

"TIME AND FRUITFUL HOUR": PRE-RAPHAELITE SINCERITY  
 IN ATALANTA IN CALYDON

The frame action of Atalanta in Calydon is a boar hunt, a metaphor for man's search for meaning during his mortal life. The boar was sent to ravage Calydon by Artemis because King Oeneus had neglected to sacrifice to her. Since Artemis is the goddess of chastity, the killing of the boar will symbolize a kind of truce attained with her, a sort of renewal in time made possible by the triumph and restoration of purity. Swinburne believed that man passionately yearns for meaning and unity in his life and that he seeks for that unity through love. Both purity and love, then, are at the root of the boar hunt, and each figure's motivation to hunt the boar will prove insufficient unless it is pure love. Atalanta desires only to please the goddess. Althaea hopes only to destroy the palpable source of threat to her harmoniously structured society. Althaea's brothers, Toxeus and Plexippus, wish only to win fame and thus be immortalized. Meleager longs to make his mother proud and prove his love for Atalanta by bestowing upon her the trophy of the boar's head. To complicate matters, in each figure's "heart is a blind desire; / In his eyes foreknowledge of death" (ll. 357-58).

Althaea's search, characterized by her focus on things which are in themselves fleeting, inevitably brings despair and propels her toward a death which will end her joyless life and obliterate her hunt for truth and immortality. Searching merely for earthly validation, Toxeus and Plexippus die ironically at the hands of their nephew Meleager because they cannot control their foolish words, the substance of worldly fame. Atalanta's wholehearted commitment to Artemis' ideal arms her against earthly losses yet leaves her escape from these losses sterile and barren. Only Meleager is able to experience his search, and thus the world, as a creative and radiant potentiality. Rather than resisting mortality, Meleager accepts the truth which never perishes and becomes an enduring, integrated being. Embodying the poetic temperament and the artistic imagination, Meleager transcends the limitations of the other hunters and thereby fulfills himself.

Meleager's mother Althaea, on the other hand, holds no kinship with the nature Swinburne believed men co-exist with and are reinforced by during life. She is unable to celebrate the seasons' manifestations but bleakly perceives that the snows of winter will "plague all men for sin" (l. 129), "Spring shall be ruined with the rain, and storm / Eat up like fire the ashen autumn days" (ll. 131-32). Althaea sees only that each season will be self-consumed, and in this she