

# Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*: prosody as sublimation in Victorian 'Greek' tragedy

Orla Polten\*

*Algernon Charles Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon (1865) is the finest example of Victorian 'Greek' tragedy, a genre of English poetry inspired by the forms, contents, and styles of Attic tragedy. For George Saintsbury, Swinburne's play represented a 'renouveau of English prosody': drawing on the metres and rhythms of Ancient Greek, Atalanta opened new phenomenological possibilities for the English language. Swinburne's fall from critical favour in the early twentieth century has meant the play's neglect, despite its crucial importance to the history of classical reception in English verse. This article reads Atalanta in Calydon through Greek prosody. Drawing on contemporary reviews, letters, and manuscript material, the article argues that Atalanta's prosody works through sublimation: that is, transforming desire for unattainable objects (principally 'the classical') into the desire for artistic creation. Aesthetic accomplishment serves to relieve the pain of living in Swinburne's tragic universe.*

## Swinburne's classical pasts

*Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), the first and greatest 'Greek' tragedy in English of Algernon Charles Swinburne, is one of the lost futures of English verse. In its portentous moods, emotional violence, and above all its metrical range and virtuosity, the play recalls the sensations of Attic drama. Approaching the text through phenomenology — that is, the study of subjective experience of sense-perception — we can enter a netherworld between dead Greek and living English.

George Saintsbury saw *Atalanta* open a new realm of phenomenological possibility in English verse: what he called the 'renouveau of English prosody' (1923: 335).<sup>1</sup> In a harsher mode, T. S. Eliot in 'Swinburne as Poet' feels the language of *Atalanta* haunting us in a Hellenistic unconscious: 'it is effective because it appears

\*St John's College, Cambridge, CB2 1TP. [olp21@cam.ac.uk](mailto:olp21@cam.ac.uk) This research was made possible by an AHRC postgraduate studentship award. This article was first developed for a panel titled 'Subtle Thieves of Age(s): Poetic Appropriations', co-organised by myself and Dr Laura Kilbride for the 2015 BAVS conference. I would like to thank Dr Kilbride for sharing chapters of her unpublished PhD dissertation with me, whose meticulous analysis of Swinburne's style served as one of the key inspirations for my work.

1 Saintsbury (1923: 335).

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to be a tremendous statement, like statements made in our dreams' (1920: 135). Eliot quotes as evidence the first stanza of *Atalanta's* second choral ode, more famous today than the play itself:

Before the beginning of years  
 There came to the making of man  
 Time, with a gift of tears;  
 Grief, with a glass that ran;  
 Pleasure, with pain for leaven;  
 Summer, with flowers that fell;  
 Remembrance fallen from heaven,  
 And madness risen from hell;  
 Strength without hands to smite;  
 Love that endures for a breath:  
 Night, the shadow of light,  
 And life, the shadow of death.<sup>2</sup>

The chorus brings the past tense ('there came') into the present ('Love that endures') as the voices travel to a primordial time before the invention of timekeeping ('Before the beginning of years'). Being alive, the chorus tells us, is tragic, because the essence of every experience can only be found in hindsight, after its moment of loss. Summer, the chorus tells us, would not exist without the 'flowers that fell', nor pleasure without 'pain for leaven'; and the capacity for 'Remembrance' that lets people recount their own histories can also drive them insane, a 'madness risen from hell'. Rhyme — the most unclassical of Swinburne's prosodic devices — drives this sensation of temporal dislocation. When we rhyme, we use one word to evoke the memory of a previous one, establishing sonic parallels where semantic correspondences did not necessarily exist.<sup>3</sup> The internal rhymes in the lines 'Night, the shadow of light,/And life, the shadow of death' make us recall words like 'Time', 'Grief', and 'gift' not as we first experienced them, but as internal rhymes and half-rhymes. Many of the rhymes in the chorus, such as 'breath'/'death', 'night'/'light', and later 'fire'/'desire' (ll. 354–356), are among the most frequently used rhymes in Swinburne's work, and among the oldest and most common rhymes in English, already popular to the point of cliché by the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The metre of Swinburne's chorus has a rising triple rhythm with four beats per line (the final beat unrealized), a form closely related to the four-beat quatrain, which of all rhythmic forms in English contains the strongest sense of

2 Swinburne (2004: ll. 314–324). All further references to *Atalanta in Calydon* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

3 Brogan et al. (2013: 1184–189). See also the reading of rhyme in *Tristram of Lyonesse* in Jarvis (2013: 525–26)

4 All three rhyming pairs appear within the first two *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer (2005), 'The Knight's Tale', ll. 2943–2944; *ibid.*, 'The Miller's Tale', ll. 3671–3672. Swinburne uses the 'breath'/'death' rhyme in no fewer than 157 poems (cf. keyword search for 'breath' and 'death' in *The Algernon Charles Swinburne Archive*).

beats organized into a complete whole.<sup>5</sup> The rhyme and metre give the passage an irresistible catchiness, demonstrated by its many musical settings over the years.<sup>6</sup> Swinburne's prosody transmutes the horror of the chorus' paraphrasable meaning into something palatable, its contradictions pleasurable: 'wrought with weeping and laughter,/And fashioned with loathing and love' (ll. 334-335). The form gives the passage a wry and uncanny quality: that class of the weird or unsettling which leads back, as Freud says, 'to what is known of old and long familiar' (1955b: 221). 'When we wake up', Eliot writes, 'we find that the "glass that ran" would do better for time than for grief, and that the gift of tears would be as appropriately bestowed by grief as by time' (1920: 135). But this is, of course, the point: in this post-classical tragedy, the time is out of joint. With the advent of *vers libre* in the early twentieth century, *Atalanta* had come to be seen as a dead end for English prosody — what might have come to pass if what Leo Strauss called one of the 'waves of modernity' (1989: 81-9) had not cast the English metrical tradition in its shadow.<sup>7</sup>

*Atalanta in Calydon*, like Swinburne's later tragedy *Erechtheus* (1876), draws its plot from the remnants of a lost play by Euripides — in *Atalanta's* case, the *Meleager* fragment (Swinburne 1904: 235).<sup>8</sup> Writing to his friend Lady Trevelyan shortly preceding *Atalanta's* publication, Swinburne describes the play's origins in the conflicted emotions surrounding the death and funeral of his sister Edith Swinburne in September 1863, and the death of his friend and idol, the elder poet Walter Savage Landor, twelve months later.<sup>9</sup> The poem is dedicated to Landor, 'with equal affection, reverence, and regret' that he could not read the finished poem (Swinburne 1904: 237). At the centre of his memorial for Landor lies the desire to reawaken through verse a lost mode of existence, the sense of being 'pure Greek':

In spite of the funereal circumstances which I suspect have a little deepened the natural colours of Greek fatalism here and there, so as to have already incurred a charge of 'rebellious antagonism' and such like things, I never enjoyed anything more in my life than the composition of this poem [...] I think it is pure Greek, and the first poem of the sort in modern times.<sup>10</sup>

To say a poem is 'pure Greek' in 1866 is not to make a claim about the poem's relationship with historical scholarship, but rather to claim pride of place in a

5 Attridge (1982: 84-87); Kilbride (2016: 78).

6 See, for example, Granville Bantock (1911), '*Four Choral Odes from Atalanta in Calydon*'; and Ed Sanders (1965), 'The Swinburne Stomp', a percussive rendition by the rock band The Fugs, which opens 'In the key of metaphysical distress' over a setting of kazoos and bongo drums and ends with nervous laughter. Intriguingly, Aleister Crowley included a musical setting of 'Before the beginning of years' in his *Rites of Eleusis*, although the musical setting has been lost. Crowley (1990).

7 Strauss (1989: 81-9).

8 Swinburne (1904a: 235).

9 Kilbride (2016: 52-53).

10 Swinburne and Lang (1959: 114-115).

distinctively Victorian aesthetic of form.<sup>11</sup> As recent scholarship has demonstrated, metrical experimentation and debate played central roles in English verse cultures of the mid- to late-nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> These cultures often relied on notions of aesthetic hierarchy to legitimate claims about a poem's success or failure.<sup>13</sup> As in other areas of Victorian culture, Greek verse represented for many the summit of achievement in poetic form.<sup>14</sup>

From where springs this sensation Swinburne names the 'pure Greek'? And how can we begin to describe it? Critics have turned to the language of sensual perception to describe the Hellenistic forms of *Atalanta*. We may perceive the Greekness in Swinburne's verse not just through our ears, but also through our eyes, our skin, our limbs. Saintsbury describes *Atalanta*'s prosody through the metaphor of a dance:

In the *Atalanta* choruses [. . .] [the quality of speed] was the speed not merely of the runner but of the dancer; a motion miraculously combining the undulation and gyration, which usually require somewhat slow progression, with the utmost rapidity, yet never making slip or slur (1923: 335).

To feel Swinburne's prosody as a dance, Saintsbury in this moment must — like Simon Jarvis today — understand prosody as a type of cognitive experience that transcends language.<sup>15</sup> Saintsbury imagines Swinburne's verse inhabiting a body which undulates and gyrates to the music of its own mind: his verse moves from the mode of the speaker, in which it 'never [makes] slip or slur', to the mode of the dancer whose miraculous motion is both rapid and stately. This tendency to describe the verse of *Atalanta in Calydon* through metaphors of physical sensation is not unique to Saintsbury. In a superb misuse of 'literal', one reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* writes that the choral songs of *Atalanta* 'literally bubble over with melody' (1865: 622–23), and for a reviewer in the *Examiner* 'the very flavour of Hymettus' hangs around the choruses (1865: 440–41).

At the centre of the phenomenological response to *Atalanta* lies a peculiar affective experience, a sense that the verse itself is haunted by a language of antiquity that is not entirely its own.<sup>16</sup> *The Saturday Review* of May 1865 observes that 'The scholar [reading *Atalanta*] is struck, every few lines, by some phrase which he can fancy a

11 Compare, for example, the formal aesthetics of the British Museum in Jenkins (1992).

Contrast Kilbride (2016: 45–101), who argues against the idea that *Atalanta* is a truly 'Greek' play.

12 Phelan (2012); Martin (2012).

13 Martin (2012: 10).

14 For comparison, see DeLaura (1969), Dowling (1994), Orrells (2011).

15 Jarvis (1998: 3–15); (2005: 57–71); (2014: 100–01).

16 For contemporary reviews sensing the Hellenistic quality of *Atalanta*'s sound, see *The Athenaeum* (1865: 450–51); *John Bull* (1865: 353); *The Reader* (1865: 447–48). *The Fortnightly Review* less generously calls *Atalanta* 'Another Periclean drama in the dialect of the Thames' (1865: 75–80).

direct translation from the Greek [...] The matter, although not really Greek in its essence, is thrown with great cleverness into a mould which almost beguiles us into forgetting the author, and imagining that we are listening to one of the contemporaries of Euripides who sought to copy the manner of Aeschylus' (Hyder 1970: 10). For this reviewer, the sound of the ancient and the modern ultimately fail to blend together because of the vast differences in the manner of thinking between then and now:

[...] the moment we cease to be passive, and endeavour either to imagine what a Greek would have said on a given subject, or, taking our own thoughts upon it, to throw them into the form which they would have assumed under his hands, we feel that it is not merely in form, or even in our actual notions and beliefs, that we are unlike him, but rather in the habit and method of our minds (Hyder 1970: 10).<sup>17</sup>

The reviewer specifies that the difference between the 'classical' and the 'modern' mind is not merely in form and content of thought, but most importantly thought's 'habit and method': the social context of classical thought in dialogue with itself, in a native environment where classical thought converses with the living voices of its present. It is impossible, above all, to recreate what Pierre Bourdieu would call the '*habitus*' of classical verse, a set of dispositions existing at the level of social patterning which defy articulation, in which practitioners of a particular social field can engage in inarticulate dialogue with one another.<sup>18</sup> Swinburne's reviewer here locates a dialectical resonance as the last and most important aspect of classical verse, impossible to recreate in the present.

However, by submersing ourselves in Swinburne's own reading of classical verse, we may be able to recover the dialectical resonance of Swinburne's 'Greek' tragedy and the classical tradition, the very resonance the reviewer of 1865 considers forever lost. We may begin to hear what another reviewer of 1904, re-reading Swinburne, identifies as the difficult sense of the present in the poet, Swinburne's 'complex modernity':

To hear again the rhythm of "A Nympholept", with its essential paganism coloured by a mind alive to our more complex modernity, is to recapture something of the glow that lights the first glimpses into the treasure-houses of Greek thought, a glow that passes. alas! as knowledge increases. [...] The paradox of genius is that Swinburne, abundantly accomplished as he is in classical learning, should have never, so to speak, outgrown the power of expressing what a Greek Swinburne might have sung ('On Re-Reading Swinburne', *Illustrated London News*, 1904: 910).

James Porter argues that this 'sublime' ineffability is the essence of Greekness and Latinity.<sup>19</sup> The word sublime, read through its etymological roots, signifies a moment or place of transition from one state to another, especially a lower state

<sup>17</sup> Hyder (1970: 10).

<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu (1990: 73), ctd. in Porter (2006: 308–09).

<sup>19</sup> Porter (2006: 345–50).

to a higher one.<sup>20</sup> The Latin *sublimis* combines the prefix *sub-*, meaning ‘beneath, below, near to’, with an uncertain root, most likely ‘*limen*’: the lintel or threshold of a doorway, whence the term ‘liminal’.<sup>21</sup> Longinus, whose *Peri Hupsos* is our sole surviving treatise on the sublime from antiquity, notoriously fails to define the sublime.<sup>22</sup> Since Longinus, Boileau, Burke, Kant, Schiller, and Lyotard have all provided conflicting accounts of the sublime, none of which have proven definitive.<sup>23</sup> This history would suggest that resisting explanation through language is one of the sublime’s key characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Broadly defined, the sublime is ‘a sense of absolute structural impossibility and of total deadlock’ which ‘produces profound mental or spiritual disruption, be this momentary or lasting’ (Porter 2016: 5). Defined more precisely, the sublime is a particular kind of paradox: ‘an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable’.<sup>25</sup>

Locating the classical or defining it by consensus is all but impossible, as even the writing of the times which we today might refer to as *classical* — of Plutarch, Longinus, Aristophanes, and even Homer — itself carries a continual sense of belatedness, of reaching back for another more classical time past.<sup>26</sup> Thus the classical is a ‘sum whose parts fail to add up, or do so only in a quick blur’:

Classicism cannot escape the paradoxes of its own definition. Presenting a front of timeless durability, classical values are in fact grasped only as fleeting and ephemeral moments that can be pointed to just when they vanish (“There!”), while all that remains of them once they are gone is the empty gesture of pointing [...] (Porter 2016: 306).

It is no coincidence that both Porter and the re-reader of Swinburne in the *Illustrated London News* of 1904 reach for exclamatory interjections — ‘alas!’, ‘There!’ — to try to catch the dew-drops of Hellenism as they evanesce in the morning sun. For both writers, the attempt to capture the essence of Greekness in language is ‘an empty gesture of pointing’. Thus we must turn to what Jarvis might refer to as those paralinguistic or extralinguistic aspects of communication which gesture to a type of thinking beyond language — the purely phenomenological aspects of a text, the sounds, smells, tastes, and textures that we can apprehend by association — in order to capture what if anything about *Atalanta in Calydon* is ‘pure Greek’.<sup>27</sup>

19 OED.

21 Lewis and Short (1989).

22 Porter (2016: xxi).

23 *Ibid.*, 36–56; Boileau-Despréaux (1966); Burke (2008); Kant (2001); Schiller (1993); Lyotard (1994).

24 Žižek (1989: 204).

25 Žižek (1989: 203), drawing on Kant and Lacan.

26 Porter (2016: 301–52).

27 Jarvis (2010: 619).

If the 'classical' is an object of desire we can never have, then the solution to this frustration may be what Freud calls 'sublimation' — the process of moving the energy focused on an unattainable object to an attainable one (Freud 1955a; Kaplan 1993). Freud's quintessential example of sublimation is the creation of art as a response to life's frustrations.<sup>28</sup> Sublimation is the process of wilfully setting the sublime in motion, harnessing for our own ends some of the energy of a force outside our comprehension or control. Swinburne's poem uses prosody as its principal method of sublimation. Imposing the right degree of aesthetic unity and order over the experience of suffering, prosody makes the experience bearable and even pleasurable. In the last few lines of the play, after the tragic outcome of nearly every character's desire, the chorus is left to wonder about the power of the gods:

Who shall contend with his lords  
 Or cross them or do them wrong?  
 Who shall bind them as with cords?  
 Who shall tame them as with song?  
 Who shall smite them as with swords?  
 For the hands of their kingdom are strong.  
 (ll. 2312–2317)

In paraphrase, this passage seems to assert the absolute power of universal and indifferent forces over human life. But this is not the passage's full significance. Once the plot runs out, the passage asserts power *over* the gods through the only means the play has left — prosody. The anaphora gives the rhythm and syntax conspicuous regularity. As the chorus wonders whether it is possible to 'tame', 'smite', 'bind', or 'cross' the gods, the governing structures of Swinburne's poetry — rhyme, metre, rhythm — assemble to bind the words into a formal structure. The gods, in the end, have been tamed by song.

### Metre and agency

We can glimpse the origins of *Atalanta's* prosody in a letter Swinburne wrote to his sister Alice in 1863, while wintering at Northcourt on the Isle of Wight with his beloved cousin Mary Gordon:

My greatest pleasure just now is when M—— practices Handel on the organ; but I can hardly *behave* for delight at some of the choruses. I care hardly more than I ever did for any minor music; but *that* is an enjoyment which wants special language to describe it, being so unlike all others. It crams and crowds me with old and new verses, half-remembered and half-made [...] [U]nder their influence I have done some more of my *Atalanta* which will be among my great doings if it keeps up with its own last scenes throughout (Swinburne and Lang 1959: 93).

<sup>28</sup> Freud (1955a).

Swinburne half-remembers the music of Handel as the verses and choruses of a Greek tragedy. Inverting the common critical technique of using the language of music to describe prosodic effects, Swinburne uses the language of prosody to describe music. Swinburne figures this aesthetic pleasure as something subtly transgressive: 'I can hardly *behave* for delight' brings to mind his equal delight in violent sexual transgression which he was exploring through close reading of Sade's *Justine* and *Juliette* at this time (Swinburne and Lang 1959: 54–83).

Swinburne's delight in composition seems to stem, at least partially, from surrendering control to the music of verse. We may think at first that old verses are remembered and new ones made. But Swinburne implies that both old and new verses are 'half-remembered and half-made', suggesting recomposition-in-performance in the manner of a rhapsode.<sup>29</sup> Describing the effects and nature of this recomposition-in-performance is extraordinarily difficult, because the aesthetic sensations of music and prosody lie outside language. Swinburne 'wants' (desires) a special language to describe what Handel's music is doing; but music itself 'wants' (lacks) the structure of a language, so he is unable to find a description for the effects of music in words. For Kant, one of the key features of the sublime experience is the failure of the mind's rational faculties: 'Sublime is that which even to be able to think testifies to a capacity of the mind which surpasses any measure of sense'.<sup>30</sup> This dark realm of the mind, ridden with irrational drives but also the source of Swinburne's rhapsodic gifts, is a central subject of *Atalanta*.

The final scenes of *Atalanta*, which Swinburne wrote first, engage most closely with the point where reason breaks down inside the sublime experience.<sup>31</sup> When Althaea sets fire to the brand that holds her son's immortality, Meleager's death scene begins. It stretches over 300 lines. As the *John Bull* review of 1865 observes, the death scene begins in 'exactly the manner and music of the old *κόμμος*' (kommos), a lyric song of lamentation in Greek tragedy (1865: 353). The song is structured as a call and response between Meleager and the chorus of Calydonian women, set in a unique lyric stanza:

#### MELEAGER

Let your hands meet  
     Round the weight of my head;  
 Lift ye my feet  
     As the feet of the dead;

29 Nagy (2002: 5, 18).

30 Kant (1963: 144); ctd. in Jarvis (2006: 75–81).

31 Swinburne and Lang (1959: 93). The sublime had been a central topic in Swinburne's thought since at least the first stages of his study on Blake in the early 1860s. See also Swinburne and Lang (1959: 60, 93–94, 102). Curiously, however, Swinburne only began to use the word 'sublime' within his poems in *Songs Before Sunrise* of 1871 — after which time he used it frequently (cf. keyword search for 'sublime' in *The Algernon Charles Swinburne Archive*).

For the flesh of my body is molten, the limbs of it molten as lead.

CHORUS

O thy luminous face,  
     Thine imperious eyes!  
 O the grief, O the grace,  
     As of day when it dies!

Who is this bending over thee, lord, with tears and suppression of sighs?

MELEAGER

Is a bride so fair?  
     Is a maid so meek?  
 With unchapleted hair,  
     With unfileted cheek,

Atalanta, the pure among women, whose name is as blessing to speak.

ATALANTA

I would that with feet  
     Unsandalled, unshod,  
 Overbold, overfleet,  
     I had swum not nor trod

From Arcadia to Calydon northward, a blast of the envy of God.

(ll. 2027–2046)

Broadly defined, the stanza form above is four lines of two beats each in triple rhythm, with the option of one or two unrealized beats at the end of each line,<sup>32</sup> followed by one line in English imitation of the classical hexameter, with six beats, a triple rhythm, and a prominent caesura.<sup>33</sup> The stanza's rhyme pattern is ABABB. This form models itself in part on a stanza form sung by Empedocles in Matthew Arnold's first Greek tragedy in English, *Empedocles on Etna* (1852).<sup>34</sup> Swinburne replaces Arnold's duple rhythm with carefully modulated rising triple rhythms, a technique which — as we shall see — hearkens back more clearly than that of Arnold to the metres of Greek verse. The parsimony of Swinburne's quatrains leads to a swelling of syllables in the final line: this transition gives some readers the sense of being overwhelmed, as if standing beneath the crest of a wave about to break on the shore. The reviewer in the *Examiner* perceives the stanzas rolling in and out of the characters' voices as 'a long wave of sound [. . .] which engulfs them all' (1865: 441).

This passage marks the second appearance of the English hexameter in Swinburne's writing. The first appearance was in the form of 'Hymn to Proserpine', written the previous year.<sup>35</sup> Despite its popularity in the mid-to-late

32 I read the meter of the first four lines as four beats due to the predominant pattern of four beats per line across the choral songs of *Atalanta*. See note 42 below.

33 For an outline of the classical hexameter in English, see Polten (2015: 11–20); Phelan (2012: 45–87).

34 Arnold (1852: 18–40).

35 Swinburne (2004: 101–04).

nineteenth century, the hexameter rarely appears in English ‘Greek’ tragedies: the metre is nowhere in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1671), Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Arnold’s *Merope* (1858), or Browning’s *Agamemnon* (1877). Attic tragedy contains a bewildering variety of metres, freely combined and torn asunder; but the hexameter line is exceptional in tragedy, appearing once in the choral odes (or ‘stasima’) of the extant tragic corpus — the first stasimon of Euripides’ *Andromache*.<sup>36</sup> There, the epic metre of the hexameter — whose dactylic feet Euripides leaves entirely unsubstituted — sharply contrasts the alternating ithyphallic metre, a rhythmical phrase more closely associated with phallic hymns of the Bacchic cult, the comedies of Aristophanes, and the drinking-songs of Anacreon.<sup>37</sup> Witness Euripides’ metrical alternations below:

- U	U -	UU-	U	U -	UU	-	UU	--	
γνώθι	τύχαν,	λόγισαι	τὸ	παρὸν	κακὸν	εἰς	ὄπερ	ἦκεις.	Know your fate, consider the present ill-fortune into which you have come.
- U -	U - -								
δεσπόταις	ἀμιλλᾷ								
-UU	- U	U -	UU-	UU	- U	U - -			
Τλιάς	οὔσα	κόρα	Λακεδαιμόνος	ἐγγενέτησιν;					Do you wrangle with your masters when you are a woman of Troy and they were born in Sparta? <sup>38</sup>
- U	- U - -								
λείπε	δεξιμῆλον								[the shrine,] leave it behind!

Andromache, a fallen noble of Troy now enslaved, begs the goddess Thetis — mother of her husband’s murderer — for solace. The women of Phthia tell Andromache to stop praying and accept her fate. The hexameter, a strange Homeric incursion on this scene in aftermath of the Trojan War, alternates with the jaunty ithyphallic ‘δεσπόταις ἀμιλλᾷ’ (‘wrangle with your masters’) (Euripides 1995: ll. 103–16). The effect is subtle (to our ears) ironic mockery. The passage immediately before this chorus, Andromache’s prayer, is a rare surviving example of elegiac couplets in tragedy, the same form in which Swinburne composed the Greek epigraph to *Atalanta*. Elegiac couplets alternate a hexameter with a pentameter. Responding to Andromache’s elegiacs, the chorus alternates the hexameters with ithyphallic cola, destroying the stately tone created by Andromache’s prayer.<sup>39</sup> The

36 Euripides, *Andromache*, ed. and tr. David Kovacs (Harvard University Press, 1995), ll. 117–46. There are a few more examples in the tragic corpus of the hexameter line as part of an elegiac couplet, but this is the only extant example of the hexameter as a colon in itself.

37 West (1982: 132, 140, 196).

38 Euripides (1995: ll. 12629).

39 Ibid., ll. 103–16.

chorus acknowledges Andromache's suffering but implores her to transfer the energy of her desire to another object — in other words, to sublimate it. And prosody — for better or ill — is the principle vehicle the chorus uses to make the idea of suffering bearable (to the viewer or reader, if not to Andromache). Prosody sublimates Andromache's suffering by transforming it into a locus for literary irony and wit.

In Swinburne's stanza form, the alternation between the two-beat lines and the hexameter has a bitter irony. Swinburne's two-beat lines have none of the jauntiness of Euripides' ithyphallics, but instead hold a lingering sense of incompleteness.<sup>40</sup> At this point in *Atalanta*, all but one of the previous choruses have featured four beats per line, reflecting the predominance of four beats per line in the English song tradition as a whole. We therefore expect four beats.<sup>41</sup> When the third and fourth beats do not come, we experience them instead as a silence, an awkward gap which begs to be filled with language but represents unspeakable pain.<sup>42</sup> The absence feels acute before the hexameter flourish that concludes the stanza. We can hear a sense of absence in *Atalanta's* words

I would that with feet  
     Unsandalled, unshod,  
 Overbold, overfleet,  
     I had swum not nor trod

because the missing beats beg us for words to make sense of grief. In performance of the tragedy on the stage, rare but not unheard of, something would need to happen to fill that space — perhaps, as scholars have speculated of ancient performances of Homer, a musical flourish at the lines' end.<sup>43</sup> A review in *The Times* of the first public production of *Atalanta* in the Crystal Palace of 1906 suggests that Swinburne's verse in performance demands continuous sound and motion, 'words that soar, that rush, that sting, that burn, a sustained eagle-flight in the eye of the sun', never breaking for silence.<sup>44</sup> An anonymous review in *John Bull* of June 1865 imagines the lyric lament of the characters grouped round Meleager as 'full-fraught with the wailing music which on such occasions the wind-instruments alone (the harps being silent) poured

40 Swinburne professed to dislike Euripides, but nonetheless owes a profound debt to Euripides in both style and content of verse. Weir (1920: 2).

41 Attridge (1982: 84–96). Compare Kilbride's reading of the *kommos* (2016: 96).

42 We can hear four beats in 'When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces' (ll. 65–72), four beats with the fourth unrealized in 'Before the beginning of years' (ll. 313–325), and four again in 'Not as with sundering of the earth / Nor as with cleaving of the sea' (ll. 1809–1810).

43 West (1981: 122–123); Clutton-Brock (1911: 139); Anon, *The Times Literary Supplement* (1911: 139).

44 Anon, *The Times* (1906: 7).

forth on the Greek stage' (1865: 353). With prosody as interesting as Swinburne's, it is almost impossible to experience moments of absence in the play as truly silent. The unrealized beats challenge the imagination to fill them. Pain becomes an impetus to create.

### The pain of words

One of the central questions *Atalanta* poses is: can language, that slippery faculty so quick to betray us, help to relieve or make sense of suffering? This question reaches a crisis in Meleager's exchange with Toxeus and Plexippus, two sceptics in a perversion of the Socratic tradition. This scene is an agon, the moment in Greek tragedy when the play's conflict is spoken aloud as a dialogic argument.<sup>45</sup>

Like much of the dialogue in *Atalanta in Calydon*, Meleager's argument with Toxeus and Plexippus takes place in an English counterpart of stichomythia, the Greek dramatic technique which sets characters' dialogue in alternating single iambic trimeter lines. Like Milton and Arnold before him, Swinburne sets the iambic trimeter components of Greek tragedy, which would be spoken by the characters rather than sung, in English blank verse lines.<sup>46</sup> After *Atalanta* prays to Artemis for favour in slaying the boar, Meleager offers a prayer to *Atalanta*. Toxeus and Plexippus ridicule these flowery speeches, accusing the prince of effeminacy:

#### TOXEUS

How long will ye whet spears with eloquence,  
Fight, and kill beasts dry-handed with sweet words?  
Cease, or talk still and slay thy boars at home.

#### PLEXIPPUS

Why, if she ride among us for a man,  
Sit thou for her and spin; a man grown girl  
Is worth a woman weaponed; sit thou here.

#### MELEAGER

Peace, and be wise; no gods love idle speech.

#### PLEXIPPUS

Nor any man a man's mouth woman-tongued.  
[...]

#### MELEAGER

Have all thy will of words; talk out thine heart.

#### ALTHAEA

<sup>45</sup> Rutherford (2012: 190–99).

<sup>46</sup> Milton (1998); Arnold (1909).

Refrain your lips, O brethren, and my son,  
Lest words turn snakes and bite you uttering them.

(ll. 916–931)

Plexippus and Toxeus bicker with Meleager over the nature of language, viewing language's capacity to affect reality with scepticism. For the uncles, Meleager's careful use of language, 'sweet words' and 'eloquence', feminises his warrior's body, rendering him 'a man grown girl'. 'Sit thou for her' is a sexual pun: in the line 'Why, if she ride among us for a man', we only have to remove 'among' to make the statement mean the vile uncles should rape Atalanta or take Meleager in turn, a prosodic formulation which would fit comfortably within the four-stress convention of Swinburne's blank verse here (though not with its syllable count).

This misogynistic figuration of language is a familiar trope in the Greek and English tradition, as when Hamlet berates how he must 'like a whore unpack my heart with words' (Shakespeare 1996: 2.2.548.), and as when at the close of the *Agamemnon* the chorus mocks Aegisthus as a stay-at-home woman for his powerful use of language, to which Aegisthus retorts: 'Those words, too, will be a cause for generating cries of pain!' (Aeschylus 2008: ll. 1625–1628). Althaea's interjection in the agon, and Atalanta's response which follows, has a similar significance. Words do not float around in an airy realm unconnected to reality but are *themselves* a part of the reality of subjective experience, material things with the power to torture and maim, as Atalanta threateningly reminds us:

But ye, refrain  
Transgressing hands and reinless mouths, and keep  
Silence, lest by much foam of violent words  
And proper poison of your lips ye die.

(ll. 1027–1030)

Atalanta's rhesis, or long speech, in response to Toxeus and Plexippus brings the stichomythia and distichomythia abruptly to a halt.<sup>47</sup> Of all passages in the surviving manuscript of Swinburne's tragedy held in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, this exchange has by far the heaviest revision, the lines written and crossed out almost blotting out the entire leaf of periwinkle paper with black ink.<sup>48</sup> As the dialogic style of Toxeus and Plexippus fights the rhetic style of Atalanta, the verse builds a galloping momentum. Style fights style and the verse writhes like Saintsbury's dancers, bearing an excess syllable here or there in stride. Witness the additions and cancellations in the manuscript version of Atalanta's declaration of eternal opposition to the heterosexual matrix:

47 Rutherford (2012: 164–79).

48 Swinburne, *Atalanta in Calydon*. [Manuscript.] Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum. 171–19v.



*Atalanta's* metrics alternate between passages of primarily five-beat lines (suggesting the mode of 'speech') and passages of primarily four-beat lines (suggesting the mode of 'song'). The lines of 'Who hath given man speech?' tend toward duple rising rhythm and five beats per line, but often feature four instead, moving back and forth between modes of speech and song.<sup>51</sup> However, for many lines of the ode the fourth and/or fifth beat is unexpressed, leading to jarring metrical shifts:

Nay, time thou seest not, death thou wilt not see  
Till life's right hand be loosened from thine hand  
And thy life-days from thee.

(ll. 1051–1053)

Just as frequently the verse refuses to conform to the tendency towards a blank verse rhythm, as in the first two lines: 'Who hath given man speech? or who hath set therein/A thorn for peril and a snare for sin?' (ll. 1038–1039). These lines deliberately delay the establishment of the ode's metrical expectations, featuring six stresses followed by four, and thus set a precedent for metrical volatility.

This is the only chorus in *Atalanta* that presents itself as song in the manner and metre of speech. In contrast to the other choruses, the basic metre of this stasimon is simply blank verse.<sup>52</sup> The conflict between song and speech in a choral ode has intriguing precedents in Greek tragedy.<sup>53</sup> Simon Goldhill ponders the effect the presence of iambic trimeter has on a choral song of Sophocles' *Ajax*: 'the choral stanza begins in the flattest of metres and then explodes into a scream of joy. I wonder if the metrical contrast is to be fully articulated in performance to capture the outburst of their feelings?' (Goldhill 2013: 115) The scream of joy of course never occurs in this Swinburne chorus, unless it is a thanatic joy: but a scream does come, and the play trembles. Feel the rhythm building:

For now we know not of them; but one saith  
The gods are gracious, praising God; and one,  
When hast thou seen? or hast thou felt his breath  
Touch, nor consume thine eyelids as the sun,  
Nor fill thee to the lips with fiery death?  
None hath beheld him, none  
Seen above other gods and shapes of things,  
Swift without feet and flying without wings,  
Intolerable, not clad with death or life,  
Insatiable, not known of night or day,  
The lord of love and loathing and of strife  
Who gives a star and takes a sun away;

51 Kilbride (2016: 68–90).

52 See note 42 above on the beat-counts of the other choruses.

53 Rutherford (2012: 29–30, 83–84, 220–221, 246).

Who shapes the soul, and makes her a barren wife  
 To the earthly body and grievous growth of clay;  
 Who turns the large limbs to a little flame  
 And binds the great sea with a little sand;  
 Who makes desire, and slays desire with shame;  
 Who shakes the heaven as ashes in his hand;  
 Who, seeing the light and shadow for the same,  
 Bids day waste night as fire devours a brand,  
 Smites without sword, and scourges without rod;  
 The supreme evil, God.

(ll. 1129–1151)

The rhythm of the lines bears out this God's hostility to every aspect of material existence: in 'Intolerable, not clad with death or life,/Insatiable, not known of night or day,' the verse encourages us to elide the third syllable of 'Intolerable' to fit within the pattern of ten syllables per line that dominates this chorus (with the exception of the two six-syllable lines). But the second adjective, 'Insatiable', slides smoothly from our lips in unelided form to fulfil the ten-syllable requirement of the line. The closeness in sound of these two words, their tongue-twisting '-able' suffixes and polysyllabicity, belies the fact that one of the words cannot be pronounced in full.

God does not fit into verse-form. Indeed, in the paraphrasable content of the poem God's creation of material form seems to be for the pleasure of humiliating it with the pathetic smallness, the 'puerility' which Longinus reads as opposite to the sublime (Longinus 1995: 168–71). God 'shapes the soul, and makes her a barren wife/To the earthly body and grievous growth of clay'; he 'turns the large limbs to a little flame/And binds the great sea with a little sand'. In the manuscript, the line 'That gives a star and takes a sun away' was originally 'That gives nothing and takes all things away'.<sup>54</sup> Through revision Swinburne changes his God from one who merely consumes to a God who gives for the purpose of deprivation and degradation. Instead of mocking that default theological option which Nietzsche so colourfully called 'monotono-theism' (Nietzsche 2005: 16.), Swinburne's God seems to exist to mock the smallness of man.

The passage strikes a balance between four- and five- beat lines, on the knife-edge of speech and song.<sup>55</sup> God is songlike when he is 'Seen above other gods and shapes of things,/Swift without feet and flying without wings'. The variation between triple and duple rhythm in these lines, and their four beats, echoes the play's first chorus, 'When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces' (ll. 65–120). But over time the stanza folds again into speech, with the five-beat blank verse rhythm of lines such as 'Who shapes the soul, and makes her a barren wife/To the earthly body and grievous growth of clay'. Then come the six-syllable lines which break the beat pattern altogether: 'The supreme evil, God'. The effect is truly uncanny because we

<sup>54</sup> *Atalanta in Calydon* [Manuscript.]: 22v.

<sup>55</sup> For an alternate reading of this chorus see Kilbride (2016: 80–88).

are not sure whether to make our home in speech or song, whether to understand the chorus as a lament or a finely-wrought argument, a speech or a rant.

The prime example of the mixed mode of speech and song in Greek tragedy, profoundly important for Swinburne's poetics, is the Cassandra scene in the *Agamemnon*.<sup>56</sup> In Cassandra's mixed mode, her brief anguished outbursts first alternate between bewildered lyric shrieks and single lines of iambic trimeter; the perplexed chorus responds in trimeters until a stichomythic sequence gives us the relative calm of spoken verse.<sup>57</sup> After this, Cassandra has a series of *rheseis* that begin over and over again in lyric cries, then descend again into trimeters.<sup>58</sup> In the line 'ἰὸὺ ἰὸὺ, ὦ ὦ κακὰ' (Iou, iou! Oh! Oh! The pain!), the dead children of the House of Atreus prompt an anguished lyric cry from Cassandra, in a rhythm of two iambic feet (Aeschylus 2008: l. 1214.). Her first line is one foot short of an iambic trimeter. Like Swinburne's six syllable statement, 'The supreme evil, God', Cassandra's exclamation cuts the metre of speech short: one iambic foot short of a trimeter, Cassandra's wail is not quite a line of song, but the precedent of her lyric ravings in the surrounding scene make it clear that this is not quite a line of speech either. We can read 'The supreme evil, God' alongside 'None hath beheld him, none' as a four-beat songlike line that leaves one beat silent. We could easily imagine both lines as the even-numbered lines of a ballad quatrain. But in the context of the blank verse which surrounds these lines, they sound like a brief outburst, a rip in the fabric of prosaic reality.

Swinburne's prosody drives us, at times, into manic states where we feel every trace or curve of word-sound is significant, and gestures towards ideas beyond language. But moments such as 'The supreme evil, God' snap us out of the rapture. We return, once again, to a rhythm that could be the rhythm of our speech. The painful silences of Meleager's death scene, the intrusions of Toxeus and Plexippus, and the moments of prosodic breakdown in Swinburne's choruses all remind us that, though we experience the music of verse through our bodies and all the senses, verse is not part of us. This verse was woven by a strange man in a strange time, referring back to times even more strange and alien than his own.

'We have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer's philosophy', Freud writes towards the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). 'For [Schopenhauer] death is the "true result and to that extent the purpose of life", while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live' (Freud 1961: 43–44). 'For death is deep as the sea' (l. 1839), Swinburne writes, a vision of the all-consuming nature of non-existence. *Atalanta in Calydon* drives the syncretism of classical paganism and Christianity, painfully woven together over centuries, towards its own tragic conclusion. If death is as deep as the sea, then the rapture of Meleager's death-scene might just be a way of summoning the strength to face the futility of life in

56 See Swinburne (2004), 'On the Cliffs', which addresses a syncretized Sappho and Cassandra as sister-goddess of verse.

57 Aeschylus (2008: ll. 1072–1213).

58 *Ibid.*, ll. 1178–1294.

Swinburne's universe. Verse, in this way, is a coping mechanism: through sublimation it releases the anxiety and frustration of living in a world with nothing in its heart.

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