

The Muse and the Lexicon:
A Note on Swinburne's "Herse"

"Herse" is representative of the large number of "child-worship" poems that Swinburne wrote between 1879 and 1894.¹ Swinburne's fascination with babies and children during this period cannot be attributed to any single source. Some of his fondness for children can be assigned to the influence of Walter Savage Landor, as W. B. D. Henderson suggests in Swinburne and Landor (London, 1918), but other influences loom as just as significant. Swinburne was impressed, for instance, by portraits of children in William Blake's and Christina Rossetti's poetry, and he calls the two the "high priest" and "high priestess" of "baby-worship respectively" in his 1877 essay, "Victor Marie Hugo." He also acknowledges his fondness for George Eliot's and Mrs. Molesworth's depictions of children in his essay on "Charles Reade" (1884). But perhaps the greatest single influence on Swinburne's sentiments at the time he wrote "Herse" was the presence of Herbert "Bertie" Mason, the son of Theodore Watts-Dunton's sister, at Watts-Dunton's home, "The Pines."² Beginning in September, 1879, Swinburne resided with Watts-Dunton and the Mason family at "The Pines," where "Bertie" was to become the especial object of Swinburne's own form of "child-worship."

Swinburne's fascination with Bertie provided the occasion for many of his "child-worship" poems. The first of several addressed to Bertie was "Six Years Old," written to commemorate the boy's birthday in 1880. Another poem, "Dark Month," is a day by day chronicle of Swinburne's unhappiness over Bertie's absence from "The Pines" in May, 1881. Swinburne's preoccupation with Bertie no doubt caused the youth's family a great deal of concern, enough at least to evoke the following response from Lady Swinburne in a letter to Watts-Dunton on May 14, 1881:

His love for that little friend amounts to devotion and I often hope that it may lead to the faith of youth in some hidden way-- for the love of, and appreciation of innocent childhood is good and wholesome. You and no doubt his Parents will guard the little child from any harmful views on that subject that Algernon might lead him into.³