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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MARION CLYDE WIER

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BY MARION CLYDE WIER

A DISSERTATION

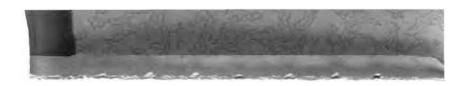
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SWINBURNE'S DEBT TO CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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 Greck 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.

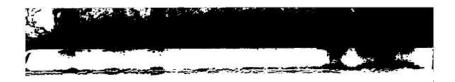
SWINBURNE'S DEBT TO AESCHYLUS

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:

έτι γὰρ θεόθεν καταπνείει πειθώ μολπᾶν ἀλκᾶ ξύμφυτος αἴών.

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 undersong 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 hillstreams 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)



THE INFLUENCE OF AESCHYLUS AND EURIPIDES

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 of 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

αίλινον αίλινον είπέ, τὸ δ'εδ νικάτω.

REFFAIN. 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:

μά γα μα γα βοφ φοβερόν απότρεπε

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. Aeschylus enjoys the company of Pindar on the title page of Erechtheus, and also supplies the theme of An Autumn Vision:

ζεφύρου γίγάντος αδρα.

TITLE. Occasionally we find an Aeschylean phrase used as the real title of a poem, as Aperotos Eros (Choe. 600).

STYLE

PILED-UF ADJECTIVES. Swinburne often imitates Aeschylus' piled-up adjective effects. These effects exhibit various degrees of complication.

The caught-up choked dry laughters—
And her mouth's sad red heavy rose all through—
By the tideless dolorous inland sea—
White-eyed and poison-finned, shark-toothed and serpentinecurled—

A star upon your birthday burned,
Whose fierce serene
Red pulseless planet never yearned
In heaven, Faustine.
Villon our sad bad glad mad brother's name—
Bird of the bitter bright gray golden morn—
The adorable sweet living marvelous strange light that lightens us—
The sea-forsaken forlorn deep winkled salt slanting stretches of sand—

With the last compare Aeschylus, Supp. 798 ff.

Would that I had a seat in the air on high where the vapory clouds turn into snow; or that there were some smooth inaccessible summit-hid solitary hanging vulture-haunted rock to be witness of my plunge into the depths below.

This usage is common in Aeschylus. See Persae 316, 940, 855, and two very fine examples, Agamemnon, 154-5; 192-7. Swinburne may have had the last passage in mind when he wrote:

but we for all our good things, we Have at their hands which fill all these folk full, Death, barrenness, child-flaughter, curses, cares, Sea-leaguer and land-shipwreck;

and

This fair live youth I give you to be slain, Spent, shed, poured out, and perish;