

Swinburne's Divine Bitches: Agents of Destruction and Synthesis

"Laus Veneris," "Dolores," and "Faustine" contain Swinburne's most extreme treatments of the female figure, cruel goddess-women who enjoy the spectacle of death and often must be appeased with sacrifice; and whose relationship to men is that of a tabooed object. The poet builds upon the divine-bitch archetype to construct motifs of religion, history, and philology which synergetically develop into what might be dubbed an anti-entropic monism.

The mention of Swinburne's name is likely to summon to the imagination elaborate scenarios of algolagnia, featuring a dominatrix as the medium of punishment and even death. Brown and Bailey note that the poetic style itself is violent.¹ But the content alone suffices to recall the floggings Swinburne received as a boy at Eton: Faustine "scourge[s] with scorpions for a rod";² the hair of Venus, like a whip, is said to "sting";³ and to Dolores—a "re-risen" Venus—⁴ the poet says, "the city lay red from thy rods."⁵ The punisher, having become a love object and hence corresponding to Swinburne's post-Eton patronage of flagellation brothels, shifts from a male authority figure to a female one: an averred goddess in "Laus Veneris" and "Dolores"; an empress in "Faustine," where the epigraph "*Ave Faustina Imperatrix morturi te salutant*" evokes the wanton wife of the emperor Antonius. Moreover, the epigraph is transplanted directly from the realm of the arena and addresses to Faustine the very salutation addressed to Caesar by the gladiators "about to die." The body of the poem bears out the analogy of the arena, but now a woman is the despot for whose pleasure the deadly sport is pursued, and the target of her lust for cruelty ranges from one man to the male population at large:

*She loved the games men played with
death,
Where death must win;
As though the slain man's blood and breath
Revived Faustine.*⁶

Two motifs manifest themselves in the lines above. First, death is represented as a spectator sport; and second, the blood of the slain is regarded as somehow beneficial to the entity in whose honor it is shed. There exists one ritual which unites these two ideas, and is common to the phylogeny of all races: the ritual of sacrifice. Sacrifice—exacted by a powerful female entity—and its component motifs are reprised elements in Swinburne's work. In "Laus Veneris" the knight who is enamored of Venus appropriates for the language of love the terminology of the sacrificial ritual: the lover whose lips cling painfully hard is said to be "appeased with sacrifice."⁷ The lovers/worshippers of Dolores likewise are associated with sacrifice:

*Who now shall content thee as they did,
Thy lovers, when temples were built
And the hair of the sacrifice braided
And the blood of the sacrifice split. . . .*⁸

"Dolores," like "Faustine," utilizes the imagery of the ancient arena, depicts the "gladiator, pale for thy [Dolores'] pleasure."⁹ Wherever there is slaughter there is pageantry. Nero is portrayed as the exultant slayer, "The implacable beautiful tyrant, Rose-crowned, having death in his hands."¹⁰ Swinburne employs lyrical language and evokes ceremonial splendor to describe the burning of Christians and of Rome, as though indiscriminately to glorify conflagration. "Laus Veneris" perhaps offers the most glamorized version of slaughter. The knight, who is the poem's narrator, makes his way to Rome, recalling scenes of battle in which he had participated: the "great time of goodly fight. . . . Of beautiful mailed men. . . . My sword. . . flecked with death. . . the heart's gladness of the goodly game."¹¹ The significance lies in the stimulus which prompts the recollection, i.e., the similarity of the procession of religious pilgrims to the procession of warriors. The knight continues to reflect on a foe whom he had killed, con-