

“BURNT TO THE BONE” WITH LOVE, DAMNATION, AND SIN: PHAEDRA AS THE SWINBURNIAN *FEMME DAMNÉE*¹

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The Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) is famous for his uniquely “bizarre” female characters. His contemporary critics as well as many of the researchers who touched upon his work have interpreted his female characters to be “obsessive,” “masochistic,” and in some cases even “sadistic.” Phædra is one of his characters who suffered the most because of this misconception. Rarely referenced at all, she has been regarded as a one-dimensional “masochist” who lacks psychological and emotional depth and whose only driving force is her desire for death. However, a close reading of Swinburne’s short poem reveals Phædra’s innermost anxieties and places her in the narrative of the Swinburnian *femme damnée* inspired by *Les Fleurs du Mal* of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Swinburne’s “Phædra” is remarkable in that it also serves as an exceptional representation of Sappho (c. 630 - c. 570 BC) in Victorian England. This paper highlights Swinburne’s aversion towards the Victorian mock-morality, as well as some of his life-long influences. Furthermore, this paper defines Phædra in a new light by considering the classical originals, Sappho’s and Baudelaire’s works, and even a twentieth-century retelling by the Russian poetess Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941).

Keywords: *Algernon Charles Swinburne, Victorian poetry, Sappho, Greek tragedy, Baudelaire, Pre-Raphaelitism, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Victorian mock-morality.*

Introduction

When in 1866 a controversial collection of poems titled *Poems and Ballads* was published by Moxon and almost instantly withdrawn from circulation, the redheaded eccentric poet who had authored the book became the target

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of contemporary critics. None of those who denounced the collection— anonymously or with a name—could have predicted that the collection composed of sixty-two poems would become the young poet's most referenced, researched, and timeless work. While many of the controversial and provocative poems in the collection—"Laus Veneris," "Anactoria," "Dolores," and "Sapphics"—have been in the centre of critics and researcher's attention, a short poem titled "Phædra," incidentally the first retelling of the Greek myth in the nineteenth century after nearly two centuries of neglect, does not seem to have been referenced or studied extensively. To say that the oversight of the poem is regretful would be an understatement; the poem of roughly 190 lines displays several of the major influences and interests which would accompany its author, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), for the rest of his life.

Despite the reputation and fame of the classical myth, and unlike the versions written by Swinburne's predecessors—Euripides, Seneca, Ovid, and Racine—his "Phædra" has not undergone meticulous research up to this day. Though we come across several brief remarks on this short poem, by specialists of Euripides and Seneca, unfortunately and predictably, their observations suffer from limitations; they view Swinburne's retelling solely as aggressive and masochistic. In his *Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz (1951) refers to Phædra as one of Swinburne's "sinister creatures" and one of the "direct forebears of ... [the] harlot of universal experience" (p. 250, p. 263). Critics of Swinburne also tend to disregard Phædra's multidimensional character and cannot see past the initial veil of masochistic desire. She is portrayed as a strong and independent woman, empowered with her willingness to give up her life instead of continuing her existence in the unbearable reality of her unrequited love and family curse. Phædra's passion while acting as her driving force is also the root of her damnation.

Phædra, alongside with other female characters that appear in *Poems and Ballads*, has been "branded" as shameless, indecent, masochistic, and obsessive. It should not be denied that these characteristics are present in Swinburne's verse, but merely on a superficial level. These analyses tend to present the poet's protagonists as one-dimensional characters lacking emotional and psychological depth. To fully comprehend Swinburne's Phædra, the short poem should be observed not only from the point of view of Pre-Raphaelitism, but also in associations with Sappho and Baudelaire;

Sappho acts as Swinburne's inspiration for female empowerment, while Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) serves as the origin of the unique archetype of *femme damnée*, that can often be observed in Swinburne's poetry of the 1860s. Parallels are also drawn with Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) and Marina Tsvetaeva's *Fedra* (1927)—the first remaking of the myth by a female author.

The aim of this paper is to shed a new light on the character of Phædra by comparing Swinburne's delineation of Phædra with how she is portrayed in the classical originals, and then examine how he adapted her in the society of nineteenth-century England. Like his Pre-Raphaelite friends and many of the Victorian poets and artists, Swinburne's work, especially early poems and plays, display the author's revolt and aversion towards the Victorian "false" morality. Phædra, amongst others of the poet's female characters, is not afraid to voice her desire, nor make any attempts to hide her sexuality. This task is accomplished by applying the comparative method to Phædra's character and observing the changes she underwent in the hands of different authors.

Preceding research

Traditionally, researchers have analysed Swinburne's works under the pretext of Pre-Raphaelitism. However, such expositions are unsatisfactory because they treat Swinburne solely as a Pre-Raphaelite poet. While it is an undeniable fact that Swinburne was influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and other Pre-Raphaelite painters, it should also be noted that during the 1860s Swinburne's interests and writing styles underwent a change which distanced him from the techniques and themes often exploited by Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelite poets. The poet himself notices this shift:

Before 1861 my early work had no doubt a savour of the same influences as the earlier works of Morris and Rossetti, — but from the date of "Chastelard" and "Atalanta" onward, I cannot trace in any part of my work ... a trace of any quality that could correctly or even

plausibly be labelled “Pre-Raphaelite” either for praise or for blame. (Lang, letter no. 727)

These differences are quite vivid even in Swinburne’s early, Pre-Raphaelite influenced poems such as “Queen Yseult.” Maxwell writes:

One of the keynotes of the Romantic medievalism that Swinburne took from the poetry and painting of Morris and Rossetti was female grace and beauty, typified by damsels notable for luxuriant—usually golden—hair, pale skin, curved or parted lips, and absorbed or absorbing gaze, a gaze sometimes tantalizing by shut or half-closed eyelids. ... Iseult’s “golden corn-ripe hair” ... clearly owes a debt to Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel” and many of Morris’s fair ladies; yet the obsessive note is Swinburne’s own, as are other identifiable motifs such as the sexual submission of the male to female power... . (2012, p. 241)

In contrast to the treatment of “fallen women” we find in Morris and Rossetti, Swinburne’s sexually assured heroines evince no guilt themselves nor rouse it in their male admirers. (2012, p. 243)

The women Swinburne portrayed throughout his career are drastically different from the “damsel in distress” archetype the reader meets in other Pre-Raphaelite poems and paintings. Swinburnian women borrow their appearances from the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, but the poet takes a step further, and bestows a pinch of aggression and defiance to his heroines.

Researchers have not studied Swinburne’s “Phædra” in much detail, though several studies have carried out investigations of the short poem to varying degrees. Before moving forward, it is important to discuss the analysis presented in these sources.

In *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Euripides*, Rosanna Lauriola, argues, “this Phædra has no sense of shame and, in her masochistic desire for self-annihilation, death appears to her as the fulfilment of love” (2015, p. 462). In *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Senecan Tragedy*, Francesco

Citti, gives a more detailed analysis of the Swinburnian poem. He ascribes puritanist values and ideals to Swinburne's "Phædra." Citti comes to the same conclusion as Lauriola: for Phædra, "passion becomes a destructive impulse, a desire for death viewed as synonymous with eros." (2016, p. 265).

Roland Mayer's analysis attempts to identify the influences that Swinburne bore when writing his "Phædra", and finds them not in Euripides, but rather in Seneca and Racine, since "only in Seneca and Racine did Phædra confront Hippolytus directly ... and only in them does the woman embrace the prospect of death at the hands of the man she loves" (2002, p. 84). Nevertheless, while Mayer manages to identify some of the influences and similarities that Swinburne's poem bares with Seneca and Racine, he too fails to discuss the poem from the perspective of a Victorian poet.

In his "Swinburnian Woman," Antony H. Harrison shows three main types of women the reader can come across throughout the poet's works: the "passionate," the "mythical," and the "matriarchal." Phædra is assigned to the category of "passionate" women who "are all high individualized, and, rather than treating their victims with the indifference of the Lucretian gods, they deeply love the men they kill or threaten. They are helpless thralls of passion which often conflict with their own or their lovers' worldly desires. Such conflicts make these women appear capricious or inconsistent, themselves mere subjects of a presiding and sinister fate" (1979, p. 90).

There are, however, other possible analyses of Swinburne's "Phædra." While these studies are conducted by different researchers, they all seem to agree on one thing: Phædra is seen as a masochistic woman who is obsessed with the subject of her love. This can also be linked to the fact that Swinburne was widely renowned for his masochism, particularly keen interest in self-flagellation. It can be concluded that these studies, despite containing a kernel of truth, have limited views and leave space for further analysis.

Phædra prior to Swinburne

When discussing the Swinburnian *femme damnée*, our interest first and foremost lies with Phædra as she is the perfect example of a condemned

woman that has been passed down to us from the time of Ancient Greek and Romans. Phædra's story closely resembles that of Zuleikha and Joseph (*King James Version*, Genesis 39:5-20). Through the ages, much like Phædra, Zuleikha has also been accused of being a cold-hearted sinner. In a similar manner, Phædra is usually interpreted as a sinner, but some retellings centre on her feelings and great love: Russian poetess Marina Tsvetaeva, however, takes a step further and portrays Phædra as a naïve and pure young woman, and all of the blame is put on the Nurse. In Swinburne's short poem we do not see the nurse, nor encounter the false accusations of rape, but rather experience Phædra's dramatic monologue and get to know her character and desires. In this poem there is no indication of Hippolytus's further actions or death. Swinburne starts his poem half-way into the myth of Phædra. At this point some major events have unravelled and it is obvious from the narrative that Phædra has confessed her love and has been rejected by Hippolytus. By doing so, Swinburne directs his readers' attention and focus to Phædra and her feelings. With the implementation of this technique, he avoids themes that might draw away the readers' concentration, such as the aforementioned false accusations of rape, the news of Theseus's death, as well as Phædra's contemplations on letting Hippolytus know about her feelings.

Phædra's tragedy can be considered a favourite of classical times. Phædra is first mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*, followed by two dramas written by Euripides, *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos* (lit. "Hippolytus Veiled") and *Hippolytus Stephanephoros* (lit. "Hippolytus Crowned"), the first of which is now lost. Modern scholars are inclined to agree that Sophocles also wrote a now-lost drama called *Phaidra* in between Euripides's two plays: "The play seems (as the title suggests) to have been concerned primarily with the character and fate not of Hippolytos but of Phaidra: if so we may assume that she had the virtue necessary for tragic stature" (Barrett, 1964, p. 12). Euripides's Phædra is mainly concerned with her reputation and ability to preserve her image of a good and righteous woman. This is what eventually leads to the false accusations of rape. This version of Phædra is unable to confess her own feelings, and Hippolytus discovers the passions his stepmother harbours towards him through Phædra's nurse.

In addition to Greek poets, Roman poets and dramatists also showed interest in the myth of this tragic love. The next author to take up Phædra's

story was the Roman poet Ovid in *Heroides*, where he presents the story to his readers through epistolary. Ovid's Phædra is more open about her feelings than that of Euripides's. She is able to confess her feelings to Hippolytus, albeit through a written letter. While the contemporary social standards and expectations might not have allowed Phædra to be able to speak her feelings aloud, they did not stop her from writing them down.

The final piece on Phædra written during the classical times, and incidentally the most famous one, is *Phædra* by Seneca the Younger. The greatest contrast that can be seen in Seneca's *Phædra* and the Greek original is the disposition of the young woman's feelings towards her stepson Hippolytus. While Euripides's Phædra is a woman who cannot speak up out of shame and must convey her feelings to her beloved by the means of her nurse, Seneca's Phædra is a self-aware and confident woman, who does not hide her feelings towards Hippolytus. Seneca goes beyond from Ovid's version, and his Phædra is the first to approach Hippolytus directly with her feelings.

Although Phædra's tragedy has been referenced and performed during the Middle Ages, the next notable retelling is by Jean Racine in the seventeenth century. Racine's *Phèdre* is greatly influenced by both Euripides's *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phædra*. However, several innovations are made and none of the characters appear to be fundamentally good or evil: Phædra does not make false accusations of rape here, since she is now a queen who is above such petty lies. Meanwhile, Hippolytus is no longer presented as a chaste and innocent martyr. He also has human characteristics and even falls in love. In this play, just as in Seneca's, Phædra feels guilty because of her feelings, and considers herself a monstrosity. In the end, Phædra commits suicide. In classical versions, the gods are omnipresent; they punish the men and women who do not follow their rules and commandments (e.g. Aphrodite makes Phædra fall in love with her stepson in order to punish Hippolytus, since he worships Artemis, is chaste, and does not want to have any associations with the goddess of love). One of the major and most important improvements implemented by Racine was distancing the gods from the main plot of the story; their shadows may be lurking around, but they do not play a deciding role in the development of the events.

Swinburne's "Phædra": A *Femme Damnée*

Given the language used in the poem, it is not difficult to determine why Swinburne's Phædra has been interpreted as a masochistic and obsessive character, who hopes to find fulfilment in death. Swinburne writes:

*Yea, if mine own blood ran upon my mouth,
I would drink that. Nay, but be swift with me;
Set thy sword here between the girdle and breast,
For I shall grow a poison if I live.*²

However, for Phædra simply dying is not satisfactory. It is apparent from her words that death from being pierced by Hippolytus's sword, which acts as a phallic symbol, would not only fulfil her unrequited love, but bring sexual satisfaction:

*[...] Come, take thy sword and slay;
Let me not starve between desire and death,
But send me on my way with glad wet lips;* (p. 32)

Nonetheless, it appears that the critics of Swinburne neglect the fact that Phædra is a woman madly in love with her stepson. Receiving death at the tip of Hippolytus's sword is in a sense a fulfilment of her unrequited love. This can be observed not only in Swinburne's wording but also prosody:

*x x / x x / x x / x / x /
I am burnt to the bone with love, thou shalt not go,
x x / x x / x / x x / x x /
I am heartsick, and mine eyelids prick mine eyes,
/ x x / x / x / x /
Thou shalt not sleep nor eat nor say a word
x / x / x x / x / x /
Till thou hast slain me. I am not good to live.* (p. 34)

Swinburne stresses words such as "burnt," "heartsick," "prick," "slain," and "live." By reading the fraction of the poem in such a manner, Phædra's

desire for death becomes clearly articulated through her diction. It should, however, be mentioned, that death is not simply a realisation of Phædra's unrequited love: it is a new beginning for her soul. This is a pattern which can be seen in many of Swinburne's poems. One of particular interest is "Faustine," also published in *Poems and Ballads*:

*She loved the games men played with death,
Where death must win;
As though the slain man's blood and breath
Revived Faustine.* (1866, p. 125)

These lines make it apparent that for Swinburne "death" is often equivalent to revival, thus meaning that by dying from a blow by Hippolytus's sword, Phædra's soul will be revived. It can be concluded from Phædra's monologue that her life in a world where she is not loved by Hippolytus is no different from death; it is a torture similar to that of a man who is dying of poison: "Are not my cheeks as grass my body pale, / And my breath like a dying poisoned man's?" (p. 32). Swinburne refers to love as a form of torture not only in "Phædra," but also in the aforementioned "Faustine," a poem which allows many parallels with "Phædra":

*The shameless nameless love that makes
Hell's iron grin
Shut on you like a trap that breaks
The soul, Faustine.* (1866, p. 127)

In both poems love and death are inter-changeable; death is equivalent to rebirth, but the neglect and dismissal of love gives way to strong sensations of pain and torture. This theme can often be observed in Swinburne's poetry of early 1860s:

*If you will slay me be not over quick,
Kill me with some slow heavy kiss that plucks
The heart out at the lips.* (Swinburne, 1926a, p. 29)

In *Chastelard*, the protagonist finds joy in being executed by Mary Stuart and prefers death over a life where he cannot be united with the Scottish queen. The French paramour of Queen Mary also “burns to the bone” with love and it is through death that he wants to unite with his lover.

By making Phædra and her passion the central theme of his poem, Swinburne displays his rejection of Euripides; his disdain and disregard towards the Greek playwright was no secret. Swinburne’s critique of Euripides’s *Hippolytus* in his essay *Contemporaries of Shakespeare*, originally published in 1875, is of particular interest. He writes: “*Phèdre* of Racine is poetically inferior to the *Hippolytus* of Euripides; ... the French playwright’s heroine is more credible and more interesting than the unimaginable atrocity—the murderous mendacity in suicide—of the Greek’s” (1919, p. 201). Nevertheless, the presence of the chorus of Træzenian women can be considered homage to the Greek playwright. While Swinburne’s short poem is written in blank verse, all of the sections that feature the chorus are written in iambic pentameter with rhythmic variations:

x / x / x / x / x /
This is an evil born with all its teeth,
 x / x / / x x / x /
When love is cast out of the bound of love. (p. 34)

Considering Swinburne’s fascination with Ancient Greece, the short poem can be read as a tribute to Greek tragedy; Kenneth Haynes, in his edition of *Poems and Ballads*, has noted that it is “an imitation of ... the use of stichomythia (one- or two-line exchanges between characters) and the oblique naming of a divinity are characteristic of Greek tragedy” (Swinburne, 2000, pp. 328-29).

For Euripides’s Phædra shame is the greatest accelerating power. Shame is what does not allow the Greek playwright’s heroine to confess her feelings to Hippolytus. Shame is what forces her to produce the false accusations of rape in order to protect her image of a “good woman.” Unlike this Phædra, Swinburne’s heroine is not bound by social standards and the prospect of shame. Both Hippolytus and the Chorus accuse her of

shamelessness, but Phædra defends herself by pointing out her relations to the gods and her hybrid nature:

CHORUS.

*Lady, this speech and majesty are twain;
Pure shame is of one counsel with the gods.*

HIPPOLYTUS.

Man is as beast when shame stands off from him.

PHÆDRA.

Man, what have I to do with shame or thee?

I am not of one counsel with the gods.

I am their kin, I have strange blood in me,

I am not of their likeness nor of thine. (p. 33)

This scene subtly, yet persistently, echoes Ovid's own Phædra, who "not only turns the 'unspeakable' into 'writable,' but she also converts the *nefas* ("illicit") into *fas* ("licit"), thus championing a new, updated morality" (Lauriola, 2015, p. 452). This Phædra also refers to the gods in order to justify her feelings, as well as to present the shameful and incestuous relationship she has in mind as "legitimate." While in Swinburne's poem there is no great stress on the incestuous nature of the relationship, the idea is introduced through Phædra's voice, "Thou art my son, I am thy father's wife, / I ache toward thee with a bridal blood" (p. 34). This very subtle, almost unnoticeable reference to incest in Swinburne's poem displays the poet's desire to distance the already well-known themes of Phædra's story. By doing so, he manages to recentre the readers' attention on the feelings of the characters rather than on their background.

In the 1860s, when young Swinburne published some of his most controversial verse, he was greatly influenced by Charles Baudelaire. Anne Walder attempts to identify the French poet's substantial influences on Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* and concludes that the short poem "Phædra" does "not show any similarities with *Les Fleurs du Mal*" (1976, p. 69). The second reason for leaving out "Phædra" from her analysis seems to be the Greek origins of the myth. Walder's claim can be dismissed with a close reading of the poem; Swinburne's Phædra pertains to the Baudelairean *femme damnée*. In *Les Fleur du Mal*, a certain poem titled "Femme

damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte” stands out. The poem portrays Hippolyte as a lesbian, with a connection to the island Lesbos, the homeland to Sappho. According to Jonathan Culler, “Baudelaire imagines lesbians as the most compelling embodiments of lust and desire ... provoked by something intangible and intensified by the very impossibility of fulfilment” (Baudelaire, 2008, p. xv). The archetype of *femme damnée* can be further explored through reading the poem; the last stanzas seem to perfectly convey the damnation of the women who fall under this category:

*Jamais un rayon frais n'éclaira vos cavernes;
Par les fentes des murs des miasmes fiévreux
Filtrent en s'enflammant ainsi que des lanternes
Et pénètrent vos corps de leurs parfums affreux.*

*L'âpre stérilité de votre jouissance
Altère votre soif et roidit votre peau,
Et le vent furibond de la concupiscence
Fait claquer votre chair ainsi qu'un vieux drapeau.*

(Baudelaire, 2008, pp. 244)³

Culler explains that the Baudelairean condemned women “suffer[s] the condemnation of men and God and, more than that, the lacerations of passion itself. Their island, Lesbos, is a land of exotic, often masochistic sensuality ... they refuse to accept what is permitted but seek the unknown, ... are imagined as ineluctably damned” (Baudelaire, 2008, p. xiv). Swinburne’s Phædra fully realises and does not hesitate to voice her damnation. “Phædra is tainted by her family blood and would appear to revel in her family misfortune which drives her towards a violent and untimely death,” writes Lene Østermark-Johansen (2014, p. 50). In Swinburne’s verse, the heroine indeed refers to her cursed bloodline in her monologue referencing Pasiphae’s perverse relationship with the bull:

*For like my mother am I stung and slain,
And round my cheeks have such red malady
And on my lips such fire and foam as hers.*

...

*She hath sown pain and plague in all our house,
Love loathed of love, and mates unmatched,
Wild wedlock, and the lusts that bleat or low,
And marriage-fodder snuffed about of kine. (pp. 37-38)*

Pasiphae's sexual desire for the bull, its manifestation as a family curse, is often mentioned by different writers. As Simon Critchley (2004) has correctly observed, in Racine's tragedy the central issue is "the naming of the monstrous, monstrous desire that produced the Minotaur, the monster that Theseus killed, the desire for his virginal son that now courses through Phædra's body" (p. 19).⁴

Curious as it may be, we see the influences of Baudelaire's aforementioned poem in Swinburne's "Phædra." Swinburne subtly echoes Baudelaire by making the Amazon Hippolyta Hippolytus's mother, and not Antiope, like in Racine's version.⁵ His heroine does not simply reference the mother of the man she loves, but also expresses her sexual desire towards Hippolyta; the Amazon Queen is likened to the "sword," which in Swinburne's verse often manifests itself as a phallic symbol:

*A sword was nurse of thine; Hippolyta,
That had the spear to father, and the axe
To bridesman, and wet blood of sword-slain men
For wedding-water out of noble well,
Even she did bear thee, thinking of a sword,
And thou wast made a man mistakenly. (pp. 33-34)*

It is because of the desire to be killed by Hippolytus that Swinburne's Phædra is regarded as a masochistic woman by his critics—a simplification of the emotions the heroine experiences. It is worth noting that Swinburne's inspiration for such a turn of events is most likely Seneca, and possibly Racine, despite the English poet's evident contempt for the French playwright. Mayor elaborates:

*Only in Seneca and Racine did Phaedra confront
Hippolytus directly (and Swinburne was well acquainted
with both classical and French literature), and only in*

them does the woman embrace the prospect of death at the hands of the man she loves. It was that which appealed to the deliquescent eroticism of Swinburne, who spins out Phaedra's plea for some pages ... Swinburne's heroine insists that [Hippolytus] draw his sword to kill her (Racine's revision of Seneca). He refuses and flees, leaving Phaedra to her own thoughts. She is depicted in Senecan colours. (2002, p. 84)

Phaedra's confrontation is a crucial change that had been introduced to the story by Seneca. It shows the greatness of the woman's love for her stepson, displays her willingness to defy the norms of her time, and her ability to transcend *shame* which is central and crucial to Euripides's story.

In Harrison's analysis we see Swinburne's heroine categorised into the archetype of *femme fatale*, (1979, p. 90) which can be explained by examining Racine's Phædra, a traditional and perfectly executed fatal woman. The French playwright's Phædra's passion turns her into a powerful force of nature which eventually destroys both her and her beloved. The model of the fatal woman can often be observed in D. G. Rossetti's poetry and painting. His *Lady Lilith*, its accompanying sonnet "Body's Beauty" (incidentally, first published in Swinburne's pamphlet-review "Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition" in 1868), and Goethe's passage on the character, which in Rossetti's translation is often used as an epigraph for the painting, are the epitome of the Pre-Raphaelite *femme fatale*:

*Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (2003, p. 162)*

*Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair,
If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee;
For, when she nets a young man in that snare,
So twines she him he never may be free. (2003, p. 304)*

Rossetti's Lilith is powerful. In her *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex*, Ussher writes:

Lady Lilith stands as a classic example of the artistic representation of this passionate, fearful woman. ... She is sexual, dangerously seductive, and does not give the appearance of an acquiescent femininity which will be easily satisfied. ... Fear of and desire for “woman” is incarnated in one painting. She is both sexual and selfish, gazing upon herself with satisfaction, symbolising her rejection of “man.” (1997, p. 96)

Praz argues that the typical Pre-Raphaelite *femme fatale* bears many similarities to the Keatsian *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (Praz, 1951, p. 201). Indeed, such influences can be observed in Swinburne’s verse, e.g. “*Laus Veneris*,” but not in “*Phædra*.” Phædra yearns for self-destruction; her desire for death acts as a fuel for her love, while Lilith, as can be seen from both of the passages quoted above, preys and thrives on men, who are merely puppets for her to toy with.

The theme of the family curse is also present in Russian poetess Marina Tsvetaeva’s *Fedra*. However, unlike Racine and Swinburne, the one who speaks of the relationship between Pasiphae and the bull is not Phædra, but her nurse:

*Издали, издавна поведу:
Горькие женичины в вашем роду, —
Так и слава вам будет в будущем!
Пасифая любила чудище.
Разонравился царь, мил зверь.
Дщерь ты ей иль не дщерь?
Материнская зла кровиночка! (1994, pp. 647)⁶*

The similarities regarding Phædra’s origins which are observed in Racine, Swinburne and Tsvetaeva do not end here. Helios, the god of sun and Phædra’s grandfather, is an omnipresent entity in Racine’s play. Phædra fears him, she feels his constant presence; she also often turns to him in her monologues. Swinburne and Tsvetaeva do not put a great stress on his presence, but they both reference him in their works, incidentally, by making the connection with Phædra’s name:

*Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture.
 Mes homicides mains promptes à me venger,
 Dans le sang innocent brûlent de se plonger.
 Misérable ! Et je vis ? Et je soutiens la vue
 De ce sacré soleil dont je suis descendue ?
 J'ai pour aïeul le père et le maître des dieux.
 Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux.
 Où me cacher ? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.
 (Racine, 1950, ll. 1270-1277)⁷*

*See thou spare not for greatness of my blood,
 Nor for the shining letters of my name.
 ...
 For the bright writing of my name is black,
 And I am sick with hating the sweet sun.
 (Swinburne, pp. 32-33, emphasis mine)*

*Вижу ль?
 Веки — зноем...
 Федрой — звали... (Tsvetaeva, 1994, pp. 660)⁸*

Mentioning Pasiphae and Helios allows the readers to make connections with the well-known fragments of the myth for a better understanding and interpretation of Phædra's inner thoughts and fears.

Swinburne and Tsvetaeva's heroines have many similarities, but the most important one is their yearning to be loved. Phædra, in the works of these two authors, unlike their predecessors, has no desire to slander, has no motives to yearn for power. In these works, she does not need to clear her name and fight the shame of loving her stepson. These two authors have captured solely her thirst for love, and in their works Phædra does not die because she has been tarnished, but because her love has been rejected. In both of these works, Phædra implies that she will commit suicide, but in both of them we do not get to see her in action (in Tsvetaeva's version the reader does get to see the aftermath of Phædra's death, while Swinburne's poem ends abruptly):

*I set my curse against him as sword;
 Yea, and the severed half thereof I leave
 Pittheus, because he slew not (when that face
 Was tender, and the life still soft in it)
 The small swathed child, but bred him for my fate.
 I would I had been the first that took her death
 Out from between wet hoofs and reddened teeth,
 Splashed horns, fierce fetlocks of the brother bull!
 For now shall I take death a deadlier way,
 Gathering it up between the feet of love
 Or off the knees of murder reaching it. (Swinburne, pp. 38-39)*

*О другом, о непробудном
 Сне — уж постлано, где лечь нам —
 Грежу, не ночном, а вечном,
 Нескончаемом, — пусть плачут! —
 Где ни пасынков, ни мачех,
 Ни грехов, живущих в детях,
 Ни мужей седых, ни третьих
 Жен... (Tsvetaeva, 1994, p. 671)⁹*

As can be observed in Tsveateva's poem, her Phædra will not simply be satisfied with suicide, but she demands of Hippolytus to commit a double suicide to start a new life. The concept of afterlife is not new at this point though, it has been heavily hinted on in Racine's play, as well as suggested in Swinburne's poem as already discussed above.

Afterthoughts

Swinburne was not the only Victorian to make omissions to his poems for the sake of re-centring the focus of his readers. This technique can also be observed in the poems of the Brownings. Robert Browning was famous for his dramatic monologues. His "My Last Duchess" (1842) tells the story of the Duke who killed his wife out of jealousy. The poem starts long after the death of the Duchess, and the events are from the Duke's perspective. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Musical Instrument" (1862), one of the

last poems published during her lifetime, while not a dramatic monologue, tells the story of the god Pan and how he turns a reed into a flute. However, she too, omitted the first half of the story—Pan’s pursuit of the nymph who refused his love and was eventually turned into a reed. Thus, Barrett Browning centres the reader’s focus on the destructions that Pan brings forth in his attempts to create the flute. Alfred Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (1842), another highly regarded dramatic monologue from the Victorian Era, also neglects the former adventures and glorious days of young Ulysses. Instead it tells the story of the mythical hero in his later years, who has already returned to Ithaca and grown old with his wife and raised a son. The last example of the exploitation of this technique is William Morris’s “Defence of Guenevere” (1858). The story omits the details of the adulterous relationship between Guenevere and Lancelot, and instead is centred on her trial, where the proud queen makes a speech in her defence.

An epic/heroic setting is chosen for these poems, but all of them centre on the characters’ contemplations of their feelings and inner thoughts. The significance of the historical/mythical setting of the poems withdraws to a secondary position. Nevertheless, the setting is there to provide background information, and motives for the characters’ actions. Epic/heroic stories had a certain form that is distinguished from lyrical poetry—iambic pentameter its universally accepted metric feet. In the nineteenth century, a change can be observed in general writing style of poetry; while lyric verse was the prevalent form used by female poetesses, it starts being utilised by male authors as well. The storytelling in itself, particularly in the hands of the Brownings, underwent alterations that led to the lyricisation of the narrative. Traditionally epic and lyric poetry have been considered masculine and feminine respectively, their origins attributed to Homer and Sappho. It is not surprising to see such drastic contrast between these two genres of poetry: the authors of these genres have been heavily divided into males and females respectively, until about mid-nineteenth century.

Topics which were quite unacceptable for their times are at the core of the poems that disrupted the tranquillity of nineteenth-century literary scene, and the poets were frequently criticised: murder, incest, betrayal, adultery, fixation, and struggle are often portrayed, and for many Victorians such open discussion of the taboo subjects usually came as shock. When Robert Browning’s *Pauline: A Fragment of Confession* first came to print in 1833 it

caused quite an uproar in the readership, and while there were also some positive responses, many critics considered the author of this piece to be a “madman” (Adams, 2009, p. 45).

In a similar manner, Swinburne was also criticised for his poetry throughout his life. In his *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866) in defence of his *Poems and Ballads* he writes:

It is by no wish of my own that I accept the task now proposed to me. To vindicate or defend myself from the assault or the charge of men whom, but for their attacks, I might never have heard of, is an office which I, or any writer who respects his work, cannot without reluctance stoop to undertake ... Certain poems of mine, it appears, have been impugned by judges, with or without a name, as indecent or as blasphemous. (1926b, Notes, pp. 354-5)

Swinburne goes on to discuss his adoration of Sappho and her great influences on his poetry: “I have striven to cast my spirit into the mould of hers, to express and represent not the poem but the poet ... I have rendered into English the very words of Sappho.” Such remarks lie at the bottom of the fusion of lyric and epic poetry, since Swinburne, a male author, admits to imitating Sappho’s poetry. Swinburne continues, “a writer as impure as my critics might of course have written, on this or on any subject, an impure poem; I have not. And if to translate or paraphrase Sappho be an offence, indict the heavier offenders who have handled and rehandled this matter in their wretched versions of the ode” (Swinburne, 1926, Notes, p. 359, p. 360).

The short poem written by the English poet does not only bear semblances to Sappho’s language and style, but also displays an interesting pattern common to the times of the Greek poetess: according to Rayor “Ancient Greece was a segregated society, in which women publicly worshipped the female gods in particular. They were encouraged to see their own lives reflected in these deities’ different manifestations: a Greek woman’s life could be described as a transition from the state of Artemis (*parthenos*, or girl) to Aphrodite (*numphê*, or marriageable young woman) to Hera (*gunê*, or wife) and Demeter (*mêtêr*, or mother). Sappho composed

songs for performances at festivals of all these goddesses” (Rayor & Lardinois, 2014, p. 9). Swinburne’s Phædra, though not in the exact order as seen above, goes through all of these transformations: when talking of herself, she first introduces the girl/daughter: “For I am Cretan of my birth: ... / I am born daughter to Pasiphae” (p. 32). Then in a span of three lines we see her jump from one of these states to another: “Thou art my son, I am thy father’s wife. / I ache toward thee with a bridal blood, / The pulse is heavy in all my married veins” (p. 34). The order of the progression of a Greek woman is twisted in Swinburne’s verse, but he reveals Phædra the mother, the wife and the marriageable young woman. After the escalation of this intense transformation, Phædra reverts to the girl yet again: “I pray thee by thy cold green holy crown / And by the fillet-leaves of Artemis” (p. 35). Though we get to see all four forms of a woman manifest themselves in Phædra, *numphê* — Aphrodite — is the one who prevails throughout the poem. The goddess of love is the very cause of Phædra’s malaise, her curse flowing through Phædra’s veins mixed with that of her family, making her “ache” and “burn to the [very] bone” with love towards Hippolytus.

The Victorians saw Swinburne as the best representor of Sappho. As an anonymous reviewer wrote in *Athenaeum* of 1889, “no bard of the present age has a genius more akin to hers, more passionate and fiery than Mr. Swinburne” (“Review of Long Ago, Michael Field,” p. 56). However, it was also because of his semblances to Sappho, that Swinburne was often “torn apart” by the critics of the time. One of the avid critics of Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites, Robert Buchanan calls Swinburne a “sexless maniac” (Hyder, 1870, p. 30) and even goes on to write that the poet is “an intellectual hermaphrodite” (Buchanan, 1871, p. 335). According to Yopie Prins, “the Victorian critical establishment ... interprets Swinburne’s transgressive language as a transgression of gender” (Prins, 1999, p. 158).

Lesbianism, damnation, Sappho, and the island of Lesbos are very common themes in Swinburne’s poetry; their presence not only displays Swinburne’s fascination with both Sappho and Baudelaire, but also the inspirations he found in their works. It should not be surprising to see Swinburne talk of Baudelaire with words that would be assigned to the English poet in the near future:

... [I]t seems merely natural to him always to use the right word and the right rhyme. How supremely musical and flexible a perfect artist in writing can make the French language, any chance page of the book is enough to prove; every description, the slightest and shortest even, has a special mark on it of the writer's keen and peculiar power. The style is sensuous and weighty; the sights seen are steeped most often in sad light and sullen colour. (Swinburne, 1862, p. 999)

While the story of Phædra is essentially the same in the works of all the authors mentioned in this paper, Swinburne is the first one to not make the central theme of his poem *sin*. Swinburne (and later also Tsvetaeva) centres on the woman and her feelings. He writes of passion and a woman's freedom to express it. His verse was often considered as immoral since it did not fit the Victorian standards of false morality; he did not simply write of feelings and sensations that his women characters experienced but enabled them with the ability to understand and voice their sexuality: a female character like this was a direct offensive against the publicly revered archetype of the *angel in the house*. Phædra's pain and suffering are self-inflicted but bear an emotional nature rather than physical. Her plea is sensual and passionate, direct, and powerful. While in Swinburne's version Hippolytus is weak, indecisive, and prone to escaping, Phædra is strong, resolute, and almost stubborn in her desire to be slain by Hippolytus. The Victorians' shock at such reversal of gender roles is not surprising. A woman's capacity to feel and express her sexuality was atrocious since it challenged the long-established masculine authority. Victorian England was not a forgiving society for those who ventured to disturb its "tranquillity," and Swinburne created with this exact intent in mind.

Notes

- ¹ For the sake of consistency, with the exception of titles and quotations, Swinburne's spelling of "Phædra" is used throughout the paper. Accordingly, all of the other character names are also spelled as seen in Swinburne's poem.

² Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Phædra” in *Poems and Ballads*, First Series. All quotations of “Phædra” are taken from *Poems and Ballads* (Moxon, 1866). Hereafter all citations are to this edition and will appear in text by page number. The present quotation is found on p. 32.

³ Never a freshening ray will shine within your caves;
Through cracks along the wall will filter deadly mists
That cast a lantern’s glow of pale and dismal flame
And penetrate your bodies with perfumes of death.
The harsh sterility of all your acts of lust
Will bring a dreadful thirst and stiffen out your skin,
And your concupiscence become a furious wind
To snap your feeble flesh like an old, weathered flag. (Baudelaire 245)

⁴ See Critchley’s essay for a detailed and vivid analysis of Jean Racine’s *Phèdre* and its influences.

⁵ While there is no explicit reference to the Amazons in Baudelaire’s poem, it is a twisted representation of Amazon Hippolyta and her son Hippolyte. Pierre Laforgue writes: “Le lieu de cette problématisation est la personne d’Hippolyte, et plus exactement le nom d’Hippolyte. «Hippolyte» en fait, car c’est tout à la fois en tant que signifiant et en tant que référent qu’est à appréhender Hippolyte dans le texte de Baudelaire. Dans la personne et dans le nom d’Hippolyte, en effet, se rencontrent, sans qu’une résolution leur soit trouvée, toutes sortes de tensions, principalement entre masculin et féminin, et secondairement entre virilité et féminité, et, enfin, plus secrètement, entre virilité et masculinité. Hippolyte avec des guillemets, «Hippolyte», renvoie à un double référent: fils de Thésée et fils de l’Amazone, d’une part; reine des Amazones elle-même, d’autre part” (275).

⁶ I’ll tell of faraway long-ago:
hapless women of your family’s line –
this will be said of you in the future!
Pasiphaë desired a monster,
turned from king, loved a wild beast.
Are you her daughter, or are you not?
Bad, the blood of your dear mother! (Tsvetaeva, 2012, p. 50)

⁷ Wretch! And I live and can endure the gaze
Of the most sacred sun from which I spring.

My grandsire is the lord of all the gods;
 My forebears fill the sky, the universe.
 Where can I hide? In dark infernal night? (Racine, 1958, ll. 1273-1277)

8 But do I see him?
 Sultry eyelids. My name means ‘shining’. (Tsvetaeva, 2012, p. 65)

9 No, I’m dreaming of different
 sleep – of one we’ll never wake from –
 the bed is spread for us already –
 not a night’s sleep – sleep eternal,
 where no stepsons are, no stepmothers,
 where no sins live on in children,
 no grey-bearded husbands, no third
 wives... (Tsvetaeva, 2012, p. 78)

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**«ՄԻՆՉԵՎ ՈՍԿՈՐԸ ԱՅՐՎԱԾ» ՄԻՐՈՎ, ՄԵՂՔՈՎ ԵՎ
ԴՍԱՊԱՐՏՎԱԾՈՒԹՅԱՄԲ. ՄՎԻՆԲԵՐՆՅԱՆ
ՖԵՂԴԱՆ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԴՍԱՊԱՐՏՎԱԾ ԿԻՆ**

Լիլիթ Այվազյան

Գրեթե երկու դար հին հունական դիցաբանական Ֆեդրայի կերպարի պատումը դուրս էր մնացել գրական ստեղծագործություններից, և միայն Ալջերնոն Չարլզ Սվինբերնն էր, որ XIX դարի իր պոեմում նրա կերպարին նոր շունչ հաղորդեց: Պոեմը հրատարակվել է 1866 թ. Սվինբերնի «Poems and Ballads» պոեմների ժողովածուում: Ֆեդրային, ինչպես նաև պոետի այլ կին կերպարներին, վերլուծաբաններն ու քննադատները բնութագրել են անամոթ, անբարո, մազոխիստ և մոլուցքային հատկանիշներով: Նախորդ ուսումնասիրությունները սվինբերնյան Ֆեդրայի կերպարը դիտարկում են միայն մեկ տեսանկյունից՝ նա համարվում է զգացմունքային և հոգեբանական խորություն չունեցող կին: Մակայն այս կերպարը համակողմանիորեն բացահայտելու համար անհրաժեշտ է հաշվի առնել ինչպես Սվինբերնի կապերը նախառաֆայելականների հետ, այնպես էլ՝ Սաֆոյի և Բողլերի ազդեցությունները նրա գրական ստեղծագործություններում:

Սույն ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է նոր լույսի ներքո վերլուծել սվինբերնյան Ֆեդրային, վեր հանել նրա կերպարի կերտման տարբերությունները դասական շրջանի գործերից և ցույց

տալ է, թե այս կերպարը ինչպես է հարմարեցվել ու մատուցվել Վիկտորիանական Բրիտանիայի ընթերցողին:

Բանալի բառեր. Ալջերնոն Չարլզ Սվինբերն, վիկտորիանական պոեզիա, Սաֆո, հունական ողբերգություն, Բողլեր, Դանթե Գարրիել Դոսսետի, վիկտորիանական կեղծ բարեպաշտություն: