

TERMINAL SWINBURNE

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What struck this not very bibliographical sesquicentenary observer most, on perusing 1866 editions of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, is the proliferation of periods dotting each page. Not just every poem title, but every subtitle (parenthesized or bare), every epigraph and postscript, every numbered stanza, every running title left or right is chaperoned by a full stop. In itself this typesetting practice does nothing to distinguish Swinburne's from other poetry collections of the day: the Moxon Tennyson of 1857, Rossetti's *Goblin Market* volume with Macmillan in 1862, Browning's *Dramatis Personae* two years later for Chapman and Hall, all observe the same punctuational hygiene that nails printed characters to their place on the page. In the case of Swinburne's book though, the practice looks like a policing action mischievously set up to fail: too little too late, and in the wrong places. The enforcement of conventional typographic protocols seems to erect a cordon sanitaire, by order of the publisher, to keep a few verbal vagrants in line after sabotage and riot have already done their worst. Not without a prognostic qualm must the Moxon typesetters have affixed, at the end of the final poem, in full caps and with a quarantining period too, their imprimatory "THE END."¹

That our poet may have written with an eye to transfiguring and transvaluing this like other Victorian conventions – or, to speak more largely, that his punctilious observance of formal protocols served him as a way of framing observations, usually critical, about them and what they stood for – becomes plausible when we negotiate the first page of "Hymn to Proserpine." There we encounter in sequence a title (full stop), a caption in parentheses locating the hymn historically (full stop), a Latin quotation (full stop), and then for good measure an opening hexameter line that ends verbally with the word "end" yet not, typographically, the full stop that might be called for:

I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath an end;

Love hath an end, period, right? No, not right: by reserving his full stop for the end of line 2, where "befriend" requites "end" with this coupleted poem's first rhyme, Swinburne takes a tiny, utterly characteristic jab at the postulation