

# Swinburne's Boyishness

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## ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the early critical reception of Algernon Charles Swinburne's 1866 collection *Poems and Ballads* with a view to articulating the extent to which the critical hostility that famously greeted the book upon publication was mediated by the category of 'boyishness'. I show that the complaint that the 29-year-old Swinburne wrote, and by implication thought and felt, too much like a boy and not enough like an adult man lay at the core of the critical onslaught and contributed to underpin critics' various complaints of obscenity, blasphemy, bad taste and so on. After considering the nature of the connection between the boyish quality often associated with Swinburne as a person throughout his life and the poetical 'boyishness' critics perceived in his work, I propose a taxonomy of three main meanings of boyishness that emerge from the early critics' attacks: boyishness as lack of virility, boyishness as lack of self-restraint, and boyishness as lack of intellectual maturity. By analysing these critical readings in the context of various medical, pedagogical and more broadly cultural discourses of the time, I make the case that Swinburne found himself cast as someone who presented precisely the characteristics of boyhood of which a functioning adult man was supposed to rid himself. The broader argument is that by giving close attention to age-based slurs, we can gain a more fine-grained account of mid-Victorian attitudes to childhood and maturity, and society's self-image more generally.

**KEYWORDS:** Swinburne, reception, criticism, boyishness, maturity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The most obvious reason for the notable hostility shown to A. C. Swinburne's collection *Poems and Ballads* (1866) by a substantial section of the critical establishment of the time was the book's 'revolt against the limits on frankness set by contemporary morality', as the philosopher T. H. Green put it: that is, the plain fact that some of these poems dealt with sexual, blasphemous or otherwise objectionable topics.<sup>1</sup> The vitriol apparent in these critics' more colourful invectives, however, suggests that hostility towards the presence of racy subjects was mediated by a more personalized antagonism against Swinburne's implied attitude towards his materials: it was he, as person rather than as craftsman, who was at the receiving end of epithets such as 'libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs', 'unclean for the mere sake of uncleanness', 'publicly obscene', and so on.<sup>2</sup> At the level of critical principle, this framing was underpinned by mid-Victorian criticism's tendency to regard 'the man' and 'the work' as an interpretive continuum: if some poems were considered immoral, one could take them as evidence that so was the author (an inference Swinburne himself contested).<sup>3</sup> Also for this

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 83. Green knew Swinburne from the days of the Old Mortality club.

<sup>2</sup> These quotes, respectively by John Morley, Robert Buchanan, and the anonymous reviewer of *the Pall Mall Gazette*, are found in my main source, Clyde Hyder, *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 29, 31, xx. Henceforward referred to parenthetically as *CH*.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrea Selleri, 'Swinburne, His Critics, and the Idea of the Dramatic', *Review of English Studies*, 67 (2016), 538–57 (in particular the discussion of Swinburne's seething riposte, 'Notes on Poems and Reviews', pp. 552–54).

reason, the language of Victorian criticism featured a twofold investment in the aesthetic and moral appraisal of literary works and authors; hence the double value of such words as 'manly' and 'childish,' which could denote both aesthetic and characterological features.<sup>4</sup> But what undesirable human qualities did Swinburne's poetry suggest to critics? What did he come across as?

Clyde Hyder's brisk synopsis ('sensuality, paganism and blasphemy') is as good a summary of the explicit early charges as any.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the framing of Swinburne as sexual outsider has dominated critical debates, starting from W. M. Rossetti's early, sympathetic pamphlet *Swinburne's Poems and Ballads*, which identifies the 'passionately sensuous' as Swinburne's main 'current of influence and feeling,' and gaining steam in the twentieth century as the poet's penchant for flagellation was latched onto by psychoanalytically inclined critics such as Mario Praz.<sup>6</sup> More recent commentators have largely agreed, although the emphasis has generally shifted towards the tensions between Swinburne's 'deviancy' and the prevalent gender ideology of his time. Thus, Catherine Maxwell writes of *Poems and Ballads*' early reception that Swinburne's 'blasphemous and sexually provocative subjects put him beyond the pale';<sup>7</sup> elsewhere she maintains that his masochism was culturally 'female.'<sup>8</sup> Yopie Prins similarly sees the poet's partiality for salacious subjects as a challenge to Victorian notions of masculinity: "The Victorian critical establishment . . . interprets Swinburne's transgressive language as a transgression of gender."<sup>9</sup> Other critics have preferred to stress the challenge posed by Swinburne's implied political radicalism, although this strain was not fully manifested until *Songs Before Sunrise* (1870);<sup>10</sup> or on *Poems and Ballads*' insistent portrayal of obsessive states of mind, which seemed to point to a corresponding madness in the author;<sup>11</sup> or on Swinburne's exhibited anti-theism;<sup>12</sup> or on the formal similarities between this collection and the then-anxiety-inducing genre of 'sensation fiction.'<sup>13</sup> Class hostility against a haughty aristocrat on the part of mostly middle-class reviewers (or, as Swinburne charmlessly put it, 'the cockney pressmen') is also plausible, although I am not aware of a sustained case having been made to this effect.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew Sussman, 'Stylistic Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Criticism', *Victorian Studies*, 56 (2014), 225–49.

<sup>5</sup> *CH*, p. xx. This vision of the poet is neatly encapsulated in Edmund Gosse's image of Swinburne's arrival on the scene of Victorian poetry as a young Bacchus surrounded by Maenads, bursting into a quiet park with great clangour and frightening the local fallow deer. Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 135–36. The image is recycled in T. Earle Welby, *A Study of Swinburne* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1926), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *CH*, p. 62. The first English-language edition of Praz's main work was *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (London: Humphrey Milford, 1933).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2006), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 38. For similar arguments, see pp. 183–87, and Thais E. Morgan, 'Mixed Metaphor, Mixed Gender: Swinburne and the Victorian Critics', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 73 (1988), 16–9.

<sup>9</sup> Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 158. Cf. Heather Ellis, 'Thomas Arnold, Christian Manliness and the Problem of Boyhood', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (2014), 425–41, esp. pp. 427–29, on why it is undesirable to let the concepts of 'womanly' and 'effeminate' elbow out that of 'childish' as counterparts of the Victorian ideal of 'manliness'.

<sup>10</sup> Thais E. Morgan, 'Swinburne's Dramatic Monologues: Sex and Ideology', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), 175–95.

<sup>11</sup> Megan Torti, "'The Life of Such Dead Things': Psychological Obsession in Swinburne's "Félise", *Victorian Poetry*, 51 (2013), 15–35.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Lyons, *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt and Secularisation* (Oxford: Legenda, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Heather Seagrott, 'Swinburne Separates the Men from the Girls: Sensationalism in *Poems and Ballads*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), 41–59.

<sup>14</sup> *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), I, 210.

Lewd, perverted, radical, atheistic, sensationalistic, insane: all these assessments uncover some facet of Swinburne's prismatically repellent quality for at least some of his more respectable contemporaries. One major feature, however, remains virtually unnoticed: namely, the note struck in unison by the relatively sympathetic John Ruskin, who called Swinburne a 'demoniac youth' (*CH*, p. 120), by the uncompromisingly hostile Max Nordau, who anathematized the poet's 'childish devilry', and by many others in between, as will be seen.<sup>15</sup> In this article I propose another look at the early responses to *Poems and Ballads*, in order to show that among the undesirable traits that Swinburne's poetry – and by implication his person – were perceived to embody, the idea of immaturity, or 'boyishness', was crucial. My claim is that the sensation that the poet wrote, and by implication thought and felt, too much like a boy and not enough like a full-grown man was among the main triggers for his early critics' animadversion. While this aspect of Swinburne's reception has not been foregrounded in recent scholarship, it was still present, indeed something of a cliché, to part-contemporaries who outlived him, such as Henry Treece, who called him an 'eternal boy, the rather roguish Peter Pan',<sup>16</sup> and Arthur Quiller-Couch, who wrote that Swinburne 'had the precocity of an elf, with no little of its outward guise. Like an elf, he never grew up'.<sup>17</sup> Harold Nicolson explicitly speaks of 'arrested development' and contends that 'Swinburne's emotional receptivity began to ossify . . . in his twenty-first year'.<sup>18</sup> But if for these commentators writing after Swinburne's death the idea that he remained something of a boy throughout adulthood was either a neutral or a tolerable element, many of the earlier critics of *Poems and Ballads* thought otherwise.

By recovering the centrality of the discursive category of boyishness in Swinburne's critical reception I hope to provide an unobvious route into the implicit axiology of the 'ages of man' at work in mid-Victorian literary culture. One key assumption here is that many aspects of a society's normativity do not manifest themselves as explicitly formulated contentions, but operate as broadly accepted notions that it is not necessary to state openly.<sup>19</sup> Thus, analysing instances in which an adult man is accused of being too boy-like – what the charges are, what behaviours could trigger them and what arguments could either support or counter them – can yield insights into cultural aspects of age stratification that might not have been articulated in overtly prescriptive treatments of the issue such as educational treatises, sermons and essays. Such a project involves shifting attention away from the explicit pronouncements of 'sages', policy-makers and group leaders, and towards the presuppositions underlying the discursive practices of people who did not (not overtly, at least) make it their business to opine on how society should be run.

This article, then, is intended primarily as a contribution to cultural history through a case study in critical reception. Swinburne's poetry will mostly be confined to the background, on the understanding that while close reading-informed methods such as Claudia Nelson's examination of representations of 'childish' and 'child-like' adults in Victorian fiction have indeed proved productive, the existing scholarship on Victorians' attitudes to age and age groups could be complemented by a less text-centric history of the age-based characterizations inflicted on public personages by contemporaries. These, too, are based on what Nelson

<sup>15</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, ed. and trans. by George L. Mosse (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993 [1895]), p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Selected Poems by Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Henry Treece (London: Grey Walls Press, 1948), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Studies in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Swinburne* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> One classic statement of this view in social psychology is Alfred Schütz, 'Common-sense and Scientific Interpretation in Human Action', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 14 (1953), 1–38.

calls the 'enormous cultural authority bestowed upon the concept of being an adult,' much of which is a function of the historically stable power imbalance between adults and children, and represents aspects of it.<sup>20</sup> One can expect Victorian and later conceptions of childhood to feature both a degree of continuity and historically specific divergences – e.g. varying levels of importance attributed to adult-linked traits such as world-wisdom, self-control, or physical strength. It stands to reason that such continuities and discontinuities may be illuminated by a history of age-based slurs, of which this article is intended to be a 'micro-oriented' specimen, partly comparable in approach to Pete Newbon's recent study of the 'boy-men' of the Romantic generation.<sup>21</sup>

In what follows I attempt a taxonomy of early critics' framings of Swinburne and his poetry as 'boyish', discuss some of their presuppositions and implicatures, and conclude by proposing a few broader considerations on what can be learned from them. The selection criteria are conceptual rather than semantic, which is to say that while uses of the actual word 'boy' and its semantic field are addressed, so are these critics' indirect allusions to the broader significations attached to the idea of the immature male. One caveat is that the implied age of the 'boy' that the 29-year-old poet apparently evoked to many could vary substantially, sometimes suggesting the features of a pre-pubescent individual and sometimes those of someone of perhaps undergraduate age.<sup>22</sup> All the relevant instances, however, share two components: that the critic thought that Swinburne wrote like someone significantly younger than himself, and that this was a problem both moral and aesthetic.

## 2. THE BOY AND THE WORK

I want to begin by addressing what is arguably a tangential matter for the moral or psychic type of 'boyishness' with which I am mainly concerned, but which was clearly related to it in several critics' minds: namely, that Swinburne's physical minuteness and behavioural patterns offered what might have been conceived as an objective basis for framing him as 'boyish.' He stood, depending on sources, at 5 ft 2 in. to 5 ft 4.5 in., he was slightly built, his head looked too large for the rest of his body, and even as a boy he tended to come across as younger than he was.<sup>23</sup> This is how he was described, as a child, by his cousin Algernon Freeman-Mitford, later Lord Redesdale:

What a fragile little creature he seemed as he stood there between his father and mother, with his wondering eyes fixed upon me! . . . He was strangely tiny. His limbs were small and delicate; and his sloping shoulders looked far too weak to carry his great head . . . His features were small and beautiful, chiselled as daintily as those of some Greek sculptor's masterpiece. . . . His language, even at that age, was beautiful, fanciful and richly varied. Altogether my recollection of him in those school days is that of a fascinating, most loveable little fellow.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Child-Like Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Pete Newbon, *The Boy-Man, Masculinity and Immaturity in the Long Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> This is in line with the relative instability of mid-Victorian conceptions of adolescence, whose definitions bounced between competing criteria (physical maturity vs. acquisition of adult social roles) that were likely not to occur at the same time. See Alice Crossley, *Male Adolescents in Mid-Victorian Fiction: George Meredith, W. M. Thackeray and Anthony Trollope* (London: Routledge, 2016), esp. pp. 5–6.

<sup>23</sup> Maxwell, *Swinburne*, pp. 5–6. *CH*, p. 3. Gosse, *Life*, pp. 283–84.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Christopher Hollis, *Eton: A History* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1960), pp. 291–92.

In this passage the signifiers of childhood are piled on so thickly that it seems unlikely that Freeman-Mitford intended it to convey a rhetorically neutral description of a child's aspect. Rather, the future poet's minuteness and cleverness seems to point to some more intangible *Wunderkind*-like quality that persisted into adulthood, and which struck some of his more conventional contemporaries as both impressive and, somehow, less than reputable.

Nor did Swinburne elicit such impressions only when very young. In a letter written in the year of publication of *Poems and Ballads*, Lord Bulwer-Lytton writes that Swinburne 'says he is 26 [he was actually 29]; he looks 16 – a pale, sickly boy.'<sup>25</sup> Edmund Gosse makes much of the poet's 'tiny frame' and describes his usual behaviour as that of a hyperactive child: '[Swinburne] skipped as he stood, with his hands jerking or linked behind him while he talked, and, when he was still, one toe was often pressed against the heel of the other foot.'<sup>26</sup> 'Instead of being a prematurely blasé young man o' the world', remarked the writer Bayard Taylor of Swinburne, then aged 31, 'he is rather a wilful, perverse, unreasonable spoiled child. His nature is still that of the *young* Shelley, and my great fear is that it will never be otherwise' (*CH*, p. 7). The demeanour of a 33-year-old Swinburne is reported in W. M. Mallock's recollections of his meeting with the poet in Oxford in 1870. This took place in the rooms of Benjamin Jowett, who had been Swinburne's tutor and who, Mallock tells us, still treated him with a 'watchful and paternal care.'<sup>27</sup> As long as the formidable Master was in the room, Swinburne remained sedate, evidently on his best behaviour; but afterwards, 'on Swinburne the effect of the Master's disappearance was magical': he began to shout out swathes of verse and gave way to immoderate expressions of enthusiasm, until Jowett reappeared and told the pair to go to bed, an injunction that was obeyed in suitably sheepish fashion.<sup>28</sup> On another occasion Swinburne fell asleep during a drinking session, lying 'back in his chair like a child who has gone to sleep.'<sup>29</sup> When Lord Redesdale saw his cousin, then aged 37, after a long hiatus, he found that he 'had still the delicate features of a child.'<sup>30</sup> And when Max Beerbohm went to see the 62-year-old poet in 1899, he could still describe him as follows:

Sparse and straggling though the grey hair was that fringed the immense pale dome of his head, and venerably haloed though he was for me by his greatness, there was yet about him something – boyish? girlish? childish, rather; something of a beautifully well-bred child (*CH*, p. 237).

It is difficult to say to what extent these observers, some of them writing at several years' remove, were influenced by knowledge of Swinburne's career and works; but at least the closest of them in time, Bulwer-Lytton, does link seeming physical immaturity, presumed onanistic tendencies (paleness and sickness were among the supposed effects of the 'solitary vice'),<sup>31</sup> and literary indecency: 'His volume of poems is infested with sensualities, often disagreeable in themselves, as well as offensive to all pure and manly taste' (*CH*, p. 125). Moreover, since

<sup>25</sup> Edward Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, letter to his son Robert. *CH*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Gosse, *Life*, p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> W. H. Mallock, *Memoirs of Life and Literature* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1920), p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Mallock, *Memoirs*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Mallock, *Memoirs*, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gosse, *Life*, p. 222.

<sup>31</sup> See for example R. J. Brodie, *The Secret Companion: A Medical Work on Onanism or Self-Pollution* (London: R. J. Brodie and Co, 1845), and William Acton, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 4th American edn (Philadelphia, PA: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1875 [1857]), pp. 26–36 (children) and 53–6 (adolescents).

Victorian critics tended to correlate visual features, textual features and even imagined ones, it seems safe to assume that some level of connection was present in most critics' minds.<sup>32</sup> A sense of Swinburne's distance from standard adult sexuality is only one side of the story: all these features – smallness, fidgetiness, overexcitability, lack of self-control, marked behavioural changes depending on the presence of authority figures, inability to hold his drink – form a comprehensive enough picture of a figure who neither looked nor behaved like the adult he was.

Applying this set of perceptions to the reception of *Poems and Ballads* can help one grasp why Swinburne's 'boyishness' was so objectionable. The problem was not that his poetry appealed to youth, an idea with largely neutral connotations;<sup>33</sup> rather, it was felt that there was something in Swinburne's poetry that suggested a failure to comply to adult standards of behaviour. An anonymous notice of the book in the *London Review* sets the tone:

From the concluding verses of Mr. Swinburne's new volume, we infer that most, if not all, of these poems were written some years ago, when the author was very young. We hardly know whether or not to hope that this may be so. On the one hand, it would be a relief to think that possibly the diseased state of mind out of which many of them must have issued may have passed away; on the other hand, it would be an additional pain . . . to suppose that such corrupt and acrid thoughts could have proceeded from the very spring and blossoming of youth.<sup>34</sup>

The connection between male poets and boyhood was of course not novel: for example, it had been a crucial node for Romantic poetics' search for a pre-cultural, creative subjectivity, as per William Wordsworth's slogan that 'the child is father to the man'.<sup>35</sup> The critical image of at least one major poet, John Keats, and of less canonical but significant figures such as Hartley Coleridge and Thomas Chatterton had been marked by the sense that they had, either literally or in an aesthetically significant sense, never achieved manhood.<sup>36</sup> As a theme childhood, or rather babyhood, would become central to Swinburne's own later works, especially *A Century of Roundels* (1883). Furthermore, in the broader cultural context immaturity was not always connoted negatively: for example, Bradley Deane has argued that there existed a positive ideal of empire-makers as retaining a boy's high-spirited callousness: '[P]erpetual boyhood . . . had an immense appeal as a fantasy that enabled and sustained the new imperialist imagination'.<sup>37</sup> And, of course, there

<sup>32</sup> See Andrea Sella, 'The "Hermeneutic Imperative" and Victorian Word Portraits', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 50 (2017), 384–97.

<sup>33</sup> In an 1870 letter, Matthew Arnold presents Swinburne as 'the favourite poet of the young men at Oxford and Cambridge'. *Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848–1888*, ed. by George W. E. Russell, 2 vols (New York, NY, and London, Macmillan, 1895), II, 50. Edmund Gosse reports the anecdote that Cambridge undergraduates paraded in the streets shouting 'Dolores' and 'A Song in Time of Revolution'. Gosse, *Life*, pp. 160–61.

<sup>34</sup> *CH*, p. 35. The reference is to the lines in the final poem 'Dedication': 'Some [of these poems] sang to me dreaming in class-time | And truant in hand as in tongue; | For the youngest were born of boy's pastime, | The eldest are young'. Algernon Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads* (London: Methuen, 1866), p. 342. In fact, it took Swinburne five years to complete and publish the volume. For the publication history of *Poems and Ballads*, see Clive Simmonds, 'Publishing Swinburne; the poet, his publishers and critics' (PhD thesis, University of Reading, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), on how Wordsworth's line influenced both novels and pedagogy.

<sup>36</sup> Newbon, *The Boy-Man* is a comprehensive study. On Keats, see Richard Marggraf Turley, *Keats's Boyish Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003). On H. Coleridge, see Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002) and Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childlike Adults*, p. 41 ff.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley Deane, 'Imperial Boyhood', *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 689–714 (p. 690).

were differences between how given individuals or subgroups within the mid-Victorian middle classes approached the issue: for instance, artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites and novelists such as Dickens and Eliot, not to mention the many children's writers that the age produced, tended to put value on retaining some child-like qualities in later life, following the post-Romantic link between childhood and creativity. Here, however, the allegation of immaturity is of a pathologizing kind, as is almost invariably the case in the early reception of *Poems and Ballads*: firstly, the connotations are almost uniformly negative; secondly, the framing of Swinburne through the categories of 'boyhood', 'boyishness' and the like was less to do with aesthetic choices than with what the poems seemed to say about his immaturity as man and poet alike.

### 3. VERSIONS OF BOYISHNESS

Having reviewed the early responses to Swinburne's poetry, with a primary focus on those produced during the poet's most controversial period following the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, I have isolated three versions of Swinburne's 'boyishness', each representing the implied lack of a trait one would expect in an adult man, and by which one could infer an undesirable persistence of boy-like traits in the poet: (1) lack of virility; (2) lack of self-restraint; (3) lack of intellectual maturity. There is a degree of interblending between these categories, but in each case a dominant note can be isolated without much strain.

#### Boyishness as Lack of Virility

Perhaps the most stinging insinuation directed at Swinburne was that his poetry manifested his lack of sexual potency or experience. This lack, as in Bulwer Lytton's contraposition of 'manly' and 'sensual', was suggested to critics by his very need to thematize carnal subjects in shrill, inappropriate ways, like a boy compensating for the lack of actual practice in this department by 'going on about it'. A case in point is one of Robert Browning's rare pronouncements on the younger poet: Swinburne's verse, he wrote, is 'florid impotence', which, though glossed in intellectual terms as 'the minimum of thought and idea in the maximum of words and phraseology', inevitably recalls the medical meaning,<sup>38</sup> if for no other reason than that it was attributed to a poet whose work was notorious for its concern with sex.<sup>39</sup> The stylistic 'floridity', then, was the negatively connoted aesthetic counterpart of a deficit in virility. Something like this is also implied in Robert Buchanan's sneer that Swinburne's poems are too 'juvenile and unreal' to produce immoral effects in readers, this being due, in turn, to their being 'unclean, with little power', and at any rate not 'wholesome food for grown-up men' (*CH*, pp. 31, 34).

Such framings of Swinburne as lacking 'power', with undertones of 'potency', imply neither an association with femininity nor one with homosexuality. As Trev Broughton has argued:

Insofar as mid-Victorian 'manliness' had a sexual component, it was defined not, as in the eighteenth century, as an element of reproductivity, nor, as it tended to be later, in stark opposition to homosexuality on the one hand and female sexuality on the other. Instead, it emerged among a cluster of overlapping notions: effeminacy, celibacy, continence, incontinence, license, and so on.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> First attested in English in 1655. 'impotence, n.' OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2019. Web. 25 November 2019.

<sup>39</sup> *CH*, p. 115. Browning's own centrality in defining a 'masculine poetics' is argued by Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 73–110.

<sup>40</sup> Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Impotence, Biography, and the Froude-Carlyle Controversy: "Revelations on Ticklish Topics"', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7 (1997), 502–36 (p. 506).

Physical immaturity is another obvious term that could be added to this 'and so on', with implications for the poet's metaphorical begetting of the poem. In an age when, as Matthew Sussman has shown, 'manly', 'powerful' and 'chaste' were often paired as terms of praise for poets who dealt with the relations between the sexes in tastefully restrained fashion, and the term 'masculine' was used (also by Swinburne himself) 'to indicate maturity and deliberative strength', Swinburne's contrastingly 'unchaste' approach was perceived as being juvenile by default, onanistic rather than (re)productive, and thus incapable of begetting actual poetic effects.<sup>41</sup>

That a connection was postulated between stylistic 'unchastity', inferior potency, and immaturity is also evidenced by the image of the 'falsetto voice' employed by at least two of Swinburne's most hostile critics. Alfred Austin mocked 'those falsetto notes which appear to compose most of Mr Swinburne's emasculated poetical voice' (*CH*, p. xxx). Buchanan (who, incidentally, was a little younger than Swinburne) condescendingly speculated that Swinburne's 'own voice [as opposed to his influences]' may be worth hearing, when he chooses, once and forever, to abandon the falsetto.<sup>42</sup> Many Victorian critics were fond of the metaphor of style as voice, which shows among other things how invested they were in finding behind the work a version of Wordsworth's 'man speaking to men.'<sup>43</sup> Falsetto as a vocal technique for an adult male singer involves modulating one's voice in such a way that the singer is able to reach higher and airier notes than can usually be achieved in full voice after puberty; so, to use falsetto as a metaphor (Austin's image of the castrato can be seen as a hyperbolic version of it) implied either the poet's simulation of sexual immaturity or the thing itself.

Buchanan followed his remarks on Swinburne's lack of power with the oddly mixed classicist's image of 'Gito, seated in the tub of Diogenes, conscious of the filth and whining at the stars' (*CH*, p. 32), which seems worth unpacking. Diogenes' tub suggests an indefinitely metaphorizable 'filth', as well as the animalism associated with the 'dog-like' Cynic; Gito (or Giton), from Petronius' *Satyricon*, is glossed by Hyder as 'a homosexual' (*CH*, p. 32 fn.), but in that work he is in fact an indiscriminately promiscuous youth, who, though no more than a boy, is equally at home with men, women and a seven-year-old girl.<sup>44</sup> Youth, passivity, immorality and possibly impotence seem to be foremost in Buchanan's tangled rhetoric: 'How old is this young gentleman, whose bosom, it appears, is a flaming fire, whose face is as the fiery foam of flowers, and whose words are as the honeyed kisses of the Shunamite?' (*CH*, p. 31). In the Old Testament, the Shunamite is a girl called Abishag. Although in his commentary Hyder points to the Song of Solomon for the image of Abishag's honeyed kisses (*CH*, p. 31 fn.), the most relevant biblical passage is 1 Kings, 1, where a decrepit King David is given that 'fair damsel' to lie with him, because he felt cold even under the covers, and it was hoped that he might thereby 'get heat'. In the King James version's splendidly laconic prose, she 'ministered to him; but the king knew her not.'<sup>45</sup> The theme, then, is that of barely mature passive (hetero)sexual allure wasted on impotence. Somehow, Swinburne is made to partake of all these significations.

<sup>41</sup> M. Sussman, 'Stylistic Virtue', pp. 226–27.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan and Co., 1872), p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> See Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses: The New, Annotated Edition*, ed. by Joseph D. Reed, trans. By Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), Ch. 11, 24, 26, 80–81, 86.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Kings 1.1–4.

Ultimately, what Gito(n) and Abishag have in common is neither sex nor sexual orientation, but the aura of illicit frisson due to their early youth, which stung Victorian sensibilities as much as today's, though for partly different reasons. Swinburne was cast as a belated pubescent boy, a corrupt ephebe that was at the same time over-excitabile and unable to deliver in the sanctioned manner. One can see how his minuteness played into this framing in an anonymous review of *Poems and Ballads* in the *New York Times*: Swinburne, the author alleged, 'is a weak young person physically, and if we must allow his claim to be possessed with seven devils of uncleanness, we must also maintain that they have left him only a dreamy Don Juan after all. One sickens of his incessant efforts to be mistaken for a libertine.'<sup>46</sup> Again, this appears to be a reference to masturbation, here conceived as a 'dreamy', inferior substitute to coitus, and more broadly associated with mental disturbances in adolescence, as well with weak, emaciated looks.<sup>47</sup> This (presumably American) reviewer's potentially libellous self-assurance about what Swinburne could actually do as opposed to what he ostensibly wanted to project about himself is somewhat remarkable, but is based on the widespread assumption of an interpretively productive continuity between the poles of 'the man' ('boy' in this case) and 'the work'. Physical smallness and lack of poetic discretion about sex, thus, contributed to mark Swinburne as someone who had not really grown up.

### Boyishness as Lack of Self-restraint

One distinct set of accusations also partly hinged on sex: not on the supposed disproportion between Swinburne's lustfulness and his ability to fulfil it, but on the more general question of his moral failure to control and manage impulse in a way compatible with decorum, through what the quintessentially Victorian sexologist William Acton called 'the steady discipline of the will'.<sup>48</sup> The purchase of this ideal, of course, extended far beyond sex. Sally Shuttleworth has discussed the common framing of children 'as victims of their own passions which had to be curbed and controlled if they were to emerge successfully into adult life'.<sup>49</sup> The lack of restraint Swinburne displayed in his poetry (both in his choice of subjects and in keeping length and imagery under control) was also cast as a failure to comply with the broader ideals of self-discipline, self-control, and (in Jed Adams's words) 'self-regulating will', which 'seems absolutely normative in Victorian rhetorics of masculinity'.<sup>50</sup> Herbert Sussman stresses both the sexual and the class dimension involved in this ideal:

This definition of manhood as self-discipline, as the ability to control male energy and to deploy this power not for sexual but for productive purposes was clearly specific to bourgeois man . . . Manliness as control validated the hegemony of the bourgeoisie by valorizing manliness as self-regulation over what was seen through middle-class eyes as

<sup>46</sup> Anon., 'A Review', *New York Times*, 3 November 1866.

<sup>47</sup> See E. H. Hare, 'Masturbatory Insanity: The History of an Idea', *Journal of Mental Science*, 108 (1962), 1–25. Hare locates the height of the idea's prominence between 1863 and 1885, and highlights W. H. O. Sankey's 1866 *Lectures on Mental Diseases*: 'Onanism is often supposed to be the cause of the pale and emaciated looks and feeble health of a patient whereas in some at least the irritability and debility has induced the onanism' (p. 13), where a connection is assumed, apart from the niceties of cause and effect.

<sup>48</sup> Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 89.

<sup>50</sup> Jed Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 209. One can, of course, resist the possible implication that the expectation of self-control was only applicable to men.

the libertinism and idleness of the gentry and the irregularity and sexual license of the working class.<sup>51</sup>

It is important not to take Sussman's otherwise plausible claim – that the ideal of self-restraint originated in the middle class and was tied with its general values – to mean that this ideal was only normative in that milieu: an aristocrat *could* be regarded as having transgressed it; Swinburne certainly was. Furthermore, more than just sex was involved.

An 1864 article by the self-consciously oxymoronic title of 'British Enthusiasm' may serve to illustrate the ramifications of this mindset. This anonymous piece, published in the *Saturday Review* (soon to lead the charge against Swinburne), starts by deploring popular manifestations of enthusiasm sparked by Giuseppe Garibaldi's visit and by William Shakespeare's tricentenary, lamenting the recent loss of supposedly traditional British self-control in terms almost comically identical to those deployed by local media after the Princess of Wales's funerals 133 years later. It continues by distinguishing between 'the bulk of those who joined in these proceedings', who 'belong to an uneasy class of society, which . . . must be considered to combine some at least of the characteristics of immaturity' and 'the higher classes in all times and countries', whose feelings 'are more completely and habitually under their own control than those of their social inferiors'. It ends by suggesting that 'working men' may 'polish themselves' by emulating their social superiors: if they learn to restrain their feelings, 'they will not be very unlike the present race of gentlemen.'<sup>52</sup> Self-restraint, then, could variously be connoted as a characteristic of both the middle and the upper classes, as a desirable British trait, and as a marker of adulthood in that one was expected to grow into it and away from the impulsiveness of childhood by self-cultivation. One may surmise that the dismay with which some early critics greeted *Poems and Ballads*' sprawling, high-pitched, unrestrained outbursts of feeling was partly due to the aristocrat Swinburne's failure to control his impulses and emotions, which could thus be cast both as a sort of class betrayal and as a transgression of normative adulthood.<sup>53</sup> Even W. M. Rossetti, while defending Swinburne, writes that, when in his 'passionately sensuous' mode, the poet 'forgets the [noble] office of self-mastery and reticence' (*CH*, p. 64).

Crucially for my argument, this lack of restraint could be framed as boyishness, John Morley's review of *Poems and Ballads* in the *Saturday Review* being a case in point. Morley was a somewhat liberal-minded man who had little truck either with Christian conceptions of sexuality as sin or with the macho bluster of the likes of Austin, but he, too, castigates Swinburne as writing like a boy rather than as the man he should be; only, his keynote is not contempt but sarcastic disgust: Swinburne 'deserves credit for the audacious courage with which he has revealed to the world a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lemprière' (*CH*, p. 23). The reference is to John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, first published in 1788 and then reprinted in versions revised by various other scholars well into the second half of the nineteenth century. Morley's is thus another example of Victorian literati's tendency to cast ancient literature as the repository of all things sexual. But study of the Classics was also the province of youth first and foremost, and indeed

<sup>51</sup> H. Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Anon., 'British Enthusiasm', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 17.44 (30 April 1864), 524–25.

<sup>53</sup> In contrast, for example, to the generally positive reception of *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), one of whose critics enthused (while still framing the author as a boy) over Swinburne's 'absolute mastery over the turbulent forces of adolescent genius'. Quoted in Ricky Rooksby, *A. C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life* (Abingdon: Scolar Press, 1997), p. 114.

Morley characterizes Swinburne's 'worst mood' as one of 'schoolboy lustfulness' (*CH*, p. 29). He continues:

'[N]o language is too strong to condemn the mixed vileness and childishness of depicting the spurious passion of a putrescent imagination, the unnamed lusts of sated wantons, as if they were the crown of character and their enjoyment the great glory of human life (*CH*, p. 24).

Most of this can remind one of the more outraged examples of the French reception of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* some 10 years earlier, but the emphasis on 'childishness' is uniquely British, and adds to the sense of a value system in which a key aspect of maturity is the ability to keep impulse under rein.<sup>54</sup>

A variation on this theme is contained in an anonymous review of Swinburne's next collection, *Songs Before Sunrise*, again in the *Saturday Review*. I include it here because it harks back to the *Poems and Ballads* scandal:

It was once our fortune, in one of our walks, to come upon a naughty little boy who was challenging the admiration of a small knot of his playfellows. He stood by the side of a large puddle and announced his attention [sic] to walk boldly into it. . . . In contempt of all . . . exhortations and threats he dashed in, scattered the muddy water about, and splashed himself and all the rest from top to toe . . . He evidently delighted in the thought that he was the naughtiest of the naughty. . . . Mr. Swinburne's acquaintance with classical literature allowed him the choice of one of the muddiest – we might rightly say, one of the foulest – of puddles in which to display his contempt for everything that is decent (*CH*, pp. 127–28).

The allegory is rather laboured, but the sense is all too clear: firstly, Swinburne's thematic choices are not threatening, but merely disgusting; secondly, the reason for these choices is sheer immaturity, including a desire to be what might today be termed 'edgy' by flaunting a jocular disregard of accepted rules. The same framing is at work in Buchanan's notorious *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, where Swinburne, unlike the more dangerous Rossetti, is 'only a little mad boy letting off squibs; not a great strong man, who might be really dangerous to society. "I will be naughty!" screamed the little boy; but, after all, what did it matter?'<sup>55</sup>

While at one level this rhetorical figuring of Swinburne as a naughty little boy is an un-subtle rhetorical trick, and while Buchanan was an outlier for biliousness, the recurrence of similar images when decrying Swinburne's thematic choices suggests that a number of his contemporaries did regard his insistence on taboo topics as juvenile – as could be any remark on something that functioning adults are supposed to have learned not to talk about in public.

<sup>54</sup> An ample selection of early critical responses to Baudelaire's most famous work is found in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), I, 1185–215. Marina Bethlenfalvai, *Les Visages de l'enfant dans la littérature française du XIXème siècle, esquisse d'une typologie* (Paris: Nizet, 1979) shows that in mid-nineteenth-century French literary culture, pre-Naturalism, children were overwhelmingly represented as symbols of innocence and/or victims rather than as potential wrongdoers to be kept under rein. This may well reflect a more general difference of emphasis between French and British culture, despite their close similarities. It may be noted that French 'enfantin' largely lacks the negative connotations of 'childish', to express which one needs the Latinate alternative 'puéril' (which in turn is not as entirely negative as the English 'puerile').

<sup>55</sup> Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, p. 36.

As in H. C. Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes', being an adult also consists of knowing when not to say anything, even if you feel like it; Swinburne transgressed this unspoken precept, too.

### Boyishness as Lack of Intellectual Maturity

If one could fail to contain one's impulses, one could likewise fail to contain one's ideas and opinions, slip out of the mainstream, and be cast as childish as a result. Possibly the best source for understanding the dominant Victorian articulations of intellectual maturity and its opposite is Thomas Arnold, Head Master of Rugby and leading light on practical pedagogy and the philosophy of education till long after his death in 1842.<sup>56</sup> Arnold's fundamental views on this issue can be summarized in three points. Firstly, boys are essentially inferior to men, both intellectually and morally – in fact, in the latter respect boys are also morally inferior to younger children: after the comparative innocence of infancy, he notes 'the hardness, the coarseness, the intense selfishness; sometimes, too, the falsehood, the cruelty, the folly of the boy'.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, the notion of manhood promoted by Arnold was not as 'muscular' as it would become in the hands of followers such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes;<sup>58</sup> rather, his model of the 'Christian gentleman' and well-adapted citizen – was '1stly, religious and moral principle; 2ndly, gentlemanly conduct; 3dly, intellectual ability'.<sup>59</sup> Thirdly, as Heather Ellis has shown, Arnold's ideal of the school system is that it should promote and accelerate the boy's progress from moral and intellectual childishness into manhood.<sup>60</sup> In this connection Arnold was fond of quoting St Paul: 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things'.<sup>61</sup> Overall, mainstream Victorian pedagogy can be characterized as hinging on leading boys to outgrow bad moral and intellectual habits to become functional members of society.

If intellectual growth was stymied, some felt, one could end up with Swinburne's extreme opinions. The practice of ridiculing the poet's intellectual maturity to attack his politics and values began with a bit of satirical doggerel published by the indefatigable Buchanan, under the pseudonym of 'Caliban', in the *Spectator*. 'The Session of the Poets', whose title repeats that of a seventeenth-century satire usually attributed to the Earl of Rochester, imagines a drinking session with some of the leading lights of English poetry around 1866, plus Buchanan himself. The ribbing is mostly light, with the exception of Swinburne, who is made to get drunk and make a fool of himself:

Why, just as the hour of supper was chiming,  
The only event of the evening occurred.  
Up jumped, with his neck stretching out like a gander,

<sup>56</sup> As Rugby School points out, '23 of [Arnold's] assistant masters became Head Masters of other public schools between 1842 and 1899': Rugby School official website <<https://www.rugbyschool.co.uk/about/history/>> [accessed November 2020].

<sup>57</sup> *The Miscellaneous Works of Thomas Arnold* (London: B. Fellowes, 1845), p. 368.

<sup>58</sup> On Victorian 'Christian manliness' or 'muscular Christianity', see Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Jed Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, p. 66 ff.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Alison G. Sulloway, *Gerald Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 138. Sulloway also discusses how Arnold's ideals spread beyond Rugby, pp. 137–42.

<sup>60</sup> Ellis, 'Thomas Arnold, Christian Manliness and the Problem of Boyhood'.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11.

Master Swinburne, and squeal'd, glaring out thro' his hair,  
 'All virtue is bosh! Hallelujah for Landor!  
 I disbelieve wholly in everything! – There!' (CH, p. 41)

At this the other poets panic, and Tennyson shouts: 'To the door with the boy! Call a cab! He is tipsy!'; thereupon the 'naughty young gentleman' is thrown out. Besides 'boy', 'naughty' and 'young', the terms 'master', 'squealed', and the interjection 'there!' all point to boyhood, just as Swinburne is made to utter a caricature of a freethinking position.

In an episode supposed to have taken place in 1862 and recounted by the politician and editor William Hardman, it was Swinburne's literary opinions that were classified as immature:

Although almost a boy [he was twenty-five], he upholds the Marquis de Sade as the acme and apostle of perfection, without (as he says) having read a word of his works . . . The assembled company evidently received Swinburne's tirades with ill-concealed disgust, but they behaved to him like a spoiled child.<sup>62</sup>

The disgust in this anecdote is mediated by a recurrent association with pornography, and by implication onanism, but the casting of Swinburne as a child is here primarily directed at the immaturity of his literary judgement.

But, of course, it was not only his judgement of others' poetic efforts that was at issue, but the deficit evinced by his own poetry in that most adult department of poetics, 'thought'. The sympathetic W. M. Payne, writing in 1897, defended the excessive fervour of *Poems and Ballads* by saying that 'its contents had for the most part been written by a mere boy' (CH, p. 203), and by quoting another 'recent critic' (whose identity I have not been able to verify) to the effect that Swinburne was 'influenced by a very boyish desire to shock the dull respectabilities of the average Philistine'. Some 30 years before, the image of a boy was in both Austin's and Buchanan's minds as they discussed Swinburne's literary shortcomings, as shown by their insistence that many of his poems were imitative, acolytic, 'very sweet things in puerility' according to Buchanan (CH, p. 31); and that this was, in turn, caused by Swinburne's being, as Austin put it, 'only the slave of his school days' (CH, p. 103). The more moderate Henry Morley, too, riffed on this note in the *Examiner* while discussing the 'manifest little crudities' produced by 'the young mind of Mr Swinburne' (CH, p. 43).

Some of the pieces in his volume of *Poems and Ballads* were, as we learn from one of the poems, written at school. Here are the passions of youth fearlessly exposed, and stirring depths that have been stirred hitherto by no poet in his youth. He could not, and he should not, stir them in his age.<sup>63</sup>

In 1875, the idea that the poet's thinking was immature was still fresh enough for Henry James to employ it with both gusto and disgust in his review of Swinburne's collection of *Essays and Studies*. Discussing Swinburne's assessment of R. W. Emerson, James begins by writing that 'it is but a colourless account [of it] to say that it embodied the very hysterics of gross vituperation.'<sup>64</sup> James couches his charge in a broader consideration of Swinburne as a poet

<sup>62</sup> S. M. Ellis: *A Mid-Victorian Pepys: The Letters and Memoirs of Sir William Hardman* (New York, NY: George H. Doran Company 1923), pp. 78–79.

<sup>63</sup> CH, p. 43. The reference is, again, to 'Dedication'.

<sup>64</sup> Henry James, 'Swinburne's Essays', *Views and Reviews by Henry James: Now First Collected*, ed. by Le Roy Phillips (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1908 [1875]), p. 51.

which, again, made use of pathologizing terms centred around a notion of 'development' that Swinburne had failed to attain:

With this extravagant development of the imagination there is no commensurate development of either the reason or of the moral sense . . . His style is without measure, without discretion, without sense of what to take and what to leave; after a few pages, it becomes intolerably fatiguing.<sup>65</sup>

It is no mere analogy to say that the genteel, fastidious James found reading Swinburne as fatiguing as he would have dealing with a wayward child, for his terms become explicit a little later in the review. Swinburne's psychology, he says, is 'extremely puerile; for we do not mean simply to say that the author does not understand morality – a charge to which he would probably be quite indifferent; but that he does not at all understand immorality.'<sup>66</sup> Swinburne is not the Messiah of evil: he is a very naughty boy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown how pervasive this framing of our poet as a belated boy was. To this may be added that Swinburne himself was no stranger to the ideology of virility that had been turned against him.<sup>67</sup> His remarks on John Keats, for example – 'a manful kind of man or even a manly sort of boy, in his love-making or in his suffering, will not howl and snivel after such a lamentable fashion' – and on Keats's poetry as 'some of the most vulgar and fulsome doggerel ever whimpered by a vapid and effeminate rhymester in the sickly stage of whelphood' are, while verbally more creative, spiritually and ideologically straight out of the Buchanan et al. playbook.<sup>68</sup> When, in 'Notes on Poems and Reviews', he defended his right to thematize sexual matters by attacking critics' prudery, he looked forward to the day when 'it will be once more remembered that that the office of adult art is neither puerile nor feminine but virile; that its purity is not that of the cloister or the harem.'<sup>69</sup> And when, in his satirical self-parody 'Poeta Loquitur', written around 1880, he returned to the *Poems and Ballads* episode, he still remembered the sting of 'juvenilization' at the hands of critics: 'The mere sight of a church sets me yelping | Like a boy that at football is shinned!', and again 'Mad mixtures of Frenchified offal | With insults to Christendom's creed, | Blind blasphemy, schoolboylike scoff, all | These blazon me blockhead indeed.'<sup>70</sup>

A broader consideration brought out by the aspect of the early reception of *Poems and Ballads* that I have been pursuing throughout this article is how unacceptable the persistence of boy-like traits in an adult male was. It is a well-established notion that Victorian ideas about children and childhood were marked by the coexistence of conflicting connotations: innocent,

<sup>65</sup> James, 'Swinburne's Essays', p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> James, 'Swinburne's Essays', p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> A cult of courage was part of this. For instance, Francis Gorman, 'Swinburne and Cowardice: Running Away and *Poems and Ballads*', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 26 (2017), 61–80 argues that Swinburne's refusal to alter the more offensive parts of his collection was part of a lifelong commitment to an ideal of bravery.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 252. Originally in Swinburne's essay collection *Miscellanies* (1886).

<sup>69</sup> Algernon C. Swinburne, 'Notes on Poems and Reviews', in *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 407.

<sup>70</sup> Algernon C. Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 422.

candid, guileless, fresh and hopeful, and at the same time immature, ignorant, untrustworthy, intemperate and unrestrained, childhood was a repository of one's best self, and at the same time something best left behind upon entering the world of adulthood.<sup>71</sup> Whether connoted positively or negatively, however, childhood could represent an 'other' to the idea of civilized adulthood. It is hard to think of a more determinedly 'grown-up' culture than the starchy, stolid, age-segregated mid-Victorian middle class, with its isolated nurseries, its exuberance-stifling clothing, and its public schools, one of whose chief functions was to birch children into adopting adult-like behaviours. This general effort towards self-control and conformity entailed that if aspects of childhood were carried over into maturity, they could become undesirable or suspect, possibly signs of intellectual, moral, or even physical deficiencies.

Finally, one can connect the Swinburne case to some of the emerging mid-Victorian discourses about the 'immature' period *par excellence*: adolescence. As noted above, contemporary framings of Swinburne as boyish relied on an extended notion of physical or psychical immaturity that could encompass a wide range of ages, all of them preceding a fully integrated adulthood. Due to his liminal status, the male adolescent fell short of this ideal more conspicuously than the child, and as Alice Crossley puts it, could be 'conceived in terms of failure, cast as imperfect or flawed in [his] inadequate performance of adult manliness.'<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, as Chris Vanden Bossche points out, 'coming of age involved the acquisition of certain mental or psychological qualities', summarizable as an 'independent, mature, and cultivated adult self.'<sup>73</sup> Now, 1866 Swinburne was someone 'old enough to know better' who nonetheless partook of all the main characteristics – physical, moral and intellectual – of what should be 'a transient, formative stage of development.'<sup>74</sup> Many of the diverse allegations put forward by critics – lustfulness, radicalism, even poetic diffuseness – were framed, typically with strained logic, within and through the category of boyishness, as if to underline that the transgressions of normative behaviour perpetrated or implied by Swinburne through his poetry were precisely of the sort that respectable society laboured to eradicate from children and adolescents: he represented the failure of an educational system to instil certain patterns of behaviour aimed at facilitating social cohesion. Swinburne's 'boyishness', thus, was the most obvious way for his hostile critics to articulate their instinctive refusal of everything he seemed to embody.

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<sup>71</sup> Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 37–41. Claudia Nelson writes of this at length in *Precocious Children & Childish Adults*, especially in chapter 2. Carolyn Steedman discusses the development of the notion that childhood remains the core of the adult self in *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Sally Shuttleworth notes 'the clash between Romantic ideas of childhood innocence, and Evangelical-fuelled notions of the child as an expression of original sin' in her 'Victorian Childhood', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), 107–13 (p. 110).

<sup>72</sup> Crossley, *Male Adolescence*, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Chris R. Vanden Bossche, 'Moving Out: Adolescence', in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Herbert Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 82–96 (pp. 94, 82).

<sup>74</sup> Crossley, *Male Adolescence*, p. 1.