

SWINBURNE ON RAPE

Margot K. Louis

Few Victorian poets explored the topic of rape; fewer Victorianists have examined what literary representations of rape remain to us from the period. In the Victorian age, rape was doubly unspeakable, perhaps because it not only involved sexual penetration (thereby coming under the taboo on any explicit *literary* treatment of sexual activity in the public sphere), but also was an act of violence – agonizing to experience, agonizing to contemplate with any empathy for the victim. As Herbert Tucker has written, “the topic virtually required, if it didn’t at some level even effect, disjunction, discontinuity, violation of the narrative line.”¹ In our own age, rape is still painful to contemplate, still hard to put in words. Nancy Venable Raine, a survivor of rape, in her recent book *After Silence* explains, “Rape has long been considered a crime so unspeakable, so shameful to its victims, that they are rendered mute.... In giving language to my own experience, I hope I can make rape less ‘unspeakable’” (Raine, 6). Even to write or read or hear about a mythical rape in a text written over a century ago may create discomfort, as I have found in researching this subject and in discussing it with friends or colleagues.

Algernon Swinburne in his time positioned himself flamboyantly at the cutting edge of literary sexual discourse, and, now that his tastes have become faddish rather than embarrassing, criticism is dealing cheerfully with their literary results. Studies of Swinburne’s Sadic and masochistic works proliferate (for the most recent criticism, see Guzynski, Barrett, Vincent, and Alexander *passim*; Prins, 121-56; Lane, 76-88); but no study has dealt with his representation of rape. Yet this concept constituted a complex challenge to Swinburne’s peculiar combination of male hedonism, masochism, identification with the female, and passionate devotion to the cause of personal and political freedom. Never one to back away from a challenge, the poet did grapple with this issue--although with an evident anxiety and ambivalence which are hardly characteristic of him. Consistently, Swinburne presents rape as an act of violation which delights the rapist and agonizes and silences the person raped. That is to say, rape creates binary, incompatible realities: the experience of the person raped, which is not a sexual experience but an