

**THE INFLUENCE OF AESCHYLUS
AND EURIPIDES ON THE STRUCTURE
AND CONTENT OF SWINBURNE'S
ATALANTA IN CALYDON AND
ERECHTHEUS. A DISSERTATION**

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The influence of Aeschylus and Euripides on the structure and content of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*. A dissertation by Marion Clyde Wier

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MARION CLYDE WIER

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Euripides on the Structure and
Content of Swinburne's Atalanta
in Calydon and Erechtheus

BY MARION CLYDE WIER

A DISSERTATION

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SWINBURNE'S DEBT TO CLASSICAL LITERATURE

SWINBURNE'S DEBT CONCEDED. Swinburne's debt to Greek literature is conceded by all who are competent to express an opinion on the subject. Skeptics may settle the question by a casual reading of such works as *Phaedra*, *Itylus*, *Anactoria*, *Hymn to Proserpine*, *Sapphics*, *At Eleusis*, *Hymn to Man*, *Genesis*, *Teiresias*, *The last Oracle*, *To Victor Hugo*, *Two Leaders*, *The Armada*, *Neap-tide*, *Thalassius*, *On the Cliffs*, *Song for the Centenary of Walter Savage Landor*, *Athens*, *Herse*, *Nine Years Old*, *Aperotos Eros*, and *Nympholept*. The evidence will be convincing. But in addition to these we have *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*, both in their technique Greek plays of a high order. Of *Erechtheus* Edmond Gosse says: "It is the most Greek of all the compositions of Swinburne, because it follows, with the greatest success, closely and yet vividly, the exact classical models. It is not merely Greek, but it is passionately Athenian, and Athens is considered, not as a theme of antiquarian curiosity, but as the living symbol of the virtue of citizenship." Woodberry says of Swinburne: "He moved toward a reproduction of both the Greek and the English antique. *Atalanta in Calydon* was his first experiment in this way, but *Erechtheus*, his second Greek play, was more perfect in the success that it aimed at." Swinburne's method of using Aeschylus and Euripides to facilitate the attainment of this end, it is the object of the following pages to make clear.

SCHOLARSHIP. Both friends and critics attest Swinburne's scholarship,—a scholarship that not only comprehended the literature of his own and foreign languages, but extended even to a facility in the use of them as media of literary expression. "No English poet has ever had so wide and familiar acquaintance with the poetry of foreign climes. He began with a felicitous command of the classical and romance languages. He took the Taylorian prize, in his college days, for French and Italian, and won other similar distinction in the ancient tongues. He has written, as a poet, in Greek, Latin, and French with literary mastery." (Woodberry.) Edmund Gosse voices the same opinion, as does Swinburne's lifelong friend Redesdale. Ruskin says, "He knows Greek,

Latin, French as well as he knows English—can write splendid verses with equal ease in any of the four languages—knows nearly all the best literature of the four languages as well as I know—well—better than I know anything.”

ASSIMILATION OF GREEK AUTHORS. At Eton Swinburne was devoted to that charming anthology, the old Eton *Poetae Graeci*, to which he owed his earliest introduction to Theocritus and Alcaeus, and on which was founded his life-long passion for Sappho. (Gosse.) The same writer tells us that Swinburne was so devoted to Aeschylus that he carried in his mind practically the whole of the *Oresteia*, and asserts that there are those still living who bear witness to his ability to quote Aeschylus as long as any auditor had the patience to listen to him. “He delighted in repeating other poetry, and was particularly ready to spout the dramas of Aeschylus, when he would gradually become intoxicated by the sonority of the Greek, and would dance about the room in the choral passages, making a very surprising noise.”

ASSIMILATION OF GREEK. The Greek elegiacs prefixed to *Atalanta in Calydon* reveal the extent of Swinburne's early assimilation of the diction and phraseology of that language, while his more intensely Greek *Erechtheus* shows how this process went on through the years that followed the composition of his first Greek tragedy. Of the significance of this gift Swinburne himself seems well aware, for he says: “The faculty of assimilation is most important and is to be distinguished from imitation. It is one of the surest and strongest signs of strong and original genius.”

PREFERENCES. With Swinburne's love of Greek went a strongly marked preference for certain Greek authors and a dislike of others that was equally intense. To him Aeschylus was the “godlike father of tragic poetry,” while Euripides was “the clumsiest of botchers that ever floundered through his work as dramatist.” But in spite of his distaste, he felt the spell of the botcher, from whom he borrowed, on occasion, as freely as he borrowed from the godlike father of tragic song.

CHARACTERISTICS In fact a marked characteristic of Swinburne's tragic style is the introduction of Aeschylean ideas treated in the Euripidean manner,—the presentation of a character cast in the Aeschylean mould, but endowed with Euripidean psychology.

SWINBURNE'S DEBT TO AESCHYLUS

Swinburne's passion for Aeschylus, unlike Dionysus' *pothos Euripidou*, underwent neither change nor moderation. Throughout his long career he regarded the Greek tragedian as a god who towered above other gods; and it was from his temple that he got the inspiration that bore up his own song in its most sublime flights. In both prose and verse he sings his praise whenever occasion arises to speak of what is most precious and potent in the hearts of men. To quote him while commending another is high praise. Speaking of Victor Hugo, he says: "his hand has never been firmer, his note more clear than now:

ἔτι γὰρ βέβηεν κατακτελεῖ
 πειθῶ μολπῶν
 ἀλλεῖ ἑύφορος αἰῶν.

A character of Hugo's he pictures as "One of those Aeschylean women, a monstrous goddess, whose tone of voice 'gave a sort of Promethean grandeur to her furious and amorous words,' who had in her the tragic and titanic passion of the women of the Eleusinian feasts 'seeking the Satyrs under the stars.'" And again "It is Aeschylus . . . who fills the bitter air of the Scythian ravine with music of wings and words more sweet than sleep to the weary, with notes of heavenly pity and love unsubduable by fear; who shows us with one touch of terrible tenderness the maiden agony of Iphigenia, smiting with the piteous dart of her eye each one of the ministers of sacrifice, in dumb show as of a picture striving to speak to them; who throws upon the most fearful scene in all tragedy a flash of pathos unspeakable, when Clytemnestra bares before the sword of her son the breast that suckled him as he slept." He never wearies of "the music that Aeschylus set to verse, the music that made mad, the upper notes of the psalm, strong and shrill as a sea-wind, the 'bull-voiced' bellowing under-song of those dread choristers from somewhere out of sight, the tempest of tambourines giving back thunder to the thunder, the fury of divine lust that thickened with human blood the hill-streams of Cithaeron." With what delight does he call attention to his translation from the Agamemnon.

Ah, ah the doom (thou knowest whence rang that wail)
 Of the shrill nightingale!
 (From whose wild lips thou knowest that wail was thrown)

For round about her have the great gods cast
 A wing-borne body and clothed her close and fast
 With a sweet life that hath no part in moan.
 But me, for me (how hadst thou heart to hear)
 Remains a sundering with the two-edged spear.

Referring to Aeschylus' metaphor of a lion's whelp, he sings:

The best men's tongue that ever glory knew
 Called that a drop of dew
 Which from the breathing creature's kindly womb
 Came forth, a blameless bloom.
 We have no word, as had those men most high,
 To call a baby by. (Herse)

In Comparisons he uses the figure again.

Child, when they say that others
 Have been or are like you,
 Babes fit to be your brothers,
 Sweet human drops of dew,
 Bright fruit of mortal mothers,
 What should one say or do?

MANNER OF IMITATION, SUB-TITLE OR MOTTO. Swinburne sometimes states his theme in the form of a line of Aeschylus quoted under the title of a poem. As a sub-title of the Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic we read

αἰδῶν αἰδῶν εἰπέ, τὸ δ'εὖ νικάτω.

REFRAIN. This line is also used as a refrain in A Year's Burden:

Cry wellaway, but well befall the right.

Under The Litany of Nations occur two lines from The Supplices, which he translates at the close:

μᾶ γὰ μᾶ γὰ βοῆ
 φοβερὰ ἀπόρρητε

He uses as a motto for Two Leaders Eumenides 1034-5 which he translates as a close for the last stanza.

Go honored hence, go home,
 Night's childless children; here your hour is done;
 Pass with the stars and leave us with the sun.

