

“WHO DOTTH THEE WRONG?”: PERFORMANCE,
PERFORMATIVITY, AND DOING THE SELF “WRONG”
IN SWINBURNE’S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES

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In the midst of the scandal surrounding *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne published *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, in which he gives readers a piece of advice on approaching the volume of poetry: “I desire that one thing should be remembered: the book is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance ... can properly be assumed as the assertion of its author’s personal feeling or faith” (*Swinburne Replies* 18). In doing so, Swinburne points his readers to what is arguably the sole uncontroversial characteristic of what would come to be known as the dramatic monologue: the distinction that we (should) feel “obliged to posit” between “the speaking ‘I’ and the poet’s ‘I’” (Sinfield 32).¹ As both Glennis Byron (108) and Catherine Maxwell (17-19) have observed, many critics of Swinburne have not felt so obliged. Despite the work of defenders like Thaïs Morgan and Nicholas Shrimpton, Swinburne is often marginalized or excluded from discussions of the genre in terms of the conventional critical narrative – following on the work of Carol Christ, Herbert Tucker, and Isobel Armstrong – of the rejection of the nineteenth-century definition of lyric as “feeling expressing itself to itself” (Mill 12),² pure self-expression “uncontaminated by rhetoric and dramatic posturing” (Tucker 226), along with the “autonomous, self-conscious, atemporal” subject that it presupposed (Slinn 309). Yet if Swinburne’s suggestion to read his poems in the “dramatic” company of those of his contemporaries is taken seriously, it is possible to see his monologues as a further turn on their “turn on Romantic lyricism” (Tucker 231), one that exploits the genre’s dual nature as performance and performative to make the (then) radical suggestion that the self is not only something that is “done” (i.e., performed), but something that can be “done wrong.”

Before turning to Swinburne’s monologues, I need to outline some claims