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Victoria's Lapse from Virtue:
A Lost Leaf from Swinburne's
La Sœur de la Reine

Francis Jacques Sypher, Jr.

SWINBURNE'S French comic drama of Hanoverian intrigue and Hugolian rhetoric, *La Sœur de la Reine*, has so far been known mainly from testimonia and from fragments contained in ten manuscript leaves at the Library of Congress. These portions were first published in 1964 by Cecil Lang, who in his commentary regrets the loss of a famous scene in which Queen Victoria confesses to her lover, Lord John Russell, her lapse from virtue — when she yielded to the enticements of the poet laureate, "M. Wordsworth." C. K. Hyder, writing a review of research up to the end of 1966, calls this fragment "as yet undiscovered." Meanwhile, the leaf has been resting quietly at the Houghton Library, and is here published, to restore a prize bell to one of Swinburne's brightest jester's caps.¹

La Sœur de la Reine was born of the same impulse as Swinburne's French novel, *La Fille du Policeman*. In a letter of January [1861], he mentions the novel and a vague plan for another "tale," representing the adventures surrounding a "twin sister of Queen Victoria," who, after being removed from the cradle and left to grow up as a prostitute, is discovered and disowned by the Queen; she expires after "an ill-requited attachment to Lord John Russell."² The "tale" became a play, and Swinburne may have made changes in the plan of action; but since much of the text is missing, the final story cannot be reconstructed exactly. The testimonia seem to confuse — as Swin-

¹ Swinburne's manuscript, catalogued as fMS Eng 815.8, is here published by permission of the Harvard College Library, and by permission of William Heinemann Limited. For other portions of *La Sœur de la Reine*, see *New Writings by Swinburne*, ed. C. Y. Lang (Syracuse, N.Y., 1964), pp. 103-118; commentary and notes on pp. 225-231. C. K. Hyder's statement is in *The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research*, ed. F. E. Faverty, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 231.

² *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. C. Y. Lang (New Haven, 1959-1962), I, 42.

burne himself does on occasion — the novel (which is also known only in fragments) and the play, and there are contradictions in their accounts.³

Swinburne apparently composed his play in the early or middle sixties; but he was occupied with it long afterwards. In a letter of 12 October [1880], Swinburne reminded Lord Houghton of certain "historic" events, such as the appearance of "Albert the Good"

at the drawing-room in a working man's blouse with a bludgeon in his hand: on which occasion he reproached the Queen with the early weakness which had led her into a criminal connection with Mr. Wordsworth, who had scandalously abused his privileged position as Laureate to seduce her by means of recitations 'de cette poésie fiévreuse et palpitante de sensualité — cette excursion, comme il l'appelait, à bride lâchée, à travers les champs fiévreux de l'amour illégitime — de la passion sans frein.'

And this is the man to whom certain Englishmen have banded themselves together to do honour! C'est vraiment trop shoking. When Lord John Russell, who had supplanted him in the royal favour, reminded her Majesty of this first liaison, she could only reply (see historical MS. *penes me*) 'Combien de fois, mon Jack bien-aimé, — toi qui me le reproches — ne t'ai-je pas entendu roucouler à mes pieds sa chanson érotique de Betty-Foy!' These things will be known some day.⁴

The passages quoted by Swinburne may have been freshly composed; together with a passage on the "Laureate," they appear (with slight variations) in the fragment as inserts, written in an autograph different from the rest, and more resembling that of Swinburne's later manuscripts.

Swinburne was capable of writing loyal tributes to Queen Victoria, such as "Euonymos," in celebration of her escape unharmed from a gunman in 1882, or "The Jubilee" (1887).⁵ But age did not diminish

³ Lang describes the fragments he prints as "Act Two (probably complete) and Act Four (probably incomplete)." A guide to the possible development of the play is Hugo's *Marie Tudor*, which was one of Swinburne's principal models.

⁴ *The Swinburne Letters*, IV, 168 (fiévreux, -euse sic; Swinburne accents the word correctly in the MS. fragment). Remarks on *The Excursion* may be found in *Letters*, II, 83, 94-95, 98. See Swinburne's estimate of Wordsworth in "Wordsworth and Byron," *Miscellanies* (London, 1886), especially p. 144 on *The Excursion* and pp. 115, 141 on "The Idiot Boy."

⁵ "Euonymos," in Swinburne's *Poems* (London, 1904), V, 244. On the event, see *The Times*, 3 March 1882, p. 9. In a scene of *La Sœur de la Reine*, Victoria tells "Sir Peel": "Cinq fois on a tiré sur moi dans les places publiques" (*New Writings*, p. 117). The Queen had in fact been fired at, threatened with a pistol, or as-

his enjoyment of royal ridicule. On the appearance of Her Majesty's *More Leaves from the Journal of a Life in the Highlands, from 1862 to 1882* (London, 1884), Swinburne sent Georgiana Burne-Jones a mock plan, with a sample scene, for a tragic drama: "Sir Brown: drame en 7 actes et 49 tableaux."⁶

Of the text of *La Sœur de la Reine*, T. J. Wise wrote: "no trace remains. Watts-Dunton informed me that it was 'shockingly improper,' and had long since been destroyed." But Georges Lafourcade in 1928 published a few lines (inaccurately quoted) from the present "fragment." He does not give its location, but most of the material that he used was in Wise's collection. And Randolph Hughes read the dialogue in "a typescript copy acquired by the owner from Wise." The manuscript leaf was acquired by Harvard on 23 July 1946 at Christie's, where it came up as part of lot 254 in the Hugh Walpole sale. Contained in the folder with the leaf is a typewritten translation, crudely literal, and reflecting inaccurate readings of the manuscript.⁷

The text of the fragment here published is written in the author's hand, in ink, on both sides of a sheet of blue paper (approximately 8 by 12½ inches) of a sort commonly used by Swinburne, water-marked: E TOWGOOD / 1861. The text fills both sides of the leaf, from top to bottom, with no indication of a heading, and no final stage direction or flourish to indicate a conclusion. But it is, fortunately, possible to establish its place in the play.

The other known fragments from *La Sœur de la Reine* contain a dialogue between Victoria and Lord John Russell (Act II, scene III). The scene opens with the Queen jealously demanding oaths of fidelity from her lover: "O cher cœur! tu ne voudrais pas me tromper, dis, n'est-ce pas que tu aurais pitié de mon amour, que tu te dirais même au milieu d'un spasme amoureux — 'Cette pauvre femme en mour-
saulted on five occasions between 1840 and 1850. The sixth was in 1872; that of 1881 was the seventh and the last of her reign. "The Jubilee" was reprinted as "The Commonwealth 1887" (*Poems*, III, 174-186).

⁶ *The Swinburne Letters*, V, 54-55.

⁷ Wise's comment is discreetly placed in a note on *Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards*, in one of his bibliographies: *A Swinburne Library* (London, 1925), p. 165. Lafourcade, *La Jeunesse de Swinburne (1837-1867)* (Paris, 1928), II, 375. Randolph Hughes, in his edition of Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon* (London, 1952), pp. x-xi. See the *Catalogue of the Final Portion of The Famous Library of the late Sir Hugh Walpole, C. B. E., Comprising Miscellaneous Books Autograph Letters and Manuscripts . . . sold at auction by Christie, Manson & Woods; Ltd. . . . July 23, 1946*, p. 27.

rait? et que cela te refroidirait les sens, et que cela me rappellerait ton noble cœur, mon amour?" These lines parody a speech in Hugo's *Marie Tudor*, in which "La Reine" tells her lover, Fabiano Fabiani: "Oh! je suis jalouse par instants! . . . Je m'imagine sans cesse que tu vas voir les belles jeunes femmes qu'il y a dans la ville. Oh! il ne faudrait pas me tromper, vois-tu!" (Deuxième journée, scène I). Fabiani professes his love, and the Queen replies: "Merci, mon Fabiano. Adieu."⁸

The Harvard fragment of Swinburne's play begins with L. J. R.'s passionate exclamation: "Ah! Victoria!" answered by "Ah! tu m'aimes! je savais bien que tu m'aimais! Merci, John!" In the ensuing exchange, John reveals his own jealousies — of Victoria's lost treasure and of her chequered past. She tells how the poet laureate seduced her, and to John's chagrined response ("Damnation!") she answers: "Allons, monsieur, taisez-vous. Cet homme serait jaloux de mes vieilles poupées."

In the other fragments, Victoria's jealous demand that her lover be faithful is followed immediately (and somewhat inconsequently) by Lord John Russell's request: "Jurez-moi du moins, Victoria, que c'était la seule fois — que ce misérable n'a jamais osé renouveler — Oh! j'en serais à renier Dieu!" to which the Queen, pettishly starting a lovers' quarrel, answers: "En vérité, monsieur, vous êtes un homme *shocking*, vous me dites là des choses —." Lord John threatens to unveil the mysteries of her past — "Tout le monde viendra vous cracher à la face la kyrielle des noms de vos amants!" But their disagreement ends with a touching reconciliation, and, of course, a kiss.

The logic — so to speak — of the dialogue requires that the Harvard fragment follow Victoria's expression of jealousy, and precede these final exchanges. And this analysis is made certain by the manuscript itself. The Queen's speech — "dis, n'est-ce pas que . . . cela me rappellerait ton noble cœur, mon amour?" ends at the bottom of the verso of a leaf (no. 9 / 9a — numbers not written by Swinburne) and Lord John Russell's speech — "Jurez-moi du moins . . ." begins at the top of the recto of the next leaf (10 / 10a). The Harvard leaf once — long ago — lay between these two.⁹

⁸ *Marie Tudor* in *Théâtre de Victor Hugo*, deuxième série (Paris, 1844), pp. 146-147.

⁹ These leaves are written in the same style of handwriting and on paper of the same size and color as the Harvard fragment. I must thank the staff of the Manu-

Perhaps there was still another leaf following the verso of 9 / 9a, but preceding the leaf now at Harvard. It seems possible that Lord John expressed his love for the Queen with more than an ardent sigh. But the addition of the Harvard fragment greatly improves the sense of the scene, and may in fact complete it. With the exceptions noted below, the text is here given as it stands.

L. J. R.

Ah! Victoria!

La Reine.

Ah! tu m'aimes! je savais bien que tu m'aimais! Merci, John!

L. J. R.

Eh bien! et moi donc, crois-tu que ta ruelle soit pour moi un lit de roses? que nulle jalousie ne me vienne mordre au cœur en songeant à ces têtes qui se sont autrefois posés sur ce même oreiller? Crois-tu, Victoria, que cela ne fasse pas de mal à un cœur d'homme, que de songer aux amours passés de sa maîtresse? O ma belle reine! tous ces noms sont pour moi [10] comme les morsures d'un fer brûlant; je rachèterais au prix de mon sang tous ces souvenirs amoureux de ta jeunesse.

La Reine.

Ingrat! tu sais bien que si d'autres ont possédé mon corps, toi seul as possédé mon âme, toi seul as régné sur mon cœur. John! John! je te le dis, toi seul as eu la virginité de mon amour; cette chair flétrie par des baisers hasardeux, toi seul as su l'échauffer, l'épurer aux rayons d'une passion véritable. Je suis venue à toi vierge; ma vie passée n'était qu'un rêve malsain rempli de fumées orageuses.

L. J. R.

[20]

Encore si vous n'aviez jamais aimé que des gentilshommes! cela se concevrait, cela s'expliquerait même; je vous aurais passé les Bright, les Derby, les Disraeli; et puis on n'est jaloux que du premier amant; on n'aperçoit sur la robe de lin que la première souillure. Et quel amant, juste ciel! avoir livré le trésor de votre jeunesse embaumée, le doux élan d'un cœur sans tache, tous les mille rêves pudiques et délicieux d'une jeune fille, à un misérable rimailleur, à un infime barbouilleur de papier! avoir choisi pour cueillir les prémices de votre virginité fleurie un bourgeois, un poète, un M. Wordsworth!

La Reine, riant.

[30]

Ah! mon Dieu! — Faut-il être fou pour avoir de telles jalousies! Ce pauvre cher M. Wordsworth! c'était le meilleur des hommes; il venait

script Division of the Library of Congress for their courtesy in helping me examine this MS., which is in the Halsted VanderPoel Collection.

tous les soirs m'apprendre le clavessin; tu n'iras pas me dire que cela n'entraînait point dans ses devoirs de poète lauréat? puis il me récitait de ses vers; cette poésie fiévreuse d'amour, palpitante de sensualisme, enivrait mon sang de seize ans, se glissa jusque dans les replis de mon cœur. Cette excursion à bride lâchée à travers les champs brûlants de l'amour — ce débordement d'ivresse poétique et sensuelle — cette parole mielleuse — agaçante — pleine de douceurs lascives, — avait une puissance de provocation dont plus d'une jeune fille a pleuré les effets funestes. Toutes les [40] Muses couronnaient de leurs plus belles fleurs ce libertinage noble et vénérable; toutes les Graces embaumaient de leurs parfums des plus subtils les ébats sans fin de cette luxure intarissable et sublime. Eh bien! John, j'étais toute petite, j'avais pris l'habitude de m'asseoir sur ses genoux, d'entourer son cou de mes bras, d'appuyer mes lèvres sur sa bouche harmonieuse, sur son front chauve et magnifique; et par un chaud soir d'été, il faisait de la musique, il chantait quelque strophe merveilleuse toute vibrante d'amour, — ne t'ai-je pas bien des fois entendu, toi qui me le reproches, roucouler à mes pieds sa chanson érotique de Betty-Foy? — il me regardait, il m'attirait, il me chiffonnait la robe, il me provoquait [50] doucement — eh bien! je me suis laissée aller dans ses bras, et je me suis éveillée dans une demi-heure toute rougissante, toute effrayée, toute souriante — tenez, comme ce beau jour d'août où nous avons valsé ensemble pour la première fois. Le beau malheur! Que c'est mal de vouloir retirer à un pauvre grand homme son triste quart d'heure de joie et de fierté, toi qui ne vois pas une heure que je ne voudrais doré de mon amour! Vilain jaloux! mauvais cœur! Je te dis que c'était comme cela, il m'a provoquée, enivrée, je me suis laissée aller —

L. J. R.

Damnation!

[60]

La Reine.

Allons, monsieur, taisez-vous. Cet homme serait jaloux de mes vieilles poupées.

TEXTUAL NOTES

Swinburne's minor lapses from academic propriety (e.g. "maîtresse," "fiévre," "posés" in line 8) are worth leaving uncorrected; they are characteristic of Swinburne's French writings. Most of the alterations in the manuscript illustrate Swinburne's search for "le cliché juste" or his hesitation over spelling and the "accord du participe passé." As for the others, they are not many, and their inclusion here makes the record complete. Numbers in these notes refer to lines of the text, as indicated above within marginal square brackets; words or letters deleted by Swinburne are enclosed in pointed brackets; "from" means "changed from"; "added" means "interlined with a caret"; "above" means "interlined above the deletion."

5 L. J. R. MS. reads LJR here and in line 59 here or elsewhere 7 *ccur* *ligature not indicated in MS.*
 8 posés *from* posée 9 pas de *from* pas du que *added*
 aux amours *above* (que d'autres) 10 de sa maitresse? O ma *above* (aux sou-
 venirs caress) (les) tous 11 comme(s) 17 as su *above* (l'as) l'épurer *added*
 22 s'expliquerait même *from and above* se p(ardonnerait) 23 (mais) et puis
 25 embaumée *above* (fleurie) 26 sans tache *above* (virginal) 28 cueillir les
 (douces) prémices de votre virginité fleurie *above* (effleurer les chastes feuilles de votre
 corolle de vierge) 31 jalousies *above* (pensées) 33-34 tu . . . lauréat? *added*
in Swinburne's later hand 35 sensualisme, (coula) enivrait 36-38 Cette . . .
 sensuelle — *added in Swinburne's later hand; final dash deletes comma* 38 cette
from Cette mielleuse — *dash above deleted comma* 39 agaçante — *dash deletes*
comma 41 coutonnaient *from* courtonnaient ce (noble) libertinage 42 des
from les 43 intarissable *begun* intarr then *changed and completed* 44 de (l)
 m'asseoir 46 front (olympien;) chauve et (supe) magnifique; 47 chantait (d)
 quelque 48-49 ne . . . Betty-Foy? *added in Swinburne's later hand; MS. lacks*
the dashes 54 vouloir *above* (jalouser) 56 ne vois *above* (n'as) une *above*
 (d') 58 provoquée, enivré, . . . laissée *final e in each case inserted on the line*
 62 vieilles *added*

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