

Fig. 1. Simeon Solomon: Sketch for illustration of the Swinburne novel Lesbia Brandon. (Box 31, Folder 20, Janet Camp Troxell Collection of Rossetti Manuscripts. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.)

## SWINBURNE AT PRINCETON

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In the 1860s Swinburne was as engaged in writing fiction as in producing material for his first published volume of poetry, *Poems and Ballads*. The manuscript of his novel *Lesbia Brandon*, however, never went into print during his lifetime because Watts-Dunton disapproved of its incestuous subtext. The opening pages of the novel, which was published only posthumously by Randolph Hughes in 1952, give a detailed description of two pairs of eyes, those of brother and sister. Their resemblance to one another is so uncanny as to make both seem sexually ambiguous, if not entirely androgynous: "Either smiled with the same lips and looked straight with the same clear eyes."

The frontispiece to this article, Figure 1, a sketch by the artist Simeon Solomon, gives us some idea of what the idealized beauty of the characters in this novel was to be. The second illustration, Figure 2, shows the younger brother Herbert, recovering from a flogging, sitting with his sister who has turned to look at him from where she sits at the piano. Herbert's teacher Denham, it is explained in the narrative, enjoys flogging his teenage pupil to punish Herbert's sister indirectly for being sexually inaccessible to him—she is already a married woman. Herbert is said to resemble his sister especially closely when his looks are heated by the application of Denham's strap, allowing Denham to enjoy the illusion of having punished the sister instead.<sup>3</sup>

Solomon apparently drew these sketches for the purpose of illustrating Swinburne's novel in 1865, but nothing was ever done with them. We know that at least six of them have been preserved, because two are privately owned and another four are in the Janet Camp Troxell Collection of Rossetti Manuscripts in the subseries, "Papers of Other Persons," under Solomon's name in the Manuscripts Division of Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

It would be easy to assume that because the manuscript of *Lesbia Brandon* lay in a drawer for so long, that the sketches were forgotten, and what would have been a prestigious commission for Solomon fell by the

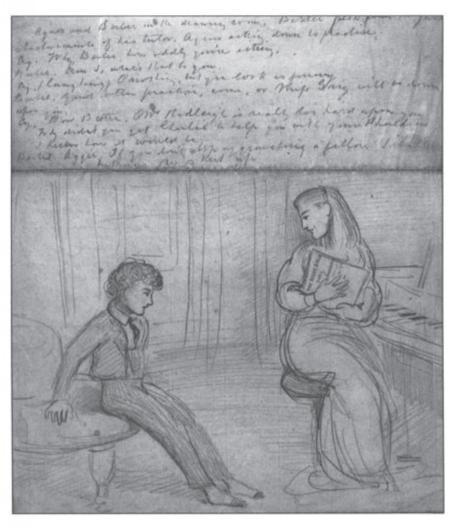


Fig. 2. Simeon Solomon: Sketch for illustration of the Swinburne novel *Lesbia Brandon*. (Box 31, Folder 20, Janet Camp Troxell Collection of Rossetti Manuscripts. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.)

wayside. The story is more complicated than that, however. The relationship between Swinburne and Solomon, which began enthusiastically when they met through Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the 1860s, was eventually embittered by Swinburne's artistic misinterpretation of Solomon's goals as an artist, but even more so by Swinburne's personal rejection of Solomon for his increasingly open homosexual lifestyle.

In Cecil Lang's six-volume edition of the Swinburne letters, there are several letters by Solomon to Swinburne but none from the poet to the painter. Swinburne remarks late in life, in a letter to someone else, that Solomon has been hawking the poet's letters to him on street corners, hoping to make money from their sensational content. Perhaps this activity was Solomon's way of avenging himself on Swinburne for his homophobia — to show that in his youth, Swinburne himself had had bisexual leanings, was quite obsessed with flagellation by both men and women, and did not disapprove of the homoerotic tendencies in his friend's drawings. Such tendencies can be inferred from the two remaining sketches at Princeton, not reproduced in this article. One shows a naked man with his head flirtatiously turned to look back over one shoulder. The other shows many handsome young models' heads with Greek names inscribed under them.

An examination of the context and history surrounding the Solomon drawings at Princeton, and more generally, the Swinburne-Solomon relationship, could illuminate controversies both within the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artist-friends to which both belonged, and within the secondary literature of the twentieth century concerning Decadent Romanticism, including what Hugh Kenner calls "the Pound Era." 5

In *The Dark Blue*, a journal of aesthetics that was published at Oxford briefly in the late 1860s and early 1870s, Swinburne brought out a review of a prose poem by Solomon, ostensibly to help the painter's cause on the artistic market.<sup>6</sup> In his review, however, he overlooks the mystical and ideological content of Solomon's style, focusing instead on the sexually ambiguous and androgynous content. He also advances the possibly anti-Semitic opinion that Solomon tended toward a certain sublime excess of feeling in his imagery because of his Hebraic origins.<sup>7</sup>

One of the images that comes under fire is Solomon's depiction of Sappho (see Figure 3). Swinburne overlooks the fact that Solomon was probably inspired by the head of Christina Rossetti. One can appreciate the resemblance by examining the portrait reproduced in Figure 4 from a chalk drawing by her brother Dante Gabriel. The importance of Sappho to Swinburne's poetry is already widely accepted; his interest in

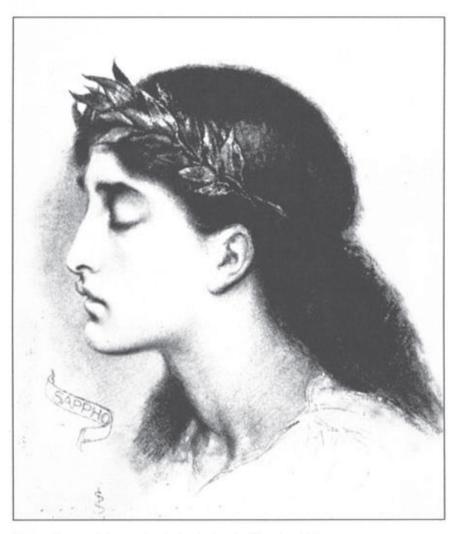


Fig. 3. Simeon Solomon: Study for the head of Sappho, 1862.

the poetic model provided him by Christina Rossetti's work remains a fertile field for investigation. I hope to demonstrate its potential below, by discussing the poetic manuscripts by Swinburne which have been preserved in the Troxell Collection at Princeton.

When Solomon saw Swinburne's review in print, he understandably objected to the author's tone, although he writes so apologetically to Swinburne about this fact that it is obvious how fearful he is of alienating a person whose influence might still help his career. When Swinburne collected his critical essays for publication in an anthology years later, he omitted the Solomon review. The best possible interpretation would be that he acknowledged the justice of Solomon's criticisms. Whatever the reason, the existence of the review, the Solomon letters, and the undeveloped sketches for *Lesbia Brandon* offer the possibility of new analyses of the relationships between Swinburne and his friends.

Although it is not the purpose of this article to undertake such an investigation, I want to note that there is another female artist who has to be taken into account in this story besides Christina Rossetti, and that is Solomon's sister, Rebecca, also a painter. The Solomon family consisted of three children, including an older brother named Abraham. All three became good painters.

One of Solomon's best known paintings is of the well-known Old Testament anecdote of an angel protecting Shadrach, Meschach, and Zabednego in the fiery furnace. Critics have speculated that Solomon modeled the faces of the three humans on himself, Swinburne, and his sister Rebecca. If the angel is, like Sappho, an androgynous adaptation of Christina Rossetti, then the painting becomes a very interesting reply to the composition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's well-known *Blessed Damosel*. In that painting Venus hovers over another androgynous-looking threesome, while at the bottom of the picture the artist reclines like Keats' errant knight in his poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci," looking upward, mesmerized by a preternatural female in the skies above.

Before I pursue any line of argument in relation to the abovementioned material, it is well to remember the purpose of this article; namely to introduce the reader to the research potential of material in the Manuscripts Division of the Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections relating to Swinburne and his circle, and to uncover connections with Swinburne holdings in the Symington Collection of the Rutgers University Department of Special Collections and Archives. The holdings of the Manuscripts Division of Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections are rich in material relating to the poet Swinburne and his circle. The most famous portion of this material is contained in the Janet Camp Troxell Collection of Rossetti Manuscripts. That collection includes over three thousand manuscript items relating to the Rossettis and their friends, among whom Swinburne was one of the most important.

The scope of the collection extends chronologically from Ford Madox Brown, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first painting teacher, to modern novelist Ford Madox Ford, who was Brown's grandson. Dante Gabriel Rossetti is the most widely represented figure, but there are also substantial holdings for Christina Rossetti. Among the items relating to her are over thirty poetic manuscripts and more than thirty folders of correspondence, including such recipients/senders as Mackenzie Bell. Robert Browning, Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll, Anne Gilchrist, Edmund Gosse, Lucy Madox Brown Rossetti, and her husband William Michael Rossetti who was Christina's other brother. Many of these names also appear in the Symington Collection at Rutgers, especially Edmund Gosse and William Michael Rossetti. Rutgers is fortunate to have a bound manuscript volume of correspondence between William Michael Rossetti and Swinburne, much of which is about poetry, and a large portion of which relates to their common interest in Blake. Another outstanding collection of correspondence, also in the Symington Collection at Rutgers, is constituted by Andre Gide's letters to Edmund Gosse, not to mention many Gosse manuscripts.

Among the Christina Rossetti letters to unidentified recipients is an especially interesting one in which she describes the development of her style as a writer. In addition to the holdings for Christina Rossetti and her two brothers in the Troxell Collection, Princeton also owns separate collections of manuscript material for each of them, individually catalogued under each of their names. In addition to the manuscript material relating to Swinburne in the Troxell Collection, the most unusual items of which are decidedly the Solomon sketches, there are significant Swinburne holdings in the outstanding literary archives of the Robert H. Taylor Collection of rare books and manuscripts as well as in the vast and rich General Manuscripts Collection.

Princeton owns over forty letters by, to, and about Swinburne including almost as many different correspondents. I will describe only a few in detail here for the sake of calling attention to central themes in Swinburne's work. Among the most unusual items in the Symington

Collection at Rutgers is the autograph manuscript of the ballad imitation Swinburne wrote entitled "Burd Margaret." Legend has it that this ballad imitation fooled the local people of the dialect area it imitates into accepting it as an authentic piece of traditional balladry, so skillful is Swinburne in imitating traditional ballad style.

Researchers who know this manuscript will be delighted to learn that in Princeton's Robert H. Taylor Collection there is a letter, undated except for the day "Sept. 15," written from Capheaton to a recipient addressed simply as Hatch, in which Swinburne revels in the acceptance of one of his ballad imitations as authentic. "One party," he triumphs, "was elated at such a discovery but only wondered where it had been all those years to escape his discovery." Swinburne goes on to specify that this example of his poetic skills as an imitator was written "in broad Northumbrian." The researcher will naturally have to investigate that dialect's ballads to ascertain whether there is indeed a connection here to "Burd Margaret."

Among the many transcriptions of correspondence preserved in the Symington Collection is a bundle of letters from Swinburne to Richard Monckton Milnes, Lord Houghton, the Keats biographer and well-to-do estate owner at whose social gatherings Swinburne found and formed a lifelong friendship with Sir Richard Burton, translator of *The Arabian Nights*. The Robert H. Taylor Collection includes a very eloquent letter written by Grenfell Baker to Swinburne in 1890, the year of Burton's death, in tribute to the great friendship Swinburne and Burton had enjoyed for so many years.

Two of the other most interesting letters to be numbered among the Swinburne correspondence at Princeton are a letter to an unidentified correspondent about religion and a letter to painter Edward Burne-Jones about his artistic career, written in 1896, just weeks before his lifelong collaborator William Morris died.

The letter to the unidentified correspondent, undated, spins a tale about Swinburne writing an elegy to commemorate a married couple who take poison to escape the effect of their recent conversion to Calvinism. Swinburne was noted for his pagan attitude toward nature—Lesbia Brandon is charged with vivid descriptions of the elemental forces of nature in constant turmoil. He also explicitly rejected the Judaeo-Christian tradition after a brief encounter with Catholicism while a student at Oxford.

It was also at Oxford that Swinburne first met Burne-Jones, who together with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris was working

on the medieval-style murals for the Oxford Union Building. In the letter to Burne-Jones, written August 12, 1896, many years after Swinburne had settled at the Pines with Watts-Dunton and his wife, and a long time since his original intimacy with the Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne shows himself to be as irrepressibly fond of parody and bawdiness as ever. He swears that the graces of a Lord Chesterfield could not do justice to the graces of Burne-Jones' art. He bewails the fact that Burne-Jones was not the one to illustrate Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* (presumably) for Morris' Kelmscott edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that was published just a few years prior to that time. Morris died on October 3, 1896, just six weeks after this letter was sent.

Death is a subject against which Swinburne's poetry strives as intensely as it is a theme embraced in Christina Rossetti's more renunciatory mode by her poetry. Although the Princeton collections contain no correspondence between Swinburne and Christina Rossetti, we know that they were good friends and that they greatly admired one another's genius. Given the strongly symbolic role both Christina Rossetti and Rebecca Solomon seem to have played in Simeon Solomon's vision as an artist, it would seem imperative that we investigate the Swinburne-Christina Rossetti relationship more deeply. Such an investigation would help us to understand the parameters of group biography useful in approaching the Pre-Raphaelite circle, as well as, of course, enriching our view of both poets.

It is precisely in such a context that the researcher will want to examine the poetic manuscripts of both Swinburne and Christina Rossetti held by Princeton's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. It would be especially interesting to compile an overview of Swinburne's revisions and corrections. Did his unusual style spring automatically from his pen, or did he work on each line to produce its peculiar dilations of syntax, and fever, and music? And what effect on our understanding of Swinburne's "musicality" will be produced by our view of the revisions in poems such as "Tiresias," or the sonnets written for publication with *Tristram of Lyonesse* about four Jacobean dramatists, or the Princeton manuscript which complements so substantially the one at Rutgers for "Iseult at Tintagel" from the *Tristram*, or indeed the almost unrevised holograph of the short Sapphic poem "Erotion"?

To touch on a few of the critical implications of these questions, let us consider briefly just one point of comparison between Christina Rossetti's poetry and Swinburne's. In 1860, apparently just after her thirtieth birthday and well before Swinburne had published any major



Fig. 4. Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Chalk drawing of Christina Rossetti and her mother, 1872. (Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.)

poetry, Christina Rossetti wrote a poem which both her brother William Michael and her friend Swinburne greatly admired, entitled "Passing Away." In it the World, the Soul, and God all take voice to remind the self that it is passing away: "Chances, beauty, and youth, sapped day by day," the World reminds us; "A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay," the Soul warns us; and then in a reversal which celebrates the resurrection and the Christian notion of afterlife, God says, "Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day, My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear me say. Then I answered: Yea." 12

Although the previous stanza mentions the approach of Jesus Christ in the traditional form of the Bridegroom, this stanza explicitly posits the relationship of lovers in God's eyes as brother and sister, or even perhaps, sister and sister. The latter possibility is, of course, especially interesting in light of Rossetti's best-known poem "Goblin Market," in which two sisters make love to one another to save themselves from damnation.

Swinburne too uses the phrase "my sister, my spouse," but in a much different context, that is, in his poem "Dolores," which appeared in the first edition of *Poems and Ballads*. The allusion to Christina Rossetti's poem raises many questions about the link between the two poets, about their sexuality and about their views of religion and in particular of the meaning of death.

One of today's most sensitive Swinburne commentators, Leslie Brisman, argues in a recent essay that in the poem "Anactoria," Swinburne's best-known contribution to the "fictions of Sappho" which preoccupied the nineteenth century, the poet "breathes in no semitones of death; he or she aspires to the condition of music rather than acknowledgement of mortality." Brisman remarks that Swinburne's speaker — Anactoria/Sappho — "rails against the ruler of the universe who so separated desire from fulfillment," expressing the demonic ambition which Brisman argues is the true object of the poems as opposed to its ostensible object, or Love:

who bade exceed
The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
Pain animate the dust of dead desire,
And life yield up her flower to violent fate.
Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,
Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,
And mix his immortality with death. (II. 177-84) 15

Sappho herself, in a fragment scholars surely only uncovered long after Swinburne's encounter with this poet, quips about death in the following fragment:

We know this much Death is an evil; We have the gods' word for it; they too Would die if death Were a good thing.<sup>16</sup>

That Sappho is much more complex a poet than Swinburne gave her credit for is obvious from another fragment, also discovered only in the twentieth century, which brings her much closer to Christina Rossetti's viewpoint:

I have often asked you not to come now

Hermes, Lord, you who lead the ghosts home: But this time

I am not happy; I want to die, to see the moist lotus open along Acheron.<sup>17</sup>

In Swinburne's poem "Dolores," which like "Anactoria" dates from the first edition of *Poems and Ballads*, the radical goal on the poet's part is to remove her/himself altogether from the Christian context "by addressing an omnipotent female deity," as Camille Paglia contends. 18 There Swinburne wrests Christina Rossetti's phrase from its context in a conscious reply to her very personal Christian acceptance of death, twisting the yea-sayer into a celebrant of a "self-made colossus rising from the primeval mud to tear down heaven's gate." The poet addresses that goddess with the line, "O my sister, my spouse, and my mother, Our Lady of Pain." 19

Ah thy people, thy children, thy chosen,
Marked cross from the womb and perverse!
They have found out the secret to cozen
The gods that constrain us and curse;

They alone, they are wise, and none other; Give me place, even me, in their train, O my sister, my spouse, and my mother, Our Lady of Pain. (II. 100-107)

One is reminded in this context, not just of Christina Rossetti's words, but of another of Swinburne's poetic forbears, William Blake. Blake addresses the worm in "The Gates of Paradise" in similar terms: "The door of death I open found & the Worm Weaving in the Ground. Thou'rt my Mother from the Womb, Wife, Sister, Daughter to the Tomb, Weaving to Dreams the Sexual strife and weeping over the Web of Life." Blake's lines seems to have been revised by Swinburne into a psychosexual image of female penetration of the Other, perhaps purposely reversing the worm's constructive role on the loom of the soul in Blake.

That Swinburne thought of Christina Rossetti in the context of Sappho is clear from a letter written to her brother Dante Gabriel and reproduced in Lang's edition:

I am delighted to hear of your sister's projects. I read again lately her little story of "Hero" in the Argosy [later entitled "Father and Lover"]—and it seems to me, if only from the song there near the end, that she of all living women of genius (or dead, for that matter—for I don't imagine the Tenth Muse of Lesbos would have tried her quite otherwise-employed hand at inditing songs & stories to soothe the cradles of infants to the necessary preliminaries of whose production she held such strong objections) is best qualified & surest to write what will give deep & passionate delight to imaginative children, as well as the more articulate and expressible pleasure of beautiful work to men."<sup>21</sup>

It remains for the researcher to decide just how Swinburne really envisions Christina Rossetti's emanation in his poetry and just how she relates in particular to his obsession with Sappho as his "Tenth Muse."

The tension the reader may perhaps have noted between Brisman and Paglia — namely, that Paglia sees Swinburne's divine bitches as profoundly sexual beings and Brisman sees them as asexual demons who burn up in their own flames of anger — is at the heart of a controversy over Swinburne and more generally the so-called "Decadent Romantics" which has been raging since the dawn of Modernism.

Swinburne has stimulated renewed interest among feminist critics today, because his writing lends itself to interpretation as a feminist poetics for female desire for some twentieth-century feminist writers, such as, for instance, H.D. She writes to a friend that reading *Lesbia Brandon* put her into an "electric coma," because in reading Swinburne's fictional account of the history of his own sexuality she found not only her poetic vocation but discovered her own bisexuality as well.<sup>22</sup>

The three leading poetic voices of English Modernism, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats, only made such a discovery more difficult by trying to banish Swinburne from their own poetic legacies. T. S. Eliot rejects Swinburne's poetry, with a few exceptions, because he says that Swinburne prefers sound to sense — an argument echoed by Brisman in his remarks about music in "Anactoria." Hugh Kenner, in *The Pound Era*, argues that Ezra Pound helped to desublimate the fictions of Sappho developed by earlier generations by improving upon modern adaptations of the original Greek, including Swinburne's, and thus displacing the contribution of the Decadent Romantics to our own times. It is well known that Yeats renounced the Swinburnian diction of his early poetry for the rougher magic of his late verse.

Hugh Kenner remarks that for all his brilliant Greek scholarship, Swinburne pours "hot fudge" on the few crystalline fragments of Sappho's poetry which had survived to his time, adding that Pound had a surer sense of diction and was, at the same time, still true to his source. The nineteenth century, especially at the time of Swinburne and Solomon, was anxious to discover a great woman poet who could rival or at least measure up to Homer, and whose legendary embrace would accommodate all their own desires. Feminist critics would argue that in rejecting the Decadent Romantic treatment of Sappho—their "fictions of Sappho"—the early moderns of our own century, men all of them, reject the power with which the Decadent Romantics had endowed women, a power which deserved to be passed along to a feminist posterity.

Does Swinburne's poetry aspire to the condition of music and thereby produce a power not to be underestimated? How do the corrections and revisions discernible in the poetic manuscripts at Princeton enlighten our understanding of the creation of such power? And what impact would *Lesbia Brandon*, itself full of occasional verse, complete with Solomon's illustrations, have had not just upon his circle of friends but upon the entire development of the late nineteenth century had it appeared in print in Swinburne's own time?

The researcher is invited to visit Princeton, and Rutgers, and find out.

## NOTES

- 1. Philip Henderson, Swinburne, Portrait of a Poet (New York: MacMillan, 1974), p. 99.
- 2. Algernon Charles Swinburne, Lesbia Brandon (London: Falcon Press, 1952), p. 39.
- 3. Lesbia Brandon, p. 31.
- 4. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), Vol. 1, p. xxxvi.
- 5. Hugh Kenner explains at the outset of his book *The Pound Era* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971) that the following "was planned as an X-ray moving picture of how our epoch was extricated from the fin-de-siecle" by the modernists, T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, and Ezra Pound.
- 6. Letters, Vol. II, #388, May 17, 1871, p. 144.
- Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Simeon Solomon: Notes on his 'Vision of Love' and other Studies," A Pilgrimage of Pleasure: Essays and Studies (Boston: Gorham Press, 1913), p. 52. Princeton is lucky enough to own Swinburne's own copy of this essay in the General Rare Book Collection.
- 8. Letters, Vol. II, #400, October [?], 1871, pp. 158-159.
- 9. Letters, Vol. II, #478, Swinburne to Watts, May 10, 1873. Lang notes in a footnote to this letter that the Solomon essay seems pointedly to have been omitted from Swinburne's list of essays.
- 10. Autograph signed letter, Swinburne to Hatch, September 15, 18??, Robert H. Taylor Collection, Box: file cabinet, Folder: Swinburne, Algernon Charles. Published with permission of the Robert H. Taylor Collection, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- 11. Antony H. Harrison, a Princeton researcher, working on an edition of Christina Rossetti's letters, recently wrote to me that Swinburne's "comments—those of an avowed atheist—on her religious beliefs and values are especially entertaining."
- 12. As quoted in Ralph A. Bellas, Christina Rossetti (Boston: Twayne, 1977), pp. 79-80.
- Joan DeJean, Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 14. Leslie Brisman, "Of Lips Divine and Calm: Swinburne and the Language of Shelleyan Love," *Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), ed. Harold Bloom, p. 213.
- 15. Brisman, Pre-Raphaelite Poets, p. 212.
- 16. Sappho, Sappho, translated by Mary Bernard, (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 87.
- 17. Sappho, p. 97.
- 18. Camille Paglia, "Nature, Sex and Decadence," *Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 221.
- 19. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne: Poems* (New York: Scribner, 1909), p. 66.
- 20. William Blake, "The Gates of Paradise," *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), ed. David Erdman, p. 266.
- 21. Letters, Vol. I. #344, February 22, 1870.
- 22. Cassandra Laity, "H.D. and A.C. Swinburne: Decadence and Sapphic Modernism," *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), eds. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow, pp. 217-240.
- 23. T. S. Eliot, "Swinburne as Poet," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1930), pp. 144-150.