

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

30 *The Witch-Mother*

‘O where will ye gang to and where will ye sleep,  
Against the night begins?’

‘My bed is made wi’ cauld sorrows,  
My sheets are lined wi’ sins.

‘And a sair grief sitting at my foot, 5  
And a sair grief at my head;  
And dule to lay me my laigh pillows,  
And teen till I be dead.

‘And the rain is sair upon my face, 10  
And sair upon my hair;  
And the wind upon my weary mouth,  
That never may man kiss mair.

‘And the snow upon my heavy lips, 15  
That never shall drink nor eat;  
And shame to cledding, and woe to wedding,  
And pain to drink and meat.

‘But woe be to my bairns’ father, 20  
And ever ill fare he:  
He has tane a braw bride hame to him,  
Cast out my bairns and me.’

‘And what shall they have to their marriage meat  
This day they twain are wed?’  
‘Meat of strong crying, salt of sad sighing,  
And God restore the dead.’

‘And what shall they have to their wedding wine 25  
This day they twain are wed?’  
‘Wine of weeping, and draughts of sleeping,  
And God raise up the dead.’

She 's tane her to the wild woodside,  
Between the flood and fell: 30  
She 's sought a rede against her need  
Of the fiend that bides in hell.

She 's tane her to the wan burnside,  
She 's wrought wi' sang and spell:  
She 's plighted her soul for doom and dole 35  
To the fiend that bides in hell.

She 's set her young son to her breast,  
Her auld son to her knee:  
Says, 'Weel for you the night, bairnies,  
And weel the morn for me.' 40

She looked fu' lang in their een, sighing,  
And sair and sair grat she:  
She has slain her young son at her breast,  
Her auld son at her knee.

She 's sodden their flesh wi' soft water, 45  
She 's mixed their blood with wine:  
She 's tane her to the braw bride-house,  
Where a' were boun' to dine.

She poured the red wine in his cup,  
And his een grew fain to greet: 50  
She set the baked meats at his hand,  
And bade him drink and eat.

Says, 'Eat your fill of your flesh, my lord,  
And drink your fill of your wine;  
For a' thing 's yours and only yours 55  
That has been yours and mine.'

Says, 'Drink your fill of your wine, my lord,  
And eat your fill of your bread:  
I would they were quick in my body again,  
Or I that bare them dead.' 60

He struck her head frae her fair body,

And dead for grief he fell:  
And there were twae mair sangs in heaven,  
And twae mair sauls in hell.

*1889*

(From *Poetical Works. The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. Ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise. Vol. 3. London: William Heinemann, 1925)