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SHELLEY'S INFLUENCE ON *ATALANTA IN CALYDON*

Terry L. Meyers

A close study of Swinburne's works reveals the accuracy of Paul de Reul's perception that Swinburne "reelit ses poètes, s'en imprègne, les respire; mêle à ses vers des réminiscences qui en font une musique de chambre, un plaisir de connaisseurs."¹ In work after work by Swinburne, the alert reader will find subtly-harmonized images, phrases, and ideas that Swinburne assimilated from his wide reading among authors of many lands and times. Among these sources, as we would expect, Shelley has a continuing place. An example of one of the ways Swinburne adopts and reworks material from one of his life-long gods of poetry is apparent in Shelley's influence on *Atalanta in Calydon*.²

That Shelley's works were in Swinburne's mind as he wrote *Atalanta in Calydon* is clear not only from the verbal echoes in the text, but also from a letter he wrote to Lady Trevelyan after publication of the play. In the letter, Swinburne makes clear that one of his intentions was to write a Greek tragedy not enervated by the intrusion of modern concepts or the infusion of didactic, optimistic doctrine:

I think it [*Atalanta*] is pure Greek, and the first poem of the sort in modern times, combining lyric and dramatic work on the old principle. Shelley's Prometheus is magnificent and un-Hellenic, spoil too, in my mind, by the infusion of philanthropic doctrinaire views and 'progress of the species'; and by what I gather from Lewes's life of Goethe the Iphigenia in Tauris must be also impregnated with modern morals and feelings. As for Professor Arnold's Merope the clothes are well enough but where has the body gone? So I thought, and still think, the field was clear for me.³

The greatest influence from Shelley is a negative one—Swinburne's wishing to avoid "philanthropic doctrinaire views and 'progress of the species'...[and] modern morals and feelings."⁴ The manifestation of this influence shows

¹*L'Oeuvre de Swinburne* (Brussels, 1922), p. 83. Reul makes the observation in noting an echo from Shelley in "The Last Oracle."

²Although many writers have mentioned the possibility of an influence from Shelley, particularly from *Prometheus Unbound*, on *Atalanta in Calydon*, none has investigated the actual effect of the influence. Most of the comments merely note Swinburne's metric facility as a descendant of Shelley's or draw attention to an analogous antitheism in both *Prometheus* and *Atalanta*. Both points are valid, but the latter loses much of its importance when we realize that Swinburne is reacting in *Atalanta* not only against the God that Shelley's Prometheus arraigns, but against Shelley's own faith that the God can be overcome.

³*The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (Yale Univ. Press, 1959-62), I, 115.

⁴Swinburne's objection to *Prometheus Unbound* is more detailed and explicit in another letter almost five years later. Swinburne again objects to the infusion of doctrine and cites the "very great inferiority and comparative inadequacy and debility" of the third act (*Letters*, II, 94). In that act, Shelley concentrates on describing the change in

clearly as Swinburne reworks ideas and images from *Prometheus Unbound* and also from the "Ode to the West Wind," using them as keynotes of philanthropy, benevolence, and optimism in his larger symphony of hatred, malevolence, and pessimism. The allusions operate, in a word, to remind the reader of the attitudes of progressive regeneration that Swinburne sets out in his play to discredit. The world and human life, as Swinburne sees them, are not open to continuing improvement. The gods of destruction and hatred, Shelley's Jupiter, are not to be overcome.

In the opening speech of the play, the huntsman's verses saluting dawn and spring and praying that success will crown his country's efforts to escape the wrath of Artemis, Swinburne raises by allusion the joyful rehabilitation of the earth in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*. In having the huntsman pray to Artemis to let "thine eyes fill the world / And thy lips kindle [it] with swift beams" and to "let earth / Laugh,"⁵ Swinburne is invoking at once Asia, whose "lips enkindle / With their love the breath between them" (*P.U.* IV. v. 48-49), and the joyfully laughing song of the earth later in the play (*P.U.* IV. 319-502, *passim*). The effect is to incorporate Shelley's hopefulness into the huntsman's.

The process of incorporation continues in the next speech, that of the chorus, similarly hopeful, similarly anticipating the arrival of spring. The appellation of Artemis as "The mother of months" recalls, as an early reviewer pointed out,⁶ the identical designation in *Prometheus Unbound* (IV. 207).⁷ The celebration in a later stanza of the chorus of the healing and amorous effects of spring also recalls, by tone and mood, the millennial spring of *Prometheus Unbound*:

For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

human society that comes with the arrival of the destined hour. Swinburne's desire to avoid didacticism, and to avoid the kind of optimism that Shelley represented for him, is interestingly apparent also, as I shall argue elsewhere, in *Songs before Sunrise*.

⁵Quotations from Swinburne and Shelley are from *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols. (London, 1904), IV, 235-333 and *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford Univ. Press, 1965).

⁶J. Warren Leicester, "Atalanta in Calydon," *Fortnightly Review*, May 15, 1865, p. 80. See also Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 343.

⁷Lawrence Zillman cites George Woods's identification of the moon with Artemis (*Shelley's Prometheus Unbound* [Univ. of Washington Press, 1959], p. 587). See Woods's *English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement* (New York, 1929), p. 693n.

Also present here is the hopefully longing attitude of Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind," "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (l. 70). Until Althaea enters, however, the correspondence to Shelley's ode is not apparent.

Althaea's first speech draws on Shelley to rebuke the hopefulness of the huntsman and of the chorus. Only two writers have seen that in Althaea's insistence that "Night, a black hound, follows the white fawn day, / Swifter than dreams the white flown feet of sleep," Swinburne is drawing on Shelley's image in *Prometheus Unbound*:⁸

Once the hungry Hours were hounds
Which chased the day like a bleeding deer,
And it limped and stumbled with many wounds
Through the nightly dells of the desert year.

(IV. 73-76)

The reversal is obvious: Shelley's chorus uses the image to invoke the past bad times as a contrast to the rebirth following the recall of Prometheus' curse. Althaea uses the image to remind us, to insist to us, that nothing has changed, that nothing can change. She goes on, moreover, to counter the hope the chorus expresses in their evocation of spring, to invert the plea of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." For her, as indeed for the play and for Swinburne, the arrival of a Shelleyan spring is impossible.

Will ye pray back the night with any prayers?
And though the spring put back a little while
Winter, and snows that plague all men for sin,
And the iron time of cursing, yet I know
Spring shall be ruined with the rain, and storm
Eat up like fire the ashen autumn days.
I marvel what men do with prayers awake
Who dream and die with dreaming.

The last lines seem almost a direct rebuke to Shelley.

Several other instances in *Atalanta* reveal Swinburne reworking Shelleyan themes and images to reiterate the pessimism of his poem. Althaea counsels her son to restrain his rebelliousness, doing so in words that momentarily cast him in a Promethean role and threaten a punishment which Prometheus undergoes. She warns him from having "a perverse will," for he who does,

Him heaven infatuates and his twin-born fate
Tracks, and gains on him, scenting sins far off,
And the swift hounds of violent death devour.

The image derives partly from the furies who hope to torture Shelley's Prometheus, "Jove's tempest-walking hounds" who "scent life" and to whom "The hope of torturing him smells like a heap / Of corpses, to a death-bird after battle" (*P.U.* l. 331, 338, 339-340).

A further denial of the worth of Prometheus' struggle occurs in the famous chorus "Who hath given man speech?" The contrast of this chorus to

⁸See "Atalanta in Calydon: A Tragedy," *Athenaeum*, April 1, 1865, p. 451 and William Robertson Nicoll, *A Bookman's Letters* (London, 1913), p. 243.

Shelley's descriptions of the gifts Prometheus brought to man is telling. Among Prometheus' gifts are Hope, Love, and speech:

Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms,
That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;

.....
He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe.

(*P.U.* II. iv. 59-73)

Speech is, in Swinburne's play, the most destructive gift possible and comes not from a champion of humanity, but from "The supreme evil, God." Neither are hope and love gifts—death is unmitigable, "strong and full of blood and fair / And perdurable and like a lord of land," and love is no recompense, for God "strewed one marriage-bed with tears and fire / For extreme loathing and supreme desire."

Swinburne makes clear his antipathy to Shelley's faith in love by using elements of Shelley's verse in his own devastating characterization of love. Both poets describe the birth of Aphrodite. For Shelley, the event is a joyous one: the sea was "cloven" at her birth and "love, like the atmosphere / Of the sun's fire filling the living world, / Burst from" her. The association of fire with Asia, whose "smiles before they dwindle / Make the cold air fire" (*P.U.* II. v. 22, 26-28, 50-51), is one that Swinburne emphasizes—but for its baleful effects.

As in Shelley, "the waves of the sea as she [Love] came / Clove," but the result is neither the rejoicing for "love / Of all articulate beings" (*P.U.* II. v. 35-36) nor the arrival of the "Life of Life" (*P.U.* II. v. 48). The rejoicing that meets the birth of Aphrodite in *Atalanta* expresses itself in "Sweet articulate words" indeed, but those who celebrate, like "The rapid and footless herds," are "foolish of heart." Aphrodite brings with her not life, but death: "they knew thee for mother of love, / And knew thee not mother of death." Their mistake was to see a Shelleyan figure whose "lips enkindle / With their love the breath between them" (*P.U.* II. v. 48-49), to think that "the life of the world in her breath / Breathes and is born at her birth." To Althaea, some visible sign should have been apparent at Love's birth:

death should have risen with thee,
Mother, and visible fear,
Grief, and the wringing of hands,
And noise of many that mourn.

We can see in these relatively few and yet significant verbal echoes and allusions that Shelley's works provided part of the matrix from which *Atalanta* came. Although surely far from uppermost in the play, the denial of Shelley's optimism is important. It reveals how Swinburne, even in writing

with his own genius and brilliance and even in constructing a play all but perfect of its kind, kept in mind not only his classical predecessors, but also Shelley. The result in these two Greek-influenced plays, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Atalanta in Calydon*, could hardly have been more different. As William R. Rutland remarks, the two plays “stand at opposite poles of thought.”⁹ But the role Shelley has in defining the attitudes Swinburne opposes is a sign of the way Swinburne frequently used Shelley to mark off his own distance from the Romantic poet.

⁹*Swinburne: A Nineteenth Century Hellene* (Oxford, 1931), p. 171.