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Swinburne reads Keats: Prostitution, pornography and the decadence of aesthetic critique

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Abstract: Keats and Swinburne loom large as purveyors of the “aesthetic” in its early and late nineteenth-century forms—that is, as a discourse of subject-formation through the exercise of tasteful distinction and as a self-referential discourse of art for art’s sake, respectively. In this essay, I analyse how Swinburne constructs a “Keats” that will allow him to master a “manliness in crisis” that affected both writers. If this “crisis” is historicized by the body as a social matter that Victorian legislators were policing in the forms of prostitution and pornography, it is, I argue, this materiality that Keats and Swinburne insist of enjoying rather than sublimating. The ultimate question I pose is this: can aesthetics become the critical discourse that recent revisionary readings have postulated if both a Romantic and a Decadent aesthetic insist on enjoying the body, materiality, gender instability and other topoi communicated by prostitution, pornography and poetry.

Subjects: Arts & Humanities; Language & Literature; Literature; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Literature & Gender Studies; Literary/Critical Theory; Deconstruction; Marxist Theory; Psychoanalytical Theory; Queer Theory

Keywords: Keats; Swinburne; aesthetics; crisis-in-masculinity (gender); historical materiality; British Romanticism; decadence; prostitution; pornography; critique



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Prostitution and pornography are usually thought of as social evils, while art, literature and the aesthetic shine forth as discourses with the power to effect social change. Recent attempts to renew the reforming power of the aesthetic manifest a struggle, in short, to get beyond what Paul de Man once called “aesthetic ideology”. In this article, I demonstrate how two critical purveyors of the aesthetic immerse literature in the instabilities that it invariably aestheticizes: instabilities of the body and gender, sexuality and masculinity/femininity. If Keats falls back on the putative superiority of the masculinist position that continues to motivate both the male (cinematic) gaze and the inoculative power of (liberal) irony, how, then, does Swinburne read Keats against himself? I will argue that Swinburne’s wanton unworking of the aesthetic insists on unveiling a geopolitical history of nineteenth-century sexualities where the possibility of any tenable position finds itself destabilized, incorporated, ecstatically decadent.

It is too idealistic ... and therefore cruel.¹

Keats and Swinburne loom large as purveyors of the “aesthetic” in its early and late nineteenth-century forms—that is, as a discourse of subject-formation through the exercise of tasteful distinction and as a self-referential discourse of art for art’s sake, respectively. If we define nineteenth-century Britain in terms of a constant conflict between a normative “manliness in crisis” and the concomitant remasculinization of gender identities threatened by effeminization due to the rise of fashion, consumerism and the cult of domesticity, this remasculinization is typified by investments in “manly leaders”, war hero worship, the beard movement, a Muscular Christianity, a male-centred medical practice and a re-insistence on animal baiting contra the SPCA (Garofalo, 2009, p. 9; Oldstone-Moore, 2005). Keats and Swinburne simultaneously exemplify and problematize discourses of remasculinization in that they are both idiotically masculinist² and perpetually slipping into dangerous sexual identifications beyond the stereotypical seesaw between emasculated and remasculinized subject positions. Does the aesthetic, then, resolve this vertiginous undoing of masculinity, or is this back-and-forth between an effeminized masculinity and the production of a “manliness enlisted to quell those crises in modernization that have been so often represented as threats to masculinity” exactly what cannot be resolved in a sublimated artistic space? (Garofalo, 2009, p. 9)

What if this irresolution is, instead of being quelled, exacerbated by the free play of desire caught up in the throes of aesthetic experience? To question the cultural production of gender identity and sexual identifications in this manner is to situate the aesthetic within the history of sexuality. The “homosexual” is a familiar Foucauldian context for defining the cultural formation (*Bildung*) of gender and sexual identity in nineteenth-century Europe, yet the “prostitute’s profound artificiality” is, as Amanda Anderson argues in a British context, an “equally charged site for some of the most acute anxieties about agency, character, and reform” (Anderson, 1993, p. 61; Foucault, 1978; Cf. Anderson, 49; in regard to the prostitute, see Bernheimer, 1989; Gilman, 1993; Goodwin, 1993).

I focus on the prostitute as a contradictory “site” of subjectification so as to clarify the relationship between a remasculinizing of discursive sex and the nineteenth-century cult of the aesthetic. The Contagious Disease Acts implemented in 1864 and 1866 typify this policing of masculinity as well as foregrounding an imperial globalization of sexual surveillance that I will return to in closing.³ These legal reforms mark how medical practitioners attempt to resolve the indeterminacy of masculinity by constructing women as objects for an almost exclusively male profession as well as for the health benefits of soldiers and sailors in “garrison and dock towns”. Medicine, along with prostitution and the military, practically embody, then, a successful masculinity by confining women to a passive role as analytic constructs, patients and sex workers. Medico-moral discipline forms, in other words, the horizon upon which a male-dominated aesthetic cultism emerges in nineteenth-century Britain. I will explicate this cult by exploring the historical differences legible in a Keatsian (Romantic) and a Swinburnian (Decadent) aesthetic via readings of how Keats and Swinburne both engage with prostitution and pornography (literally, writing about prostitutes) in *Lamia* (1821) and *Poems and Ballads: First Series* (1866).

My overarching intent is, however, to complicate re-elaborations of the Kantian equation between the aesthetic and critique undertaken by Robert Kaufman, Isobel Armstrong and Jonathan Loesberg. If this equation promises that an aesthetic representation of the world’s contradictions will grant us a critical purchase on this world (Armstrong, 2000; Clark, 2000; Kaufman, 2000; Loesberg, 2005), immersion in a decadent aesthetic irreversibly complicates, as I hope to demonstrate, the possibility of mounting a critique of normalizing discourses. The omnipresence of these discourses results from their global distribution by an imperial status quo, in this case, by the imposition of a masculinist norm on prostitution and pornography, sexuality and poetry (on the norm, see Foucault, 2004). The impossibility of a self-critical aesthetic derives, I argue, from the end result of nineteenth-century aestheticization: the endlessly reflexive artwork as an irrealization of both the geopolitical real and the embodied aesthetic subject who depends on this imperial reality for his or her pedagogical and cultural formation. If the Keatsian aesthetic subject occupies a positional fluidity that allows the

Romantic persona to identify with countless positions without losing grip on a “manliness in crisis”, in Swinburne, this positional superiority is identified with a mastered crisis in masculinity that finds itself assailed on two fronts: (1) Swinburne’s revisionary resexualization of a disembodied Keatsian aesthetic; (2) the historical overdetermination of the decadent aesthetic by a surge in the policing of prostitution and pornography, sexuality and poetry. Romantic and decadent aesthetics share, in sum, a common aim across the early and late nineteenth century: a desire for mastery vis-à-vis a progressively destabilized masculinity.

My test case for demonstrating this disabling of aesthetic mastery will be readings of Swinburne through the lens of queer theory that appeal to the fact that the poet was not a practicing homosexual in order to criticize him as an insufficient critic of heterosexual norms. I wish to explicate, in contrast, that Swinburne’s status as a non-practicing homosexual cannot be dismissed without being complicated. Indeed, my analysis of his contingent embodiment as a non-active homophile will show aesthetic critique to be irreversibly immersed in a hypersexualized aestheticism. This immersion renders critique, in turn, into a decadent, morbid or reflexively paralysed position in between untenable binary stereotypes, such as male–female, homosexual–heterosexual, passive–active, perverse–normal, et cetera. What I mean to say is that Swinburne’s desire to escape into the aesthetic sexualizes it so extremely that the subject can no longer hold onto the positional superiority of a masculine gender identity. He is far too disoriented by the aesthetic *spiel* within which he occupies an infinity of sexual positions without wanting, or being able, to settle for any.

Aesthetic critique will emerge not as a rising above this abysmal play on the viewless wings of a masculine subject position, but as a way of being critical of the historical overdeterminants of aesthetic subjectification in which critique finds itself enmeshed. This mode of critique remains, as we will see, unable to ground itself in the reassuring fiction of a masculine subject, a self-identical self, a biographical body or any other semblance of a fixed position. How, I want to ask, might a reconceiving of the aesthetic as a decadent form of critique be akin to the self-critical, or, more accurately, the autocritically reflexive “discourse ... without a subject” that Althusser envisioned? (Althusser, 1999, p. 15). Or, to rephrase, how is the presumed parallelism between subjective mastery vis-à-vis the excesses of aesthetic play and the positional superiority of the masculine subject vis-à-vis an übersexualized “manliness in crisis” to be interrogated? I initiate my interrogation of the equivalency between the aesthetic, critique and masculine superiority by focusing on the prostitute as a key site for querying the relationship between a so-called pure (i.e. reflexive) poetry and the history of nineteenth-century sexualities.

I begin with Swinburne rather than Keats, since the latter poet does not receive the critical attention that his poetry calls for, a situation whose rectification can help us rethink sexual aspects of Keats’ “ditties of no tone” that also tend to exceed normative comfort levels (“Ode on a Grecian Urn,” l. 14).⁴ Each edition of the two-volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature* excludes “Swinburne” from academic and pedagogical culture all the more effectively. This exclusion was already in effect, thanks to the decision to omit any dark Swinburne, such as “Anactoria”, “Dolores” or even “Laus Veneris”, in preference for the disembodied pleasures of *Atalanta in Calydon* fetishized by the poet’s class(ical)ist contemporaries.⁵ Swinburne’s celebration of social and figural aspects of existence that are crucial to Keatsian poetry—to wit, prostitution, pornography and perversity—is, in other words, left unaccounted for. This informal censorship was present from the moment that Swinburne, initially hailed as a classical poet of the purest propriety for his erudite *Atalanta in Calydon*, printed in 1865 by Edward Moxon & Company, was prevented from publishing his outré collection *Poems and Ballads* with the same publisher. Keats’ milieu was, as we shall see, far more permissive in regard to prostitution, pornography and perversity even though the later nineteenth-century canonization and construction of his life and work by Richard Monckton Milnes and others bracketed this threesome.⁶ In explicating the less canonical Swinburne as a revisionary reader of Keats, I hope to recover this lost Keats by bringing out aspects of canonical Keats that have been placed out of play.

In 1866, the year *Poems and Ballads* was published, the second Contagious Disease Act was passed in an effort to reform the “garrison and dock towns” of Great Britain through the enforced regulation of sexually transmitted diseases. This reformation was also a practical reaffirmation of masculinity, since the bodily inspection of prostitutes by male doctors was instrumentalized by the invasive, phallic insertion of a speculum. *Poems and Ballads* is haunted by the prostitute as a figuration for fallen women even as this figure enables a gender-transgressing sexuality. Consider these lines from “Anactoria”, Swinburne’s ventriloquy of Sappho’s love for her promiscuous and eponymous lesbian lover:

Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites.
Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
The paces and the pauses of thy feet!
Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air
The fallen fillets fragrant from thine hair!⁷

Anactoria is “fallen”, unfaithful and abject, yet the distracted state of her hair aestheticizes her “beauty” to such a point of madness that the Fall becomes as sweet as the Satanic serpent’s bite. The reflexive reference to the poetry itself (and not to the subject writing or reading the poem) as the “paces and pauses of thy feet!” is an auto-reference re-enacted by the alliterative fragment “fallen fillets fragrant from” as well as by dizzying Swinburnian repetitions: “Ah, ah”; “Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet”; “Ah sweeter”. This ostentatious reflexivity reminds the reader that the intensity of “Anactoria” cannot be experienced outside the space that the poem creates. In art and art alone is a cross-gendered identification with the deathly ecstasy delivered by the lesbian phallus possible: “like a beast it bites,/Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites”.⁸

Swinburne’s sexual identification with feminine, lesbian and transgendered bodies in *Poems and Ballads* bears the mark of Keats’ influence. These identificatory figures that tempt masculine desire to ecstatically escape itself are modelled on his reading of Keats’ “Ode to A Nightingale” as well as on the Keatsian reinscription of eighteenth-century discourses of sympathetic identification. “Now more than ever seems it rich to die,” as the speaker tells the addressee of the ode as he “ceas[es] upon the midnight with no pain,/While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad/In such an ecstasy!” (ll. 55–58). Keats’ sympathetic art deploys the “significatory play” of literal characters (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 394)—“art”—in order to produce a “poetical Character” forever in excess of social imperatives that I recognize myself as a fixed self, say as a man (Iago) or a woman (Imogen)⁹:

As to the poetical Character itself ... I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member ... it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er delights the camelion Poet!¹⁰

Swinburne’s delight in “foul”, “low” and “mean” feminine characters such as “Faustine”, “Dolores”, “Fragoletta”, “Hermaphroditus” and “Anactoria” revels in religious revisionism, blasphemy and transgression, for instance, the poet’s revamping and revalorizing of the decadent stigmata associated with the ur-prostitute Magdalena in “Faustine”. “Faust[ine]” emerges as a sex worker gloriously excluded—pace Goethe’s *Faust*—from a redemptive Christian tradition: “Even he who cast seven devils out/Of Magdalene/Could hardly do as much, I doubt,/For you, Faustine” (ll. 49–52).

Swinburne’s fallen women elicited the condemnation that their unmaning of the masculine subject was intended to provoke.¹¹ In 1866, John Morley accused the poet of “grovel[ling] down among the nameless shameless abominations which inspire him with such frenzied delight”.¹² In 1870, Alfred Austin denigrated Swinburne’s inspiration as “the feminine muse of the Hetairae,” a learned, euphonious and Grecian term that Austin employs to aestheticize, and simultaneously distance

himself from, the courtesan (Austin, 1869; Hyder, 1970, p. 105). The poet's critics are not wrong. In "Laus Veneris", Venus appears as no more than a whore who seduces Tannhäuser from chivalric, manly virtue by embodying an image that once again registers the influence of both Keats' theory of sympathetic identification and his "Ode to a Nightingale":

Asleep or waking is it? for her neck,
Kissed over close, wears yet a purple speck
Wherein the pained blood falters and goes out;
Soft, and stung softly—fairer for a fleck. (ll. 1–4).

Swinburne explicitly answers Keats' questioning of the existential reality of the ecstatic-aesthetic no-place at the dark heart of "Ode to a Nightingale" positively by displacing the unanswerable question that this utopic topos produces—"do I wake or sleep?" (l. 80)—onto Venus and the semi-necrophilic desire that her ambivalent presence inspires: "Asleep or waking is it?". Keats' famously open-ended question is, in other words, answered by Swinburne's requerying of the question: "Is she dead or alive?"; "Do I desire her living or dead?"; "Do I touch her or not?"

If Keats "die[s]" into nothingness in the "Ode to a Nightingale", Swinburne transforms this nihilistic utopia into a sexualized zone of endlessly pleasurable undecidability. This highly questionable no-place epitomizes the aesthetic irrealization of embodied subjectivity that I am interested in exploring (l. 55). The woman's body seems to simulate an ontological ground beyond nothingness for the benefit of the male subject even as gender identity is put into play, perverted and looked at awry. The eye loses privileged possession of the avian body that the disembodied Keatsian gaze feminizes and arrogates as a "Dryad of the trees" or "wood-nymph" (l. 7; *Lamia* 1, l. 130). The desexualized or literally meta-physical question posed from this self-privileging position—"do I wake or sleep?"—becomes, as a result, an existential trauma of gender that undoes male self-possession by disembodying it as "art": "Am I a man or a woman"; "Do I exist or not?"; "Am I living or dead?".¹³ This sexualized irrealization of gender identity is the price Swinburne is willing to pay rather than let his "soul" be borne along into "nothingness" by an embodied sense of sexual "things" that resist aestheticization.¹⁴

Swinburne's sexualization of his precursor's stance into an indeterminately gendered position stresses the persistence of a residual masculinism in Keats, where "things" are not, comparatively speaking, as undecidable as they are in his inheritor. The speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" remains residually masculine and can arguably be said to reassert his maleness by killing a feminized bird: "and now 'tis buried deep/In the next valley-glades" (ll. 77–78).¹⁵ In the "Ode on Melancholy", the aesthetic also depends on the death of a woman, a "mistress" or "Beauty that must die" (ll. 18, 21). So too, *Lamia* is "relent"-lessly killed by male "eyes" in *Lamia* (2, ll. 295–296). In "Itylus," on the other hand, Swinburne exploits the mythographic undecidability concerning the "nightingale = Philomela/swallow = Procne" equation¹⁶ to create an interminable state of mourning where the "poetical Character" mimes both feminine parts:

I the nightingale all spring through,
O swallow, sister, O changing swallow,
All spring through till the spring be done,
Clothed with the light of the night on the dew,
Sing, while the hours and the wild birds follow,
Take flight and follow and find the sun (ll. 19–24)

The poem ends where it begins with the nightingale mourning Itys or Itylus; yet, it is uncertain if she is the child's mother, Procne, or aunt, Philomela. Form "coil[s]" upon itself like a serpent "swallow[ing]" its tail in its own mouth.¹⁷ The melancholic mourning for Itylus's death as a result of his ingestion by King Tereus in punishment for the king's rape of one of the sisters remains unquenchably curled up in

a space of pure, dead and narcissistic beauty. Swinburne's war against time ("the hours") pushes his poem into an interminable mourning: a feminized position enacting the aesthetic abandonment of a residual masculinity.

Swinburne consolidates Keats' aesthetic nihilism by taking the Keatsian text beyond the masculinist comfort zone of either a positionally superior psychic position, or the self-insulated gaze erected by "Ode to Psyche": "I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired" (l. 43). If Keats prefers to murder/aestheticize the female body rather than becoming undecidable in relation to gender and sexual identity, the young Swinburne enjoyed making "pastiche[s]" of Keats' *Hyperions*¹⁸—that is, in mocking the "fixed" Keatsian "shapes" that restrict his desire for an endless play of sexual identifications.¹⁹ In order to pit a post-masculine Keats against a residually masculinist Keats, Swinburne constructs the earlier poet as an aesthetic sublimation of a unstable body into an undecidable *corpus* where neither position can subsist as a certainty.

In 1866, he apotheosized the Romantic poet as a figure immersed in the corporeal vagaries of libidinal life who also manages to sublimate merely mortal desire into an undying aesthetic realm. Or so *Notes on Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne's defence of *Poems and Ballads*, suggests via a figure that unmans Keats' influence through an allusion to the young poet as "a statue of Hermaphroditus" in regard to which "[t]here is nothing lovelier ... in later Hellenic art" (p. 356)—that is, as a holy (because hermaphroditic) whore "far above" all "breathing human passion" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn," l. 28). If Keats associates Lamia, the "hermaphroditic" prostitute figure in *Lamia*, with the holy whores confined in Corinthian temples so as to distance himself from these threats to male agency,²⁰ Swinburne undoes this distancing from the feminine by relinking the safely ensconced Keatsian male spectator with a prostitute. He performs this scandalous gender-transgression by identifying Keats with the eponymous, sex-servicing protagonist of Swinburne's poem "Hermaphroditus". Grecian art, allusions and mythology offer, in sum, the aestheticizing link that allows Swinburne to valorize Keatsian poetic *materia*: disease, prostitution and the pornographic perversities of post-lapsarian desire. He reemphasizes these country matters in his precursor in order to purify Keats' *amor mundi* in and as an art for art's sake.

Keats and Swinburne occupy divergent moments in the history of nineteenth-century sexuality. To trace this divergence between a residually masculinist poetry where the aesthetic exercise of a "depth of Taste" reaffirms a positionally superior male subject and a post-masculine poetry whose extreme aestheticism exceeds subjective fixity is to show how Swinburne undoes self-identifications based on either sex or gender (Keats, *Letters*, 1, 203). It is the chameleonic agency of the Keatsian "poetical Character" that allows Swinburne to do so even as both their oeuvres register the historical overdetermination of poetry by the policing of sex and gender through the social management of prostitution, pornography and obscenity. A re-examination of the literary historical connection between these two celebrators of the aesthetic as an agency that loves to be out of itself even if this outside is "foul", "low", "poor", "mean", or "shock[ing]" complicates, as will soon become evident, queer theoretical truisms. Although queer theory has contributed extensively to the study of Romanticism and decadence, its focus on the "homosexual" in lieu of the prostitute indefinitely defers insight into the historical overdeterminants of the sheer groundlessness of a hyper-sympathetic art for art's sake.

In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats incarnates this totally embodied lack of ground, or this voiding of corporeal and (as we will subsequently see) geopolitical reality by means of a paradox—that is to say, he irrealizes his poetry by immersing it in bodily pain and suffering:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow

And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (ll. 26–30)

Although the “Ode to a Nightingale” is far more embodied than the poem it echoes, Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (“Or pining Love shall waste their youth”), Keats’ poem is always on the verge of falling into the ossified formalism of allegorical capitalization: “Beauty”, “Love”, “Melancholy”, etc.²¹ The poem evades being petrified in place by ending on an undecidable note in between waking and sleeping that irrealizes or aestheticizes a male body in crisis instead of realizing it as allegorical capital.

This undecidability of aesthetic experience is crucial, as I will now argue, for understanding the exercise of an extreme aestheticism as an embodied yet abyssal zone in between gender identity and poetic identifications. This aesthetic remains in perpetual oscillation between a fixedly embodied self and multiple sexualities. It is, then, a neither/nor and both/and phenomenon, and not the fixed position of a critical aesthetic subject rising above it all. My argument will proceed by reading Keats’ *Lamia* as an allegory of whoring and by rereading Swinburne’s flagellant writings as a solution to the problem that Keats diagnoses in *Lamia*: the ultimately untenable subject position catalysed by the all-too-sympathetic (if not sym-pathic) figure of the prostitute. It is this figure that embodies the ambivalence of masculine desire in relation to an unmanning by the aesthetic that the male ego both fears and desires.

In 1808, James Curry, whose lectures Keats attended during his medical studies at Guy’s Hospital, complained in print about the spike in prostitution-produced diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhoea, both of which were often treated with mercury cures:

Without accusing the male youth of the present day of greater laxity than those of former generations, it may be asked,—how many arrive at the adult age without having occasion to use mercury? ... few escape the necessity of using it.²²

Curry’s pro-mercury cure stance decried exclusively confining the use of mercury to venereal diseases, while Astley Cooper, another lecturer Keats heard at Guy’s, only prescribed it in mild doses for syphilis—i.e. the blue pill or *Pilula Hydrargyri*—and supported, contra Curry, restrictions on mercury usage. Sawrey, the doctor who probably treated Keats as well as his brother Tom, held another opinion. He confused syphilis with gonorrhoea in keeping with the erroneous medical knowledge of the early nineteenth century and prescribed mercury as a preventative for the latter developing into the former on the basis of a “severely ulcerated throat”; i.e. the infection Keats worsened as a result of his Scottish walking tour in 1818 (Gittings, 1968, p. 449).²³ If Keatsians are hesitant to admit that the poet used mercury to cure a sexually transmitted disease, or that the “youth” pining, dying and “growing pale” in “Ode to a Nightingale” is suffering from a venereal disease, Andrew Motion’s biography unhesitatingly engages this underside of the canon when he writes that Keats “bought sex as and when he wanted it—which is only what one would expect of someone of his nature, living in his particular time”.²⁴

Swinburne’s case is different, for he clearly identifies himself as a sex customer. “My life has been enlivened of late by a fair friend who keeps a maison de supplices à la Rodin”: a house of torture modelled on the sadomasochistic dungeon operated by Rodin, a torturer-physician in Sade’s *Justines*. “There is”, he continues, “an occasional balm in Gilead,” where the word “balm” encrypts “bum,” or the sexualized part of body where Etonians such as Swinburne were whipped for disobeying disciplinary codes²⁵ Swinburne’s allusion to the Bible clarifies his unabashed predilection for prostitutes as a solution to a problem of sexual, pedagogical and biblical proportions:

Why do they provoke me with their images and foreign gods? Harvest is past, summer is over, and we are not saved. I am wounded at the sight of my people’s wound; I go like a mourner, overcome with horror. Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician there? Why has no new skin grown over their wound?²⁶

The wounds inflicted on the poet by his pedagogical experiences cannot be healed. Swinburne is driven, instead, to sublimate childhood vulnerability and the infinite mourning it instances by recoding these feminized positions as mastery in the form of a masochistic aesthetic. He performs this reparative work through literature (by becoming a chameleonic poet in submission to a lack of masculine mastery under the control of exquisite metrical patterns) and lived experience (by paying for the privileged position of being dominated by professional sadists).

If one hundred per cent certainty in regard to Keats' status as a sex customer is not possible, Hyder E. Rollins's editorial annotations to the letters that mention the "mercury"-cure (a medicine that was admittedly also prescribed for other ailments) suggest an avoidance of the historical fact checking that might constrain the reader to confront Keats' familiarity with prostitutes. On 8 October 1818, when visiting Benjamin Bailey at Oxford, a haunt for student-servicing sex workers, Keats writes that "[t]he little Mercury I have taken has corrected the Poison and improved my Health—though I feel from my employment that I shall never be again secure in Robustness" (1, 171). On 21 September 1818, Keats had already complained to Dilke that writing poetry for posterity is killing him with anxiety and blames his anxiousness on the mercury that he was taking, as Robert Gittings has argued, to prevent his "gonorrhoeal infection" from "developing into syphilis" (449): "after all it may be a nervousness proceeding from the Mercury" (1, 368). In response to the first citation Rollins notes "See I, 369," the page of the second citation, yet when the reader turns to that page he or she reads "See I, 171". This meaningless to and fro-ing insulates readers from the possibility that Keats may have been a consumer of sex by declining to helpfully annotate the anachronism that mercury was used at the time as a treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

The point is not to decide if he was or was not a frequenter of sex workers, but to be aware of the inescapable figurality of an undecidable situation.²⁷ The god Hermes or Mercury, mythic physician and god of medicine, shares the caduceus with his disciple, the deified doctor, Asclepius. Given the association of this "lythe Caducean charm" with what Hermes calls "my serpent rod", or the penis as a possible site of gonorrhoeal or syphilitic infection (by means, for example, of the serpent as a figure for venomous poisons), I feel the suppressed trope Mercury ought to infect *Lamia* instead of the Grecian Hermes that the Hellenic setting of the poem seems to demand (1, ll. 89, 133). The poem can then emerge as an allegorization of Keats' historical situation as the sufferer of a sexual disease associated with prostitution. Swinburne anticipates, in any case, this allegorical reading by envisioning Keats as a hermaphroditic merger of Hermes and Aphrodite, or of promiscuous erotic love (Aphrodite, the Venus of "Laus Veneris," venereal disease, or "Venery"—that is, "1. The practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure; indulgence of sexual desire 2. fig. A source of great enjoyment")²⁸ and a pharmakonic cure for this promiscuity (Hermes, Mercury or mercury as a pharmaceutical that is both, etymologically speaking, toxic and therapeutic).

Charles Brown, Keats' roommate when he was falling in love with Fanny Brawne, was a dedicated consumer of sex, and even impregnated their servant while Keats was sublimating his never-to-be-sexually consummated love for Fanny into poetry. She remained an inaccessible next-door neighbour teasingly separated from the rooms Keats and Brown shared by a makeshift wall.²⁹ Keats' literary response to this metonymic, day-by-day de-meaning of his beloved *Brawne* by *Brown* (who also made advances on his typographic double that were not rebuffed with the vigor demanded by Keats' jealousy) through an aestheticization of lived experience was not, in short, the achieved purity Swinburne wanted it to be. Keats' admission that he "look[s] upon Fine Phrases like a Lover" suggests, on the contrary, that he responded to Brown's frustrating oversexualization of an impossible Fanny through recourse to a masturbatory pornographic poetry (Levinson, 1988, p. 4) that prefigures Swinburne's obscene *Poems and Ballads* (2, 139).

Pornography, including flagellant variants, was widely available, as Julie Peakman has shown, to the literate classes in eighteenth-century Britain (Peakman, 2003). Iain McCalman has argued that this pornographic tradition merged with anti-establishment political messages in the late eighteenth century only to end up depoliticized into what he calls a "commercial, 'hard-core' business"

fixated on “sexual arousal” and self-pleasure by the early nineteenth century (McCalman, 1988, p. 42). Even if explicit pornography was still difficult to attain—the Marquis de Sade, an epitome of obscenity, was only published (untranslated) in the thirties—no “systematic procedures were in place to stop pornography or obscene publications” in Keats’ lifetime (Sigel, 2002, p. 22; in regard to Swinburne and pornography, see Pease, 2000, pp. 37–71). The government finally responded to the fear that pornography was getting into the untutored hands of the working classes by passing an Obscene Publications Act in 1857, a legal initiative that encouraged reforms against both pornography and prostitution in the latter half of the century.

Although sporadic attempts to reform prostitution punctuated Keats’ milieu (Bristow, 1977, p. 67), bills facilitating the prosecution of sex workers were only passed after his death (1821) in 1824, 1839, and 1847.³⁰ The relative sexual permissiveness of the early nineteenth century in relation to the latter half of the century is marked by the contaminous paranoia that inspired the Contagious Disease Acts in the sixties and the zealous legislative war on “maiden violation,” “white slavery” and “child prostitution” in the eighties. Although Keats insists that he “does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men” (Richard Woodhouse; cited in Keats, *Letters*, 1, 162)—i.e. that the deleted sex scene in “The Eve of St. Agnes” is indeed pornographic—his publications escaped informal censorship, whereas Swinburne’s *Poems* were preemptively judged obscene by his respectable publishing house, Moxon, and had to appear under the imprint of Hotten, a publisher who also trafficked in flagellant pornography. Swinburne, as is well known, wrote flagellant verse and bawdry. He also paid whores to dominate him with whips and other paraphernalia. Given Jan Marsh’s harsh critique of decadent art as “high-class pornography based on the visual and sexual exploitation of women by producers and consumers,” Swinburne’s fluidly post-masculinist sexuality begins to seem less transgressive and anti-feminist than it initially appeared (Marsh, 1985, p. 56; in regard to Swinburnian liquidities of desire, see Laity, 2004). He emerges, in fact, as all-too-akin to his anti-feminist *confrère* Dante G. Rossetti and his fetish for sex workers.³¹

This appearance of a gender-transgressing poetics in Swinburne relies, as previously mentioned, on an unmaning or self-dis-“Member[ing]” identification with fallen women, as is underlined by Alfred Austin’s assault on “Mr Swinburne’s emasculated poetical voice” for “eliminating all that was masculine” through “intensifying and exaggerating what was not masculine by aid of his modern feminine lens” (pp. 109, 97). “Hermaphroditus” and “Fragoletta” are androgynes readily available for sodomy and fellatio, respectively, (Dellamora, 1990, p. 70) while “Faustine” and “Dolores” are invariably violated Baudelairean whores.³²

In “Anactoria,” however, Swinburne’s transgression of normative sexuality results in a becoming-whore that goes too far, producing a reactionary response on the part of his threatened masculinity. “Anactoria” elicits an enjoyment of a “male lesbian” body,³³ yet negates alternative masculinities by demonizing femininity in accordance with the gender stereotyping of men (active) and women (passive) that construed fallen women as passive provocateurs of male desire. Sappho’s disempowered rant against her female lover can therefore be seen as the ventriloquized rage of a male who resents being so sexually provoked by Anactoria’s actions that he finds himself in the passive position of a male lesbian body (Sappho): an effeminizing figuration of self-loss into the dissolutive nothingness of a deathly embrace that Swinburne both resists and aestheticizes, or, rather, resists by aestheticizing. “O that I,” as Sappho-Swinburne says, “Durst crush thee,” Anactoria-Swinburne, “out of life with love, and die,/Die of thy pain and my delight, and be/Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!” (ll. 129–132). The Swinburnian character wants to “cease upon the midnight” evoked in “Ode to a Nightingale” (l. 56), yet he, unlike the Keatsian speaker, longs to die accompanied by a “superflux of pain” (“Anactoria,” l. 28), or “with a pang/As hot as death’s is chill, with fierce convulse/Die into life” (Keats, *Hyperion* 3, ll. 128–130). The disempowerment exorcised by the Ode as “no pain” is taken to the algolagnic limit (l. 56). It is enjoyed to an excessive extreme in “Anactoria,” a molten loss of gendered identity, or a “bear[ing] along” of the “soul to nothingness,” that produces—a *contrario* as it were—an appeal to the passive–active gender opposition as a bulwark against the enforced slippage of a securely gendered identity into Sappho, as consummated by Sappho’s dissolution into

Anactoria, and so on, as *nauseam* (Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 158, 159). An endlessly circular aesthetic characterized, as we have seen, by mourning, gender loss and narcissism, proves too traumatic for Swinburne's residual masculinism.

The gendering of activity and passivity that Swinburne's defence against trauma relies on is ex-emplified by the anti-feminist rhetoric voiced by William Acton, eminent venerologist and author of *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspect, in London and other large cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Attendant Evils* (1857). Acton insisted on women's passive sexuality so that he could accuse this alleged lack of agency for corrupting male virtue. Acton "dismissed vicious inclination" in women "as playing a minor role" in the causation of prostitution,

for he believed women were generally devoid of sexual appetite. In fact, Acton was quite concerned that young men received the wrong ideas about female sexuality from prostitutes, who simulated sexual excitement to please their customers. (Walkowitz, 45)

Swinburne's abjection of the fallen woman as an artificial and simulacral source of seduction and over-stimulation in "Anactoria" serves, then, to keep a debased or passive sexuality away from the male body. If this corrupting or all-too-active feminine passivity is no more than a projection of male oversexuality, Swinburne keeps it at an imaginary distance by abjecting his own (masculine) oversexuality onto women as all-too-active vehicles for what John Morley's review of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads: First Series* labels the lesbian truth of (fe)male desire—namely, the "unnamed sated lusts of sated wantons" (24).

Swinburne criticism has recently reversed this condemnation of the poet's verse as too actively feminine or stereotypically lesbian by arguing that it is not sufficiently open to the supposedly passive position encoded by sodomy or the pathic posture of a no-less stereotypical male "homosexual". Richard Dellamora recuperates the hyper-sympathetic errancy of poetic identifications by citing Swinburne's "stated aversion to sodomy" as a ready and easy way to persuade the reader of the poet's "conventional sexuality" (Dellamora, 1990, p. 82). This allegedly non-threatening sexual ethos becomes, in turn, an all-too-convenient negative condition enabling what Dellamora identifies as the "imaginative mobility" of his "bisexual fantas[ies]". If the valorization of a masculinist aesthetic whose positional superiority or "imaginative mobility" I have been trying to question in this essay is implicit in Dellamora's argument, it is explicit for Thais Morgan: "Situating as a secretly practicing homosexual and therefore *personally invested* in homoeroticism ..., Pater would have been highly receptive to the aesthetic ... discourse in Swinburne's writings of 1866" (Morgan, 1993, p. 322; emphasis added). Morgan naturalizes Pater, a practicing homosexual, as more radical in his sexuality than his non-practicing double on the stereotypical basis of this lack of a personal investment in a clearly legible homosexual ethos.

What Morgan means by this Swinburnian "discourse in mid-Victorian criticism" is a limited sympathy with the homoerotic gaze and its objects, or an androgyny that "expands possibilities for gender identifications and sexual practices for men within a secure framework of masculinity" (318). Like Dellamora, she assumes a "secure" sense of maleness that the fundamentally unstable, variable and inconsecutive Swinburne failed to betray in his fomentary textuality, de-territorialized desires and biographical errancy. Morgan refuses to countenance the possibility that signifying representations of desires (plural, polyvalent and contagious) may be more "queer" (in her terminology) than biographical embodiments of desire (singular, subjective, privative): "The transgressive perversities including homoeroticism that are depicted in Swinburne's work are not equivalent to the full-fledged legitimization of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Pater's" (330). For Morgan, Swinburne merely "depict[s]" perversion and transgression, while Pater embodies both through his homoeroticism and homosexuality. The closeted "homosexual" is thereby legitimized as fully "fledged," developed or sexually mature in comparison with Swinburne's polymorphous perversity, or a putatively infantile refusal to assume a fixed position.³⁴ Perhaps, however, it is better to avoid "legitimization", if the secret pathways of a perverse art for art's sake are to be pursued to their self-undermining limits.

A recovery of the passage Dellamora cites to prove Swinburne's allegedly heterosexist aversion to sodomy that both he and Morgan assume suggests how literally stereotypical "queer" readings can be. Swinburne, according to the diary of A. L. Munby, "expressed a horror of sodomy, yet *would* go on talking about it; and an actual admiration of Lesbianism, being unable, as he confessed, to see that that is equally loathsome" (cited in Hudson, 1972, p. 283). The poet obviously takes a frenzied delight in repeatedly enjoying the half-presence of "sodomy" and "Lesbianism" in his oral cavity: "[t]his however led to worse talk. ... variable and inconsecutive as his talk is" (Munby, cited in Hudson, 1972, p. 283).

The poet's repetitively compulsive enjoyment of the oral drive enables an identification with the object, penetrated and pathic position of the prostitute. He also vicariously experiences this not quite passive persona via his "craving (ultra Sapphic and plusquām-Sadic) lust after the sea" (Swinburne, *Letters*, 1, 305)—that is, an oceanic desire to be both a "Sapphic" (active/passive) lesbian and "Sadic"/masochistic vis-à-vis the whip, rod or birch and sodomitically violating/violated (active-passive) vis-à-vis the sea.³⁵ This abandonment of the active-passive stereotype that undergirds agency is also instantiated by the heady highs of his often alliterative verse, as Morley intuits when he criticizes Swinburne for encouraging a chameleonic sympathy with a de-referential aesthetic through his promiscuous "hunting" out of "letters. ... carried on by the swing of words"—that is, by mere wording instead of by a stately "flow of thoughts" (pp. 26–27).³⁶ Swinburne's cruising of prostitute figures embodies, then, not only his "culture's most extreme threats to cherished notions of private selfhood and autonomous self-control", but a challenge to present-day investments in a pre-Keatsian autonomy of identity politics based on adherence either to the supposedly superior positionality of the masculine aesthetic subject or to the actively "practicing homosexual" (Morgan, 1993, p. 14).

My recontextualization of Swinburne's Decadent aesthetic vis-à-vis Keats' Romantic aesthetic intimates that it is possible for chameleonic identifications with a normative "theory of feminine sexual passivity" to challenge heterosexuality even if the chameleon poet is not an active homophile (Anderson, p. 43). Keats' aesthetic practice insists, in other words, on a residually masculinist positional superiority that Swinburne struggles to free himself from. Swinburne's undecidability in relation to the active-passive opposition stresses a shift from this Keatsian position to a decadent, morbid or reflexively paralysed loss of agency, gender and mastery. This aestheticist paralysis motivates, in turn, Dellamora and Morgan's commitment to a subject that will master the extremities of aesthetic play. If Jerome McGann is right that the "ideal point toward which the masochistic fantasy moves" in Swinburne "is some form of art for art's sake ... for example ... the ideal of the chameleon poet", (McGann, 1972, p. 282) this Keatsian ideal is indivisible from the poet's identification with socially abused Magdalenes, even as this deterritorialized sympathy is contradicted by his desire for an aesthetic sublimation of the inevitable impurities of embodied sexuality in the male name of John Keats. Swinburne is driven, as we have witnessed, into this state of contradiction by his desire for a paradoxical impossibility: a fully embodied aesthetic of disembodied bliss.

Keats' negotiation between prostitution, pornography and a masochistic aestheticism prepares the ground for the double bind entrapping Swinburne. If this bind can be defined as a desire to sublimate a degraded body while preserving its sexual liberty, it is reiterated by a desire to beat this degradable, contingent body into an aery thinness purified of sexuality. It can be further amplified as a desire for a self-abasing alchemization of embodied subjectivity into an eternity of "art" where the "I" survives as a self-less artefact, an I-ago or an I-mogen.³⁷ I will now read the figure of Hermes, Mercury or the patron god of alchemy in *Lamia* as an extended allegory for the desire to cure, aestheticize or master the sexual disease and anxiety that constitute Keats' sadomasochistic experience of a "gordian complication of feelings" in relation to "Womankind" (1, 342). The final phase of my argument will then track Swinburne's engagement with what he wants to sublimate in Keats: the contradiction, double bind or knot tying nineteenth-century male sexual identities to a self-abjecting process of aesthetic subject-formation. My contention in what follows will be that Swinburne's flagellant writings foreground the masculinist bias afflicting his precursor in a way that frees masculine desire from its positional superiority as a privileged aesthetic subject.

Lamia is set on the isle of Crete, where the eponymous heroine, sick of being trapped in a “serpent prison-house”, manipulates Mercury into restoring her womanly form so she can pursue her Corinthian beloved, Lycius (1, l. 203). The action then shifts to Corinth, a city renowned for growing rich on prostitution, as well as a word associated with licentious, profligate and dissipated behaviour.³⁸ The poem spotlights prostitution as an illicit source of wealth by drawing attention to Corinth’s “palaces imperial,/And all her populous streets and temples lewd”; i.e. spaces in the ancient world for the buying and selling of sexual favours (ll. 351–2). Sinister sex workers “thr[ow] their moving shadows on the walls” as these holy whores “cluste[r] in the corniced shade/Of some arch’d temple door or dusky colonnade” (ll. 359, 360–1). *Lamia* also alludes to ancient and modern prostitution via the proper name Lamia, a proverbial byword for a courtesan who became rich and famous pursuing her esoteric arts in ancient Greece (Bonnie & Vern Bullough, 1987, p. 39).³⁹

Mercury comes to Crete in pursuit of a “wood-nymph’s beauty,” or a fetish object which Lamia magically hides from the sight of “hoofed Satyrs,” “languid Tritons” and “Wood-Gods” intent on purchasing her flesh with “[p]earls” and “rich gifts” (ll. 130, 14, 15–16, 34, 19). Lamia initially appears as a madam withholding her most precious worker. The “nymph” reincarnates the “Dryad” or wood-nymph mortified and fixed in place by the “Ode to a Nightingale” (l. 7) by pursuing “pleasant days,” which “She tastes unseen; unseen her nimble feet/Leave traces in the grass and flowers sweet” (ll. 95–6). The nymph’s footwork echoes a tactic Grecian streetwalkers used—namely, wearing shoes that left charactered imprints declaring their availability (Bullough and Bullough, pp. 37–38); yet the “traces” that she leaves behind require that Lamia supplement hermeneutic inquiry if the divine customer is to visually devour his prize:

One warm, flush’d moment, hovering, it might seem
Dash’d by the wood-nymph’s beauty, so he burn’d;
Then, lighting on the printless verdure, turn’d
To the swoon’d serpent, and with languid arm,
Delicate, put to proof the lythe Caducean charm.
So done, upon the nymph his eyes he bent,
Full of adoring tears and blandishment,
And towards her stept. (ll. 129–137)

Mercury, after paying the panderer a metamorphosis by means of his caduceus, is allowed to both see and seize the fallen woman as his transcendental prize (Cf. the Latin, *caducus*, falling, or fleeting, *cadere*, to fall, and the etymology for “decadence”): “or say a dream it was,/Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass/Their pleasures in a long immortal dream” (ll. 126–128).

If Mercury is able to realize his “dream” of pleasure incarnate, to fix the trace of the feminine in place and to infinitely indulge in the possessive power of “his eyes,” the mercury cure, in contrast, weakens the human immune system and might even have hastened Keats’ death by tuberculosis.⁴⁰ Medical mercury poisons sex for Keats, whereas the allegorical Mercury offers the exact opposite of a murderous mercurial remedy. Mercury, the God of alchemists, hermeneuts, merchants and thieves, figures a hermeneutical and/or hermetic reading practice as an aestheticizing defiance of the mortality communicated by sex. Mercury, in curing disease, spawns a sickness unto death, unlike the God Mercury, who allegorizes a purchasing or stealing of embodied, living “pleasures” in a substitute form—that is to say, in a sublimated artistic space where the venality, commodification and heterosexual violence exemplified by the patriarchal institutions of prostitution and marriage are all purified into a disembodied isolate as if it were an incarnation of the “Beauties of Nature” (Keats, *Letters*, 2, 260): “Into the green-recessed woods they flew;/Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do” (ll. 144–145).

Lamia is described as “full of silver moons,” thereby associating her with mercury or quicksilver, as if she were a mercury cure in the form of a poison girl (l. 51). Hermione de Almeida explains this social myth that persisted into the nineteenth century: “virginal poison girls or boys. ... were

employed for therapeutic purpose. ... during epidemics of venereal disease either as a cure for syphilis or as a protection against its infection [in] the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Europe”.⁴¹ The text’s description of Lamia as “A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore/Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core” supports de Almeida’s reading of her as a pharmakonic poison girl (ll. 189–190). Mercury has, it appears, passed on his curative power to Lamia, who is to seduce and save Lycius, often seen as a figure for the boyish poet,⁴² in the purificatory form of a virginal street-walker: “Why this fair creature chose so fairly/By the wayside to linger, we shall see” (ll. 200–201). Yet she is, as we recall, a madam, and is only playing the part of a working girl: “And next she wonder’d how his eyes could miss/Her face so long in Corinth, where, she said,/She dwelt but half retir’d, and there had led/Days happy as the gold coin could invent/Without the aid of love” (ll. 310–314).

How is it that Lamia, her “Persian” servants and her palatial, loveless brothel have been “miss[ed]” by every Corinthian: “none knew where/They could inhabit; the most curious/Were foil’d, who watched to trace them to their house” (ll. 391–393)? Just as the nymph-prostitute leaves “traces” that cannot be seen or seized by mere mortals, so too, Lamia’s “house” anticipates a nineteenth-century euphemism for a bordello hidden in plain sight: a *maison close*, literally a closed house. Yet, her whorehouse is also hidden insofar as it is an “open secret”—a necessary evil that cannot be admitted into the hypocritical visibility of consciousness, conscience or the commercial city.

Lamia, having made her wealth from prostitution, agrees to marry Lycius. She wants, when all is said and done, to make her parvenu wealth respectable and must therefore purify the disreputable, miserable or fallen origins of her “gold” by redecorating the imperial palace that her capital has produced: “She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress/The misery in fit magnificence. ... till. ... the glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched *grace*” (2, ll. 115–116, 120–121; emphasis added). A crowd of Corinth’s finest citizens descend on her house for the wedding, yet the in-bred hypocrisy of the male-only audience prevents them from admitting that they have been there before to be serviced by Lamia’s whores:

The herd approach’d; each guest, with busy brain,
Arriving at the portal, gaz’d amain,
And enter’d marveling: for they knew the street,
Remember’d it from childhood all complete
Without a gap, yet ne’er before had seen
That royal porch, that high-built fair demesne;
So in they hurried all, maz’d, curious and keen. (2, ll. 150–156)

Lamia has apparently effaced the dirty origins of her “gold coin,” for the “herd” cannot stop “wondering/Whence all this mighty cost and blaze of wealth could spring” (1, ll. 313; 2, ll.197–98). Each citizen regresses toward a fantasy “childhood” (“all complete/Without a gap”) in order to repress a social evil—the bordello—that has been the site of post-pubescent debauch. Only the philosopher Apollonius, Lycius’s pedagogic-paederastic mentor, is immune to Lamia’s hetero-hetairae “Beauties”.⁴³ This sadistic pedagogue protects himself from being charmed by Lamia by taking pleasure in inflicting pain on her “person”. He grows jealous of Lamia’s “charms,” provokes his pupil to re-see her as a “common” whore, and eventually kills her with his murderous gaze:⁴⁴

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings

...as it erewhile made

The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. (2, ll. 229–34, 236–8)

John M. Murry allegorizes Apollonius as a figure for Keats' roommate, Charles Brown, and his desublimation of Keats' idealization of Fanny and "Womankind" in general into prostitutes. Murry summarizes this "unbidden presence" in Keats' life and poetry in a stereotypically masculinist fashion (2, l. 167): "Apollonius is Charles Brown the realist, trying to break Fanny's spell over Keats by insisting upon her as the female animal," or as what Keats unconsciously encrypts as "Brawn" (*Letters*, 2, 13; a word signifying the fleshy cut of an animal, in particular, "the flesh of a boar [or pig], collared, boiled, and pickled or potted").⁴⁵ If the masculinist equation of women and fleshy commodities uncritically reiterated by Murry is, however, a limit-experience that Keats struggled in vain to escape, then my allegory can be presented in the following formula (Murry, 1925, p. 157): the attempt to aestheticize the worldly—money, sex, marriage, heterosexual violence and the primitive accumulation of capital; i.e. Corinth's "palaces imperial" as a stand-in for imperialist London—fails due to the ineradicability of "Pornography," as defined by Robley Dunglison's *Medical Dictionary* (1857): "a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene".⁴⁶

In conclusion, I want to return to how nineteenth-century British aesthetics, in particular, the masochistic motivation for the turn to aestheticism, register the global imprint of a geopolitical history of sexuality. Keats cannot drift on a sea of endless sexual identifications eternally. This positionally superior masculine aesthetic subject ends up, as a result, "hung" as a "cloudy troph[y]" in an "isle of Lethe dull," a *museal* "temple of Delight" on an island fortress, or the museum-mausoleum at the heartland of the "Ode on Melancholy" (l. 30, deleted stanza, l. 10, l. 25)⁴⁷: "*Her trophies* (death-pale are they all) ... are *hung*," as William Empson writes, "because sailors on escaping ship-wreck hung up votive gifts in gratitude ... or because, so far from having escaped, in the swoon of this achievement *he has lost, life, independence and even distinction from her*" (Empson, 1947, p. 217; emphasis added). To produce aesthetic monuments is to fixate gender identity by modelling it on classical statuary, as is the case in Keats' *Hyperions* and "Ode on Grecian Urn," or in Swinburne's transformation of the Borghese Hermaphroditus into the poem "Hermaphroditus" so as to affix a secure (because sculptural and not textual) bisexuality. Moreover, to serve a museal culture in this manner is to submit to a maternal imago, fetish or superego of the nation. It is to acquiesce to self-sacrifice as an existentially contingent being or sexually troubled body so as to be fixed forever as a trophy-life dedicated to servicing and fortifying the island prison. How much more masochistic is this submission to imperial Britannia for a poet set adrift on a sea-borne empire dominated by what an ultra-aesthete like Swinburne in the sixties could only experience as Queen Victoria's far more jingoistic and cynical imperialism? Aestheticism lives, when all is said and done, on fictive identifications that must end in the defiant death of the body that once experienced them, and hence in the death of the embodied possibility of art as critique: "She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die" ("Ode on Melancholy," l. 21).⁴⁸

The contradictory positionality of Swinburne's identificatory desire enables his poetic personae to intermittently break out of "the statue of Hermaphroditus" that he imagined Keats' poetry to be—that is, to have "no character" and be "every thing and nothing" in *Poems and Ballads*. An early poem foresees, however, that this "delight" in the undecidable is too traumatic to be maintained forever. The chameleonic Swinburnian character is threatened by "exhaustion" (Austin, "Mr. Swinburne," p. 108) or "overdoing" (Rossetti, *Swinburne's Poems and Ballads*, p. 82) and longs, like the Keatsian "poetical Character," for the marmoreal fixity of being dominated, hung or dead. In *Laugh and Lie Down*, written in 1858–1859, a feminine figure named Imperia completely dominates a disingenuous would-be ingénu named Frank so as to save him from the disturbing uncertainty of identifications legible in "Anactoria": "I shall have you whipt again, most painfully whipt,/You little piece of love" (Cited in Lafourcade, 1932, pp. 81–82). Frank ends up, of course, "whipped to death".

Swinburne's later flagellant verse defers the impossible solution promised by death through a regression to his formative whippings at Eton. The repetitive versifying of these texts, such as "Arthur's Flogging," reiterate Swinburne's desire for aesthetic purification of his British selfhood. If Arthur is a Tennysonian codeword for a heroic and imperial Britain in *The Idylls of the King*, Swinburne purifies himself from the vulgarity of this imperialism through the sting of the birch. Tropes of flagellation function, in turn, as an ecstatic undoing of a positionally masculine autonomy through the masochistic submission to poetic metre that Swinburne's verse imperiously demands⁴⁹:

Swift as the birch on Arthur's bottom fell,
Hard as the birch on Arthur's bottom rung,
Like the deep notes of a funeral bell,
The master's words of keen rebuke were flung,
"I'll flog you well for crying—flog you well;
I'll have no crying here, boy; hold your tongue;
I'll give you more to cry for, you young dog, you!
I'll flog you—flog you—flog, flog, flog, flog, flog you." (ll. 81–88)

Swinburne also visited flagellant prostitutes in his lifelong attempt to attain as masochistically perfect a submission as possible without having to literally die into life. Like Keats, however, he can only submit to the museal history of violence codenamed imperial mother Britannia by submitting to metre. This submission is not merely local, but global insofar as the socialized violence visited on prostitutes at home was being extended "beyond the extreme sea-wall". If "British colonial administrators established wide-ranging legislation ... between the 1850s and the 1880s ... to stem the growing tide of VD and the attendant loss of soldier-power it entailed", (Levine, 2003, p. 1) this legislation had carte blanche to violate human rights overseas with an impunity prohibited in benevolently monitored home territories. The health of the imperial military was, after all, the impetus for the purification of garrison and dock towns undertaken by the Contagious Disease Acts and resisted by a contradictory combination of feminist and religious reformers.

What is unsublimatable for Keats and Swinburne is more than the body alone. Although the sexual errancy of embodied being resists sublimation at home, what resists sublimation on a global scale is the organizational nihilism that symbolic, institutional and military violence impose on docitized bodies. If the biopower of the nation-state depends on "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die",⁵⁰ this violence is exemplified, for Swinburne, by the pedagogical violation that he suffered at Eton, training school for the elite, only to internalize this *viol* (rape) as the *ne plus ultra* of poetic bliss.⁵¹ The infinite gender and sexual identities of aesthetic experience give way to a deadly submission without reserve to canonization in the mausoleum of culture. Keats and Swinburne "must" submit to Imperia and her indomitable empire of the sea. This self-sublimation into a metrical artform leaves these worshippers of "Beauty" no place to stand except an aestheticized lack of corporeal and geopolitical reality in a museum with only one work inside: 'my death'.

Such, at least, seems to be the case confirmed by yet another hymn to the maternal superego of empire: Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine". The spondee that reverses the predominantly anapestic metre on the words "Far out" is a metrically startling invention that apotheosizes formal virtuosity as an phonetically inaudible and typographically unseen nothing signifying nothing⁵² (so too, the trochaic inversions on "Waste water" and "White-eyed") but submission to metre in the absence of a subject engulfed by the whitening wave of warring wor(l)ds:

O lips that the live blood faints in, the leavings of racks and rods!
O ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs of gibbeted Gods!
Though all men abase them before you in spirit, and all knees bend,

I kneel not neither adore you, but standing, look to the end.
All delicate days and pleasant, all spirits and sorrows are cast
Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past:
Where beyond the extreme sea-wall, and between the remote sea-gates,
Waste water washes, and tall ships founder, and deep death waits:
Where, mighty with deepening sides, clad about with the seas as with wings,
And impelled of invisible tides, and fulfilled of unspeakable things,
White-eyed and poisonous-finned, shark-toothed and serpentine-curved,
Rolls, under the whitening wind of the future, the wave of the world. (ll. 432–454)

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Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Insulted and the Injured*, cited in Deleuze (1989, p. 15).
2. In regard to idiotic masculinity in the early nineteenth century, see Gonsalves (2007). “Phallic enjoyment” (*jouissance*) is the “*jouissance* of an idiot”, “which the importance of masturbation in our [psychoanalytic] practice underlines” (Lacan, 1975, p. 75). The aesthetic is never, it appears, too far away from a fall into sheer self-pleasure, or *jouissance* as “idiotic enjoyment” (Zizek, 1992, p. 128).
3. The first act of 1864 “applied to eleven garrison and dock towns in England and Ireland”; “Chatham and Windsor” were included in the 1866 act (Poovey, 1995, pp. 88–97; Walkowitz, 1980, p. 76, 78).
4. Citations from Keats’ poem are from this edition and will be cited by line number (Keats, 1978).
5. Terry L. Meyers notes how Swinburne is “still ... banished ... from the sanctuary of such canonical compilations as the Major Authors Edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. To my mind, this exile has been for moral and ideological reasons, even in this age when the canon has been expanded in so many ways. Whether it has room for someone as consistently subversive as Swinburne is still to be seen” (see Rooksby & Meyers, 2009).
6. Monckton Milnes’ 1858 two-volume edition of the *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* was published in London by Moxon, the same publishing house that refused to publish Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*.
7. Citations from Swinburne’s poems are from this edition and will be cited by line number (Swinburne, 2004, ll. 115–120).
8. For a reading of Judith Butler’s notion of the “lesbian phallus” as a “significatory play” that forever “defer[s]” any attempt to “visually grasp” the objectified object of the male gaze, or the fiction of the embodied word, see Rosenberg (2003, p. 394).
9. Or, as Foucault defines the resistances writing offers to the demands of biopower that we identify ourselves emergent in Keats’s era: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write” (Foucault, 1972, p. 17).
10. All citations from Keats’s letters are from this edition and will be cited by volume and page number (Keats, 1958). The word “Member,” which signifies both the “penis” and “the vagina, the vulva, the female genitals,” intimates the gender confusion communicated by the poetical character; see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., “Member, n.” (cited examples span the period 1300–1966).
11. Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* achieved this *succès de scandale* by revitalizing demonized and effeminizing cultural genres such as the Spasmodic School and the popular tradition of sensationalism (see Blair, 2006; Seagroatt, 2002).
12. Contemporary reviews of *Poems and Ballads* will be cited from this edition (Hyder, 1970, p. 23; Morley, 1866).
13. Lacan (1993, pp. 161–182) explicates these hystericalizing or effeminizing questions in “The hysteric’s question”.
14. Cf. Keats’ *Sleep and Poetry*: “A sense of real things comes doubly strong,/And, like a muddy stream, would bear along/My soul to nothingness” (ll. 157–159).
15. In regard to the idiotically masculine desire to assert maleness by murdering/aestheticizing women, see Bronfen (1992). This desire is foreshadowed by the violence that the crisis-ridden male poet William Collins enacts on a feminized “Evening”. In “Ode to Evening”, a very muscular “Winter, yelling through the troublous air,/Affrights thy shrinking train/And rudely rends thy robes” until his victim lies dead and buried: “sure-found beneath the Sylvan shed” (Lonsdale, 1976, ll. 46–48, p. 49).
16. “[L]ater Roman mythological handbooks ... reversed” the Grecian identification of Procne with the nightingale and the violated Philomela with the swallow (Young, 1951, p. 181; cf. Hudson-Williams, 1980, p. 127).
17. Swinburne’s recourse to serpentine imagery in *Poems and Ballads*—i.e. “coiled obscene/Small serpents with soft stretching throats” (“Faustine,” ll. 134–135)—is partially explained by his desire for a poetic form turned in upon itself in the manner of the mythical serpent *ouroboros* that Coleridge calls on to exemplify an autotelic artwork characterized by organic form: “The common end of all narrative, nay, of all, Poems is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion—the snake with it’s Tail in it’s Mouth” (Coleridge, 1959, p. 956).
18. See the Swinburne poems collected in Lafourcade (1927, pp. xii–xvi).
19. i.e. “I bore/The load of this eternal quietude,/The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes/Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon Gasping with despair/Of change, hour after hour I cursed myself.” (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1, ll. 389–392, 398–399).

20. Since a “well-known illustration” based on Edward Topsell’s *The History of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607) that “Keats could have seen” represented the lamia as “hermaphroditic”, the figure of Lamia associates both Keats and the holy whores of Corinth (hermaphrodites were traditionally considered sacred) with the threat to masculinity empowered by the figure of the hermaphroditic prostitute (Gallant, 2005, p. 159).
21. “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” see Lonsdale (1976, l. 65). In regard to the constant tension in Keats’ poetry between the “wakeful anguish” of lived experience (psyche, affect, trauma, etc.; “Ode on Melancholy,” l. 10) and the aestheticist tendency to “wakefully languish” in allegorical abstraction. See Gonsalves (2006, p. 463).
22. *Examination upon the Prejudices Commonly Entertained against Mercury*, cited in Gittings (1968, p. 157).
23. For an argument that Keats’ sore throat was a “manifestatio[n] of mercury toxicity,” see Davis (2004, p. 90). In regard to the demonization of the prostitute as the source of venereal disease, see Spongberg (1997, pp. 35–60).
24. Motion (1997, p. 198). In regard to the hesitancy in accepting Keats as a sexual adult on the part of professional Romanticists, in comparison, say, to Byron or Landon, see the infantilizing of Keatsian sexuality in Turley (2004): “In general, recent criticism, has followed Byron and Hazlitt” by “link[ing] Keats’s poetry ... to an adolescent or unformed sexuality” (Whale, 2005, p. 8): “Keats may (or may not) have experienced sexual consummation on a visit to a seaside village near Hastings in 1817, and he may have had venereal disease. But of a Byronic plenitude of sexual gratification he knew nothing” (McFarland, 2000, p. 26).
25. Citations from Swinburne’s letters are from this edition and will be cited by page number (Swinburne, 1959, p. 305).
26. *The New English Bible* (1970), *Jeremiah* 8: 19–22; Cf. 46: 11.
27. For an extreme example of a reading that privileges deciding the matter over recognizing the figurality of the question, see Andrews (1969).
28. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., “Venery, n.”. Keats’ conflation of sexual enjoyment and illness reinforces the equation of sex and venereal disease: “You are sensible no man can set down Venery as a bestial or joyless thing until he is sick of it and therefore all philosophizing on it would be mere wording. Until we are sick, we understand not” (*Letters* 1, 279).
29. “Sometime in 1819, certainly by October, Brown had formed a liason with their Irish servant, Abigail O’ Donaghue” (Stilling, 1966, p. 12). Since Carlino Brown was born 16 July 1820, he was probably conceived in November or December—that is, around the time Keats returned to live with Brown (November 1819) and brokered an engagement to marry Fanny (December 1819).
30. Vagrancy Act (1824), Metropolitan Police Act (1839), Towns Police Clauses Act (1847). The offence against the law was not the act per se, but the “breach of public order and the creation of a public nuisance” (Nead, 1988, p. 115). In the 1860s there was a shift from “control[ling] soliciting in the streets and public highways” to the “regulation of contagion” through the Contagious Disease Acts; the 1860s and 1870s also emerge as a highpoint for independently operating prostitutes due to the decline in brothels in London “from 933 in 1841–410 in 1857” as a result of “new licensing laws” (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 24).
31. Lackey (1983). For a critique of Rossetti’s (and Lackey’s) anti-feminism, see Sheets (1988).
32. In regard to these Baudelairean “masterpieces of sadomasochistic rhapsody,” see Sieburth (1984, p. 350).
33. On the male lesbian body as an “imaginary construct made up of literary and visual intertexts” in order to solve the crisis or “incoherences implicit in modern male heterosexuality” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 146) and to negotiate gender identity in “between men/between women in terms of proliferating subgroups,” see Morgan (1992, p. 41).
34. An underlying “fear” of the epistemic “horror” accompanying gender indeterminacy is legible in Keats’ ornithological valorization of maturity: “The difference of high Sensations with or without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again with-out wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shouldered Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go thro’ the same air and space without fear” (*Letters*, 1, 277; emphasis added).
35. Swinburne’s abyssal bisexuality is influenced by both Byron and the Spasmodic poet Alexander Smith (see Hughes, 2004)—on Swinburne, sadomasochism and the sea, see Alexander (1996). Since whipping was a traditional punishment for prostitutes, as well as a libertine and pornographic heritage bequeathed to Swinburne by the eighteenth century, the act of being whipped puts the masochistic client in the place of the fallen sex worker, while simultaneously displacing—via a cash payment—the “shame” associated with this object sexuality from the subject onto the prostitute via the taint of “golden coins” (Rossetti, “Jenny,” ll. 92, 342; see Rossetti, 2003).
36. Even a sympathetic reviewer concurs: “Nor is it in emphasis only that Mr. Swinburne drifts into overdoing: he sometimes allows his poem to run away with him, and makes it simply too long”; W.M. Rossetti, *Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads* (Hyder, 82; emphasis added). Cf. Austin: “Indeed, anybody reading ‘Dolores’ through must feel puzzled to know, when he reaches the end, why it is the end; why, in fact, Mr. Swinburne did not go on forever in that strain. There is no question but that, short of physical exhaustion, he could do so, as he proves that he could when he sets to work to write some fresh lyric” (107–108).
37. “Our two soules therefore, which are one,/Though I must goe, endure not yet/A breach, but an expansion,/ Like gold to aery thinnesse beate” (“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” ll. 21–24). In regard to the sexual couple as a figure for unifying oneself on the model of an artwork, be it a “well-wrought” or a Grecian “urn,” see Donne’s “The Canonization”: “we two being one, are it;/So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit./We die and rise the same, and prove/Mysterious by this love” (ll. 33, 24–27). Citations from Donne’s poems are from this edition and are cited by line number (Donne, 1965).
38. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., “Corinth, n.” “Relating to the licentious manners of Corinth’ (J.), profligate; in 19th c. use: Given to elegant dissipation. ... (From the proverbial wealth, luxury, and licentiousness of ancient Corinth). ... A wealthy man; a profligate idler; a gay, licentious man; also, a shameless or ‘brazen-faced’ fellow. ... A ‘swell’; a man of fashion about town”. Examples include: “1785 *Grose Dict. Vulg. Tongue, Corinthians*, frequenters of brothels” and “1879 *Farrar St. Paul* (1883) 403 A reference to the immorality of the city may still be heard in the use of the word ‘Corinthians’ for profligate idlers”.
39. Keats credits “Burton’s ‘Anatomy of Melancholy’ (Part. 3. Sect. 2. Memb. 1. Subs. 1.)” as his source for the story of *Lamia* (359). Corinth appears as a *locus classicus* for prostitution in Part. 3. Sect. 2. Memb. 1 Subs. 2.

40. "In addition to a plethora of physical symptoms," such as the "toxic effects on the human immune system [that] paved the way for Keats's susceptibility to tuberculosis," "mercury poisoning produces neuropsychiatric symptoms including depression, irritability, hallucination, paranoia and suicidal gestures. During his final year, Keats displayed many of these symptoms" (Davis, p. 94–95).
41. de Almeida (1991, p. 193). This social myth incited the rape of young children and adolescents (see Trumbach, 1998, pp. 210–218).
42. Cf. Turley's reading of Keats' imaginings as immature, yet Turley seems over-insistent on seeing *Lamia* as a refusal of "a set of circumstances deeply inimical to his boyish desire"—that is to say, licit and illicit prostitution; i.e. marriage and whoring (69). For an analysis on how these two poles play out in the infantile male imaginary so as to upset the adult–boy dichotomy, see Gonsalves (2010).
43. "Greco-Roman erotic relations pivoted on patterns of dominance and submission, patterns that both affirmed and consolidated social and political hierarchies" (see Greene, 1998, p. xii). Apollonius reacts to Lycius's attempt to break away from hierarchical, homosexual and pedagogical domination by assuming the posture of a scorned lover as well as by invading the heterosexual enclosure his rebellious student is trying to create with *Lamia*, as is seen when he, "an uninvited guest" and "unbidden presence" (in his own words), "force[s] himself upon" Lycius by crashing his marriage feast (2, ll. 165–167). And so we see Lycius give way to Apollonius's violation of his threshold in an anal image that seems to conclude in a figural ejaculation: "Lycius blush'd, and led/The old man through the inner doors broad-spread;/With reconciling words and courteous mien/Turning into sweet milk the sophist's spleen" (ll. 169–172; emphasis added).
44. "common woman: a harlot; so common prostitute," also said "of criminals, offenders, and offences; as common barrator, scold, swearer; common nuisance, common gaming house, etc.". Both senses were current in the nineteenth-century; see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., "Common, a."
45. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., "Brawn, n."
46. Cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 cd ed., "Pornography, n."
47. "The German word, 'museal' [museum-like] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like family sepulchers of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture. Art treasures are hoarded in them, and their market value leaves no room for the pleasure of looking at them. Nevertheless, that pleasure is dependent on the existence of museums" (Adorno, 1981, p. 175); On the centrality of this museal unconscious to nineteenth-century British art, see Siegal (2000).
48. Cf. the ending of Byron's "Prometheus": "Triumphant where it dares defy,/And making Death a Victory" (ll. 58–59). "[I]" ought to refer to "his spirit," yet given that "his spirit" is followed by "itself" and "its," the referent slips from Prometheus to Byron's spirit to the work of art itself (ll. 53, 54, 57; McGann and Weller, 1980–1993).
49. Swinburne, according to Yopie Prins, "suffers" under metre as "an automatic mechanism, a repetition compulsion that takes control and makes authorial mastery redundant" (Prins, 1999, pp. 123, 155–156).
50. In regard to the necropolitics of nineteenth-century biopower (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 12–13).
51. "Old Etonians" internalized the flagellation paradigm to such an extent that they wrote enthusiastic letters in support of birching against social reformers (Gibson, 1978, p. 137).
52. For an argument against the definition of prosody as "nothing plus nothing equals something," see Jarvis (1999, p. 4). Jarvis's turn toward "real experience" as the "foundation of any possible ontology" (13) is, however, preempted by Keats' emptying out of prosody as ontology: "every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing—Ethereal thing[s] may at least be thus real, divided under three heads—Things real—things semi-real—and no things", yet all three nothings remain nothing in themselves (1, 242; emphasis added).

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