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Sexual and Erotic Transgression Through Aesthetic History: A Study of Algernon Charles Swinburne

Cover Page Footnote

Great thanks to Kristin Mahoney

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Ronny Ford

Swinburne's relationship to both history and eroticism are highly complicated, populated with paradoxes, and marked by the desire to situate eroticism within a distant history. The question as to why Swinburne turns to the past in his aesthetic and dissident poetry is answered by how he places sexual dissidence in seemingly highly conservative time periods, and how that serves to increase his transgressiveness in the eyes of a Victorian audience while also allowing for his use and bastardization of established literary figures and narratives (i.e. Sappho and leprosy, respectively). Necrophilia and monstrous femininity/lesbianism—a kind of femininity to be abhorred because it is shown as being violent or disgusting—play key roles in the ways in which Swinburne creates transgressions in both "Anactoria" and "The Leper." Despite this, the limitations of his theoretically transgressive writing need to be examined as well, as he often fell into his own trap of adhering to the very norms which he so sought to defy. His accidental condemnation effectively undoes his desire to be transgressive.

Much of Swinburne's writing is highly aesthetic, a movement that predated Decadence and helped eventually define Decadence as "an aesthetic in which failure and decay are regarded as seductive, mystical, or beautiful" (Hansen 3). Swinburne's erotic longing in both "The Leper" and "Anactoria" coincide quite closely with the purposeful dissatisfaction of Decadence, the desire to have desire (4). Decadence, inherently rebellious against Victorian moral ideals regarding sex and sexuality, certainly makes sense as something that developed at least partially out of Swinburne's writing. He was obsessed with the idea of breaking Victorian ideals and making the general audience uncomfortable while heightening the discomfort by placing his poems in both the medieval and the classical period. Despite being a predecessor to Decadence, Swinburne may have accidentally condemned aestheticism in his two poems "The Leper" and "Anactoria" by associating aestheticism with such things as necrophilia and erotic violence.

Swinburne's desire to intertwine history with sexual dissidence is clear in both "The Leper" and "Anactoria," as the former features necrophilia and medievalism and the latter features monstrous femininity, lesbianism, and classicalism. By situating these taboos in the past, he creates a sexuality that is at the same time obsessed with dissidence and phobic of it, as the association between monstrosity and lesbianism in "Anactoria" is one that cannot be undone. Similarly, in "The Leper," by attempting to condemn Christian ideals, Swinburne actually upholds them by creating an association between disgust and the act of taking care of someone with leprosy. Despite seeming to be innovative in using both the classical and the

medieval periods to critique Christian ideology in the Victorian period, he is, more than anything, adhering to the very conventional ideologies on femininity and sexuality that he is attempting to condemn: that helping a leper is an act that goes against God, that sins of the flesh are disgusting, that femininity is potentially violent, and that lesbianism is a threat. Again, this condemnation essentially undoes what Swinburne aimed to do in these particular poems: to be transgressive.

Part of how Swinburne sought to achieve his aim was through his use of aestheticism to beautify the horrible. "The Leper" is an undeniably aesthetic text, both in the way it shows a subject pining over a decaying and dead body and also in the "recognition that any genuine fulfillment of his [the subject's] passion is irretrievably lost to him," a concept very much associated with aestheticism and eventually with Decadence (Harrison, "Poems and Ballads"). The poem opens with a beautiful setting, showing us a "royal house" in which the leper woman is served "wine and curious meat" ("The Leper" 5-6). Then, there is a quick shift from beauty to "scorn" (9), as the true subject matter of the poem becomes evident: the speaker is taking care of a woman who has leprosy. Although acting against God's wishes, it seems that the speaker is highly invested in God and Christianity in general, enough so to recognize his own sins of caring for a woman with leprosy and committing necrophilia: "though God always hated me / and hates me now" (14-15). Despite knowing his sins, he continues to take care of the woman and commits a necrophiliac act upon her death, implying his love and desire for her is greater than his fear of God. However, this transgression falls short; because Swinburne did not try to cultivate a feeling of empathy for the speaker, the audience naturally is revolted by him and his actions. Swinburne's desire to mock Christianity undoes itself when he associates the act of helping a woman with leprosy with disgust and necrophilia.

The speaker of the poem reflects Swinburne's sensibilities in that he understands his wrongdoings but continues to do them; Swinburne knows he is being transgressive in writing a necrophiliac love poem between a man and a woman with leprosy, but he does so regardless. Similarly, the speaker of the poem recognizes he will exist in perpetual dissatisfaction, as the object of his love can be only that: an object. Through the crying of the speaker as he services the woman, it becomes clear that he wants to serve her for all his life. This is clearly impossible, as her death is imminent. Of course, his desire to care for her forever creates an ironic paradox within the poem, as the speaker clearly wants to possess the woman in totality, as conveyed by the necrophiliac act he commits. The obsession with decay and death, especially as it is observed on the body of a woman, was quite popular during the era of aestheticism and is present in this poem. It seems that Swinburne is using aestheticism to his benefit here in his attempt to be iconoclastic; his use of aestheticism is a clear and absolute way to telegraph to his audience that the topics he writes about in "The Leper" are beautiful. This is the essence of his transgression within this poem, but beautifying the horrible is not enough. Swinburne appears to accidentally mock his own beautification by making the speaker abhorrent. From forcing unwanted advances to committing necrophiliac acts, the speaker has no redeeming qualities.

In "The Leper," it is evident that "Swinburne invokes the medieval superstition that constructed leprosy as God's punishment for carnality" (Lyons 187). Thus, living with someone who committed a carnal sin is a social transgression in and of itself. In the case of "The Leper," the sin is likely adultery or premarital sex, considering the speaker's superstitions about

whether “she kept at heart that other man’s” (136). Adding in the desirous love only makes it more transgressive, not even particularly because she is dying, but because she is unclean. This is all an attempt to “locate points of convergence between romantic convention and aberrant sexuality, evil and moral heroism, self-sacrifice and abjection, in order to reveal both the instability of such categories and the tendency of Christian cultures to scapegoat those who confound them” (Lyons 190). Essentially, Swinburne is using Victorian sensibilities as a way to make his poem distasteful to the very audience at which it is directed. His main goal in doing so is to show the various flaws in Victorian society and to point out the iconoclasm of Christianity and its moral failures.

In doing so, however, Swinburne accidentally condemns that which he is trying to beautify. In making the poem so shocking and offensive to his audience, he is unknowingly aligning himself with the common conceptions of leprosy as an affliction that drives all those except for the perverted away. This highly Christian narrative must be examined because Swinburne was characteristically anti-Christian, meaning he was using Christian ideologies to his advantage in attempting to be iconoclastic. The speaker of “The Leper” seems to recognize outwardly that God despises him for helping and pining after a leper, which creates an air of irony as he is taking care of the woman out of a belief in Christian values—in addition to his unsavory lust for her. Perhaps this is Swinburne’s attempt at showing how debased Christian values can be if they are simply applied in situations that are outside of the norm. From this poem, it is clear that “he sought to define himself against the conventions of Victorian religious doubt and to cast atheism as a mode of Romantic transgression” (Lyons 177). Swinburne used medievalism as a tool to achieve this.

Swinburne’s “The Leper” is undeniably medieval, from the many invocations of God to the implications of leprosy and carnal sin. This starts with the leprosy itself, a disease associated with this particular time period. It is extended further at the mention of “that knight’s gold hair,” referring to the knight with whom the leper woman was in love with prior to contracting leprosy (27). The concept of cleanliness is highly medieval as well, demonstrated by the woman who has leprosy confessing that she thinks herself “clean and whole of shame” (38). This alludes back to a medieval poem titled “Cleanness,” written by an anonymous poet and now found in the popular Gawain poetry collection; in this poem, sins of the flesh, being mostly sexual but also related specifically to the concept of good hygiene, are described as the most terrible sins to commit. What the leper woman thinks herself to be clean of is just that: sins of the flesh. This is untrue simply by the fact that she has leprosy, a disease thought to be contracted by those who commit carnal sins. There is an acknowledgement of this, that God “changed with disease her body sweet,” implying that God was the one who gave her the disease (47).

Swinburne starts to make this medieval aesthetic particularly dissident in the line “how sweeter than all sweet she is” (55). This line acknowledges the fact that she is sweeter now that she has been touched by God. In theory, that sounds perfectly Christian-like, but because God’s touch was for the purpose of giving her leprosy, it becomes highly transgressive in this case. The speaker of the poem sees the woman with leprosy as beautiful because she has leprosy and thus believes the disease to be a gift from God. The reader is then left to wonder whether the speaker’s recognition of his sin in the line “I should have never kissed her” makes his sins any better, or if in fact it makes them all the more transgressive as he recognizes what he is doing

but continues to sin (115). It is clear that Swinburne's placing of necrophilia within the context of leprosy and medievalism was an attempt at making the poem more transgressive, as both were very much tied up with Christianity. In doing so, however, Swinburne undoes himself; the association between carnal sins and leprosy, as well as the association between helping someone with leprosy and perversion, actually uphold medieval conceptions of Christianity and carnality. This is the essence of Swinburne's failure: his use of abhorrent aesthetics seems to be all on the surface, as though it would be enough to mock Victorian religious ideals through disgust alone. "The Leper" is transgressive in a shallow sense, at the level of language alone, thus failing in its aim to mock Victorian morals and religious ideals.

Many of the writers who studied and wrote about the medieval period came immediately after Swinburne and would be categorized as Decadents who "used medieval settings, forms, and themes in their works to achieve emotional and spiritual effects, as well as to inculcate political and social values" (Harrison, Introduction). Swinburne was really no different, as "setting his work in the age of faith allowed Swinburne to continue his attacks on the misguided values of Christianity" (Harrison, Introduction). This answers the question as to why Swinburne chose medievalism: to a Victorian audience, it represented a time of faith and piety. It must be noted, however, that Swinburne's medievalism was his own, meaning that he made very conscious choices about what to change or omit. Swinburne was certainly aware of the general conceptions of medievalism within Victorian society. He would have used that to his advantage in writing "The Leper" while attempting to use medieval values to heighten the poem's dissidence.

The ways in which Swinburne changes the medieval aesthetic are equally as transgressive as his choice to have the speaker help a leper and then commit necrophilia. There is a clear romantic love coming from the speaker, and although love stories were very popular during the medieval period, romantic love was "thought possible only within a social elite" (Phillips and Reay 10). The social standing of the woman is unimportant since she is a leper, which trumps all social standing and makes her an outcast, and the speaker, as a scribe, is not high enough in society to achieve romantic love, either. Changing these norms is part of how Swinburne is seeking to be transgressive; he is implying that the romantic love the speaker feels is a bastardization of love, something that cannot exist and is only understood within the context of sexual desire. By making "The Leper" about sexual desire, Swinburne is once again upholding the very values he wants to destroy. The sexualized love between the speaker and the woman with leprosy certainly paints a perverted picture, but more than anything it upholds the idea that lust and sex are to be condemned.

The closest Swinburne gets to creating true transgressions in "The Leper" is with his association between the speaker and God. "The Leper" seems to want to tell its audience that God himself is the creator of sexual dissidence, which is the crux of Swinburne's mockery of Christianity. The speaker often invokes God, all while pining after the woman with leprosy. In fact, the poem implies that the speaker is obsessed with the woman in part because she was touched by God himself when he gave her leprosy. Swinburne is essentially trying to communicate that Christianity will lead people to do disgusting things. However, this attempt at being transgressive fails, too, because ultimately the poem communicates that the speaker's version of Christianity is a dissident and distant one, reliant upon perverse desires and stuck in the medieval period. Swinburne fails in saying that Christianity is a perverse practice overall,

because the speaker of the poem is violating his own ideals by taking care of someone with leprosy. Thus, rather than a harsh condemnation of religious practices in general, "The Leper" condemns perversity in the medieval period. Swinburne uses medievalism in "The Leper" in an attempt to make the poem even more sexually transgressive. An examination of history within the poem will help to reveal the ultimate failure of this attempt.

While the effect of medieval values within "The Leper" is important to examine, it is equally vital to question why exactly Swinburne chose to place this poem and its subject matter within the context of medievalism. Though his Victorian audience was likely not as well versed in medievalism as he was, Swinburne would have recognized that the period is often one that is thought about purely in terms of faith, chastity, and conservatism. Using this time period to discuss something as transgressive as necrophilia would have certainly put a shiver down any Victorian's spine, as they would have likely expected a chivalrous tale about a knight with only the appropriate amount of romance. It is by flipping these expectations that Swinburne makes "The Leper" discordant with Victorian ideals. Ultimately, Swinburne uses his audience as a tool against itself, taking common conceptions and narratives and bastardizing them, creating something highly uncomfortable to read in the present day, and likely harder still to comprehend in the Victorian period.

Despite Swinburne's desire to put himself in opposition with Victorian thought, much of "The Leper" plays into conceptions of the way that Christianity and sexuality function. First and foremost, "The Leper" is a scandalous poem, and so the association between disgust and sins of the flesh—specifically necrophilia, adultery, and premarital sex—cannot be undone. This connection absolutely serves to uphold the general narrative of the time about sexual breaches. In the speaker's admonition of the fact that he is hated by God, the association between sinfulness and sexual dissidence is only highlighted. Thus, Swinburne's attempt at making Victorian audiences feel disgusted at their own social and religious norms through the use of common historical conceptions as well as general sexual violations utterly fails, as he is accidentally adhering to the very conceptions he is attempting to condemn. "The Leper" is certainly not the only example of Swinburne's failed attempts at being transgressive.

"Anactoria," much like "The Leper," is undeniably aesthetic as well as transgressive in its portrayal of a kind of monstrous femininity paired with a homoerotic connection to pain and death, making it yet another precursor to Decadence that is highly "suggestive of the fin de siècle fascination with cultural degeneration" (Hansen 2). In "Anactoria," "cultural degeneration" is represented in the form of a violent kind of homoeroticism which is highly aestheticised through Swinburne's comparison with natural elements. Swinburne's beautification of something seemingly horrible—feminine sexuality and lesbianism—made this text particularly troubling for a Victorian audience. In fact, it was "Anactoria" that "aroused the greatest protest from Swinburne's critics" (Morgan 180). This was at least in part due to the embellished violent homoeroticism of the text.

In "Anactoria," Sappho is speaking to her lover, cataloguing the many physical and emotional sensations associated with their love, many of which are quite violent. Swinburne writes that "thy sharp sighs / Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound" and "I would my love could kill thee" (2-3, 23). This exhibits a clear association between homosexuality and violence, positing homosexual love as highly dangerous and intrinsically painful. Swinburne aestheticizes monstrous femininity and lesbianism. He does this primarily by comparing these acts of

violence in female eroticism to beautiful things in nature: for example, when he writes, “let our sifted ashes drop like leaves” (10). “Anactoria” does differ from “The Leper” in that there is no shift into sexual dissidence, as “Anactoria” begins with the characterization of bitter love. Thus, in this poem, there is no trickery; the reader knows from the very start what the subject is, and is faced immediately with something highly uncomfortable combined with something very beautiful.

The feeling of discomfort continues all throughout the poem, as each passage seems to become more and more violent, speaking of death and dying specifically in relation to love. A Victorian audience might be most uncomfortable when Swinburne talks about the loss of virginity between two women, writing of “all the flower-like white stained round with blue” (42). The concept of taking one’s virginity is most commonly associated with a phallus and a vagina coming into contact, but here there is no natural phallus. This line associates losing one’s virginity with becoming stained, and it would have made a Victorian audience highly uncomfortable as it suggests penetration with a phallic object other than a penis. Swinburne uses nature imagery to make this disturbing line seem beautiful, which is his attempt at creating a transgressive kind of femininity through Sappho.

In addition to feeling uncomfortable because of the association between beauty and female violent homoeroticism, it can be clearly understood that a Victorian audience “felt particularly vulnerable” to Swinburne’s preaching of his own anti-Christian ideals through that very same use of violent homoeroticism in “Anactoria” (Morgan 180). We can understand some of his anti-Christian ideals from the passage below:

Is not his incense bitterness, his meat
Murder? his hidden face and iron feet
Hath not man known, and felt them on their way
Threaten and trample all things and every day?
Hath he not sent us hunger? who hath cursed
Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with thirst
Their lips who cried unto him? who bade exceed
The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
Pain animate the dust of dead desire,
And life yield up her flower to violent fate? (“Anactoria” 171-80)

Swinburne is calling attention to the fact that the Christian God, if he is the creator of all things according to Victorian thought, also created pain, suffering, and murder. In effect, what would perhaps make Victorian audiences most uncomfortable in this realization is that if God created pain, he also created the kind of violent homoeroticism that Swinburne writes about in “Anactoria.” Like “The Leper,” Swinburne is using the audience against itself, forcing their conceptions about Christianity and homoeroticism to become warped in the reading of this poem. Swinburne is forcing his audience to recognize that, while God may have created everything that is beautiful, he also created everything that is terrible.

Despite Swinburne’s attempts at being transgressive, “Anactoria” reads mostly as irresponsible and highly lesbophobic. Positioning femininity/lesbianism and transgressiveness in

the same work implies an association between them, that to be a lesbian is also to be a monster or one who revels in pain. Swinburne is by no means a lesbian and thus had no real right to write a poem that “incorporates Sappho’s language” in such a highly appropriative way (Zonana 40). Swinburne is using lesbianism to shock his audience and thus is playing into the homophobic idea that lesbianism is erroneous. Therefore, Swinburne condemns homoeroticism as well as Sappho’s “full sexual femaleness” (41). In this accidental association, Swinburne is playing directly into the “fears of sexual seduction by a female whose ‘earthliness’ threatened to consume [his audience’s] own ‘heavenliness’” (41). Again, as with “The Leper,” Swinburne’s attempt at disgusting his audience only plays into their previously held conceptions about femininity and homosexuality. Swinburne creates “a male lesbian body, a transgressive female figure,” thus not only condemning femininity and lesbianism as a whole, but also accidentally condemning transness and trans women (Prins 112). In doing so, he “makes a lesbian reading of Sappho sexually explicit,” implying that lesbianism (and perhaps transness as well, viewed in a modern lens) are always sexually explicit and nothing else (112). He is not challenging Victorian conceptions of lesbianism at all, but rather he is adhering to them.

Like “The Leper,” “Anactoria” takes place in the distant past, this time the classical period. Swinburne creates this setting most evidently by not only having Sappho as the speaker, but also in the following lines:

Ah, more to me than all men as thou art,
Shall not my songs assuage her at the heart?
Ah, sweet to me as life seems sweet to death,
Why should her wrath fill thee with fearful breath?
Nay, sweet, for is she God alone? hath she
Made earth and all the centuries of the sea,
Taught the sun ways to travel, woven most fine
The moonbeams, shed the starbeams forth as wine,
Bound with her myrtles, beaten with her rods,
The young men and the maidens and the gods? (85-94)

It is clear that Sappho is speaking to one of the many Greek goddesses in an act of worship, acknowledging her greatness but also recognizing that she is not the only deity. This takes on a somewhat paradoxical meaning as Sappho also speaks of the Christian God later in the poem, implying perhaps the pair coexist even in a time before the Christian God had been conceived. Here, one can see a flaw in Swinburne’s historicizing of this particular poem, as it is not purely classical because of the imposition of Christianity and monotheism. This is necessary, however, as to have it be purely classical would leave little room for Swinburne to then condemn Christianity. The paradox he creates by having Sappho address not only her goddess but also the Christian God plays directly into how the poem seeks to portray something inappropriate. It almost surely put his Victorian audience into a confused discomfort as they would have seen the Christian God as the only God, with no possibility for worshipping any other deity. It is for this discomfort that Swinburne breaks the traditional mold of classical history, and it is not at all accidental.

Why, then, does Swinburne use that mold at all if his desire is to condemn Christianity? Why place the poem in a time period which did not know of Christianity at all? The answer of course, as with the answer to all other questions posed here, is that he does it to be transgressive. He takes yet another idealized time period and attaches monstrous femininity and homoeroticism to it. In doing so, and in appropriating the time period to talk about lesbianism, he seems to take on a very Catullian attitude, especially with the many paradoxes in the text. Many of the poems Catullus wrote (specifically poems 72 and 85) spoke of the same idea that Swinburne writes: "Cruel? But love makes all that love him well / As wise as heaven and crueler than hell" (Swinburne, "Anactoria" 145-146). In fact, those particular lines almost exactly mimic the ones from Catullus' 72nd poem: "quod amantem iniuria talis / cogit amare magis, sed bene velle minus" (because such an injury compels / a lover to love more but to wish well less; my trans.; 7-8). The significance of imitating Catullus comes from the fact that Catullus also wrote a poem through the eyes of Sappho (his 51st poem), and so Swinburne is mimicking a classical poet who did the same thing he is doing in "Anactoria." Thus, Swinburne successfully places the poem within the classical time period even while employing many paradoxes, all of which serve to make the text more uncomfortable for a Victorian reader.

As with "The Leper," however, Swinburne's attempt at being transgressive by writing a historical and iconoclastic poem falls short. Not only is he associating femininity and lesbianism with monstrosity, he is also undoing his own condemnation of Christianity. Swinburne is trying to signify that God is monstrous because he created monstrosity, but instead he accidentally promotes to the Victorian audience that lesbianism and worshipping other gods makes one a monster. Swinburne's failure at condemning Christianity stems from how heavily he bastardizes it; it can be written off as mis-practicing rather than the denouncement Swinburne seeks to write. He wants the association between monstrosity and Christianity via Sappho to communicate to his readers that the God they worship created suffering, pain, and violent perversion. Although Swinburne's endeavor to discomfort Victorian audiences via "Anactoria" was still somewhat successful due to the homoeroticism and violent nature of the poem, the overall sentiment fails to get across.

Discussing "The Leper" alongside "Anactoria" seems only natural, as both are placed within the distant past. Despite being so different in subject matter and in time period, the two poems in conjunction tell the reader something very important about Swinburne as a writer: he had a deep understanding of the role history plays in society and used that to his advantage to make his writing all the more transgressive. He uses the classical and the medieval periods in "Anactoria" and "The Leper" respectively as a way to seduce and then shock his readers. Swinburne understood his audience's attachment to and understanding of the past and used that to his advantage in writing poems that would cause unrest.

Swinburne's use of the distant past, however, has its limitations. In "The Leper," his use of medievalism and Christian imagery in order to condemn Victorian Christianity only serves to uphold it, as the poem makes a clear association between sins of the flesh and filth. Similarly, in "Anactoria," his use of the classical period to create a paradox of religion backfires; instead of using lesbianism and polytheism to his advantage in achieving his goal of being transgressive, he simply falls into the trap of condemning them in much the same way his audience would have (although certainly using a different method). His aestheticization of both necrophilia and monstrous femininity is indicative of a desire to write transgressively and to make his audience

uncomfortable, but once again there are limitations to his method. Swinburne, in writing “The Leper” and “Anactoria,” created an association between perversion, violence, and the aesthetic movement. By placing aestheticism in conjunction with these societally condemned concepts, he made the movement itself transgressive. Swinburne thus condemned his own movement and the one to come after: Decadence.

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