

Necrophilia in Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The Leper" *

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The 1860s was the decade which defined Algernon Charles Swinburne's career (1837-1909), just as it was the decade in which he was most criticised; it set the tone for future critics and researchers who would venture upon studying Swinburne's poetry. Swinburne published quite a few books during this decade—collections of poems as well as dramas. Some of his earlier works were dismissed, while others, like *Atalanta in Calydon*, were praised for their great rhythm and exceptional writing style. However, Swinburne came to undeniable fame and infamy after publishing his *Poems and Ballads* in 1866. Swinburne's collection of poems was deemed unacceptable by the standards of the Victorian mock-morality. Many reviewers, both anonymous and named, came forward to criticise the young poet by calling his work "immoral," "disgusting," "tasteless," and so on. The backlash was so strong that Swinburne's publisher, Moxon, withdrew *Poems and Ballads* from circulation less than a month after its publication.

It cannot be denied that Swinburne's poems, indeed, were telling stories based on themes unusual for the readers of the nineteenth century: death, sexuality, incest, rape, and other similar topics were the basis for most of the poems in *Poems and Ballads*. However, these are only the superficial aspects of his poems. By referencing only these, the philosophy of Swinburne's poems is pushed back, ignored, and forgotten. It is most unfortunate, that most of Swinburne's early critics and the majority of his researchers in the 20th century do not get past this superficial veil of his poems.

One of the themes that is most commonly observed throughout Swinburne's career is "love after death." While this notion was brought to its peak in the poet's masterpiece, *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), it is also present in his earlier works. Some of Swinburne's poems give a new meaning to the concepts of "love" and "death." Most importantly, the "love" which is most often observed in *Poems and Ballads* is not the pure emotion so very familiar to the Victorians. On the contrary, it is an emotion fuelled by lust and desire. "Phaedra," "Dolores," "Faustine"—these poems which were given the names of their heroines, put the innermost feelings and desires of their protagonists on the front. Swinburne portrays the men whom they love getting torn apart by that very same love. The three archetypes of *femme fatale*, *femme*

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damnée, and *damsel in distress* are most prominent in Swinburne's verse of the 1860s. *Femme damnée* is the archetype which arises particular interest: the predecessor of the Swinburnian damned woman can be found in the *Les Fleurs du Mal* of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67). Swinburne was very fond of Baudelaire and his poetry, the influences of which are very vividly seen in *Poems and Ballads*. A very short correspondence between the two has been preserved in addition to Swinburne's detailed review of Baudelaire's work in the *Spectator* of 1862. Nevertheless, Baudelaire's *femme damnée* is unique in that she is a lesbian, which is not a necessary condition in Swinburne's poems. Moreover, the Swinburnian damned woman is usually born after being rejected by the man whom she loves tremendously. This emotion, which in some cases is bordering obsession, leads her to destroy the man she loves, which in its own turn becomes the cause of her own demise—a trait unique to Swinburne's archetype.

In Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, a short poem titled "The Leper" stands out for its extremely unusual concept of "love after death." While the female protagonist of this poem is a little different from the above-mentioned *femme damnée*, she is presented as a literal damned woman due to having contracted leprosy. Leprosy raged in medieval Europe and was widely considered to be a divine punishment sent to the sinners by God. A recent study, The Magdalen Hill Archaeological Research Project, has brought to light the fact that those suffering from leprosy were also given a burial fit a Christian believer at the St Mary Magdalen Cathedral located in Winchester (Roffey and Tucker). The study debunks the commonly accepted belief that lepers were mistreated and seen as castoffs of society. Nevertheless, a glance at the literary works of the Middle Ages, Early Modern and Victorian eras shows that lepers were regarded with disdain. Dante and Spenser criticise lepers in their verses and portray them as abominations (Skinsnes and Elvove 295-9). The word *lazar* was sometimes used instead of *leper*, and interestingly enough, it does not bear the same negative connotation. *Lazar*, derived from Lazarus, is considered to be somebody worth saving and caring for, since that is what Jesus Christ did for Lazarus of Bethany (John 11).

Swinburne presents "The Leper" as based on medieval French sources. The said source is added in a footnote at the end of the poem. It should be noted that this is a fabrication made by Swinburne, who in actuality is the author of the "French source." "The Leper" tells the story of a beautiful noble lady whose beauty is renowned in the whole world. The story is told from the perspective of the scribe who served the lady and her lord. Unfortunately, the beautiful lady catches leprosy and is shunned by all those who fawned upon her. The lord she loved casts her away from his palace as an abomination. The scribe, who has been in love with the lady for

many years, leaves his position at the palace to take care of her, give her food and drink, and attend to each and every of her needs until death takes her. The scribe is not repulsed by his lady's changing appearances: he continues to love her, now openly, he kisses and lays with her. Given the nature of leprosy, the lady eventually succumbs to her disease and dies after her miserable time spent together with the scribe. Her death, however, does not in any way inhibit the scribe's love for her. He continues kissing and laying with her corpse until he succumbs to death himself, a notion slightly implied at the end of the poem and explicitly written in Swinburne's "French source."

The scribe's love towards his lady can be seen as innocent and pure: the lady's physical degeneration and loss of her beautiful appearances do not sway the scribe's feelings for her. He loves her unconditionally when the rest of the world is rejecting her existence. This can largely be attributed to his love for her prior to her falling ill, which can also be interpreted as symptoms of obsessiveness:

For will to kiss between her brows,
I had no heart to sleep or eat. (ll. 8-9)

[The scribe] plucked his clerk's hood back to see
Her curled-up lips and amorous hair. (ll. 11-12)

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the scribe is not only obsessed with the beautiful lady, but also used to stalk her and secretly dream of possessing her. This alone rejects the possibility of his love being innocent and pure—his feelings transcend both the physical and spiritual realms. The scribe's sole aim is to be in possession of his lady, be it in life or in death:

Yet I am glad to have her dead
Here in this wretched wattled house
Where I can kiss her eyes and head. (ll. 22-24)

Contrary to others who shunned away from the lady because of her disease the scribe finds her degenerating and decaying body extremely lovable. This illustrates that the scribe is not in love with the lady's character or person, but simply with her human shell—her body. Thus it is not surprising to see the scribe lust over the soulless corpse of his lady:

[God c]hanged with disease her body sweet,
The body of love wherein she abode. (ll. 47-8)

Fools were they surely, seeing not
How sweeter than all sweet she is. (ll. 55-6)

The scribe's love for his lady continues escalating alongside her disease. He finds her to be sweeter than ever despite her deteriorating body. This in itself is quite strange and appalling, an emotion which the reader is bound to feel. However, Swinburne contradicts this by presenting to the reader what the scribe feels—he is disgusted and appalled by everyone else who shuns his lady.

Despite extremely fervent emotions, the scribe's love is unrequited. Swinburne portrays the scribe kissing his lady during her lifetime, but he also puts a great stress on the fact that she does not love him. She is not happy in her current state notwithstanding the scribe's delicate care of her deteriorating body:

'I pray you let me be at peace,
Get hence, make room for me to die.'
She said that: her poor lip would cease,
Put up to mine, and turn to cry. (ll. 81-4)

During the scribe's very short dramatic monologue the lady has few lines. These are filled with extreme emotion and help the reader understand her relationship with the scribe on a deeper level. This quotation not only shows the miserable state she is in, but also contributes to her unwillingness to be loved and touched by the scribe. Moreover, by expressing her attitude towards the scribe, Swinburne makes it clear that his love cannot be fulfilled while the lady lives. Her death becomes an essential part of the plot, adding to the drama of the scribe's story, and the tragedy of his love. After the lady's death, very predictably, the scribe is engulfed by an insatiable passion towards her lifeless body:

... and I sit still and hold
In two cold palms her cold two feet.
Her hair, half grey half ruined gold,
Thrills me and burns me in kissing it.

Love bites and stings me through to see
Her keen face made of sunken bones.
Her worn-odd eyelids madden me,
That were shot through with purple once. (ll. 101-8)

The lady's decaying body is far more appealing and delightful for the scribe. It is only natural for him to be enchanted by her decomposing body. It is, however, necessary for her to die so the scribe's love can achieve some semblance of fulfilment.

In his poetry of the 1860s Swinburne often expressed his critical opinion of religion, especially Catholicism. In "The Leper" Swinburne's rejection and critique of God is portrayed quite vividly. Throughout the poem the scribe seems to find fault in himself for not being loved by his lady as well as for her death. However, at the very end of the poem as his own demise becomes apparent, the scribe directs his spite towards God:

Sometimes when service made me glad
The sharp tears leapt between my lids,
Falling on her, such joy I had
To do the service God forbids. (ll. 77-80)

But surely I would fain have done
All things the best I could. Perchance
Because I failed, came short of one,
She kept at heart that other man's.

I am grown blind with all these things:
It may be now she hath in sight
Some better knowledge; still there clings
The old question. Will not God do right? (ll. 133-40)

The scribe is obsessive, masochistic even—traits very common especially in Swinburne's poetry of the 1860s—but his love for his lady is unconditional. The scribe puts her above everything else, even God. As mentioned above, lepers were viewed with disdain in the middle ages. Such an attitude was born from the negative representation of those struck with the disease in the Bible—abominations punished by God for their sins who must be banished from their communities. This leads to one simple conclusion: the scribe's actions are an outcry against God. His words stand testament to the fact that he fully realizes that he who is supposed to serve God is directly doing what has been forbidden by the Lord. Yet he neither feels remorse nor does he regret any of his actions.

Loving the corpses or spending time with dead loved ones is a common theme in the literary works of the nineteenth century, especially in poetry. Two prominent poems from the mid-nineteenth century that blatantly feature necrophilia are Robert Browning's "Porphyria's

Lover” (1842) and Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee” (1849). These two poems hold great importance when analysing “The Leper” in particular since Swinburne is known to have been influenced by both of these poets’ whose work he held in high esteem. In one of his letters Browning writes, “I have received courtesy from [Swinburne], and been told he feels kindly to me—I believe it, indeed” (*Letters*, 84). On the other hand, Swinburne writes about Poe:

Once as yet and once only has there sounded out of it all one pure note of original songworth singing, and echoed from the singing of no other man; a note of song neither wide nor deep, but utterly true, rich, clear, and native to the singer; the short exquisite music, subtle and simple and sombre and sweet, of Edgar Poe. (“Under the Microscope,” 418-9)

It is only natural for Swinburne to have been influenced by the two poets whose work he read from a young age and whom he regarded highly.

Similar to “The Leper” the concept of “love” undergoes changes in these poems by Browning and Poe. In “Porphyria’s Lover” the woman, Porphyria, is very forward with her feelings. She is somewhat aggressive and active about her approach to her lover; she acts with an eagerness that puts the protagonist off. In the first half of the poem he is quite unsure of how to respond to her feelings, and as a result of this unassertiveness the protagonist finds himself choking Porphyria with her own beautiful golden hair. This is a very literal turning point in the poem: with Porphyria dead and silent the protagonist takes her place and is now aggressive about his approach to her. He caresses her hair, he starts kissing her, and spends the night embracing Porphyria’s corpse:

... she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred, (527)

Browning’s protagonist is unable to love Porphyria unconditionally: for him to return Porphyria’s feelings she has to die. Her murder and the reversal of their roles is the unique trait of Browning’s poetry, which earned him the label of a “madman” (Adams 45). To explain this trope so often observed in Browning’s poems, Carol T Christ writes:

The animation of corpses ... not only defers closure but reverses it, converting a death narrative to a life narrative, to reconstitute the body. (397-8)

Browning's poetry features corpses and death quite often, and it is only natural for the dead to become "animated" acting figures in his stories. This can be most splendidly observed in his "My Last Duchess" (1842).

Poe's "Annabel Lee" is a little different in comparison to Browning's poem. The protagonist and Annabel Lee are in love with each other, but their love is destined to be unfulfilled. The protagonist believes that both the angels in heaven and the demons in hell were jealous of their love, and to deprive them of their happiness the higher powers killed his Annabel Lee. The protagonist's love for Annabel Lee manifests itself as a very strong emotion until the very end of the poem. He declared that nobody, not even angels or demons, are capable of forbidding them to keep loving each other:

And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee. (Mabbott 479)

Poe's protagonist speaks very tenderly of his feelings and his lover. Their love is reminiscent of a childish first love; it is an innocent and pure emotion. This is, at least, the impression one gets when reading the poem. However, it is at the end of the very last stanza that the grotesque so tightly associated with Poe appears—the protagonist has invaded Annabel Lee's tomb with the purpose of spending the rest of his days with her:

And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, *I lie down by the side*
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea. (Mabbott 479, emphasis mine)

The sweet and somewhat sorrowful tone of the poem is abruptly replaced with shocking sensations as the last two lines reveal the necrophiliac tendencies of the protagonist.

Sara Lyons traces the origins of "The Leper" in Browning's "Porphyria's lover" and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). She writes:

Swinburne appropriates the Gothic romance premise of Browning's monologue and escalates it into an experiment in the decadent aesthetics he had absorbed from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. (185)

Certainly, Browning and Baudelaire's presence in "The Leper" is undeniable. However, the emotional state and the feelings of Poe's protagonist resemble those of the scribe far more. Having lost their respective beloved woman to a disease, both of them continue to love these women even after their deaths. For them, the corpses of these women are just as lovable as their living selves. On the other hand, Porphyria is murdered simply on the whim of her lover. Browning's protagonist is "suffocating" from Porphyria's aggressive approach and the directness of her lovemaking. To free himself from the invisible threads that have come to tie him down, all he can do is to "pass them on" to Porphyria by choking her with her own hair. Browning's narrative dictates that Porphyria should die and become inanimate for her lover to be able to show his own feelings.

Swinburne's protagonist is quite unique even when compared with the characters written by Browning and Poe. Unlike the beautiful Annabel Lee and Porphyria, the beauty of the lady of "The Leper" decays along with her disease. But the protagonist continues to love her despite the changes that take place in her physical appearance. Moreover, unlike his predecessors, the scribe's love is not returned by his lady. His unrequited love is not destined to ever be fulfilled. The lady shows gratitude to the scribe for taking care of her, but she is plagued by feelings of remorse for having treated him badly in the past. She continues to love the man who has thrown her out of his castle. She desires death:

Yea, and the scorn she had of me
In the old time, doubtless vexed her then.
I never should have kissed her. See
What fools God's anger makes of men!

She might have loved me a little too,
Had I been humbler for her sake. (ll. 113-18)

Yea, all this while I tended her,
I know the old love held fast his part:
I know the old scorn waxed heavier,
Mixed with sad wonder, in her heart. (ll. 125-29)

The scribe may have gotten access to her body after her death, he may have become able to embrace and kiss her, and revel in his perverse desire for her corpse, but in the end he was never loved by his lady for whom he gave up not only his position at the palace, but in the long run, even his life.

Necrophilia, or a love of corpses, is a common trope in European literature that can be traced back to antiquity. Being unable to let go of dead lovers symbolises sorrow, desperation, and most importantly love. Losing a loved one is equivalent to losing the body that was loved. Treating the corpse of a dead lover as a sexual object is surely an action that will engender disgust and repulsion in many. While the action itself can easily be seen as a sin, necrophilia present in the literary works of the nineteenth century stands for love that transcends the boundaries of life and death. The protagonists are unable to let go of the women they love, they commit atrocious deeds, and yet they go far beyond death to keep loving the dead. In other words, the literary necrophilia surpasses realism and portrays the grotesque in beautiful colours. It creates the sublime by including elements of “horror” and “terror.” By portraying the terrifying to be irresistibly beautiful, the grotesque contents become alluring. Swinburne’s genius can be found in short poems such as “The Leper” which fully display his ability to transform the socially unacceptable topics into enchanting little stories. This of course, is “art for art’s sake.”

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