

THE TANNHAUSER THEME: SWINBURNE'S "LAUS VENERIS"

"Notes on Poems and Reviews" was Swinburne's reply to those critics who had greeted his Poems and Ballads (1866) with derision. The latter volume featured "Laus Veneris." The initial response, negative, was so pronounced that Swinburne's publisher, the firm of Moxon, represented by Bertram Payne, withdrew the edition, despite John Ruskin's initial blessing. A few months earlier, Swinburne had published "Laus Veneris" singly to test the climate and had found no particularly ominous response. With the publication of the collection, however, the clamor began. The reviewer for the Athenaeum found Swinburne "unclean for the sake of uncleanness"; Punch called the poet "Mr. Swineborn"; the Saturday Review condemned the poet's "maulings of the frenzied bagpipes"; The Globe referred to "poetic Billingsgate of the choicest description"; the Times urged that the editor be brought to court; one anonymous person informed Swinburne that a bag would be clapped over his head and his genitals cut off.

There were enthusiasts, however, particularly among younger readers who may have taken him too literally. Harold Nicolson described "the excitement of discovery, the sharp throb of youth," aroused by the volume. Swinburne's name was "the very wine of freedom, the zest of heresy, the whole music of passion." Edmund Gosse supplied a firsthand account: "At Oxford, it simply swept us (the undergraduates) off our legs. At Cambridge the young men joined hands and marched along shouting 'Dolores' or 'A Song of Revolution.'" Thomas Hardy wrote Swinburne in 1897 that he read the "early works walking along the crowded London streets to my imminent risk of being knocked down." George Saintsbury reported that Poems and Ballads "set us all exploring through Gautier and Baudelaire to Flaubert." And John Ruskin responded a second time, though haltingly, writing Swinburne a month after the book appeared:

For the matter of it -- I consent to much -- I regret much -- I blame, or reject nothing. I should as soon think of finding fault with you as with a thundercloud or a nightshade blossom. All I can say of you, or them -- is that God made you, and you are very wonderful and beautiful. . . . There is assuredly something wrong with you -- awful in proportion to the great power it affects, and renders (nationally) at present useless. So it was with Turner, so with Byron. It seems to be the peculiar judgment -- curse of modern days that all their greatest men shall be plague-struck.¹

Incensed by Moxon's withdrawal, Swinburne transferred Poems and