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Terry L. Meyers

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Abstract

Points out that Arthur J. Munby's Victorian diaries "further document . . . Swinburne's early enthusiasm for Whitman" and "suggest Swinburne's homophobia existed at least as early as the late 1860s."

- 3 Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Story, and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 3:258.
- 4 Dickens, 3:311-312.
- 5 Paul B. Davis, "Dickens and the American Press," *Dickens Studies* 4 (1968), 34.
- 6 Dickens, 3:625n.
- 7 Moss, 106.
- 8 Moss, 138.
- 9 Quoted in Dickens, 3:311n.
- 10 An examination of *The Morning Chronicle* confirms there was no second letter. See *The Morning Chronicle* (London), July to September 1842, British Museum File, British Museum Microfilm Service.
- 11 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 51.
- 12 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 61-62.

A NOTE ON SWINBURNE AND WHITMAN

In my 1996 article in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, I set out to clarify Algernon Charles Swinburne's attitude towards Walt Whitman and suggested that a homophobia dating, I thought, from the early 1870s encouraged Swinburne's harshening criticism of Whitman.¹ A source I overlooked at the time, however, provides a bit more information.

In 1972, Derek Hudson published excerpts from the diaries of Arthur J. Munby.² Munby was an English barrister and minor poet who moved through the literary and aesthetic life of Victorian London and who wrote down his daily interactions with the great as well as the obscure (especially the women laborers with whom he was obsessed). He recorded several comments by Swinburne that further document, if only briefly, Swinburne's early enthusiasm for Whitman and that suggest Swinburne's homophobia existed at least as early as the late 1860s.³

On December 2, 1866, Munby wrote in his diary that he had gone to the Arts Club, where he met Swinburne, who spoke of Whitman and who made a comparison of some sort between his own *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Whitman, probably in terms of both writers' critical reception:

Going upstairs afterwards I found Swinburne, & had some talk with him about Poe's Raven, Walt Whitman (whom of course he frantically praised) and Bourdelaire [sic], a certain ribald French poet, whom he declared to be '15 million times' better than Tennyson. He spoke of 'my unfortunate book' and its resemblance to Walt Whitman. (233)

A year later, on December 2, 1867, Munby dined with Swinburne again, and the question of homosexuality came up, with Swinburne condemning the practice:

Swinburne and I had a talk about Shakespeare's sonnets: he upholding that hateful theory of their meaning, and talking of them with an air of high moral indignation which, in him, was amusing. 'If I, or Tennyson, or any man who has been successful in poetry' said this cool young person 'had dared to hint such things, we should have been scouted as utterly indecent.' After dinner, when I was alone in the back drawing room, he came to me, & kept up a long and earnest talk, or rather declamation, about the merits of Walt Whitman & W. B. Scott. (246)

On May 2, 1870, Munby dined at the Arts Club once more and managed to steer Swinburne out of a rant denouncing Christianity:

In the midst of his tirade, a clerical member of the Club came in; but Swinburne went on unheeding, till I turned him (variable and inconsecutive as his flow of talk is, it was easily done) into Shakespeare's sonnets. This however led to worse talk; he 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. When I expressed disgust pretty strongly, however, & regret at what he has written thereon, he took it very gently and quietly, instead of blustering, as he used to do. (283)

In commenting on Lesbianism, Munby had in mind Swinburne's "Anactoria" in *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and his defense of that poem in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866).

These short references change little of what I say in "Swinburne and Whitman: Further Evidence," though they do suggest Swinburne's homophobia existed earlier even than the trials of several Victorian homosexuals that I suggested might have encouraged Swinburne to distance himself from Whitman.

College of William and Mary

TERRY L. MEYERS

NOTES

1 Terry L. Meyers, "Swinburne and Whitman: Further Evidence," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 14 (Summer 1996), 1-11.

2 Derek Hudson, *Munby: Man of Two Worlds—The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby, 1828-1910* (n.p.: Gambit, 1972).

3 Swinburne's homophobia may have existed even earlier. That question and the related (and more complex) question of Swinburne's own sexuality are ones I explore in a study in progress, but I believe Swinburne's homophobia may be adumbrated in letters exchanged among William Bell Scott, Lady Trevelyan, and Swinburne in November and December 1865 (Cecil Y. Lang, *The Swinburne Letters*, 6 vols. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1962], 1:135-143).

Swinburne appears to have remarked in public that "the Greeks did not seem to me worse than the moderns because of things considered innocent at one time by one country were not considered so by others" (*Letters*, 1:137), and the remark was apparently construed as an admission to being homosexual himself (Scott so implies in writing that Swinburne "suffers under a dislike to ladies of late—his knowledge of himself and of them increasing upon him" [*Letters*, 1:135]).

Lady Trevelyan appears to have alerted Swinburne to the imputation, and he writes back in fervid if somewhat opaque terms that suggest not only distress at being so labeled but also a repugnance at homosexuality itself.