

AESTHETIC PERVERSIONS AND SWINBURNE'S "LES NOYADES"

Karen Alkalay-Gut

Because so much of Swinburne criticism has assumed an association between Swinburne's personality, his speakers, and his characters, questions of his employment of the dramatic monologue, personae, and the lyric voice are basic to an understanding of his verse. Yet despite the fact that Swinburne's poetry is often described as concerned with forms, and that his use of the rondel, the rondeau, and other less popular genres has been investigated, his numerous experiments with the lyric and dramatic modes in poetry have been less carefully examined. Only recently have questions about Swinburne's dramatics been asked. Recent studies of Swinburne, such as those by Nicholas Shrimpton, Thais Morgan, and David Riede, have shown both the dramatic nature of Swinburne's monologues and the complexity of his social criticism through this dramatic style of presenting a wide range of characters and allowing them to speak for themselves, which added a new dimension of irony and freedom from realism.¹

Perhaps because the use of a dramatic as opposed to a lyric or confessional mode indicates consciousness and artistic control, thus fulfilling a basic ideal of aestheticism, Swinburne himself seems to have been extremely sentient of the distinctions between poetry and non-fiction, as well as between the dramatic and lyric modes. In defence of his *Poems and Ballads* (for which he was personally vilified) he declared that he was writing not lyrics but dramatic monologues: "the book is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance of enjoyment or despair, belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of its author's personal feeling or faith" ("Notes" 18). Although this assertion is obviously a plea to consider his poetry as works of art and not confessional statement, Swinburne's avowals of multifariousness have yet to be applied to readings of all his poems. Made more difficult by the confusion purposely engendered in his works, close readings nevertheless yield the conclusion that this very confusion, this blurring of literary genres, is intentional and an essential component of the poem.

The breaking of the conventions of genre, in fact, may well be part of the innovative significance of some of the poems, and reading them with this assumption can be extremely fruitful, adding new dimensions to poems previously