

Title	Sinner within the saint : the inner dichotomy of the Swinburnian Mary Stuart in Chastelard
Sub Title	聖人にして罪人 : スウィンバーン作『シャステラード』におけるメアリー・スチュアートの二面性
Author	Ayvazyan, Lilit
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2022
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.122, (2022. 6) ,p.219 (26)- 233 (12)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01220001-0219

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Sinner within the Saint: The Inner Dichotomy of the Swinburnian Mary Stuart in *Chastelard*

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The image of Mary Stuart's character has been shaped chiefly through the works circulating during her imprisonment and following her execution in 1587. After Mary's beheading, her story has been told, retold, and reimagined by countless historians, novelists, tragedians, and poets. The scope of these works is so vast, spreading over space and time, that to cover them all would be a gargantuan if not an impossible task. What makes the story of the tragic Queen so fascinating to both writers and readers of every century following her death, including our own, is the variety, inconsistency, and endless contradiction present in historical accounts and literary works. Mary was treated as a martyr by Catholics, while the Protestants branded her with the image of an adulteress. Her son King James VI of Scotland, despite having neglected his mother in exile and arrest under the rule of Elizabeth I, made use of Mary's execution to strengthen his claims to the British throne. Many tragedies recounting the life of Mary were published during his and his son Charles I's rule. These stories did not cease being written and rewritten even after Charles' execution, which allowed many contemporaries to draw parallels with his grandmother's beheading.

Mary's tragedy has been fascinating for many generations simply because it is the tragedy of a real woman full of emotions, drama, and human passions. Mary's story is very controversial, and it has always been challenging to tell where the thin line between truth and fabrication blurs. Retelling her story, especially during the reign of Elizabeth I and the direct heirs of Mary, bore a political nature. John D. Staines writes, "[a]s soon as a writer represents the death of king or queen, even a tyrant, he or she introduces sympathy into the political equation" (181). Thus, it is not surprising that most writers who touched upon the

Queen's story were inclined to portray her in one of the conventional archetypes: the harlot adventuress or the religious martyr. Over time the political pretexts faded away, but the archetypes survived. From the mid-seventeenth century, we see authors express their interest in the character of the Queen rather than the political aspects of her life.

Chastelard (1865), the first play of Algernon Charles Swinburne's (1837-1909) trilogy on Mary Stuart, is his most significant endeavour into the "Elizabethan" drama but at its very core, the play is vividly Victorian. Swinburne puts Mary in a court which embodies the double standards and false morality so often observed during the nineteenth century. The attendants and the lords surrounding Mary Stuart are always ready to criticise and denounce their Queen for her decisions, while they are not hesitant to do precisely the same, if not worse. Mary's character was not judged and misunderstood only by her counterparts in the play but also by Swinburne's critics.

Following Swinburne's centenary in 2009, there has been a spark of newfound interest in his works, but his plays remain largely neglected. *Chastelard* can boast of having received the most attention amongst Swinburne's plays, although these analyses are outdated, often superficial, and suffer from glaring shortcomings. Swinburne's Mary has been branded with the labels of a "sadist" and a "vampire"; in other words, she is considered a *femme fatale*. Swinburne, often associated with Victorian aestheticism and decadence, is famous for his "immoral," "sodomasochistic," and "obsessive" characters. These negative connotations still haunt Swinburne's name because of analyses by two of his early critics, Georges Lafourcade and Mario Praz. Praz writes, "Mary Stuart is ... the monster ... [she] is cold, she cannot weep" (220). He then refers to Lafourcade, "Swinburne ne puise l'inspiration qui anime les magnifiques tirades de *Chastelard* que dans ses propres tendances et dans ses propres désirs" (qtd. in Praz 222).¹

Notwithstanding this, the contrary stands true: Swinburne's characters are multidimensional human beings with integrity and psychological complexity. *Chastelard* places on full display the intricate emotions of its characters. Traditionally, critics have treated *Chastelard* as a masochist for having sought the fulfilment of his love towards Mary Stuart in death, while Mary Stuart has been labelled a sadist for stoneheartedly executing *Chastelard*, whom she claimed to love. Although several attempts have been made to analyse *Chastelard* after Lafourcade and Praz, those generally follow the same line of thought. *Chastelard*'s desire to

die for love is perceived as typical to the archetype of the troubadours, and the bard himself is considered an embodiment of a gallant knight. Gerald Kinneavy adequately analyses Chastelard's character and identifies him as "the ideal courtly lover" often observed in mediaeval literature. He writes, "Chastelard does seem made up of a great many of the courtly knight's characteristics. There can be no doubt that he is vassal to his lady" (3). Unfortunately, Kinneavy does not explore Mary Stuart's character in similar detail and depth.

Anthony Harrison is one of the few researchers who have been able to see past the veil of the *femme fatale*; to him, "she is not primarily a sinister *belle dame sans merci*" (91). In his "Swinburnian Woman," he categorises Mary Stuart as "passionate":

They are helpless thralls of a passion which often conflicts with their own or their lovers' worldly desires. Such conflicts make these women appear capricious or inconsistent, themselves mere subjects of a presiding and sinister fate. (90)

However, Harrison does not elaborate or comment on Mary's tragedy in detail, nor does he discuss the dichotomy within her character.

To better understand Swinburne's characterisation of Mary Stuart, this essay aims to reconstruct the already-established image of the Queen in *Chastelard*. The complex psychology bestowed upon her by Swinburne warrants her vindication from the stigma of a whimsical and sadistic character. A close reading of the play offers an unprecedented perspective into the decisions of Mary: Chastelard's eccentric actions, the Queen's conversation with Father Black, and the "peer pressure" from her court provided the perfect setting for beheading the bard. From the beginning of the drama, Swinburne puts Mary into a situation where she would face criticism regardless of her choice. The Queen faces the dilemma of loving the bard and desiring to preserve herself.

Swinburne is unique in describing Mary in a realistic way. She is not a faultless, sinless martyr; she can love, care, feel jealous, and despair. The Victorian poet fully accepts Mary's decision to execute Chastelard. In his "Note on the Character of Mary Queen of Scots" (1882), he writes: ²

To spare the life of a suicidal young monomaniac who would not accept his

dismissal with due submission to the inevitable and suppression of natural regret, would probably in her own eyes have been no less than ruin to her character under the changed circumstances and in the transformed atmosphere of her life. ...The act of Chastelard was the act of a rebel. (438-39)

More than anything else, Swinburne's two essays on Mary Stuart show his admiration of the Queen's character and spirit; they display his attitude towards the historical truth of some debated events of her life.

It is essential to observe Mary Stuart's character in *Chastelard* independent of Swinburne's later plays of the trilogy—*Bothwell* (1874) and *Mary Stuart* (1881). These three plays have all been written in distinctly different stages of the poet's life and literary career and, according to Curtis Dahl, bear definitive autobiographical elements:

To a surprising extent [Swinburne] portrayed her in his own image, and if she was ... his lifelong heroine, it was in part because she was a projection of himself—of what he was and even more of what he would have liked to be. First attracted to her by qualities in her and her legend that appealed to him, when he came to fill in the details of his dramatic character as distinct from the historical Mary he added salient traits from his own nature. (92-93)

It stands to reason that Swinburne's portrayal of Mary would shift and undergo alterations in accordance with the changes in his own life, writing style, and interests. Swinburne saw a reflection of himself in the Scottish Queen; moreover, for him, she represented all of the things he loved, i.e. France and art:

He, too, coming from the colorful, culturally vibrant, not always moral Oxford and London of the Pre-Raphaelite period ..., had found the British world censorious of aesthetic and passionate values and full of Scottish Buchanan-Knoxes denouncing in moral reprobation his "fleshly" style of poetry. He too had been called irreligious. He too had met Puritan cant and intolerance and philistine hardness. *He saw I think, whether consciously or not, her struggle against her*

moralistic and practical enemies as a symbol of his own. (Dahl 94-95, emphasis mine)

Swinburne's likeness to Mary, his extreme obsession with Jacobitism and its cause, the fantasies that one of his ancestors had been a lover of the Queen's, his desire to justify and defend the execution of Chastelard and the murder of Lord Darnley, beg the question: would the poet who admired Mary Queen of Scots to such an extent portray her as an atrocious blood-sucking vampire?

The character of Queen Mary has often been misunderstood and misrepresented in the analyses of Swinburne's critics. While Lafourcade and Praz tend to refer the source of creating such a "sadistic" character to Swinburne's own masochistic habits, the roots of their analyses run much deeper. During the Victorian era, Swinburne's work was often criticised for its "eroticism." The poet immediately became the target of literary critics following the publication of his *Poems and Ballads* on August 4, 1866. The backlash was so intense that Moxon, the publisher, withdrew the books from circulation. In his *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, Robert Buchanan refers to Swinburne using such remarks as "hysterical tone," "heinous," "thorough nastiness," culminating into "the first feeling of disgust at such themes as *Laus Veneris* and *Anactoria*, faded away into comic amazement" (338). However, the critic's savage attack on Swinburne and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites arises from a thorough discomfort Buchanan and other reviewers felt in reading unconventional female characters. As Allison Pease has phrased it:

On the surface it seems that what shocked these critics most of all was the open representation of physical sexuality in the poetry. But while the reviews focus on obscenity, they are coded in a language that reveals an even deeper anxiety about middle- and upper-class male privilege in a society whose rigid class boundaries were threatening to give way to a feminized underclass. (43)

The Victorians were familiar with male characters who freely expressed their love and ardour for the objects of their affection. On the other hand, female characters never directly voiced their sexual desire or yearning for gratification. It is not surprising that the self-assured and

open-minded Swinburnian women who did not belong to the archetype of “the angel in the house” were seen as challenging the authority of Victorian men.

Mary Stuart was exactly this type of character not only in Swinburne’s *Chastelard* but also in her historical court. Her existence in itself was a threat to the Scottish bureaucrats. Even after marrying Lord Darnley, Mary never acknowledged his authority as a king, and to his death, Darnley remained the Queen’s royal consort. Her son James hesitated to accept Mary back from her exile because she posed a threat of restoring herself on the Scottish throne instead of acting as the Queen-Mother. Mary’s existence threatened even the prudish English Protestants because she had a better claim to the British throne than Elizabeth I.³ The Scottish Queen had to constantly fight the men surrounding her who would not accept her French upbringing, her Catholic faith, and especially her gender. Such an attitude of men towards her figure and character did not change even in many literary works.

Swinburne makes it evident that his Mary is aware of the bard’s feelings, and even after her attendant Mary Seyton tells her of seeing Chastelard kiss Mary Beaton, the Queen is willing to forgive him. The disappointment and sorrow are evident in her speech, but she exercises generosity and forgives both him and Beaton:

He doth not well to sing maids into shame;
And folk are sharp here; yet for sweet friends’ sake
Assuredly I’ll see him. I am not wroth.
A goodly man, and a good sword thereto—
It may be he shall wed her. I am not wroth. (35)

In Swinburne’s verse, Queen Mary does not blame Beaton but instead finds fault with Chastelard. Victorian England was a misogynistic society where women had limited rights and freedoms and were often the targets of the patriarchy’s scorn. This society did not hesitate to humiliate the woman, even if a man was at fault. An example of this is the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869:

... enforced in 18 garrison towns and ports and surrounding areas (within 15-mile radius), required women identified as prostitutes by the police to submit to internal

examination by a doctor and, if infected, to detention and treatment. ... an official sanction to vice and breached civil liberties, exposing working-class women to instrumental rape at the discretion of the police. (Howarth 186)

For the women's movement "vice" raised more complex issues than slavery, exposing, above all, differences in class perspectives on sexuality. But feminists could agree in attacking *the double standard of sexual morality that routinely visited punishment on prostitutes but not their clients*. (Howarth 187, emphasis mine)

Queen Mary's readiness to side with her attendant and see the bard as the seducer allows parallels with Josephine Butler's testimony before the Royal Commission: "Let your laws be put in force, but let them be for male as well as female" (qtd. in Hamilton 17). Despite having been written by a man, Mary retains her ability to judge without prejudice towards gender.

Mary's personality and inner struggle are further explored through her short dialogue with Father Black, a character traditionally ignored by Swinburne's critics. However, the short sequence during which he talks to the Queen features an essential clue to Mary's decision of executing the bard. Father Black talks to the Queen of the people in the streets—the subjects of the Scottish kingdom:

FATHER BLACK

... I heard men say,
(Their foul speech missed not mine ear) they cried,
'This devil's mass-priest hankers for new flesh
Like a dry hound; let him seek such at home,
Snuff and smoke out the queen's French—'

QUEEN

They said that?

FATHER BLACK

'— *French paramours that breed more shames than sons*

All her court through’; forgive me. (36, emphasis mine)

It is crucial to keep in mind that Mary is the Queen of Scots before all else. She is fully aware of the hostility present in her court. Losing the support of the people would mean losing the Scottish throne. This small fragment of her conversation with Father Black turns into an inkling for understanding why she chooses a public execution to get rid of Chastelard. This conversation, which seemingly is of no importance, exposes some of Mary’s motives: executing Chastelard is not a simple sadistic whim; it is Mary’s way of establishing her authority in the eyes of her people. The support of the common people is crucial for any Queen or King; it is the very foundation of their rule. At a glance, it might seem unfitting to find the political ethics in Swinburne’s aesthetic lyric; however, the poet’s essays “Note on the Character of Mary Queen of Scots” and “Mary Queen of Scots” provide sufficient evidence for this line of thought: ⁴

... may it be pleaded on the other hand that the queen of Scotland could not ... be expected to sacrifice her reputation and imperil her security for the sake of a cast-off lover who could not see that it was his duty as a gentleman of good sense to submit himself and his passion to her pleasure and the force of circumstances. *The act of Chastelard was the act of a rebel as surely as the conduct of Darnley three years afterwards was the conduct of a traitor*; and by all the laws then as yet unrepealed, by all precedents and rights of royalty, the life of the rebellious lover was scarce less unquestionably forfeit than the life of a traitorous consort. (“Note” 438-9, emphasis mine)

The developments and events of the play and Swinburne’s critical essays provide sufficient substantiation to discard the theory that Mary is a *femme fatale*. Moreover, it is clear that she has no intention of killing Chastelard, but the conversation with Father Black provides her with an adequate reason to execute the bard for the sake of preserving herself and her throne.

Swinburne portrays Mary as a bearer of unyielding patience. Her patience is best displayed when Chastelard infiltrates her room. Unbeknownst to the bard’s presence, she walks into her bedchamber, starts to undress, lets her hair down, and thinks aloud about her

troubled state of mind, her doubts, her marriage to Lord Darnley, and the memories of her first husband. It is in such a vulnerable state that she notices the French bard hiding behind her bed. It is appalling that many of Swinburne's critics manage to idealise the deviant bard who was sniffing at the Queen's bedsheets and pillows, fantasising about her, and creeping on her from hiding. Swinburne's description of Mary's reaction is unique; she is immediately trying to tie her hair up and put her girdle back on: "Give me that coif to gather in my hair— / I thank you—and my girdle—nay, that side" (59). While a female author of the nineteenth century would likely portray Mary in confusion, hiding under her bedsheets to conceal her nakedness, Swinburne still manages to give a credible description of the course of her actions, albeit not very feminine. The Queen remains composed, in control as would befit a person of her stature. Nevertheless, first and foremost, she warns Chastelard of the danger he would bring upon himself if he stays in her room:

Nay, but stand up, kiss not my hands so hard;
By God's fair body, if you but breathe on them
You are just dead and slain at once. (59)

Why, you shall go, because I hate you not.
You know that I might slay you with my lips,
With calling out? But I will hold my peace. (60)

She fully understands what fate awaits Chastelard if he stays in her room; she is aware of her rights to call for her attendants or guards to remove the rebellious young man. She continuously warns him of the peril he is bringing upon himself but always adds that she will not harm him.

Touched by Chastelard's confessions, Mary talks of her feelings, of the jealousy that had been burning hot in her heart:

I love you best of them.
Clasp me quite round till your lips cleave on mine,
False mine, that did you wrong. Forgive them dearly

As you are sweet to them; for by love's love
I am not that evil woman in my heart
That laughs at a rent faith. (62)

The Queen is genuinely moved, she regrets being rash and rude to him, and she explains that jealousy caused her to act the way she did. However, throughout the scene, she continues begging him to leave her chambers before they are found. While she is initially asking the bard to leave to preserve his life, she soon asks him to leave so that he does not shame and ruin her. Such a request might at the outset seem selfish, but by connecting all the dots—especially taking into consideration that the bard does not care about his own fate—it is rather Mary's last resort in trying to save Chastelard's life:

Nay, for God's love be away;
You will be slain and I get shame. God's mercy!
You were stark mad to come here; kiss me, sweet,
Oh, I do love you more than all men! yea,
Take my lips to you, close mine eyes up fast,
So you leave hold a little; there, for pity,
Abide now, and to-morrow come to me. (63)

While asking Chastelard to leave, Mary cannot control her yearning for him. Most of the conversation that takes place between these two bears a similar nature—Mary begs Chastelard to leave, the bard refuses to comply, Mary warns him of the deadly threat he has brought upon him by sneaking into her room, and the bard expresses his readiness to die just to have these few moments with her. It is here that the Queen tells Chastelard “I shall be deadly to you” (64), a line often used to indicate Mary Stuart's vampiric nature; a close reading of the entire stanza, however, presents a different picture:

O me! this is the Bayard's blood of yours
That makes you mad; yea, and you shall not stay.
I do not understand. Mind, you must die.

Alas, poor lord, you have no sense of me;
I shall be deadly to you. (64, emphasis mine)

Mary has already asked the bard to leave her room multiple times at this point, not to mention she continues to do so after uttering these lines. It seems that she is stating the facts, the natural course of events that are to come if the bard does not leave since his actions can easily be labelled as high treason. It is unreasonable to see any threat in the words of a woman who is simply trying to warn and prevent the upcoming disaster, to preserve her dignity, and save her paramour.

Even when gravely offended, Mary's determination to keep Chastelard alive is further observed in her manner and speech when Darnley and the Four Maries enter her bedchamber. She does order the guards to take the Frenchman away but is sure to mention that he should not be hurt, while Lord Darnley insists that Chastelard should be hanged immediately: "Lords, I pray you see / All be done goodly; look they wrong him not" (69).

In Scene I of Act IV, the reader is told that three weeks have passed, and Chastelard's life has been spared for such a long time only thanks to the Queen's kindness: "Nay, these three weeks ago / I said the queen's wrath was not sharp enough / To shear a neck" (71). It is in the Queen's monologues that her true feelings pour out:

And yet the thing is pitiful; I would
There were some way. To send him overseas,
Out past the long firths to the cold keen sea
Where the sharp sound is that one hears up here—
Or hold him in strong prison till he died—
He would die shortly—or set him free
And use him softly till his brains were healed—
There is no way. Now never while I live
Shall we twain love together any more
Nor sit at rhyme as we were used to do,
Nor each kiss other only with the eyes
A great way off ere hand or lip could reach;

There is no way. (74-75)

This brief yet powerful passage can be classified as a dramatic monologue. It conveys the innermost troubles of the protagonist. As David Bergman has put it, “the approved model for the dramatic monologue favors the depiction of failure and corruption rather than sainthood and heroism” (773). Indeed, Queen Mary is neither a saint nor a hero but merely a woman who cannot help but order the execution of the man she loves. Be it the pressure of those surrounding her or her own desire to preserve her name and save herself from being shamed, Swinburne clarifies that the rest of her court would have done precisely the same. Mary agonises over her feelings and the position she has been put in because of the bard’s selfish actions. There seems to be no alternative, and she is forced to express her willingness to die with her lover when she visits him in the dungeons: “What if we lay and let them take us fast, / Lips grasping lips? I dare do anything” (126). Chastelard stops her and is soon after led to the executioner. The Queen promises Mary Beaton to do everything in her power to save Chastelard’s life, but the following scene describes the bard’s beheading. This scene is the last one in the tragedy, and the execution is conveyed through the eyes of Mary Beaton and Mary Carmichael. To underscore Mary Stuart’s sadistic nature, critics often refer to the following words uttered during Chastelard’s execution:

MARY CARMICHAEL

[S]he seems at point to speak:

Now she lies back, and laughs, with her brows drawn

And her lips drawn too. (103)

A psychoanalytical approach highlights defence mechanisms at work; Mary Stuart’s laughter at the death scene of her lover is not an expression of warped sadistic pleasure but a manifestation of repression—of intense emotion hidden behind the veil of laughter. According to Davis, repression is a defence mechanism that “ensures that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind ... is prevented from entering into it” (803). Mary’s final laughter is the symbol of the dichotomy between her desire to spare the bard’s life and preserve her status.

It is hard to tell what makes the Queen break her final promise as Swinburne does

not elaborate further. However, looking back at the whole play, it seems that the reason is her desire to survive and preserve her throne. As the historical Queen of Scots was intent on maintaining her position, it is not too far-fetched to assume that Swinburne had similar intentions for his character:

At her best and worst alike, it seems to my poor apprehension that Mary showed herself a diplomatist only by education and force of native ability brought to bear on a line of life and conduct most alien from her inborn impulse as a frank, passionate, generous, unscrupulous, courageous and loyal woman, naturally self-willed and trained to be self-seeking, born and bred an imperial and royal creature, at once in the good and bad or natural and artificial sense of the words. ("Note on the Character" 441)

Mary Stuart is, indeed, the least understood and the most criticised of Swinburne's character. Despite the traditional archetypes developed around Mary's character, in *Chastelard* she was never meant to be represented as a saint, nor as a sinner, but rather as a combination of both: Swinburne aimed to sing of a woman who was real to him. Swinburne's delineation of his Queen is sufficient evidence of his love and admiration towards her as well as his firm affirmation. That is to say, he would have never portrayed her as a one-dimensional character who can be explained away through simple words of "good" or "bad," much less the derogatory label of a "vampiric monster." Unfortunately, most of Swinburne's critics tend to emphasise her decision to execute Chastelard; they are therefore unable to recognize that Swinburne's Mary is, ultimately, a nuanced albeit flawed human being. Both the poet and his Queen possessed complexity and depth of character. As Swinburne says in "Adieux à Marie Stuart," "Strange love they have given you, love disloyal, / Who mock with praise your name" (*The Poems* 262). These lines echo the treatment Swinburne's works would receive as he faded into obscurity in the twentieth century. Swinburne has written of many female characters throughout his literary career, both imaginary and real, but Mary Stuart is undoubtedly his most complex heroine as she was also the poet's reflection. Swinburne's affection towards her becomes apparent through his verse, and like an enamoured bard in love with the Queen, he continued singing her praise throughout most of his life.

Notes

- 1 Although Lafourcade and Praz use psychoanalytical terms such as “sadistic” or “masochistic,” they do not provide psychoanalytical substantiation for them; they make reference to Swinburne’s fancy for flagellation, which he picked up during his years at Eton College as well as quote some controversial lines that allow for more than one interpretation. Regardless, despite holding some share of truth, their analyses tend to present Swinburne’s protagonists as one-dimensional characters lacking emotional and psychological depth. Even a 2011 study by Ritchie Robertson refers to Swinburne’s Mary Stuart as a “vampire,” a term Praz uses, alongside “monster,” to describe her: “[Mary] here shows herself as calculating as Schiller’s Elizabeth. She is a Machiavellian as well as a *femme fatale*. . . . here and throughout the trilogy Mary is entirely amoral” (334). Such a conclusion is usually based on the Queen’s final decision to go forward with Chastelard’s execution.
- 2 “The Note on the Character of Mary Queen of Scots” was initially published in the January issue of the *Fortnightly Review*.
- 3 Mary was the granddaughter of Margaret Tudor (1489-1541), Henry VII’s elder sister, and had a better claim to the English throne than the daughter of Anne Boleyn.
- 4 “Mary Queen of Scots” is Swinburne’s article for *Encyclopædia Britannica*’s luxurious Ninth Edition (1875-1898).

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