

OF HUNTS AND HUNTERS: ATALANTA IN CALYDON

A fair number of recent critical essays have focused on Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon.<sup>1</sup> None, however, has thoroughly considered the significance of the play's primary metaphor -- that of the hunt. Atalanta in Calydon is a story of pursuit. The play abounds in hunts and hunters, with narrative action centering on the search for the wild boar which Artemis has sent to ravage the land and people of Calydon:

But Artemis, having at first stirred up these tribes to war against Oeneus, king of Calydon, because he had offered sacrifice to all the gods saving her alone, but her he had forgotten to honour, was yet more wroth because of the destruction of this army, and sent upon the land of Calydon a wild boar which slew many and wasted their increase, but him could none slay, and many went against him and perished.

(Atalanta in Calydon, from The Argument)<sup>2</sup>

All the great warriors of Greece -- chief among them Meleager, the son of Oeneus and Althaea and a proven hunter/warrior; Toxeus and Plexippus, the brothers of Althaea; and Atalanta, a worshipper of Artemis -- gather in Calydon to hunt the boar and slay it. This pursuit of the wild boar serves as the precipitating action for the most important hunt in which the people of the drama find themselves engaged: the pursuit of an ordered human existence.

The various cyclical "chases" of the natural world referred to in the opening lines of the play set the context for the human predicament with which Atalanta is concerned. There is nothing permanent in the world of nature; change and mortality comprise its very essence. After the chief huntsman prays to Artemis for success in killing the boar, the Chorus celebrates the season "When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces" (65); but in immediate counterpoint, Althaea observes that "Night, a black hound, follows the white fawn day" (125). Spring, with its life-giving force, does for a time obliterate the barrenness of winter; but winter will come once again just as surely as night follows day. Because they, too, live in the natural world, men are bound by the same cycle. However intensely they desire and enjoy life, human beings exist in time, and their end will be death:

We wax old,  
All we wax old and wither like a leaf.  
We are outcast, strayed between bright sun and moon;  
Our light and darkness are as leaves of flowers,