

Taking Althaea Seriously: Swinburne's Twin-Born Queen

ELLEN A. LANZANO

In *Swinburne, A Nineteenth-Century Hellene*, W.R. Rutland observed that if Swinburne had published no other work besides *Atalanta in Calydon*, "his name would still be sure of a place among the major poets of the language."¹ Such recognition, however, has not been given in due portion to his main character whose striving to transcend her gender-bound, fate-bound contract with the world dramatizes Swinburne's unique appropriation of the classical tradition. Rutland has also made the observation that "there is only one character "who is more than the merest outline. This is Althaea. In one sense she is the whole of the play, for she dominates it almost until the end."² In noting that "critics have always understood that the central act of the play is "the breaking of the maternal bond," David G. Reide hints at the importance and complexity of her burning the brand that signals the end to her son's life.³ Her chiaroscuro vision of experience forms the basis of the play's apocalypse. It is in the very process of understanding the nature of her choice to unmake the world she lives in that the strains of classicism and Swinburne's sensibility and, ultimately, the full nature of the tragedy are recovered.

Frank M. Turner's book, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, contends that Victorian "discussions of Greek civilization were conservative in character" and "designed to overcome modern tendencies toward subjective morality and romantic art on the one hand, and utilitarianism and radical politics on the other."⁴ By his own admission, Swinburne admired the placid regularity of Greek poetic form and felt it was best suited for lyric expression. And as Richard Altick noted, "Swinburne dwelt upon the se-

¹ W. R. Rutland, *Swinburne, A Nineteenth-Century Hellene* (Oxford, 1931) p. 93.

² *Ibid.* p. 178.

³ David G. Reide, *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Myth-Making* (Charlottesville

renity of ancient Greece.”⁵ But it is also true that he was most attracted to the “antiphonal scheme of music” and its mathematical regularity not to convey the serenity of the Pindaric form, but to sustain the discourse of opposition with such themes as spiritual decadence and renaissance.

In *Atalanta*, the “rhythmic reason” and “regular variations”⁶ of the law of the Greek form with its “antiphonal correspondence in subject and in sound”⁷ was the framework for a conceptual debate between fate and humanity. In Althaea’s opening prose summary she asks the question to which Swinburne’s entire play is an answer: “if sleep have no mercy, and man’s dreams/Bite to the blood and burn into the bone,/What shall this man do waking?”⁸ She asks ‘how do we live?’ given that “Spring shall be ruined with the rain” and religion offers no comfort, for “Winter, and snows” will come “that plague all men for sin” (129). The acute radicalism of *Atalanta* is based on the fact that Althaea posits no sane answer to this question, for, to her, neither prayers nor nature nor motherhood itself can offer protection from “the iron time of cursing” (130). Althaea’s only response to her own question is that there are yet “more bitter things than death” (142).

The critics called it blasphemy, but its publication in 1865 is a striking exception to Turner’s argument that the Victorian appropriation of Greek ideals of unity was an attempt to combat social divisiveness, that “those aspects of Greek culture or of modern Greek scholarship that might have challenged dominant Victorian intellectual or moral values were ignored, suppressed, or in some way domesticated.”⁹ Swinburne’s entire use of classicism was a flight from the inertia of his surroundings. In the construction of Althaea’s character, in particular, he waged an insurrection against the Victorian pieties of religion, marriage, and the feminine, primary issues in the England of his day.

The play’s classicism and its author’s sensibility are the double priorities of the play’s equilibrium that vibrate in sympathy in the characterization of Althaea. In her agony, Swinburne addresses his own inseparable and corresponsive paradoxes concerning love and suffering, women and

⁴ Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1981) p. 448.

⁵ Richard Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York, 1973) p. 105.

⁶ C. K. Hyder, *Swinburne Replies* p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 98.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne is quoted from *Swinburne: Poems and Ballads, Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Morse Peckham

men, androgyny, militarism, religion, and family, chaos, and order. From this stew of principles, he distills Althaea’s inmost theme. When she decides to take back her son’s birthright, her choice unites the literary-historical time separating the Greek idea of fate with the nineteenth-century dictum that character is destiny. It is interesting to note that her undoing also precipitates a twentieth-century Derridean logic, making her a rhetorical amalgam shaped by the shadow world of Swinburne’s denials. The twin impulses in her character—to heal and to destroy—interrogate each other relentlessly until the end when they become paradoxical answers to the question of fate and the question of a woman’s survival amid the exigencies of social and religious laws. In a final scene of transformation she becomes a figure disintegrating under the pressure of a rhetorical madness. Drained of its essential terms, her character empties itself of its contents in her final disclaimer: “From this time,/Though mine eyes reach the end of all these things,/My lips shall not unfasten till I die” (1946-1947).

Critics have seldom clearly recognized or treated Althaea’s dilemma ad hoc. She is hardly a character, as Douglas Bush says, with “little real conflict.”¹⁰ According to many other critics, Swinburne removes the locus of conflict from within a single hero and polarizes the struggle in nearly allegorical fashion between *Atalanta* and *Althaea*, the one embodying youthful idealism and the other, the repressive instincts of the old order. Accepting this theory means accepting the main characters without individual conflict, as mere abstractions of suggested meanings and the play itself as a war between dueling families of adjectives. This argument follows T. S. Eliot’s lead in *The Sacred Wood* where he interprets Swinburne’s diffuseness as “the hallucination of meaning,” in which language is uprooted from its object, adapting itself “to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment.”¹¹ Previously, in 1884, R. H. Stoddard recalled that the “luminous mists” of Swinburne’s language make the meaning “difficult to discover.”¹²

In fact, it is Althaea who is an ordering force that separates the profusion of words into whole opposing affiliations connected to her dreams “stricken” with images of love and loathing, of “sweet springs” (1164) made “bitter with the sea” (1165). Inseparably, the twin echoes of life and love on the one hand, and death and barrenness on the other, resound as a tonic chord

⁹ Turner, *The Greek Heritage*, p. 449.

¹⁰ Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York, 1937) p. 337.

throughout, contouring the diffused largesse of Swinburne's imagery, and challenging the interpretation that offers a limited view of her conflict or displaces it among divided characters. From the start of the play to the end, she gradually expands from a fearing mother to a critical confluence of warring relationships.

In Swinburne's verse, the peculiarity of his lovers is that they are bound together but never reconciled to each other. The world of Althaea's psyche is also two powers, locked together in a hostile equation, and like Swinburne's married contraries, both beyond redemption. By way of antiphrasis, the entire text of her speeches uses a rhetorical mode that alternates between the advocacy of order on one side, and the threat of chaos, on the other. As M. K. Louis points out, the "verbal magic" of *Atalanta* is that the double language expresses the paradoxical condition of the "old earth" that "has made man and unmade."¹³

Swinburne's antitheses at war in Althaea's character extend the Greekness of the play further to sustain the traditional Greek concern with the tragic disturbance of order in the state and functions as well to sustain the movement of Althaea's growing helplessness in the process of her own, and her son's, unmaking.

Many have seconded Cecil Bowra's notion of Swinburne's play that the "tragic outlook he displays are profoundly and inescapably Greek," but have likewise echoed the poet's words that his play was "pure Swinburne" as well.¹⁴ Calydon's queen is a medial figure poised between Greek conventions of tragic heroes and Swinburne's own nineteenth-century correlatives of such conventions. The central reality of the tragedy is Althaea's fateful decision to burn the brand. Like her sister Clytemnestra, she must set the world aright when one family member murders another, when her son kills her brothers. Both the idea of the protection at all costs of social order and the idea that free will can mediate between the dualities of order and chaos were part of the ideology of Swinburne's time. F. R. Southerington in *Hardy's Vision of Man* stresses Hardy's idea that "the progress of society and the conduct of the individual depend largely on the nature of human choice."¹⁵ Tess and Jude, for example, were severely tested by such boundaries, but, like Althaea, they are both boundless in their ardor to choose rightly despite the fact that their choice means self-obliteration.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (New York, 1950) p. 149.

¹² R. H. Stoddard, *Swinburne's Poetical Works* (New York, 1884) p. xvii.

¹³ M. K. Louis. "Wise Words and Wild Words: The Problem of Language in

In Victorian fiction, tragedy often arises when women cannot find what they need in the ordinary environs of their lives, which, in a heavily paternalistic society offered few choices besides the life of a wife and mother. Often, Victorian heroines were den animals struggling against enclosing circumstances in the narrow scope of their domestic space. In few works, if any, is the conflict between the role of woman in the private and public sphere more profound than in *Atalanta*. Indeed, this play is about a constellation of conflicting powers in the feminine psyche.

The tragedy unfolds from the negligence of Althaea's husband Oeneus to honor Artemis, the raw force of female power in the natural world. Her spirit, cast like a net over the play, harbors birth-giving and death-giving properties, the twin proclivities of Althaea's nature. Like the Hindu goddess Kali, Artemis is "Lady of the Womb," but she is associated with remorseless death as well, as Marija Gimbutas notes. Bloody offerings such as phalli were suitable sacrifices to her.¹⁶ As the beast of death, the boar is the emanation of Artemis as well as the embodiment of Althaea's rage for justice at any cost. In *Weaving the Visions*, Christine Downing describes Artemis as the "Lady of Wild Things," of "uncivilized nature"¹⁷ and the spirit of a "wild and dangerous, rude and barbarous land."¹⁸ Althaea, like Artemis, "gives herself to her own passion, her own wildness" (126).

But Artemis "does not suffer self-doubt or inner division."¹⁹ Althaea, on the other hand, is a character gravely conflicted in social terms by her responsibilities not only as a mother, a wife, and a sister, but as a head of state as well. Georgia Warnke discusses Gadamer's idea that for catharsis and acceptance to occur we must first experience a denial that the fate of the hero could have happened to anyone, much less ourselves.²⁰ But from the start Althaea's conflicts and her concerns seem proportional to the confusing reality of women's lives, caught in battle with both domestic and professional identities. It is not therefore surprising that Althaea becomes two people to redress the wrongs of family and kingdom. Nor is it surprising when she transforms again into a monadic force of biblical justice at the end, combining fate, motherhood, and the gods.

"Althaea" derives from the verb *althomai*, meaning to become whole or sound. Swinburne develops the healing aspect of Althaea's character in a

¹⁴ C. Maurice Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge, 1949) p. 225.

¹⁵ F. R. Southerington, *Hardy's Vision of Man* (New York, 1971) p. 68.

¹⁶ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (New York, 1991) p. 110.

¹⁷ Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Femi-*

passage that celebrates motherhood. Her consciousness of motherhood is so complete that she bears in her memory a clear picture of her son's total life, from the cradle to his manhood:

For there was never a mother woman-born
Loved her sons better; and never a queen of men
More perfect in her heart toward whom she loved.
For what lies light on many and they forget,
Small things and transitory as a wind o' the sea,

I forget never; I have seen thee all thine years
A man in arms, strong and a joy to men
Seeing thine head glitter and thine hand burn its way
Through a heavy and iron furrow of sundering spears (658-666)

But what Althaea says about love and prophecy, is centered in Swinburne's skepticism of the whole natural and supernatural order:

Love is one thing, an evil thing, and turns
Choice words and wisdom into fire and air.
And in the end shall no joy come, but grief,
Sharp words and soul's division and fresh tears
These things are in my presage, and myself
Am part of them and know not; but in dreams
The gods are heavy on me, and all the fates
Shed fire across my eyelids mixed with night,
And burn me blind, and disilluminate
My sense of seeing, and my perspicuous soul
Darken with vision; seeing I see not. (209-222)

In the divisive logic of *Atalanta*, love brings fear of what follows, and it is fear that destroys love as well as order in the state and the family. Order—the fawn that senses danger and flees—and chaos—the wolf that follows—are balanced in Althaea's consciousness of her role as Queen, as wife and mother, and as sister. She believes in the “tender and temperate honours of the hearth/Peace and a perfect life and blameless bed” (425), to have “chaste lives,” “homekeeping days and household reverences” (1362-1370).

But true to the contrary logic of her character, Althaea's insistence on perfect conformity to cultural expectations anticipates her rash action when the rules are violated. Meleager's adoration of the virgin Atalanta is dan-

gerous because Atalanta is also the chosen one of Artemis, deadly enemy of his country. There is no observation one can make about Atalanta that considers her apart from her virginity, establishing her bold independence from man, the hearth, and family—values that lie at the core of Althaea's world. In warning Meleager against “following strange loves” (693), Althaea acknowledges what the mere intimation of Meleager's feelings for the virgin Atalanta have done to her:

Lo, I talk wild and windy words, and fall
From my clear wits, and seem of mine own self
Dethroned, dispraised, disseated; and my mind,
That was my crown, breaks, and mine heart is gone,
And I am naked of my soul (694-698)

Althaea's vision of “the crying of armies undone” (836) materializes after the arrival of Atalanta in Calydon. Nonetheless, she persists in her task to save her kingdom and her family from the vengeance of a slighted god. To succeed, she must transcend the limitations of her gender and then subvert the power of theodicy and the martial society of men. Her transformation is all the more ironic in considering the ideas she expresses earlier in the play in a mood of reflexive piety. On the importance of upholding the law of woman's pacifism, she states:

A woman armed makes war upon herself,
Unwomanlike, and treads down use and wont
And the sweet common honour that she hath,
Love, and the cry of children, and the hand
Trothplight and mutual mouth of marriages. (477-481)

She warns Meleager of the consequences of loving such a woman as Atalanta, the would-be saviour of Calydon and the virgin huntress sent to destroy the boar that incarnates the rupture of traditions and relations. Ironically, to Althaea, the virgin, isolate, seductive, uplifted from the confinement of roles and relationships, is more of a threat to the authority of the state, and the culture that serves it, than the wild animal sent by an outraged god to destroy the country. Althaea describes the consequences of loving the radical woman:

whom if one love,
Not fire nor iron and the wide-mouthed wars
Are deadlier than her lips or braided hair.

Falls from the other and burns the lives of men. (482-486)

Her resistance to the coming of Atalanta illuminates Althaea's terrain where she presides over a national order, much like nineteenth-century England, based on rigid reverence for the gods, the family, and the state. But at the same time, like many Victorian heroines, she acts at considerable variance to the law of submission to all three. Swinburne's play becomes a verbal war that partitions and re-creates what was thought and said about women in the discourse of the nineteenth century. Like Hardy's Sue Bridehead, Althaea is partly fashioned out of the mold of the "Girl of the Period" in the 1860s whom Robert Gittings in *Young Thomas Hardy* describes as "rationalist" and "anti-Church"²¹ in her rage to disempower the formidable system that binds her. Like Swinburne's Sappho, Althaea reviles the gods for their cruel irrationalities.

Viewed in this way, Althaea and Atalanta are more alike than Althaea's preachments against violations of women's role would allow. Each character is "unfeminine" by Victorian standards, in defying social expectations, in safeguarding their right to choose. By snatching the brand from the fire at his birth and igniting it when she decides he must die, she lives out the conflicted prophecy of the twice-born soul. Althaea—healer-consumer, mother-murderer—separates from one to become the other, like spirit separating from matter. Upholder of the law, she transgresses the law of her motherhood and godlike steals the life she gave. In so doing she releases her world from the lifetaking rule of gods and the swords of men, and, hence, from the hell they have made of Calydon.

Victorian generalities about women were stylized in the literature of the typologies of the saint and the seductress. Because Atalanta, the ancient version of the New Woman liberated from social convention, has invaded Althaea's domain of household reverences, Althaea must transcend the limitations of her role as wife and mother in order to defeat the threat to order. Althaea herself becomes the New Woman dispossessed of hearth and home. But she is unlike the effete Sue Bridehead who withdraws to Phillotson as a refuge from the world and Trollope's Madeline Neroni whose power emanates from her seductive invalidism. Althaea is the wronged god incarnate and acts with the power and passion of the violated Artemis. Atalanta refutes both the ancient and Victorian conventional attitude toward women as most powerful—in their servility. As Robert Bell expressed it in "The Ladder of Gold": (1850)

Stern and obdurate strength is not the finest characteristic of women; they are most strong and most lovable in their weakness. In this aspect we discern their humanity, which brings them nearer to our sympathies; and even their errors and failures add a grace to our devotion by leaving something for our magnanimity to forgive (Vol. 2, book 4, ch. 6) (qtd. in Reed)²²

Fragments of *Meleager* by Euripides, one of Swinburne's sources, state:

"It is fitting that a good woman should remain within the house; out of doors she is good for nothing."

And:

"If men were to attend to the labour of the loom, and women were to take with pleasure to weapons...they would be worth nothing; nor we either."²³

In transgressing the feminine limits of power, Althaea receives the fate of women who supersede their rights and meet their own destruction. In burning the brand, she violates her own true nature, and faces a life in despair. In Apollodorus, another of Swinburne's sources, she hangs herself.²⁴ In *Atalanta*, Althaea makes her own doom by an act of will that in its scale transcends the combat of her rivaling instincts for family, state, and faith. Her character becomes anti-formulaic in her subversion of both the classical and the nineteenth-century hermeneutics of woman and her place.

The Manichaean battle that rends Althaea strikes a balance of power between the forces of the polemic implied in "the hounds of spring...on winter's traces" (65). Like Swinburne's Proserpine, who forgets "the life of fruits and corn" ("The Garden of Proserpine" 60), to rule in the garden of the dead, Althaea conceives of a perfect life only after death, in "the clear seat and remote throne of souls" (510). She is granted the godly powers of life and death, like the twin powers of Proserpine, to preside over the growth of the living, and to wait "for all men born" (GP 58) in the garden of the dead. Chief among paradoxical values is love itself, beset as it is, not only by repression, but also by suffering.

²⁰ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge, 1987) p. 61.

²¹ Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy* (London, 1975) pp. 93-95.

²² Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Athens, Ohio, 1975) p. 67.

Love and suffering are equivocal worlds to Swinburne, as he shows us in such poems as "Anactoria." Once love exists, its very existence means the possibility of displacing itself, obeying the rule of impermanence decreed by the "God, that makes time and ruins it" ("The Leper" 45). In *Atalanta*, the most effective analogue for his vision was the firebrand, an image of the love that destroys since, once enflamed, it consumes itself. As John Reed remarks in *Victorian Conventions*, suffering on earth had propitiating, redemptive consequences for eternal life because of its therapeutic value on earth.²⁵ Although most critics still adhered to classical models of tragic conflict, to many writers of Swinburne's time, tragedy was a window on life's relentless anguish. In the novel a character's resignation was the object of sympathy and admiration, designed "to enable us to pass by sympathy into other minds and other circumstances, and especially to train the moral nature by sympathy with noble characters and noble actions."²⁶ In *Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot writes: "so inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive of no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain."²⁷ In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue Bridehead makes her own life choices in defiance of social, religious, and natural laws, but only creates more of the suffering which for her and Jude represents life's only reliable law.

Swinburne sought to transcend that simplistic idea by constructing in the form of a woman an adversary to suffering powerful enough to challenge its authority. In their astounding defiance Swinburne's women are what Baudelaire called the "iron flail of souls."²⁸ What Swinburne wrote after studying Michelangelo's female heads suggests the fatal power of his own women:

But in one separate head there is more tragic attraction... a woman's, three times studied, with divine and subtle care; sketched and re-sketched in youth and age, beautiful almost beyond desire and cruel beyond words; fairer than heaven and more terrible than hell, pale with pride and weary with wrong-doing; a silent anger against God and man burns, white and repressed through her clear features.

Bearing a telling portent of Althaea, he remarks that "In some inexplicable

²³ Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition*, pp. 335.

²⁴ Apollodorus, *The Library* 1.vii.7-viii.3; ix.8-ix.22.

²⁵ Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, p. 8.

way all her ornaments seem to partake of her fatal nature, to bear upon them her brand of beauty fresh from hell."²⁹

Althaea warns her son to "fear thou the gods and me" (683). In unfolding the calamity that results, Swinburne adheres to the dark curvature of his realities that lie beneath the ideals of love, family, patriotism, religious worship, and even the love between mother and child. To Althaea, *Atalanta* is a curse because she does not "cleave to things ordained" (454). Mary Lefkowitz in *Women in Greek Myth* describes the fate of such women:

Since Greek myth glorified the role of a mother, it also tended to condemn to infamy those who in some way rebelled against it. A confirmed mortal virgin who resisted the advances of a god might get away simply with metamorphosis into a tree or flower but women who consciously denied their femininity, like the Amazons, or who killed their husbands and fathers, like the women of Lemnos, were regarded as enemies and monsters.³⁰

Hence the double curse of *Atalanta*: she causes mother to kill son, and condemns her to the fate of a woman who has killed a male relative. *Atalanta* turns Althaea into an image of herself, vilified as a transgressor against ordained law. The virgin does not spin, as Althaea notes, recalling ironically the spinners of fate who give her the brand which she plucks from the fire at the birth of Meleager. With the symbolism of the brand, the "three weaving women" (243) "who fright the gods" (277) threaten that love must eventually come to ruin, and to Althaea, all god-ordained blessings are designed to "mock us with a little piteousness" (158). The "grey women" (276) made fate a correlative for love: Althaea's love is invested in the firebrand unlit, sustaining Meleager's life, but fate is the same firebrand kindled. Thus, in living in the hell of this eventuality, love to Althaea is "a thwart sea-wind full of rain and foam" (184), and the beloved: "Not fire nor iron and the wide-mouthed wars/Are deadlier than her lips or braided hair" (483-484).

This is what happens to all which the gods have given. This is Swinburne's rationale for an abhorrence of religion. Life is no divine gift. It is a totality of moments each of which transform into their opposite. Synthesis, in the sense of harmony, can never quite exist, except for the reciprocal relation between one state of being and its opposite. Artemis, in sending *Atalanta* to kill the boar and to close the rift between gods and humanity, has sent a

²⁷ Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 78.

storm that blows disasters equal in degree to the original punishment. By the same token, the firebrand changes from a magic safeguard against death to death itself. This deadly reciprocity is what the chorus means when it describes the human condition:

Strength without hands to smite;
Love that endures for a breath:
Night, the shadow of light,
And life, the shadow of death. (321-324)

Full of loathing for the gods, the chorus describes them as "Saying Joy is not, but love of joy shall be" (1163):

Thou hast kissed us, and hast smitten; thou has laid
Upon us with thy left hand life, and said,
Live: and again thou has said, Yield up your breath,
And with thy right hand laid upon us death. (1158-1161)

Because in their perversity the gods have made us "transitory and hazardous" (1154), they are "The supreme evil" (1151). As Samuel Chew noted, "No Greek, not even Euripides, would have dared this extremity of defiance."³¹ In *Atalanta*, the gods and the fates are transfunctional. Artemis becomes Erinys in her devastations. Yet the gods of fate hold petitioners in thrall out of mere desperation. In Swinburne's poem-prayer to Dolores, *Our Lady of Pain*, he begs her to respond "By the thirst of unbearable things,/ By despair, the twin-born of devotion" (Dolores 106-107).

In the beginning, at Meleager's birth, Althaea laughs to think she has the power to protect her son forever, "having all my will of heaven" (281), not realizing that the same power could also destroy him. In his essay on Blake, Swinburne upheld Blake's belief that the only God is the God within, the idea that "by culture and perfection of humanity man makes himself God."³² In a perverse distortion of that affirmation, Althaea becomes a god herself in exercising her prerogative to take her son's life. Swinburne's words describing his dark Venus apply to Althaea as well: she "will endure no rival but God,"³³ and like his Dolores, Althaea is "fed with blood-offering and blood-sacrifice."³⁴ In this way Swinburne makes his character an analogue to the corresponding system of divine power that enthralls her. She and

²⁹ Philip Henderson, *Swinburne: Portrait of a Poet* (New York, 1974) p. 81.

³⁰ Mary Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1986) p. 36.

³¹ Chew, *Swinburne*, p. 62.

³² A. C. Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (San Francisco, 1890) p. 262.

Meleager become death's twin-born, symbols of the malleability of the individual and the state, shaped and reshaped by the inevitable alterations of time and circumstance. Althaea's language itself is a commotion of referents to endless transience. Her reality is a code for the transitional signs of the world, such as "wind" upon a "wave" (685), a "discolouring stain" (490), an "ephemeral seed" (524).

Novalis said, "Fate and character are but names for one idea."³⁵ Character is a process of response, a chronicle of changing reactions to the facts of the world, that are also in a state of unceasing change. External influences feed into the contents of character from the fluctuations of the world outside and intermarry with the world within. The Heraclitean flux of energies such as innate character and the social and economic environment in such a novel as *Mill on the Floss* make defiance of such fateful circumstances inevitable for Maggie Tulliver and inevitably tragic as well.

The phenomenology of many nineteenth-century characters of poetry and prose indicate an appropriation of Heraclitean maxims, particularly that nothing can remain in the same state, every entity possesses properties of the state opposite from itself and all contraries are produced from the same source. In *Blake's Apocalypse*, Harold Bloom contends that "The vision of Heraclitus is of an attunement of opposite tensions, of mortals and immortals living the others' death and dying the others' life."³⁶ In Swinburne's essay on Blake, he clearly delineates the transformative agility of Blake's characters in the prophetic books and other works. In *Milton*, characters shift their shapes with the "cross-currents of symbol and doctrine,"³⁷ turning from or toward the "generative power of love."³⁸

The contrarieties that Swinburne develops—in nature, supernature, in the religion and polity of Calydon culminate in the Queen's character that is structured on the opposition of water and fire, Heraclitean elements bound by the energy of opposition, of ripening dew and "Dissundering" (2224) flames. She is both "holy" and "just" and "unholy" and "unjust" (2221-2222) in her role as both victim and executrix of fate. Like a Heraclitean cosmos the interplay of her elements clash "like smitten cymbals" (1824), moving constantly between the flooding and ebbing of love, its burning and consuming, her energies of good and evil intertwined, but originating from the same passionate source. In his dying speech Meleager knows the

³³ A. C. Swinburne, *Swinburne Replies*, ed. C. K. Hyder p. 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

³⁵ Jeannette King, *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge, 1978) p. 78.

³⁶ Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (Garden City,

elements of his mother's world have conjoined to make his beginning and his end. She brought him forth "fragrant from the rains" (2218) only to "devour" (2224) him with "fire and subtlety" (2223).

Swinburne's customary antitheses serve as an admixture to the Hellenic notion of fate, making Althaea a character in whom the Greek problem of fate vs. free will is cast in the shape of a Swinburnian paradox. Basically, the tragic core of the play arises from Althaea's sense of fate equivoiced between a nature that heals and a nature that consumes. From the beginning of the play images of a god immanent in nature double with those of a god in flight from it. Spring and youth bear images of fruition and death. When the Chief Huntsman heralds the coming of dawn, he remembers "that flameless shell/Which was the moon" (23-24), prefiguring the charred life of Meleager at the end of the play. Though "winter's rains and ruins are over" (105), the chorus hints at some dark impending consummation. In the intensifying passion, the Bacchanal is blinded by the foliage, the wildness of her surroundings cleaving to her, and the sense of what is happening frightens even "The wolf that follows, and the fawn that flies" (120). The Maenad and the Bassarid, votaries of Bacchus and protectors of animals, paradoxically tore them apart in licentious rituals. The chorus is preparing us for the "madness risen from hell" (32) when Althaea transforms from earth mother to the "bedfellow" (1864) of fate "whose mouth/Looks red from the eaten fruits" of her own womb (1867-1868).

Ironically, without Althaea's intervention, it is possible that Meleager's devotion to Atalanta could have deepened into love and could have modulated his rashness with a sense of vulnerability. Althaea's action has even uprooted the tiny bloom of Atalanta's growing tenderness, and the civilizing influence it implies. The world they lived in ends in "sudden destruction unaware" (1726). Althaea's lighting of the brand at the climax of the play is nothing less than an eschatological sacrifice destroying the foundation of the present and future state.

When the queen hears the news of her brothers' murder by her son, she does not consider the possibility that Meleager killed his uncles out of a need to defend himself against their own threats against his life. Her choice is to regard Meleager either as a dysfunctional mechanism of the family and the state, which he previously glorified as a "man in arms, strong and a joy to men" (664), or to remember him as her child, "the small one thing that lying drew down my life/To lie with thee and feed thee" (670). Madened by the onus of fate and laboring under the weight of conflicting obligations, she ends her son's life. She chooses to deny her private moth-

erhood for the exigencies of the public domain. To Althaea, burying her brothers "unavenged" and bringing dishonor to her dead mother and to her office as queen is a worse crime than killing her own son, for, as she says, "though mine own fire burn me too" (1758), "one choice/We have, to live and do just deeds and die" (1761-1762). With that decision, she steps onto alien ground, becoming her child's "twin-born fate" that "scenting sins far off," "Tracks, and gains" on him who "the swift hounds of violent death devour" (471-473).

Fate in the classical sense may be defined as either the force within or the force outside the hero that pushes him to commit a grave error of will or judgment. These corollary aspects of fate, that is, fate as blind circumstance, and fate as a particular predisposition of self become the same as Althaea enacts the will of both kinds of fate simultaneously:

For none constrains nor shall rebuke, being done,
What none compelled me doing; thus these things fare.
Ah, ah, that such things should so fare; ah me,
That I am found to do them and endure,
Chosen and constrained to choose, and bear myself
Mine own wound through mine own flesh to the heart. (1771-
1776)

In the deepest irony, Althaea's internal weakness or "fatal" predisposition is the very belief that she is "fated" by external causes, as the helpless pawn of blind chance. This rift in perception generates the text of the play and forms the basis of her character. Her humanity is in combat on equal terms with the abstract principle of biblical justice. Believing all else is "withered as leaves wither/In the blasting of the sun (1432-1433), she chooses the one thing that remains—a righteous atonement. This is the basis for taking away the life she gave: "But I being just, doing right upon myself/Slay mine own soul, and no man born shames me" (1769-1770). In doing so, she becomes "Fate, mother of desires and fears, "the law of tears," "an unfathered flame" (1817-1819). She changes from an oracular priestess predicting fate to fate itself, signifying the power of Swinburne's Germanic goddess Hertha in the demand that her children return the life she gave them:

I am in thee to save thee
As my soul in thee saith;
Give thou as I gave thee,

Thy life-blood and breath
Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy
thought, and red fruit of thy death.³⁹

In response to the appeal the chorus makes to her instinct to survive the murder of her brothers, to consider "love-worthy things,/Thine husband, and the great strength of thy son" (1587-1588), Althaea can only answer "I would I had died unwedded, and brought forth/No swords to vex the world" (1602-1603). Novalis has said that the imagination "loves night, meaninglessness, and solitude."⁴⁰ For Althaea, liberty comes when all polarities are negated in death. She denies the force of her maternal love "ineffaceable" (1751), and chooses instead to remain above rebuke, resigning herself to the afterworld where ancestral honor reigns, "in that waste world"(1753), "alien from the sun" (1755).

Thus, Althaea falls victim to a fate that is thoroughly paradoxical, and rooted in Swinburne's awareness of the tragic dualities in the world outside as well as the world within. Althaea defies the gods by becoming Ate, "that breeds up death and gives it one for love" ("Phaedra" 140). The chorus, in alluding to the fate of external circumstance that surrounds Althaea, points to her doubleness in knowing "the life that breathes, the life that grows" (1827), and yet who is:

The daughter of doom, the mother of death,
The sister of sorrow; a lifelong weight
That no man's finger lighteneth, Nor any god can lighten fate;
(1830-1833)
For death is deep as the sea,
And fate as the waves thereof. (1839-1840)

In Althaea's dark theophany, she is Cybele, Swinburne's "queen over death and the dead" (Dolores 348). She is both the death-mother Althaea and the virginal Atalanta, for both have ruined love. In "Dolores" Swinburne describes Cybele, "A mother, a mortal, a maiden" (347), "cold" and "virginal, holy" who "hath wasted with fire" the "high places" of the gods and "hath hidden and marred and made sad/The fair limbs" of love (353-354).

³⁷ Swinburne, *William Blake*, p. 261.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 252.

³⁹ A. C. Swinburne, "Hertha" in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, eds. W. Houghton and G. R. Stange, (New York, 1968) pp. 76-81.

⁴⁰ Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p. 1.

Cybele is the Mother of all Nature whose chariot is drawn by lions she does not feed. The rapacious energy of the lions brings forth creation and devours it. Born bisexual, she is castrated by the gods, and an almond tree grows from her fallen genitals. An almond blossom impregnates her and she gives birth to a son. Eventually, she drives him mad by frustrating his attempts to marry, and he castrates himself.

Igniting the brand signals the final extirpation of the gods as a source of knowledge, enlightenment, determinancy, stability, superseded by a god of mere "Chance, and the wheel of all necessities." To the chorus's admonishment to "fear the gods" (1799), Althaea responds, "Fear died when these were slain and I am as dead,/And fear is of the living" (1801). The great mother assumes the power of life-giving, life-taking fate. Althaea is an "axe" (1808) and begins the "sundering of the earth" (1808) and "cleaving of the sea" (1809).

Fate's are we
Yet fate is ours a breathing-space; yea, mine,
Fate is made mine for ever; he is my son,
My bedfellow, my brother. You strong gods,
Give place unto me; I am as any of you
To give life and to take life. (1861-1866)

She is then the fire that burns the brand: "I am fire, and burn myself; keep clear of fire" (1805). And—in that chilling image—the Chorus turns to see "a faint fire lightening from the hall" (1887). The chorus laments that "The house is broken, is broken; it shall not stand" (1806). She announces that Meleager has become a fire kindled and extinguished. In her agony, Althaea asks:

O soft knees
Clinging, O tender treadings of soft feet,
Cheeks warm with little kissings—O child, child,
What have we made each other? (1928-1931)
As if in answer, Meleager describes his creation and death:
The bitter mother and mother-plague
Of this my weary body—thou to; queen
The source and end, the sower and the scythe,

The rain that ripens and the drought that slays,
The sand that swallows and the spring that feeds,
To make me and unmake me. (2209-2214)

The war between these impulses rends Althaea until she becomes a paradox incarnate, a house divided against itself, a world imploded under the pressure of division. In destroying Meleager, she vanquishes the idea of his impending destruction, and the madness of foreboding vanishes from her mind. As Meleager's life ebbs away, Althaea's mind ceases to burn and she falls into a demented serenity as the brand burns. In restoring herself to righteousness by severing the offending part of her, she has acted to fulfill the demands of the paradox she was born for:

For all my life turns round on me;
I am severed from myself, my name is gone,
My name that was a healing, it is changed,
My name is a consuming. (1942-1945)

Up until this point much of the play advances from the adversarial energy of a binary system of words that "divide and rend" (1203). But Swinburne's oppositions are not Blake's contraries which are alternating forces yielding affirmations. All that is left of the warring paradoxes at the end of *Atalanta* is silence, for silence is the new combinatorial rule that signals the end of the war of words between mortals and the gods: "For silence after grievous things is good" (1197). Silence is a casualty of fate. In lighting the brand Althaea herself heals the breach of separation in her apotheosis as the single world force that makes and unmakes the destiny of her son and her country.

In the romantic mind, character answers the question of destiny by making the choice to draw aside the veil of the finite, revealing the infinite and the meaning of true self. Althaea's choice stills the finite polemics of laughter and tears. She steps into a larger perception of herself as part of the infinite process of giving and taking life: "mine eyes/That outweep heaven at rainiest, and my mouth/That laughs as gods laugh at us" (1860-1861). In silencing at last the voice of her spirit "strong against itself" (1704), the split structure of words, the cacophony of revolt of man against man, nature and god, become indelible history. The stream of Althaea's maternal power to give and sustain life has flowed into the greater waters of primeval unity with the powers of divine judgment and retribution. The attunement of opposing tensions that Bloom speaks of is signaled in *Atalanta* in the eclipse of language, signaling the eclipse of a society.

At the end of the play, Althaea, failing in her attempt to reconcile the bitter paradox of an incomprehensible theodicy, becomes its mute symbol instead. And in fulfilling the meaning of her name, she dissolves into the

lexicon of the world's antinomies. Althaea, fate, nature and time unending are rolled into one in the apocalypse at the end of the play. At the "loosening of the large world's girth/And quickening of the body of night" (1813-1814), Oeneus asks "What thing wilt thou leave me?" (2082). The chorus has already answered in its response to the news of the burning brand. What is left is Fate—that which Althaea incarnates as the "mother of desires and fears" (1817) now "without body, without name" (1821)—and nature, in "the blue sad fields" (1826).