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# *La Sœur de la Reine* and Related "Victorian Romances" by Swinburne<sup>1</sup>

Gillian Workman

**A** PART from its intrinsic value, the Houghton fragment is interesting for the light it throws on Swinburne's "Victorian romances" in general. Cecil Y. Lang, in his *New Writings by Swinburne*, refers to five separate accounts (by Swinburne himself, Georges Lafourcade, John Bailey, W. H. Mallock, and J. O. Field) of what he assumes to be the one play — *La Sœur de la Reine*. Three of these refer to the relationship between Wordsworth and Queen Victoria which is finally elucidated by the discovery of the Houghton fragment. The one which is verbally the most accurate is that of Georges Lafourcade:

Swinburne nous peint . . . John Russell faisant une scène de jalousie, au sujet du poète Wordsworth, à la Reine, qui se défend ainsi: 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 tous les soirs m'apprendre le clavecin; tu n'iras pas me dire que ce n'était point dans ses devoirs de poète lauréat? "

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations have been used in footnotes:

*Letters* — for *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959-62, 6 vols.

*New Writings* — for *New Writings by Swinburne*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, Syracuse, N.Y., Syracuse University Press, 1965.

*Works* — for *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Edmund Gosse and T. J. Wise, London, Heinemann, 1925 (reissued by Russell and Russell, New York, 1968), 20 vols.

This article, originally incorporating a transcript of the Houghton fragment, was written before I knew of Professor Sypher's article (note 3 below). His article has kindly been made available to me; I find, however, that his comments on the fragment do not materially alter my approach. His assumption that what he calls the "testimonia" relate to *La Sœur de la Reine* as now known — "fragments contained in ten manuscript leaves at the Library of Congress" (published by Cecil Y. Lang in *New Writings*) and the Houghton fragment (now first published in Professor Sypher's article) — is similar to the assumption, occasionally modified, of Professor Lang; it is, therefore, covered by my discussion of Professor Lang's work.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Lafourcade, *La Jeunesse de Swinburne* (London and Paris, Société d'Édition: les Belles Lettres, 1928), II, 375. See also *New Writings*, pp. 228-229.

Swinburne's own account, given in a letter of 1880 to Lord Houghton, and quoted by Professor Sypher,<sup>3</sup> is less accurate verbally, but is clearly identical in spirit. A third allusion, although similar in spirit, differs as to fact. Lang quotes the critic and reviewer John Bailey's knowledge — acquired from an acquaintance of Swinburne's in 1917 — of the existence of a dialogue between the Duchess of Kent and Queen Victoria, in which Victoria confesses that she has taken a lover:

Ce n'était pas un prince; ce n'était pas un milord, ni même *Sir R. Peel*. C'était un misérable du peuple, en nomme [sic] *Wordsworth*, qui m'a récité des vers de son *Excursion* d'une sensualité si chaleureuse qu'ils m'ont ébranlée — et je suis tombée.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the burden of both Lord John Russell's and Victoria's words in the Houghton fragment is compressed and given to Victoria to deliver. The reference to *The Excursion*, which, in the fragment, is part of a

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The Houghton fragment forces a modification of the impression of the scene, described by Clyde K. Hyder as Queen Victoria's confession of a "lapse from virtue" after hearing Wordsworth read the more seductive passages of his *Excursion*. — *The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research*, ed. F. E. Faverly (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 231.

Swinburne's tongue is firmly in his cheek. He clearly felt *The Excursion* quite unlikely to produce such results. Had Wordsworth's *liaison* with Annette Vallon been known to Swinburne, part of the fun of his portrayal in the fragment would have been lost. Wordsworth seemed to Swinburne a most unlikely man to be involved in such an affair. It might equally be said of Swinburne, as he says of Blake, "There is . . . a certain half serious perversity and wilful personal humour in the choice and use of these representative names, which must be taken into account by a startled reader unless he wishes to run off at a false tangent." (*Works*, XVI, 147)

There is an interesting parallel to this portrayal of Wordsworth in *The Portrait*, where Swinburne describes the reaction of Peter, the portrait-painter, to the lady's device for killing her husband, thus:

"Then this Peter greatly commended her, for he was a man that rejoiced in all manner of shameful dealing, and was also unclean of his life, as is the fashion of men that paint and men that make songs and verses; for this Peter also made many amorous poems, and played upon stringed instruments marvellously well. And the lives of such men as are painters, or such as are poets, are most often evil and foolish; therefore it may be well conceived of this Peter that he was a very lewd man." (*Works*, XVIII, 4)

In both, Swinburne is clearly laughing at the moralistic attitude toward art which had prompted attacks upon him as upon others.

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Jacques Sypher, Jr., "Victoria's Lapse from Virtue: A Lost Leaf from *La Sœur de la Reine*," *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, XXI:4 (October 1973), 350.

<sup>4</sup> *New Writings*, p. 229. There is a fuller description of the context of this quotation in *Letters*, I, 161-162, n. 2.

*double-entendre*, and, in Swinburne's letter, becomes more explicit, here loses the surface meaning altogether.

Lang believes that Swinburne's letter "momentarily fused (or confused) 'La Fille du policeman' and 'La Sœur de la reine.'" <sup>5</sup> The letter claims that the occasion of Albert's confrontation with the Queen on the subject of her relationship with Wordsworth was that on which, having instigated an insurrection, Albert appears, "at the drawing-room in a working man's blouse with a bludgeon in his hand." <sup>6</sup> Such a confrontation takes place in *La Fille du policeman* in the chapter, 'L'époux de la Reine.' <sup>7</sup>

In this case, it seems that there once existed at least three separate accounts of the Queen's seduction by Wordsworth: that given in the dialogue between Victoria and Lord John Russell in the Houghton fragment, and quoted in part by both Lafourcade and Swinburne; the scene between Victoria and the Duchess of Kent, described by John Bailey; and the confrontation with Albert, described in Swinburne's letter. The first two scenes seem to belong to *La Sœur de la Reine*, the third, to *La Fille du policeman*.

It is possible, however, to read Swinburne's letter in such a way as to see the statement of the fact of the relationship alone as Albert's, and all that follows as a parenthetical explanation, in Swinburne's own voice, of the circumstances of the seduction. In this case, Swinburne is paraphrasing, in his letter, not some missing portion of *La Fille du policeman*, but that fragment of *La Sœur de la Reine* held in the Houghton Library.<sup>8</sup>

Alternatively, it could be that this letter was the first occasion on which Swinburne thought of including the Queen's relationship with Wordsworth, which seems to have been a major motif of *La Sœur de la Reine*, as a grievance which might well be added to Albert's list in *La Fille du policeman*. The tone of the letter as a whole would certainly

<sup>5</sup> *New Writings*, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, IV, 168.

<sup>7</sup> *New Writings*, pp. 155-157.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Sypher's suggestion (*op. cit.*, note 3 above) that Swinburne was not quoting from the Houghton fragment, but that he improved on the fragment in his letter of 1880, and then revised his original text, could be supported by the exuberance of the letter. The support Professor Sypher adduces — that "the passages . . . 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" — though interesting and possible, is not conclusive. Handwriting in a confined space cannot but be different from handwriting which is not cramped.

support this: for, in it, Swinburne leaps from subject to subject, establishing the most tenuous of connections between each.

This does not, of course, rule out the existence of earlier — or later — amalgamations of the two plots which ignore this particular blending.

One is tempted to suggest that — in spite of the fact that the former is presented as a play, the latter as a novel — *La Sœur de la Reine* and *La Fille du policeman* are in fact part and parcel of the same work: Mallock's retelling of Swinburne's account of the plot of what Lang assumes to be *La Sœur de la Reine* contains the love-triangle between Victoria, Lord John Russell and Peel, that occurs in the text of *La Sœur de la Reine* as Lang presents it; and it also contains an allusion to the fact that England is "on the verge of a revolution . . . due to the frightful orgies of the Queen."<sup>10</sup> There is no direct threat of revolution in *La Sœur de la Reine* (although one could claim that the atmosphere is sufficiently disturbed to potentiate one), but there is in *La Fille du policeman*. There is evidence of the Queen's immorality in *La Sœur de la Reine*, but not in *La Fille du policeman*. There is, however, a line in *La Fille du policeman* which obviously carries a double-meaning: Victoria is introduced thus:

La douce et noble créature que Dieu fit asseoir sur un trône chancelant sentit déjà percer les épines de sa couronne de martyre. Elle pliait déjà sous ce fardeau surhumain d'un énorme empire malade. Son beau teint blond s'altérait sous ce poids de tant de milliers d'homme qui pesaient sur elle. [my emphasis]<sup>11</sup>

This line seems to suggest either that Victoria has already been described as possessing lovers, or will be so described in the story.

It seems to me, however, that the simplest and most plausible explanation of the occasional "fusion (or confusion)" of the two stories is that the stories were not two, nor one, but many. In a letter of 1861, Swinburne claims to have "nearly completed my French novel"<sup>12</sup> (which Lang notes as *La Fille du policeman*), and then says: "Should it come forth, and be read, I would follow it up by a tale which I have

<sup>9</sup> Randolph Hughes, apparently referring to the then unpublished letter now published in *Letters*, I, 41-42, claims that *La Sœur de la Reine* was "originally conceived as a 'tale,'" rather than as a drama — *Lesbia Brandon*, ed. Randolph Hughes (London, Falcon Press, 1952), p. X, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Mallock, *Memoirs of Life and Literature* (London, Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1920), p. 56. See also *New Writings*, p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> *New Writings*, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, I, 41.

vaguely conceived already."<sup>13</sup> Then follows a description of the plot of this projected tale — which Lang indicates to be *La Sœur de la Reine*,<sup>14</sup> and which does clearly resemble *La Sœur de la Reine* as he publishes it (although with some additions and some omissions) — and concludes: "There! At this rate I shall have a series of historical romances of the Victorian period rivalling Dumas."<sup>15</sup> This does not necessarily indicate that other "romances of the Victorian period" were already in existence, prior to either *La Fille* or *La Sœur*; but it could be seen in this light. At the least, it shows Swinburne's interest in establishing such a corpus, and thus the possibility that it did come into existence.

The brief allusions in Swinburne's letters to delightful happenings, such as Robert Browning's running "stark naked at noonday through the Marble Arch,"<sup>16</sup> Tennyson and Browning's suicide "by shutting themselves up in a hermetically sealed room with a pan of ignited charcoal between them,"<sup>17</sup> and Carlyle's triumphing over the downfall of the last articulate poets of England, "regardless alike of his years, of the weather, and of the law of the land prohibiting indecent exposure . . . dancing a Highland fling, in a state of total nudity and partial intoxication, down and up the whole length of Cheyne Row, Chelsea, with a Scotch cutty-pipe in his mouth and the Scotch Fiddle on his back" —<sup>18</sup> these, and others, may be references to other portions of the satirical corpus; or, if these letters contain all of these incidents that ever existed, they themselves belong to it. Similarly, "La Mort du Mari" may be all that ever existed of *Sir Brown: drame en 7 actes et 49 tableaux*; but, equally possibly, other scenes may have been created.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 42.

<sup>14</sup> See also Randolph Hughes's "Foreword" to his edition of *Lesbia Brandon* (*loc. cit.*, note 9 above).

W. M. Rossetti, writing to Watts-Dunton a few months after the poet's death, asked if he had "found any trace of a very amusing performance by Swinburne, earlier than the Cheyne Walk days; a drama in French called *La Sœur de la Reine*. It is a rollicking skit, over some detached pages of which we used to laugh hugely, purporting to deal with the early life of Queen Victoria. Lord John Russell, of all men in the world, figures as her ardent and I fear overmuch favoured lover." Cecil Y. Lang indicates that Swinburne's "Cheyne Walk days" were 1862–1865 (*Letters*, VI, 417).

<sup>15</sup> *Letters*, I, 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 293.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>19</sup> See *Letters*, V, 54–55. Cecil Y. Lang is, I feel, mistaken in implying that this is part of *La Sœur de la Reine* (see *New Writings*, pp. 229–230).

Certainly, we can include in the corpus the magnificent "Report of the Proceedings on the First Anniversary Session of the Newest Shakespeare Society," with its "Additions and Corrections";<sup>20</sup> "Tennyson or Darwin?";<sup>21</sup> the two letters to the Editor of the *St. James's Gazette*<sup>22</sup> and the one to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*,<sup>23</sup> on Gladstone and Home Rule. Lang also refers to "some fragments of a burlesque verse drama . . . in the Rutgers University Library."<sup>24</sup>

Lang himself points out the fact that, in one version of *La Sœur de la Reine*, "Kitty is the Queen's daughter, not her sister."<sup>25</sup> He also, as we have seen, detects a momentary fusion or confusion of *La Fille du policeman* and *La Sœur de la Reine* in Swinburne's letter. He suggests the same<sup>26</sup> in relation to what he assumes to be Field's version of *La Sœur de la Reine*,<sup>27</sup> but which Field calls *La Princesse Katy*.<sup>28</sup> He speaks of the Wordsworth-Victoria relationship as a "theme, or a variation" that has been lost.<sup>29</sup> In talking of *La Fille du policeman*, he suggests the possibility that he has stumbled on two versions of one chapter.<sup>30</sup> The fact that Mallock does not record that Swinburne called the "historical drama" of which he sketched the account, by either of the two familiar titles, and that he claims that Swinburne asserted that this drama "existed in his memory only,"<sup>31</sup> would seem to confirm this view. So does Field's assertion that *La Princesse Katy* was "unwritten."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, insofar as we rely on reports of the stories' contents, rather than their actual text, it can always be argued that discrepancies are due to failures of memory. Thus John Bailey, after his report of his friend's quotation from Swinburne, says, "I quote from memory, very likely not Swinburne's words."<sup>33</sup> And this could be made good

<sup>20</sup> *Works*, XI, 198-222.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 342-345.

<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, V, 184-187 and 220-222.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 291-293.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 186, n. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *New Writings*, p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>31</sup> W. H. Mallock, *op. cit.* (note 10 above), p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> *New Writings*, p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> John Bailey, 1864-1931, *Letters and Diaries*, ed. Sarah Bailey (London, John Murray, 1935), p. 175.

even in the case of Swinburne's own account, given, it seems, some twenty years after first composition.

Of internal evidence to support my point I can offer only the *double-entendre* of *La Fille du policeman*, with its suggestion of Victoria's immorality. This theme has no part in *La Fille du policeman* as it stands. It may, as has already been suggested, form part of lost portions of the story. Or this solitary hint may exist as a cohesive allusion to another "romance of the Victorian period," either anticipated or already in existence. It could, quite simply, have been included in *La Fille du policeman* to prepare for *La Sœur de la Reine*, which, as we have seen, Swinburne was already sketching in his mind prior to its completion. It is true that the plot he outlines in his letter of 1861 contains no allusion to Victoria's immorality; but this does not deny the possibility that he added to this conception, and that, in *La Fille du policeman*, he prepared for his introduction of this as a major motif in *La Sœur de la Reine*. Alternatively, it might have been the joyful implications of words at first intended without any double-meaning which suggested the motif. Whichever view is correct — whether the planned plot of *La Sœur de la Reine* caused the insertion of a *double-entendre* in *La Fille du policeman* or whether the verbal play of *La Fille du policeman* suggested additions to the proposed plot of *La Sœur de la Reine* — either supports the suggestion that neither story was a totally discrete entity, but that each fecundated the other.

It may be that Lang is being over skeptical when he speaks of "Mallock's . . . ill-remembered synopsis"<sup>24</sup> — after all, Mallock claims that the synopsis was Swinburne's, not his own<sup>25</sup> — and that we ought to have more faith in the variant accounts given by Mallock, Field, and Bailey.

It is possible to view the material that Lang discusses and presents as containing *three* plots (not two) — those of *La Sœur de la Reine*, *La Fille du policeman*, and *La Princesse Katy*. In spite of the similarity of the names "Katy" and "Kitty,"<sup>26</sup> the plot that Field describes is more than a variation or a simple amalgamation (as Lang suggests) of the plots of the other two.<sup>27</sup> The difference between being the Queen's

<sup>24</sup> *New Writings*, p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>26</sup> The fact that Field was an American (*Ibid.*, p. 226), suggests that the names might have been identical; and that "Katy" was substituted, by him, for the less familiar "Kitty."

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jean Overton Fuller's account of Swinburne's "flagellant manuscripts" as



sister and her daughter, although itself not massive, does cause significant dissimilarities in plot. And, even apart from these, other major differences exist between *La Sœur de la Reine* and the outline of *La Princesse Katy* given by Field.

To these three plots were added endless variations.<sup>85</sup> (It is significant that Field says that "There was no special plot.")<sup>89</sup> It was part of the fun that the plots of each should be fused and confused, that words said in one context, such as the Queen's description of her relationship with Wordsworth, should be repeated in another; that the name of the Queen's sister in one version should so closely resemble that of her daughter in another; that the fate of one young girl should resemble that of another. (Both Katy of *La Princesse Katy*<sup>40</sup> and Nelli of *La Fille du policeman* have unpleasant experiences in a cab.<sup>41</sup> Swinburne anticipates that the Queen's sister in *La Sœur de la Reine* will be "finally consumed by an ill-requited attachment to Lord John Russell";<sup>42</sup> Nelli is infatuated with Prince Albert.<sup>43</sup> Nelli refers to "ma pauvre cœur de seize ans";<sup>44</sup> Victoria to "mon sang de seize ans.")<sup>45</sup> Princess Kitty charcoals herself to death,<sup>46</sup> just as Browning and Tennyson do.<sup>47</sup>

Quite without intending it, Lang himself joins this game, in his sug-

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"a vast and tangled jungle, in which he rings the changes upon a limited number of Christian and surnames in a manner suggesting connections between one piece and another, sometimes falsely." — Jean Overton Fuller, *Swinburne: A Critical Biography* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 68.

<sup>85</sup> Another major version of the fate of Kitty (the Queen's sister) was created in 1875 as a result of the context in which the *Daily News* had referred to this "unacted French melodrama by a living English poet." (See *Letters*, III, 17-18, and 7, note 2). Cf. Jean Overton Fuller's comment on the flagellant manuscripts: "Obviously, Swinburne worked many times over similar themes." (Jean Overton Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 258). Swinburne similarly varies his account of Browning's indecent exposure. Compare *Letters*, I, 293, and IV, 223.

<sup>86</sup> *New Writings*, p. 227.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>88</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>89</sup> *Letters*, I, 42.

<sup>40</sup> *New Writings*, p. 166.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>42</sup> See Houghton fragment. Cf. with Swinburne's references to his own "émotions de seize ans" (*Letters*, V, 8, n. 1) and his sensitiveness to Philip Marston at the age of sixteen, because of his remembrance of "my own enthusiasms at that age." (*Letters*, I, 240-241).

<sup>43</sup> *Letters*, I, 42.

<sup>44</sup> See p. 360 above.

<sup>45</sup> See p. 360 above.

<sup>46</sup> See p. 360 above.

<sup>47</sup> See p. 360 above.

gestion<sup>48</sup> that Wordsworth, and not Lord John Russell, is the father of the Queen's daughter, the Princess Kitty. Undoubtedly, Wordsworth's relationship with Victoria had been one that could have produced a child; but there is no known version of the story which suggests that it did.

In doing this, Lang is clearly acting in a way that would have pleased Swinburne, who is known to have encouraged even Tennyson to join in the game. He is reported as saying to him, of his *Idylls of the King*, "We understand, of course, that Arthur is Prince Albert and Guinevere is Queen Victoria. But who is Launcelot?"<sup>49</sup>

Other versions of Swinburne's "Victorian romances" may exist somewhere in Swinburne's own hand. But, undoubtedly, the majority of variations never existed on paper: they were created in the joy of Swinburne's verbal performance. Their hold on permanent existence was in their impression on Swinburne's audience. The detail of the accounts that were committed to paper by his hearers — some even at second hand — shows how magnificently Swinburne must have delivered his delightful absurdities.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *New Writings*, p. 230.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted by C. K. Hyder, *Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame* (New York, Russell and Russell Inc., 1963), p. 284, n. 7.

<sup>50</sup> What he does is similar to what he describes Blake — in a quite different spirit — as doing: "he seems to mix up the actual events of history with the . . . legends of his own mythology." (*Works*, XVI, 105).

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