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## Swinburne, Africa, and the Lash

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**Abstract:** Algernon Charles Swinburne’s late poems encouraging Britain’s aggression against the Boer States are exercises in imperialist jingoism, and seem at odds with the poet’s longstanding Republicanism and advocacy of individual rights. A close examination of Swinburne’s notorious involvement in practices of sado-masochist flagellation, however, casts some light on how these poems can be read as congruent with his earlier ideological investments. The rhetoric of his Boer War poems is precisely aligned with his earlier responses to the Bulgarian Crisis of 1876 and the Eyre Affair of 1865; in both of these moments, Swinburne’s political reaction is keyed to his aversion to the use of the lash (by the Russians in the former, by the British colonial Jamaican regime in the latter). While Swinburne was something of a connoisseur of passive flagellation—to the extent that birching becomes sometimes a metaphor for poetry itself—the act of deploying the lash against an unwilling subject (as the Boers did to their African workers) is for him the epitome of tyranny and dehumanization.

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On Thanksgiving Day 1862, some eighteen months into the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln greeted the author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe as “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war”—or so it is reported (Vollaro 18). The anecdote, while famous, is almost certainly apocryphal, but it underscores the degree to which Stowe’s 1852 international bestseller *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had raised public awareness of the horrors of American chattel slavery. That of course was Stowe’s conscious intention for the novel. A grotesque, and certainly unintended, side-effect of the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, however, was the role the book’s scenes of whipping played in the sexual formation of young European readers. Krafft-Ebing (in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886), Freud (“A Child Is Being Beaten,” 1919), and other researchers into “deviant” sexualities—sadism, masochism—would find with some regularity that Stowe’s spectacles of black bodies under the lash had served to arouse the early desires of those who would grow up to take pleasure in the infliction and reception of pain (Gibson 38).

The English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), notoriously invested in the rhetoric and practice of beating, probably read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (*everyone* did) but he left no recorded

opinion on the novel. (He would on numerous occasions later in the century record his intense dislike of Stowe herself: she had incurred his displeasure by besmirching Lord Byron's reputation in her 1870 *Lady Byron Vindicated*.) For literary representations of whipping, Swinburne could look to the works of de Sade, to the well-furnished pornographic library of his friend Richard Monckton Milnes, or to the surprisingly copious variety of flagellant pornography available to Victorian readers (Marcus 252-265). And in general, Swinburne didn't concern himself much with Africa or persons of the African Diaspora. There are only scattered references to the African continent in Swinburne's large corpus of poetry, most of them, like the description of Egypt in the 1866 poem "Cleopatra," no more than classicizing stage-setting.

Swinburne's only extended engagement with Africa comes very late in his career, in a series of *Poems* written between 1899 and 1901 concerning the second Anglo-Boer conflict, popularly known as the Boer War. By this point in his life Swinburne had largely retreated from public view; for twenty years he had been living in suburban Putney with the solicitor Theodore Watts-Dunton, who had rescued the poet from alcoholic dissipation in 1879. Swinburne continued to write, perhaps more prolifically than before, but his writings no longer provoked the large-scale public condemnation and debate ignited by some of his more inflammatory early works. His general detachment from society was however punctuated by occasional forays into literary and public controversy: a years-long argument with F. J. Furnivall of the New Shakspeare Society, an 1884 attack on the publishers of John Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne, an 1890 set of verses calling for the death of Czar Alexander III, and others. That Swinburne would feel moved to express himself on the Boer War was not anomalous.

The causes of that war were complex, and involved both political and economic rivalries between the British of the Cape Colony and the Dutch-descended Boers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, most of whom had migrated from the Cape Colony in the 1830s, partly in reaction to Great Britain's abolition of slavery (upon which the Boers' agrarian economy depended). Following the discovery of diamonds in the Orange Free State and gold in the Transvaal, there was an enormous influx of English-speaking immigrants to the Boer Republics. The Boers, jealous of their own ethnic national identity, were reluctant to extend citizenship rights to such *uitlanders*. Tensions between the Republics and Great Britain came to a head in late 1899, and in the resulting conflict the British, after initial setbacks, decisively defeated the Boers and absorbed their states into the Union of South Africa.

The war was extraordinarily divisive in Britain. A number of prominent public figures and some newspaper editors were rightly suspicious of the proclaimed motives for going to war against the Boers, arguing that the conflict was driven more by desire for the Boer Republics' mineral resources and a general desire for imperial expansion than by humanitarian concerns. But much of the popular press kept up a steady drumbeat of jingoism, printing lurid accounts of the "savagery" of the Boers, their ill-treatment both of English-speaking *uitlanders* and the Black Africans who worked their farms and mines. It was in the midst of this national argument, and for the medium of the rabidly anti-Boer popular press, that Swinburne composed his five poems.

These are not great poetry—they are certainly not to be compared to the psychological and metrical complexity and subtlety of such earlier Swinburne poems as "Anactoria," "The Triumph of Time," or "Ave atque Vale"—but they are rather remarkable as examples of a first rate-poet's turn to sustained

invective and jingoistic empire-promotion. The first, a sonnet entitled “The Transvaal,” is dated 9 October 1899, when negotiations between Britain and the Boers had broken down and conflict seemed imminent; it was published (without copyright, to encourage public circulation) in *The Times* two days later. “The Transvaal” explicitly calls for the British Empire to declare war on the Boer Republics:

Patience, long sick to death, is dead. Too long  
 Have sloth and doubt and treason bidden us be  
 What Cromwell’s England was not, when the sea  
 To him bore witness given of Blake how strong  
 She stood, a commonweal that brooked no wrong  
 From foes less vile than men like wolves set free—  
 Whose war is waged where none may fight or flee—  
 With women and with weanlings. Speech and song  
 Lack utterance now for loathing. Scarce we hear  
 Foul tongues that blacken God’s dishonoured name  
 With prayers turned curses and with praise found shame  
 Defy the truth whose witness now draws near  
 To scourge these dogs, agape with jaws afoam,  
 Down out of life. Strike, England, and strike home. (Swinburne, *Poems* 6.385)

The Empire is called to remember the 17th-century heyday of Oliver Cromwell and Admiral Robert Blake, who had led the Commonwealth’s fleets to victory against the Dutch and the Spanish: England was then “a commonweal that brooked no wrong.” The Boers are less than human, “dogs, agape with jaws afoam,” who make war on “women and . . . weanlings.”

Swinburne’s rhetoric here is of a piece with the customary hyperbole of his other polemical writings, both verse and prose. Sometimes such rhetoric is effective, sweeping the reader up in its political or ideological enthusiasm. But from the perspective of 120 years’ distance, with a contemporary sense of the forces at work in the fin-de-siècle European imperial struggles in Africa, the poem’s patriotic bloodthirstiness is apt to make one a bit queasy. And while Swinburne’s handling of the sonnet form is assured as ever—the enjambments, especially, which evoke those of Milton’s political sonnets, work to press the reader urgently forward—the poem’s reliance on reified abstractions (“patience,” “treason,” “the truth,” etc.) and highly colored modifiers (“foul,” “dishonoured”) undercut the specificity of its indictment. Its final exhortation—“Strike, England, and strike home”—is clear and emphatic enough, but undermined by the tangled syntax of the five-line sentence before (“Scarce . . . life”), a regular mare’s nest of invective.

The remaining four poems of Swinburne’s Boer War sequence—“Reverse,” “The Turning of the Tide,” “On the Death of Colonel Benson,” and “Astraea Victrix”—are no more subtle or distinguished, alternating praise for “England’s iron-tempered oak” with bitter scorn for its Boer adversaries (“murderous foes,” “envious knaves,” “German boors”) (*Poems* 6.386, 6.388). They show all of Swinburne’s formal and metrical facility—which never deserted him—but none of the intellectual subtlety and figural ambiguity that distinguish his finer work, particularly that of the 1860s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Swinburne’s Boer War poems have received rather little critical attention.

M. van Wyk Smith, in his authoritative survey of the war's poetry, dismisses them as "shrill and vicious, confused in thought as well as execution," and ultimately "illustrative of the culture of violence which accompanied the imperialist ideologies of the time" (53, 54). Julia F. Saville deplors them as evidence of Swinburne's backsliding from the ardent republicanism of his youth—the young leftist firebrand, as it were, ageing into a Fox News-watching xenophobe: they show him an "under-informed, intolerant patriot" (50). But Francis O'Gorman, in the introduction and notes to his recent 21st-Century Oxford Authors edition of Swinburne, without defending the poems *per se* offers a more nuanced reading, arguing the essentially unchanged nature of Swinburne's commitment to individual liberty: a liberty which in Swinburne's eyes can only be guaranteed to the inhabitants of southern Africa—British, Boer, and native alike—by the protection of the British Empire (xxviii-xix, 654-655). From a 21st century perspective, and too many of Swinburne's contemporaries, this is a risibly naïve political stance, one that repeats many of the worst clichés of the colonial and imperial enterprises; but for all its shortsightedness, it has at its kernel a humanitarian impulse.

I want to build on O'Gorman's reading, not so much to "redeem" Swinburne either for his obtuse imperialism or for the cringe-worthy subtlety of his public verse appeals, as to unwind some of the elements of the psycho-political investments that result in these poems, and to emphasize one particular element of the continuity of Swinburne's thought: his conception, that is, of *flogging*—the use of the whip, in short. To do so, it is helpful to look back over Swinburne's general reputation during his lifetime, the particular characteristics of his work and persona that defined him for readers at given periods of his career; and to consider his posthumous reception and reputation.<sup>1</sup>

Swinburne's public career began in controversy, not political but moral. Critics hailed his *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) as a marvel of versification, but there was some uneasiness regarding the play's fatalism and strident anti-theism. *Poems and Ballads* (1866), while its poems were similarly recognized as remarkably assured and masterful, raised a storm of controversy over its sexual content, including allusions to and depictions of lesbianism, sado-masochism, necrophilia, and hermaphroditism. Swinburne defended himself by preaching a gospel of aestheticism, an "art for art's sake" derived from Théophile Gautier.

Even as he gained this early reputation as a licentious, antinomian writer, Swinburne considered himself a politically committed poet: as early as 1857, when he was at Oxford, he had written an "Ode to [Giovanni] Mazzini," the Italian Risorgimento leader. His advocacy of "art for art's sake" never excluded the possibility of a poetry that acted as "ally" to a particular cause. While "the worth of a poem has properly nothing to do with its moral meaning or design," Swinburne wrote in 1872, "we refuse to admit that art of the highest kind may not ally itself with moral or religious passion, with the ethics or the politics of a nation or an age.... In a word, the doctrine of art for art is true in the positive sense, false in the negative; sound as an affirmative, unsound as a prohibition." (*Collected Writings* 12.243, 344).

Swinburne presented himself, like his hero Shelley, as a poet of fiery republican sentiments, sentiments most thoroughly displayed in the 1871 collection *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) and in various poems in his subsequent books, like the suite *Dirae* (1873), sonnets of invective against Napoleon III and Pope Pius IX, or "Clear the Way!" (1884), which called for the abolition of the House of Lords. Indeed, according to one account the most proximate cause of Swinburne's not being offered the laureateship after Tennyson's death in 1892 was not the scandal of *Poems and Ballads* but his poem "Russia: An Ode, 1890," advocating the assassination of the Russian Tsar (Kernahan 56).

In the years after his retirement to Putney with Watts-Dunton in 1879, Swinburne's poetry—and he produced great quantities of it—was much less concerned with either libidinal urges or republican causes: he wrote a great number of topographical poems, homages to earlier writers, sea poems, and poems praising the wonderful beauty of babies. He wrote poems for the anniversary of the Spanish Armada and for Queen Victoria's jubilee. By the turn of the century the scandals of earlier decades were only minor blots on the reputation of a writer who was widely acclaimed as the greatest technical master of English versification.

That particular reputation was swept away in turn by the innovating modernists, who dismissed his work as all too typical Victorian diffuseness; T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay "Swinburne as Poet" is one of the most devastating take-downs in literary history. Swinburne's critical reputation only began to recover from modernist and New Critical dismissals since the 1970s; he probably remains less widely read than any other major Victorian poet. He has, however, over the past century acquired a rather more titillating reputation: as a poet obsessed with flogging.

Swinburne's flagellant proclivities were known among a close circle of his friends during his lifetime, but in the years immediately after his death knowledge of those activities was mostly suppressed. Edmund Gosse, a friend of Swinburne and his first biographer, set out what he knew about Swinburne and flagellation in an essay of 1875, but he incorporated none of that information into his 1912 biography of the poet.<sup>2</sup> Gosse and Thomas James Wise presented none of Swinburne's explicitly flagellant poetry in the "complete" edition of his works they prepared between 1925 and 1927.

The Italian critic Mario Praz had access both to Gosse's essay and to Swinburne's manuscripts. His landmark study of "decadent" literature *The Romantic Agony* (1930, English version 1933) identifies Swinburne as a progenitor for many of the motifs and preoccupations of the fin de siècle, and extensively explores the role of "the English vice"—flagellation—in Swinburne's writings.<sup>3</sup> Following Praz, many of Swinburne's previously unpublished flagellant works have come into print,<sup>4</sup> and critics and biographers have made something of a cottage industry of digging out the documentary record of Swinburne's flagellant activities and tracing the weals and bruises they leave throughout his writings. Swinburne's earlier reputation as a republican firebrand, his turn-of-the-century elevation as a sublime metrical craftsman, and even the modernist notion of him as the windiest of Victorian windbags, have been largely replaced by notoriety as a poet of beating, or algolagnia—the association of sexual pleasure and physical pain. He has become recognized as, in Yopie Prins's words, "the poet laureate of Victorian flagellomania" (96), and as such he has been studied in detail in such works as Ian Gibson's *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* and Niklaus Largier's *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*.

What, however, do Swinburne's flagellant enthusiasms have to do with his intervention in the Boer War? Swinburne's animus against the Boers, I would suggest, is motivated at least in part by his attitude towards the act of whipping. And his specific reaction to the motif of the lash can be seen in two earlier moments in which he voiced his opinion on English imperial policy, two moments which overlie one another—which almost seem fused in Swinburne's mind. For reasons which I hope will become evident, I'll work backwards chronologically.

In late 1876 Swinburne published the prose pamphlet *Note of an English Republican on the Muscovite Crusade*, registering his strong disapproval of English neutrality in the matter of the "Eastern question." A series of popular uprisings had taken place in Bulgaria, a province of the tottering

Ottoman Empire—the United Kingdom’s ally, as one recalls from the Crimean War of twenty years earlier, and viewed by many as a satellite of the British Empire—uprisings brutally suppressed by Turkish irregular forces. Russia, under the guise of aiding a fellow Slavic people, was poised to move into the Balkans. Benjamin Disraeli’s Tory government, anxious to contain Russian expansionism, was inclined to support the Ottomans against the Russians. But widespread press coverage of Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria had given rise to a strong party demanding British neutrality in any conflict: arrayed behind Liberal opposition leader William Ewart Gladstone, such groups as the “Eastern Question Association” attracted the support of many of the day’s leading cultural figures—William Morris, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and especially Thomas Carlyle, who coined the phrase “the unspeakable Turk” (Thompson 207).

In a 24 November 1876 letter to *The Times*, Carlyle argued that England should stand aside and let Russia into the Balkans: the Russians, he argued, “have done signal service to God and man in drilling into order and peace anarchic populations all over their side of the world” (qtd. in O’Gorman 602-604). Swinburne’s *Muscovite Crusade* pamphlet is largely an attack on Carlyle, and Swinburne’s violent reaction to the Scotsman’s letter hinges precisely upon the practice of *whipping*. In vituperative prose, Swinburne attacks Carlyle as “A preacher who defends the gallows, an apostle who approves the lash”; he quotes Carlyle on “the good offices of ‘beneficent whip’ and ‘portable gallows’”; and he characterizes the Russians as “the torturers, the hangmen, and the women-whippers of Hungary [and] Poland” (*Complete Works* 15.411, 15.412).

What is foremost on Swinburne’s mind in 1876 (as several references in the *Muscovite Crusade* pamphlet demonstrate) is how Carlyle’s pro-Russian stance on the Eastern Question echoes Carlyle’s involvement in the Morant Bay affair of eleven years before. (This is the second historical moment to which I alluded earlier.) In 1865, in response to an outbreak of civil unrest, the white governor of Jamaica, Edward John Eyre, had declared martial law. He brutally suppressed what he believed to be an incipient uprising: several hundred black Jamaicans were executed or slaughtered outright, and over six hundred men and women (some of them pregnant) were flogged—inevitably evoking memories of slavery, abolished only thirty years before. Eyre was recalled to England to stand trial for the excessive force he had displayed, and committees of public-minded individuals were formed both to hold him liable for his brutality—John Stuart Mill headed that “liberal” cause—and in his defense. Eyre’s most prominent defender, and organizer of the “Governor Eyre Defense and Aid Committee” (which included Tennyson, Dickens, Ruskin, Kingsley, and others), was Thomas Carlyle. (Carlyle had already, in his 1849 “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” expressed scorn for notions of racial egalitarianism.)<sup>5</sup>

What struck Swinburne with horror at the time, and would remain with him, was Carlyle’s defense of the “beneficent whip” as wielded in Morant Bay. Eyre’s outrages, he wrote, “made the letters and dispatches from Jamaica for a month or more read exactly and literally like a series of connected extracts from the very worst chapter’s of [de Sade’s] *Justine*” (*Swinburne Letters* 3.231). Carlyle’s defense of Eyre in 1865, he explained to his correspondent (not yet housemate) Theodore Watts, was of a piece with his admiration for Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, “a drunken murderer and whipper of women” (O’Gorman 308). Early in life, Swinburne had admired Carlyle’s flamboyant literary style, his energetic and captivating rhetoric; but how could the great Scottish writer defend a man under whose auspices such atrocities had taken place? “Not all Englishmen,” writes Swinburne in

*Muscovite Crusade*, “have yet forgotten the horror of shame, the sickness of disgust, with which they learnt how the accomplices and the satellites of [Eyre] had carried out such ultra-Bulgarian atrocities as the stripping and whipping of women by men in public with scourges of ‘pianoforte wire’” (O’Gorman 307). (“I do not follow Dr. Sandwith,” Swinburne wrote Watt, “in quoting the loathsome detail about ‘the whips made of piano-wire’ being ‘first tried on the backs of women’ and showing ‘that their skins were easier cut than those of males,’ for very shame and physical nausea. . .” [*Swinburne Letters* 3.232].) Carlyle’s approval of Russian intervention in the Balkans in 1876 was of a piece with his defense of Eyre: an approval of the application of the “beneficent whip,” however barbarously or sadistically wielded, as a corrective to “anarchy” and civil disobedience.

It is at least in part around the issue of the lash, I would suggest, that Swinburne’s indignation against the Boers revolves. Let us set aside the realities of the British provocation of the War, which would end in the annexation of the Boer Republics; even at the time many were inclined to view it as one of the more disreputable episodes of a sordid Imperial history, a naked grab for mineral resources and land. For Swinburne, fired by the pot-stirring of the London press, the issue was one of British “liberty” against Boer “slavery.” The Boers of the Transvaal, he wrote the *Saturday Review*, were “tyrants,” “slavedrivers,” and had founded their republic with “the noble purpose of establishing an independent oligarchy of slaveholders.” If let alone, they would “[drive] civilization, liberty and progress from South Africa by driving the English into the sea, and [proceed] to establish a reign of terror and slavery and torture for all dark races from Cape Town to the Zambesi” (*Swinburne Letters* 6.154).

There is a grain of truth here: one impulse for the formation of the Boer Republics was the Dutch settlers’ dissatisfaction with Britain’s 1834 abolition of slavery, and it was said to be proverbial that the Republics were a place where every man could “whip his own n——.” It was precisely such elements, and the general ill-treatment of black Africans in Boer territories, repeated and exaggerated in the British popular press, that inflamed Swinburne against the Boers. The most telling lines in “Astraea Victrix,” his final war poem, extol British generosity to the defeated Boers, and remind the reader of what treatment the Boers have given natives: “We loosed not on these knaves / Their *scourge-tormented* slaves” (*Poems* 6.391, my emphasis). For Swinburne, the Transvaal was a *de Sade* novel, a hell of whippings: like Russia where serfs suffered the knout, or Governor Eyre’s Jamaica—or perhaps Harriet Beecher Stowe’s southern United States.

Why however does this poet obsessed with flagellation exhibit such an apotropaic response to tales of Boer whipping, of Russian knouting, of Governor Eyre’s flogging of Jamaicans? The answer I would suggest involves the particular details of Swinburne’s own flagellant life, and the arcane passages of his psychosexual history—of which much is of course unknown, and perforce unknowable. One thing that is certain, abundantly evidenced in his writings and correspondence, is that Swinburne took a particular pleasure in the experience of being birched. He seems to have acquired this taste at Eton, where the “flogging-block” in the headmaster’s chambers was a much-used and storied appliance. From his years of greatest literary achievement (and personal dissipation), the 1860s and 1870s, the most telling account we have of Swinburne’s liaisons involve his frequent visits to an establishment in St. John’s Wood, London, where (in Gosse’s words) “two golden-haired and rouge-cheeked ladies received, in luxuriously furnished rooms, gentlemen whom they consented to chastise for large sums” (*Swinburne Letters* 6.245). And even in his decades of placid and abstemious retirement in suburban Putney, when the sexually-charged *Poems* of his youth were far behind him, Swinburne wrote flagellant doggerel and

carried on a correspondence with his cousin Mary Gordon that continually alluded to birching.

But so far as we know Swinburne never, at least in person, *wielded* the whip, or any other instrument of chastisement. Making an unobvious distinction—one following Deleuze by separating the two complexes, rather than Freud, for whom sadism and masochism are two sides of a single neurosis—one might argue that Swinburne was a *masochist*, and a masochist of a peculiarly English sort, rather than any kind of *sadist*. Even more useful I think is the distinction—one which we can find operative in Swinburne’s imagination—between the *whip* and the *birch*: the latter is a salutary, ceremonial, *Bildung*-producing experience which every Eton boy came to expect, which binds him into a fraternity and genealogy of equals, and which, incidentally, provides sexual pleasure; the former is an inorganic instrument of terror and domination, the perennial mark of dehumanization and enslavement.

I oversimplify, of course, the complex dialectic of pleasure and pain, of submission and domination, involved in Swinburne’s flagellant imagination.<sup>6</sup> But it is clear that for him, while the experience of being beaten by a beautiful woman, or even by a headmaster, could be the occasion of considerable sexual pleasure, the notion of the whipping of an unwilling human being—especially a woman—was unspeakably repugnant. To be *voluntarily* beaten was an act of pleasurable submission, even, paradoxically, an assertion of liberty. But any regime that involved *involuntary* whipping betrayed the very humanity of the person whipped, and branded the whip-wielder a tyrant and “slavedriver.”

The birch—again, in contradistinction to the whip, the lash—is close to Swinburne’s heart, and close to the heart of his miraculous facility with meters, even to the very sources of his creativity. Prins, in “Metrical Discipline,” has ingeniously traced the connections between the rhythms of flogging and the meters of Swinburne’s flagellant poems, reading them as moments within a disciplinary and pedagogical scene. In Swinburne’s imagination, the rhythmic repetitions of flagellation, of sexual excitation, and of poetry’s stressed syllables and rhymes are intimately intertwined, even merged. We see this most clearly in the painfully repetitive scenes of *The Flogging-Block*, where the meters of the lines are punctuated by, sometimes coincide with, the strokes of the birch:

Swish!—Swish!—Rupert feels that the rage which his master in whipping him gluts  
Is scarce to be satiated—Swish!—by the largest allowance of cuts.  
Swish!—Swish! Rupert howls at each cut, as the pitiless rod seems to search  
All the tenderest hind parts out, & leave them on fire—set on fire by the birch.  
Swish!—Swish!—How it hurt him!—Swish!—Swish!—Not a boy has the heart left to  
mock.  
Swish!—“Now, sir, get up!” Rupert rises, all covered with blood, from the block.

(174)

As Largier argues, these *Poems* do more than provide evidence of Swinburne’s particular “sexual obsession”: they are “a poetic and poetological reflection on the staged ritual act of ‘the ‘flogging block’ in which the same arousal that lies at the basis of poetic creation takes place and becomes public” (354). More strikingly, one character in Swinburne’s unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon* encapsulates how poetry itself is, like flagellation, an algolagnic experience, a rapture of pleasure



and pain: “It’s odd that words should change so just by being put into rhyme. They get teeth and bite; they take fire and burn . . . one can’t see why this ringing and rhyming of words should make all the difference in them: one can’t tell where the pain or the pleasure ends or begins” (333).

Swinburne’s poems, then, are the birches with which he drives his readers—and himself—into an ecstasy of painful pleasure. They are both an erotic and a pedagogical medium, a ritualized experience through which the poet initiates his readers into a kind of emotional and carnal knowledge. This sort of linguistic flagellation must be read, however, on a continuum, at the other end of which the pleasurable and the erotic wholly disappear, entirely displaced by the disciplinary, even the punitive. There are times and circumstances when the loving birch must be displaced by the unobtrusive whip, times when the writer assumes the role of *mastix*, scourge or whipper, singling out and punishing wrongdoing.<sup>7</sup> We see this very often in Swinburne’s prose writings: in his criticism, where encomia for excellence (he claimed to value criticism only as “the noble art of praising”) are often edged out by scornful attacks on pretension and incompetence; and almost incessantly in such polemical texts as the *Muscovy Crusade* pamphlet. The punitive scourge is less common in Swinburne’s poetry. Its appearance in these late Boer War *Poems*, however, is neither surprising nor out of character. However much one might regret the poet’s political short-sightedness, or decry the degree to which, ignoring or forgetting his own admonitions regarding the necessary autonomy of the poem, he has subjugated his muse to polemical ends, the Boer War poems are a moment in which the metaphorical “lash” of language is directed against those who would bring down the material whip of servitude upon their human kindred.

### Notes:

1. The best account of Swinburne’s contemporary and immediately posthumous reputation remains Hyder’s *Swinburne’s Literary Career and Fame*; Rooksby’s “A Century of Swinburne” surveys his critical reception in the 20th century.
2. Gosse’s essay was printed in a small edition “for private circulation” in 1925, and was made widely available only in 1962 as an appendix to Lang’s *The Swinburne Letters* (6.233-248).
3. Praz’s appendix “Swinburne and ‘Le Vice Anglas’” (435-457) is of particular interest.
4. See *Lesbia Brandon*, selections from *The Whippingham Papers*, two substantial poems (published in *The Pearl*) reproduced in Gibson (320-328), and *The Flogging-Block*.
5. Nathan Hensley, while he does not discuss Swinburne’s Boer War writings, casts a wonderfully and subtly illuminating light on the operations of imperial violence in his chapter “Form and Excess, Morant Bay and Swinburne,” juxtaposing Morant Bay and Swinburne’s precisely contemporary *Poems and Ballads* (137-193).
6. A far more subtle and provocative (and wonderfully witty) exploration of Swinburne and flagellation is Vincent, “Flogging Is Fundamental.”
7. The 4th century BCE grammarian Zoilus of Amphipolis was known as “Homeromastix” for his criticism of Homer. The early modern playwright John Marston (one of Swinburne’s enthusiasms) revived the suffix in his 1599 *Histrionmastix* (The Player Whipped), and a number of titles using the term were written in the 17th century: Thomas Dekker’s *Satiromastix* (1602), William Middleton’s *Papisto mastix, or, The Protestants Religion Defended* (1606), Martin Fotherby’s *Atheomastix; clearing foure truthes, against atheists and infidels* (1622), and William Prynne’s *Histrionmastix* (1632), among many others.

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