

## Afterword

*The Midhurst Lashes* conflates and adapts as a screenplay Algernon Charles Swinburne's two novels *Love's Cross-Currents* and *Lesbia Brandon*. *Lesbia Brandon* (which supplies much of the screenplay's 1849 section) is a weird fragment, but *Love's Cross-Currents* may be the best unreadable novel in the English language.

It first appeared pseudonymously as *A Year's Letters* in *The Tatler* in 1877, some 15 years after Swinburne wrote both novels. Save for some underground notoriety, it failed to garner much attention—the peril, perhaps, of publishing it under the name “Mrs. Horace Manners.” In 1905 it came out in book form under Swinburne's name, retitled—not by him—*Love's Cross-Currents: A Year's Letters*.

Both books—saturated with feeling (however perversely expressed), partly autobiographical, partly derived from De Sade and from Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, supremely subtle (and yet operatic)—are dominated by one of Victorian literature's great characters: Helena, Lady Midhurst.

The structure of *Love's Cross-Currents* appears to be transparent: a prologue followed by letters written by members of an extended family recounting their interactions over one year's time. But the text is incomparably dense. Swinburne assumes his multiple voices with wonderful humor, but writes obliquely and obscurely, making no concessions to the reader. Anyone who gets through the book does so only by dint of drawing up a family tree to keep straight its three sets of cousins (*see p. iv*).

The novel's surface is so impenetrable that it's startling to find beneath it a familiar marriage plot, the family title as the prize: In the course of the year, Midhurst's nephew, Lord Cheyne, dies; her other nephew comes into the title, but the first nephew's pregnant widow (Midhurst's granddaughter) happens to give birth to a son, thus disinheriting him who is the mother's lover and baby's father and bringing the title safely to Midhurst's direct line.

But of course the novel's real action takes place inside these events, in a killing zone of hearts. Midhurst ruthlessly whips her daughter, niece, nephews and grandchildren into and out of affairs and marriages. She promotes, then ends—by blackmailing her niece—her grandson Redgie Seyton's first experience of love (Redgie, it would seem, is Swinburne) and banishes her granddaughter's true love. She hurts every cousin, inflicting pain while flattering her own youthfulness and safeguarding her respectability, and crowns her manipulations by securing—at any cost to others—the family title for her own great-grandson.

Yet despite its tragedies, it's funny, too. I think P.G. Wodehouse must have admired the precisely calibrated austerity of Swinburne's comedy. Indeed, I can't but see Bertie Wooster as another burned-out husk seared by experiences like unto Redgie's.

Perhaps the reader's difficulty in getting at the story *The Midhurst Lashes* retells is the index of its meaning to the author. Control, manipulation, pain, powerlessness, surrender, ecstasy and love in a *haut monde* of play, rivalry and score-settling—perhaps only by packing everything into so dense a mass could Swinburne even raise such issues.

Here's where stripping the story down to a screenplay can be useful. Screenplays are deadly to read because they're not meant to be read, nor is this one: It's meant to be embodied by actors in two-hours' projection of dreamy light. But meanwhile it can serve as an abstract or critique of Swinburne's fiction—lay out his characters and themes in a way his prose resists.

For *Midhurst* I wrote with Billie Whitelaw in mind, having admired her movies and—thanks to Prof. Miriam Drabkin, my Latin teacher at CCNY—seen her in New York in Beckett's *Rockaby*.

I completed *The Midhurst Lashes* in Los Angeles in 1995, sent it over to Creative Artists Agency, and a few days later was gratified to open my door to a messenger bearing the paperwork that made me a client. A savvy Hollywood friend told me so unlikely an occurrence was probably due to CAA's having recently signed Kenneth Branagh and needing "class" projects to present him. Alas, my script had no part for him, though he'd make a ripe John Cheyne today. But CAA was good to me—

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helped me to writing “coverage” (I wish I still had my suggestions for *Runaway Bride* to see if any were adopted), and its librarian offered me a research job. (Should I have taken it? I still can’t decide.) But of course what an agency wants is material for moneymaking movies and TV shows, and such has never much interested me. Michael Ovitz gave me a sunny smile at the agency’s door one day, but soon departed for Disney. My agent left, too, and one morning I opened my door to a messenger returning my submissions, and that was that.

My adaptation is a reduction. Anyone who likes *The Midhurst Lashes* has a treat in store: reading Swinburne’s novels.

Steve Meyers  
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*The Midhurst Lashes*

*A screenplay adapted from A.C. Swinburne's novels*

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