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# ‘The Feet of Love’: Pagan Podophilia from A.C. Swinburne to Isadora Duncan

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In an article entitled “Le paganisme poétique en Angleterre” published in May 1867 in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, the French literary critic Louis Etienne underlined the striking similarities between Keats’s and Swinburne’s pagan and sensual inspiration, deploring, however, the lack of manliness of their verses. Rather than emulating the virile ideal which the ancient Greeks had set so high, Keats and Swinburne seemed indeed to have favoured excessive “crying at the feet of Venus”—an effeminate whining tendency which Etienne detected “on almost every page” (316) of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866). If he was certainly right about the importance of Venuses in Keats’s and Swinburne’s poetry, revealing their more “feminine” Hellenism, Etienne probably also had a point about feet: these indeed play a crucial role in the works of the two poets, as epitomized by Keats’s famous address to “the naked foot of Poesy” which he wished to free from its prosodic strictures, like Perseus liberating Andromeda:

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness,  
Let us find, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy. (l.1-6, 340)

In a much more recent essay devoted to Keats’s “boyish, fetishist erotics” (Turley 100) and entitled “‘Strange longings’: Keats and Feet”, Richard Marggraf Turley suggests that Keats’s supposed poetic effeminacy may be partly reflected in his regressive podophilic fantasies. However nowhere does Turley relate the Romantic poet’s foot obsession with his fascination with antiquity, although many of the examples quoted are explicitly pagan—for instance the comparison of Diana’s and Venus’ feet in Book one of *Endymion*:

...her hovering feet,  
 More bluely vein'd, more soft, more whitely sweet,  
 Than those of sea-born Venus. (l.624-6, 123)

According to Turley, Keats focuses “on Diana’s feet” as a “fetishized substitute for the missing phallus” in order “to avoid unpleasant thoughts of castration” (95)—drawing on Freud’s analysis of fetishism as the displacement of sexual desire onto inanimate body parts (and feet in particular). Freud understood foot fetishism as a compensatory response to infantile confrontation with the castration complex (that is, with the absent phallus of the mother). With this reading in mind, the reference to the Venus Anadyomene, “sea-born” from the castration of the God of the sky, appears all the more significant.

The cruel birth of Venus was also one of Swinburne’s favourite mythical scenes recurring six times in *Poems and Ballads* and *Atalanta in Calydon*.<sup>1</sup> In every single occurrence, the poetic persona’s gaze is arrested by Venus’ feet:

When a wonder, a world's delight,  
 A perilous goddess was born,  
 And the waves of the sea as she came  
 Clove, and the foam at her feet,  
 Fawning, rejoiced to bring forth  
 A fleshly blossom... (PB l.741-6, 271)

Not only does this excerpt conjure up and intermingle Swinburne’s “sea complex” which Gaston Bachelard convincingly related to a longing for the mother figure (the great “Mother” to take up Swinburne’s own pun<sup>2</sup>), the cleaving imagery here symbolically repeats the castration of Uranus whose sperm formed the spume or foam of the sea from which Aphrodite emerges and on which her feet symbolically lay.

This article aims to explore the key role played by the eroticizing of feet in the libidinal economy of Swinburne’s early “pagan” poetry, focusing both on foot fetishism and on related imagery of masochistic trampling which provide an interesting variation on his well-known algolagnia or flagellating fantasies. But this erotic beating was also closely intertwined with Swinburne’s poetics and conceptions of rhythm—as he reclaimed the pun on metrical feet so frequently used in both Greek and Latin poetry. The last two sections of this essay contextualize and politicize this fascination with feet by emphasizing on the one hand the stigmatization found in medical treatises exposing so called “sexual perversions” such as podophilia, and on the other the liberating prospects offered by such erotic displacements—notably in the work of the American and hellenophile dancer Isadora Duncan who was also an enthusiastic reader of Swinburne’s poetry.

## Erotic trampling: The “feet of lust” (PB “Laus Veneris”, l.176, 15)

Representations of antique feet in 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry and the visual arts are generally rather discreet or secondary and when such body parts do feature prominently, it could be argued that podophobia rather than podophilia is implied. For instance, the huge foot in Henry Fuseli’s chalk composition entitled *The Artist Moved to Despair by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments* (1778-79) reveals how antique artistic *feats* weighed upon the modern poet who longed to tread along the “bright path” (Turley 89) opened

up by the great poets of the past. The ancient Greeks were indeed lucky: contrary to modern artists, they experienced no anxiety of influence, theirs was already a literature of masterpieces. To quote the words of Swinburne's fellow Aesthete John Addington Symonds, paraphrasing Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale": "The Greeks had no past: no hungry generations trod them down" (Symonds 1902, 361).

However, with Swinburne, such treading or trampling no longer appears as a negative metaphor for the burden of literary filiation. On the contrary, the poet happily followed in the footsteps of Sappho by exploring, in particular, their common erotic fantasies about feet. In his Sapphic poem "Anactoria" for instance, feet are mentioned no fewer than ten times: "Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet/The paces and the pauses of thy feet!" (PB l.117-8, 50). But female feet are the sole locus of desire—men's "iron feet" (referred to on l.172) seem less erotically enticing, an opposition already formulated in fragment 16 in which Sappho celebrates a feminine Hellas, that of the "lovely" Helen of Troy or Anactoria, rather than the brutal steps of the Lydian soldiers:

Some say an army on horseback,  
Some say on foot, and some say ships  
Are the most beautiful things  
On this black earth,  
But I say,  
It is whatever you love. [...]  
...reminding me of Anactoria,  
Who is gone  
And whose lovely walk  
And bright  
Shimmering face  
I would rather see  
Than all the chariots  
And armed men in Lydia (Sappho 31)

Other echoes of Sappho's fragments, and notably her address to "the bitter sweet" Eros, similarly resonate in "Fragoletta", a poem in praise of gender ambiguity :

O bitterness of things too sweet !  
O broken singing of the dove !  
Love's wings are over fleet,  
And like the panther's feet  
The feet of Love (PB l.66-70, 69)

Men, when they are not gods or heroes, are generally heavy-footed. Only the feet of women or androgynous boys elicit passion or fascination. In Book eight of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is thus captivated by the swift, "twinkling" feet of the "young boys in the first bloom of youth" who perform before him at the court of King Alcinoüs:

...around him stood boys in the first bloom of youth, well skilled in the dance, and they smote the goodly dancing floor with their feet. And Odysseus gazed at the twinklings of their feet and marvelled in spirit. (l.250-265, 277)

Moreover vases in the form of pretty feet were a very popular form of earthenware<sup>3</sup> in Greek Antiquity, which one could not only enjoy visually as beautiful artifacts but equally touch and taste wine from. Some such vases were alternatively used to store perfumes.

Far from awed by this weighty antique heritage, Swinburne reclaimed both this Hellenic literary and visual culture eroticizing feet as beautiful and sensual body parts. In his poetry, these may be adorned with precious stones (like Venus in "A Ballad of Death" who wears "pearl and purple and amber on her feet", PB l.39-40, 6) or caressed

because of their softness (“her small soft feet, that be/Shod now with crimson royally”, “The Masque of Queen Bersabe”, *PB* l.94-8, 179). Sound is also essential as the pacing of harmonious feet is closely linked to beautiful music and dancing—which is further emphasized by the systematic use of striking imitative alliterations in “f” (“fleet feet”, “fiery feet”) evoking the swiftness of the dancing paces:

Feed ye on these, eat and wax fat, cry out,  
Laugh, having eaten, and leap without a lyre,  
Sing, mix the wind with clamour, smite and shake  
Sonorous timbrels and tumultuous hair,  
And fill the dance up with tempestuous feet. (*PB* 1011-1015, 280)

These sounds made by “tempestuous feet” reflected in the poet’s highly alliterative meter suggest that Swinburne’s poetic feet were not meant to be praised exclusively as static body parts. Indeed these are frequently described as “swift or fleet”, recalling the Homeric epithet applied to Achilles—the “swift or fleet of foot”. Such archaic sounding adjectives may be found in his play *Atalanta in Calydon*, inspired by a lost fragment of Euripides, which counts sixty-five references to feet:

Maiden most perfect, lady of light,  
With a noise of winds and many rivers,  
With a clamour of waters, and with might ;  
Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,  
Over the splendour and speed of thy feet ;  
For the faint east quickens, the wan west shivers,  
Round the feet of the day and the feet of the night. (*PB* l.74-80, 251)  
(...)  
And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,  
Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,  
Follows with dancing and fills with delight  
The Maenad and the Bassarid ; (*PB* l.105-8, 251-2)

In the second quotation, the context is Dionysian rather than Apollonian. Swinburne, like many of his contemporaries, was increasingly drawn to the Eleusinian mysteries and all the wild rituals associated with Chthonian divinities rather than to the marmoreal beauty of the Olympians—thus anticipating in many ways Friedrich Nietzsche’s polarization between those two forces underlying Greek tragedy. This “anti Olympian topos” (Louis 14) in favour of Dionysian ecstasy may evoke the paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema who not only drew on ancient Greek vases for some of his compositions but also went to Swinburne for learned advice concerning his antique subjects. In *Autumn Vintage Festival* (1877), the raised position of the dancing Maenad’s foot thus reveals a deliberate attempt at downplaying static sculptural models. Interestingly, feet (which are generally the weak point of antique masculine heroes—from Oedipus the swollen-footed to Achilles or Antaeus) appear here as the means of empowerment of feminine figures thanks to liberating dances.

However Greek bacchanals were often a dangerous business. In Euripides’ *Bacchanals*, Agave dismembers and tramples her own son Pentheus to death. The threatening correlative of the fetishization of the dancing foot is this crushing and destructive impulse which is evoked in *Atalanta in Calydon* in Althaea’s prophetic dream of her son’s death:

...and Love  
Trampled the ember and crushed it with swift feet. (*PB* l.287-8, 258)

Rhythmical treading is here turned into an eroticized spectacle. This equally recalls the Dionysian process of winemaking during which the grapes are trampled to the point of bursting.<sup>4</sup> But in Swinburne’s poetry the metaphor of the wine-press also suggests erotic release, as shown by the following quotations from three of his Hellenic poems:

“Laus Veneris”:

Naked and sad, they drink the dregs of it,  
Trodden as grapes in the wine-press of lust.  
Trampled and trodden by the fiery feet. (PB l.190-2, 15)

“At Eleusis”:

...a lordly vine, whose grapes  
Bleed the red heavy blood of swoln soft wine. (PB l.197-8, 170)

...and “The Hymn to Proserpine”:

Sweet is the treading of wine, and sweet the feet of the dove ;  
But a goodlier gift is thine than foam of the grapes or love. (PB l.5-6, 55-6)

These examples not only introduce a comparison of the juice of the bursting grapes with blood (based on the obvious chromatic similarities between the two liquids) but also with “foam”—that is the same word Swinburne used in *Atalanta in Calydon* to refer to the sperm-like spume mingled with blood which gave birth to cruel Aphrodite:

For an evil blossom was born  
Of sea-foam and the frothing of blood,  
Blood red and bitter of fruit. (PB l.729-31, 271)

## Fetishist metrics: “thy cruel faultless feet” (PB “Anactoria” l.18, 48)

If trampling imagery in Swinburne’s poetry may certainly be related to his sado-masochistic conception of love, the fetishization of the menadic dancing foot also reveals his sharp sensitivity to poetic rhythm equating body and poetic corpus. In his poem “Anactoria” he deliberately reclaims and remembers the mutilated fragments of Sappho’s poetry, emphasizing the corporeality of Sappho’s verse, as well as the body of Sappho as text. This sheds light on the significance of feet in Swinburne’s antique poems and in some of his hellenophile contemporaries, such as J.A. Symonds. Both poets resorted to the common Greek and Latin pun of feet (*pous/pes*) in their love poetry. In a note to his “Feet of the Beloved” or “*ruthmoi podon philtaton*” Symonds (who also admired and emulated Swinburne’s Sapphics) explains that his poem was directly inspired by Philostratus’s *Epistles* in which such puns were frequent: “O dearest melodies, O beat/ Of musically moving feet!” (Symonds 1880 l.1-6, 57).

In Swinburne’s eponymous poem, Anactoria’s dancing gait imprints a clear rhythm to the line which mimics the “lovely step” of Sappho’s lover (Prins 131). Bypassing Horatian and Catullan Sapphics in order to retrieve, as it were, the original voice and rhythm of Sappho’s poetry, Swinburne indeed imagined Anactoria as the erotic and metrical embodiment of Sappho’s re-remembered fragments. With this analysis in mind it could be quite tempting to interpret the strategic positioning of Sappho’s lyre and poem at the feet of Sappho and of the statue of Aphrodite in Simeon Solomon’s *Erinna and Sappho*<sup>5</sup> (1864) as a meaningful *index* to Sappho’s creative impulse. Solomon and Swinburne were indeed close friends at the time and mutually influenced one another: the poem “Erotion” included in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* is for instance an ekphrastic depiction of a painting by Solomon entitled *Damon and Aglae* (1866). Their

correspondence in the 1860s also reveals a common obsession with flagellation which Swinburne developed at Eton. Although he was a keen reader of Sade, Swinburne's tendencies were both masochistic and sadistic (two terms later coined by Krafft-Ebing<sup>6</sup>) as he delighted in graphic descriptions of the pain experienced by young boys on the flogging block—such as Herbert in Swinburne's unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon*, who is repeatedly flogged for the faulty feet of his school verse. In this novel as well as in Swinburne's poetry, "Verse hurts horribly" as if "the effect of the verse" were transferrable to "the action of the verse itself" (Prins 124). No wonder therefore Swinburne's "suffering meter" (Prins 140) reaches an erotic climax with the images of treading and crushing found in his most Sapphic works, *Lesbia Brandon* and "Anactoria":

O too sweet  
 To crush love with thy cruel faultless feet (PB l.18, 48)  
 He would have given his life for leave to touch her, his soul for a chance of dying  
 crushed down under her feet. (Hughes 38)

The poet's fantasies of erotic trampling need therefore to be understood not only as a variation on the flagellation motif but as a means to further emphasize his complex intertwining of metrics and erotics.

## Poetic perversions: "strange men's feet" (PB "Love at Sea", l.24, 145)

Many Victorian readers were shocked by the overt eroticism of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. Although most critics had to acknowledge the poet's impeccable formal emulation of Greek poetry, the subject matter was considered obscene and perverse. The writer and cartoonist George Du Maurier, who was acquainted with the Parisian aesthetic circles Swinburne had frequented, was among those who felt torn between his fascination for the poet's faultless metrics and his repulsion for his provocative immoral stance. In a letter to his mother in 1864, he describes the poet as both an "extraordinary man" and "a little beast [with] an utterly perverted moral sense" (Morgan 76). The word "perverted" certainly echoes Swinburne's own use of the term "perverse" in his poem "Felise" (PB l.102, 153 and l.162, 155) as well as in *Lesbian Brandon* (Hughes 34). If the word "perversion" had since the Middle Ages been used mainly in the singular to refer to a reversal of the divine order of things, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the meaning of the term was rapidly evolving as the medical discourse started to stigmatize a wealth of new "perversions" and "sexual aberrations"<sup>7</sup> such as homosexuality, hermaphroditism, masochism and fetishism, to name but a few (Lantéri-Laura 25-27). It seems nonetheless rather ironic that Du Maurier should have expressed such distrust of Swinburne's supposed perversities, given that he himself was an acknowledged podophile, writing at the time when foot-fetishism was becoming the "model perversion" (Foucault 203) of this emerging discourse on sexual deviance. The opening chapters of the novel *Trilby* (1894) describe for instance how three artists working in a studio filled with antiquities—"a little Theseus, a little Venus of Milo, a little discobolus [...] a horse's head from the pediment of the Parthenon..." (3)—become enamored of the eponymous heroine's perfect foot:

"That's my foot," she said, kicking off her big slipper and stretching out the limb.  
 "It's the handsomest foot in all Paris. There's only one in all Paris to match it, and here it is," and she laughed heartily (like a merry peal of bells), and stuck out the other.



And in truth they were astonishingly beautiful feet, such as one only sees in pictures and statues—a true inspiration of shape and color, all made up of delicate lengths and subtly modulated curves and noble straightnesses and happy little dimpled arrangements in innocent young pink and white.

So that Little Billee, who had the quick, prehensile, æsthetic eye, and knew by the grace of Heaven what the shapes and sizes and colors of almost every bit of man, woman, or child should be (and so seldom are), was quite bewildered to find that a real, bare, live human foot could be such a charming object to look at, and felt that such a base or pedestal lent quite an antique and Olympian dignity to a figure that seemed just then rather grotesque in its mixed attire of military overcoat and female petticoat, and nothing else!

(...)

It is a wondrous thing, the human foot—like the human hand; even more so, perhaps; but, unlike the hand, with which we are so familiar, it is seldom a thing of beauty in civilized adults who go about in leather boots or shoes.

(...)

When Mother Nature has taken extra pains in the building of it, and proper care or happy chance has kept it free of lamentable deformations, indurations, and discolorations—all those grewsome boot-begotten abominations which have made it so generally unpopular—the sudden sight of it, uncovered, comes as a very rare and singularly pleasing surprise to the eye that has learned how to see! (Du Maurier 15-6)<sup>8</sup>

Praising the eponymous heroine's beauty in classical sculptural terms, the narrator follows the desiring gaze of the three men who focus on her fragmented body and on her feet in particular as the locus of their common aesthetic and sexual fantasies: "... with the point of an old compass, [Little Billee] scratched in white on the dark red wall a three-quarter profile outline of Trilby's left foot, which was perhaps the more perfect poem of the two." (20). But the artist's sketching of the shape of Trilby's perfect appendage may also be read as an intertextual allusion to the story of the origins of painting related by Pliny in his *Natural History*: that of Butades' daughter outlining the shadow of her lover's profile on the wall (Pliny XXXV, §43, 373).

Contemporary medical texts similarly articulated aesthetic idealization, religious adoration and fetishist practice, thus turning podophilia into a textually transmissible perversion. One of the first medical treatises on the subject was Alfred Binet's *Le Fétichisme dans l'amour* (1887) which Freud would later use for his own definition of fetishism both in his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905) as well as in his analysis of Jensen's *Gradiva* (1907).<sup>9</sup> Drawing on literary examples as well as medical case studies, Richard von Krafft-Ebing also devoted several pages to foot-related fantasies in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

In English, the first occurrence of the word "fetishist" in a purely psycho-sexual sense can be found in 1897 in the writings of Henry Havelock Ellis, who was a close friend of Symonds and an admirer of Swinburne's poetry. Ellis was as much fascinated by past attitudes about sex as by contemporary "deviances". In the section devoted to foot fetishism in the 5<sup>th</sup> volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, he relates the story of podophilia from Antiquity to the present, commenting, for instance, on Ovid's fetishist obsessions:

Jacoby points out that among the Greeks, the Romans, and especially the Etruscans, it was usual to represent chaste and virgin goddesses with their feet covered, even though they might be otherwise nude. Ovid, again, is never weary of dwelling on the sexual charm of the feminine foot. He represents the chaste matron as wearing a weighted *stola* which always fell so as to cover her feet; it was only the courtesan,

or the nymph who is taking part in an erotic festival, who appears with raised robes, revealing her feet. (Ellis 1906, 24)

This passage provocatively counters Victorian idealizations of the antique body. The possibility of locating modern deviance in antiquity indeed suggests an anthropological longing to strip the ancient Greeks or Romans of the ideologically charged fantasies of corporeal perfection which Johann Joachim Winckelmann's essays on Greek art had contributed to fostering.

## Politicized *gradivae*, from "Atalanta" to Isadora: "with feet/Unsanded, unshod,/Overbold, overfleet" (PB "Atalanta in Calydon" l.2043-45, 313)

Whereas Krafft-Ebing simply postulated the identity of foot fetishism and masochism, Ellis takes into account the more complex desire for sadistic erotic trampling, explaining that "the foot is a center of force, an agent for exerting pressure, and thus it furnishes a point of departure not alone for the merely static sexual fetish, but for a dynamic erotic symbolization." (Ellis 1906, 44-45) The aesthetic implications of understanding podophilia as "dynamic erotic symbolization" rather than as a sexual pathology (Schaffner 56) are numerous as shown by the parallels which may be drawn between Swinburne's fetishist poetry and Isadora Duncan's dance theory. The writings of Havelock Ellis provide an interesting connection between the poet and the performer. Indeed Ellis was not only a pioneer psychologist interested in human sexuality, he also wrote extensive literary criticism and published several philosophical essays including one on "The Dance of Life" in 1923. In this text, he discusses the spiritual significance of dancing—an artistic practice which he does not confine to the realm of choreography but generalizes to all forms of aesthetic endeavours—including poetry: "...beyond mechanical skill, the cadences of the artist's speech are the cadences of his heart, and the footfalls of his rhythm the footfalls of his spirit, in a great adventure across the universe." (Ellis 1923, 143)

The essay clearly bears the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche whose ideas Ellis actively strove to popularize in England. The dance metaphor is indeed central to Nietzsche's philosophy as Ellis explains:

In our own time, Nietzsche, from first to last, showed himself possessed by the conception of the art of life as a dance, in which the dancer achieves the rhythmic freedom and harmony of his soul beneath the shadow of a hundred Damoclean swords. He said the same thing of his style, for to him the style and the man were one: "My style," he wrote to his intimate friend Rohde, "is a dance." "Every day I count wasted," he said again, "in which there has been no dancing." The dance lies at the beginning of art, and we find it also at the end. The first creators of civilisation were making the dance, and the philosopher of a later age, hovering over the dark abyss of insanity, with bleeding feet and muscles strained to the breaking point, still seems to himself to be weaving the maze of the dance. (61)

Rather than long for a sculptural body palatable to the Neoclassical taste, Nietzsche celebrated dancing forms and liberated limbs. These references to dancing shed light on the German author's interest in the Dionysian dithyramb, which he believed to be the creative impulse underlying Greek tragedy.

But interestingly two other names are frequently quoted in Havelock Ellis's essay: those of Swinburne and of Duncan, whose aesthetics can also be closely related to Nietzsche's

daring Dionysian conceptions. Ellis emphasizes in particular what he calls Swinburne's "rhythmic signature" (150) and reminds his reader to bear in mind the metaphorical meaning of poetic "metre" as "a rhythmic stamping of feet" (57) when reading poetry. Ellis equally praises Duncan for having brought "back the free naturalism of the Greek dance" (55). Although he does not make any explicit parallel between Swinburne and Duncan, we can infer from this text that the inspiration of both authors sprung from the same primitive sources with a desire "to revive that beauty which—alas—is at present forgotten and buried" (Duncan quoted in Macintosh 51). This attempt to restore antiquity to a Dionysian life is best felt in Swinburne's Sapphics—in particular in his longing to excavate the original Sapphic foot rather than to follow Latin "bloodless and colourless" (CW 15:357) versions of the fragments. Similarly, rather than praise marmoreally white statues, many artists belonging to Swinburne's aesthetic circle, such as J. McNeill Whistler or A. Moore showed a greater interest in the polychrome Tanagra statuettes (Ribeyrol 135) which had begun to be unearthed in the 1870s. These small figurines challenged neoclassical conceptions of Greek art by revealing more feminine aspects of Greek art. Alma-Tadema, the Victorian painter of Bacchanals, also seems to have been drawn to these Tanagras as a bronze statuette of a dancer (strangely recalling Jean-Léon Gérôme's own polychrome Tanagras of the 1890s) features prominently in his painting *The Golden Hour* (1908).

Duncan, extolled by Alma-Tadema<sup>10</sup> and described by the sculptor Rodin as a "Tanagra in action"<sup>11</sup> (Rodin quoted in Garnier 79), went to the British Museum to make sketches of these dancing figures and "of all the Greek vases and bas reliefs [...] and tried to express them to whatever music seemed to me in harmony with the rhythms of the feet and Dionysiac set of the head, and the tossing of the thyrsis" (Duncan quoted in Macintosh 85). Her fascination with the antique art of the dance was intertwined with her interest in the dithyramb described in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, which contributed to "put[ting] the singing/dancing chorus (the Dionysiac) at the centre of ancient tragedy and in turn the dancer at the heart of modernist aesthetics" (Macintosh 7). Listening to a Greek chorus was enough for her to bring an antique relief back to life. The photographs which have survived of her performances paradoxically capture this desire to turn stone into life as she raised her foot to defy sculptural poses.

<sup>12</sup>

Duncan was also encouraged in her chthonian excavations of the antique art of the dance by Jane Ellen Harrison's research on vases and feminist research into primal matriarchy.<sup>13</sup> The Cambridge Ritualists, of which Harrison was one of the prominent members, had indeed praised dancing "as the most authentic and primitive means of communicating with the divine" (Macintosh 11). Harrison and Duncan, who may well have visited the British Museum together, shared a common interest not only in Nietzsche's works but also in Swinburne's poetry whose provocative Hellenism they both deeply admired. The Victorian poet is indeed mentioned twice in Duncan's autobiography<sup>14</sup> and Harrison quotes his Greek play *Erechtheus* in her essay on *Ancient Art and Ritual*.

It may also have been with Swinburne's Sapphic metrics in mind and notably his poem "On the Cliffs" that Duncan set off on a pilgrimage to the cliffs of Leucas where the Lesbian poet supposedly committed suicide out of unrequited love, literally acting out Swinburne's following in the footsteps of Sappho. She also visited Eleusis "with bare

legs, bare feet and sandals” (Duncan 1927, 96) as if to better connect with the mysteries which both Swinburne and Harrison had praised over Olympian rituals.

Swinburne’s preoccupation with Greek visual culture as much as with antique texts may also have spurred Harrison and Duncan to challenge the masculine obsession with philology which had underlain Victorian Hellenism. By insisting upon the importance of the art of the dance in Greek antiquity, both women were attempting to reclaim a forgotten and archaic feminine part of the Hellenic heritage, eclipsed by the dazzling monumentality of fifth century BC Attic sculpture and architecture. In texts as early as Hesiod’s *Theogony* the dancing of the Muses is indeed sensually depicted:

From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos, and, when they have washed their tender bodies in Permessus or in the Horse’s Spring or Olmeius, make their fair, lovely dances upon highest Helicon and move with vigorous feet. (Hesiod l.1-8, 79)

This may also explain why Harrison and Duncan were very much drawn to archeological excavations, bringing back to life more primitive aspects of antique culture, from Mycenae to Knossos.

Like the archeologist Norbert Hanold in Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva* who interprets the gait of Zoé Bertgang as the sign of the revival of his beloved sculptured Gradiva, whose classical, naked foot is the focus of the erotic tensions of the story, Duncan follows in the footsteps of resurrected Greek artists and poets. But contrary to the excavating fantasies of Jensen or even Théophile Gautier (in *Arria Marcella* or *Le Pied de la Momie* for instance<sup>15</sup>), the foot is no longer a metonymy for fetishist desire of a fragmented and passive female body. Duncan indeed placed a political rather than strictly erotic emphasis on female feet, which she considered central to her dance of “freedom”.<sup>16</sup> Her emulating of ancient Greek dancers could even be understood as an attempt at resisting the course of the history of the body since the Renaissance which Francis Prost (following Alain Corbin’ and George Vigarello’s analyses) has convincingly interpreted as a history *against* the body (Prost 9-11).

In keeping with social concerns about dress reform liberating women’s bodies, Duncan insisted on dancing either completely naked or simply clad in a Greek tunic—with no tutu or dancing shoes. These shoes were compared to corsets, girdling the bodies of women and hampering their liberty of movement: “The Venus of Milo stands on her pedestal in the Louvre for an ideal; women pass before her, hurt and deformed by the dress of ridiculous fashions: she remains forever the same, for she is beauty, life, truth.” (Duncan 1970, 79). This quotation may be read as a fitting caption for the 1870 *Punch* cartoon by Du Maurier mocking the constraints of modern fashion. The drawing<sup>17</sup> represents “girls from two different periods”—antique and modern with jarring aesthetic and moral conceptions. The group of Victorian women is ironically described as an “antique chorus” prudishly averting their eyes from the Venus of Milo’s naked breasts in order to stigmatize the more *symbolic* unloosening of her foot, her waist and her hair: “Look at her big foot! Oh, what a waist: - and what a ridiculous little head! - and no chignon! She’s no lady! Oh, what a fright!”

To overcome the deep ideological strictures reflected in such fashion *dictats*, Duncan advocated a return to the freer spirit and clothing of antiquity. Like Swinburne’s “overbold” Atalanta who hunts like men “with feet/Unsандаled, unshod”, Duncan believed that the naked, unbound foot of Greek deities and of the dancer of the future should no longer be the passive locus of masculine desire but a means of a specifically

feminine form of emancipation, which should be exalted as such: "A Woman once asked me why I dance with bare feet and I replied, 'Madam, I believe in the religion of the beauty of the human foot'" (Duncan 1909, 11).

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## NOTES

1. See K. Haynes (ed.), A.C. Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads, First Series* and *Atalanta in Calydon* : "Atalanta in Calydon", l.729-767, 271-2 ; "Anactoria", l.47-50, 48 ; "Sapphics", l.7-11, 163 ; "Hymn

to Proserpine" l.78-84, 59 ; "Dolores", l.308, 132, "Laus Veneris", l.389-392, 21. The references to Swinburne's works will be abbreviated as follows : *PB* for Haynes's edition of *Poems and Ballads, First Series* and *Atalanta in Calydon* ; *CW* for the 1925-7 edition of the poet's complete works.

2. This pun on the French *mère/mer* is found in "The Triumph of Time", for instance on l.294 "o mother, o sea".

3. See K.D. Morrow, *Greek Footwear and the Dating of sculpture* (1985).

4. According to the French Hellenist and anthropologist Marcel Détiéne the use of the Greek word *ekpédan*, in reference both to the leaping of the Maenad and to the surging of the wine in Euripides' *Bacchanals*, reveals the centrality of the foot in the Dionysian body (Détiéne 73-5).

5. Simeon Solomon, *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mitylene*, watercolour, 1864, Tate Gallery : <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mitylene-t03063> (website consulted 15th May 2014)

6. Gilles Deleuze, in his reading of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus à la fourrure*, mentions Krafft-Ebing et Havelock Ellis, and questions the ambiguous gender of the sadist and the masochist :

La figure du masochiste est hermaphrodite, comme celle du sadique, androgyne. Chacun dans son monde dispose de tous les éléments qui rendent impossible et inutile le passage dans l'autre monde. On évitera en tout cas de traiter le sadisme et le masochisme comme d'exacts contraires – sauf pour dire que les contraires se fuient...(60)

7. To use Valentin Magnan's term of 1885.

8. On Du Maurier's podophilia, see E. Jenkins, "Trilby : Fads, Photographers, and 'Over-Perfect Feet'".

9. In both texts, Freud quotes (in French) Binet's analysis of foot fetishism as grounded in infantile experience : "On revient toujours à ses premières amours".

10. See the article on Duncan published in *The World*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1900 : "The Alma-Tademas saw her dance and succumbed to her charm, that she became thenceforth their protégé and was made much of by London's exclusive aesthetic set" (quoted in Daly 15).

11. Duncan refers three times to these small statuettes in her autobiography, in particular in chapter 31 where she describes the students accompanying her in Athens as a procession of "living Tanagra figures" (252).

12. In his article " 'In Search of a Dead Rat' : The Reception of Ancient Greek Dance in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe and America", Naerebout (in Macintosh 45) underlines the influence of Muybridge's chronophotographical experiments on Maurice Emmanuel's 1895 thesis on Greek dancing in 1895 (*The Antique Greek dance*) which Harrison and Duncan most certainly read.

13. In "The Dance" (19), Duncan addresses Demeter in the following terms : "I have thrown aside my sandals that my feet may touch your life-giving Earth more reverently".

14. Eva Palmer, who met Duncan in 1905, was another important dancer who mentions Swinburne and Nietzsche in her autobiography, *Upward Panic*. She even claims to have known *Erechtheus* and *Atalanta in Calydon* by heart. On Palmer and Duncan, see Cooper-Albright in Macintosh 66-7.

15. On the links between Swinburne's podophilia and Gautier's, see Ribeyrol's "Poetic Podophilia : Gautier, Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Classical Foot-Fetishism" (2015).

16. In "The Dance", Duncan claims that the dancer of the future "shall dance the freedom of woman" (21).

17. George Du Maurier, *The Venus of Milo ; Or Girls of Two Different Periods*, *Punch*, 1870 : <http://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I00003lbdX95E36U> (website consulted 15th January 2014)

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## ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes the key role played by the eroticizing of feet in the works of major Victorian writers, notably Algernon Charles Swinburne whose early “pagan” poetry explores multiple forms of erotic trampling in connection with Dionysian conceptions of rhythm. Although stigmatized as a form of sexual perversion in the medical discourse of the time, poetic podophilia thus offered liberating prospects to many writers and artists, including the American and hellenophile dancer Isadora Duncan who was also an enthusiastic reader of Swinburne’s poetry, and whose politicized theory of dance, strongly indebted to ancient Greek art, centered on the emancipation of the naked foot and of the female body.

Cet article analyse la place centrale accordée à l'érotisation du pied dans l'œuvre de certains écrivains victoriens, notamment Algernon Charles Swinburne dont la poésie païenne explore à l'envi le motif sadomasochiste du piétinement en lien avec une conception dionysiaque du rythme poétique. Bien que stigmatisée comme perversion sexuelle dans le discours médical de l'époque, la podophilie ouvrit ainsi des perspectives libératrices à de nombreux auteurs et artistes, comme la danseuse Isadora Duncan, fervente lectrice de Swinburne, dont les théories très politisées sur la danse, inspirées de l'art grec antique, prônaient l'émancipation du pied et du corps de la femme.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** foot-fetishism, sadomasochism, dance, Dionysus, J. Keats, A.C. Swinburne, J.A. Symonds, G. Du Maurier, I. Duncan

**Mots-clés:** fétichisme, sadomasochisme, danse, Dionysos, J. Keats, A.C. Swinburne, J.A. Symonds, G. Du Maurier, I. Duncan

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