fighters, tough of talk and sinewy speech [but otherwise] nerveless [with] tongues ... stouter than their hands” (642-644). The men, outraged that they are called tongue fighters to their faces, go off to war, even though throughout the play there is the universal acceptance that Chthonia's sacrifice will save Athens and nothing else will suffice. In his final speech as he leads his forces out to battle, Erechtheus admits that the men “bear but in [their] hands / The weapons *not the fortunes* of [their] fight” (713-714, my emphasis). Though physically active, the men have less effect on the outcome of the drama than the women who stay at home.

The social assertion that women were agentless was, by the mid nineteenth century, butting up against growing evidence to the contrary. Carried by a growing compulsion to develop a rational understanding of the universe in place of evacuated religious understanding, stories about female aberrance were becoming popular in spite of, and sometimes because of, the social distaste they gave rise to, but these stories did

not necessarily encourage empathy. They were merely meant to explain why such aberrance occurred, as with the Chapman trial. Halttunen asks us to consider the impetus behind the chronicling of Lucretia Chapman's trial as compared with a hypothetical trial from a hundred years before:

Had William Chapman been murdered in 1731, the printed account of the incident would have assumed the form of an execution sermon for the convicted murderer, which would have passed briefly over the sequence of events before and after the assault to concentrate on the spiritual destiny of the convicted murderer about to be launched into eternity at the gallows. (43)

With God less and less apparently present to judge the soul, social awareness shifted to compulsive analysis of man's and woman's physical and psychological motivations. Science quickly asserted its own brand of explanatory narrative in place of religious faith. Had Lucretia Chapman been found guilty, a confession or some other explanation for her aberrance would have been expected.

G. M. Young elegantly describes the shift in focus from religious to rational transcendence as "evangelical reason, secularized as responsibility" (17). Certainly the nineteenth-century English, even as they retained their Christian values and practices, were well on the path to deifying themselves as gods among men, the Anglo-centric theme at the heart of Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" and also Matthew Arnold's call, in *Culture and Anarchy*, for Englishmen to model the true morality for the benefit of the rest of the world. Aberrations in the machine were the font of mystery.

Criminals, villains in Dickensian spider plots of vengeance for vengeance for vengeance's sake—all deviance from the national ideal required explanation of the motivations behind the deviancy.

Michel Foucault's treatment of confession in his *History of Sexuality* applies here—confession as closure, confession as the *at last, the truth* moment that rests all tensions through the mechanism of explaining their mechanism. I use the word confession to refer to internality that does not align with external comportment. For instance: were Lucretia Chapman found guilty, she would be expected to confess; At the end of *Atalanta*, we await the eponymous heroine's confession of her true feelings for Meleager, or possibly the true bitterness she bears to her goddess. Similarly, throughout *Erechtheus*, we wait for Chthonia to confess her doubt, or possibly her anger, for being forced to sacrifice herself on behalf of characters who think her fate tragic.

However, confession, while functioning textually as a means for establishing closure through a reconciliation with truth, proves a means, for texts that ultimately moralize, to merely flirt with honest explorations of female aberrance while explicitly espousing the status quo. Plays like *Isabelle; or, Woman's Life* (1834) and *A Woman of Business* (1864) began challenging the constraints of the female role in front of sold-out audiences; however, they never commit to surpassing those constraints. The heroine of *A Woman of Business*, for instance, finds herself more capable of running her husband's business than he, to which he even admits. However, as Daniel Duffy argues, the play is attempting to appeal to two conflicting audiences: the body of the play is “soliciting a portion of the [feminist] audience” (127), while the end of the play, when the heroine

confesses herself to be “rooted in the period’s angelic femininity” (144), “provide[s] a route through its actions for sexist spectators” (143). Duffy shows that both *Isabelle* and *A Woman of Business* end with their heroines gravitating to the sexist comfort of their socially approved-of roles and confessing their true inner state to be that of feminine submission. And so, while these plays flirt with the periphery of what was morally acceptable in the time in which they were written, ultimately their heroines cower to the pressures of reaffirming the values of the Victorian period.

Medea gives her audience nothing, not even sadness for the crimes that she commits—in fact, her *deus ex machina* escape from punishment hints strongly at divine vindication. Unapologetic for her heinous sins, saved from justice by contrivance of an outdated theatrical technique, one would think Medea reviled by Victorian audiences. And she was by many. However, as Shanyn Fiske shows in *Heretical Hellenism*, “a sensationalist culture ... began to coalesce in the late 1830s and 1840s [that brought] to spectacular prominence the image of the violent, manipulative and socially deviant woman” (25). Obsession with female aberrance had grown an arm opposing that of moralistic repression—an arm that found a kind of joy in bad girls. Via the excitement she caused, Medea rode to unparalleled theatrical success in front of audiences who considered her disgusting, pressing against the limits of female respectability. The same movement that made up her fanbase consumed and produced other narratives in which aberrant women were allowed to be responsible for their own aberrance, neither surprisingly innocent nor confessing to influence by an external, corrupting force, but capably, autonomously aberrant.

While its motivations are entirely different, criticism of Swinburne's mythical female characters seems to parallel the Victorian response to aberrant women. We want explanations. Atalanta's decision to live without a man is an aberrance, and when we critics look outside the text to reasons for her behavior, we see more than one. Wilson and Young point to Mary Gordon, and I point to Greece, and others still point elsewhere. Probably none of these connections are incorrect; likely there are still true connections left to make. However, sometimes we must return our focus to the character for what does not translate backwards into either Greek mythology or the language of a broken heart. As an example, Chthonia and Praxithea have never been compared to Mary Gordon, though I contend that they are just as agent and conscious as their Arcadian sister. They do not appear on critical radar because their passions happen to align their attitudes with the submissive, Victorian-female ideal. They don't stick out as much. They don't seem as strong as Atalanta. However that is just an illusion, as it is an illusion that Atalanta does not feel.

Chapter 2:
The Heroines of *Atalanta and Calydon*,
and *Erechtheus*

Atalanta's Intelligent Loneliness

Atalanta is commonly portrayed by older critical studies to be the usurper of Althea's proper eponymous crown. The argument has reason: not only is Althea the one who chooses to kill Meleager and thus bring down the house of Calydon, but it seems Atalanta is responsible for very little other than her bewitching presence. However, Mark Siegchrist's argument that Atalanta is the final trap in the revenge plot laid out by Artemis, and my own argument that she becomes aware of this fact prior to any of the tragedies that befall the family, attribute the responsibility for the tragedy to Atalanta.

I believe that proving her agency is key to appreciating Atalanta's unexpressed emotionality, for if we understand her to be responsible for the events as they unfold in the play, then the tension shifts to her internality. She *chooses* to let Meleager die, and if the choice is easy to make, then there is no tension. Because the work is a drama, we receive no glimpse into her thoughts, except what she expresses out loud, and so her internality is inextricably unclear. Concerning drama, I believe we as readers and critics are encouraged to make insightful leaps into what goes unsaid, what remains internal, to which the author gestures minimally.

Atalanta in Calydon tells the tale of Meleager's unrequited love for Atalanta, chaste acolyte of the goddess Artemis. The goddess, spiteful toward the Calydonian

family for failing to pay her proper tribute, first sends a great boar to ravage the agriculture and wreak general havoc on the Calydonian countryside, then sends Atalanta, supposedly to help kill the boar. In actuality, Atalanta is the final stage of Artemis's revenge.

Upon first seeing her, Meleager falls in love, which marks both his doom and, as I and Siegchrist believe, the moment he plays into Artemis's greater designs for revenge. When he slays the boar and lays the carcass at Atalanta's feet, she "chastely with chaste lips / [gives a] faint grave laugh" (1534-1535) and walks away. Meleager's uncles, along for the hunt, are insulted by her ability (only Meleager performs better than Atalanta during the hunt) as well as her disdain, and they ride "against her violently / And cast the fresh crown from her hair [,] / dishonoring her" (1539-1531). Meleager, out of rash love, kills his uncles to defend Atalanta's honor.

Meanwhile, the queen his mother, Althea, has all her life kept safe a brand that she knows is the secret to her son's formidable, ongoing existence. The fates foretold to her when he was born that Meleager would be healthy and alive until the brand was fully consumed by fire, and so at the beginning of the play we are allowed to know that she has kept the brand safe since that day. When she hears of her brothers' death, however, she casts the brand into the fire, killing Meleager and, it is implied, dying herself of grief. The royal house of Calydon is thus ruined, and Artemis's revenge is complete. With his final words Meleager begs Atalanta to kiss him before he dies, but Atalanta denies him, lamenting instead, "Hail thou: but I with heavy face and feet / Turn homeward and am gone out of thine eyes" (2310-2311). Meleager has played the game of love assuming

that she would play it as well, and the assumption has cost him his life. Atalanta, while sad and regretful for the unintentional part she has played in his death, chooses to not return his feelings. Though I do believe a close reading of the text supports the possibility of her affection for Meleager, Atalanta is dedicated to the path of chastity that binds her to the service of her god, Artemis. Presented with the path of marriage to Meleager, she chooses the other path, the path of more independence, instead.

Atalanta in Calydon fascinates me because I read Atalanta's purity as paradoxically un-Victorian,³ for while preserved virginity, traditionally, stood for the intact innocence of a woman preceding marriage, Atalanta's virginity is her strength as well as the very seat of her self-awareness. She is not innocent. As one critic describes it, harshly for my tastes, Atalanta's virginity is like an "arctic sadism" (Wilson 120), but then that critic draws from Swinburne's biography, wherein stone-faced and aloof Mary Gordon straddles the horse she perpetually rides of Swinburne's fragile heart. Still, Atalanta is a force, and not a particularly sweet one. Instead of being protected from sex by the men around her, Atalanta rejects sex of her own will, and only has men around her as a consequence of being a woman on the hunt. Instead of virginity signifying her naiveté and dependence, Atalanta's virginity *is* her independence, and she chooses to

³ Neither is Swinburne's Atalanta much like the Atalanta found in Ovid. In Book VIII of *The Metamorphoses* (from which Swinburne derived the story in the first place) in which Ovid recounts the tale of "Meleager and Althea," Atalanta is dramatically absent from most of the proceedings *until* Meleager presents her with the boar as tribute, upon which she finds "the giver of the gift as pleasing / to her as the gift" (605-606). Ovid's Atalanta is tangential; her response to Meleager's attention merely serves the plot function of making Althea's brothers upset that their efforts are overlooked in favor of a woman's. Ovid's Atalanta is not even an agent of Artemis, but merely one of the warriors who happens to be a girl. The tragedy that befalls Calydon is, in Ovid's telling, a tragic sequence of events; not a trap set by a goddess in which Atalanta is the assassin.

preserve it as a keystone of her identity. Relative to the conservative notions of the feminine role in Victorian England, Atalanta is anomalous, perverse, and dangerous.

By the mid eighteenth-hundreds, the religious fervor attributed to the Restoration had shifted to power a more skeptical purpose, urging the English gentleman to “be serious, to redeem the time, to abstain from gambling, to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, [and] to limit the gratification of the senses to the pleasures of a table lawfully earned and the embraces of a wife lawfully wedded” (Young 13). Victorian society not only embraced the tenets of Christianity and secularism simultaneously, but used one to bolster the other, so that when we consider the popular phrase (of the time and yet today), “cleanliness is next to Godliness,” we see that the Christian tenet of *Godliness* is conflated with the social standards of hygiene, each strengthening the other. Ultimately, cleanliness is just a facet of respectability, and the latter can be substituted for the former to encase a larger portion of what we are talking about. For if *respectability* is next to Godliness, then religion has opened the door for respectable members of society to reach for a kind of asymptotic godhead, the ideal as captured by the stable familial binary of subservient woman and her stolid master, man: “The Family may be regarded as of Divine Institution, as a Divine appointment from the comfort and education of mankind” (Young, 21).

By conflating secularist respectability with Christian faith, Young shows the ideals of femininity and masculinity to be means of ascension in *both* society and religion. Respectability is next to Godliness, thus Society’s respect goes to those who are most near the divine. In such a world, the opportunity arises for people to ascend and be

godly, god like, like God, and perhaps even become gods themselves, but no human is supposed to be pure enough, respectable enough, to be truly divine.

Except, of course, in mythos, and that is how we return to Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, which is after all a retelling of a Greek myth in dramatic verse, and so chock-full of gods and god-like non-gods. Atalanta, I argue, is divine, not merely an acolyte of Artemis but possibly her avatar, and if not that, then a god in her own right, as Meleager suggests. If a Victorian woman's *ethic* was her "[e]vangelical faith in duty and renunciation" (Young 15), then Atalanta is not merely assuming the *poise* of duty and renunciation; rather, Atalanta embodies these qualities and makes them her own, garnering stupendous power in the process. For if we consider Victorian respectability to comprise poses that imitate imperfectly the various structurally necessary ideals of Victorian society, then Atalanta's respectability is paradoxically undermined by her integrity. She is not posing; she is pure from surface to center. Her virginity and intelligence are not "dress[ing]s," as Young calls them, "to attract men" (137), nor are they walls inviting siege. Atalanta's nature is harmonious with her outward manner; as such, there is nothing for suitors to assail. She is dangerous for Meleager because he believes that he holds the key to unlocking the warmth within her cool purity; after all, he is a man, her necessary counterpart, since "every girl was prospectively the wife of a gentleman, a workman, or something in between" (Young 137). The irony of the pure Victorian woman is that her purity is supposed to be impermeable to all except the man who wins her, and he does so through a kind of doctrinal loophole embedded in the ruins of her original sin—woman the weaker sex, more easily tempted, must take a husband for

her own protection. Atalanta is without such a loophole, so when Meleager attempts to enter her, he is instead broken by that which first attracted him: the purity of her purity, the impermeability of her “armored and iron maidenhood” (966).

But Atalanta is not merely a shell of propriety, as the word *armored* implies. She devotes herself, body and soul, to her cause. Atalanta never fails to reaffirm her devotion to Artemis, which, as she says, brooks “no man’s love / for ever” (967-968), but she is not without internality. We would not appreciate her devotion otherwise. She recognizes the cost of her faith, and has measured it, but she never falters. The most open she ever becomes about her burden is when Toxeus and Plexippus conjecture, cruelly and out loud and in front of everyone, as to why Atalanta is even present for the hunt. Toxeus asks, “Except she give her blood before the gods, / What profit shall a maid be among men?” and Plexippus, jumping onto the bandwagon with his brother, agrees that virgins are most useful for sacrifice, but amends Toxeus by saying that they are also good for one other thing: sex. Yet more insults pass between the two of them, but Atalanta remains silent until Plexippus begins musing on the proportional gaps that separate God from man, and man from woman: “For no less division sunders these” (943). When Plexippus insults her gender, she responds.

She has relatively few lines in the play. Sometimes it seems that she is not even present, as is especially the case with Meleager’s gratuitously extended death speech. She is well crafted as the watchful, quiet player in the proceedings; though she plays a key part in the fall of Calydon’s royal family, it is true that they as much tear each other to pieces around her as interact with her. However, when Atalanta speaks, she speaks better

than everyone else. Her words are always measured, and they always cut to the bone. She, with Althea as the runner-up, is always the smartest person in the room. For instance, in response to Plexippus's dig at her sex, she tells him and his brother of the struggles she must face in her own path, as a celibate maiden of Artemis:

I shall have no man's love
 For ever, and no face of children born
 Or feeding lips upon me or fastening eyes
 For ever, nor being dead shall kings my sons
 Mourn me and bury, and tears on daughters' cheeks
 Burn; but a cold and sacred life, but strange,
 But far from dances and the back-blowing torch,
 Far off from flowers or any bed of man,
 Shall my life be for ever. (967-975)

The repetition of the words “for ever” here becomes a kind of cant—she does not run from nor delude herself about her perpetual chastity, but rather internalizes the difficulties of her chosen fate by giving it voice over and over. She registers the men's comments as insulting her worth in general, which she does not accept, but neither does she seem particularly concerned. She is not impressed by men. And why should she be? Plexippus and Toxeus are vile, Meleager is silly, and Oeneus has caused the whole mess by forgetting to include a sacrifice to one of the more dangerous gods on the pantheon.

Later in the same speech, she defends her “great heart [that is] not less ... godlike [than a man's]” (996-997) even though she, devoted to purity, wants no “manner of

praise,” not even “memory” of her to persist after she dies, so that she may be that much more pure for her goddess. She and the men speak completely different languages when they speak of value. She even mocks them under the pretense of assuaging their unspoken fears that she will steal the fame of killing the boar from them:

I am not mighty-minded, nor desire
 Crowns, nor the spoil of slain things nor the fame;
 Feed ye on these, eat and wax fat; cry out,
 Laugh, having eaten, and leap without a lyre,
 Sing, mix the wind with clamor, smite and shake
 Sonorous timbrels and tumultuous hair,
 And fill the dance up with tempestuous feet,
 For I will none; but having prayed my prayers
 And made thank-offering for prosperities,
 I shall go hence and no man see me more. (1010-1018)

After having extolled upon the cost of her own chastity, there is acid in the lines *eat and wax fat; cry out*. Atalanta does not crave fame—she has chosen to disregard the vanities of life—but she is accurate in supposing that fear for their fame, and not doubt of her worth, is the source of Plexippus’s and Toxeus’s insults. When they ride to attack her after the boar has been slain and laid at her feet, one cries, “Lo now, / Shall not the Arcadian shoot lips at us, / Saying we all were despoiled by this one girl?” (1536-1538). Here Swinburne’s text lies closest to Ovid’s. They are afraid of embarrassment, and were we golden-hearted, we would be embarrassed on their behalf. We already know the

length and breadth of their concerns, for Atalanta has already laid them out before us. We are even less impressed by the men's blustering because we are given prior warning.

Meleager is less vile, but may be more stupid⁷ than his uncles. In one passage he claims not to love Atalanta, yet in the same passage he elevates her person above those of the gods:

I saw not one thing like [Atalanta],
 Most fair and fearful, feminine, a god,
 Faultless; whom I that love not, being unlike,
 Fear, and give honour, and choose from all the gods. (618-621)

As Siegchrist notes, “[T]hat Meleager should further presume to prefer Atalanta to any of the gods, in the same breath in which he denies loving her, is a recklessness that shows a lack of judgment” (702). Perhaps love makes him so stupid, but in a world where jilted gods can manifest plagues and wild boars, Meleager is not very conscious of the potential ramifications of what he offers. The gods are dangerous, spiteful, and unpredictable, and he should listen to his mother when she reminds him of these qualities of theirs. His unconcern amounts to hubris.

Despite his stupidity, Meleager's love should be understood primarily as a function of socially encouraged desires; we can feel sorry for him when we are not calling him a fool. Rather than desist when Atalanta expresses her disdain for his affections, he is encouraged by the chase. Their first date occurs, after all, on a hunting excursion, and the connotative connections between hunting and courtship are rich. But Meleager is mistaken, or at the very least confused; his relationship to Atalanta is

complicated, not affirmed by, their hunt. Meleager forgets that Atalanta is an acolyte of the goddess Artemis, who is forever hunter and never hunted. Atalanta, as acolyte to the Goddess of the hunt, is not a hind to be pursued. We may even conjecture that the hunt, for Atalanta, is an act of prayer. As Adam Roberts reminds us, “[T]he acts of hunting and sacrifice are very similar” (757). Thus, we have three entangled agendas for the hunt: the hunt, in its traditional form, as a means to “maintain civilization” (Roberts 740), hunting as courtship, and hunting as worship. As it happens, the entanglement of these agendas in the act of hunting is foreshadowed in the close of the Chorus’s first address:

And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,
 Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,
 Follows with dancing and fills with delight
 The Maenad and the Bassarid;
 And soft as lips that laugh and hide
 The laughing leaves of the trees divide,
 And screen from seeing and leave in sight
 The god pursuing, the maiden hid.
 The ivy falls with the Bacchanal’s hair
 Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;
 The wild vine slipping down leaves bare
 Her bright breast shortening into sighs;
 The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,
 But the berried ivy catches and cleaves

To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare

The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies. (105-120)

The Chorus' illustration of the ritualistic hunt--Pan and Bacchus each chasing prey (Bacchus's chase and choice of prey, a maiden, being more vividly couched in the lascivious language of lust; Pan's prey, the Maenad, is a fox)--stands opposed, aesthetically, to the hunt for the boar and its own tangled themes. The separate elements of the song come together harmoniously into one liquid image of chase, prey, sex, and religious ritual, that Meleager's blind love of Atalanta does not realize but upset. In fact, by gifting the boar to Atalanta instead of sacrificing it to Artemis, Meleager makes his operatively grave error.

Siegchrist recognizes Artemis as "a unique and peculiarly awful power. As the embodiment of an aloof and deliberate virginity, she personifies the successful attainment of that ideal self-sufficiency every human being struggles vainly to reach" (695). He goes on to say, regarding the Chorus's title for Artemis, "mother of months" (66), that the goddess seems "the wielder of a power [that] she is herself immune to" (699). Could such a power be sex? Each of Siegchrist's descriptions of Artemis may just as easily apply to Atalanta, one reason why I agree with his assessment that Atalanta is the ultimate weapon in Artemis's revenge. Atalanta is more than a weapon, though; she is the physical, sexual manifestation of all of Artemis's heavenly qualities on Earth. She is a messianic missile sent by Artemis to kill Meleager the only way he can be killed—with stupid sex.

Love leads Meleager to "bade whet knives and flay" (1343) the boar's dead body, as one would for a sacrifice, but then lay the body down, not before an altar of Artemis,

but before Atalanta's feet. Siegchrist wonders why Atalanta laughs when Meleager presents her with the hunt's prize, "with [the laugh's] hitherto unsuspected depths of feeling in the virginal heroine. Though Atalanta throughout the play acts entirely on behalf of Artemis, performing her role in the hunt purely as religious ritual, Swinburne's description of her laugh suggests unexplored possibilities of human response beneath her coldly chaste surface" (707). I contend that when she sees the boar is to be paid as tribute to her instead of to her goddess, she realizes the completeness of her goddess's revenge as well as her part in it. For look at the many-layered blasphemies of Meleager's act: the play's conflict began when Oeneus, the king and Meleager's father, did not honor Artemis with tribute. Meleager is repeating his father's mistake, only this time on an excursion in which he has been personally aided by Artemis's envoy, Atalanta. Secondly, as Artemis's envoy, Atalanta's receiving tribute in Artemis's place from a man who has called her a god is likely a huge affront to Artemis's sensibilities. Finally, on several occasions Atalanta has mentioned her pledge against worldly goods, fame, or any vanity. Meleager presents, unfortunately, the most promising means of deviating from her godly purpose and rejoining the world of flesh. She is tempted. His tribute is not small, and he is a prince and a great warrior.

The moment he presents her with the boar must be a shock, for if she takes his gift she is renouncing her pledge. His gesture is as good as a proposal, for accepting the boar means she must leave her old life behind forever. Her old life is difficult, by her own admission, but as Atalanta realizes the implications of accepting the gift she must also realize the ramifications of Meleager's offering it to her. He has betrayed Artemis, and is

asking her to betray Artemis as well. Atalanta must reel, in the moment, taking it all in.

So Atalanta finds herself with a choice: either to stick with her current life in service of her goddess, or to follow Meleager and brave Artemis's eternal capriciousness. Althea is shown early in the play lamenting mankind's subjugation to such unkind divinity:

Lo, where they heal, they help not; thus they do,
 They mock us with a little piteousness,
 And we say prayers, and weep; but at the last,
 Sparing awhile, they smite and spare no whit. (157-160)

Later in the play the older woman thrills to her sudden, once-off opportunity to “be as a god” herself and kill her son; the gods of *Atalanta* must be especially unkind for Althea to conflate infanticide with a divine act, and Atalanta knows she is protected from such cruelty when she is actually that cruelty's tool. Her loyalty to her Goddess is Meleager's final doom. So what is Atalanta given to do but to let out a “faint grave laugh” at the enormity of the traps they each lie in and can only choose between, these different poses of sadness, and walk away?

Atalanta is caught in an elaborate web of causality and has enough concerns of her own, and so it is puzzling why so many critics consider the work to be wrongly titled. Cassidy, for example, blusters forward without hedging:

The root of the tragedy is Althea's, not Atalanta's, and therefore the title is misleading. Although she is the root of the tragedy, Atalanta stands by as a spectator, not at all returning Meleager's love, and responding to his final

passionate speech only with the words that she is sad and must go home
(91).

McGann, meanwhile, cannot decide whether the tragedy is Meleager's or his mother's, and never once broaches the possibility that it is Atalanta's: "Formally, the tragedy is Meleager's, who is killed by his mother for the evil he has brought forth by his precipitate, but not dishonorable, act. But Althea is an altogether more tragic *figure* than her son" (95). Cassidy is right that Atalanta does not return Meleager's love; however, he calls her a *spectator* when she is in fact an agent of Meleager's destruction, as Siegchrist argues and I agree. McGann's search for the character at the center of the tragedy hints at his similar opinion of Atalanta. However, if we are to accept that Atalanta is aware of the trap the moment Meleager presents her with the boar, I believe the responsibility, and so the tragedy, becomes hers.

And as the final, conscious agent of Calydon's tragedy, Atalanta, for one brilliantly understated moment, holds the fate of her suitor, his family, and herself in her hands. Althea glories bitterly in her brief, god-like power to birth and then destroy her son, but perhaps her passion is ironic. Atalanta preempts the older woman's power by rendering her decision to kill Meleager redundant. Meleager proffers his sacrifice, and himself, to Atalanta—and the Arcadian rejects his tribute. We may not be given access to her thoughts in the moment, but the piece is named for her, she is Artemis's trap for Meleager, and she is the more intelligent, the more *observant* character—we are allowed to surmise that she learns what her Goddess has planned, as we are encouraged to imagine the inner turmoil of a goddess's last chance to be human.

Chthonia's and Praxithea's Schemes for Martyrdom, Disguised as Submission

One of the ongoing, chic debates concerning Swinburne is whether *Atalanta in Calydon* or *Erechtheus* is superior. The debate provides such endless play because the works are commonly considered too dissimilar for any clear, qualitative comparison of them to be possible. In the playful fourth chapter of his book, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism*, Jerome McGann constructs a fictional debate between two critics who disagree whether *Atalanta* or *Erechtheus* is Swinburne's best work, using their debate to define the differences and similarities between the two verse-dramas. Neither side wins. As Adam Roberts notes, the two plays are rarely studied together, even though they are the only two examples of their genre to be produced by Swinburne (757).

The reason for the critical distinction between the two plays is that the plays seem to come from significantly different Swinburnes—one passionate young poet, and one “an answer to those who fancy that Swinburne's liberty be but anarchy” (Welby 131). Subsequently, the plays have proven more useful to contemporary criticism as bookends to the decade-and-a-half in which Swinburne produced his most highly-regarded writings, points along a line that map Swinburne's artistic and personal evolution from passionate youth to mature logician.

William Rutland and Harold Nicolson founded the wall that separates the two works, as well as the front lines of the camps that bear each one up as their standard.

Rutland, in 1931, favored *Erechtheus*:

[Considered] as works of art, [*Atalanta*] is a *tour de force* of youth, and its value as literature lies ... in its pure poetry. Whereas [*Erechtheus*] is a

masterpiece produced in full maturity, which attains to an ethical intensity and spiritual elevation not often equalled and perhaps never surpassed in literature. (Qtd. in McGann 93).

Harold Nicolson, meanwhile, criticizes *Erechtheus* for qualities similar to the *maturity* that Rutland lauds, considering the play too thoughtful to be poetic, too controlled to depict greater truth:

The elevation [that *Erechtheus*] undoubtably attains is not as the inevitable widening of an emotion unconsciously released, but as the artificial selection of a rarified atmosphere, as the conscious adoption of an empyrean plane. This impression is increased by the rigid subordination of human personality and endeavor to the inscrutable whims of destiny; for although heroism is the theme of the tragedy, yet the heroism displayed is too purposeless, too inhuman. (151)

The *purposeless heroism* Nicolson speaks of is the seeming lack of agency of *Erechtheus*'s characters, who act as if they are non-autonomous parts clicking along like clockwork in a larger mechanical device. King Erechtheus learns from the oracle that his daughter, Chthonia, must die if Athens is to survive the impending Thracian onslaught. He tells his wife, Praxithea, who, with seemingly very little doubt, tells her daughter that half of her heart "is cloven with anguish by the sword made sharp for thine, / Half exalts its wing for triumph, that [she] bare thee thus divine" (870-871). Chthonia doubts her fate even less than her mother does, and she meets her death so gracefully that the Chorus, which earlier found the prospect of her sacrifice distasteful, exalts her heroism in song:

For her face was not darkened for fear,
 For her eyelids conceived not a tear,
 Nor a cry from her lips craved pity;
 But her mouth was a fountain of song,
 And her heart as a citadel strong
 That guards the heart of the city. (1181-1190)

Praxithea's and Chthonia's main concern, that Chthonia must die before she can fulfill her sex by becoming a mother—virginal death a “fruitless burden”—is shown to be allayed by Chthonia's radical, grand metamorphosis into the mother of Athens' future. Because of her sacrifice, the Thracians lose the battle and the city is saved. Athena descends to congratulate her city for being the transcendental signifier for all great cities to follow.

Chthonia never doubts her conviction to die for her city, and so her heroism is questionable—is she being brave, or is she merely serving, as an ideal woman of her poet's period is wont to do? *Erechtheus*'s genre is itself questionable in part because of the lack of tension surrounding her death, the lack of tension surrounding all death by the play's end. Whatever cost has been paid for saving Athens, everyone is satisfied. Yes, Chthonia and Erechtheus sacrifice themselves; yes Chthonia's two sister's (Praxithea's only remaining family) kill themselves in a madness befitting the tragic-Greek form; yes Erechtheus dies in battle; yes Praxithea comes to wish death upon herself for all that she has lost, for being the only member of her family remaining. However, these events occur early, and the play's closure is redemptive. Athens is saved. In the words of Athena, who

descends *deus ex machina* in order to personally martyr the entire city for its suffering: “[All to come shall] hold as highest of honours given of God / To be likened to the least of thine ... Thine shall be the crown of all songs sung, of all deeds done / Thine the full flower for all time” (671-75). She speaks of Athens in general and of its heroes particularly, the heroes continually conflated with the body of the city they love—Erechtheus its *crown*, Chthonia and Praxithea its mothers—and the Athenians are measurably uplifted by her words. The Chorus, momentarily critical of Praxithea for infanticide even though her actions saved Athens, now glories in their “mother that makest [them] free” (1757). Praxithea, who contemplates suicide just a few lines previous to the Goddess’s address, speaks of her “heart made whole” and gives voice to a kind of divine epiphany regarding continuity and oneness that could be said to lie close to the work’s thematic center: “There is no grief / Great as the joy to be made one in will / With him that is the heart and rule of life / And thee, God born of God; thy name is ours” (1746-49). And so is *Erechtheus* really a tragedy, are its heroes truly heroic? There is some question, after reading *Erechtheus* for the first time especially, as to whether anything of any importance ever occurs in the play’s two thousand lines. Athens’ fate all along has been to be uplifted by the sacrifices of its people, as it has been their fate all along to die righteously. None of the major players’ sacrifices were ever going to be allowed to be in vain.

And yet some of their sacrifices are sponsored by a kind of vanity. For instance, Chthonia and her mother’s submission to their fate is illusory—when they agree that Chthonia must die on behalf of Athens, they are both seizing upon an opportunity to be

canonized in the mythological infinity. More conscious of how their heroism will be perceived by future generations than of how their obedience immediately serves Erechtheus's needs, their likeness to the Victorian ideal of feminine submission is actually a red herring. And so we come to at least one similarity between *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*, to be found in the critical reduction of Swinburne's heroines' emotional agency. Atalanta is shortchanged for being considered cold-hearted; Chthonia and Praxithea suffer similar reduction through common critical conception of them as simple, submissive models for the Victorian feminine ideal.

Chthonia and Praxithea's attitude toward sacrifice which, when compared to the attitudes of the play's counterpoint sacrifice-figure, Oreithyia, is shown as far more graceful and positive and results in more positive mythologizing of their story. Oreithyia approaches her admittedly violent and awful wedding as if she is to be sacrificed, and so the elegy sung of her by the Chorus is mournful, supplying readers with a baseline for appreciating the adulations of Chthonia, whose legacy is ecstatic, positively glowing with enthusiasm, while her death is real and her sister's is figurative.

There is a purposeful confusion of opposing ideas in *Erechtheus*: The advance of the Thracian army is described in a despairing pun as the oncoming "unbearable birth" (357)—conflating *death* with *birth*; Boreas's rape of Oreithyia, which leaves Chthonia's sister betrothed in shame to the cruel god and Praxithea deeply sad at the prospect of losing yet another daughter, is described by the Chorus as an especially violent and regretful kind of sacrifice—conflating *wedding* and *sacrifice*. Nicolson notes that it is impossible to tell whether the Thracians really are an invading force or a more natural,

sea-borne disaster (152)—and, just so, the play conflates the threat of man with a threat more divine, or perhaps more natural, in origin.

Jerome McGann calls these opposing but conflated images and themes *relational structures* and *echo systems*, which he says compound endlessly a pattern of sounds and ideas that are defined as relational even as they are purposefully confused. His fabricated Erechthosian celebrates these structures for how they are so “regular, formal, and almost mathematically precise” (119), while his fictional Atalantian complains that they are all the play has to offer in the utter absence of drama. Indeed, they permeate the play with a kind of electric vagueness that charges each speech with chaotic probability at once intellectually exciting and emotionally confusing. The Messenger describes Chthonia as having “light in all her face as that of a bride” (1202) when she submits herself for sacrifice. The word *bride* calls to the reader’s mind Oreithyia’s “wedding” to the god of the north wind even as he evacuates what dramatic tension is left in the play by that point, and we are encouraged to weigh the multiple meanings implied by the connection simultaneously in order to grasp a smart indefinite: Chthonia is wedding herself to Death in order to give immaculate birth to the bodiless child, Athens (McGann 188). But of course all of such calculations are very methodical, and embody some of the greater motivations for critical disregard of *Erechtheus*. Swinburne’s mature play is so planned and pruned as to seem utterly without dramatic stakes—again, there is the inescapable presence of fate in every scene and hanging over the course of the entire play, making it hard to read any character as having any agency over their destiny.

However, I believe that within the *relational structures* and *echo systems* that

McGann identifies there is room for *Erechtheus's* characters to confront even that which is fated with a modicum of agency. We see this metaphorical wiggle room in the thematic connections established between Oreithyia and Chthonia and the way each chooses to meet her fate, and thus how each controls her legacy.

Oreithyia's character seems at first injected somewhat unnaturally into the natural course of events in the play. Her story, told by the Chorus in response to Praxithea's pre-emptive mourning song for Chthonia, on the surface compounds our perception of Praxithea's sadness by informing us that Chthonia will not be the first daughter Praxithea has "lost." However, the break from the continuity of events is jarring, especially in a work that otherwise seems so controlled, especially if the only purpose of the digression is to add to the play's drama, which Swinburne seems to hold as a low priority. However, the language describing Oreithyia's rape and betrothal indicates that the tale of Oreithyia serves as more than just another sad story:

With horse-yoke fleeter-hoofed than flame,
 To the mountain bed of a maiden came [Boreas, god of the north wind],
 Oreithyia, the bride mismated,
 Wofully wed in a snow-strewn bed
 With a bridgroom that kisses the bride's mouth dead;
 Without garland, without glory, without song,
 As a fawn by night on the hills belated,
 Given over for a spoil unto the strong. (567-574)

In addition to the obvious sacrifice connotations of a maiden taken by a god, the language

of the Chorus's song conflates the rape/sacrifice with an act of betrothal. Boreas does not merely rape Oreithya, nor does he only abduct her. He weds her, and then he "kisses [her] bride's mouth dead," sealing his consummation with the traditional transaction between gods and virgins—sacrifice. Not that she is actually killed—but she is effectively removed from mortal consideration. She is wed to a god now, and to her mother and to all who loved her she is no more. Roberts points out that "the proximity of these two ceremonies, marriage and sacrifice, is something the ancients remarked on" (766), and indeed the Chorus returns from reminiscing sadly about the past to peering with melancholy into the future, another wedding now yet to come:

Now a younger grief to mourn
 Needs a new song younger born.
 Who shall teach our tongues to reach
 What strange height of saddest speech,
 For the new bride's sake that is given to be
 A stay to fetter the foot of the sea. (624-30)

The new bride they speak of is, of course, Chthonia, and her bridegroom is Death. However, this second daughter of Praxithea meets her fate with a passion that is different from her sister's. Notably, Chthonia has purpose to die for, is prepared for her betrothal by the litany of promises of future glory she and her mother trade preceding the ceremony. But the confusion of the themes, wedding and sacrifice, and the space in the play in which Oreithya's story occurs—just following Chthonia's assurances to her mother that she is grateful that "with one blow dividing the sheer life / [she] might make

end [and save the city,] for such end / The Gods give none they love not” (901-904)—encourage us to read Oreithyia’s sacrifice and Chthonia’s wedding as mirror to one another, and so the manner with which they meet their fates comparable. Oreithyia is terrified, unable to act, “For the heart was molten within her to hear, / And her knees beneath her were loosened for fear, / And her blood fast bound as frost bound water” (613-15). Her story is canonized as one of woe, as a terrible incident befallen a hapless maiden; and the Chorus is prepared to learn a new “saddest speech” for the tale of Chthonia, who is to be slain for their benefit. They rehearse, even as she is still preparing herself, by predicting how the sacrifice will unfold:

As a bride shall they bring her, a prey for the bridegroom, a flower for the couch of her lord;

They shall muffle her mouth that she cry not or curse them, and cover her eyes from the sword.

They shall fasten her lips as with bit and with bridle, and darken the light of her face,

That the soul of the slayer may not falter, his heart be not molten, his hand give not grace. (818-23)

The chorus imagines the death of Chthonia in much the same light that it imagines the death of Athens. She is to be brought as a reluctant bride, her mouth muffled “as with bit and bridle.” She is to be used against her will, against even the will of Athens which sanctions her death, her face hidden so that the “slayer may not falter.” We sense that this sacrifice, which must be, almost cannot happen. Even if Athens is saved, the cost may be

too high.

However, Chthonia's is not to be a tale of woe like that of her sister. When Praxithea hesitates in her persistent application soothing fear-nots, remarking acidly that Chthonia's life is shortly lived and thus is a "short gain of all yet shall [God] get of thee" (416), her daughter responds with measured authority: "Brief be my life, yet so long live my thanks" (417). And thus Chthonia begins her purposeful, even *grateful*, walk down the aisle. She and Praxithea latch onto a vision of the future in which they are immortalized for what they give for Athens's survival. Chthonia, doomed to never give birth to a human child, can be the mother of the city she saves. And so the projections of the Chorus never come to pass—Chthonia meets her death as proud "as a bride," when her sister meets betrothal as if it is her death; the former sister is martyred, and the latter given a tragic ode, while both face the immortalizing force of mythology within which their only agency is to effect a legacy of either grace or terror. Chthonia's grace distinguishes from her sister's terror and simultaneously establishes the narrow avenue in which agency and fate can coexist—for she is always going to die, but it is in her hands whether she dies nobly or not, and so in her hands how her immortal story is to be told.

Chthonia does not submit to fate--such a reading overlooks her bravery. Yes, she dies as she is fated. Yes, she does so in a halo of pride for having the opportunity to become the mother of the future; a seemingly flat, uninteresting feminine ideal. However, the bravery with which she meets her fate should not be set aside simply because her actions conform to what is expected of a female. In her words, and behind her words, and in her bravery that is evident when viewed in relation to her sister's terror, we see that

Chthonia, and her mother, are taking control of the myth that contains them. They understand that Chthonia was “[born] for death's sake [and will] die for life's sake, if indeed [her fate] be to die, This [her] doom that seals [her] deathless till the springs of time run dry” (882-883), and they are seizing control over the immortality that is now promised. In a world where events happen as they are fated, Chthonia distinguishes her foresight and bravery by wedding death.

Conclusion

The preponderance of attention paid to Swinburne shifts the focus away from his heroines, who originate as much from Greece as they do from his romantic history. Antony Harrison separates Swinburne's text from its biographical constraints; however, his *Swinburnian Woman* is itself a reduction. There are more than three types of female characters in Swinburne's body of work, as the individual complexities on display in two of Swinburne's mythical female characters, Chthonia and Atalanta, testify.

I turn to the relationship between Victorian society and Greek mythical constructions because Swinburne is playing in that arena. His experience with Mary Gordon of course inspired him, as did the university schooling that introduced him to Greek mythology. However, Swinburne, like the Greek mythology which he revered, was never totally accepted by his readers, who fixated upon his periodic alcoholism or his aberrant sexuality or his disregard for aesthetic propriety, who obsessed over Greek mythology because it seemed unaware of the rules guarding proper conduct of women. Swinburne said of ancient Greece that he felt closer to it than he felt to his own time; I believe we can learn something about him by situating ourselves accordingly.

Regarding the stakes to criticism of Swinburne in general: His female characters have largely been studied to support research into other aspects of his life, career, period, and influences, while Swinburne's efforts were to raise the art above such contexts. Though authorial intent is less weighty evidence than text, is it not paradoxical to root around in a man's life for new perspectives on his art when simultaneously we disregard

his conscious intentions? My own response to *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* is complex, because I see tension arising between contexts, not within them: In *Atalanta*, Meleager mistakes a Greek warrior priestess for a virginal Victorian woman; In *Erechtheus*, Chthonia's brave efforts are masked by her likeness to a Victorian ideal; In both works, the dramatic importance of the heroines is obfuscated by the flashier characters to either side of them, or by our readiness to see them as something that they are not.

In the end, I return the focus to the women themselves because they are the original wellspring, where things can be complicated once again, so that future critics can have something of which to make sense.

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