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**POSITIONING THE WOMAN WRITER: AUGUSTA WEBSTER
AND HER VICTORIAN CONTEXT**

**BY
VICTORIA LEI**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED AS A PARTIAL
FULFILMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOPHY**

**UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
MS DOROTHY MCMILLAN**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes its direction from the belief that the preoccupations of a period are often most helpfully discussed through the work of its so-called minor writers. Such writers also enable the critic to articulate and clarify the concerns of other writers more firmly established in the canon. At the same time, of course, the minor writer is inevitably given importance and position within the context of the period, in a fruitful two way process. This is particularly the case with the Victorian writer Augusta Webster since her use of a wide variety of literary genres helps to express the breadth of literary culture in the period. At the same time, since she is a woman and a woman writer, subject to the historical circumstances peculiar to her sex, a study of her work enables the articulation of the linked literary, social and political concerns that surround the problem of identifying how writers construct and are constructed by gender. Positioning Augusta Webster, which is what this thesis seeks to do, thus unavoidably involves a discussion of the Victorian context within which she works and, I hope, goes some way to illuminating both the writer and the context.

I begin by offering a literary and biographical overview with the aim of identifying the major issues both formal and historical which she encountered as an aspiring writer and semi-public figure. I try to show that her growth as a writer was linked to her preoccupations with the 'woman question', specifically with the education, work and political situation of women. I try also to show how these

issues were those of the time and how Augusta Webster's treatment of them affected contemporary responses to her work.

The Introduction is followed by a chapter on Webster's novel, *Lesley's Guardians*. This is a long chapter and might not be felt to be strictly justified by the quality or the fame of the work. But I feel that it is an important site for the laying out of a number of themes and worries of the period. Thus I discuss Webster here in relation to Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and so on. Issues dealt with in this chapter include the problem of professionalism for women artists and writers and hence the question of education; the exploitation of motifs of orphanhood and female friendship; the central concerns of marriage, motherhood and the family and the related problems of spinsterhood and loneliness. I try to show that these problems have formal consequences for narrative and for the balance between social realism and romance.

My next chapter engages with Webster's translations of Æschylus and Euripides. It thus inevitably discusses the refusal of classical education to women and the consequences of this for their social and literary positions; again Eliot and Barrett Browning feature strongly. Various contemporary theories of translation are also considered. The subjects of the translations, Prometheus and Medea, allow discussion of the exploitation of the forbidden act, the outsider and monstrosity; Shelley and Mary Shelley are invoked and the possible monstrosity of the female aspirant is briefly touched upon.

The central section of my thesis is devoted to Webster's most famous work, *A Castaway*, which notoriously provides the fallen woman, here a middle-class prostitute, with a voice. Dickens, Gaskell and Barrett Browning are also introduced in their treatment of the fallen woman. Webster's use of the dramatic monologue forms a preface to a further discussion of the whole volume, *Portraits*, in the next chapter and the way in which the outsider is employed as social critic is analysed. *A Castaway* is suggested as a model for future directions in women's writing.

Taking as its starting point Webster's 'As a rule, I does not mean I' the fourth chapter looks at *Dramatic Studies* and *Portraits* as ways in which the woman writer can escape the limitations of personal experience in her poetry. Webster's own remarks about the tyranny of biographical readings are invoked and it is conceded that this is a problem for both male and female writers of the period. But I conclude, nevertheless, that women poets found the dramatic form especially congenial. Hemans and L.E.L. are discussed as predecessors of Webster. The nature of Augusta Webster's feminism is analysed in this chapter and I show how, although Webster is often directly contemporary in her choice of voices, she also, like Browning and Tennyson, uses historical and mythical figures to engage with contemporary concerns. Webster's deconstruction of the patriarchal myth is suggested as prefiguring the revisioning of myth in the work of a number of twentieth-century women writers.

Chapter five deals with Webster's closet dramas. I begin with brief outlines of these little known works; place them among other nineteenth century dramas

and note that they were generally well reviewed. Webster's initial commitment to the old five-act structure gives way to the more modern three-act form but throughout, the dramas, like the dramatic monologues, visit the past to illuminate contemporary issues. The woman question is once more prominent but in these works the darker side of women's nature is exposed and Webster's usual themes of female power and friendship are temporarily abandoned.

The sixth chapter takes Webster's writing life towards its conclusion with a discussion of her fantasy for girls, *Daffodil and the Croixaxicans*. This story of the adventures of a young girl in a frog kingdom is situated within the genre of Victorian writing for children. Like the tales which proceed it, *Daffodil* enables the interrogation of social conventions and I show that almost all Webster's social concerns find their way into this tale. Specifically, of course, the treatment of Daffodil's adventures allows Webster to redefine Victorian feminine ideals.

I conclude with some speculation about the reputation of Augusta Webster. Beginning with Theodore Watts-Dunton's prediction that Webster would, like many others, probably be forgotten after her death, I suggest that although the factors that shape the subsequent reputation of a writer are extremely complex, some possibilities may be put forward to explain why Webster is only now becoming known again. Her closet dramas came just at the point when the genre was ceasing to be much regarded and in any case her poetry had always been felt to be difficult and 'masculine'. The notion of 'art for art's sake' was, of course, inimical to her socially committed voice, her refusal to abandon 'strength' for beauty, and her restless search for the most efficient expression for her concerns

all contributed to her disappearance from the canon. Happily she is now again becoming visible.

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Introduction

Without entering into the vexed question how far it is possible for even the highest creative genius to transcend the ideas, the aspirations, and the tendencies of the age, we may be sure that in the rank below the highest these influences of the time are all-powerful. [...]

Meantime, one or two of those less familiar poets who draw all their inspiration from Mr Tennyson are, perhaps unconsciously, more susceptible of the threatening presages and stormy signs that float in the atmosphere of modern thought. That *malaise*, that restless discomfort of which symptoms abound on every side, is beginning to affect writers who in form and turn of expression are the most sedulous disciples of the tranquil idyllic school. The recently published volume of a poetess who is as yet, we think, comparatively unknown offers a rather striking illustration of this.

Saturday Review (1867)¹

Augusta Webster is one of the nineteenth-century female writers whose position in literary history has not been convincingly established: her narrative poetry, lyrics, sonnets, dramatic monologues, novel, and plays are distinctive for their forcefulness and psychological acuity. Throughout her life Augusta Webster was deeply concerned with the lot of women. Many of her poems treat entirely or incidentally of questions specially affecting women. She wrote numerous cogent women's monologues and created some complex and believable heroines. Her journalism deals directly with contemporary social problems, especially the woman question. Her translations of Greek classics have been esteemed for their accuracy, fidelity to the originals and fluency. And she confirmed her reforming spirit by her suffragism and work for the London School Board.

Augusta Webster was born Julia Augusta Davies at Poole, Dorset, on 30th January 1837. Her maternal grandfather Joseph Hume (1777-1855) was probably one of the models for her own liberal philosophy. He was the author of a translation in

¹ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.181.

blank verse of Dante's *Inferno* (1812) and of *A Search into the Old Testament* (1841). He was a close friend of Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and William Godwin. Elizabeth Lee notes in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that 'Hume was of mixed English, Scottish, and French extraction, and claimed descent from the Humes of Polwarth'.²

Joseph Hume was a radical politician. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he was employed by the East India Company in his earlier days. In 1812 he briefly became an MP. He was re-elected in 1818. Before re-entering parliament Hume took an active part upon the central committee of the Lancastrian school system, and studied the condition of the working classes. He also devoted great attention to Indian affairs. He was one of the leading radicals of the day. He advocated free trade, opposed flogging in the army and consistently questioned public expenditure.³ According to Strachey, in 1848 Joseph Hume, supported by Richard Cobden, moved a resolution in the House of Commons to extend the vote to all householders, including women.⁴ Augusta's mother, Julia, was the fourth daughter of Joseph Hume. Augusta Webster's husband Thomas Webster wrote to William Hazlitt's grandson, William Carew Hazlitt, in 1896: 'Joseph Hume had six daughters of whom my mother-in-law, Mrs Julia Davis, is the last survivor. At the age of ninety-three, she is still in the enjoyment of every faculty.'⁵ In a letter of Charles Lamb to Joseph Hume's daughters, written in 1832, we can see Lamb's friendly relations with the family:

² Elizabeth Lee, 'Augusta Webster', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, 63 vols ed. by Sidney Lee and Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder, 1885-1900), vol.60, pp.115-16 (p.115).

³ Sidney Lee ed., *Dictionary of National Biography* (1891), vol.28, pp.230-31.

⁴ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: G. Bell, 1928; Virago, 1978), p.43.

⁵ Thomas Webster, Letter to William Carew Hazlitt, dated December 3, 1896, British Library, *Hazlitt Correspondence X*, additional MS.38, 907, f.76.

Many thanks for the wrap-rascal, but how delicate the insinuating in, into the pocket, of that 3.5d., in paper too! Who was it? Amelia, Caroline, Julia, Augusta, or 'Scots who have'?

As a set-off to the very handsome present, which I shall lay out in a pot of ale certainly to her health, I have paid sixpence for the mend of two button-holes of the coats now return'd. She shall not have to say, 'I don't care a button for her.'

Adieu, trs amiables!

Button	6d.
Gift	3.5
Due from	2.5
which pray accept ... from your foolish coat forgetting	C.L. ⁶

Julia Hume (1803-1897) married the naval officer George Davies (1800-1876) in July 1832. George Davies was born in the parish of St Cuthbert, Wells, Somerset.

O'Byrne's *A Naval Biographical Dictionary* (1849) records:

This officer entered the Navy, 23 June, 1813, as First-Class Volunteer, on board the AJAX 74. [...] In that ship he assisted, while at the siege of St. Sebastian, in taking the island of Sta. Clara, and was present, as Mid-shipman, at the blockade of Rochefort and of Toulon, the surrender of Marseilles, and the capture of a vast number of the enemy's armed and other vessels. Joining next the QUEEN CHARLOTTE 100, bearing the flag of Lord Exmouth, he took part in the bombardment of Algiers, 27 August 1816; and on that occasion he particularly attracted the notice of his Commander-in-Chief, whose orders he was throughout employed in conveying to the different ships of the fleet. The boat he commanded was frequently under the necessity of being partially re-manned, in consequence of the great loss of her crew in killed and wounded. In September 1817, Mr Davies, who for the last twelve months had been unable to procure employment, rejoined Lord Exmouth in the IMPREGNABLE 104, on that officer hoisting his flag as Commander-in Chief at Plymouth. [...] He subsequently, in 1821 became attached to the SERINGAPATAM 46, in the boats of which ship he appears to have assisted at the capture and destruction of various piratical vessels in the West Indies. On his removal in January 1824 to the NALAD 46, then in the Mediterranean, he contributed to the utter defeat [...] on 31 of that month, of the *Tripoli*, Algerine corvette of 18 guns and 100 men; and, on the night of 23 May following, he aided in the boats [...] at the destruction of a 16-gun brig, moored in a position of extraordinary strength alongside the walls of the fortress of Bona, in which were a garrison of about 400 soldiers, who, from cannon and musket, kept up a tremendous fire, almost perpendicularly, on the deck. He afterwards, in charge of the ship's barge, brought out a piratical mistico from the island of Hydra.⁷

George Davies was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in June 1826. He returned to England in 1827, on board the SYBILLE 48. Between 1828 and 1831, he served in

⁶ Charles Lamb, *The Letters of Charles Lamb: to which are added those of his sister*, ed. by E.V. Lucas, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1935), vol.2, p.40.

⁷ William R. O'Byrne, *A Naval Biographical Dictionary: Comprising the Life and Services of Every Living Officer in Her Majesty's Navy, from the Rank of Admiral of the Fleet to that of Lieutenant* (London: John Murray, 1849; Polstead: J.B. Hayward & Son, 1986), p.266.

the West Indies. From 1832 onwards George Davies held several coastguard commands. As a consequence Augusta Webster was brought up 'trailing in the wake of a naval career'.⁸ She spent her childhood on the ship *Griper* in Chichester Harbour and at various seaside places in southern England (1837-1843). *A Naval Biographical Dictionary* records that George Davies 'was so successful as to effect the capture of not fewer than 15 notorious smuggling vessels, besides making numerous other seizures and many valuable salvages'.⁹ In 1842 he attained the rank of commander, and was appointed the next year to the Banff district in northern Scotland, as Inspecting Commander of the coast line from Banff to Peterhead. The family resided for six years in Banff Castle, and Augusta attended a school at Banff. From 1849 to 1851, Davies held coastguard command at Penzance in Cornwall, where he won a reputation for his success in saving shipwrecked seamen. *A Naval Biographical Dictionary* says:

The generous exertions of this officer in often hazarding his life for the preservation of his fellow creatures, by jumping overboard and otherwise, have been so conspicuous as to have obtained for him six medals from the Royal Humane Society and the National Shipwreck Institution. King Louis Phillippe, in acknowledgement of his having saved the crews of three French vessels, has also conferred on him two gold 'medals of merit'; and on the last occasion His Majesty presented him with the order of the Legion of Honour, permit him to accept. In addition to these testimonials of Commander Davies' high merit, we may further enumerate the presentation of three pieces of plate, and the frequent thanks of the Board of Admiralty and of the Committee at Lloyd's.¹⁰

Theodore Watts-Dunton says that Webster 'had a genuine love of the sea and a true knowledge of the sea's ways and moods'.¹¹ Augusta Webster's passion for the sea can be traced in some of her poems. And one of her early prose pieces, 'The Brissons', a moving story which recounts the 1851 rescue of the survivors of a

⁸ Vita Sackville-West, 'The Women Poets of the 'Seventies', in *The Eighteen-Seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. by Harley Granville-Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p.122.

⁹ O'Byrne, p.266.

¹⁰ O'Byrne, p.267.

shipwreck off the coast of Cornwall, is very likely derived from her recollection of girlhood experience and stories. We may have a glimpse of her childhood through 'The Brissons':

Dear little *Sylvia*, the most beautiful cutter in her Majesty's Revenue Service! So, at least, think I, who have watched her in every dress and in every weather till I grew to look on her as a familiar friend, and in my child fancies, looking out at her on many a silver summer night as she lay in the bay in sight of my window, felt that, while all around me was sleeping, she and I awake were holding converse together across the quiet water.

The admirable commanding officer of *Sylvia*, who comes to the rescue, might be based on Augusta's own father: 'A brave hard-working, plain-spoken man he was, who had had his own way to make in the service, and made it.'¹² Theodore Watts-Dunton claims that George Davies 'was, in his unpretending way, a hero'.¹³

In 1851 George Davies became Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire and settled his family in Cambridge. In 1857 he was nominated also to the chief constableness of Huntingdonshire. In Cambridge Augusta was given a good education. She read widely and attended the Cambridge School of Art, studied Greek, learned Italian and Spanish, made brief educational visits to Paris and Geneva and became fluent in French. She also gained admission to the South Kensington Art School. And it seems that by then Augusta had already been involved in the women's movement. Ray Strachey recalls:

The records of these early years of organization are full of life and spirit. [...] There runs a current of pure youthful enthusiasm and gaiety. Augusta Webster, for example, for whom admission to the Art School in South Kensington was secured, nearly dashed the prospects of women art students for ever by being expelled for whistling. But they recovered from the blow and set to work to organize a Society of Female Artists of their own, and proceeded as gaily as ever.¹⁴

¹¹ Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'Mrs Augusta Webster', *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

¹² Augusta Webster, 'The Brissons', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 5 (1861-1862), p.61.

¹³ Watts-Dunton, *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

¹⁴ Strachey, p.96.

Perhaps Augusta Webster was more fortunate than many other Victorian girls from the upper- and middle-classes in terms of education. Still, her education in classics was not something that can be taken for granted. In the *Dictionary of National Biography* Elizabeth Lee notes that Augusta learned Greek in order to help a younger brother. In a letter Webster tells Professor Blackie that she taught herself Greek as a girl at home, with no adviser and what might nearly be called no books and ‘certainly no serviceable books besides the wretched Charterhouse Grammar’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Augusta Webster acquired a fluency in the classical language that few Victorian women writers could rival. A nineteenth-century critic even claims that the ‘strength of thought and felicity of diction’, which are the most noticeable features of her mature works, ‘owes to her long and patient study of the classical languages’.¹⁶

In December 1863 at the age of twenty-six, she married Thomas Webster, fellow and law lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge, by whom she had a daughter, Margaret Davies Webster. So far no record of the daughter’s date of birth has been found. In January 1873 Webster wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes: ‘You call me Miss in your kind letter received last spring and on the flyleaf of the book. May I mention that I am a matron of long standing. My family was eight years old in November. She is at this moment teasing me to read or tell her a story.’¹⁷ So Margaret Davies Webster must have been born in November 1864. In another letter to Oliver Holmes

¹⁵ Augusta Webster, Letter to Professor John Stuart Blackie, dated June 13, 1870, in *Blackie Papers*, National Library of Scotland, MS. 2629, ff.233-234.

¹⁶ *Examiner*, May 21, 1870, p.324.

¹⁷ Augusta Webster, Letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes, dated 11 January 1873, bMS Am 1241.I (1019), The Houghton Library, Harvard, Cambridge, quoted in *Augusta Webster: Portraits and other Poems*, ed. by Christine Sutphin (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), p.10.

Webster tells more about her own appearance and ancestry, as well as those of her daughter:

I venture to send you my 'carte'. It is an extremely good likeness; only that it looks the brunette type I myself unfashionably admire. You must please to imagine very yellow brown hair and English pink and white. My Margaret [illegible] Italian tints of her likeness; but it is a vagary of her own, her father being true Saxon and I Welsh, Saxon, Scotch & a touch of French and Walloon.¹⁸

In the same letter Webster reveals her attachment and devotion towards her daughter:

I am sure you will feel charitable sympathy when I tell you that our dear little daughter has been causing us great anxiety from an attack of congestion of the lungs. [...] We are hoping now that the worst is over, and I have taken her today for a walk to see the spring crocuses from whom I have had to invent messages to her every day since the sun began to shine lately. She was very proud at receiving a message from you and returns 'her love and four kisses' — her usual allowance.¹⁹

Whatever the reason for it, having only one child was against the prevailing fashion.

Although birth control information was available in the nineteenth century, it was not widely circulated in England until the 1880s.²⁰ Not only was contraceptive advice, even from doctors, often incorrect or even unhealthful, but the whole subject was regarded with horror by most respectable women. Birth control was condemned as immoral, disgusting, unnatural, injurious to the health, and damaging to the family and therefore to society as well.²¹ Consequently, as Dr R. T. Trall wrote in 1866, 'the health of a majority of women in civilized society is seriously impaired and their lives greatly abbreviated by too frequent pregnancies.'²² The average number of children

18 Augusta Webster, Letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes, dated March 13, 1873, bMS Am 1241.I (1020), The Houghton Library, Harvard, Cambridge, quoted by Sutphin in *Portraits and other Poems*, pp.10-11.

19 Quoted by Sutphin in *Portraits and other Poems*, p.13.

20 Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), p.63.

21 Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.161.

22 R. T. Trall, *Sexual Physiology* (London: M. A. Orr, 1881), p.203.

per couple was, in the 1860s, between five and six,²³ and frequently a woman suffered numerous miscarriages and much discomfort between successful pregnancies. In her sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*,²⁴ published in 1895 after her death, Augusta Webster somewhat defensively celebrates the fact of having only one child:

Since first my little one lay on my breast
 I never needed such a second good,
 Nor felt a void left in my motherhood
 She filled not always to the utterest.
 The summer linnet, by glad yearnings pressed,
 Builds room enough to house a callow brood:
 I prayed not for another child — nor could;
 My solitary bird had my heart's nest.

But she is cause that any baby thing
 If it but smile, is one of mine in truth,
 And every child becomes my natural joy:
 And, if my heart gives all youth fostering,
 Her sister, brother, seems the girl or boy:
 My darling makes me mother to their youth.
 (M&D, p.41)

In *Mother and Daughter*, Augusta Webster repudiates the popular view that a mother's love was infinite, so that each of her many successive children could expect an undiminished share of attention and affection:

You think that you love each as much as one,
 Mothers with many nestlings 'neath your wings.
 Nay, but you know not. Love's most priceless things
 Have unity that cannot be undone.
 You give the rays, I the englobed full sun;
 I give the river, you the separate springs:
 My motherhood's all my child's with all it brings —
 None takes the strong entireness from her: none.
 (M&D, p.39)

Here, Webster refuses to glorify the joys of bearing and rearing a large brood of children. She believes the love available to each child must grow less and less with every new arrival, as the limited amount of the mother's time, attention, and

²³ François Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p.34.

²⁴ Augusta Webster, *Mother and Daughter: An Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1895), henceforth *M & D*.

emotional capacity is divided again and again. The mother of only one, loves with a complete and entire devotion that may be more fully satisfying. As Kathleen Hickok points out, Webster implies that a small family might be a matter of individual right and preference, rather than a manifestation of God's will.²⁵

Her daughter later became an actress. According to *The Green Room Book* (1908), Margaret Davies Webster was educated privately. She was prepared for stage by some years of study with Hermann Vezin, Henry Neville and E. B. Norman. She first appeared at the Theatre Royal, Margate, under Sarah Thorne.²⁶ She made her London debut and played the heroine in one of her mother's plays, *In a Day*, at Terry's Theatre, London in 1890. The *Era* was complimentary towards her performance and said that she had a graceful figure, pleasing features, a voice of excellent sweetness as well as a fair amount of dramatic instinct.²⁷ However, the comment she got from the *Stage* is harsh: 'Her aptitude was plain, and not less pleasing; her inadequacy for the part was equally plain and equally unpleasing.'²⁸

From 1898 to 1903, Margaret Webster played Esther Coventry in tours of 'One of the Best' over three hundred performances. She also toured with Osmond Tearle, Miss Fortescue, Miss Lucy Wilson, the Pinero Play Company; with Miss Kitty Loftus at Savory and Terry's. She appeared at the Albert Hall Theatre in her own adaptation of 'La Locandiera', entitled 'Mine Hostess', playing the part made famous by Duse. In 1907 she was engaged by Patrick Kirwan for his pastoral season at the Botanic Gardens

²⁵ Kathleen Hickok, *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1984), p.77.

²⁶ John Parker ed., *The Green Room Book or Who's Who on the Stage* (London: T. Sealey Clark, 1908), p.458.

²⁷ *Era*, May 31, 1890, p.9.

²⁸ *Stage*, June 6, 1890, p.13.

& C. In 1908 Margaret acted in several one-act plays in the entertainment company managed by herself and Rose Cazelet.

On the evidence of the sonnet sequence, *Mother and Daughter*, and Webster's letters to Oliver Wendell Holmes it seems reasonable to assume a peculiarly close relationship between mother and daughter and Margaret Webster can certainly be found continuing in the preoccupations of her mother. Margaret Davies Webster was a member of the Actresses' Franchise League, established in December 1908 'as a bond of union between all women in the theatrical profession who are in sympathy with the Women's Franchise movement'. According to the constitution of the League written in 1914, the objects of the League were:

1. To convince members of the Theatrical profession of the necessity of extending the franchise to women.
2. To work for Votes for Women on the same terms as they are, or may be, granted to men by educational methods, such as:
 - I. Propaganda Meetings.
 - II. Sale of Literature.
 - III. Propaganda Plays.
 - IV. Lectures.
3. To assist all other Leagues whenever possible.

In 1914 a 'Men's Group' was formed, so that actors, dramatists and others connected with the theatre were 'able to show their practical sympathy by becoming associated with the League'.²⁹ Both mother and daughter seem to have been lucky in their personal and professional relationships with men, perhaps showing that quietly effective feminists were often found among the ranks of the personally unoppressed.

Augusta Webster's husband Thomas Webster was demonstrably very supportive towards his wife's literary career, her involvement in the suffrage movement, as well as her work on the London School Board. Besides being a fellow and law lecturer at

²⁹ *Actresses' Franchise League 1909-1916: Annual Reports and Leaflets*, in Fawcett Library.

Trinity College, Cambridge, he was also a partner of an important firm of Cambridge solicitors and held in Cambridge a high position in his profession. However, in 1870 Augusta Webster persuaded her husband to resign his partnership in the legal firm at Cambridge and move to London, there practically to begin life anew, so that she could pursue her literary career. Thomas Hake and Arthur Compton-Rickett describe her as ‘a woman of genius and keen literary ambition’: it had been her dream since girlhood to mix in literary circles, where she would win a fuller appreciation of her undoubted literary gifts.³⁰

From 1860 until her death in 1894, Augusta Webster wrote plays, poems, novels and essays on both contemporary and classical themes. Webster’s forms and mannerisms were pioneered in works by others — Robert Browning’s monologues, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sarcastic declamations, and Alfred Tennyson’s lyric interludes. Nor was Webster afraid of expressing herself in a diction plainer and more direct than that of her mentors. And her feminism, intellectual accomplishment, as well as her socio-political concerns give her poetry a strength, which distinguishes her work from that of mere versifiers. Edmund Clarence Stedman says, ‘Her work is ambitious, and marked by a strength and breadth not thought to be the special traits of woman’s work. She is not only a poet but also a ready and practical thinker.’³¹ The ‘strength’ of Augusta Webster was often extolled in her work, but also sent her critics into a fever of sexual anxiety. In *The Poets and Poetry of the Century*, while comparing Webster favourably with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Jean Ingelow, Mackenzie Bell points out, ‘the

³⁰ T. E. Hake and A. Compton-Rickett, *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*, 2 vols (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack Limited, 1916), vol.2, p.17.

³¹ *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.884.

quality which distinguishes her from all the other women poets of her time is concentrated strength, [...] that quality which, as it is generally deemed the specially masculine quality, is called virility.³² Eric Robertson praised her poetry for its 'man-like reserve of expression'.³³ Indeed, as a poet, Webster was more concerned with opinions, socio-political issues and ideologies than with unsocialised feelings expected of women poets.

However, before she finds her true voice, she too has to make the journey out of the 'seductive house of romance'.³⁴ Augusta Webster's earliest works include two volumes of poetry, an article for *Macmillan's Magazine*, and a three-volume novel, all published between 1860 and 1864 under the pseudonym Cecil Home. In 1860, at the age of 23, she published her first volume, *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems*. The collection consists mainly of short lyrics and ballads, most of which strike an attitude of, in Leighton's words, 'routine pathos'.

The title poems of *Blanche Lisle* and her second volume, *Lilian Gray* (1864), rework the theme of a woman betrayed by her suitor. Both volumes show that she had been reading Tennyson's *Poems* (1842) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857). Mackenzie Bell believes that compared to *Blanche Lisle*, *Lilian Gray* is a distinct advance in which 'many passages evince a maturity of thought rare in so young a poet'.³⁵ The article, 'The Brissons' (*Macmillan's Magazine*, November 1861), recounts with great feeling the 1851

³² Mackenzie Bell, 'Augusta Webster', in Alfred H. Miles, ed., *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 10 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7, p.500.

³³ Eric S. Robertson, *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies with Illustrative Extracts* (London: Cassell, 1883), pp.354-355.

³⁴ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.174.

³⁵ Miles, p.501.

rescue of the survivors of a shipwreck off the coast of Cornwall. The novel, *Lesley's Guardians* (1864), embeds the fickle-lover motif in a narrative with some unconventional, even bizarre touches. Generally speaking, these earlier volumes already reveal the germs of that aptitude in character analysis which marks her later work.

In 1866 at the age of twenty-nine, Augusta Webster started to publish under her own name, beginning with a translation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, which contemporary opinion approved highly. Her translation of Euripides' *Medea* (1868) was also well reviewed.

Her real potential as a poet is realized when she discovers the dramatic monologue. In 1866 Augusta Webster produced *Dramatic Studies*, eight dramatic monologues of remorse, renunciation, and compromise: three of which are spoken by women. The *Saturday Review* declares *Dramatic Studies* 'marked by many signs of remarkable power',³⁶ and the *Westminster Review* remarks that 'Mrs Webster shows not only originality, but what is nearly as rare, trained intellect and self-command'.³⁷ The *British Quarterly Review* claims that Augusta Webster's *Dramatic Studies* and translation of the *Prometheus* have 'won her an honourable place among female poets', and 'she bids fair to be the most successful claimant of Mrs Browning's mantle'.³⁸

After the success of *Dramatic Studies*, Augusta Webster published her next collection of poems, *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*, in 1867. It is considerably longer than her earlier volumes and shows more variety in poem length, tone,

³⁶ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.182.

³⁷ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 30 (1866), p.275.

³⁸ *British Quarterly Review*, 46 (1867), p.249.

viewpoint, and stanzaic form. It consists of five long narrative poems and forty-two lyrics, which again show some influence of early Tennyson and Barrett Browning. The first poem, 'A Woman Sold', which gives its title to the collection, portrays with great dramatic skill a woman marrying for money. Webster also gives a set of studies from characters in the New Testament: Bartimaeus, Judas, Pilate, and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. The volume's final long narrative, eighty-nine pages of blank verse entitled 'Lota', summons up themes and devices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Its reminiscences, social descriptions, and intermittent pathos, in Florence S. Boos's opinion, reflect Webster's genuine talent for third-person narrative.³⁹ The *Saturday Review* compliments Webster's 'admirably subtle analytic power' in *A Woman Sold*.⁴⁰ The *Westminster Review* says that she 'possesses more thought than her sister poets'⁴¹ and the *Leader* comments on her 'masculine' set of mind.⁴² However, the *Saturday Review* points out that quantity is excessive and there is occasional carelessness about quality. The *Westminster Review* also indicates that in this particular volume Augusta Webster 'has fallen into the common mistake of publishing too much'. The reviewer of the *Saturday Review* believes a large portion of the volume are composed in her earlier days, which show 'youthful effusion' and 'palpable imitation' of Tennyson. The reviewer points out:

People who have ringing in their ears,

Break, break, break, on thy cold grey stones, O Sea,

Do not value a poem that opens

Dance, dance, on thy way, thou rippling stream,
Laugh to the summer skies —

³⁹ See Florence S. Boos, 'Augusta Webster', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol.35, *Victorian Poets After 1850* (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1985), pp.280-84 (p.282).

⁴⁰ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.181.

⁴¹ John R. de C. Wisc, *Westminster Review*, 31 (1867), p.579.

⁴² See Boos, pp.280-84 (p.282).

But joy lies dead in thy laughing gleam,
Like love in a false love's eyes.
(AWS, 144)

The critic continues:

Nothing can be more intensely ill-advised than this immoderate publication of everything that one can sweep out of old desks and portfolios. A half would have been distinctly better than the whole in the present case. It was only last year that Mrs Webster published *Dramatic Studies*, a volume marked by many signs of remarkable power. Why should we have another volume before the present year is a month old?⁴³

The *Month* describes the short pieces in this volume as the 'dust' of Webster's muse, which is 'not always pure gold'. The reviewer's praise is equivocal:

We are not inclined to complain of Mrs Webster for having emptied her desk for our benefit. It is true that poets of the very highest class generally find it their best policy to be chary as to what they publish. They write a great deal more than is ever seen, and, no doubt, their reputation is higher on account of their self-restraint. There is a large class of secondary stars in the poetical firmament who write gracefully, and seldom fail to interest us, and these can well be allowed to make themselves common.⁴⁴

The *British Quarterly Review* imagines that 'some of the poems of this volume are of older date than her publications of last year, otherwise they must have been written in portentous and perilous haste'. Indeed, except the title poem 'A Woman Sold' and the long narrative 'Lota', most of the shorter poems in this volume belong to the same class as those collected in her first volume, *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems* (1860). It is possible that after the success of the *Dramatic Studies*, Augusta Webster was under pressure to publish 'everything that one can sweep out of old desks and portfolios'. The *Saturday Review* affirms there are signs that Augusta Webster is quite strong enough to stand by herself, and therefore she ought to be 'urged to throw off those influences of other poets which she has hitherto allowed to be too powerful with her'.⁴⁵ The *British Quarterly Review* expresses a similar point of view:

⁴³ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.182.

⁴⁴ *Month*, 6 (1867), p.274.

⁴⁵ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.182.

Mrs Webster evinces remarkable powers — we trust that she will have faith in them, and listen only to her own inspirations of song; we trust also that she will subject them to the severest discipline, and steadily refuse to print a line that has not had the utmost thought and art bestowed upon it — we may then safely predict for her an honourable and permanent place in the sisterhood of English song.⁴⁶

Webster's next poetry, *Portraits*, a volume of thirteen dramatic monologues, appeared in 1870. Two editions were published in February and August and a third, with two additional poems in 1893. Among one of the five monologues spoken by women, 'A Castaway', a striking sketch of a prostitute, has become Augusta Webster's most famous work. The poem ranges widely over the whole complicated issue of the fallen woman and prostitution in the nineteenth century, was compared favourably with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Jenny', which appeared in the same year. *Portraits* attracted the attention of the most important critics. The *English Independent* praises the author of *Portraits* as 'a daring genius' whose work is distinguished for its 'air of reality and [...] deep sense of seriousness'.⁴⁷ The *Westminster Review* remarks, 'Mrs Webster's taste is perfect. [...] Her new volume shows marked progress. It exhibits greater self-restraint, a firmer technical handling, purer colour, and deeper thought. [...] If she only remains true to herself she will most assuredly take a higher rank as a poet than any woman has yet done.'⁴⁸ The *Examiner* even declares: 'With this volume before us, it would be hard to deny her the proud position of the first living English poetess. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has passed away, and her mantle seems to have fallen on Mrs Webster'. Comparing Webster with Barrett Browning the critic says:

In essentials, there is a great similarity between these two ladies. They both display the same cast of thought, and have both caught inspiration from the cold severity of classical literature, rather than from the imitative song of modern poets; while in their original poems there is a completeness, and a vigour, which are too often wanting in these days of plagiarism and repetition.⁴⁹

46 *British Quarterly Review*, 46 (1867), pp.249-250.

47 See Boos, pp.280-84 (p.283).

48 John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 37 (1870), p.627.

49 *Examiner*, May 21, 1870, p.324.

In 1872, Augusta Webster published her first play, *The Auspicious Day*. The *British Quarterly Review* claims that 'there is a dramatic severity and strength throughout ---- evidence of a sustained and lofty creative instinct ---- which should be sufficient to deepen and extend Mrs Webster's already well-won poetic reputation'.⁵⁰ The *Westminster Review* believes that *The Auspicious Day* 'shows a marked advance, not only in art, but, of what is of far more importance, in breadth of thought and intellectual grasp'.⁵¹

Her next work, *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute* (1874), is a poetical version of the French translation by T. Pavie of a tale from the well known collection of Chinese stories, entitled *Kin Koo Ke Kwan*. The *Westminster Review* believes that the volume is marked not by mere sweetness of melody, but by infinitely rarer gifts of dramatic power, passion and sympathetic insight.⁵² In 1929 Vita Sackville-West quoted a lyric from this volume and declared that it 'is pretty enough to deserve a place in anthologies'.⁵³

In 1879 Augusta Webster produced *A Housewife's Opinions*, a collection of essays which had originally appeared in the *London Examiner* in the 1870s, during the editorship of Professor William Minto, when 'such contributors as A. C. Swinburne, William Black, W. Bell Scott, and others seemed likely to revive the traditions of the journal, which had been made classic by Leigh Hunt and Fonblanque'.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *British Quarterly Review*, 56 (1872), p.253.

⁵¹ *Westminster Review*, 42 (1872), p.272.

⁵² *Westminster Review*, 46 (1874), p.598.

⁵³ Vita Sackville-West, 'The Women Poets of the 'Seventies', in *The Eighteen-Seventies*, ed. by Harley Granville-Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p.124.

⁵⁴ Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'Mrs Augusta Webster', *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

The *London Examiner* was more a political than a literary journal, whose readers were generally middle- to upper-middle-class and politically liberal. Webster's topics range from homely advice on domestic servants, gossip, hobbies and the wearing of mourning, to political commentary on the latest controversial parliamentary debates. Her inmost thoughts, convictions and matured opinions on all important subjects are thoroughly aired. Florence S. Boos suggests that the title of the volume is 'presumably mock deprecation', for Webster's topics range widely.⁵⁵ Indeed the choice of the title is interesting. Instead of detaching herself from the common lot of women, Webster tried to reconcile her intellectual power and feminism with the role of a housewife. In 1882 Edmund Clarence Stedman suggested that 'those not familiar with her writings will be glad to look at her portrait — of a refined and purely English type, and plainly marked by intellect and sensibility'. And he mentioned that Mrs Webster lived in 'a snug and semi-rustic house in Cheyne Walk, London, near the Chelsea Embankment, a region dear to the friends of Carlyle'.⁵⁶ In 1906 William Michael Rossetti recalled that apart from authorship, Mrs Webster was 'one of the best of women':

Every now and then we were in the society of Mrs Augusta Webster, the poetess, with her husband and daughter. [...] Her countenance was not specially remarkable: it was that of a highly sensible lady, of the practical domestic type; lit up by a fine pair of eyes, and crowned by beautiful silky crisped yellow hair. There was not an atom of affectation or pretension about her: her conversation was marked by thought and solidity, without gush or finessing, and her demeanour was eminently straightforward, frank, and kindly. If all literary and independent-minded ladies were like Mrs Webster, the talk about 'The shrieking sisterhood' and the unsexed blue-stocking would soon die out, or stand confessed as a silly and malicious travesty of the truth.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Boos, pp.280-84.

⁵⁶ Edmund Clarence Stedman, 'Some London Poets', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.885.

⁵⁷ William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, 2 vols (London: Brown Langham, 1906), vol.2, p. 502.

Yet Webster's calling her essays 'A Housewife's Opinions' is aggressive rather than self-deprecatory. The radical Chancellor Lord Brougham said of Harriet Martineau the suffragette, 'Harriet Martineau! I hate her! I hate a woman who has opinions.'⁵⁸ Webster is claiming the right of a housewife to have opinions and, more importantly, to have them published. It is also an implicit assertion of the housewife's power and bid for the public sphere and this is particularly important in the light of Webster's commitment to women's rights and to the enfranchisement of women. Women she implies, have potentially a great deal of power. Webster claims in the Preface of the volume: 'Though written for immediate appearance in those lighter columns of weekly journals which everyone reads and no one recalls, they had, even most jesting of them, all the care and thought I could have given work meant to last.' Theodore Watts-Dunton, being a fellow contributor with her in the *Examiner*, confirms that Webster 'never wrote a line that was not inspired by honesty and good feeling, while as a conscientious and painstaking critic [...] she had no superior, scarcely an equal'.⁵⁹ The *Westminster Review* claims that Mrs Webster was not only a good poet and translator, but also a good writer of social articles: 'She discourses on all kinds of topics, from Browning to legs of mutton, from translation to toys, with a ready vivacity and brisk goodwill which should make a Housewife's opinions deservedly popular not only among housewives.'⁶⁰ The *Athenæum* and the *Spectator* are less enthusiastic. They believe that these articles are too 'light' and therefore not worth republishing in a permanent form. The *Athenæum* even says that 'it is a waste of power for an able writer to give to them all the care and thought which she might

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Longford, *Eminent Victorian Women* (Auckland: Macmillan, 1981), p.17.

⁵⁹ Watts-Dunton, *Athenæum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

⁶⁰ *Westminster Review*, 55 (1879), p.293.

have bestowed on a work which was intended to last'. The critic disapproves of Webster's witty style of writing:

These essays may have cost Mrs Webster a great deal of trouble, but it is only her jests which give any proof of it. Undoubtedly that admission applies to a large portion of the book, for Mrs Webster has almost throughout adopted a would-be funny style which appears to be meant to pass for liveliness. Most of these essays begin with something more or less jocose, and all of them abound in common quotations either slightly altered or misapplied so as to render them waggish.⁶¹

Nevertheless, both the *Athenæum* and the *Spectator* appreciate many of Mrs Webster's opinions, especially on the subject of women's education and 'the rest of the programme of those who would give women a higher vocation and a larger sphere':

Here she finds something in which she is really interested, and the opinions of a clever woman are naturally worth reading upon such questions. She deals with them not only with vigour and earnestness, but with a sound senses not always to be found even in the advocacy of clever women.⁶²

In 1879 Webster also published her second drama. *Disguises* is a romantic comedy whose disguised identities in a rural setting suggests the pastoral world of *As You Like It* or *A Winter's Tale*. Reviewers found *Disguises* a major work: 'Mrs Webster,' wrote the critic for the *Scotsman*, 'has produced an original drama which is by far the most important contribution made to this department of English literature in recent years.'⁶³

Augusta Webster turned her attention to municipal politics in the 1870s. After the Websters moved to London in 1870, Augusta Webster became increasingly involved in the women's suffrage movement. She was acquainted with Frances

⁶¹ *Athenæum*, January 4, 1879, p.14.

⁶² *Athenæum*, January 4, 1879, p.15.

⁶³ Augusta Webster, *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* (London: Macmillan, 1893), Appendix ix.

Power Cobbe,⁶⁴ which suggests that she may also have known John Stuart Mill, who was one of the prime movers of women's suffrage at this time. An ardent feminist, Augusta Webster believed that women's achievement of the suffrage was inevitable despite the six parliamentary defeats she witnessed in her lifetime. In the early 1870s, both Augusta Webster and her husband, Thomas Webster, were members of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, which was formed in November 1871, Augusta Webster herself being a member of the Executive Committee of the Society from 1871 to 1878. In 1875, Augusta Webster's daughter Margaret Webster's name appears in the subscription list appended to the annual report, together with her parents' names.⁶⁵

A letter from Augusta Webster to Macmillan in January illustrates her involvement in the National Women's Suffrage Society:

This is my way of introduction to Miss Blackburn, who in a day or two, is to call on you on behalf of the Central Committee of the National Women's Suffrage Society to talk to you about a pamphlet she is to ask you to publish.

It is a collection of short expressions of opinion from women of more or less note as artists, writers, educationalists, philanthropists etc. Some of them names that command respect all over the country and none of them less than creditable. And being what it is I don't think you will feel any hesitation about publishing it, at the committee's expense. I have just written to Miss Cobbe to ask her to send a short prefatory essay for it; but I have been also requested to show up a short preface on behalf of the Committee. I have made it more a note than a preface.

Even with a little essay from Miss Cobbe, the pamphlet, though I think it cannot be without a certain interest, cannot be expected to command any sale. But though, our funds being at ebb just now, we should rejoice indeed at gains and Miss Blackburn will have to consult you as to the cheapest way in which we can bring it out properly, our pamphlet has quite other than money gains and losses to look to.

I have asked Miss Blackburn to send you as far as we have had printed of the opinions. They have been issued as leaflets. There are more now in M.S. and more are expected.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Frances Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe: As Told by Herself* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1894), p.586.

⁶⁵ See *The National Society for Women's Suffrage: Annual Reports and Minutes*, in Fawcett Library.

⁶⁶ Augusta Webster, Letter to Macmillan, dated January 24, 1879, in University of Reading Library.

In 1878 Augusta Webster wrote earnestly on the current suffrage bill in the *Examiner*, arguing for the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women ratepayers on the grounds of natural justice. The vote was then enjoyed by all male householders but still denied to all women, even those who were ratepayers in their own right, without a husband or brother to 'head the household'. It was 'commonplace justice', therefore, to grant the franchise on the basis of the same qualifications, regardless of sex: women householders bore an equal burden of taxation and had an equal right to representation. If the state allowed single and widowed women to live independently, as it manifestly did, it must accept the notion of Eve without an Adam and grant her equal citizenship. Webster's vision is not limited by that of the early suffragists, whose demand for votes for women discriminated against married women.⁶⁷ She claimed that married women should not be excluded:

We should not find so many married women prominent as workers in the Women's Suffrage Society if it were not generally felt among them that to remove the stamp of inferiority from the women on whom it is inflicted on ground of sex alone, is to remove it from all women, and that the result must be favourable to the general position of women altogether.⁶⁸

Her contributions were subsequently reprinted by the Women's Suffrage Society in leaflet form, and were forwarded to Christina Rossetti. Augusta asked Christina to add her name to the cause of women's suffrage. She did not manage to convert Christina Rossetti, who, while objecting to Webster's points of view on Women's Suffrage, asserted that she did admire Augusta Webster:

⁶⁷ The early suffragists' claim to the vote was grounded in the rather narrow argument that women property owners should have as much right as male property owners to exercise the franchise. Thus married women were effectively excluded. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 gave women control of their earnings. Other forms of property were controlled by husbands under the doctrine of coverture. Thus any property a woman brought to her marriage became her husband's and the propertyless married woman could not qualify for the vote.

⁶⁸ Augusta Webster, 'The Parliamentary Franchise for Women Ratepayers', 1878, reprinted in *A Housewife's Opinions*, 1879, pp.275-79.

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? [...] The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man's leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes. [...] Also I take exception at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage, — for who so apt as Mothers — all previous arguments allowed for the moment — to protect the interest of themselves and of their offspring? I do think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex, and make the female not a giantess or a heroine but at once and full grown a hero and giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and little beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries. Influence and responsibility are such solemn matters that I will not excuse myself to you for abiding by my convictions: yet in contradicting you I am contradicting one I admire.⁶⁹

Augusta Webster also had a strong commitment to advancing women's educational opportunities. She was twice elected to the London School Board, the first elected public body to admit women on the same terms as men. In 1870, as a result of that year's Education Act, local school boards began to be formed to supplement the existing schemes of voluntary elementary schools, and to set up and administer the new system of elementary schooling. Primary education was made compulsory for girls as well as boys. *The Times* commented on the formation of the London School Board, 'No equally powerful body will exist in England outside parliament, if power be measured by influence for good or evil over masses of human beings.'⁷⁰ Election to the board was open to women as well as to men. Not only could women stand for election, but, if they were ratepayers, they could vote. This was the first opportunity ever for female citizens to exert political power officially. In 1879 Webster was elected a member of the London school board from Chelsea by a margin of 4,000 votes. In November 1880, Augusta Webster's husband Thomas Webster was appointed as a manager of the school board in the Chelsea division, on the motion of Augusta Webster. In June 1881 she was appointed a member of the Chelsea division of the Special Committee on Representation. In the early 1880s

⁶⁹ Quoted by Mackenzie Bell in *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1898), pp.111-12.

when her health forced trips to Italy, she sent an apology from Rome to the school board, dated 29th October, 1881, explaining her absence from board meetings:

I am very sorry to be forced to ask you and the Board to accept my apologies for my absence. The dangerous attack of pleurisy which stopped my attendance at the end of the summer has, as was inevitable, left for the present effect enough to make me very liable to a second attack if I catch cold, and a second recovery would perhaps be too much to expect. I am, therefore, ordered not to run the risks of a winter in London, and to remain in a mild climate until the east winds are over in spring, when I may fairly count on returning in health and strength to resume all my duties.⁷¹

For health reasons she did not seek re-election in 1882, but she ran again successfully in 1885. According to Elizabeth Lee, she conducted her candidature without a committee or any organized canvassing and owed her success no doubt to her great power as a speaker. Mackenzie Bell acknowledges that Augusta Webster's influence on the School Board was considerable,⁷² no doubt particularly in the promotion of education for women. Not surprisingly, like the majority of female board members, Augusta Webster always tended to initiate and support progressive policies. In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Elizabeth Lee describes her advocacy of state-supported and improved education for the poor: 'She threw herself heart and soul into the work. Mrs Webster was a working member of the board. She was anxious to popularize education [...] and she anticipated the demand that, as education is national necessity, it should also be a national charge. [...] Her leanings were frankly democratic.'⁷³ Theodore Watts-Dunton says:

It is no exaggeration to say that with her benevolence was a passion — a passion in gratifying which she felt that no self-sacrifice and no expenditure of force were too great. If, like all people of strong feeling, she had her prejudices, these never arose from rivalry — never from that cancer of envy which is sometimes said to be a disease of the literary character. Generosity and courage were apparent in her frank and genial face — apparent in every tone of her frank and genial voice.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ *The Times*, November 29, 1870.

⁷¹ *School Board of London: Minutes of Proceedings*, vol.15, in London Metropolitan Archive.

⁷² Bell, in *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, vol.7, p.499.

⁷³ Sidney Lee ed., *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.60, pp.115-16.

⁷⁴ Watts-Dunton, *Athenæum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

Elizabeth Lee claims that 'in the heat of controversy her personality rendered her attractive even to her most vigorous opponents'.⁷⁵ Perhaps it is worth noting that Augusta Webster, like all the female members of the London School Board, belonged to the class that did not use the London education system themselves.

In Victorian upper- and middle-class families, the education of girls was taken far less seriously than that of their brothers. The experience of being kept at home and being taught by mothers or governesses whilst brothers were sent away to school was one shared by large numbers of middle-class girls in the second half of the nineteenth century, and right up to the time of the first world war. In *Women, Marriage and Politics*, which explores the lives of women in more than fifty families involved in British politics from about 1860 to 1914, Pat Jalland claims that girls from privileged backgrounds were likely to receive a poor education with an emphasis on ladylike accomplishments. Even the educational reforms of the last two decades of the nineteenth century had little impact on upper-class girls until the Edwardian era. Most were taught at home by governesses whose academic training was often very limited. Some governesses did earn the affection and respect of pupils and parents: the Ribblesdale family regretted the departure of their French governess in 1881 after 'eight years of uninterrupted confidence and support; loved and depended on by us all'.⁷⁶ But many governesses were remembered for their severity as well as their ignorance --- like Millicent Fawcett's governess who was 'incompetent to the last degree'.⁷⁷ Maggie Harkness commented to Beatrice Potter in 1879 on the education of

⁷⁵ *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.60, pp.115.

⁷⁶ Emma Ribblesdale, *Letters and Diaries*, ed. by B. Lister, priv. pr. 1930, p.41, quoted by Pat Jalland in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p.10.

⁷⁷ M. Fawcett, *What I Remember*, 1925, p.38, quoted in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p.10.

their contemporaries: 'girls brought up at home in a school-room, and shut up all day long with a woman who perhaps possesses no mind whatsoever' were not equipped for any independent life.⁷⁸ Mary Gladstone, daughter of the Liberal leader William E. Gladstone, born in 1847, wrote in old age that 'a lifelong depreciation started in my childhood when old Mrs Talbot gave me the impression that I was "wanting", i.e. half-witted. My governess, from 10-17 years, continued to treat me as half-witted, so I grew up as a nonentity. I have never outgrown it'. Lucy Masterman commented years later on Mary's education at the age of seventeen:

She could speak French and read Dante in Italian, and later was able to speak and read German. Otherwise her knowledge seems to have had no sort of framework and her studies no aim whatever. When emancipated from the schoolroom she read furiously, but inconsequently. [...] Her mind was kept like a kind of domestic pet, to be fed upon literary tit-bits.⁷⁹

A generation later, Molly Bell, daughter of a millionaire iron-master, grew up with 'a never-ending regret that I happened to be a girl'. She and her sister, Elsa, were taught by an uninspired governess from the time Molly was five:

For more than ten years I was bored to death all the time. [...] My mother's idea of the equipment required for her two daughters was that we should be turned out as good wives and mothers and be able to take our part in the social life of our kind. We must speak French and German perfectly, and be on friendly if not intimate terms with Italian. We must be able to play the piano and sing a bit, we must learn to dance well, and know how to make small talk. The more serious side of education did not take any part in the plans my mother made for us. Science, mathematics, political economy, Greek and Latin — there was no need for any of these. No girl that we knew was trained for any career or profession, nor did girls of our class go to school.⁸⁰

Many of these girls envied their brothers, fully aware of the fact that a boy's education was considered a much more important affair by their parents, and worthy of more expenditure. Sisters waited eagerly for their brothers to return during

⁷⁸ Maggie Harkness to cousin, Neatrice Potter, n.d. (1878), Passfield Papers, II, I (ii), ff.128-31, quoted in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, pp.10-11.

⁷⁹ Mary Gladstone — *Diaries and Letters*, ed. by Lucy Masterman, 1930, p.2, quoted in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, pp.11-12.

⁸⁰ Mary Trevelyan, 'The Number of My Days', undated MS, *Trevelyan Papers*, pp.17-23, quoted in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p.12.

vacations; when they did come back they sometimes felt rather overawed by their learning. The more intelligent upper- and middle-class girls who were educated at home sometimes profited indirectly from their brothers' education in school and college. Some set out to conquer certain branches of learning in order to help their brothers' studies. Nora Balfour (later Mrs Henry Sidgwick), living at home in Whittingehame in the late 1860s, decided to brush up her mathematics partly in order to be able to help her brothers, but also to develop her own understanding of the language.⁸¹ Augusta Webster learned Greek in order to help a younger brother. In an article titled 'University Examinations for Women' Augusta Webster points out:

The expense of instruction must long continue to tell more restrictively against girls than boys. This is hard on the girls, and one might say that in abstract justice parents are bound to distribute what mental provision they can afford to buy for the creatures they have brought into the world among them all, with the same fairness as bodily food, and that they have no right to stint one sex in order to fatten the other. But in this world justice refuses to be abstract. [...] For the parents are sure that their sons cannot take their places in the world without education for those places, that the instruction they purchase for them is their indispensable stock-in-trade, and that without it they must sink in worldly position, and do only minor, or even menial, work; and they are not sure that a similar investment for their daughters will bring in any return whatever — it might even, they perhaps think, be a counter influence to the young woman's natural charms in the eyes of some possible husbands and so hinder instead of helping them to take their places in the world.

(AHO, 9-7)

According to Pat Jalland, private boarding schools were usually only patronized in exceptional domestic circumstances and they seem to have been generally the preserve of the middle levels of the middle class. Even when the girls were sent away to school the quality of the education they received was generally markedly inferior, in academic terms, to that of their brothers. Fashionable schools existed which offered a curriculum of Music, Dancing, Art, German, Italian, French, English, Morals and Religion. Mrs Humphry Ward spent nine years as a young girl at three different

⁸¹ E. Raikes, *Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham* (London: Constable, 1908), p.16.

boarding schools, characterized by poor teaching and ignorance of the physical needs of growing girls: 'As far as intellectual training was concerned, my nine years from seven to sixteen were practically wasted. I learnt nothing thoroughly or accurately.' She compared her experience unfavourably with her brothers' six years at Rugby. In intellectual families, the daughter continued her education under the guidance of a father or a brother. Without such help, if she had enough determination, she pursued her studies alone. However, the majority of upper- and middle-class girls relapsed into a young-lady life of visiting, novel-reading, gossiping and embroidering. She is allowed to cultivate certain restricted, acceptable accomplishments. Yet she must not take them too seriously, she must not play the piano or draw too well, for that suggests professionalism. In 'University Examinations for Women' Augusta Webster says:

Side by side with the frivolous, or the stupid, or the merely patient, girls who take their ignorance pleasantly and never find it too much, there have always been others — a minority doubtless but a large minority — who have felt the restlessness of intellectual faculties unnaturally cramped, the weariness of unsatisfied hunger of mind, and who in their drawing-room life have envied their schoolboy brothers their teachers and their tasks, their books and their hours set aside for using them, as a crippled invalid on a sofa may envy the healthy their fatigues. [...] The highest education they contrived to get, for women of the sort spoken of took a higher than was offered them — some of them, in fact, *stole* it, working surreptitiously over their brothers' discarded schoolbooks and hiding away treatises on metaphysics or astronomy as novelists make naughty heroines hide away French novels.[...] There is no lack of girls eager to learn if they may; there are probably fewer girls than youths not willing to learn if they must. (*AHO*, 101-102)

In various articles for the *Examiner*, reprinted in *A Housewife's Opinions*, Augusta Webster criticizes the education and up-bringsings of contemporary young ladies.

Concerning the teaching of foreign languages, she says in 'Keys':

Perhaps the mental waste of keys is most to be seen in the case of modern languages. [...] Ladies [...] commit most waste in this direction. To be sure, one reason for it is that they generally are taught more modern languages to waste than are their male relatives. A more productive cause, however, is the mistaken theory in their education which accounts the art of speech in foreign tongues as a chief and ultimate object, ignoring altogether the art of having anything worth saying in them. It is difficult to persuade women that the knowing, more or less, several languages is not in itself either a consequence or a cause of superior capacity, except in the linguistic faculty, and that it is more to think soundly in one language than to talk sillily in a dozen. But it would be hard to blame them for an exaggerated estimation of the relative value of linguistic accomplishments in their education when it is one held by so many of those to whom they are taught to look for guidance — i.e. their partners at balls, and their husbands. (*AHO*, 41)

More irrelevant than foreign languages are musical acquirements. In the article 'Pianist and Martyr' Augusta Webster points out many young ladies 'pursue their art of measured sounds ascetically', not to gratify a taste but to perform a duty:

Putting aside any recollection of personal sufferings of our own, of chromatic ascensions next door of which each note seemed hammered into our aching heads, [...] — putting aside all subjective considerations, we must needs revere these martyrs to duty who are to be found in every English home and swarm next door. What they do they do because it is right. They do not know why they ought to give a large part of their young lives to a protracted attempt at mastering a craft which requires a rare and special talent not belonging to them, they only know that it is their vocation.

Webster points out that these girls simply accept their music, like their lace-embroidery, as a part of 'women's mission to anybody or nobody' (*AHO*, 21-23).

Augusta Webster enters a strenuous protest against useless fancy needlework in 'Whatever is Worth Doing is Worth Doing Well' and describes it as 'futile laboriousness' and 'industrious waste of time'. She claims that women's time is not considered to have any value and therefore more than men they spend themselves in vehement uselessness:

Virtue, divided between the natural objection to fatigue and the desire of possessing the faculty of industry, spends its skill in ceaseless fussings and uses ninety times nine stitches in time to save some futurely possible nine, and safely binds a thousand things which no one will ever want to safely find, till negligence itself could be no more unthrifty, and indolence no more lavish of unfruitful hours. [...] Poor soul, she thinks she is working; but her work was while her hands were still. [...] Where there chance to be brains and a use for brains, it is a pity when finger-twiddling takes the place of work and the will to be useful is lost in tasks that, with hours of manipulation added, do not repay the outlay of pence upon the materials. (*AHO*, 106-108)

In *Women, Marriage and Politics* Pat Jalland indicates that when upper-class families gave their daughters a good education at all, it was usually too little and too late. Katharine Wallas condemned this practice in about 1910:

The Balfour girl arrived [at Cambridge] — A pretty looking creature of about 18 knowing nothing beyond $(a+b)^2$ and with an idea that she'll get through Matric. in June. Parents in these circles are pretty cruel to their children without meaning harm. [They] keep the poor things without a chance of doing serious work and are then suddenly seized with the idea that it would be 'nice for Ruth to go to College'.⁸²

⁸² Katharine to brother, Graham Wallas, N.D. [c.1910], *Graham Wallas Papers*, Box 42, quoted by in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p.14.

Molly Bell briefly attended Queen's College, London at the age of fifteen. After her uninspired governess left she developed an appetite for books ranging from 'the great classics' to Rider Haggard and regretted that she had discovered a love of learning too late. When she wistfully perused the Girton College syllabus at the age of eighteen she knew that she could never compensate for all the wasted years at home.⁸³

In 1878, by means of a supplemental charter, the University of London became the first academic body in the United Kingdom that threw open its degrees, honours, prizes to students of both sexes, on terms of perfect equality. Augusta Webster comments in 'University Examinations for Women' that parents' attitudes towards their daughters' education might be changed because of that:

That large class of parents who might at present be disinclined to listen to arguments in favour of a more real education for their girls, because they see that their girls can be just as successful in society without it, will by-and-by unconsciously accept the stronger argument of example, and come, as though they had never felt otherwise, to feel it their natural duty to give daughters, as well as sons, a solid preparation for the work of life.

And most importantly, a girl's time 'will be considered to have some value':

Those who have noted the aimlessness and drifting and fussy futility of the days of most women in the classes where women have their maintenance provided for them are understood never to be too busy over one thing to do another [...], can easily see that this higher appreciation by others and by herself of the value of her time would in itself be an education to a girl. (*AHO*, 96)

She points out in 'University Examinations for Women' that passing such an examination as that of the London University cannot be achieved by the 'first clever girl who has in her own fashion made the best she knew how of her abilities'. Such an examination is a test of training, not of 'brilliancy and facility and fitful scholarship, much here, little there, such as comes of self-teaching and undirected zeal', but of even and thorough work. She claims it would be unwise for the class of women 'who have struggled on as they best might, remedying for themselves the

inaccuracy and deficiencies of the education given them and never ceasing to be conscious of their loss of preparation for the later work of life', to seek the kind of 'academical distinction which was not open to them to earn in a seasonable day':

It is only too certain that they will always be the weaker for the want of due training in due time; but it would be worse than futile to track back for it too late. As well set mature ladies to make up vehement skipping-rope and vaulting practice for the active exercises they did not have in their growing time, as set them to that sort of schooling which should have been the preliminary to the studies and undertakings of elder years. It is never too late to learn; but it is soon too late to learn after the fashion of youth. (*AHO*, 103-104)

Augusta Webster was also concerned with the position of working-class women. In 1847, the Ten Hours Bill had been passed, to limit the working hours of women and children to ten a day. In 1873, a Home Office report recommended the further reduction of women's hours of work from sixty to fifty-four a week. Webster, pointed out that such legislation, which meant to protect, might drive women to starvation or prostitution:

Protection of them threatens to take such formidable power that thier lives will be a slavery, not to work, but to laws which forbid them to work. They will be able to starve, for no law can forbid that, but they will not be able to be weary with labour: they will be free to battle against poverty by help of vice, but not to injure their healths by long and exhausting tasks, and their feminine dignity by coarse and mannish occupations. Some women would like a choice. (*AHO*, 173)

Augusta Webster's concern with the issue of prostitution will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Celibacy was another problem that seriously affected many Victorian women. Between 1860 and 1870, the problem of unmarried women provoked considerable discussion. Articles such as 'Why are Women Redundant?' or 'What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?' appeared. In Britain in 1851 there were 2,765,000 single women aged 15 and over. By 1861, this figure had risen to 2,956,000 and by 1871

83 *Trevelyan Papers*, pp.17-23, quoted in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p.12.

to 3,228,700 — an increase of 16.8 per cent over the twenty years.⁸⁴ Some observers believed that the growth was greater amongst the more privileged levels of society than amongst the less:

There are hundreds of thousands of women — not to speak more largely still — scattered through the ranks, but proportionately most numerous in the middle and upper classes: who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labour of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own.⁸⁵

Part of the explanation for this inordinate growth in the numbers of single women who could not find husbands was the different mortality rates of the two sexes. By 1841 the expectation of life at birth was 40.19 years for the males of England and Wales, but 42.18 years for females.⁸⁶ During the next thirty years or so the mortality rates for both men and women declined, but more rapidly for the latter.⁸⁷ Therefore, although more boy babies were born than girl babies, by the time they had reached the age of 15, diseases of all kinds and violent deaths had done much to redress the balance and turn the scale the other way.⁸⁸ More noticeable to contemporaries was the difference between the sexes with respect to emigration. Although the authorities differ on the absolute numbers of migrants during these years, they are agreed that the period 1851-1861 was remarkable for a considerable expansion in the flow of emigrants from Great Britain as compared with the precious decade, while the next decade fell only slightly behind it in intensity. This was largely a working-class phenomenon. Yet about 6 per cent of the permanent migrants were from the middle

⁸⁴ J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), p.27.

⁸⁵ W. R. Greg, 'Why are Women Redundant?', the *National Review*, April, 1862.

⁸⁶ D. V. Glass, *Population Policies and Movements in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p.14.

⁸⁷ W. P. D. Logan, 'Mortality in England and Wales from 1848 to 1947', *Population Studies*, 4 (1950), table 1, pp.132-78 (p.134).

class. Whereas 2.53 per cent of all males emigrating between 1854 and 1860 were recorded as 'Gentlemen', 'Professional Men', and 'Merchants', the figure for 'Gentlewomen' and 'Governesses' formed only 0.7 per cent of all female emigrants. So England lost many marriageable men to the services or to America or Australia where there was greater economic opportunity for them — opportunity which younger sons, especially, might not have been able to ignore. With the family fortune left to the oldest son, younger sons had to survive on allowances that frequently were too small to support a wife and family. There was little that a gentleman could do to augment his allowance. Making a marriage with a non-working, (upper) middle-class woman was a luxury beyond the financial means of many, or at least a luxury readily postponed to a more comfortable, settled middle age. So lots of young women were spinsters and the separate sphere argument was called in question because while women stayed at home, men often went too far abroad. Webster observes in an essay titled 'The Dearth of Husbands':

The dearth of husbands was known as a statistical discovery. [...] Men enough to match the women, and a few over to spare, are born into England, but, as each generation ripens into marriageable years, a large proportion of the men and scarcely any of the women have left the country. Men's employments are more dangerous, and in that way some lives are lost against which there is no balance on the women's side to set, yet probably this difference is one which would have been met [...] by the slight excess in births of male over female children: but the one-sided drain from temporary or permanent expatriation could not but from its beginning produce a disproportion between the sexes which there was no diminishing influence whatever in the number of the female population to retrieve — a disproportion which has yearly increased and will yearly increase. (*AHO*, 239-40)

Concerning the solution to the problem, there were two main viewpoints; the popular one, upheld by writers like W. R. Greg, was that marriage was the despotic law of life, and that therefore the aim of 'many female reformers and one man of real pre-eminence' to make single life attractive and pleasant for women was misguided and perverted. The better solution was for women to make married life

attractive and pleasant for men, so that they would prefer having a wife to keeping a mistress, or if all else failed, for women the emigration solution, which was constantly being put forward, was considered by the feminists to be no solution at all. Their attitude was that, as thirty per cent of women in England were unmarried, it would be better to accept the situation and to educate them to support themselves in comfort rather than to ship them off to the colonies like superfluous cattle. The degrading necessity for marriage would no longer exist were women educated for a profession; there would be fewer unions of interest and more of love; and with honourable spinsterhood in the fashion, prostitution would decline and more men would be forced to contemplate marriage.

In 'The Dearth of Husbands' Augusta Webster points out that even if 'every woman in England were a Helen of Greece for fascination, and every woman in England were bent on being married, still, out of every three, one must waste unwed'. Therefore parents should not go on educating their daughters 'to the occupation of waiting till somebody came for them, and educating them to no other occupation'. She claims that 'the class which produces the Unprotected Female must, like the class which produces the Habitual Criminal, be brought, for the public good, under the redeeming influences of sound education'. But she understands that 'education has by no means yet come within the reach of the majority of women, and is most of all out of the reach of gentlewomen likely to be left penniless at their parents' death'. She suggests that failing the capacity for a profession, daughters should be taught to pursue some employment by which, in case of necessity, they would be able to earn money; trades like engraving on glass and painting on china might be learned for much less than it cost for a girl without special musical talent to acquire the accomplishment of playing the piano

objectionably, and would offer means of making money by no unpleasant toil. Webster points out the ability to earn her livelihood at need might save a girl from ruining her self-respect and her happiness by a mercenary marriage, and from the anxieties of a hopeless poverty if she made no marriage or she married someone who was financially insecure or became a penniless widow with children to work for (*AHO*, 240-5).

In *A Housewife's Opinions*, Augusta Webster appears as an 'unsentimental social critic and a debunker of romantic myths'. As Angela Leighton says, Webster was not an 'out-and-out radical'. Her opinions 'grow out of a middle current of liberal thinking in the nineteenth century: her scepticism is more amusingly implicit than angrily polemical, her feminism is essentially practical and her views are usually disguised by ironic humour'.⁸⁹ Perhaps it is difficult to exactly classify Augusta Webster's ideology. The scepticism that emerges sometimes in her religious poems further confuses the picture. Her political position is equally undefined. In a letter to a Miss Morris in 1886 Augusta Webster says:

I have thought about it but I have come to the conclusion that I cannot very well give the lecture you propose. I feel a very great interest in Socialism and find myself in sympathy with it on many points but I am not a socialist and never shall be unless a form of Socialism is developed which leaves (as I believe Socialism could) a larger room for individualism than is generally connected with the idea of Socialism — and than present ordinary life allows. And then there are many questions, of course, of law and morals and customs to think about. I ought not to come forward in a position that would identify me with a Socialist League — it would be 'false pretence'.

I do not think either that I have a subject in my head and heart that, steering clear of pronounced doctrine one way or the other on socialism, would nevertheless be appropriate.

Webster concludes the letter by saying, 'I should like to be at some of the lectures if I can manage the time, but in order to hear and to learn. I do not accept the popular idea of Socialism as revolution and riot but want to see what outcome of its doctrines

⁸⁹ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.173.

there might be for improvement of what civilization has mismanaged and Xtianity failed to cure.’⁹⁰

In the 1880s and 90s, Augusta Webster was the regular poetry reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, and so during this period her critical and creative work proceeded in tandem. In 1881 Webster produced *A Book of Rhyme*, a collection of lyrics from her plays, some from the then unpublished play *In a Day*. The volume contains a graceful seasonal sequence of thirty poems which she called ‘English stornelli’ and sixty other short lyrics. As usual, the *Westminster Review* was enthusiastic: ‘The *Stornelli* are a series of wonderful picture verses, *huitains*, containing each a little study, carved like a gem by a skilful master-hand.’⁹¹ The *Athenaeum* now recognizes the originality of Webster’s verses:

Mrs Webster has the merit of being quite uninfluenced, in her lyrical work at least, by the poetic fashions of the day. This is itself a great merit. The press is now pouring forth a flood of so-called poetry which is something less than a weak dilution of the poetry of Mr Swinburne, Mr Rossetti, and those who immediately followed them.⁹²

Webster’s tragedy *In a Day* (1882) was the only one of her plays to be produced on the stage. It was performed at Terry Theatre in London in May 1890. Webster’s adult daughter Margaret Davies Webster played the heroine.

In 1884, Webster published a long fairy-tale, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans: A Romance of History*. Like some other fairy-tales written by nineteenth-century female writers, it is not written only for children. Many of Webster’s social concerns are presented: through various characters in a fantasy world, Webster freely explores female power and potential, and establishes her own feminine ideal.

⁹⁰ Augusta Webster, Letter to Miss Morris, dated May 17, 1886, *Morris Papers*, vol.9, Brit. Mus., Additional MS. 45,346, f.25.

⁹¹ *Westminster Review*, 60 (1881), p.564.

⁹² Theodore Watts-Dunton, ‘A Book of Rhyme’, *Athenaeum*, August 20, 1881.

The Sentence (1887) has been considered as Webster's best play. It is a domestic tragedy based on incidents recorded by the Roman biographer and historian, Suetonius. The play was very favourably reviewed and strongly admired by Christina and William Michael Rossetti. The latter praised the play as 'one of the masterpieces of European drama', and claimed that 'it is the supreme thing amid the work of all British poetesses':

There are two British poetesses to one or other of whom the palm is now generally awarded; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Georgina Rossetti. [...] Mrs Browning had to show such splendid work as *The Drama of Exile* and *Aurora Leigh*; but she could never have done *The Sentence*, or anything like it. As for Christina Rossetti — though it may easily be supposed that I should be the last to undervalue her noble work in other fields of poetry — the very suggestion of her writing any tragedy, much more any such tragedy as *The Sentence*, would be preposterous. (*M&D*, 13-14)

It seems that in the 1890s Augusta Webster achieved some sort of popularity. Her drama *In a Day* was produced for the first time in May 1890. Her volume *Portraits* was reprinted in 1893. In the same year *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* was published, the last book by Webster published in her lifetime. The *Selections* included nine miscellaneous poems that had earlier appeared in magazines, as well as lyrics selected from her plays. The *Athenæum* commented in August 1893:

We hope the simultaneous publication of these volumes may be taken as a sign that Mrs Webster's poetic work is, or is becoming, 'popular'. It is enough, of course, for the poet himself that he has audience fit, though few; and of such competent appreciation Mrs Webster has been assured for at least a quarter of a century. Those who have no very keen recollection of her first two volumes — 'Blanche Lisle' (1860) and 'Lilian Gray' (1864) — remember very thoroughly her 'Dramatic Studies' (1866) and all the volumes that have followed it. Since 1866 Mrs Webster has been recognized in the world of letters as the most finely and broadly intellectual of the feminine poets of to-day. It is now pleasant to think that the admiration always freely accorded to her by the students of poetry is, or is about to be, bestowed upon her by that great public which some poets find it difficult to reach.⁹³

William Michael Rossetti once even mentioned her as a possible candidate for Poet Laureate. Tennyson died in October 1892 and there was no obvious successor.

⁹³ Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'Mrs Webster as a Poet', *Athenæum*, August 26, 1893, p.277.

According to Olive Garnett, on 23 October, when the Garnett family dined with Rossetti, the laureateship was the chief topic of conversation. William was 'of the opinion that Swinburne and Wm. Morris should have the refusal of it, after them perhaps Coventry Patmore. He thinks Sir Edwin Arnold will probably get it, and would keep out Lewis Morris at any price. Christina Rossetti, possibly Augusta Webster should be the choice among women. As I entirely agreed I said nothing.'⁹⁴

Augusta Webster died at Kew on 5th September 1894 without ever achieving this fame. Theodore Watts-Dunton in his obituary of Webster regards her as 'a poet of remarkable intellectual strength, a prose writer of exceptional accomplishments, and philanthropist of a peculiarly noble temper'.⁹⁵

She left behind a few short lyrics and an uncompleted sonnet sequence on her daughter. They are collected in the volume *Mother and Daughter: An Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence* (1895), edited by William Michael Rossetti. It is a personal expression of maternal love and a commentary on the varying moods and experiences of motherhood. William Rossetti remarks in the preface that the sonnets form the first poetic sequence on the title's subject:

The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections. [...] It seems a little surprising that Mrs Webster has not been forestalled — and to the best of my knowledge she never was forestalled — in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers. (*M&D*, 11-12)

So in her own time, at least towards the end of her poetic career, Augusta Webster was much acclaimed. In 1871 Buxton Forman affirmed that 'I have more

⁹⁴ Olive Garnett, *Tea and Anarchy: The Bloomsbury Diaries of Olive Garnett, 1890-1893*, ed. by Barry Johnson (London: Bartlett's Press, 1989), p.127.

⁹⁵ Watts-Dunton, *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

than once seen claimed for her first place among the women-poets of England'.⁹⁶

Seeking for an explanation for her having been less popular, the *Westminster Review* pointed out in 1874:

A flashy novel sells by thousands on the railway book-stalls, whilst a genuine poem, like Mrs Webster's 'Auspicious Day', is treasured up only by one or two students of poetry. Yet the explanation is easy enough. A true poet must make his audience. He must in fact educate the public up to his level. Only here and there will he at first find a few sympathetic minds. This was the case with Keats, with Wordsworth, with Browning. Each struck a new note, to which the public was not accustomed. The same is the case with Mrs Webster.⁹⁷

But by 1875 Edmund Stedman was proclaiming her verse 'nearly equal' to that of the 'best of her sister artists'⁹⁸ — Mrs Browning, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow, Miss Procter and Mrs Knox. He claimed:

I am not sure but her general level is above them all. She has a dramatic faculty unusual with women, a versatile range, and much penetration of thought; is objective in her dramatic scenes and longer idylls, which are thinner than Browning's but less rugged and obscure, shows great culture, and is remarkably free from the tricks and dangerous mannerism of recent verse.

Twelve years later in the American journal, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*

Stedman asserted that 'on extending my acquaintance with her books this view is not materially changed'. Putting her in the company of Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow and Miss Procter, Stedman agreed that Augusta Webster was 'one of the best' of female poets.⁹⁹

In 1880 Theodore Watts-Dunton placed her in the company of George Eliot and Frances Power Cobbe, 'who, in virtue of lofty purpose, purity of soul, and sympathy with suffering humanity, bend their genius, like the rainbow, as a covenant of love over all flesh that is upon the earth'.¹⁰⁰ Whether or not Webster

⁹⁶ H. Duxton Forman, *Our Living Poets: An Essay in Criticism* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871), p.281.

⁹⁷ *Westminster Review*, 40 (1874), p.597.

⁹⁸ Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Victorian Poets* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1873), p.281.

⁹⁹ *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.885.

¹⁰⁰ Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Athenaeum*, 15 September 1894, p.355.

was personally acquainted with George Eliot, such company is, as Angela Leighton says, the right one. She belongs to the 'liberal, humanitarian tradition of the high Victorians, with its social responsibility and philanthropical concern'.¹⁰¹ Thomas Hake notes that Theodore Watts-Dunton showed himself the 'nurse of genius' in Augusta Webster's case with unrelenting zeal, 'for he felt an exceptional desire to do the utmost in his power to aid her in gaining recognition among the writers of her time'. He attended her receptions with great regularity, and from time to time he expressed his genuine esteem for her work in the *Athenæum*. It has been claimed that the case of Augusta Webster is one of many, illustrating Watts-Dunton's ready instinct for work of high quality. Thomas Hakes points out that in his long connection with the *Athenæum* Watts-Dunton never used its pages to puff an unworthy writer, but 'often and often he drew attention to talented writers unjustly neglected by the majority'.¹⁰² In 1881 Christina Rossetti wrote to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

I am not well versed in George Eliot as a bard, but feel inclined to rate Mrs Webster decidedly higher. The latter, some of whose poetry I really have admired, has sent me her fresh volume, so I have duly returned mine. Once she and I had a courteous tilt in the strong-minded woman lists, so it became doubly incumbent upon me to fall short in no observance.¹⁰³

Webster is mentioned in Oscar Wilde's short essay 'English Poetesses' (1888). Maintaining that 'of all the women of history' Elizabeth Barrett Browning 'is the only one that we could name in any possible or remote conjunction with Sappho',

¹⁰¹ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, pp.166-67.

¹⁰² *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*, vol.2, pp.17-18.

¹⁰³ Christina Rossetti, *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Brown, Langham, 1908).

and that Christina Rossetti 'is simply a very delightful artist in poetry',¹⁰⁴ Wilde acknowledges:

Mrs Pfeiffer, Mrs Hamilton King, Mrs Augusta Webster, Graham Tomson, Miss Mary Robinson, Jean Ingelow, Miss May Kendall, Miss Nesbit, Miss May Probyn, Mrs Craik, Mrs Meynell, Miss Chapman, and many others have done really good work in poetry, either in the grave dorian mode of thoughtful and intellectual verse, or in the light and graceful forms of old French song, or in the romantic manner of antique ballad, or [...] the intense and concentrated sonnet.¹⁰⁵

However, her name is not included in Gladstone's 'list of poetesses'. In 1890, Christina Rossetti criticised Gladstone's failure to include the name of Augusta Webster: 'I did not notice the omission at the moment, but suspect it in retrospect'.¹⁰⁶ Her suspicion is that Gladstone's well-known opposition to women's suffrage coloured his judgement. As Angela Leighton says, Rossetti's own impartial admiration for her poetic contemporary was already, in the 1890s, going against the tide.¹⁰⁷ In 1895 William Michael Rossetti prefaced Webster's unfinished sonnet sequence, *Mother and Daughter*, with a highly laudatory review of her work, but acknowledged that her 'true rank' had not yet been 'fixed' (*M&D*, 14).

Far from being fixed in any rank at all, her fate as a poet is to have disappeared almost entirely from literary history. After Webster's death critical enthusiasm for her work waned. As Florence S. Boos points out, she seems to have lacked the network of literary connections which helped Coventry Patmore, Thomas Woolner, William Allingham, Arthur O'Shaughnessy and Edmund Gosse find their places in standard

¹⁰⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'English Poetesses' (1888), in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968), pp.101-8 (p.101).

¹⁰⁵ Wilde, pp.101-8 (p.105).

¹⁰⁶ *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, p.175.

¹⁰⁷ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.165.

literary histories.¹⁰⁸ Augusta Webster was aware of the fact that she lacked literary connections. After the success of *Portraits* in 1870, she wrote to Professor Blackie:

I am very glad you think so well of *Portraits*. As to a 2nd edition we do not at all expect it. That would imply a sort of success which we have understood to be next to impossible in these days of a writer so entirely without literary connection, and I don't think that our publisher either — even if he and we would like 'pushing' — has opportunities of making friends for a friendless book. Critics however have always been much better to me than I see them called by their many satirists and, in spite of our numbering no reviewers among our circle of acquaintances, it will be thanks to the reviewers if ever I get anything into a 2nd edition. As it looks likely to be some years before any thing so surprising happens.¹⁰⁹

After her death only William Michael Rossetti, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Elizabeth Lee (who wrote the two-page memoir for the *Dictionary of National Biography*) and Mackenzie Bell (author of an appreciative introductory essay to Webster's verse for volume seven of A. H. Miles's *Poets and Poetry of the Century*) wrote significant responses to her work. In 1914, Theodore Watts-Dunton wrote to Hugh Walker:

Many thanks for a sight of the typed script of your essay upon Augusta Webster. It is difficult to get magazine editors to read with intelligent literary eyes anything upon a poet that is out of the public ken. It is a monstrous thing that such poetry as Augusta Webster's should be unknown. Her name is not even mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.¹¹⁰

Nor is she mentioned in, for instance, Marjorie Bald's *Women-Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (1922) and Curtis Hidden Page's *British Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (1924). She is only mentioned briefly in Oliver Elton's *A Survey of English Literature: 1830-1880* (1927), which devotes space to other women poets. Angela Leighton claims, by this time, the 'stylishness' of the aesthetes and the 'milky lyricism' of the Georgians had conspired to oust such socially committed voices as Webster's,¹¹¹ which, as a nineteenth century critic points out, does not hold to the

¹⁰⁸ Boos, pp.280-84 (p.284).

¹⁰⁹ Augusta Webster, Letter to Professor John Stuart Blackie, dated June 13, 1870, in *Blackie Papers*, National Library of Scotland, MS. 2629, ff. 233-234.

¹¹⁰ *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*, vol.2, p.18.

¹¹¹ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart*, p.165.

principle of 'art for art's sake', and seeks to give utterance to the thoughts and feelings of the day, to its faiths and doubts, to the aspects 'under which life presents itself to its children'.¹¹² The same thing happened to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose polemical political poetry, *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Poems before Congress* remained unjustly neglected throughout most of the twentieth century till recently. And Barrett Browning herself had been transformed into a legendary heroine of a romance, misrepresented as a pining recluse rescued by Robert Browning. The manner in which Barrett Browning's works were read during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had much to do with establishing her as personality rather than as a poet. She was considered mainly as the writer of love letters and sonnets to her husband. In 1932 Virginia Woolf commented on Barrett Browning's position as writer:

'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' is glanced at perhaps by two professors in American universities once a year; but we all know how Miss Barrett lay on her sofa; how she escaped from the dark house in Wimpole Street one September morning; how she met health and happiness, and Robert Browning in the church around the corner. [...] Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place.¹¹³

Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster, published in 1893, consists mainly of lyrics, not of her best, politically explicit poems. Her most famous work on 'the cause of Woman', *A Castaway*, does not appear. The *Athenaeum* points out:

Mrs Webster has her own voice and her own manner of producing it. This is not perfectly discernible in the 'Selections', because, within the limits assigned to the book, it has not been possible to make a full exhibition of the writer's dramatic power. Her truly classic dramas are represented here only by certain of the songs contained in them. That, of course, is unfortunate.¹¹⁴

In *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (1860), Kunitz and Haycraft, while affirming Webster's achievement in dramatic monologue, admit that she is

¹¹² *Spectator*, 43 (1870), p.497.

¹¹³ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader, Second Series* (London: Hogarth, 1932), p.202.

¹¹⁴ Watts-Dunton, *Athenaeum*, August 26, 1893, p.277.

‘remembered, however, as a skilful experimenter in Lyrical meters’.¹¹⁵ H. Buxton Forman classifies Webster’s miscellaneous verses as her worst works: ‘The thoughts in this division of work are generally good as far as they go; but they are never great or very deep: the workmanship is always passably good, but it is never original’. In 1871 he was quite right to point out that Webster’s ‘neat mediocre lyric work’ did not earn for her any wide repute, and ‘never would have earned for her a name to be preserved more than a few seasons’.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Augusta Webster has largely been represented by her secondary works which are not supposed to earn her any long lasting reputation. And that might have led to the disappearance of her work from the canon in the twentieth century. In 1929, when Vita Sackville-West searched for some biographical information about Augusta Webster, she could find little more than ‘so much orange-peel and spume’.¹¹⁷ However, Augusta Webster was going to be absent from the literary tradition for another half of a century,¹¹⁸ till in 1984, Kathleen Hickok paid considerable attention to her in *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women’s Poetry*. She puts Augusta Webster in the company of Amy Levy and George Eliot, who were ‘among the most consistently honest in their representations of women’.¹¹⁹ In 1992 Angela Leighton pointed out, ‘The omission of Augusta Webster from the list of major women poets of the nineteenth century has gone unchallenged for too long since Christina Rossetti, in

¹¹⁵ Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Wilson, 1960), p.648.

¹¹⁶ Forman, *Our Living Poets*, pp.172-173.

¹¹⁷ Vita Sackville-West, *The Eighteen-Seventies*, p.123.

¹¹⁸ An abridged version of ‘Circe’, which appears in George Macbeth’s *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), seems to be the most substantial, or perhaps the only representation of Webster’s poetry during this period.

¹¹⁹ Hickok, p.10.

1890, first challenged it'.¹²⁰ In 1995 Joseph Bristow indicated that Webster 'strikes us as the most dispiriting example of a sorely neglected talent in a still under-researched field of inquiry'.¹²¹

Tess Cosslett says in *Victorian Women Poets* published in 1996, that she was disappointed, but not really surprised, to find that Victorian women poets such as Augusta Webster or Michael Field were not represented at all in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1983). She claims, 'The historical recovery of lost women — writers, artists, scientists, feminists — has been a major project of the recent feminist movement'.¹²²

I first began to be interested in Augusta Webster eight years ago when the poet and critic, Philip Hobsbaum, drew 'A Castaway' to the attention of my supervisor. At that time very little had been written on Augusta Webster since her own time: the poem 'A Castaway' had been referred to by Angela Leighton in an article on the fallen woman and by Susan Brown in her study on the issue of prostitution. Also there was an entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* by Florence Boos.¹²³ Since then she has attracted increasing interest chiefly from Angela Leighton again,¹²⁴ but also from Isobel Armstrong, Dorothy Mermin and

¹²⁰ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart*, p.201.

¹²¹ Joseph Bristow ed., *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.27.

¹²² Tess Cosslett ed., *Victorian Women Poets* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), p.1.

¹²³ Angela Leighton, ' "Because men made the laws": The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet', *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), pp.109-137; Susan Brown, 'Economical Representations: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny", Augusta Webster's "A Castaway", and the Campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts', *Victorian Review*, 17 (1991), pp.78-95; Boos, pp.280-84.

¹²⁴ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets Writing Against the Heart* (1992).

Kate Flint;¹²⁵ and an edition of selected poems and essays has recently appeared.¹²⁶ This is a great improvement but it still brings to light a very small proportion of Augusta Webster's work and the attention of these critics is somewhat unbalancing. Criticism tends to focus mainly on a selection of the poetry, and in that mainly on her dramatic monologues which lend themselves to what feminist criticism wants to say about the special dilemmas of the woman poet in the period. This is important work and I invoke it particularly in chapters III on 'A Castaway' and IV on the dramatic monologue. But I believe that there is a need for a study of Augusta Webster's *oeuvre* and this is what I set out to offer, hoping that it may act as a preliminary to further study of specific parts of her work.

My interest, then, is in offering appropriate contexts within which this work may be read, in exploring the mutual exchanges between texts and contexts and in showing how these connect Augusta Webster to most of the central socio-political/literary concerns of her time. Thus her translations are discussed within the contemporary debates about the theory and practice of translation, her children's novel within contemporary concerns about the nature of female education and female employment and so on. The method of the thesis is to weave a tapestry of text and context among chapters, that will produce an intersecting picture of the woman and the age.

¹²⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Dorothy Mernin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993); Kate Flint, ' "... As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I": Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet', in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.156-59.

¹²⁶ Christine Sutphin ed., *Augusta Webster: Portraits and other Poems* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000).

It may be that Augusta Webster will be recovered only through her monologues and a few other pieces, but I think this will be a pity and that her monologues themselves will not be fully understood until we appreciate not only what she could do with the monologue, but also what she could not. In my last chapter I suggest that it was unfortunate for her survival that she should have turned away from the univocal monologue (although she made some experiments with the introduction there too of alternative voices) to the dialogic closet drama just at the point when the closet drama was becoming less fashionable.

Webster's proper position will probably turn out to be constantly in process, rather than fixed. The dramatic monologue may take the centre stage today but give way to-morrow to the closet drama, for example, which is increasingly proving of interest partly through the recovery of its earlier mistress, Joanna Baillie. Or the critical focus on print culture may highlight her work as a journalist; and there are other possibilities. The aim of this thesis, then is to enter the placing debate and to find a variety of proper positions for its subject.

Chapter One

Lesley's Guardians

A nature that is ever, in the mass, better, truer, higher, nobler, quicker to feel, and much more constant to retain, all tenderness and pity, self-denial and devotion, more than the nature of men.

Charles Dickens¹

It was inevitable that the unyieldingly dualistic requirement of the mid-century — which held that woman must be incessantly all-giving, and that she must be the embodiment of altruism to balance the economic necessity of the egotistic ambitions of the male — should lead to its opposite: the myth of the completely self-sufficient and hence completely egotistical woman, whose only wish was to gaze in the mirror and spend herself in autocratic self-contemplation.

Bram Dijkstra²

In 1864, Augusta Webster published a three-volume novel, *Lesley's Guardians*,³ under the pseudonym Cecil Home.

The protagonist of the novel, Lesley Desirée Hawthorn, has a French father and an English mother. She endures a period of genteel poverty as a student-artist in France and marries Louis de l'Aubonne, who is, according to the arrangement of his family, supposed to marry an heiress, Stephanie de la Chatellerie. Lesley and Louis get married in London without Louis's family's knowledge or permission. Within half an hour of the marriage, on discovering that Louis never meant to recognize her publicly as his wife and that in France at any rate, she is not his wife, Lesley leaves her husband.

¹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848), chapter 3.

² Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.145.

³ Augusta Webster, *Lesley's Guardians*, as Cecil Home (London: Macmillan, 1864), henceforth *LG*.

With this marriage that is no marriage the novel opens. Lesley goes back to Paris and resumes her position as a student-artist. The succeeding chapters are taken up with the history of Lesley's subsequent life. Lesley attains considerable distinction as an artist and is received into upper-class society. Then, even more fortunately, she turns out to be the long lost heiress of an estate under the administration of Mr Maurice, the former lover of Lesley's best friend Marion Raymond. After her mother's death Lesley goes to England, first staying with Marion and later with her uncle's family. Louis goes back to his home town and prepares to marry Stephanie. He seems quite content for a while. However, after the death of his godfather and his own father, he becomes head of the family. Obtaining both power and freedom, he desires to treat what he had once considered an empty ceremony as a valid marriage and attempts to claim Lesley as his wife. After vainly pursuing and haunting Lesley over a long period of time, he jumps from a cliff, is severely disfigured and disabled and dies soon after.

As time shows all the petulance, vanity and weakness of Louis's character, Lesley gradually reaches the conviction that what she once held the greatest misfortune of her life was in reality its greatest blessing. And long before Louis gives up the pursuit, Lesley comes to feel that every real connection between him and her has vanished. On Louis de l'Aubonne's death she eventually marries Mr Maurice.

Lesley's Guardians is the first long novel Augusta Webster published. And with the partial exception of a long fairy-tale romance, *Daffodil and the Croëxaxicans: A Romance of History* (1884), she never returned to the novel genre. On the title page of the copy of *Lesley's Guardians* which she gave to her fellow

poet, Jean Ingelow, Webster wrote, 'One of my early failures'.⁴ The circumstances under which she made this statement are still unclear, but Augusta Webster must have been aware that *Lesley's Guardians* was definitely not one of her most popular works. It did not attract much attention from nineteenth-century critics: the *Spectator's* opinion is the only nineteenth-century review of the novel I have found so far. The critic describes the author of *Lesley's Guardians* an 'ingenious novelist'. He claims that it is in the working out of the effect of situation upon character that Cecil Home's special power lies. The gradual dying out of Lesley's love for Louis is described as one of the best conceived things in the book. The reviewer also admires the presentation of the relationship between Marion and Mr Maurice, and the portraits of their characters. However, he regrets that the writer who 'can paint so well the shifting relation of Marion and Mr Maurice, and the character of Mrs Hawthorne [...] should not entirely avoid the use of startling situations, and devote his powers to the delineation of ordinary life'.⁵

Florence S. Boos thinks that there are some 'unconventional touches' in *Lesley's Guardians* and that it is unfortunate that Augusta Webster never wrote another novel, for 'Webster's genuine gift for description of women's reflections and social relationships never found full expression in her essays or dramas'.⁶ Indeed, many questions concerning the Victorian woman's position, questions about marriage, women's education, women's employment, family and social relationships are presented and explored in this early work of Augusta Webster. If her first volume *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems*, published in 1860, reveals the germ of that aptitude

⁴ Quoted by Florence S. Boos in 'Augusta Webster', *Victorian Poets after 1850*, ed. by William E. Fredeman and Ira B. Nadel, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1982-), 35 (1985), pp.280-84 (p.281).

in character analysis which marks her later poetry, it is in *Lesley's Guardians* that her intense and passionate study of woman's position and destiny is first developed.

Various types of characters in this novel reappear later in her dramatic monologues, closet dramas and even the fairy-tale, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans: A Romance of History*. The interest in social matters revealed in *Lesley's Guardians* is extended in her prose volume, *A Housewife's Opinions* (1879), which consists mainly of essays originally contributed to the *Examiner*. So far from being a failure, it is at least a vigorous expression and exploration of the woman question from a writer who was deeply concerned with the lot of women throughout her life. It is perhaps precisely because of its range of concerns that *Lesley's Guardians* is an insecure novel. In trying to cover the main 'woman question' issues of the day Augusta Webster writes too diffuse a narrative. It is possible, therefore, to be impressed by its breadth but to feel that it lacks grip. But by reading this fiction in the context of the social and political issues of the period and in the light of Augusta Webster's later theorised positions in *A Housewife's Opinions* we can see how Augusta Webster worked her way through the popular forms of the time looking for modes of expression for her ideas about women in love and work.

The protagonist of *Lesley's Guardians* is a talented painter. The fictional presentation of the female artist can be seen as a reflection of the reality of the mid-19th-century. As Pamela Gerrish Nunn says in *Victorian Women Artists*, the 1860s 'seemed such a boom time for women artists'.⁷ The number of female artists was increasing throughout the century: by 1841, according to census figures, 278 women

⁵ *Spectator*, 37 (1864), pp.797-98.

⁶ Boos, p.281.

⁷ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), p.19.

in Britain were identifying themselves as artists and by 1871 this figure had risen to 1069. The art press was teeming with articles and comment on women and art, and a considerable number of female artists' names became familiar to the art loving British public in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. It is during this period that the women's art movement, as an aspect of the larger women's movement, became a central issue in British culture. Women's rights were, of course, becoming an increasingly urgent issue in Britain, France, Germany and the United States.

In 1855, the French painter, Rosa Bonheur, became an overnight sensation in London when her picture 'The Horse Fair' was exhibited by the art-dealer Ernst Gambart, and she was taken up by journalists as a model of the modern woman.⁸ In fact, her popularity became greater and more enduring in Britain than in her native France. Other French female painters to attract notice in Britain were Henriette Browne and Sophie Anderson. In 1856, a Society of Female Artists, of which Augusta Webster was probably one of the founders, was set up in London.⁹ In 1857, the feminist and painter, Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), published a booklet entitled *Women and Work*, in which she declares that 'there is no reason at all why a woman should not build a cathedral if she had the instruction and the genius'.¹⁰ In the same year, she and Bessie Parkes established a feminist newspaper, the *Englishwoman's Review*.

It is therefore in the context of considerable interest in female professionalism, and specifically the professional female artist, that Augusta Webster makes one of the themes of *Lesley's Guardians* the conflict between love

⁸ Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, p.4.

⁹ See Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: G. Bell, 1928; Virago; 1978), p.96.

and art. The theme is, of course, explored by various Victorian writers. Notably Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*,¹¹ published in 1856, is the story of a woman poet, Aurora Leigh. The centre of the story is the heroine's literary development, and her growth towards an understanding and acceptance of love, and of her struggle to reconcile the need to fulfil herself in love with the need to fulfil herself as a poet.

Aurora's first crisis comes when she is twenty years old. Her cousin, Romney, who throws himself into the task of reforming society and improving the conditions of the poor, asks her to marry him and join in his work. She narrates how on her twentieth birthday, feeling 'so young, so strong, so sure of God' (*AL*, II, 13), she imagines wearing the poet's laurel 'In sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it' (*AL*, II, 34). She recalls: 'I drew a wreath / Drenched, blinding me with dew, across my brow' (*AL*, II, 56-57). However, Romney's appearance transforms her from a woman actively crowning herself as a poet, to an art object:

I stood there fixed,
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. (*AL*, II, 60-64)

In *Lesley's Guardians*, Augusta Webster stresses the fact that Lesley's first suitor, Louis de l'Aubonne, who first sets eyes on Lesley at Lesley's old master's studio, never sees her as an artist: 'it was not as an artist that he had ever thought of her' (*LG*, II, 121). Throughout the novel, he is only attracted by her physical beauty

¹⁰ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Women and Work* (London: Bosworth and Harrison, 1857), quoted by Nunn in *Victorian Women Artists*, p.4.

¹¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), in *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (New York and London: Norton, 1996); henceforth *AL*.

and his younger brother, Paul, similarly fails to recognize her as an artist. At the beginning of the novel, when Lesley is a student-artist who labours hard to learn her art so that she may support herself, Paul says to Louis after the wedding: 'Thy beauty can sew, I suppose; she may perhaps earn your breakfasts' (*LG*, I, 48). Later, when Lesley's artistic promise has been recognized by 'one or two whose recognition is a passport to the talker's world, which give fame for the day, and thence usually to the buyers' world, which gives wealth' (*LG*, I, 262), when Lesley has been received in 'good society', largely because of her art, Paul still describes her as 'an adventuress, a young person in a humble station desirous of securing to herself by a lofty marriage a position to which only her beauty could advance her' (*LG*, II, 137). Paul's position can be explained away as antipathy deriving from social and cultural difference, but even Mr Maurice, the man Lesley eventually marries, sees her as an art object rather than an artist:

Marion was singing one evening and Lesley, lost in the sweet music, leant lightly back in her chair with her cheek resting on her pink finger-tips and her eyes looking into dreams. With the strong light glittering her hair and given back from her white dress, so trim with its dainty cerulean ribbons, on to the shadowed cheek in soft reflections, with her rare complexion and pure outlines thrown out from the rich background of crimson velvet, with the motionless drooping grace of her careless pose, she made so exquisite a picture that Maurice, a real beauty-worshipper, could not look away from her, and as he watched he was struck with the sadness deepening on the fair fresh face in its repose and began to speculate upon it till she became the poem to Marion's music and unconsciously his gaze grew so intent that Lesley was all at once aware of it and was discomposed.

(*LG*, II, 189-190)

As Dorothy Mermin suggests, 'for the Victorians: *poems* are women'.¹² In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Ladislaw tells Dorothea that she needn't write poems because she is a poem (Book I, Chapter 22).

¹² Dorothy Mermin, 'The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet', in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.198-214 (p.201).

In *Aurora Leigh*, Romney judges Aurora a woman fit only to be one of the 'doating mothers, and perfect wives, / Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints' (*AL*, II, 222-23). These, Romney imagines, qualify her as wife, as co-worker in his utopian visions of social reform for the poor. His own obsessive concern with his philanthropic schemes completely blinds him to the importance of poetry to Aurora, and his conventional views of a woman's role result in an inability to see Aurora as an individual with her own needs and desires. He believes that women are capable of personal, passionate, and selfless love, but not of universal compassion or the general understanding he believes necessary for the creation of art. Romney condescendingly dismisses Aurora's dreams of achieving artistic success and asks her to marry him and devote herself to his philanthropic schemes. Aurora recognizes that Romney's desire for her is as object of his life not subject of her own:

What you love
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
A wife to help your ends, — in her no end.
(*AL*, II, 400-403)

For Aurora, this passive role is unacceptable: she rejects his limited view of women's roles, refuses his proposal, and claims that she has her own work to do.¹³

George Eliot's verse drama, *Armstrong* (1871),¹⁴ is another story dealing with the complicated issues of a female artist. Armstrong is a young opera singer just reaching the peak of her powers. She has the voice and the sensibility of a great artist and ambition to equal her talent. As modern critics like Bonnie Lisle and

¹³ George Eliot, *Armstrong* (1871), in *The Legend of Jubal and other Poems, Old and New* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1879), pp.71-140, henceforth *Armstrong*.

¹⁴ See Bonnie J. Lisle, 'Art and Egoism in George Eliot's Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), pp.263-278; Susan Brown, 'Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women', *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), pp.89-109.

Susan Brown agree, the conflict between romantic love and art is not the only conflict in *Armgarth*.

However, her commitment to her art does create conflict when she rejects the marriage proposal of a long-time suitor, Graf Dornberg. She insists that she cannot 'divide her will' between husband and art. She fears that succumbing to Dornberg would 'divide her will' and threaten her devotion to art. She accuses him of desiring her as an appendage, a help-mate whose value would be augmented by the renunciation of her gifts:

What! leave the opera with my part ill-sung
While I was warbling in a drawing-room?
Sing in the chimney-corner to inspire
My husband reading news? Let the world hear
My music only in his morning speech
Less stammering than most honorable men's?
(Armgarth, 97)

Armgarth loves Dornberg but refuses him out of loyalty to her art, which she knows she would renounce to his 'unspoken will' if they married. But as Kathleen Blake argues, 'the poem identifies the more dangerous result of the division of art and love as the woman artist's contempt for her own sex. This becomes a species of suicidal self-hatred when she suffers the common feminine lot herself.'¹⁵ While Armgarth is prepared to sacrifice love for art, she is not ready to give herself fully to either. Ambition and desire for glory are the things that inspire Armgarth to strive for the highest achievement:

I am only glad,
Being praised for what I know is worth the praise;
Glad of the proof that I myself have part
In what I worship. *(Armgarth, 98)*

¹⁵ Kathleen Blake, 'Armgarth: George Eliot on the Woman Artist', *Victorian Poetry*, 18 (1980), pp.75-80 (p.80).

When Armgart loses the purity of her voice after a serious illness, she is literally suicidal. She assails the doctor for not allowing her 'to die a singer, lightning-struck, unmaimed' rather than live on as an ordinary woman. She articulates a radical sense of loss of identity:

Oh, I had meaning once
Like day and sweetest air. What am I now?
The millionth woman in superfluous herd.
What should I be, do, think? (*Armgart*, 113)

The heroine of *Aurora Leigh* has a deeper understanding of the role of an artist than Armgart. Aurora admits that at the age of twenty, when she imagines wearing the poet's laurel, when she rejects Romney, she is 'Woman and artist, — either incomplete' (*AL*, II, 4). Years later she understands that the loss of love and passion is the price she has paid for being an artist:

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,
On winter nights by solitary fires,
And hear the nations praising them far off,
Too far, ay, praising our quick sense of love,
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the unkissed lips
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist. (*AL*, V, 439-47)

Aurora's desire for love is always matched by an equally strong desire to fulfil herself as a poet. Her tenderness is bestowed only on those who cannot threaten her autonomy. It is therefore impossible for her to choose love at the expense of self-fulfilment: she cannot endure being objectified by Romney. Eventually Romney recognizes her role as a poet and acknowledges that her work is more important than his. Aurora is allowed to prove that only poetry can effect real social change, and Romney finally realizes that people can only be affected through their souls, and that poetry does this best. The conflict between love and work, perhaps somewhat conveniently, fades away when Aurora's work is redefined as including (rather than,

as he had originally proposed, being included by) Romney's. Aurora eventually reconciles the desires for fulfilment in both love and art.

The protagonist of *Lesley's Guardians* never really reconciles the desire for love with her desire to fulfil herself as an artist. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that she is late for work because she stays up for Louis de l'Aubonne in the evenings. Madame Baudoyer, who is still nominally her teacher, scolds her, 'how will you make an industry of your art, to live by it, if you allow yourself such idleness, careless child?' Lesley replies, 'Then I must make my pleasure of it [...], and find another occupation for my industrious hours.' Madame Baudoyer is amazed:

No pupil had ever laboured so diligently as Desirée to master the mechanical difficulties of her art, determined as she was to make it 'an industry'— none had shown so decided an intention to abide by it through success and ill success. And the girl had been so proud recently when she had begun to have her earnings by her brush, small though they necessarily were as yet, she too, like her master and her rival M. Baudoyer, as she laughingly said. And now such a surprising fickleness! Such a strange levity in one who had been accustomed to talk of her profession so seriously! (*LG*, I, 17-19)

Soon after, Madame Baudoyer and her husband are told that Lesley is leaving them: 'they knew now that she was going to-morrow with her mother to England, there to be married in three weeks' time; and, though she would return to Paris, their darling pupil was lost to them' (*LG*, I, 28-9).

Lesley does not, however, return to Paris as Louis's wife. She leaves Louis and goes back to her work with the Baudoyers. After the loss of love in the midst of her sorrow Lesley begins to feel the inspiration of her art and her life goes out into it more and more. Her art for her is a profession as well as a consecration. Lesley dedicates all her energies and desires to her art: 'She would study, she would think, she would pray, she would strive all to be greater, so she should do more greatly' (*LG*, I, 92-93).

In the later part of the nineteenth-century, it became obvious that more and more women were practising art with the intention and ambition of being professional, and that they meant their work for sale and serious attention.¹⁶ Lesley claims that she is a professional artist; she claims professional status on principle, as a statement about the substantiality and consequence which her art has for her, and which she wants others to acknowledge. At the same time, like many women artists in the nineteenth century, she also uses her art as a source of income. Economic necessity — the result of a deceased or truanting husband, continued spinsterhood, dependent parents or offspring — demanded earning activity from a middle-class woman. Helen Huntingdon in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* supports her son and herself by her landscape painting. In real life, numerous female artists earned their living by their work. For example, Harriet Ludlow Clarke was a stained glass artist and wood engraver. The *Dictionary of National Biography* says that 'having a turn for art, and wishing to earn an independent living, she adopted about 1837 the practice, unusual for a woman, of engraving on wood'.¹⁷ Fanny Corbaus was another well known artist of the mid-century whose family depended on her talents. Ellen Clayton says:

Very early in life, Fanny [Corbaus] displayed a marked love for drawing. When she was but fifteen, the childish fancy was suddenly turned into a matter of stern necessity. Her father lost a considerable competence, and became enfeebled both in body and mind. The young girl bravely faced the difficulties of an arduous profession, and set to work in right earnest.¹⁸

Margaret Gillies's situation was similar: reverses in family fortunes led to her taking up art professionally, and she specialized in portrait-painting, often miniatures.

¹⁶ Francis Palgrave, 'Women and the Fine Arts', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 12 (1865), p.119.

¹⁷ Leslie Stephen & Sidney Lee, eds, *Dictionary of National Biography*, 63 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1885-1900), 4 (1885), p.426.

¹⁸ Ellen C. Clayton, *English Female Artists*, 2 vols (London: Tinsley, 1876), vol.2, p. 68.

According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 'she determined to earn for herself an honourable livelihood, and [...] took the somewhat bold step of becoming a professional artist'.¹⁹ Again, Mary Harrison, the flower painter from Liverpool, was obliged to be a professional artist, having 'a large family of children for whom, through the invalided condition of their father, she was compelled to provide'.²⁰

Lesley keeps emphasizing that she is a 'work-woman'. She is pleased to look on herself as a real worker, as really earning her livelihood in the working-day world. She likes to feel that her art is a major duty of her life as well as its underlying interest. Love is then not the only thing Lesley lives for. It is, however, the only thing that can make her give up her profession: 'Once, for love of Louis de l'Aubonne, she had been willing to lose the completeness of her artist life, but for less than love she was not prepared to do it' (*LG*, II, 219). When the legacy is discovered, she is worried that this new inheritance will bring her into social bondage. She says to her friend Marion, 'I know it will take away my self-reliance [...], it will change my life, I shall be a drawing-room fine lady instead of a work-woman. I wanted to make my fortune, and it has come to me' (*LG*, II, 219). Her worry is not based on nothing. A woman from the middle or upper class was expected to possess or cultivate sensitivity and an interest in 'culture', but as aids to her personal charm, not as work. She need not pursue artistic matters seriously, since her survival would never depend upon it. As long as a woman's artistic interests and performance were leisurely, she could call herself a lady, and 'ladies' were required in the upper and middle classes. The visualization of the ideal relation of women to the artistic — the sensitive

¹⁹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, 7 (1886), p.1247.

²⁰ *Art Journal*, February 1876, p.47.

amateur, modest in her ambition and faithful to patriarchal tradition, can be found in Samuel Baldwin's painting 'Sketching from Nature'. It is a picture of a delicately dressed young woman, standing against the picturesque countryside, with an opened sketch book hanging carelessly on her left arm. She looks up from the sketch she is supposed to be working at, so that her face is completely revealed. Her posture indicates that she is posing rather than doing any serious work. Far from being a threat to man's monopoly of the role of 'artist', unlike the protagonist of *Lesley's Guardians*, who laughingly calls her master, Pierre Baudoyer, her 'rival', the woman in 'Sketching from Nature' is herself the work of art: what she produces will very clearly be inconsequential. The tidiness of her clothing is also telling. On Aurora's twentieth birthday Romney tells her:

'Keep to the green wreath,
Since even dreaming of the stone and bronze
Brings headaches, pretty cousin, and defiles
The clean white morning dresses.'
(*AL*, II, 93-96)

For Romney, the 'green wreath' of leaves represents an Aurora who will stay 'pretty' and 'clean' in her 'white morning dresses', and thus be a more picturesque and pleasing wife. He advises Aurora to avoid the 'headaches' and dirty dresses of real work, and to keep to the pose of creativity which shows her person off to more advantages. Images clearly defining women's relationship to art as decorative, trivial, sentimental and romantic, show that the identity of artist was not one which a female person could seriously or effectively inhabit. Whatever an artist was in the modern age, he was a man. The sculptor Harriet Hosmer, an example of the possibility of women becoming established fine artists, was accused of not being the author of her own work because it seemed to some inconceivable that a mere woman could or

should successfully practise that most monumental of arts.²¹ In society at large, of course, much effort went into assuring middle-class women of the meaninglessness of their own creative work over and above its contribution to their essential task of being a lady. The author of *The Habits of Good Society* says:

All accomplishments have the one great merit of giving a lady something to do; something to preserve her from ennui; to console her in seclusion; to arouse her in grief; to compose her to occupation in joy.²²

The only true function of the ‘accomplishment’ is to accomplish woman’s required goal of femininity. It is not to make her name, make her money or make herself heard, but to make her a lady. Rosamund in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2) is an example:

Rosamund, though she would never do anything that was disagreeable to her, was industrious; and now more than ever she was active in sketching her landscapes and market-carts and portraits of friends, in practising her music, and in being from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady. (Book I, Chapter 16)

Middle-class women were in most ways relative creatures. Their choices were largely determined by their place in the social system of mid-Victorian society. They were identified as women, and to seek an identity as an artist also was to come into conflict with that fundamental, socially imposed identity. Furthermore, the assumption that a middle-class woman need not earn her living seemed to doom her to eternal amateurism.

However, Marion does not think that the discovery of the legacy need put an end to Lesley’s career. She tells Lesley, ‘if you don’t work for the dear necessity of living now, you, discontented child, work because, God having given you a gift, it is your duty to use it’ (*LG*, II, 219-10). And soon after that we are told that Lesley becomes more absorbed than ever in her artist-life. Later, when it has been decided that in order

²¹ See Cornelia Crow Carr, *Harriet Hosmer* (New York: Moffat, 1912).

to be safe from Louis de l'Aubonne and the malicious rumours against her, she ought to leave Paris, the place where her career as an artist lies and go to England with her mother and Marion, Lesley looks forward to 'the fine old house and broad park and the woods and the wide meadow-slopes of Ormeboys' and the new lessons she is to learn there from 'the artist's mother-teacher, Nature' (*LG*, III, 6). Yet she does not intend to stay in England for long. She has a greater plan for her career:

And at the far end of the pleasant vista there began to rise a shadow of the artist's capital, of a journeying thither no longer too impossible even for hope — for she was not poor now. She had not thought of it when that legacy was first discovered, although it had been her one wish before she saw Louis de l'Aubonne. [...] And why should not she and her mother find a nest in Rome and be there together in quiet happiness while she studied, as she would study, as hard as if her livelihood depended on it, as she still almost wished it did? 'Ormeboys first, and to know my new relations, and then Rome!' (*LG*, III, 6-7)

Lesley's mother's background is also indicative. She is disowned by her family because she marries Lesley's father, a poor foreigner, who dies while Lesley is still very young. When her mother is alive, she is removed and isolated from her snobbish, class-conscious relatives in England, and her mother is supportive of Lesley's work. Mrs Hawthorn is not a forceful woman but her 'helpless guardianship' of her daughter nevertheless gives Lesley some sort of independence and freedom. We are told that from her childhood Lesley 'had been accustomed to assist her mother, or rather to act for her, in all emergencies calling for decision' (*LG*, I, 101).

Lesley loses her mother in the later part of the novel and becomes parentless. Orphanhood is widely used in Victorian fiction, especially by women writers. All three of Charlotte Brontë's major heroines — Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe and Shirley Keeldar are orphans. Fictional orphans could be shown making decisions, negotiating the world, and exploring paths traditionally barred to middle-class girls. In the hands

of writers such as the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, the orphan became a figure fraught with radical implications. The first of these is centred on the orphan-heroine's freedom to act and to work. The orphan, who lacked financial independence, was less likely to meet resistance or hostility, if she proposed to be trained to earn her own living. Jane Eyre is sent to Lowood to prepare her to earn her own bread. Even the orphan who has been used to living relationally often has to learn to make her own way, as Lucy Snowe discovers in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853):

Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence upon others; to myself alone could I look. I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances. [...] It seemed I must be stimulated into action, I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy. (Chapter 4)

However, Lesley's situation is very different from that of the orphans mentioned above. By the time her mother dies, she is an heiress, therefore financially secure and not alone. When her natural guardian is taken away from her, her upper-class bosom friend, Marion Raymond is eager to take Lesley under her protection. Maurice, the wealthy land-owner, considers himself Lesley's guardian because of his connection to Lesley's inheritance. Mrs Hawthorne says to Lesley on her death-bed: 'I am not frightened about death now, dear, and I should not leave you without protection. I can trust Marion and Mr Maurice better than any I could have chosen' (*LG*, III, 27). Even Lesley's uncle, who disowns her mother, is keen to renew the family relationship. Instead of allowing Lesley to obtain freedom, her mother's death is almost the starting point of her being pressed into conformity with the expectations and conventions of the class she belongs to. First of all, it is considered that Lesley should not live alone with her maid:

But after a few days Marion became urgent that her friend should come under the protection of her roof; 'You can not stay here alone with Justine,' she argued, 'you are both too young.'
'Why can I not?' said Lesley quietly.
'It is better not, for appearance sake.'

'I am not important enough to have to think of that,' returned Lesley, with the old impracticability; 'and I am alone in the world now,' she added sadly; 'what does it matter to any one what I do?'

'You are not going to be alone, Lesley. And if you were, you must all the more be a little careful of custom. You really are too young to have no one with you but your maid — people will talk; they are always ready enough.' (*LG*, III, 29)

Maurice's opinion is equally decided: he believes that Lesley must not remain in Paris under existing circumstances, and having no suitable protection, she cannot possibly be allowed to go on living alone. Both Marion and Maurice think that Lesley ought to go to England with Marion immediately. However, Lesley is reluctant to adhere to the plan for her departure approved before her mother's death:

She would do anything else to conform to the wishes of Mr Maurice and Marion, for her mother's trust in them, but they must not insist on this. If they would not have her live alone (though she could not see what that mattered) she would ask the Baudoyers to receive her; there were two vacant rooms belonging to their corridor which she could take. [...] She would leave Paris too if they liked, but would they send her to Rome then — not to England now. (*LG*, III, 33-34)

Her plan is not approved and she is told she is to hold a higher social position than the Baudoyers can share. Lesley says tearfully, 'But the dear old Baudoyers were good enough for me once. [...] Ah! it is coming to what I feared; I am ceasing to be an artist, I am to be a drawing-room fine lady.' Yet Marion replies, 'Not a bit of it, Lesley [...], you could not help being yourself in all simplicity if we made an empress of you, and you would still be an artist if we forced you to be an idle one' (*LG*, III, 34).

When Lesley eventually goes to Ormeboys with Marion, in order to avoid Louis's insane pursuit, her artistic activities do not actually cease, though obviously the seriousness of her art has been very much undermined. She goes on sketching, rambles into the woods, where she spends 'hours making sylvan studies or dreaming pictures and girlish romances alternately', and works hard in 'her own pleasant studio in the north turret' (*LG*, III, 93). Lesley's freedom and her artistic activity is much more seriously restricted during her stay at her uncle's house in London:

She had almost to give up her own art: there was neither time nor quietness for her. At first there had been no place found where she could set up her easel. There were not many rooms in the house. [...] Mrs Lesley made the dining-room her morning bureau, [...] she consigned the girls to the drawing-room [...] there to prosecute their music and drawing regularly every morning, and she afforded her niece the same privilege, only suggesting that watercolour was more feminine than oil and less likely to spoil the carpets. However, finding Lesley disinclined to change her style of art, she afterwards allowed her to have her easel in the back drawing-room in the morning. (*LG*, III, 203-204)

Mrs Lesley's preference for watercolour is representative. Oil painting was often said to be too smelly and dirty for women to practise, while watercolour painting became recognized as one of women's 'especial occupation', which they could do in leisure time, 'before marriage and between confinements'.²³ Lesley's uncle's family's attitude towards her art reflects the typical conventional opinion of their class. They think it too terrible that a young lady of their blood should ever have been looked on as 'a professional person,' and choose to 'regard her as an amateur, like any other accomplished young lady' (*LG*, III, 194). Lesley's crippled cousin Frederick, an outcast in the family, is the only one of the family who does not systematically ignore what Lesley still calls her profession. Augusta Webster typically uses the outsider as clear-sighted social commentator. Furthermore, though Lesley pays for lodging with her uncle, she is still there as Mr Lesley's niece and does not have the rights and the independence a stranger's house might have offered: 'There were the French readings and the walks and the drives and the shoppings and the calls to make and the calls to receive, none of which she could be excused' (*LG*, III, 205). Under these circumstances, we are told that 'Lesley did make a daily effort to settle to her work. But it was only that she might feel that she was not turning entirely out of her chosen path' (*LG*, III, 204).

²³ Martin Hardie, *The Victorian Period*, in Joyce Whalley's *Bibliography of Water-colour Painting and Painters in Britain*, III (London: Batsford, 1968), p.245.

It is marriage that finally puts an end to Lesley's artist life. After Lesley promises to marry Mr Maurice, Marion says to her:

'And what becomes of Lesley Hawthorn, the artist? [...] With all this love-making you have forgotten that that dream goes by.'
 'Oh, no,' said Lesley; 'indeed it does not; Maurice does not say so. He is even going to build me a studio.'
 'I know. But it must be the drawing-room dilettante instead of the workwoman, as you used to say, Lesley. I don't suppose Mrs Maurice of Thorncroft will be allowed to enter the lists among the workers.'
 'Ah! no. I know that and am sorry. But art is not only a means of making room for oneself in the world's crowd, Marion; it is its own life, and I shall still have part of mine in it.' (*LG*, III, 278)

We can see that at this stage, Lesley has already prepared to give up the completeness of her life as an artist and assume her conventional role. Marion comes to the conclusion that art will have no real part in Lesley's fulfilment:

You will be too happy, too much engrossed with your husband's undertakings, to have all your mind bent to it as it has been — and who knows better than you that it takes the whole of a person to make a practical artist? No, Lesley, I daresay you'll paint a pretty little picture now and then — your husband's portrait to begin with — but you won't fulfil the promise of Rizpah or Iseult: you won't even equal them. (*LG*, III, 279)

Marion is proved right: years after Lesley 'had the delight of watching the development of talent like hers, and more, in her second boy, and anticipating with something like certainty the accomplishment of her once promised career in him' (*LG*, III, 279). It seems that fulfilment in art has fallen back to the patriarchal convention.

In real life Anna Mary Howitt gave up exhibiting her paintings on her marriage to Alaric Watts in 1859, after very successful public shows in the 1850s. Mary Severn gave up painting on her marriage to Charles Newton in 1861 to copy his archaeological discoveries; Florence Claxton stopped exhibiting at the academy when in 1868 she became Mrs Farrington, continuing her work only in less noticeable areas like the Society of Female Artists. Marriage was always expected to put an end to any

activity which took a woman beyond the domestic sphere. Sculptor Harriet Hosmer declared:

An artist has no business to marry. For a man, it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong, I think, for she must either neglect her profession or her family, becoming neither a good wife nor a good artist. My ambition is to become the latter, so I wage eternal feud with the consolidating knot.²⁴

In Pamela Gerrish Nunn's opinion, Hosmer's choice of single status can be supposed to be the choice of other women who enjoyed long, successful careers as painters:

Emily Mary Osborn, who was artistically active for over 50 years, remained unmarried. The sisters Martha and Annie Mutrie, who could claim twenty-five and thirty exhibiting years respectively, never married. Women artists of the period who did marry and became mothers have expressed their realization of the debilitating effect which the circumstances had on their careers. Henrietta Ward reflected on her early works:

So far, as may be seen, I had not specialized — at least not to any great extent — in historical painting, confining myself instead to domestic subjects, which was surely natural, as all my leisure moments were of necessity spent in looking after my children.²⁵

It is difficult to reconcile the female artist with qualities of a traditional domestic angel. Yet besides literary work, painting was another artistic activity for women acceptable to Dickens. Dickens was keen to help secure proper training for aspiring female artists. He writes to W. H. Wills from Gad's Hill in April 1859:

Hullah's daughter (an artist, who is here), tells me that certain female students have addressed the Royal Academy, entreating them to find a place for their education. I think it a capital move, for which I can do something popular and telling, in the Register. Adelaide Procter is active in the business, and has a copy of their letter. Will you write to her for that, and anything else she may have about it: telling her that I strongly approve, and want to help them myself.²⁶

24 Letter of 1854, quoted in Carr, *Harriet Hosmer*, p.35.

25 Henrietta Ward, *Reminiscences* (London: Pitman, 1911), p.88.

26 Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Walter Dexter, 3 vols (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), vol.3, p.101.

Dickens's daughter Katey actually became serious about her art, though she did not begin to achieve recognition and success as an artist until after her father's death. When one of her paintings was accepted by the Royal Academy in 1877 and sold on the very first day it was exhibited, Georgina Hogarth wrote to Annie Fields: 'Ah! how pleased and proud her dear Father would have been! I don't know anything that could ever have pleased him more!'²⁷

Dickens sat for at least one professional female portrait-painter, Miss Margaret Gillies, in 1843, and no doubt respected her as an independent working woman. However, he had scant sympathy for women painters who gave the pursuit of art precedence over their domestic concerns. Christina Thompson, née Weller, was a woman he had once been strongly stirred by. After he first met her in 1844, he wrote to his friend T. J. Thompson, who became her husband later:

I cannot joke about Miss Wellers; she is too good; and interest in her (spiritual young creature that she is, and destined to an early death, I fear) has become a sentiment with me. Good God what a madman I should seem, if the incredible feeling I have conceived for that girl could be made plain to anyone!²⁸

But when he visited the Thompsons in Italy, he wrote to Georgina Hogarth on 28 Oct 1853, 'We had disturbed her at her painting in Oils; and I rather received an impression that what with that, and what with music, the household affairs went a little to the wall',²⁹

Madame Baudoyer in *Lesley's Guardians* is certainly not an ideal housewife. At the beginning of the novel, Lesley is helping the Baudoyers to prepare the dinner table. Mme Baudoyer's chaotic housekeeping is described in detail:

²⁷ Georgina Hogarth quoted by Arthur A. Adrain in *Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.189.

²⁸ *The Dickensian*, 17 (1921), p.152.

²⁹ Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol.2, p.504.

And to and fro she went, arranging the room so as to allow some possibility of a table being spread for the dinner expected from the restaurant in the next street. For Jean the concierge, and his wife, who for a small stipend so far waited on the painter's housekeeping necessities as to clean the rooms (when they were allowed to do so) and lay out the breakfast, did not consider the care of the dinner table among the duties they had undertaken. 'Every one dines at a restaurant in these circumstances,' they considered.

[...]

'How hard your room is to make neat,' continued Lesley, flitting about her task. 'see, how can you sit with this case right at your elbow as you dine? You would certainly knock it down, picture and all — and look, this pallet all over paint on the table where the dessert should be put till we want it.'

In contrast with Mme Baudoyer, Lesley demonstrates the characteristics of a domestic angel:

Lesley understood all about it, and by the time the little basins of soup were sent from the restaurateur's with the 'portions' of meat, vegetable or pastry, which she, determined to do all herself, arranged on the small portable cooking stove to keep warm, her table was set out and looking as nearly comfortable as circumstances and the un-Frenchness of the word would admit. (*LG*, I, 22-26)

This passage shows that Lesley is capable of assuming the traditional domestic role of a Victorian English woman and suggests that the role is a valuable one.

Lesley's desire for fulfilment in art, and her reluctance in conforming to the convention of her class is evident. After her mother's death, she insists on living alone in Paris, in order to secure her freedom and independence. When Marion urges Lesley to go to England with her, Lesley is altogether recalcitrant. She cannot give an immediate reason for that. She asks Marion: 'And will you not trust me so far as to believe that I have a right motive, Marion? I cannot speak of a reason, for I hardly have one. But, indeed, I know I am deciding rightly' (*LG*, III, 31).

Violet, Marion's sister-in-law, is the first person to indicate what consequence Lesley's going to Ormeboys might have. Maurice is Marion's nearest neighbour in Ormeboys. Violet is sure of Maurice's attachment to Marion. However, she believes Lesley might become a threat if she and Maurice are 'thrown together' too much (*LG*, III, 40-41).

Violet is proved to be right. Later in the novel, persuading Lesley to accept Maurice's love, Marion says, 'Lesley, I think I know now why you wanted to stay by yourself at Paris, and why you hurried away from Ormeboys' (*LG*, III, 239). The unspoken reason is that Lesley tries to avoid Maurice. Apparently, Lesley refuses Maurice because she believes that Marion is in love with him. But perhaps subconsciously, Lesley knows that more than anything else, love and marriage are the things which can make her give up her career as an artist. Lesley has demonstrated assertiveness in resistance to Louis's second pursuit. However, her resistance to Maurice is comparatively irresolute and powerless. She appears to be passive in the face of Maurice. She never speaks out boldly, as Aurora Leigh and Armgart do. Maurice's power over Lesley is evident. After Mrs Hawthorn's death, Maurice writes Lesley 'a kind but peremptory letter', urging her to leave Paris and go to England with Marion. Lesley, 'receiving it from Mrs Raymond, read it nervously, and seemed on the moment inclined to be obedient, but in a few hours was even rather more opposed to quitting Paris with Marion than she had been before its arrival' (*LG*, III, 33). In Ormeboys, when Maurice first declares his affection towards Lesley, Lesley bursts into tears, crying, 'Oh, this is so wrong! Oh, my dear Marion' and tears herself away from him (*LG*, III, 174). Later, when Maurice sees Lesley at her uncle's house, Lesley 'trembled and began to wonder if she should be able to hold her ground against this masterful man'. When she is face to face with Maurice, she is 'scarcely mistress of herself, feeling something between alarm and happiness because she could not resist him' (*LG*, III, 227-28).

Lesley's conformity to the expectation of her class parallels the development of her relationship with Maurice. At the beginning of the novel, Lesley is a student-artist who struggles to earn a living with her art. She walks to work along the 'dingy

streets' of Paris alone. When some 'blouse-clad workman' or 'slouching soldier' exclaim, 'Oh la belle Anglaise! comme ça est jolie!', she 'moved onwards blithely and fearlessly, in her simple print morning dress, with her little sheaf of brushes in her hand as a kind of proof that she was out on business' (*LG*, I, 14-15). Later in the novel, when she meets Maurice in Alderbridge Avenue, where Maurice declares his love for her, she is coming back from a visit to old women in the neighbouring cottages and she wears a thick veil:³⁰ 'Lesley, coming softly along the white road, with her little basket, empty of its good things now, swung carelessly on her arm and her long burnous sweeping the rime from the great boles on one side as she passed' (*LG*, III, 173). That is quite an image of traditional Victorian womanhood. It was taken for granted that woman's primary interest should be in marriage and a family. If she is drawn to some additional complementary activity, it would be for altruistic purposes: doing good for others, showing womanly compassion and charity for those less fortunate than herself.

At the opening of the novel, we are told that Lesley is fond of 'mother' that 'sweet homely title', not knowing it was a vulgar one, she chiefly uses it when 'more fashionable daughters would have said mama' (*LG*, I, 2). However, towards the end of the novel, during her stay at her uncle's just shortly before her marriage, she seems to have been transformed into quite a fashionable Victorian young lady, at least in appearance. Her aunt, a social snob, describes her as 'one of the nicest and most lady-

30 According to C. W. Cunningham, in the 1860s a correspondent of a woman's magazine who complained that 'gentlemen will stare at her so', was advised that as there was no law to prevent it, 'it is better for pretty women to wear thick veils when walking unattended'. See C. W. Cunningham, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Toronto: William Heinemann, 1935), pp.188-89.

like girls she knows' and is 'such a nice companion' for her daughters. She claims that they all have 'just the same refined tastes' (*LG*, III, 288).

When Lesley goes to see the Baudoyers after her marriage, she has turned into a grand English lady, who is:

kind and winning and full of grateful memories, but not the girl they had petted and scolded, not their Desirée; they called her Madame, and were only half at ease with her. [...] It was always as if she were another person from this dear beautiful Mrs Maurice. There had been one of those great breaks that cannot be bridged over. The pupil was Desirée, but there was no Desirée now, she was gone into the shadowy past. (*LG*, III, 289)

When Lesley marries for love, she abandons her ambition of fulfilment in art, surrenders all obvious signs of independence and assumes her conventional role. Victorian novels almost always end with the marriage of the heroine. Seemingly, *Lesley's Guardians* falls into this convention. And it coincides with some other Victorian love plots.

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) is another example of such a collapse. The shrewd and intelligent heroine Shirley Keeldar transacts business, goes over her accounts and prides herself on her manly qualities: 'I read the leading articles, and the foreign intelligence, and I look over the market prices; in short, I read just what gentlemen read' (Chapter 18). Charlotte Brontë presents a vivid picture of Shirley's ability to act on her own, making her own decisions and scorning a conventional subservience. But once Shirley has met her match she is willing to resign from her rank of 'Captain Keeldar', master of her own fate, and to assume a subaltern role. Louis Moore is her master in the sense that he has been her tutor and knows more than she does, but his own attitude to his position as tutor and lover is sententious and self-important:

I wish I could find such a one: pretty enough for me to love, with something of the mind and heart suited to my taste; not uneducated — honest and modest. I care nothing for attainment; but I would fain have the germ of those sweet natural powers which nothing

can rival: any temper Fate wills — I can manage the hottest. To such a creature as this, I should like to be first tutor and then husband. I would teach her my language, my habits, and my principles, and then I would reward her with my love. (Chapter 18)

Shirley reacts to this with scorn, yet in the course of this encounter between them Louis wears Shirley down to the point where she exhibits her powerlessness and acknowledges his superiority. Like Lesley, Shirley is not permitted a plot in which she fully develops her potential. They are both nipped in the bud by marriage.

The ending of *Lesley's Guardians* is not, however, a perfectly happy ending: the gap between Lesley and her old friends, the Baudoyers, can never be bridged; the happiness of Maurice and Lesley is in some sense at the expense of Marion, who is destined for a life of loneliness and discontent. It is not an ideal marriage that Augusta Webster presents here. Lesley's marriage to Maurice rather reflects than affirms social convention. Lesley's giving up her art and her independence for love does not really reflect Augusta Webster's personal preference. It rather presents the social assumption that marriage is the only desirable goal for a woman.

Thirty-five years later in 1899, the *Lady's Realm* tackled the subject, 'Does Marriage Hinder a Woman's Development?' It was felt in general that marriage was necessary for a woman's fulfilment, but that it should be to someone of understanding and sympathy, willing to encourage the interests and talents of his wife. One contributor, however, stated that a woman who wanted a career 'should make up her mind to stand alone. [...] Matrimony is in itself a career, and if the man happens to be interesting the woman is almost sure to give him her best, and put what is left into any work she attempts.'³¹

³¹ *Lady's Realm*, March 1899, quoted by Jenni Calder in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p.168.

Later in the 1870s Augusta Webster expressed her objection to the idea of calling matrimony a profession. In an essay for the *London Examiner* titled 'Matrimony as a Means of Livelihood' she indicates:

By giving the name of 'profession' to the lot and duties of a matron it was supposed by many that they epigrammatically conveyed a rebuke to such women as permitted themselves to desire the mental training and the remunerative careers apportioned to men. (*AHO*, 229)

She asserts that marriage should not be the only goal for a woman and women should not marry for marriage's sake. The position that she takes here polemically was not, however, unproblematically reached, as her novel shows.

Lesley is half-French and is brought up in France, but Lesley herself keeps emphasizing that she is an English girl. On the other hand, the narrative voice keeps stressing her French elements. French is Lesley's first language and she speaks English with a French accent. At the beginning of the novel, when Lesley says 'I love him, mama', the third person narration comments, 'Lesley was half French, after all. English girls do not say "I love him" even to the kindest mothers. *Like, care for*, do duty for the word that, like some term of religion too sacred for common talk and made ridiculous by contrast if used except in prayer, is almost impossible upon their lips' (*LG*, I, 5). During her childhood and youth she is removed from England, as well as the class she belongs to, and as a result is free from the habitual restrictions on Victorian upper-middle-class girls. Furthermore, as the only child of her parents, she has no brother to wait on. After the death of her mother she enters her uncle's family and Victorian upper-middle-class society in general as an outsider. It is rather through her minor female characters like Lesley's best friend, Marion Raymond, Marion's sister-in-law, Violet Raymond, and Lesley's English cousins, Octavia and Eloisa, that Augusta Webster most fully presents and explores the situation of Victorian women.

The presentation of Lesley's cousins discloses the emptiness of upper-middle-class girls' lives. Octavia and Eloisa are described as 'two well-looking uninteresting young women, with brown eyes smooth dark hair, well trained and of decidedly good address'. They are more or less undistinguishable except that Octavia is 'a little better looking, a little more accomplished, a little more talkative, and in most things a little cleverer than Eloisa' (*LG*, III, 182). They employ their time with music, watercolours, dainty embroideries and bead-work. They play the piano, but not too well: 'Octavia played correctly and with precision, without rhythm or expression; Eloisa played incorrectly, without precision, rhythm or expression: much the same might be said for their singing, excepting that Eloisa had a sweeter voice than her sister's, in spite of its being oftener out of tune' (*LG*, III, 202). They do not really care about the foreign languages they are taught, and they don't show much interest in books: their mother has a horror of their 'being blue'. Lesley is brought up in France and has escaped the English young lady's education. Her superiority over Octavia and Eloisa is obvious. After Lesley marries Maurice and leaves her uncle's house, her uncle 'noticed as a loss the absence of a bright beautiful face and a pleasant voice, and thought the talk round his dinner-table more common-place and uninteresting than it had been in the last few months' (*LG*, III, 286-87). Augusta Webster, of course, loads the dice against Octavia and Eloisa by making them less physically attractive than their cousin, although they actually share her physical qualities. Lesley has lots of admirers and in the end, marries well in a conventional way. But there is no sign of marriage for Octavia and Eloisa. If their education is to serve them in society and to prepare them for husband hunting, it is insufficient. Later in the article titled 'Pianist and Martyr' Webster mockingly indicates that girls might as well be taught to flirt as play the piano:

The taunt sometimes levelled at them that they seek and value musical acquirements as a means of winning a husband, is one which, in nineteen cases out of twenty at the least, is undeserved. Girls who consciously go to work to get married know very well that a well-placed sigh is worth fifty sonatas and that no amount of major prestidigitation can win a triumph over the rival who, though a dunce at the music-book is an expert in smiles and dropped eye-lids. (*AHO*, 21-23)

Therefore if the Victorian English girl was brought up just for marriage, the conventional education she received did not even make her competitive in the marriage market. Between them the girls share the vices of extreme conventionality and fashionable laziness. Octavia does everything correctly: she is always employed and always satisfied with her employment; Eloisa is discontented and indolent. Lesley finds, however, that she can make more of Eloisa, who does all that her sister does well incorrectly and with dislike. She 'wished she might have learned Latin and Mathematics like a boy instead of having the heart worn out of her with music and drawing that she never could and never should do decently'. And towards the end of the novel she cries out, 'I wish I'd had no education — I wish I'd been myself, if I had turned out as uncouth as a schoolboy, rather than the kind of young lady I am' (*LG*, III, 286). Lesley cannot talk in anything but commonplaces to the practical Octavia, while with Eloisa she is unconsciously more ready to utter her thoughts. She believes that if there 'had been a beginning as well as a finishing in Eloisa Lesley's education', or if 'she had had energy enough to supply the deficiency she felt in her mental diet' (*LG*, III, 189) she would have been a thoughtful cleverish woman with a character of her own, instead of being an indifferent copy of her sister. By presenting this pair of sisters, Augusta Webster attacks the traditional education of middle-class girls and the conventional role of the Victorian woman. The better a girl plays this role, the less potential she possesses for either intellectual or spiritual development.

Besides female education, middle-class marriage is another issue central to Lesley's *Guardians*. By the time *Lesley's Guardians* was published, celibacy, like

almost every other matter affecting women, had been to some extent given public attention.

Caroline Helstone in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, facing the prospect of spinsterhood, devotes much serious thought to the subject of the rights of the single woman. She is made the mouthpiece of many really advanced opinions:

Where is my place in the world? [...] Ah! I see that is the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve; other people solve it for them by saying, 'Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted'. [...] But I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise; they call them devoted and virtuous. Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it. [...] I believe single women should have more to do — better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now. (Chapter 10)

However, honourable spinsterhood was still a feminist dream. The situation of the spinster was certainly not seen as an enviable one. And as Patricia Thomson says:

The novelist was obviously not yet disposed to take the 'unmarried woman' as seriously as she took herself. Despite its grand prospects, celibacy was still far from rivaling marriage as a career for an enterprising young woman — and even the most advanced and emancipated writers stopped short of a perennial spinster ideal of womanhood. [...] And although the novelist's ideal heroine had been played upon by so many external influences of late that they were often unsure just what she was really like, of one thing they were still certain: her ultimate fate must be marriage.³²

Despite her concerns with women's rights, as well as the opinions she puts forth in her prose work, honourable spinsterhood is not to be found in her novel. Violet Raymond, the unmarried upper-class woman in *Lesley's Guardians*, falls into the category of comic spinsters. She is the comic butt of her social circle. Marion, her sister-in-law complains to Lesley about her excessive consciousness of rank:

'It is the most extraordinary thing, [...] Miss Raymond is a lady by birth, though no one would think it to hear her so constantly telling those detestable anecdotes, where the whole point is that the person who did or said whatever inanity it was had a title — and

³² Patricia Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p.119.

she has in most other respects lady-like feelings too, but she tries other people's terribly [...] we can't both live in one world if she won't give up her "Anecdotes of people who had friends in the red book." (LG, II, 48)

Even her name is a joke and its inappropriateness is expressed in a manner that would be called misogynist in a male writer:

Violet, May, Lily, Daisy — and May is a wrinkled spinster long since out of bloom, and Lily wears a false front and combs it low to hide the crow's feet, and Daisy is a gaunt masculine woman with hard features and a gruff old voice, and Violet is round and flabby and creased like our Violet Raymond! (LG, II, 39-41)

Eventually, marriage is the solution to Violet's problem. She chooses to marry Simon Gueret, a well off widower from a social scale lower than hers. She is contented and happy. The narrative voice comments,

Well it does not seem such a bad arrangement after all. I do not know why, because a lady from no choice of her own has remained single a good many years, she may not, fortune favouring her in a tardy hour, retrieve herself from the odium of that epithet of 'old maid', which is found so intolerable by many respectable females; and if a gentleman of appropriate seniority, having had the hap to lose his first wife, resolves within himself that she would be neither a reluctant nor an unsuitable successor and that it would be greatly to his comfort that there should be such successor, why should Mr All-the-World and his wife shake with rude guffaws and keep their wit alive for a week on such small aliment as the prosaic nuptials afford? (LG, II, 309-310)

The concessions made here remain, however, rather patronising. Whatever her opinions about respectable spinsterhood Augusta Webster did not think that the novel easily accommodated such women. The conventions operating against the single life contained the notion that women must be desperate for men and marriage, and so the unmarried and the late married remained potentially comic.

Like many other Victorian novels, *Lesley's Guardians* is concerned with domestic relationships above all others. Throughout Augusta Webster's literary life, marriage and family were the institutions which most directly engaged her imagination. Just before Victoria came to the throne, a year before Augusta Webster was born, Bulwer-Lytton wrote in *England and the English* (1836):

A notorious characteristic of English society is the universal marketing of our unmarried women; — a marketing peculiar to ourselves in Europe, and only rivalled by the slave merchants of the East. We are a matchmaking nation. [...] We boast that in our country,

young people not being affianced to each other by their parents, there are more marriages in which the heart is engaged than there are abroad. Very possibly; but, in good society, the heart is remarkably prudent, and seldom falls violently in love without a sufficient settlement: where the heart is, there will the treasure be also? Our young men possessing rather passion than sentiment from those liaisons, which are the substitute of love: they may say with Quin to the fair glovemaker, 'Madam, I never make love, I always buy it ready-made.'³³

Bulwer-Lytton adds to this a condemnation of the female side of the contract. 'The ambition of women absorbed in these petty intrigues, and debased to this paltry level, possesses but little sympathy with the great object of a masculine and noble intellect. They have, in general, a frigid conception of public virtue: they affect not to understand politics, and measure a man's genius by his success in getting on.'³⁴

Bulwer Lytton's remarks are indicative of the confines of the lives of upper- and middle-class women, which are described in many Victorian novels. Sixty years later Marie Corelli is still complaining about the marketing of women in the discussion 'The Modern Marriage Market' which she initiated and which went on for several months in the *Lady's Realm*. Her own piece was a passionate attack on the fact that, as she puts it, 'In England, women — those of the upper classes at any rate — are not to-day married, but bought for a price'.³⁵

In the Victorian novel it is virtually impossible to get away from the concept of marriage as a financial transaction. The idea of money is there even when the cash is absent. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), there is Lady Crawley: 'Her heart was dead long before her body. She had sold it to become Sir Pitt Crawley's wife. Mothers and daughters are making the same bargain every day in *Vanity Fair*' (Chapter 16). In Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848), when Edith rejects Carker she expands on the

33 Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1836), p.57.

34 Bulwer-Lytton, p.58.

35 *Lady's Realm*, April 1897, quoted by Calder in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, p.167.

subject of her marriage — ‘I suffered myself to be sold, as infamously as any woman with a halter round her neck is sold in any market-place’ (Chapter 54).

In *Lesley's Guardians*, Augusta Webster gives a typical example of such a bargain. At the age of seventeen Marion Annesley is sold to Mr Raymond, who is over twice her age, so that her mother can give the entire family fortune to Marion's half brother, the unworthy Ralph Annesley:

Yes, indisputably, she married for money. [...] Miss Annesley was indignant. ‘Mama! Would you have sold yourself?’
 ‘No, indeed; nor will I have you do anything so wrong;’ sinful was the word on the tip of the mother's tongue, but she changed it; it was a little too strong, for perhaps in her deepest heart she was not convinced by her own arguments. (*LG*, I, 175-82)

In general Mrs Annesley is satisfied with Marion's marriage. She thinks she has provided well for her daughter's fortunes and has given her a wise and kind husband. Marion is not allowed to mourn for her lost lover, Maurice. Mrs Annesley fully believes that her own design is better for her daughter's happiness. So dying in Marion's arms she says: ‘God bless you, my child, you thought you were making a sacrifice and you left me able to do my duty to my husband's son’ (*LG*, I, 182). But Marion never quite forgives herself. She thinks that her marrying for money is a sin, despite its self-sacrificial element. Years later when she meets Maurice again she says, ‘it was very wrong, but I didn't understand it so then’ (*LG*, II, 84). And later she tells Lesley:

‘That wanting to be a providence leads us wrong sometimes, Lesley — I tried it once — not by honest work though, as you did; but by a — well, a *sin*, I think, I am still expecting my punishment for it — but I don't think any lower temptation could have brought me to it. [...] But no woman is overcome finally by that deception without fault, great fault. (*LG*, II, 220-21)

Like Thackeray and Dickens, Augusta Webster attacks snobbery and the commercial marriage, and it was an attack that became commonplace in Victorian fiction. Although money was so crucial in marriage few Victorian writers would have defended it as the proper basis of a marriage. What Victorian fiction so often offered

as a alternative to cash was romantic love, with all its associations of passion, sacrifice and self-denial. Augusta Webster attacks the commercial marriage not by presenting a sentimental, or morally self conscious, or deliberately humble alternative, but like Thackeray, by showing how these basic assumptions about the union of man and wife actually work.

In theory, Victorian sensibility did not approve of mercenary marriages. But it is hard to reconcile this with the strong belief in duty, both of children to parents and of parents to children, and practical common sense. To the most unambitious middle-class girl marriage meant 'setting up an establishment', and without money that was not possible. Even for well provided girls whose livelihood is not a problem, marriage often means 'a place in the world'. In *Lesley's Guardians* Augusta Webster describes the heiress Stephanie's feelings towards marriage:

Of course it was desirable to be married, she should have a place in the world and amusements and interests, instead of being nobody and living for nothing as it was with her now; and it would be nice to have the spending of fabulous wealth, and to wear diamonds and to go to Paris and be seen at the tuilleries. (*LG*, I, 205-206)

Motives other than money, property and the acceptance of convention are barely relevant. Marriage is a part of one's progress in the world, and the idea of marriage permeates the thinking of young women and young men long before any particular choice is considered. Love, even sexual attraction, had little to do with marriage. Young women were told that they would 'grow to love' their husbands after marriage, and conventions of courtship were such that there was very little opportunity to know one's future spouse well before marriage. The marriage arranged for Louis de l'Aubonne and Marie Stephanie de la Chatellerie falls into this category. Their god-father, M. de Fourrière, who arranges the marriage says to Stephanie's mother, 'That grave little Stephanie suits me; she is very good and gentle and I love the child; I must do something for her, but I cannot divide my estate, and I have

promised it to the other (Louis). I shall marry her to him, does that suit you?’ Stephanie herself is the heiress to her own family estate. The readers are told that ‘few could venture to estimate the fortune that those two neighbour estates would represent when they were joined’ (*LG*, I, 205). Before their god-father’s death they have no choice but to obey. Louis tries to rebel and elopes with Lesley, then finds himself powerless. When he is settled with the idea of marrying Stephanie, he worries that Stephanie might be married to him against her will, his mother says, ‘It will not be against her will, Louis; she is dutiful and she is modest and amiable, she will love him who is chosen for her husband and not any before’ (*LG*, I, 219). Louis and Stephanie are not allowed to be together on their own before their formal engagement takes place and love before engagement is not expected. When Stephanie cries, ‘Oh, mama, can there be love enough between him and me for marriage? — his heart full of that other person, and mine —’, her mother Madame de la Chatellerie reproaches her, ‘What were you about to say? Just Heaven! You allowed no immodest fancies of ill-taught young girls to enter your head? You have not allowed yourself to think too much of some person not proposed to you by your parents?’ (*LG*, I, 243)

At the beginning of the novel the otherwise sympathetic Madame Baudoyer claims she does not approve of love matches:

‘Young people follow their foolish fancies in them instead of trusting to the experience of their friends whose age and discretion fits them to choose for them, and what can be expected from it? [...] And how could a young girl who respected herself think of loving a man before he was presented to her as her future husband? And of course she would feel it her duty to love him when that had happened, and he would be quite safe then since her family had considered him suitable for it. But trust a young girl’s prudence in such a choice! Bon!’ (*LG*, I, 34-35)

The marriage of the Baudoyers is a happy one. In front of Lesley, Pierre Baudoyer teases his wife with ‘a certain tenderness’:

‘But had I never danced with a young girl at a ball and trembled as I spoke to her? And had I never seen a face that was the prettiest and dearest I knew, and painted it in all my pictures till it became a jest that Pierre Baudoyer had only once seen a woman’s face? And did no one always blush crimson when she saw me, and put white flowers into her hair because I liked them best on her?’

Madame Baudoyer remembers those old days as kindly as her husband does. But still she ‘must maintain her reputation’. She insists that their marriage had no folly in it but was ‘properly arranged’ for them by their relations:

‘But did not our parents meet and say, “So much my son will have; so much is my daughter’s portion — they will suit each other; he will be a great painter, and she, who has her poor little talent for his art, will be able to assist, working under him” and so arrange it all, before we said one word of our wishes to each other?’ (*LG*, I, 35-36)

But the match made for Louis and Stephanie turns out to be a disaster. Louis has never loved Stephanie and after the death of his own father and his god-father, he starts his persistent pursuit of Lesley, under the somewhat self-sacrificial permission of Stephanie. And Stephanie, despite all her sympathy and devotion towards Louis, does not love him. She writes Lesley a letter, pleading Louis’s cause with her rival. Reading the letter Marion tells Lesley, ‘she does not love him, but she wishes to think she does. You can see that letter was never written out of the wild impulse of a woman to give up all her happiness for the man’s — if she can only do him some service and die.’ Marion believes that Stephanie’s acting generously to Louis is for the pleasure of sacrificing herself, rather than for any great love for him. She concludes that Stephanie is ‘one of those women who if she comes to be his wife will only love to be his slave and yet never really know what loving him is like’ (*LG*, III, 57-58). Their marriage is saved from taking place by Louis’s tragic death. Subconsciously she prefers Louis’s brother Paul, who is more capable of appreciating her merits. And after Louis’s death she marries Paul. When Marion and Lesley criticize her ‘making love’ to Paul over Louis’s death-bed, the third-person narration comments:

Poor Stephanie was no coquette; she looked softly at Paul because she could not help it, not at all out of design: she liked him so much, she began to suspect that she had liked him a very long time, almost before she had been told to like Louis. (*LG*, III, 269)

In *Lesley's Guardians* then, the arranged marriage is examined and assessed by means of the treatment of cultural difference. The French automatically assume that marriage is a matter for the parents to arrange. The English, on the other hand, seem to have far more freedom in terms of marriage. Madame Baudoyer speaks to Lesley, 'But you have been brought up like an English girl, and love matches are esteemed among them. But it must be truly a dangerous system.' At the age of twenty-four Louis is free to marry Lesley in England. But in France, the Code Napoleon encumbers the marriage of men below twenty-five. Mrs Hawthorn says to Lesley before the wedding:

'Under ordinary circumstances they could prevent his marrying you, as they will his marrying any body else, excepting this choice of their own — or some choice of their own at — any rate some one with money enough to tempt them to give up this one — which is not a likely thing to find. But you, being half English at the least and marrying in England, are independent of their consent. So that you are the only person who could save him from being forced, poor fellow, into what we English think the *sin* of loveless marriage — A marriage for money — Ah, it's contemptible!' (*LG*, I, 7)

But on the other hand, Augusta Webster discloses the reality of the marriage market in England. Marion's marriage is certainly a mercenary marriage — an extreme case. Lesley's mother is disowned by her English relations because she married a poor foreigner for love. Even in love matches financial circumstances have to be considered. As a young undergraduate Maurice tells himself that 'since, with only three hundred a year and the choice of his profession, he could neither marry a young lady with no present fortune nor foresee the fulfilment of an engagement with any certainty, he ought not to fetter her (Marion's) youth with such a tie' (*LG*, I, 161-62). The union of Violet Raymond and Simon Gueret has a touch of unconventionality, for they are not from the same social class. Violet chooses to marry Gueret, disregarding the fact that she is going to 'lose caste in England'. But she also thinks

of the material comfort she is going to enjoy by marrying Gueret. When Gueret examines the possibility of making Violet his wife, he thinks that 'a respectable kind-hearted woman like Miss Raymond, with a sufficiently pleasing appearance, considering her age, and in all probability a convenient fortune, might be a very tolerable companion for his advancing years' (*LG*, II, 169-70). When he proposes to Violet, he gives 'a short retrospect of his past career', as well as a brief but distinct 'statement of his present financial circumstances' (*LG*, II, 300). The marriage between Lesley and Maurice is a marriage of love. But it is also a conventional marriage. People around them all think that they are 'so suited', in terms of social status, wealth and age. And their union represents a reunion of the family estate. According to Pat Jalland in *Women, Marriage and Politics*, by the mid-nineteenth century middle- and upper-class British marriages were no longer strictly arranged and controlled by parents. However, informal regulation was vital, since the British upper class still sought to prevent undesirable alliances while permitting controlled access to social advancement by deserving new wealth. It was possible to allow children greater freedom of choice because a series of complex social institutions had been developed during the eighteenth century to control the courting process. County balls and assemblies combined with the elaborate ritual of the London season to provide a safe national marriage market for the élite. In addition to the careful regulation of the national market, most parents exercised some influence in guiding their daughters' choices. From the mid-nineteenth century outright veto was rare, because it was not often needed.³⁶ The pressure of convention replaces the need for compulsion. As Augusta Webster says in an article titled 'Mrs Grundy':

³⁶ Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics: 1860-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.46.

It is said that two or three hundred years ago English parents were noted for their severe and even cruel rule, surely the need they found for restraints and chastisements came from the absence of that gentler though stronger control by Mrs Grundy which lightens the hands of the parents of to-day. [...] We will do as others do and that with the martyr's zeal, but not upon compulsion and not upon argument. Mrs Grundy's whisper in our children's ears is wiser than Solomon's rod. (*AHO*, 34)

Through her remarkable female character, Marion Raymond, Augusta Webster explores the unhappy state of mind, discontent and frustration of a thoughtful young woman of that period. As a young girl she has a craving for knowledge. Her own mother thinks that she is a 'wilful girl, full of impulse, uncertain as the winds and as wild, always trying at some impossible out-of-the way goodness, always learning something that there was not the slightest necessity for her knowing' (*LG*, I, 178). Her pursuit of knowledge is not encouraged by her mother. She has an elder half brother, Ralph Annesley, who is a lazy and selfish 'ne'er do well' as a young man. He does not help Marion with her study, wonders how she could bother her head with those 'beastly schoolbooks', and teases her for 'being blue'. Marion's relationship with her brother in some ways remind us of the relationship between Maggie and her brother Tom in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). As a child, Tom is given an expensive education; Maggie, who is clever with books, is not offered this opportunity. In the end, she is given a young lady's education, which cannot help her to develop her potential. When bankruptcy descends on the Tulliver family, Tom is able to work and earn, and finally save the family's fortune. Maggie, as a girl, can do nothing.

As a grown up woman Marion has the reputation of 'being blue'. The limitation of her education is exposed when she first encounters Maurice's friend Durne who deliberately wants to test her. We are told that she answers quite easily his first remarks on the music and the tasteful decoration of the rooms, and she brings out 'gay little common-places very appropriately'. But she is completely confused

when Durne tries her with a Latin quotation. When Durne inquires about her 'favourite style of reading', Marion replies:

'Oh no, I don't know anything scientific. I like reading history though rather. I used to get good marks from my governess for it very often.'

She learns Mangnall's work by heart, and reads 'Goldsmith and Mrs Markham, and Ancient History Abridged'. For poetry, she thinks Anon 'seems to have written some of the sweetest pieces of poetry in Thompson's Selections'. She also reads Mrs Hemans, *The Corsair*, *Marmion*, Tennyson and 'quite difficult ones' like Milton, Tupper and Shakespeare (LG, II, 16-22). Durne is deeply amused confirming his sense of his male superiority in terms of intellectual training; and he gets more and more amused as the conversation goes on. We are told that he inquires 'with redoubled earnestness to conceal his danger of laughing'.

George Eliot saw how the classics were made to bolster a small but important male snobbery. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Tom boasts to Maggie, 'I should like to see you doing one of my lessons. Why, I learn Latin too. Girls never learn such things. They're too silly' (Book II, Chapter I). In *Middlemarch* she shows how the Greek language was used to shore up the self-esteem of the English male:

'Well, tell me [Fred Vincy says to his sister] whether it is slang or poetry to call an ox a leg-plaiter.'

'Of course you can call it poetry if you like.'

'Aha, Miss Rosy, you don't know Homer from slang.'

(Book I, Chapter 11)

Marion resents the restricted role of the Victorian woman: 'Act up to it and you'll do some good; you are a man and can, we can't, we, poor things; have got to stay looking out of the windows of our enchanted prison, waiting for some one to kill the dragons for us' (LG, II, 51). Throughout the novel Marion performs in a sense the subordinate role. But the *Spectator* reviewer says that she is to his mind the true

heroine of the book.³⁷ Her petulance and her affectation, along with her real gentleness and a certain external hardness, form a rather unusual but perfectly natural character. It is on Marion that Augusta Webster bestows the greatest pains and with her that she achieves a more unusual success. Unlike Lesley, Marion suffers as a Victorian woman and reminds us of many a heroine in nineteenth-century literature. As with Little Dorrit, Lizzie Hexam, and Louisa Gradgrind, her devotion is almost always rewarded by ill-usage, ungratefulness and disappointment. Marion's mother never shows her much affection, preferring her worthless step-son Ralph Annesley and sacrificing the family fortune for him. In consequence she has to marry Marion to a rich man for money. Widowed young, left with money and freedom, Marion is unhappy. She feels guilty for not marrying for love and thinks she ought to be punished because of that. Her brother, still dependent on her, is as selfish as ever, although on the surface he is dramatically transformed into a highly religious man. Ralph Annesley bewilders Marion 'with the number of new sins he has found out for her' and claims that her studies in art and literature are 'a hindrance to the work of grace'. He acts as a moral policeman and casts judgement on Marion, as well as on her friends, including Lesley. He warns Lesley 'against the temptation to impure thoughts in the study of her art, in the careless intercourse of society [...], in dancing, in dressing, in a dozen trifling matters' (*LG*, III, 103). Finding the new Ralph Annesley more unlovable than the old, Marion tells Lesley, 'he will lecture all my visitors about their worldliness and insist on my dressing in nothing but brown and grey.' In despair she breaks out 'in her impetuous way':

'I did love my brother in spite of all, I did much — I did wrong even, I tell you, for his sake, when everybody called him worthless, and it is hard to have him now, in his cold

³⁷ *Spectator*, 37 (1864), p.798.

unloving way, reproving me out of his iceberg height of sanctity; I have but him on whom I have a claim for love — and I have had no love in all my life!’ (LG, II, 75-79)

Therefore, Marion not only suffers like Louisa Gradgrind, but also in some ways like a Maggie Tulliver, who is wrongfully condemned by her brother.

Yet on the surface Marion is frivolous. After the thoughtful young girl Marion Annesley fades into history, Marion Raymond turns up at Baudoyers’ studio as a rich and beautiful English young lady and becomes a fellow pupil of Lesley. She works ‘with some application, in a flighty kind of way indeed, full of likes and dislikes to her copies, with an impatience of difficulties and with a petulant perception of her shortcomings that did not promise much for their correction’ (LG, I, 282-83). She reappears, this time to Maurice, at Lady Leonora Hurst’s Ball as a rich young widow with a ‘very bright complexion’. She appears to be sociable and have individual taste in dressing; she is accomplished in a feminine way, yet uneducated. Durne, who meets her at that party for the first time, thinks that she is silly. But Durne soon changes his mind. When he gets to know Marion better, he says to Maurice, ‘That woman is a woman, not one of our pretty dance and simper machines, all tight stays and minauderies. She has life in her, and feeling too, if I don’t mistake. I like her impetuosity’ (LG, I, 55-56).

Lesley’s real thoughtfulness is ‘lightly and gracefully veiled’ by the ‘kitten-like playfulness, the pretty *mutineries* and caprices’ (LG, I, 115), while the depth and power of Marion’s character is covered by her frivolity:

Marion had one especial gift: she talked the most wonderful nonsense, enthusiastically, *con amore* — nonsense with an underlying meaning subtle but perceptible and to herself always distinct, such rare nonsense as only thoughtful people can talk. Maurice appreciated it, and could even return it in kind; but, while she rejoiced him by the readiness with which she caught his clue, he could not always lay sure hold on hers. The chameleon, as Durne still sometimes called her, changed colours too often for him, who was never very apt at reading women, to discriminate the varied lights that threw them.

(LG, II, 67)

Maurice always appreciates and admires Marion, but never really understands her; Durne, a less central figure, has 'keener eyes'. Unlike Maurice, who thinks that Marion is one of the lightest-hearted creatures on earth and that the only misery she has is 'losing her husband so soon', Durne detects that Marion is restless and dissatisfied. He is almost sure that she likes someone else and was a victim of a mercenary marriage:

'Sold, I haven't a doubt — persuaded into some pseudo heroineism [sic] about self-sacrifice. She would have been just the girl to be gulled that way, and have a little bitterness at herself, and I dare-say all the lot of them in the business, at the bottom of her heart all her life afterwards.' (LG, II, 69)

After listening to Durne's observation Maurice watches Marion 'more inquisitively', but he still fails to penetrate her social façade.

Maurice is the most important, and, it is suggested, the most admirable male character in *Lesley's Guardians*. Both Lesley and Marion worship him, unsurprisingly perhaps, since his various acts set him up as a hero. He rescues Louis from his assailants when Louis is attacked by a group of youngsters during his unfortunate journey to England. And later he honestly restores Lesley's legacy, when he discovers that she is the long lost heiress of part of his family property. However, as the critic of the *Spectator* says, he is a prig, and, as Marion says, he is one of those good men who cannot respect the feelings of others. Yet he is made to play a crucial part in the merging and exchanging of roles between Lesley and Marion.

Tess Cosslett suggests that the representation of friendship between women is often of special significance in the work of women writers, involving as it does issues of female solidarity and female self-definition.³⁸ Female friends figure

³⁸ Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1988), p.1.

crucially at important turning-points of the narrative in the works of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as those of Augusta Webster. As Tess Cosslett remarks, the coming together of two women is often essential to the resolution of the plot, figuring a necessary stage in the heroine's maturation and readiness for the marriage that conventionally closes the story. At these turning points transforming interchanges occur in which potential rivals discover solidarity, or women who seem to be representations of opposite types merge or exchange identities. These interchanges nearly always operate to assimilate one or both women into marriage. The female friendship is usually contained within a male-female romance structure. It happens quite often that two women who are potential rivals discover or declare solidarity, and arrange between themselves which of them is to have the man: sometimes there is a scene in which each in turn offers him selflessly to the other. The convention that women are enemies, because they are in competition for men, is counteracted here by the contradictory convention that women are self-sacrificing angels. Women writers use this convention to build a position of power for their female characters. Instead of the two rivals being passive victims of male choice, they actively decide the matter between themselves. The focus is not on the man's problems of choice, but on the interaction between the women. Some kind of female-female resolution always seems to be necessary before the male-female resolution can happen. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, it is crucially important to Maggie not to abuse Lucy's trust, and to return Stephen to her. She gains Lucy's forgiveness and admiration. The final meeting of reconciliation between Maggie and Lucy is essential before Maggie can go on to the consummation of her reunion with her brother Tom in the flood. The marriage plot plays itself out for Lucy in the final

chapter, when ‘years after’ Stephen revisits Tom and Maggie’s tomb again ‘with a sweet face beside him’. As in *Middlemarch* and *Aurora Leigh*, as well as Augusta Webster’s two other earlier works *Lilian Gray* and ‘Lota’, a scene in which two women affirm their solidarity, and one gives up a man to the other, is necessary before the final male-female coming together.

At the same time, the fictional female friendship operates as a partial merging of identities between the two women: the friends take on some of each other’s qualities to make one or both of them more suitable for marriage, or more ready to accept marriage. In most cases, the important friendships are between women who represent different possibilities of female identity and role allowed by society. The merging and exchange of qualities between them blur their distinctions and challenge their rigidity. Through the presentation of the female friendship, then, women writers may interrogate dominant images of female identity. We can read into this process the woman writer’s problems about her own unconventionality — her need to be unconventional and yet to conform to acceptable standards of ‘womanliness’, and also her need to reconcile her difference from other women with her unconscious identity or conscious solidarity with them. These tensions are dramatized as the two women take on each other’s identities and intrude into each other’s plots at significant turning points in the narrative.

Female friendship is the point where the female community asserts its claim and its values, where specifically ‘female’ qualities are nurtured, where the

exceptional woman meets up with the 'common lot of womanhood'.³⁹ According to Deborah, 'Girls' friendships, it was believed, should foster the feminine qualities of empathy and expressiveness, and should develop a capacity for sustained intimacy.⁴⁰ Mrs Ellis also sees female friendship as helping to initiate a woman into an exclusively female sensitivity and emotionalism:

In the circle of her private friends, as well as from her own heart, she learns what constitutes the happiness and the misery of woman, what is her weakness and what her need, what her bane and what her blessing. She learns to comprehend the deep mystery of that electric chain of feeling which ever vibrates through the heart of woman, which man, with all his philosophy, can never understand.⁴¹

Through female friendship, women learn to specialise in the life of the emotions, and to pass on that skill. Thus intimacy together with identification encourages the reproduction of an acceptable 'female' identity. In *Lesley's Guardians*, we find mergings and exchanges of identity going on between Lesley and Marion. The friendship is set up to form a debate on the possible female identities a woman can take up. The merging of their identities represents a complex process of negotiation about acceptable female identities.

The narrative voice introduces Marion to the readers by comparing her with Lesley. But unlike Maggie and Lucy in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, they are not presented as exactly opposed types:

She was good looking, and more. [...] If I were to describe her appearance I must use nearly the same terms as for Lesley Hawthorn, yet the two were distinctly unlike. And Lesley was far the most beautiful. Neither of the faces was marred by that symmetrical dullness which is called regularity of feature, but this girl's features were less harmoniously combined; the bright bloom of her cheeks was not so transparent, her eyes were keener and harder bright. She might have the advantage in form; both were tall and shapely, but hers was of fuller outline, in better proportion to the height; yet Lesley's, from its very deficiency, had a fragile gracefulness which the other could not rival. And

³⁹ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982), p.113.

⁴⁰ Gorham, p.113.

⁴¹ Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (London: Charles Griffin, 1845), p.281.

though each possessed the inconvenient charm of changing expression, in general this girl's had a too eager vivacity, far less winning than Lesley's softer look of interest.

Neither Lesley nor Marion represents conventional feminine beauty. However, Lesley's 'fragile gracefulness' and 'softer look' is certainly more acceptable by Victorian standards. They are simultaneously rivals and allies. The narrative voice is anxious to explain the use of the word 'rival':

I have used the word 'rival' above; it suggests to me to explain that it is not because of such a connection or disconnection between these two that I have made this comparison, but because I am allowed to hope that any who has cared to follow the story to the end of the seventh chapter must have taken sufficient interest in it to receive some sort of portrait of its heroine on the mental camera; and it seems a likely plan of presenting the heroine of the present chapter to such a one to describe her with reference to that portrait, always hoping that he may by-and-by form for himself a true likeness of her also. (*JG*, I, 154-55)

However, Lesley and Marion do turn out to be rivals for Maurice, the conventional romantic hero. And eventually it is Lesley who marries Maurice and takes up the traditional role. When the two friends first come together, Marion seems more likely to assume a conventional role. With her good looks, wealth, accomplishment as well as seemingly light-heartedness, she is considered as highly marriageable in upper-class society, whereas Lesley is a poor artist who has decided to dedicate her life to her art. The two women seem to belong to two different types of story, and their meeting signals the interchange of two different types of narrative. Lesley and Marion meet each other at the end of volume one, but before that meeting, they belong to two different plots in the novel. Through their friendship, the two plots entwine and alter — they intrude into each other's stories and exchange plots.

The friendship between Marion and Lesley operates to assimilate Lesley into marriage and pull her back into the world of traditional womanhood. Before Marion comes into her life, Lesley does not have close female friends of her own age. Her only companions are her mother and the Baudoyers. We are told that she forms no intimate friendship with her fellow pupils. From the very beginning Lesley reckons

that her friendship with Marion has done her good. We are told that Lesley rejoices 'in her pleasant intercourse with a female friend not many years older than herself'. She tells her mother: 'I do feel dull and dispirited at times, and, though I complain at being made idle, I think it is good for me that Marion has returned to force me to a holiday now and then. Sometimes it is as if I were not interested in life, but looking on it stupidly out of a sleep' (*LG*, I, 288-89). Mrs Hawthorn soon allows Marion to take over part of her role, recognising that Marion cheers Lesley up in ways that she cannot match. Like Lesley, Marion has independent and rebellious elements in her own nature, but she has far more experience and worldly wisdom than Lesley. She knows how hard it is for a woman to act against the expectation of society and is always ready to advise Lesley to compromise, though in theory she agrees with her. She insists on taking Lesley away from Paris, where there are lots of rumours against her, because 'she saw plainly that Lesley was too fragile to stand long in a battle against the venom-tongued world: she knew that she would be very quiet and very unyielding, but all the time the poison of the wounds would be working internally and she would soon sink down and die' (*LG*, III, 36-37). Marion brings Lesley into her social circle and gives her the opportunity to enter society as a beautiful woman. When later Lesley turns out to be an heiress, Marion instructs her to act according to the expectation of the class she belongs to. She helps to bring about Lesley's new appearance as an attractive and socially desirable young lady by transferring some of her own qualities of attractiveness and social status to Lesley.

When Louis is temporarily reconciled to the idea of giving up Lesley and marrying Stephanie instead, he tells Stephanie:

Her very faults were noble, she was only too pure, too proud; she might have been a saint, a heroine, — yes, a Jeanne d'Arc, but never an Agnes Sorel. [...] Well, after all,

what have I to complain of? [...] Why should the white dove soil her feathers by following me to the ground where I lay grovelling in anguish?' (LG, I, 252-53)

In order to adapt herself to romance with Maurice and traditional womanhood, Lesley needs to assume some of the inner qualities of Marion, as well as her external qualities.

Throughout the novel Marion is presented as more compassionate and tender-hearted than Lesley. When the physically and spiritually crushed Louis turns up at Marion's grand ball, Marion effectively saves Lesley from meeting him in front of other guests, but she is disarmed at once by Louis's helpless look. Towards Louis's burst of passion, his bitter grief and his fond pleadings, Lesley and Marion react differently:

Lesley stood distressed and pitying but never for a moment relenting, and Marion looking in her face saw something like contempt growing out of its weariness. [...] Marion herself was unhappy. [...] She could not triumph in her success with that wild sorrow before her. It seemed as if she somehow were guilty of it, and it was greater that she could bear; for with her vivid sympathy she was not pitying it but *compassionating* it, feeling its reflex in her own moved heart. She would have liked to take his hand tenderly in hers and bid him be comforted and trust her that all should come right. She would have liked — she who had always dreaded the possibility of Lesley's yielding to a dangerous love and sacrificing the best life in her to this wild wooer — she would have liked to fold Lesley in her arms and say, Forgive, and Forgive, till she yielded and plighted her troth again to Louis de l'Aubonne. It was hard work to be mistress of herself and look on tearless and stern.

Marion Raymond, who in her own person has always borne disappointment stoutly, has the intensest sympathy for disappointment in any one else:

No matter in how slight a thing, no matter how soon forgettable, the dull shade of disappointment falling suddenly upon the brightness of pleasant expectations was to her most painful to witness or to understand. (LG, II, 253-55)

Marion is gifted with the pain and power of a quick sympathy; understanding that the character of other human beings can never be 'a subject of exact science' for her, since even her own remains to her 'an often-varying mystery', she is content 'to feel with them and for them instead of "studying" them'. She perceives 'by revelation, not by dissection' (LG, II, 269-70). Augusta Webster defines the process of maturation to

womanhood as a mental development of greater powers and wider, deeper sympathies. Lesley achieves that partly through her own sorrows and sufferings, but more importantly through her friendship with Marion.

Lesley's love for Louis is largely physical attraction. She loves him because he is 'as beautiful as a Greek god':

He was very handsome and very pleasant, no wonder he had taught Lesley to love him. [...] He was tall and slight, with deep passionate eyes, and dusky curls tumbled over a low broad forehead that had an odd way of wrinkling as he talked but when he was in repose was marvellously smooth and white for such a rich southern complexion as darkened redly over his cheeks. [...] The grace of his manner was something to be seen, and his words flowed with all the animation of the Gascon and the grace of the Parisian.

The third person narration points out the 'over-fullness' of Louis's upper lip is the only flaw noticeable in his beautiful face:

which however, though of a noble masculine type, had in it a want of calmness or decision or some such expression looked for on such boldly cut features, so that it reminded one of a passionate woman. (LG, I, 38-39)

This description reminds us of Arthur Huntingdon's portrait in Anne Brontë's

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall:

The bright, blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery — you almost expected to see them wink; the lips — a little too voluptuously full — seemed ready to break into a smile; the warmly tinted cheeks were embellished with a luxuriant growth of reddish whiskers' while the bright chestnut hair, clustering in abundant, wavy curls, trespassed too much upon the forehead, and seemed to intimate that the owner thereof was prouder of his beauty than his intellect. [...] — And yet he looked no fool. (Chapter 5)

When Lesley observes that Louis is 'evidently grave natured and probably easily brought to exaggerate his more serious thoughts into melancholy', she thinks naïvely: 'I will watch, and keep all sorrow from him.' Like Arthur Huntingdon, Louis turns out to be vain, weak and petulant. His melancholy proves to be destructive, and like Arthur he cannot control his violent temper. The heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen, also a female artist, in her youth actually enters into a disastrous marriage with the model of that portrait. Lesley is lucky to be saved from having to live out such a marriage.

Webster's suspicion of male good looks is confirmed in the presentation of Maurice. Maurice is 'an English gentleman, with the power of an athlete and the refinement of a scholar — but not a handsome one'. We are told that Marion, even before her marriage, was not interested in male beauty — 'the beauty of an Antinous would not have served him with Miss Annesley'. She appreciates Maurice because of his moral and mental gifts:

She, who was always ready to run a tilt against 'les convenances' wherever and whenever she chose to consider them tyrannical or dishonest, appreciated his quiet independence of the voice that incomprehensible uncomprehending legislator surnamed The World. Her strong will, because it was a woman's strong will, was prepared to find a proud pleasure in yielding to his man's strong will surer and masterful, she would be glad to lay down her self-reliance and rest on the wisdom and the love of one whose superiority she could feel: she liked to have her imperviousness met by his firm self-assertion. (*LG*, I, 118-19)

Lesley needs to adopt Marion's sympathetic insight, her more serious attitude about men, as well as her readiness to yield her 'woman's strong will' to a 'man's strong will' before she can appreciate and accept Maurice. There is something a little conventional, a little clichéd in Augusta Webster's apparent acceptance of the notion of the strong man, to whom the woman will happily relinquish her independence. Her position on relationships became more complex in her later work.

On the other hand, Marion also assumes some of Lesley's qualities. She tells her, 'I wish I had your gift, Lesley; you will always come with little scar or scathe out of your life troubles; you pass out of them into your art, and are all the richer at heart for the suffering — you have one life in you — and that the master life — that it can only strengthen, not kill' (*LG*, II, 79). It is through her relationship with Lesley that the true strength of Marion's character is unfolded. The friendship develops as Lesley is experiencing serious crises in her life — the death of her mother, the constant pursuit and disturbance by Louis, as well as the malicious rumours spread by Louis's brother Paul. Marion goes through all these crises with Lesley and unreservedly

offers her support, trust and protection which even Maurice is not always ready to give. Marion and Lesley's friendship stands out as uniquely valuable against the hostility and jealousy otherwise surrounding Lesley in times of trouble: even the romance between Maurice and Lesley is diminished in contrast to this friendship.

Marion and Lesley can be seen as complementary, the merging and exchanging of their qualities and identities being essential to Maurice's transferring his affection from Marion to Lesley. The merging of their identities first becomes manifest in that particular evening, when Marion is singing and Lesley is lost in the sweet music. Under Maurice's male gaze, Lesley becomes the poem to Marion's music.

When Lesley's mother becomes seriously ill, Marion helps to nurse her, showing again her compassionate nature, patience and tenderness. At the same time, her temporarily taking over Lesley's role is indicative:

Marion who, when she found how things were going, chose to take up her quarters at the Hawthorns, declaring that she would have her fair share of the nursing, had tears in her eyes many a time afterwards when she thought of what Lesley must have undergone in those many cruel days. She admired her endurance as a thing of the saintliest beauty. She spoke of it thus to Maurice as he came time after time to make inquiries and offer services sometimes thankfully accepted. 'Sometimes I could kneel down and pray to be made like her,' she said with downright enthusiasm. (*LG*, II, 11-12)

With Mrs Hawthorn, Marion shares the affection she could never share with her own mother, and Mrs Hawthorn grows to love Marion like a daughter before she dies.

As Jenni Calder says in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, it is an important ingredient of romantic fiction, without which the essential ambience of romantic love would be lost, that the female must be weaker than the male. When Lesley and Marion first come together in Paris, Lesley seems to be the independent, high-minded and unconventional one: she is an artist who has already attained considerable distinction; and she has just faced the disappointment from her

relationship with Louis stoutly. Marion is a rich young widow who has nothing to care about except balls and dresses with little opportunity to reveal her power and strength. As the friendship develops, however, and Lesley becomes mentally and physically worn out by Louis's constant pursuit and haunting, in order to support and protect Lesley, Marion has to maintain and even emphasize her external hardness despite her real gentleness and compassion. When Lesley and Marion arrive in England, Marion turns out to be the capable mistress of Ormeboys, managing a huge estate and a large team of servants. Lesley appears in front of her tenants as a 'pretty sweet-spoken young lady' and she proves to be incapable of managing her own property:

Lesley, fairly bewildered by the numerous petty demands of her tenants, was at a loss to know what to promise and what to withhold, or whether she ought not to agree to everything; until Marion suggested to her to tell them to make their applications through the agent who was coming round as in Maurice's landlordship, and she herself remembered to add, for their encouragement, that they were still under Mr Maurice's management and he would be consulted on their requirements. Perhaps her tenants were a little disappointed, for they knew that Mr Maurice would only do for them what was just and reasonable, and on this occasion they had hoped to secure a good deal more than that. (*LG*, III, 154)

Marion is empowered while Lesley displays her powerlessness, which makes her more suitable for the conventional romantic hero.

In the latter part of the novel, a symbolic scene, foreshadows the final exchange of identities between Lesley and Marion and signifies the merging of the two. When Louis loses all his hope of getting Lesley back, he wanders wildly in the neighbourhood, finding a sketch-book which he thinks was Lesley's:

It was only a little sketch-book lying on the ground. It really belong to Marion. [...] It had a variety of outlined landscapes, figures, faces, studies of trees, scattered about it with no great respect for each other's intactness, and he bleared the lines into greater confusion by kissing them with his foolish lips that left traces of their hot touch. But he came to one page which he crumpled up angrily, with a curse between his teeth: it was dotted with little portrait heads, some unfinished, some repeated over and over again with slight changes in the features, as if done from memory. [...] But one so accurately drawn, of so faithful a likeness, that it was evident that that was most vividly impressed on the artist's mental eye. It was Maurice: and it was that portrait which aroused Louis's sudden jealousy. 'Let it be,' he said, fiercely, throwing the book back to where it had been found. 'Let her keep her new lover's portrait; I will show her I can do without her.' (*LG*, III, 143-44)

Driven by insane passions, Louis jumps from a cliff and dies soon after, freeing Lesley morally and spiritually for her marriage to Maurice. Before Lesley's wedding Marion says to her: 'I daresay you'll paint a pretty little picture now and then --- your husband's portrait to begin with' (*LG*, III, 279). Lesley then becomes the one who draws Maurice's portrait, takes over Marion's plot and acts out her wishes.

Maurice never understands Marion. And he never really understands Lesley. Augusta Webster stresses the irony in his choice:

This much was certain, Marion Raymond, with all her noble endowments, with her courage and her candour and her brave stand against all that was prejudiced and all that was false, and her generous heart and her quick fancy, could not seem to him the woman he could love. Imperceptibly he had turned from her to the paler figure at her side. Lesley, in her seeming helplessness, more beautiful, as true and, as he read it, more trusting, more womanly-pliant, had become his type of pure and graceful femininity. Marion was fearless and unconventional, as he believed it would be better for the world that all true women should be, but he found her the less lovable for it; she would be self-sustained, she would not cling to a man and confide in him and twine her whole flexible being round his, as a woman of a softer spirit — as Lesley would do — Lesley, who could not be independent and defiant and throw the mistakes of society in its teeth, but would lean on her husband, lovingly burdensome at every step, and give him the delightful responsibility of taking care of her. And so, with the usual inconsistency of mortals, Maurice, who was a strong advocate for a stand against the increasing empire of conventionality, especially over educated women, preferred Lesley to Marion because he thought her unable to offer the opposition his theory encouraged. But if Lesley had had no charm but this flexibility which he ascribed to her, we, who know something of her, might laugh at him for his choice. (*LG*, III, 177-78)

Maurice's choice of Lesley reminds us of Dr John's choice of Paulina in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Like Dr John, Maurice can only love a woman who can adapt herself convincingly to his feminine ideal. Dr John cannot see Lucy's true nature.

And he cannot really understand Paulina's inner life:

In Paulina there was more force, both of feeling and character, than most people thought — than Graham himself imagined — than she would ever show to those who did not wish to see it. [...] Graham would have started had any suggestive spirit whispered of the sinew and stamina sustaining that delicate nature; but I, who had known her as a child, knew, or guessed, by what a good and strong root her graces held to the firm soil of reality. (Chapter 26)

However, it is through Maurice, who is 'never very apt at reading women' that the blurring and exchange of identities between Lesley and Marion becomes possible.

Hugh Durne, who understands Marion better than others, forgives her after she harshly refuses his proposal:

'What a fool I am!' he said to himself. 'I might have known how she would take it. Was there ever a woman who wasn't more jealous against being taken for a *delaissée* than of her very life.' And he also called Maurice a fool in his own mind. (*LG*, III, 281)

We can imagine that had Maurice had 'keener eyes' like Durne's, he would have chosen differently. When Marion and Lesley become rivals for the same man, there is tension between the two friends. Yet each in turn offers Maurice selflessly to the other. Marion keeps throwing Maurice into Lesley's way, while Lesley keeps running away from Maurice. Lesley can only accept Maurice's proposal after Marion persuades her to take him over: the male/female reconciliation can only happen after the female/female reconciliation. However, in order to make the union of Lesley and Maurice happen, Marion has deceived both Lesley and Maurice. Maurice is never conscious of Marion's self-sacrifice. When he visits Lesley at her uncle's place and reveals his love towards her for the second time he says:

Marion is not being allowed to sacrifice herself to me or to any one. If she had left me the least room to suppose that she had ever, since she has been her own mistress, thought of me excepting as a friend, if she had even spoken gravely about my love for you, or more directly than by a jest or a hint now and then, I might have doubted. [...] But it is not so, there is not the least appearance of her performing one act of generosity — a sacrifice, as you say. (*LG*, III, 224-25)

Lesley always suspects that Marion is performing a self-sacrifice till Marion finally assures and convinces her that she does not love Maurice and will never marry him. Yet Marion is not telling the truth, and so there is an imperfection and inequality in the reconciliation since it is not based on complete openness and mutual understanding.

A reconciliation based on more mutual understanding can be found in her second volume, *Lilian Gray*, also published in 1864. Augusta Webster here uses the narrative patterns of the ballad. The protagonist Margaret tells her younger sister

Amy about her love for a certain local aristocrat, Walter Hope, who had seemed to return her feelings but then fell for a country girl, Lilian Gray. Torn between the two women, Walter marries Lilian at Margaret's generous instigation. Lilian Gray is technically the 'other' woman, but she is no evil schemer or cold-hearted usurper, nor is Walter a treacherous double-dealer, but a man genuinely divided: 'Torn by two loves, unlike, yet each a crime' (*Lilian Gray*, 22). As Walter confesses, Margaret represses her feelings and tells him to go back to Lilian Gray. Margaret and Walter remain unreconciled till Margaret goes to visit Lilian, pining on her sick-bed, and asks forgiveness for unwittingly depriving her of Walter's affection. The two women come together in an embrace: 'Sudden she drew me to her, as I bent, / And clung to me with sobs, and kissed my cheek' (*Lilian Gray*, 46). It is important that Margaret admits to Lilian that she loves Walter before Margaret and Lilian in turn offer Walter selflessly to each other:

'Yes,' I said,
 'I love him: but love often asks hard things;
 Sometimes, for love, to part with what we love.'
 'Alas!' she wept, 'then you will die. Oh, best
 That I, so frail, should die, not you.'
 'Yet no,'
 I said, 'through grieved I shall not die.
 And though I died yet that were not more sad
 Than a long life vexed with another's pain,
 And shame of him I love. But I shall learn
 God's peace on earth, and know a quiet rest.
 And now farewell, dear Lilian; think sometimes
 Kindly of Margaret Aubrey.'
 (*Lilian Gray*, 46-47)

At the same moment Walter makes his appearance and, taking Margaret's hand, closes the triangle: 'He took my hand — / One moment only so we three were linked' (*Lilian Gray*, 47). In Angela Leighton's words, such a 'configuration of three for a moment challenges all the played-out rivalries and fatal conclusions of

romance'.⁴² However, it has nowhere to go: Lilian dies after marriage. And Margaret, instead of accepting Walter, whom she loves, decides to remain single and leaves Walter to his widowhood. As Angela Leighton says, such emotional inconclusiveness is characteristic of Webster's demystifying imagination and it is characteristic too of the ending of *Lesley's Guardians*.⁴³ Marion's resignation of Maurice to Lesley marks her departure from the conventional love-plot, which is handed over to Lesley to complete. Marion cannot however, take over Lesley's role as an artist. As she says herself, she does not have Lesley's gift, for her talent is a flighty one, and will not absorb her as Lesley's has done. It is stressed in the novel that one of the advantages Lesley possesses is early training. Marion is fully aware of the fact that her opportunity for serious learning has come too late. At her first meeting with Durne, after Durne displays his superiority to her in terms of education, Marion takes her revenge when she dances with him again, for Durne is a bad dancer, and is easily danced out of breath. She refuses to talk about literature again, and Durne is forced to talk about the 'importance of dancing as an art':

'Yes,' she said, 'it has to be learned like other things.'

He went on telling her how diligently he cultivated it — so many hours a week he considered necessary for practice — such means he took for acquiring correctness in time. [...]

'Ah,' she said, 'I have known many other gentlemen who never could get to dance well. I dare say you didn't begin soon enough.' (*LG*, II, 28-29)

Durne is too old to learn how to dance, while it is too late for Marion to go for academic training 'after the fashion of youth'. Later Augusta Webster theorises the position that she adumbrates in her novel: as I have noted earlier, Webster points out in 'University Examinations for Women', an article appeared in the *Examiner*

⁴² Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.177.

⁴³ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.177.

in the 1870s, that 'It is never too late to learn; but it is soon too late to learn after the fashion of youth' (*AHO*, 104).

When it becomes impossible for her to marry the man she loves, Marion actively tries to get her own life sorted. She picks up Mrs Browne, a poor kinswoman of hers and decides to make Mrs Browne's son the heir of Ormeboys. Her act is reminiscent of Aurora's rescuing Marian in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. The household Aurora and Marian set up together is proposed by Aurora as a self-sufficient women's house:

'I am lonely in the world,
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. Come, — and henceforth thou and I
Being together will not miss a friend,
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
Make that up to him.' (*AL*, VII, 120-23)

However, despite Aurora's proposal to Marian, she is not presented as finding any peace or fulfilment in the relationship. Marian finds happiness but then she has the child to make her complete: Aurora is still lonely, discontented, and obsessed as never before with thoughts of Romney. Marian's only role in this friendship seems to be to provide the flowers and occasionally lend the baby, and Aurora seems to spend most of her time walking around alone or sitting alone, brooding about her lost past and unfulfilled present. Marian's presence, with the baby, only serves to make Aurora more discontented with her own life: she hears Marian laughing in the garden, and thinks,

Laugh you, sweet Marian, — you've the right to laugh
Since God himself is for you, and a child!
For me there's somewhat less, — and so I sigh.
(*AL*, VIII, 25-27)

The last scene Augusta Webster presents to us is Marion's pacing up and down alone in the moonlight:

Her hands pressed tight together and her head bent forwards: she moved unevenly, sometimes almost with a rush, sometimes languidly. There is something unhappy looking about such a walk alone in the white stillness; it does not remind you, unless by contrast, of the dreamy-thoughted pleasure you have often known yourself at such a time.

By-and-by Mrs Browne came out on the terrace; 'Are you not afraid of taking cold? I have brought you a shawl; but I think you should not stay out any longer. It is getting chill.'

'Thank you, you are very good, but I am not afraid; I don't feel cold. I will come in presently; I hope you haven't been thinking me very rude though, to have left you so long alone in the evening.'

'Oh no, not at all; I have been with my children; the moonlight made them wakeful, and I have been singing them to sleep.'

Marion looked after her and as she went back to the house; 'Yes, she is not alone, she has her children; but what have I? Oh Lesley, if you had only known!'

(LG, III, 290-91)

Resigning from the conventional possibilities of womanhood, like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Aurora Leigh before her final reconciliation with Romney, Marion represents here the unconventional woman who has no real chance of forging a meaningful new self in a social context that does not provide a possible role for her. Lesley is enlarged by her contact with Marion but she leaves her friend in the end with a fractured identity and no clear way forward. It is perhaps not altogether surprising that Augusta Webster did not write more novels. The blend of realism and melodrama that characterises *Lesley's Guardians* does not provide her with a vehicle adequate to the issues of female modernity that she wished to address. She is courageous enough to give Marion a more or less unhappy ending but at the expense of forcing Lesley into conventional matrimony. And so the potentially professional woman alone is tamed into a wife and the woman more fitted to be a wife is left alone without the intellectual resources to sustain her. It is not a cheerful situation for women and not a promising estimate of their social and professional opportunities. Three years later in the long narrative poem, 'Lota', in *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867), Augusta Webster tried her hand at a happier and more inclusive ending.

‘Lota’ is a verse novel written very much after the fashion of *Aurora Leigh*.

Lota is an English girl who has spent her girlhood in Italy with her father. She meets an Italian aristocrat, Emilio, a Byronic figure, who falls passionately in love with her. Unlike Louis in *Lesley’s Guardians* Emilio marries Lota despite his father’s threat of stripping him of his inheritance. The marriage turns out to be stormy. At the age of seventeen, before learning ‘a wife’s love’, Lota is taught to scorn her husband by Olympia, Emilio’s former lover, ‘a beautiful fierce deadly fiend’ (*AWS*, 251). Olympia tells Lota about Emilio’s love affairs with various women, including herself and declares she is more to Emilio than Lota could be. Emilio’s father dies without reconciling with his son, and knowing his cousin Carlo has stolen his inheritance, Emilio attacks his forfeited home with his wild followers and wounds Carlo. Emilio is convicted; Lota flees to Paris with her father, feeling hatred and shame towards her husband.

After her father’s death Lota goes back to England and takes shelter under her aunt’s roof, where she meets Gervase, the hero of the story. Both Lota and her cousin Evelyn are in love with Gervase. So the two women who are on very friendly terms become rivals. Evelyn is an angelic woman who easily fits into the conventional feminine ideal, but Lota too is eventually assimilated to the acceptable traits of womanhood. This assimilation is achieved through the agency of Gervase. Gervase, ignorant of Lota’s past, falls deeply in love with her. When Lota flees from her aunt’s house after Gervase declares his love towards her, Gervase starts a quest for the woman he believes must have fallen, very much similar to Aurora Leigh’s quest for Marian Erle in Paris. When he finds her, Lota has earned independence through honest work. Unlike Maurice in *Lesley’s Guardians*, who does his best to keep Louis away from Lesley, Gervase brings Lota back to her husband. When Lota pours out

her secret to him, he assures her that from the point of view of an English gentleman her husband's conviction is no shame:

I see a great crime with the least of shame
That ever crime could have. Our English blood
Runs cooler in the veins, but yet, I think,
We've many a steady honest gentleman,
Whose deadliest vengeance is a going to law
Would rub his hands 'Now that's the man for me,
A fine bold madcap standing for his rights
What a magnificent lawlessness'. (AWS, 263-64)

Yet, Lota still has to take up some of the self-sacrificing qualities of her angelic friend before she can forgive and accept her spiritually and physically crushed husband. Gervase sets off to search for Emilio, leaving Lota in Evelyn's care.

When Lota falls seriously ill, Evelyn turns out to be a most caring and patient nurse and tends her back to life. There again is a scene where each in turn offers Gervase to the other. Lota admits she loves Gervase, but wishes Evelyn to have him: 'Oh Evelyn, if he would love my friend, / And she would love him [...] as I think she could'. Like Marian Eric in *Aurora Leigh* and Marion Raymond in *Lesley's Guardians*, Evelyn is determined to clear the way for Lota and Gervase:

'Not so, you dreamer. He and I no more
Could take love of our making for love's self
And keep life warm by it than we could think
We felt the rays hot from a tinsel sun
And sit to bask in it upon the stage.
Friends he and I, but never more than friends.'
(AWS, 275)

Gervase turns up at this point and overhears the conversation. But instead of consummating his relationship with Lota he brings her a message from her husband, who is dangerously ill. By this time Lota has been converted by Evelyn's moral influence, and when she comes to Emilio's sick bed, she declares: 'You are my husband, I will stay with you / And be your nurse.' To Evelyn she says: 'You were /

My stay: but I have learned from you, and now / I am his stay' (*AWS*, 282, 284). We are told that Lota does 'wifely duty to her best' and nurses her husband back to life.

So Lota goes back to Emilio and Gervase marries Evelyn. In the closing scene of the poem the two happy couples are going for a trip to Italy with their children. It is a perfectly happy ending very rare in Webster's writings. Though in the end both Lota and Evelyn take up the traditional role of wife and mother, there is something unconventional in the resolution of the plot. In her earlier work 'The Brissons', a short story published in 1861, Webster depicts an unhappy couple who forgive each other when they are facing death after a shipwreck. However, they are immediately parted after their brief reconciliation: the wife dies in a storm while the husband survives. In *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall*, Helen goes back to nurse her dying husband and in *Lesley's Guardians*, Lesley forgives Louis on his sick bed. But unlike Arthur Huntingdon and Louis, Emilio is allowed to live, and unlike Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Emilio is not disabled nor disfigured. In 'Lota', Webster has tried to find a solution to unhappy relationships and has imagined a future for the reconciled couple. Yet the poem is, of course, contrived and schematic and peculiarly unlike the kind of encounter with real life that the verse novel was purporting to offer. Augusta Webster then discovers, as many previous writers had found, that the inclusively happy ending is won at an expense of the plausibility that social realism has as an aim.

Chapter Two

The Translations of Augusta Webster

Æschylus's Prometheus Bound and

Euripides' Medea

The Woman's act of writing is a disobedience as profound as Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods.

Helen Cooper¹

It is precisely when one is off one's guard that one reveals most about oneself; similarly a translator unwittingly reveals a good deal of himself when he thinks he is safely engaged in rendering the work of another writer.

Timothy Webb²

In this chapter I will discuss Augusta Webster's practice as translator of the Greek classics. Her translations of the *Prometheus Bound* of Æschylus,³ and of the *Medea* of Euripides,⁴ published in 1866 and 1868 respectively, were well received by 19th century critics. The *Illustrated London News* recognizes them as 'scholarly translations'.⁵ The *Westminster Review* declares her versions 'have won universal praise from all who are capable of forming an opinion'.⁶ Mackenzie Bell indicates that they are 'exceedingly close to the originals, and

¹ Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p.15.

² Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p.115.

³ Augusta Webster, Translation of *The Prometheus Bounds of Æschylus*, ed. by Thomas Webster (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866), henceforth *Prometheus*.

⁴ Augusta Webster, Translation of *The Medea of Euripides* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866), henceforth *Medea*.

⁵ *Illustrated London News*, September 15, 1894, p.330.

⁶ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 37 (1870), p.626.

display thorough acquaintance with Greek drama and a penetration into their spirit which could only be displayed by a student who was also a poet'.⁷

Augusta Webster claims on the title page of her translations that she has 'literally translated' those Greek classics into English verse. Indeed, the literality, accuracy and the fidelity to the originals of her translations have always been recognized by the critics. The *Westminster Review* says, 'among recent translations of poetry Mrs Webster's *Prometheus* of Æschylus claims a high rank. Of her volume of original poems we have already spoken. Her translation is marked by the same high qualities, but especially by fidelity to the original without losing its spirit.'⁸ The *British Quarterly Review* claims that her version of the *Prometheus Bound* is both 'accurate and poetical'.⁹ The *Contemporary Review* believes that it 'has clearly been a labour of love, and it has been done faithfully and conscientiously'.¹⁰ The *British Quarterly Review* thinks that Augusta Webster 'need not fear the comparison' with Milman, the Dean of St. Paul's, and believes that she is 'the more Æschylean'.¹¹ In the *Westminster Review*, John R. de C. Wise compares her translation with Potter's versions of the *Prometheus Bound*:

As a critical test, we will take the first five lines of the famous invocation of Prometheus to the elements. Potter's rendering runs thus:

'Ethereal air, and ye soft-winged winds,
Ye rivers springing from fresh founts, ye waves,
That o'er the interminable ocean, wreath
Your crisped smiles, thou all-producing earth,
And thou bright sun, I call, whose flaming orb
Views the wide world beneath; see what, a god,

⁷ Mackenzie Bell, 'Augusta Webster', in A. H. Miles ed., *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 10 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7 (1892), p.505.

⁸ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 30 (1866), pp.278-79.

⁹ *British Quarterly Review*, 44 (1866), pp.551-52.

¹⁰ *Contemporary Review*, 2 (1866), p. 448.

¹¹ *British Quarterly Review*, 44 (1866), pp.551-52.

I suffer from the Gods.'

And now we will take Mrs Webster's.

'Oh! marvellous sky, and swiftly winging winds,
And streams, and myriad laughter of sea-waves,
And universal mother earth, I call ye
And the all-seeing sun to look on me,
What I a God endure from other Gods.'

John R. de C. Wise points out that the first and most striking difference is Mrs Webster's terseness as opposed to the earlier translator's diffuseness. The number of her lines correspond with those in the original. He claims, 'whenever we have compared the two versions Mrs Webster maintains the same superiority'.¹²

Her translation of the *Medea*, on the whole, attracted even more attention and was highly esteemed by the critics. As the *Contemporary Review* says, 'she has asserted for herself a better place among translators of the *Medea* than amongst the many whom the *Prometheus* has drawn to it.'¹³ The *Pall Mall Gazette* points out, 'The *Medea* has hitherto had many imitators, but few English translators, and none who have performed the work with as much honesty and general ability as Mrs Webster.' The *Morning Star* claims, 'One of the very finest specimens of translation we have. It is wonderfully literal, and yet so fluent, flexible, and melodious, that passages of it read like an original English poem.' The *London Student* says:

The masterpiece Mrs Webster has undertaken to translate, and we must congratulate her on the result. She seems fully to have realized the difficulties the translator has to encounter, and to have dealt with them boldly. She has consented to no compromise. She has approached the task with at least two essential qualifications for success — a sound and accurate knowledge of the language she proposes to handle, and a fine,

¹² John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 30 (1866), p. 278.

¹³ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), p.465.

discriminating taste. [...] The much-vexed passages she has evidently weighed for herself, and has throughout acted the part of a conscientious and faithful interpreter.¹⁴

The *Westminster Review* claims that her translation of the *Medea* is ‘a photograph of the original, without any of that harshness which so often accompanies a photograph. She has combined, what is the despair of the translator, accuracy with freedom’. The critic takes her rendering of the opening speech of the old nurse as an example, and indicates that it ‘both preserves the original metaphor, and yet retains an English sea term’.¹⁵ The *Contemporary Review* declares, ‘In faithfulness and accurate interpretation she is second to none, and this in itself is saying a great deal for a lady-translator.’ The critic admires ‘the skill which she shows in arriving at the most direct and natural expression of the force of some Greek metaphor or simile’. It says, ‘Felicity, united with accuracy of translation, meets us, indeed, constantly in little turnings of Euripidean phrases.’ The reviewer also recognizes that Mrs Webster in some cases shows a scholarly soundness of judgment in deciding between various readings and claims that, ‘she is generally worthy of all imitation by that sex which is supposed to be stronger, as in most other points, so in matter of scholarship.’¹⁶ The *Athenæum* says:

It is surprising how closely and correctly she has reproduced the original, expressing its full force and delicate shades of meaning, line for line, and almost word for word. The metre also of the greater part is similar to that of the Greek, and the whole is in such a shape as to enable the English reader to form a good idea of the original work.¹⁷

¹⁴ Quotations from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Morning Star* and the *London Student* are from advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 1-2.

¹⁵ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 33 (1868), p.607.

¹⁶ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), pp.465-466.

¹⁷ J. Millard, ‘The *Medea* of Euripides’, *Athenæum*, September 1868, p.394.

The *Westminster Review* compares Augusta Webster's version of the *Medea* with Cartwright's translation, 'Just a year and a half since, when noticing Mr. Cartwright's version of the 'Medea', we expressed a hope that Mrs Webster might be induced to undertake the task in which he had broken down. We have no reason to repent of our wish. Mrs Webster's translation surpasses our utmost expectations.'¹⁸ The *Contemporary Review* claims, 'We have compared her with Potter and Cartwright, whom to excel is not a very great feat; and we have also tested some of her choruses by comparison with versions by far better hands than Cartwright or Potter, and the result is in her favour.'¹⁹

However, some critics suggest a lack of smoothness and loftiness in Augusta Webster's translations. While admiring the accuracy of her version of *Prometheus Bound*, the *Contemporary Review* points out:

Here and there single phrases have been happily rendered. The *myriad laughter* of sea-waves, *twinkling-vestured* night,' '*cavernous boom* of thunders,' could not easily be improved on. But we own that we miss, in the choruses especially, the loftiness and the music of Aeschylus. In —

'The whole land echoes now with sighs,
Sighing and making moan for the old majesties
Of thee and of thy race.
Yea, where the Asian colonies lie fair,
In loud lamentings for thine ills do mortal dweller share,'

There is, especially in the last line, a heaviness which does not satisfy the ear that has been trained to a perception of the more subtle laws of melody. And this is, we believe, a fair specimen of the versification generally.²⁰

Her translation of *Medea*, published two years later, was again criticized for the want of smoothness. The *Athenæum* says, 'If there is any drawback, it is

¹⁸ Wise, *Westminster Review*, 33 (1868), p.607.

¹⁹ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), p.465.

²⁰ *Contemporary Review*, 2 (1866), p.448.

the want of smoothness and an even flow in the versification, particularly in choral pieces'. The *Contemporary Review* indicates:

It would have been possible to throw more rhythmical elegance into a translation that might still have preserved some smack of the original in metre and sense than Mrs Webster's. We are somewhat surprised, however, that she is less faultless in matter of rhythm and smoothness, where the feminine ear should have stood her in stead. In some of her blank-verse translation of the Euripidean iambics, and in very many of her substitutes for the Euripidean anapaests, she is decidedly rugged and, indeed, we should doubt whether her forte is so much sonorous elegance as a vigour and energy of expression. [...] It would have been possible to throw more rhythmical elegance into a translation than Mrs Webster has done. Grotius turned them into Latin much more metrically, though, perhaps, it is hardly fair to cite a Latin version as against an English.

The reviewer concludes, 'the truth is, that any attempt to imitate strange metres requires thorough mastery of rhythm, and so perfect an ear as does not fall to the share of one person in a hundred, however cultivated.'²¹

I discussed Augusta Webster's translations in December 1995 with Mr. Alexander Garvie of Glasgow University. He is a specialist on Æschylus and confirmed that Webster's versions of *Prometheus Bound* and *Medea* are reliable translations. He was quite impressed that a woman writer of the nineteenth century could translate Greek classics with such accuracy, for it was not usual for women to learn Greek in those days. But he also finds that Augusta Webster's translations are 'a bit flat and not very inspiring'. He thinks that her English is very Victorian, which is old-fashioned for us. If there is a fault to find, it will be with her English, not with her Greek scholarship.

Garvie's opinion of Augusta Webster's translations reminds us of what was said of Elizabeth Barrett's first version of *Prometheus Bound*. Alice Falk observes that 'one is surprised by the flatness of the 1833 *Prometheus*'.²² In a letter to

²¹ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), p.466.

²² Alice Falk, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Her Prometheus: Self-Will and a Woman Poet', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 7 (1988), pp.69-85 (p.74).

Robert Browning, dated February 1845, Elizabeth Barrett says her 1833

Prometheus is 'as flat as the nearest plain'.²³

Elizabeth Barrett translated *Æschylus' Prometheus Bound* twice. The second translation was completed in 1845 and published in 1850.²⁴ Her first translation of *Prometheus Bound* was undertaken in the first two weeks of February in 1832. 'In a fortnight', Alice Falk notes, the twenty-six-year old with no university training 'made a reasonably accurate, readable, almost line-for-line verse translation of the least easily translated Greek tragedian'. 'Æschylus presents difficulties to the manliest Greek scholar', a reviewer observed in 1835: 'think of those rugged obstacles to a woman's mind!' But other reviewers did not esteem her translation. She herself soon came to condemn it harshly as 'cold stiff & meagre, unfaithful to the genius if servile to the letter of the great poet' and she quickly withdrew it from circulation. She was pained not by the lack of scholarship but by the lack of poetry. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, dated February 1842, she says:

Do tell her that I c^d, but feel it as a condescension from any person of that degree of acquirement, of that high cultivation, to take any notice of such an imperfect production as this hard dry unvital translation of mine. [...] It is not scholastically that I am so ashamed of it, but poetically. It is correct enough as far as the letter goes — but otherwise I am only surprised that Æschylus does not dog me with his spirit-dog, as he himself might call his soul. But he doesn't think it worthwhile.

[...]

I have heard that Mrs Coleridge said of my translation (Coleridge's daughter!) ~ 'It is a creditable attempt to do what is impossible'. I myself w^d. say far less of it — for I know how much better it c^d. be done. Even I c^d. do it better now. Coleridge himself, or Shelley had done it well — they w^d. at least have drawn from the admitted 'impossibility,' a GRAND POSSIBLE. What Mrs Niven w^d. do me the honor of writing about, is not worth her reading.²⁵

23 Browning, Robert, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, 1845-1846, ed. by Elvan Kinter, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; London: Distributed by Oxford University Press, 1969), vol.1, p.31.

24 Falk, pp.69-85 (p.72).

25 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford 1836-1854*, ed. and introduced by Meredith B. Raymond & Mary Rose Sullivan, 3 vols (Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University; The Browning Institute; Wedgston Press and Wellesley College, 1983), vol.1, pp.338-39.

Elizabeth Barrett herself observed that she only began to find her own poetic voice in the *Seraphim* volume of 1838. In Alice Falk's opinion, she lacks the confidence for a strong personal reading of Æschylus in the earlier translation and clings to the letter of the original.²⁶

Soon after the publication of the poems of 1844, which established Elizabeth Barrett as a major English poet, she began a second version of the *Prometheus Bound*. She received critical help from Browning and completed the translating in May, 1845. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, dated 11th February, 1845, she says:

You know my opinion of that miserable production called my translation of Æschylus's Prometheus, & which sh^d. be rather called the blot on my escutcheon. Well! To prove my truth of self reproach & efface the blot. [...] I have been translating the whole over again. I began with the first Greek line & ended with the last, not referring at all to my former misdoing, & have completed a version, which however faulty in many respects, is not faulty in the way of the preceding one [...], in being as cold as Caucasus on the snow-peak, & as flat as Salisbury plain. It has more poetry, at least, & is nearer Æschylus: & I have had great pleasure in doing it, & in feeling that I have done something to retrieve my own disgrace as a poet by my own hand. Perhaps I may print it in a magazine — but I do not know. I have not made up my mind. I did it for conscience's sake, more than from any other motive. Now I may sleep at night, & Æschylus's ghost not draw the curtains [...] 'all in his winding sheet.'²⁷

She claimed to have retranslated the play in repentance: to quiet her conscience rather than for the mere purposes of publication. The earlier version she described as 'the word of a mind imperfectly possessed of its own wide-awake powers': 'I could not speak my mind then ... my own mind ... how much less, Æschylus's?'²⁸ She believed that her second *Prometheus*, unlike the first, was poetry.

²⁶ Falk, p.74.

²⁷ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford*, vol.3, p.76.

²⁸ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford*, vol.3, p.115.

The new translation was very well received by contemporary reviewers.

Those who mentioned the first version agreed that the second was much stronger.

Edmund Clarence Stedman points out:

Her first venture of significance was in the field of translation. [...] The translation was at that time a unique effort for a young lady, and good practice; but abounded in grotesque peculiarities, and in fidelity did not approach the modern standard. In riper years she freed it from her early mannerism, and recast it in the shape now left to us, 'in expiation,' she said, 'of a sin of my youth, with the sincerest application of my mature mind.' This later version of a most sublime tragedy is more poetical than any other of equal correctness, and has the fire and vigor of a master-hand. No one has succeeded better than its author in capturing with rhymed measures the willful rushing melody of the tragic chorus.²⁹

However, Elizabeth Barrett's sense of the classical ethos was faulted in the anti-romantic movement of the early twentieth century. Percy Lubbock claims, 'she never understood that deliberate aim at attainable perfection which is at the heart of Greek literature. Hers was the romantic temper, never content with attainment.'³⁰ Edmund Stedman, who admires her second translation of the *Prometheus Bound*, also admits, 'her other translations were executed for her own pleasure, and it rarely was her pleasure to be exactly faithful to her text.'³¹ Obviously then the less literal translation is more open to the criticism that it is contaminated by the prejudices and predilections of the age of the translator.

The most obvious difference between the two versions is in length. Barrett Browning had been ashamed that the 1833 translation ran some twenty lines longer than the approximately 1080 lines of Greek, yet there is no apology for a new version that ran over 1280 lines. In general, Barrett Browning more freely uses language and style characteristic of her own poetry. She even changes

²⁹ Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Victorian Poets* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887), pp.121-122.

³⁰ Percy Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters* (London: Smith & Elder, 1906), p.11.

Æschylus. One startling change clearly reflects Barrett Browning's own associative imagery, linking breasts with female power. In the 1833 version, the maidens of Colchis 'untrembling stand / In war'.³² In the second translation, they 'with white, calm bosoms stand / In the battle's roar'.³³

Augusta Webster's *Prometheus Bound* ran to only 1093 lines. The number of her lines corresponds with those in the original. It is an even more line-for-line, word for word translation than Barrett Browning's 1833 *Prometheus*. The translation was published when she was twenty-nine. It is likely that as a young woman writer, Augusta Webster did not start her career without apprehension. The translation of the *Prometheus Bound* is the first literary work she published under her own name, and the version was edited by her husband, Thomas Webster. He writes in the preface:

The reason why the title-page of this book bears the name of an editor as well as that of a Translator is, that my wife wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady's name could give, and so rightly or wrongly, looked to me for what she wanted. I have most carefully compared this translation, line by line, with the original, and am not afraid to vouch for its conscientious adherence to the letter of the text. I offer no opinion as to what share of poetic merit it may have, but leave that to critics less biased than myself.

Obviously, Augusta Webster was worried that her audience might not have confidence in a lady translator. However, there is no other evidence of her own uncertainty about the quality of her work. Nor can we claim that she clings to the letter of the text because she did not have her own poetic voice. In 1866, she also produced *Dramatic Studies*, eight dramatic monologue of remorse,

³¹ Stedman, *Victorian Poets*, p.122.

³² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Prometheus Bound of Æschylus and Miscellaneous Poems* (London: A. J. Valpy, 1833), p.32.

³³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Prometheus Bound of Æschylus', in *Poems of 1850*, ll.484-85.

renunciation, and compromise; three spoken by women. It is a volume which signals Augusta Webster's discovery of her true voice.

So far, I have not found any subsequent apology by Augusta Webster for her close adherence to the original in her translation. Years after her translations of the *Prometheus Bound* of Æschylus and the *Medea* of Euripides, when she was confident enough to criticize Robert Browning's translation of Æschylus's *Agamemnon*, she still preferred a more literal translation. In an article titled 'a Transcript and a Transcription', which first appeared in the *Examiner*, and was later reprinted in her *A Housewife's Opinions*, she compares Robert Browning's translation with Morshead's version of *Agamemnon*. She claims that if Robert Browning the 'great poet', the 'hail-fellow of Æschylus', who 'spends his vigour in unflinching self-restraint and will not be lured from his dogged fidelity as a translator by any temptation to achieve a beautiful passage or a well-rounded stanza', calls his own version a transcript, the version of Morshead the 'aspirant', who 'turns aside to follow the flight of his own fancy [...] and adds himself to Æschylus', should be called a transcription according to Webster's definition of the word, as applied by composers to 'a more or less fanciful and ornated reproduction on their own instrument of a song or other piece not originally intended for it'. Augusta Webster confirms:

It is noticeable [...] that it is the word-by-word translation, the mere imitation as one might say, which bears the strong impression of originative power — a power which must have been recognised if Robert Browning had never been heard of before — and the loose translation, giving play to interpolated originality, which leaves the reader suspicious of the want of such a power in the translator and certain only of his elegant scholarship. (*AHO*, 66)

She points out the non-literal and expanded translation of Morshead's translation of *Agamemnon* is 'un-Æschylean':

Much of it is beautiful, all is musical, it rarely deserts the original completely — rather it hovers round it in its desertions like a butterfly round a favourite flower — it rarely, perhaps never, misses or perverts a meaning. [...] It is essentially correct. But it is not *Æschylus*. The spirit is gone — this very merit aimed at by free and expanding translations, that of preserving the higher thing, the spirit, at the expense of the lower thing, the letter, is just what oftenest does go, much as you would lose the expression of a sitting face if you tried to paint the expression disregarding the feature. (*AHO*, 67)

Webster prefers Robert Browning's literal translation:

With a determination and a minute accuracy which approach the miraculous he has trodden step by step in the footprints of his elected leader. He has added nothing, altered nothing, omitted nothing. He has done by *Æschylus* as he would have had *Æschylus* do by him if each had been the other. [...] And the self-sacrificing labour of such a reproduction of one poet by another is rare and very great. (*AHO*, 71)

In the article quoted above Augusta Webster pronounces Browning a 'chief of poets'. Actually as a poet she may herself be termed a pupil of Robert Browning. Her dramatic monologues and blank verses are written under the influence of Browning. In the discipline of translation Browning felt himself required 'to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language'. In another article included in the same volume Augusta Webster clearly states her own theory of translation. She points out it is customary to argue whether the translator should be faithful to the letter or to the spirit of the original. But in her opinion, letter and spirit are inseparable:

But can you have the spirit of a poet's work without the letter? No one advises a painter to paint the beauty of his sitter and never stickle for the features, or the instrumentalist to render the expression of a composer's music by altering the air at will. In poetry the form of the thought is part of the thought, not merely its containing body. (*AHO*, 61)

She believes no poet, minor or major, will ever accept a free rendering of his own poems as conveying their spirit:

He would refuse to recognise *his* thoughts, *his* descriptions, *his* similes, transmuted in the crucible of another man's mind. He would be like a man who wanted his own portrait — painted, of course in good looks — and who got instead the limning of a handsome man unrecognisable. (*AHO*, 62)

Webster thinks ideally the Greek classics should be translated in the way the *Old Testament* had been translated. It ought to be done 'by a company — a

company seeking no personal glory and impressed with such a reverence as would prevent their altering or elaborating one jot or one tittle'. And since poets 'have their vanity, and still more have their taste in harmonies', such a translation would have to be in prose, by 'faithful men who knew their tongue and aspired to be its perfect servants, not its harmonious masters as versifiers claim to be'. She states:

No sole human being can translate with the entire disinterestedness necessary for such translation as that of our masterpiece of the English language, the version of the Hebrew Testament. The men who made that version looked above all, before all, to the letter; the spirit, they thought, was there of itself, if they were but faithful to the dictionary. If there were but men to translate Homer so by the letter! (*AHO*, 64-65).

So Augusta Webster's theory of translation is similar to that of Robert Browning. However, she also criticized Robert Browning's translation for its obscurity and harshness:

But the reader who knows no Greek at all will be left bewildered and incredulous. For Mr. Browning's translation — in that much like a literal prose crib — needs the Greek text to explain it. And it needs it in consequence, not merely of the word-to word translation seem disjointed and confused, but in consequence of obscurity for which Mr. Browning's idiosyncrasies rather than his theory of translation are responsible. [...] If you translate a sentence which is not upside down Greek into one which is upside down English, you are not literal, although you may have rendered the words exactly and in their very order, for eccentricity — which was not in the original phrase. [...] The ruggedness of sound which adds to the bewildering effect of some of the more crabbed passages is in a great measure caused by the jerks of the inversions, and somewhat by the dissyllabic termination, of which, in unrhymed verse, English ears do not promptly catch the rhythm. We must protest against this excessive ruggedness of sound as in itself a fault in translation. No doubt Æschylus was not of the mellifluous order of poets, any more than Mr. Browning himself, and should not be rendered in glib soft cadences, but he was a Greek, master of a harmonious and nicely quantitative language, and could never be cacophonous. And, since it is not possible in translating from any language into another to give the suitability of cadence and rhythmical emphasis with which even a rugged poet ever and anon enhances tender or touching meanings, it is the more unjust to create a supererogatory harshness throughout. (*AHO*, 72-74)

Augusta Webster concludes the article by saying, 'We could wish nothing better for literature than that Mr. Browning having translated the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus, should go on to translate the *Agamemnon* of Robert Browning' (*AHO*, 79). Professor Minto, editor of the *Examiner*, used to say that the best

article which ever appeared in the *Examiner* was Mrs Webster's review of the two translations of the 'Agamemnon' by Browning and by Mr Morshead.³⁴ *Harper's Magazine* claims that Augusta Webster 'has the right of an expert' to comment on Browning's translation.³⁵ The *Athenæum* does not like *A Housewife's Opinion* as a book: the critic condemns most of the essays in the volume as 'light articles meant to be read and forgotten', yet he recognizes Augusta Webster's criticism of the translations of Browning and Morshead as 'evidence of care and thought':

The review is not only an admirable bit of criticism, but a lesson. Mrs Webster has already tried and proved her skill as a translator of Æschylus, and she is in every way entitled to be heard as a critic of other people's work. She shows a nice appreciation of the merits of Mr. Browning's remarkable work, but in the few places where she corrects him it is difficult to think she is wrong; where she finds fault with Mr. Morshead we know she is right.³⁶

We can be sure that Augusta Webster's fidelity to the original text is out of principle and confidence. The accuracy of her translations has been widely recognized, and she has largely avoided obscurity; even a modern reader will not find her translations hard to read. Sometimes she has to sacrifice music and smoothness in her translation in order to be literal. H. Buxton Forman comments, 'If to these two excellent translations be applied the high test of inquiring whether, as the works here stand, they are poems of supreme beauty, it will have to be confessed that they fail under such test. But as literal rendering has been the translator's first aim, we need not be so exacting.'³⁷ The *Athenæum* says, 'the difficulty of combining exact rendering with musical

³⁴ Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'Mrs Augusta Webster', *Athenæum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

³⁵ Edmund Clarence Stedman, 'Some London Poets', *Harper's Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.886.

³⁶ *Athenæum*, January 4, 1979, p.15.

³⁷ Forman, *Our Living Poets*, p.181.

verse may well be admitted as a sufficient excuse.³⁸ However, she often does manage to throw herself heartily into her author's spirit and render it with fidelity and beauty. The critic of the *Contemporary Review* cites the first antistrophe of the Chorus 'as a specimen of lyric translation with which the most critical can scarcely find any fault':

There too, the ancient lay runs thus,
 Once Cypris, quaffing from the wave
 Of crystal — flowing Cephissus,
 O'er all the land her soft breath drave
 In tender wafts of scented wind:
 And donning ever her sweet crown
 Of rose-bloom in her loose locks twined,
 Her vassal loves, assigned
 Kind ministers to wisdom, she sends down,
 And helpmates in all deeds of good renown.
(Medea, ll.833-46)

The reviewer continues quoting another passage:

Oh, then I erred when I went forth and left
 My father's house, lured by a Hellene's talk,
 Who, with the god's help, shall pay forfeit yet.
 For neither shall he more behold alive
 His sons by me, nor shall his new-made wife
 Bear to him other sons, since the ill wench
 Shall die an ill death, doomed by my drugged salves.
 Let none believe me weak or lethargic,
 Nor tame in spirit, but far other-souled:
 Dour to my foes, but to my friends most helpful:
 For the loves of such do wear the nobler grace.
(Medea, ll.800-10)

The critic believes, 'Saving an exception which we take to the word 'dour', which is a Scotticism, we can find no fault in point of accuracy, vigour, versification, or spirit in this conclusion of one of Medea's most passionate speeches'.³⁹

According to Augusta Webster's theory of translation, we may presume that she would not have approved Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'free and

³⁸ J. Millard, *Athenaeum*, 26 September, 1868, p.394.

³⁹ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), p.466.

expanding' second translation of the *Prometheus Bound*. In fact, it is quite likely that Augusta Webster had read Barrett Browning's version by the time she did her own translation. In 1871, Buxton Forman even hinted that Augusta Webster tried to excel Elizabeth Barrett when she translated the *Prometheus Bound*: 'It does not seem necessary to show how futile has been the attempt to supersede Mrs Browning's, if indeed such was the aim of the more recent version; and it is not easy to know what is the aim of re-translating a foreign work unless it be to supersede former translations.'⁴⁰ Augusta Webster's translation of the *Prometheus* was frequently compared with those of Elizabeth Barrett Browning by her contemporaries. Buxton Forman was in favour of Elizabeth Barrett's version:

The present version of the *Prometheus*, equally with other new versions, must of course be compared with Mrs Browning's magnificent rendering of that magnificent work; and Mrs Webster's falls no less short of Mrs Browning's than do all other English presentations of the mighty conception of *Æschylus*. Mrs Webster's literalness is doubtless useful. But literalness of word is a matter of small account as compared with essential faithfulness and large beauty.

He compares Augusta Webster's translation of the last words of the chained *Prometheus* with Elizabeth Barrett's rendering of that passage. Augusta Webster's version is:

Lo, in very deed, no more in mere talk
 Does the earth now rock,
 And a cavernous boom of thunders rolls near,
 And the forked fierce blaze of the lightning glares out,
 And whirlwinds chase round the eddying dust,
 And the blasts of all the winds leap abroad
 At war each with each in contending gusts,
 And the sky and the sea are mingled in storm-
 Such tempest from Zeus in our sight strides on
 Towards me as though to daunt me with fear.
 Oh mother mine, thou revered one, Oh sky
 That bear'st in due round light common to all,
 Do ye see me what wrong I endure?
 (*Prometheus*, ll. 1116-28)

⁴⁰ Forman, *Our Living Poets*, p.182.

Mrs Browning gives the same passage thus:

Ay! in act now, in word now no more,
 Earth is rocking in space.
 And the thunderous crash up with a roar upon roar,
 And the eddying lightnings flash fire in my face,
 And the whirlwinds are whirling the dust round and round,
 And the blasts of the winds universal leap free
 And blow each upon each with a passion of sound,
 And æther goes mingling in storm with the sea.
 Such a curse on my head, in a manifest dread,
 From the hand of your Zeus has been hurtled along.
 O my mother's fair glory! O Æther, enringing
 All eyes with the sweet common light of thy bringing!
 Dost see how I suffer this wrong?⁴¹

Forman claims, 'There seems to me to be no less a gulf here than that fixed for ever between the mediocre and the supreme'. However, he concludes, 'Mrs Webster's *Prometheus* is certainly more of a poem than any other English one except Mrs Browning's'.⁴² *Harper's Magazine* says that Augusta Webster's version of the *Prometheus* is second only to Mrs Browning's in fire, and is superior to that in evenness.⁴³ Eric Robertson claims that her *Prometheus Bound* 'may be conceded to be a terser and a more imposing translation from Æschylus than Mrs Browning's'.⁴⁴

In the 19th century women were excluded from classical education. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Tom Tulliver boasts to Maggie, 'I should like to see you doing one of my lessons. Why, I learn Latin too. Girls never learn such things. They're too silly' (Book II, Chapter 1). Even more than Latin, Greek was the stamp that authenticated culture and class. In *Middlemarch*, when

41 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Prometheus Bound of Æschylus', in *Poems of 1850*, ll.1275-87.

42 Forman, pp.182-83.

43 Stedman, *Harper's Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.886.

44 Eric S. Robertson, *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies with Illustrative Extracts* (London: Cassell, 1883), p.354.

Dorothea asks her husband about Greek accents, she acquires 'a painful suspicion that here indeed there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason' (Book I, Chapter 7). Sydney Smith said in 1808:

We cannot deny the jealousy which exists [...] respecting the education of women. There is a class of pedants, who would be cut short [...] a whole cubit, if it were generally known that a young lady of eighteen could be taught to decline the middle voice. [...] The great use of her knowledge will be that it contributes to her private happiness.⁴⁵

It says much for the fascination of Greek that there were women who strove to surmount the barriers placed in their path. Richard Jenkyns notes in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*, 'No novelists can compare with George Eliot in fervency of enthusiasm for the ancient world.'⁴⁶ George Eliot's sex barred her from what she called the 'Eleusinian mysteries of a University education'.⁴⁷ Yet without tutors she acquired a degree of learning which many university men might have envied. When she was ill she did not turn to light literature. 'She sits up in bed,' wrote G. H. Lewes, 'and buries herself in Dante or Homer'.⁴⁸ John Fiske describes meeting her; 'I know every bit of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" as well as I know the "Pickwick Papers"', he says, but confesses that when he tried to argue with her about the Homeric question she outgunned him: 'She seems to have read all of Homer in Greek too [...] talked of Homer as simply as she would of flat-irons.'⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Sydney Smith, *The Works of the Rev. Sydney Smith: Including his contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1859), vol.1, pp.178, 180.

⁴⁶ Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p.113.

⁴⁷ George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), Book I, Chapter 2.

⁴⁸ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 7vols (London : Oxford University Press, 1954-1956), vol.7, p.39.

⁴⁹ *The George Eliot Letters*, vol.5, p.464.

Writing in her childhood, Barrett Browning recorded that at age eleven, 'To comprehend even the Greek alphabet was delight inexpressible'.⁵⁰ She began her studies with Mr McSwiney, her brother's tutor, driven by her belief that 'Greece sustains the arts, sciences, even virtue to a greater perfection than anyone ever has'.⁵¹ Taine heard of a guest at a country house who 'discovered that his hostess knew far more Greek than he did [...], and confessed himself beaten: whereupon [...] she wrote his English sentence of excuses in Greek. [...] This Hellenist is a woman [...] of fashion: furthermore, she has nine daughters [...] and [...] numerous house guests.'⁵² Edmund Clarence Stedman says in *The Victorian Poets*, published in 1887, 'Some of the best modern translation have been made by women, who, following Mrs Browning, mostly affect the Greek. Miss Swanwick and Mrs Webster, among others, nearly maintain the standard of their inspired exemplar.'⁵³

Still, women who possessed sound knowledge in Greek were exceptional. The *Athenæum* pointed out in 1868, after the publication of Augusta Webster's translation of the *Medea*: 'there are not many ladies possessed of Greek scholarship enough to translate Euripides with accuracy. Mrs Webster has shown in her translation of Æschylus's *Prometheus*, as well as her present work, that she is one of the few equal to the task'.⁵⁴

50 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character', in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. by Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, 4 vols, to date (Winfield, Kan.: Wedgestone, 1984-), vol. 1, p.350.

51 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol.1, pp.40-41.

52 Taine, Hippolyte, *Taine's Notes on England*, tr. by E. Hyams (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), p.22.

53 Stedman, *Victorian Poets*, p.275.

54 J. Millard, *Athenæum*, September 26, 1968, p. 394.

For a woman Augusta Webster received a comparatively good education. She attended classes at the Cambridge School of Art, learned Italian and Spanish, and became fluent in French by making brief educational visits to Paris and Geneva. However, she still had to experience Greek differently from her male contemporaries. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, she studied Greek to help a younger brother. And in a letter to John Stuart Blackie, professor of Greek in Edinburgh University, dated 30th May, 1870, she says:

You are very right in considering my excursions into Greek authors flirtations, that is just what they are as yet, for I mean to set to work at some schoolboy drudgery in a little while and so put something more like a foundation under my guesswork scholarship. I taught myself as a girl at home, what little I know mysteriously in my own room and with no adviser and what might nearly called no books and certainly no serviceable books besides the wretched Charterhouse grammar, my being able to make out the meaning of a poet — if I like him so as to be able to enter into the spirit of him — comes from a rather remarkable gift of good guessing, and my being able to retain confidence in my interpretation so made, comes from my having a husband who has learned Greek in good University earnest on insisting on my cancelling my most brilliant guesses if he thinks the grammar of the original stands in their way. I have been telling him ever since we were married that it is high time for him to take me in hand and give me a sound classical education; but he is very lazy, and I generally have a good many irons in the fire and so we don't begin my schooling. Housekeeper's duties and a little daughter to attend to and all the many social taxes on a married lady's time leave little room for any steady study, although I believe that something to learn is valuable exercise for keeping the head healthily ready for originating work, and for balancing one's brain.

I confess the flimsiness of my scholarship because, though I certainly do my own translating and though I mean to translate and publish one more Greek Drama (some one of Sophocles), I do not want to carry false colours and wear the honours of a learned person when I am but a dabbler.⁵⁵

Professor Blackie himself published metrical translations of Æschylus (1850) and Homer (1866). He had also shown interest in Elizabeth Barrett's translation of *Prometheus Bound*.⁵⁶ Perhaps Augusta Webster sounds a bit too

⁵⁵ Augusta Webster, Letter to Professor John Stuart Blackie, dated 30 May, 1870, National Library of Scotland, *Blackie Papers*, MS. 2629, ff.205-208.

⁵⁶ In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, dated 4 June 1845, Elizabeth Barrett mentions, 'The other day I had a letter from Professor Blackie of Aberdeen [...] oh, did I tell you that before? [...] To ask first for the printed copy, [...] & then for the M.S. — promising all sorts of spiritual consolations & re-integrations — but I did not send him the new work.' *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford*, vol.3, p.115.

humble in calling herself a dabbler. In fact, as indicated earlier, her Greek scholarship was recognized and esteemed by her contemporaries. However, the letter quoted above tells us a simple fact: classical education was for men and she was excluded from it. As a girl she did not have the opportunity to work at some 'schoolboy drudgery'. She did get some help from her husband, and her translations were published within the first few years of her marriage. But the social obligations of a married woman hardly left her any time for steady study. According to her letter to Blackie she wanted to translate and publish one more Greek drama, 'some one of Sophocles'. However, she never went back to Greek translation after the publication of her version of the *Medea*.

It seems that Augusta Webster planned to translate in total, one from each of the three great Greek Tragedians. Perhaps for her, translating Greek plays meant more than an 'exercise for keeping the head healthily ready for originating work'. It seems she also tried to prove that she, a woman, was intellectually equal to a man by presenting her Greek scholarship.

In an 1845 letter, Elizabeth Browning states, 'I believe that, considering men & women in the mass, there IS an *inequality* of intellect, and that it is proved by the very state of things of which gifted women complain'.⁵⁷ She admitted to Mary Russell Mitford that 'through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman, & a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes as soon as ever I was free

⁵⁷ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford*, vol.3, p.81.

of the nursery, & go into the world “to seek my fortune”.⁵⁸ And at fifty she joked about being at last reconciled to being a woman.⁵⁹ It was in her later years, after she became a wife, a mother and a successful poet, that Elizabeth Barrett Browning managed to find a story, *Aurora Leigh*, to reconcile the roles of woman and poet.

Perhaps we need to unearth more about Augusta Webster’s life, especially her childhood and youth, before we can confirm whether she had ever had ‘a steady indignation against Nature who made her a woman’ or not. But we can believe that she managed to reconcile the roles of woman and intellectual in her earlier days. William Michael Rossetti once described her as ‘one of the best of women [...] of the practical domestic type’ and declared: ‘If all literary and independent-minded ladies were like Mrs Webster, the talk about “the shrieking sisterhood” and the unsexed blue-stocking would soon die out, or stand confessed as a silly and malicious travesty of the truth.’⁶⁰

It seems Augusta Webster herself was anxious to relate her Greek scholarship to her female identity. The essays in her volume, *A Housewife’s Opinions*, are selected from the *Examiner*. Most of them are ‘social articles’. ‘A Transcript and a Transcription’ is the only review included in the volume.

Augusta Webster notes on the Preface:

I have, of course, not thought reviews suitable to this selection. Yet one review is among the contents, and perhaps its appearance asks for a word or two here. My excuse is that comments occasioned by a work of Robert Browning are, as to their theme, of an

⁵⁸ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford*, vol.2, p.7.

⁵⁹ Letter to Mrs Martin; the context is her disgust at the injustice of men in the political sphere. Thomas De Quincey, *Unpublished Letters of Thomas De Quincey and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by S. Musgrave (Auckland: Auckland Public Library, 1954), p.34.

⁶⁰ William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, 2 vols (London: Brown Langham, 1906), vol.2, p.502.

importance which makes them rather a literary essay than a review in the ordinary sense of the word. But my *reason* is that in that review I had had an opportunity of saying some things about translation generally for which I could ill find like text and illustration elsewhere.

Presumably, by including her opinions about Browning's translation of *Agamemnon*, she tried to stress the fact that she, a housewife, had a sound knowledge in Greek classics, which is traditionally a male sphere.

Prometheus Bound then seems to have held a special attraction for Augusta Webster. Prometheus is a righteous figure, suffering alone. Enchained for helping mortals, his refusal to explain his hints at a marriage that will overthrow Zeus earns him the added punishment of having his liver eaten by an eagle. He and the maddened, wandering Io, the prototype of helpless womanhood are both victims of Zeus's passion: Io suffers from the violence of Zeus's love while Prometheus suffers from the violence of Zeus's hatred.

Prometheus preoccupied the minds of many male poets of the nineteenth-century. For Byron Prometheus symbolized a type of rebel: 'Of the *Prometheus* I was passionately fond as a boy. [...] If not exactly in my plan, it has always been so much in my head that I can easily conceive its influence on all, or anything that I have ever written.'⁶¹ Schlegel thought it a masterpiece. For him the gift of fire meant the gift of culture to mankind. Goethe conceived the hero as an image of himself — a prophet, reforming a bad world. Swinburne and Meredith, later on, were to find in it an image for Italy, 'stretched on Promethean rocks, torn by fouler eagles'. Shelley read the *Prometheus* over and over again — once with Byron on the shores of Lake Lemna. In J. T. Sheppard's opinion, the dreams and

⁶¹ Lord George Gordon Byron, *Letters and Journals*, ed. by R. Prothero, 6 vols (London: J. Murray, 1898-1901), vol.4, p.174.

visions of the early part of his own *Prometheus Unbound* are exquisite developments of Æschylean themes.⁶²

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), also called *The Modern Prometheus*, is a story about an uncontrollable creature wreaking vengeful destruction upon the heads of his monomaniacal scientific creator and his world. Many Victorian writers idealised married love and the role of the wife and mother. The home was portrayed as a sanctuary in which the wife reigned as 'guardian angel' in the words of Coventry Patmore, or a 'Queen' in Ruskin's terms. Law and customs as well as literature told women that they should confine themselves to their sphere of home and family and this view was legitimatised by Victorian science which held that the psychological and cultural difference between men and women, such as women's greater tenderness, generosity and intuition, were biologically based. Women's sphere was judged to be 'naturally' different from that of men. Women, therefore, challenged the whole gender order when they demanded to cross the boundary between the private and public spheres. Opposing movements for 'improving the higher education of women', and for 'throwing open to them fields of activities' from which they were then excluded, the eminent physician Henry Maudsley stressed in 1874 that 'there are significant differences between the sexes', and women 'cannot choose but to be women; cannot rebel successfully against the tyranny of their organization'.⁶³ He claimed:

Sex is fundamental, lies deeper than culture, and cannot be ignored or defied with impunity. You may hide nature, but you cannot extinguish it. Consequently it does not

⁶² J. T. Sheppard, *Æschylus & Sophocles: Their Work and Influence* (London: Harrap, 1928), p.176.

⁶³ Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and in Education', *Fortnightly Review*, 21 (1874), pp.465-83 (p.468).

seem impossible that if the attempt to do so be seriously and persistently made, the result may be a monstrosity — something which having ceased to be women is yet not man.⁶⁴

Victorian scientists, men of letters and legislators viewed any attempt to change the sex-role system with horror. To them, it was in a sense like the creation of Frankenstein's monster, or Prometheus's theft of fire. It was said that one terrified lady jumped out of a window rather than meet Harriet Martineau — that 'allegedly appalling creation of the new age, a female Frankenstein's monster'.⁶⁵

Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), a Victorian novelist, related Prometheus to her own struggle and sufferings. Throughout her literary career she was supporting an extended family on the income from nearly one hundred novels, travel books, literary histories, biographies, and translations. Widowed young, with three small children, she was perpetually at pains to sort out the conflicting demands of motherhood and writing. Finally she lost all her children: she writes in 1894, after the death in adulthood of her two remaining children:

That was the burden and heat of the day: my anxieties were sometimes almost more than I could bear. I had gone through many trials, as I thought, and God knows many of them had been hard enough. [...] Many times I have woken in the morning feeling in myself that image of Shelley's 'Prometheus', which in my youth I had vexed my husband by not appreciating, except in what seemed to me the picture rather than the poem, the man chained to the rock, which the vultures swooping down upon him. Their cruel beaks I seemed to feel in my heart the moment I awoke. Ah me, alas! pain ever, for ever, God alone knows what was the anguish of these years.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Maudsley, pp.465-83 (p.477).

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Longford, *Eminent Victorian Women* (Auckland: Macmillan, 1981), p.20.

⁶⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant: The Complete Text*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.151.

To Augusta Webster, a woman poet who took an active part in the women's suffrage movement, who had a strong commitment to advancing women's educational opportunities, who throughout her life had been deeply concerned with various problems women facing, the choice of the play reconciles her desire for the liberation of womankind and her sympathy with victims of injustice. The *Saturday Review* believes it was not accident which led Webster to translate *Prometheus Bound*, for she 'shows a consciousness of the pain that lies hidden in our modern social life which is highly significant'. The critic claims this consciousness of social discomfort and pain is the sure forerunner of an impassioned and stormy effort to root out the evil sources of the pain:

For a time we obey the noble lesson of resignation, but eventually resignation is transformed into fiery effort. The tone which runs through Mrs Webster's poetry- [...] is that of endurance and resignation, but under this there is a sub-flavour of wonder and defiance.⁶⁷

The 'flavour of defiance' in Webster's poetry has been observed by other critics. Commenting on her volume *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867) the *British Quarterly Review* says:

Mrs Webster writes as Mrs Browning would have written, and with the same experimental or sympathetic feeling of the world's sorrow and sadness; which, however, is not so much to be utilized by inward feeling as to be conquered by resistance and the help of circumstances.

The critic points out that Webster 'would suffer as Prometheus suffered, not as Christ suffered'.⁶⁸ In Christina Rossetti's 'From House to Home', collected in

⁶⁷ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.181.

⁶⁸ *British Quarterly Review*, 46 (1867), p.249.

the volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862),⁶⁹ the woman's suffering is identified with the suffering of Christ. The speaker sees a vision of a woman standing on thorny flowers, drinking from a loathsome and bitter cup:

She bled and wept, yet did not shrink; her strength
 Was strung up until daybreak of delight:
 She measured measureless sorrow toward its length,
 And breadth, and depth, and height.
 [...]
 But as she drank I spied a hand distil
 New Wine and virgin honey; making it
 First bitter-sweet, then sweet indeed, until
 She tasted only sweet.
 [...]
 Then earth and heaven were rolled up like a scroll;
 Time and space, change and death, had passed away;
 [...]
 They sang a song, a new song in the height,
 Harping with harps to Him Who is Strong and True:
 [...]
 Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,
 Double against each other, filled, sufficed:
 All loving, loved of all; but loving best
 And best beloved of Christ.
 (ll.133-192)

As Alice Falk says, 'Such suffering becomes blessed by the sincere religious faith that many of the women poets shared. They found a higher justification in identifying with Christ.'⁷⁰ In a culture that insists on female self-effacement, in a male poetic tradition where the woman is denied a place as a speaking subject, when the nineteenth-century critics see pure art as 'too supremely selfish, perhaps, for the spirit of self-abnegation which informs the soul of a woman',⁷¹ the woman poet may try to avoid 'unfeminine selfishness' through celebrating self-sacrifice, self-denial and obedience in her writing.

⁶⁹ Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, a variorum edn, edited, with textual notes and introduction by R. W. Crump, 3 vols (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979-1990), vol.1, pp.11-90.

⁷⁰ Falk, pp.69-85 (p.75).

⁷¹ Review of 'Earlier Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1826-1833', in *Athenaeum*, December 15, 1877, p.766.

However, what the nineteenth-century critics find in Webster's poetry is the 'defiance' of the rebellious Titan, which emanates from a hubristic self.

The *Medea* of Euripides is more closely related to Augusta Webster's concern with the woman's question and her own creative writing. The plot is borrowed from the ancient legend of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, i.e. of the first explorers of the east coast of the Black Sea in quest of gold. Jason, hereditary king of Iolcos in Thessaly, was the leader of these adventurers, and had married, and on his return brought with him to Iolchos, Medea, an enchantress of Colchis, by whose aid he had surmounted every difficulty, and succeeded in obtaining the wished-for prize. By her he had two children: but having been compelled to leave his native land, and becoming enamoured of Glauce, daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth, or inspired by an ambition to connect himself with a royal race, he prepared to marry her. Orders are sent by Creon to Medea to withdraw with her children from Corinth. At this indignity her proud spirit is fired with resentment. After vainly expostulating and upbraiding Jason with the services she has done him, she resolves to take a terrible revenge. Under pretence of at last acquiescing in the expediency of the new match, she sends to Glauce a present of a robe and head-dress, secretly smeared with phosphorus, by which both Glauce and her father, who runs to her assistance, are miserably burnt to death. Not content with wreaking her vengeance on her rival, she designs to punish Jason too for his perfidy. And this she does by slaying her own children with her own hand. Having previously secured an asylum with Aegeus, king of Athens, she then escapes by a chariot provided by her grandfather, the Sun.

The *Athenæum* says, 'If Euripides is the most tragic of poets, the *Medea* is one of the most tragic of his tragedies. In it he depicts with great skill and power the feelings and conduct of a discarded wife. The subject, if not grand, is one of general interest, being confined to no time, place, or class of society. It is also one which a lady might naturally be expected to handle with success, as she must be able to enter fully into the feeling of the unfortunate heroine in her distressing condition, and, therefore, to produce a vivid copy of the tragedian's conception.'⁷² The *Contemporary Review* points out:

Mrs Webster is right in seeking the finest models of Greek tragedy when she essays to translate. It was a right instinct that directed her to the *Prometheus* of Æschylus, and certainly she could not have chosen a finer drama of Euripides, or one more deserving of good translation, than his *Medea*. For it is, indeed, one of his noblest dramas, and one which, by the skilful and natural delineation of his heroine, entitles a dramatist, whom it is too much the fashion to abuse, to a place beside Æschylus, Sophocles, and even Shakespeare.

The critic is also glad that Mrs Webster 'has not been deterred from translating it by the ill-savour of the poet's "misogyny"', and that she 'has not taken fright' at such sentiments as 'If men could raise their children other whence, / And there should be no woman-tribe at all: / So would there be no mischief in the world' (ll.574-5) or at Medea's admission — 'But woman's a poor she-thing, born to cry' (l.928), but, 'by giving them very much as she found them, enabled English readers to connect them with the context and with the character and drift of the speaker; a process which, in the one case, takes the sting out of the taunt, and in the other demonstrates its baseness'.⁷³

At the time, however, translating the *Medea* of Euripides was a less conventional thing to do than translating the *Prometheus Bound* of Æschylus.

⁷² J. Millard, *Athenæum*, September 26, 1868, p.394.

⁷³ *Contemporary Review*, 8 (1868), p.465.

For Euripides was not really popular among the Victorians. According to Richard Jenkyns, Æschylus was the most influential of the three tragedians in the romantic period, Sophocles in the middle of the Victorian age and Euripides towards the end of the century.⁷⁴ Schlegel, Macaulay, Keble and Arnold all assumed in their essays and lectures that Euripides was the least of the three poets. Paley commented in 1857:

At the present day, the taste of modern scholars has rather gone against him. [...] It is nevertheless true, that while neither Æschylus nor Sophocles has ever had any serious detractors, it has been the fate of Euripides, if he has many warm friends, also to have met with some bitter enemies. Now much of this odium is unquestionably due, not to any real faults of his own, but to the irresistible wit and raillery of Aristophanes, who, whether he had any personal quarrel with Euripides, or simply, disliked his innovation in the old tragedy, has so severely and unceasingly satirized him, that the very name of Euripides almost unconsciously connects itself with the idea of a butt set up for the arrows of ridicule. Unfortunately, most persons (at all events young persons) are more partial to what is merely amusing than to either deep thought or the exercise of independent judgment, — and we are all naturally more disposed to join others in blaming, than to stand forward in defence of disputed merit. [...] We must remember that the cleverest men are not always the most exempt from prejudice.⁷⁵

John R. de C. Wise pointed out in the *Westminster Review* in 1868: Euripides 'was misappreciated in his own day, and is still misunderstood in ours'.⁷⁶

Elizabeth Barrett Browning spoke of 'Æschylus the thunderous', 'Sophocles the royal' and 'Euripides the human, with his droppings of warm tears'.⁷⁷ F. A. Paley says, 'The very nature of his plays, so full of feeling, so touching to the heart, so deeply imbued with sympathy for the failings and sufferings of humanity, was such as to secure a large share of admiration from all who themselves know what it is to feel.'⁷⁸ And it was widely agreed that Euripides was the most modern of the three. Earlier Coleridge had thought that

⁷⁴ Jenkyns, p.106.

⁷⁵ F. A. Paley, *Euripides: With an English Commentary*, 3 vols (London: Whittaker, 1857), Preface, vi-ix.

⁷⁶ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 33 (1868), p.607.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Wine of Cyprus' in *Poems 1844*, ll.81-90.

he was 'like a modern Frenchman, never so happy as when giving a slap at the gods'.⁷⁹ Alford thought him 'of the three great masters, unquestionably the greatest Dramatist; in the modern sense'.⁸⁰ Pater found in the *Bacchae* 'touches of a curious psychology, so that we might almost seem to be reading a modern poet'.⁸¹

However, the modernity and humanity of Euripides did not help his reputation. Richard Jenkyns indicates, 'the Victorians tended to worship those artists who were most unlike themselves — Homer, Raphael, Bach'.⁸² Miller says that 'ancient tragedy departs entirely from ordinary life; its character is in the highest degree ideal'.⁸³ Schlegel, in his Third Lecture, also maintains that 'the aim of Tragic poetry was altogether to separate her ideals of humanity from the soil of Nature, to which the real human being is fettered as a vassal of the glebe'.⁸⁴

It was towards the end of the century that scholars turned increasingly from Sophocles to Euripides. So if Augusta Webster's act of translating Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* was somewhat under the influence of her Romantic grandfathers, her choice of Euripides' *Medea* in the 1860s was unconventional.

⁷⁸ F. A. Paley, *Euripides: With an English Commentary*, Preface, viii.

⁷⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London and New York: H. Mifford, Oxford University Press, 1917), p.252.

⁸⁰ Henry Alford, *Chapters on the Poets of Ancient Greece* (London: Whittaker, 1841), p.159.

⁸¹ Walter Pater, 'The Bacchanals of Euripides', *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1910).

⁸² Jenkyns, p.107.

⁸³ Gilbert Murray, *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*, Short Histories of the Literatures of the World (New York: D. Appleton, 1897), p.296.

⁸⁴ August Wilhelm von Schlegel, 'Theatre of the Greeks', *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1876), p.178.

Yet her turning to *Medea* is logical and significant. Like Euripides, Webster always shows 'sympathy for the failings and sufferings of humanity' in her creative writings, especially in her dramatic monologues, which I am going to discuss in subsequent chapters. As a student of humanity, Euripides well understood the female heart, and the power which 'Love' exercised over it. As Paley says, his strength as a poet lies in his power of depicting human passions, especially in their evil consequences. He knew human nature well, and he knew also how to describe and portray its most secret impulses and its most stormy emotions. In the *Medea*, the character of Medea is very powerfully drawn. She is a woman of ardent temperament, strong attachments, and proud and daring spirit. Euripides endows this character with great understanding. He depicts with great skill and power the feelings and conduct of a discarded wife. And he represents in vivid colours the struggles which her heart has to endure between conflicting feelings: the affection of a Mother and the stern hatred of an injured Wife. The play does castigate conventional male attitudes towards women.

Unlike his contemporaries and predecessors, Euripides took his themes from every-day life. And it is not only through the mouths of heroes, nor even of the chorus, that Euripides conveys his moral instructions. For this end he even makes use of slaves, servants, nurses, messengers, and attendants. In her dramatic monologues, Webster often gives voices to humble, unheroic characters. And in her drama *In a Day*,⁸⁵ Webster makes Olymnios, a slave

⁸⁵ Augusta Webster, *In a Day, A Drama* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882); henceforth *In a Day*.

‘whose wisdom, / More proud than all ambitions’ (p.8), the true hero of the play. And it is often through these characters that Webster’s moral instructions are voiced. Some critics have seen Euripides taking the side of women and other oppressed groups.⁸⁶ Murray claims in *Euripides and His Age* (1913): ‘To us he seems an aggressive champion of women. [...] Songs and speeches from the *Medea* are recited to-day at suffragist meetings’.⁸⁷ In the *Medea*, Euripides allows his female characters to give voice to important ideas. The female chorus sing:

The hallowed rivers backward stream
 Against their founts: right crooks awry
 With all things else: man’s every scheme
 Is treachery.

Even with gods, faith finds no place.
 But fame turns too: our life shall have renown:
 Honour shall come woman’s race,
 And envious fame no more weigh women down.
 [...]

No more the staid songs shall be heard
 Of Muses hymning our deceit;
 For Phoebus not on us conferred
 The lyre, heaven — sweet,

Lest we a counter strain should sing
 Against the race of men: but ages old
 Have in their keeping many a thing,
 Not of us only but of men to unfold.
 (*Medea*, 11.411-426)

His *Medea* is far from being silenced. In one of the most famous speeches of the play, she speaks to the Chorus, detailing the hardships of women, showing what they have in common:

For he in whom was all to me, my husband,
 Ye know it well, has proved of men most base.
 Aye, of all living and of reasoning things
 Are woman [sic] the most miserable race:

⁸⁶ See Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (London: Robert Hale, 1976), pp.103-12; Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and His Age* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1913), p.32.

⁸⁷ Murray, p.32.

Who first needs buy a husband at great price,
 To take him then for owner of our lives:
 (*Medea*, ll.223-28)

Medea gains the support of the Corinthian women by identifying herself as a woman among women. She likens her situation to theirs: 'of all living and of reasoning things / Are women the most miserable race'. Her argument is an incisive analysis of the typical Athenian woman's position. A woman leaves behind everything she could have called her own, purchases a husband she doesn't really know, and must seek to learn his ways. But even if things go well for a time, she can still lose her husband:

To be a prophetess, unless at home
 She learned the likeliest prospect with her spouse.
 And if, we having aptly searched out this,
 A husband house with us not savagely
 Drawing in the yoke, ours is an envied life;
 But if not, most to be desired is death.
 And if a man grow sick to herb indoors,
 He, going forth, stays his heart's weariness,
 Turning him to some friend or natural peer;
 But we perforce to one sole being look.
 (*Medea*, ll.235-44)

The rationale behind this double standard is the excuse that men protect women and that women must therefore submissively accept their behaviour: 'But, say they, we while they fight with the spear, / Lead in our homes a life undangerous' (*Medea* ll. 245-46). Euripides has Medea assert that men have the easier task: 'Judging amiss; for I would liefer thrice / Bear brunt of aims than once bring forth a child' (*Medea*, ll.247-48). This speech written in Fifth-Century Athens, was still significant to women in nineteenth-century Britain.

The cities of Greece were male-dominated societies. At dinner parties no women were seen except flute-girls; men spent most of the day out of doors, in the streets and marketplaces, where women, or at any rate women of good

family, were not to be seen. At Athens women of the respectable classes lived in a condition not much better than purdah. They were not citizens and had no political rights. Nor had they any independent economic status. However, they were recognized as natives of the city. The Periclean citizenship law of 451 B. C. E. stated that both father and mother had to be from Athens for a child to be a citizen, so they were essential for passing citizenship on to their sons. In *Against Neaira* (D59.122) Demosthenes claims that men 'have courtesans for pleasure, concubines for the daily tending of the body, and wives in order to begot legitimate children and have a trustworthy guardian of what is at home'.⁸⁸ This passage underlines the fact that a respectable woman's importance lay in protecting the goods of the house in her lifetime and in producing legitimate offspring. The accepted virtues of woman and man were radically different in kind: his lay in courageously winning glory in battle, hers in bearing the pain of childbirth and loving her children. Sally Humphreys points out, 'The contrast between public and private life in classical Athens was sharp. Public life was egalitarian, competitive, impersonal. Its typical locus was the open arena — market-place, law-court, theatre, gymnasium, battle-field. [...] The *oikos*, by contrast, was in closed space, architecturally functional rather than ornamental. Its relationships were hierarchic: husband-wife, parent-child, owner-slave [...] women, children and slaves had no formal place in public life.'⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Konstantinos A. Kapparis ed. and tran., *Against Neaira : [D. 59]* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), p.161.

⁸⁹ Sally Humphreys, *The Family, Women, and Death* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp.1-2.

Perhaps Victorian England bore little real resemblance to ancient Greece, but there was this similarity, that English males of the upper classes spent much of their time in institutions from which women were barred: public school and university, army and navy, Parliament, the club. [...] In both ancient Greece and England a great many women fell into one of two types; on the one hand there were wives, mothers and sisters, chaste and worshipful; on the other there was the *hetaera*, the courtesan or the servant girl, inferior in class, an incitement to adventures delightful but sordid.

At the end of the play, Medea speaks her final lines justifying the act of killing her own children and inveighing against Jason for abandoning her, from a chariot provided for her by the Sun:

I would have largely answered back thy words
 If Zeus the father knew not what from me
 Thou didst receive and in what kind hast done.
 And 'twas not for thee, having spurned my love,
 To lead a merry life, flouting at me,
 Nor for the princess; neither was it his
 Who gave her thee to wed, Creon, unscathed,
 To cast me out of this his realm. And now,
 If it is so like thee, call me lioness
 And Scylla, dweller on Tursenian plains,
 For as right bade me I have clutched thy heart.
 (Medea, ll.1366-77)

F. A. Paley claims in his edition of *Euripides*:

In the relations of wife and mother she is not unamiable; but as a wronged and castaway bride she is morbidly vindictive. Her sense of injury rankles so deeply in her mind that she will sacrifice everything to avenge it. The lives of her own children, whom she dearly loves, are not too great a price to pay for satiating her resentment against their father. She cannot brook the idea of being *slighted*. All that she has done, all that she has suffered, for a faithless husband, is vividly recalled to her mind, and is eloquently but fruitlessly urged on the cold-hearted Jason. He is apathetic to her appeal. He replies to her impassioned address by sophistical arguments, and pretends to show that he is acting really for the interest of his family in contracting a powerful alliance. He appears altogether in a despicable light, and the poet has contrived to enlist our sympathies on behalf of the murderess rather than that of her renegade and traitorous lord. We feel for the young and forlorn princess, whose romantic attachment to a stranger, and simple-minded belief in his promises, induced her to leave all for him, — home, country, father, and friends. We feel for her, even though in some sense she is a

wicked woman; but let us rather call her a natural woman, who has not been taught to view revenge in any other light than as a just and lawful satisfaction.⁹⁰

We cannot confirm whether Augusta Webster held the same opinion.

However, she certainly had read the passage quoted above, for her translation of the *Medea* is based on Paley's edition.

Restricted by her theory of translation, it is not possible for her to express her own views and feelings directly in her translation of the *Medea*. Instead of adding herself to Euripides in her translation, she did the recreation in her own poem: 'Medea in Athens'. The poem is published in her volume, *Portraits*, in 1870. It is a monologue spoken by Medea herself after the death of Jason. As the speaking subject, Medea claims that all the crimes she committed, including the murders of her own brother and her own children, were driven by Jason, a man:

Who, binding me with dreadful marriage oaths in the
midnight temple, led my treacherous flight from home
and father? Whose voice when I turned,
desperate to save thee, on my own young brother,
my so loved brother, whose voice as I smote
nerved me, cried "Brave Medea"? For whose ends
did I decoy the credulous girls, poor fools,
to slay their father? when have I been base,
when cruel, save for thee, until — Man, man,
wilt thou accuse my guilt? Whose is my guilt?
mine or thine, Jason? Oh, soul of my crimes,
How shall I pardon thee for what I am?

(*Portraits*, 10-11)

As Alice Falk says, 'translations offer particularly rich insights into a writer's assumptions and preoccupations'.⁹¹ So Webster's Greek translations provide an entry into her poetic consciousness. Medea, although a character in Greek mythology, is close kin to the fallen women in Augusta Webster's work. In her

⁹⁰ Paley, *Euripides: With an English Commentary*, vol.1, p.70.

creative writings, in general, Augusta Webster likes to see society from the position of the outsider. *A Castaway*, published in the same volume, is a 600-line poem ranging widely over the complicated issue of the fallen woman and prostitution in the nineteenth century. It is a dramatic monologue spoken by a relatively high-class courtesan. Like Io and Medea, she is an outcast. She is suffering from the law made by man — man is the one who makes her fall. Though such a character Augusta Webster manages to speak bravely about the issue of prostitution from the perspective of the fallen woman.

91 Falk, pp.69-85 (p.69).

Chapter Three

'A Castaway': the Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century

'If that tawdry-looking girl could write down her story ... we should have another masterpiece! It is because they suffer so that women have written supremely good fiction.'

Ella Hepworth Dixon¹

It is only when the slave begins to move, to complain, to give signs of life and resistance, either by his own voice or by the voice of one like himself speaking for him, that the struggle for freedom truly begins. The slave now speaks. The enslaved women have found a voice in one of themselves ... a voice calling to holy rebellion and to war.

Josephine Butler²

In *Casa Guidi Windows*, published in 1851, Elizabeth Barrett Browning points accusingly to the dark underside of economic expansion, In Angela Leighton's words, 'an underside of ignorance, crime, and prostitution':³

no light

Of teaching, liberal nations, for the poor
Who sit in darkness when it is not night?
No cure for wicked children? Christ, — no cure!
No help for women sobbing out of sight
Because men made the laws?
(*Casa Guidi Windows*, II, ll.633-39)

According to Nickie Roberts, in the nineteenth century, there were more women working as prostitutes than at any other time in Western history, before or

¹ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1929; Reprint, London: Granada, 1977), p.122.

² Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (London: Marshall, 1896), p.320.

³ Angela Leighton, ' "Because men made the laws": the Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet', *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), pp.109-127 (p.109).

since. And there were more clients too.⁴ The police estimated that there were 6,000 prostitutes in London and 25,000 in the country as a whole in the 1860s. However, as John Chapman says, the numbers given by the police only represent the 'lowest class of abandoned women', or so called 'regular' prostitutes, who were only a small proportion of the whole.⁵ Many observers thought the figure was up to ten times that. Figures as high as 80,000 prostitutes resident in London alone have been advanced. John Chapman even estimated that in the 1860s, there were about 368,000 women living wholly or in part by means of prostitution throughout the United Kingdom.⁶ The prostitutes openly solicited and crowded the streets, not only in London, but in all Britain's growing industrial cities and ports: Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and so on. When the French socialist, Flora Tristan, visited England in 1839, she was astonished at the numbers of prostitutes to be seen 'everywhere at any time of day'.⁷ Emerson, on a visit to England, was shocked by the lewdness of the after-dinner conversation of London's literary men, and was appalled at the number of prostitutes on the streets of Liverpool.⁸ Nickie Roberts believes the unprecedented boom in prostitution is related to the Industrial Revolution. She points out that the economic revolution had major consequences for working women:

While a tiny minority found employment in the factories, the rest found that the economy was not expanding fast enough to provide them with regular jobs. Those who did find work — in sweated garment workshops, as seamstresses of milliners, or in domestic service — were generally paid a below-subsistence wage which forced them either to be partially

⁴ Nickie Roberts, *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), pp.192-201.

⁵ John Chapman, 'Prostitution in Relation to the National Health', *Westminster Review*, 36 (1869), p.184.

⁶ Chapman, p.184.

⁷ Jean Hawkes, trans., *The London Journal of Flora Tristan 1842*; or, *The Aristocracy and the Working-class of England* (London: Virago, 1982), p.83.

⁸ Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p.83.

dependent on the higher wage of a male partner, or to supplement their earnings through prostitution. And even in the factories, women were paid far less than the male workers, which put them at a disadvantage in the desperate struggle for survival: they were the poorest of the poor, underprivileged even among those who had nothing.⁹

Indeed the poverty of working-class women at this time is scarcely credible. The pioneering investigative reporter Henry Mayhew plumbing the depths of 'darkest London' in 1849 to describe the lives of poor seamstress, wrote: 'I had seen much want, but I had no idea of the intensity of the privations suffered by the needlewomen.' One seamstress he interviewed told him:

I used to work at slop work — at the shirt trade — the fine full-fronted white shirt; I got 2¹/₂d. each for 'em. [...] By working from five o'clock in the morning to midnight each night I might be able to do seven in the week. That would bring me in 17¹/₂d. for my whole week's labour. Out of this the cotton must be taken, and that came to 2d. every week, and so left me 15¹/₂d. to pay rent and living and buy candles with. I was single and received some little help from my friends; still it was impossible for me to live. I was forced to go out of a night to make out my living. I had a child and it used to cry for food. So, as I could not get a living for him and myself by my needles, I went into the streets and made a living that way.¹⁰

Another woman who worked in the 'slop trade' (sewing for cheap tailors) earned precisely three shillings a week, which was insufficient, after she had bought her candles, to provide her with food. She told Mayhew of the other young single women in the slop trade: 'The prices are not sufficient to keep them, and the consequence is, they fly to the streets to make their living.'

The overwhelming majority of prostitutes in the nineteenth century were working-class women. In one late-Victorian study of London prostitutes interned in Millbank prison, over 90 per cent of the sample were from the working class.¹¹ Besides those who depended for their livelihood entirely upon prostitution, a large

⁹ Roberts, p.189.

¹⁰ Henry Mayhew, 'Prostitution among Needlewomen', *Morning Chronicle*, November 13, 1849.

¹¹ Quoted by Judith R. Walkowitz in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.15.

number of house-servants, slop-workers, milliners, dressmakers, laundresses and shop workers prostituted themselves in addition to their regular work.

Of course, the sexual exploitation of children is probably the most notorious aspect of the Victorian sex trade. Mass poverty formed a large pool of potential child prostitutes: some parents, desperately poor, sent their own children on to the street to solicit, and there were groups of orphans who lived and roamed in gangs, struggling to stay alive through begging, petty crime, and prostitution. Girls as young as twelve worked the West End streets, and some brothels were staffed entirely by children. According to one policeman of the 1880s, their clients came from the upright, Christian middle class — ‘respectable gentlemen’.¹² Before her trial in the late 1880s, Mary Jeffries, the wealthy madam of such a brothel, was quite adamant that she had nothing to fear: ‘Nothing can be done with me [...], as my clients and patrons are of the highest order.’¹³ She was very lightly dealt with.

The majority of prostitutes in the nineteenth century were then, from the working class. However, a large number, perhaps the majority of clients were from the middle and upper classes. Besides child prostitutes, who were enormously demanded by the ‘respectable gentlemen’, the number of high-class courtesans (who could only be afforded by men of higher social rank) also increased. According to Nickie Roberts, the market for high-class prostitutes had never been better, with the result that ‘the Victorian era became another classical age of the courtesan’.¹⁴

¹² Roberts, p.198.

¹³ Michael Pearson, *The Age of Consent: Victorian Prostitution and its Enemies* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972), p.100.

¹⁴ Roberts, p.198.

It seems that it was quite common for Victorian middle-class men to be implicated in prostitution. Victorian sexologist William Acton writes, 'It is a delusion under which many a previously incontinent man suffers, to suppose that in newly married life he will be required to treat his wife as he used to treat his mistresses. It is not so in the case of any modest English woman. He need not fear that his wife will require the excitement, or in any respect imitate the ways of a courtesan.'¹⁵ This passage assumes that large numbers of Victorian middle-class men will have had mistresses --- who were courtesans. During that visit of Emerson's to Britain he recorded in his diary a conversation with Dickens and Carlyle, in which they said that 'chastity in the male sex was as good as gone in our times; and in England was so rare that they could name all exceptions'.¹⁶ In the 1840s an American visitor to Cambridge commented on the habits of the students there:

There is a careless and undisguised way of talking about gross vice, which shows that public sentiment does not strongly condemn it; it is habitually talked of and considered as a thing from which a man may abstain through extraordinary frigidity of temperament or high religious scruple, or merely as a bit of training with reference to the physical consequences alone; but which is on the whole natural, excusable, and perhaps to most men necessary.¹⁷

This natural activity depended on the existence of one hundred prostitutes in a community of sixteen hundred undergraduates. The American observer added, 'that shop-girls, work women, domestic servants, and all females in similar positions, were expressly designed for the amusement of gentlemen, and

¹⁵ Quoted by Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York: Norton, 1966), p.29.

¹⁶ Quoted by Gilbert Haight, 'Male Chastity in the Nineteenth Century', *Contemporary Review*, 219 (1971), pp.252-262 (p.252).

¹⁷ Quoted by Haight, p.256.

generally serve that purpose, is a proposition assented to by a large proportion of Englishmen, even when they do not act upon the idea themselves.’¹⁸

In analysing the problem of prostitution, Victorian commentators almost always laid the burden of sin on women. In his famous book on prostitution published in 1857, William Acton admits that most of the prostitutes ‘are driven to evil courses by cruel biting poverty’.¹⁹ However, his list of factors which lead to prostitution stressed personal characteristics such as ‘natural desire; natural sinfulness; the preferment of indolent ease to labour; vicious inclinations’ before any economic factors. The bad characters of prostitutes such as dishonesty, idleness, vanity, love of dress, love of excitement, love of drink were explored and recorded by various sociologists of the period. But the characters of their male-clients (whose demand kept many of them in business) were not frequently criticized. On the contrary, excuses for their activities in prostitution were found by the experts.

There was a reluctance to believe that women, apart from prostitutes, could, or should, experience sexual pleasure. Sex was a marital duty, and the strictest view was that it was a duty only to be performed for the purpose of procreation. Thus it was assumed that a husband could go elsewhere rather than impose his desires on his wife too frequently. In William Acton’s opinion, ‘The majority of women are not very much troubled with sexual desires of any kind’, and ‘a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself’.²⁰ He also felt, like many others, that anything but the most restrained and limited sexual activity was damaging to men and women alike. However, he implies that male sexuality has to be accepted.

¹⁸ Quoted by Haight, p.257.

¹⁹ William Acton, *Prostitution: Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities* (London: John Churchill, 1857), pp.161-86.

In his *History of European Morals*, W. E. H. Lecky describes prostitutes as 'guardians of virtue' because, without recourse to prostitutes, the 'respectable' male would inevitably threaten the respectable female:

Herself the supreme type of vice, she is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her, the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted, and not a few who, in the pride of their untampted chastity, think of her with an indignant shudder, would have known the agony of remorse and of despair. On that one degraded and ignoble form are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame. She remains, while creeds and civilizations rise and fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people.²¹

But when men's activities in prostitution led to bankruptcies, ruins and diseases, prostitutes were treated as the source of corruption and diseases, while their clients were seen as victims. Venereal diseases were widespread at all levels of nineteenth century society, and as a 'deviant' group engaged in the commerce of sex, prostitutes were blamed for their spread.

The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 were introduced as exceptional legislation to control the spread of venereal disease among enlisted men in garrison towns and ports. By 1869, they were in operation in eighteen 'subjected districts'. The acts gave the police power, in the 'subjected districts', to subject any woman they suspected to compulsory and regular hospital checks for venereal disease. If she was infected, she would be interned in a certified lock hospital. If she refused, she was liable to imprisonment. In the 1870s, a broad movement for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts organized by middle-class nonconformists, feminists, and radical workingmen emerged. They challenged the acts as immoral and unconstitutional, and called for their repeal. Josephine Butler, wife of the Rev. George Butler, Principal of Liverpool College,

²⁰ Quoted by Marcus, p.32.

formed the Ladies' National Association. In 1870, the Ladies' National Association issued a sharply worded Ladies' Manifesto denouncing the acts as a blatant example of class and sex discrimination. The manifesto argued that the acts not only deprived poor women of their constitutional rights and forced them to submit to a degrading internal examination, but they officially sanctioned male vice. Repealers sustained a public campaign that sought both to educate public opinion about repeal and to influence political circles in Parliament. As part of their political agitation, repeal leaders and their paid agents descended upon the subjected districts, agitated among registered prostitutes, and encouraged them to resist the legal requirements of the acts. In 1883 the acts were suspended, in 1886 repealed.

The reformers who joined the campaign acknowledged and deplored the economic factors that led women into the sex trade. However, they were still limited by their own class bias and by their continued adherence to a separate ideology that stressed women's purity, moral supremacy and domestic virtue. Thus they became indignant when confronted with an unrepentant prostitute who refused to be reformed or rescued. The prostitutes had their reasons for refusing to be reformed. In the nineteenth century, the work in most of the Magdalen asylums and refuges for fallen women was not satisfactory. Henry Mayhew recalls the comment of a prostitute he interviewed:

She knew all about the Refuges. She had been in one, but she didn't like the system; there wasn't enough liberty and too much preaching, and that sort of thing; and then they couldn't keep her there always; so they didn't know what to do with her.²²

²¹ William Lecky, *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne*, 2 vols in one (New York: Appleton, 1869), vol.2, p.283.

²² Henry Mayhew, *London's Underworld: Being Selections from 'Those that Will not Work', the Fourth Volume of London Labour and the London Poor*, ed. by Peter Quennell (London: Blacken, 1950), p.92.

Peter Quennell points out that the ‘boredom, piety and religious discipline’ in these institutions proved ‘poor substitutes’ for the ‘Bohemian laxity and relative independence’ of the life of a prostitute.²³ Furthermore, most of these institutions neglected the after-care of their inmates. The reformers believed that prostitution was a deeply rooted evil which should be expunged from the face of the earth. But not much was said about what would happen to prostitutes once their work had been wiped out.

Many nineteenth-century writers engaged with the issue of ‘the fallen woman’ and prostitution. Among these I want specifically to look at Charles Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. These writers all expressed sympathy with fallen women in their work and in various ways challenged conventional social attitudes. A passage in William Gayer Starbuck’s *A Woman Against the World*, published in 1864, can be seen as representative of popular attitudes in the mid-Victorian period:

When a woman falls from her purity there is no return for her — as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow. Men sin and are forgiven; but the memory of a woman’s guilt cannot be removed on earth. Her nature is so exquisitely refined that the slightest flaw becomes a huge defect. Like perfume, it admits of no deterioration, it ceases to exist when it ceases to be sweet. Her soul is an exquisitely precious, a priceless gift, and even more than man’s a perilous possession.²⁴

It is hard to contradict the position that Victorian society demanded purity on the part of women, but merely discretion on the part of men. On discovery the woman falls; the man may be embarrassed for a while but may move freely in society. As Sally Mitchell says, ‘A Victorian young man did not lose his virtue when he

²³ Peter Quennell, ‘Introduction’, *London’s Underworld*, p.25.

²⁴ William Gayer Starbuck, *A Woman Against the World* (London: Bentley, 1864), vol.3, p.100.

tumbled in the hay with a cottage girl or visited a brothel, although he might have felt sinful, sullied or bestial. When applied to a woman, however, “virtue” and “physical chastity” were interchangeable terms.²⁵ There was also a common belief that women who fell must be rather weak and depraved creatures, a fallen woman was capable of sin and therefore responsible for her own destiny.

In *Ruth*, published in 1853, Mrs Gaskell criticized this common social attitude through her presentation of Mrs Bellingham. Mrs Bellingham believes that Ruth must be the cause of her son’s indiscretion and Ruth’s loss of virtue must be borne by the girl herself. Mrs Bellingham’s stand is best seen when she listens to the ‘ludicrous’ manner in which Ruth thanks God for sparing the life of Bellingham. Mrs Bellingham ‘did not imagine the faithful trustfulness of (Ruth’s) [...] heart’. As George Watt comments, it is more than the desire to protect her son from the scandal which prompts her to ignore the possibility of Ruth’s innocence: it is the result of habit and convention.²⁶ Her great fear is that Henry may wish to make more of the relationship. A fallen woman of a lower class is more than Mrs Bellingham can accept:

It was my wish to be as blind to the whole affair as possible, though you can’t imagine how Mrs Mason has blazoned it abroad; all Fordham rings with it; but of course it would not be pleasant, or indeed, I may say correct, for me to be aware that a person of such improper character was under the same (roof). (Chapter 8)

Ruth is considered ‘improper’ while Bellingham is not. And when Bellingham’s loyalty to Ruth speaks of his guilt in the affair, the mother silences the admission:

I do not wish to ascertain your share in the blame; from what I saw of her one morning, I am convinced of her forward, intrusive manners, utterly without shame, or even common modesty [...] a more impudent, hardened manner, I never saw. (Chapter 8)

²⁵ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), xi.

²⁶ George Watt, *The Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1984), p.35.

Ruth remains in Mrs Bellingham's mind a 'degraded girl', a 'vicious companion', who with her 'artifices' leads Henry astray. Ruth's youthful pliability, her simple nature and her innocent devotion, cry out against the unfairness of Mrs Bellingham's conventional and materially conditioned voice. Later in the book Mr Bradshaw serves as another version of unjust moral conventionality. He is appalled that his daughters have been 'exposed to corruption' by having Ruth as their governess, even though nothing in her character or behaviour even gave him any reason to suspect her past, and even though he admires Ruth's accomplishments and refinement so much that he wanted her to teach his daughters in the first place. Bradshaw brushes aside the Reverend Benson's suggestion that Christianity requires him to forgive sinners:

The world has decided how such women are to be treated; and, you may depend upon it, there is so much practical wisdom in the world, that its way of acting is right in the long-run. (Chapter 27)

Mrs Gaskell intends the reader to see Mr Bradshaw in an unpleasant light; he is ostentatious, harsh to his own children, and has an overbearing manner and a tasteless house. In this novel, Ruth is presented as a victim, not a sinner. In order to defend the rights of the seduced girl and the illegitimate child, Mrs Gaskell attacks those who have contributed to Ruth's fall — her careless father, her neglectful guardian, her employer, Mrs Mason, her lover Bellingham, and those who condemn her without thought, like Mrs Bellingham and Mr Bradshaw. And in her earlier novel, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848, Mary Barton's aunt, Esther, who becomes a prostitute, is also presented as a victim of seduction. Charles Dickens also shows this kind of sympathy with fallen women. In his novels corruption is always male engendered. Both Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Little Emily in *David Copperfield* are victims of predatory men.

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, when Aurora accuses Marian of committing a 'wrong' for 'certain profits' from a seducer, Marian refuses to accept the conventional role of fallen woman, and she speaks out in her own defence and transforms woman from scorned object to angry subject:

What, 'seduced''s your word!
Do wolves seduce a wandering fawn in France?
Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws
Seduce it into carrion? So with me.
I was not even, as you say, seduced,
But simply, murdered.

(AL, VI, 766-71)

Mrs Gaskell, Dickens and Barrett Browning all try to reverse the attitude which blamed women for sexual corruption. Although still presenting them in certain ways as sinners, they always play up their good qualities. Mrs Gaskell believed that woman's most womanly trait was her consideration for the weak, the helpless and suffering. Ruth never loses this kind of sympathy even in her most fallen state: her headlong rush towards suicide is stopped by a cry of pain from Benson. Martha in Dickens's *David Copperfield* is a prostitute, but one with a heart of gold. She helps to look for and rescue Little Emily even though she herself is in a pitiful condition. Again in *Little Dorrit*, the prostitute Little Dorrit encounters at night shows solicitude for her because she thinks that Little Dorrit is a child. Nancy in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, published in 1837, is a character whom Dickens hoped 'to do great things with'.²⁷ Like the fallen women mentioned above, she is described as a saving influence instead of a corrupting one. She sympathizes with Oliver Twist and helps to rescue him from the thieves despite the danger and threat she faces. At the same time, her devotion and loyalty towards the man she loves, the

²⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London, New York: Chapman and Hall, 1874), p.96.

unworthy Bill Sikes, is also remarkable. Like the pure women in Dickens's novels, Nancy is capable of self-sacrifice.

Dickens, Gaskell and Barrett Browning challenge the traditional idea that women were the source of disease, moral pollution and degradation. However, their treatment of the fate of the fallen women shows that their imagination is still more or less constrained by convention, literary convention in particular. Traditionally, the fallen woman must die or go into exile, or both, at the end of her story. Dickens's and Mrs Gaskell's fallen women always follow this convention. Esther in *Mary Barton* crawls back to her old home like a wounded animal. Mary and Jem find her on the pavement: 'fallen into what appeared simply a heap of white or light-coloured clothes, fainting or dead lay the poor crushed Butterfly — the once innocent Esther' (Chapter 38). Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son* dies repentant, hearing the blessed story of Christ's ministry to 'the criminal, the woman stained with shame, the shunned of all our dainty day' (Chapter 58). Nancy dies in the act of saving. As Philip Collins suggests, Nancy's premature and violent death 'saved Dickens from having to imagine a future life for her, in due consonance with the novel's happy ending and her state of repentance'.²⁸

According to some contemporary records, it seems that the careers of prostitutes who continued within the profession were usually brief. Many Victorian observers stated that British prostitutes usually sank rapidly from one grade of the wretched life to a lower and a lower one, until they reached the lowest depths of misery and infamy, and from the time they entered on their fatal

²⁸ Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p.96.

career their lives were seldom prolonged beyond three or four years. They believed that only in extremely rare and exceptional cases did they ever escape from their degraded position. However, other nineteenth century investigators found conversely that the great majority of prostitutes enjoyed better health than other women of the class from which they were chiefly supplied. They claimed that the downward progress and death of the prostitute, in the absolute ranks of that occupation, were exceptional; that many prostitutes returned sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life. Many of them married and settled down after they left their profession. For most of them, John Chapman says, prostitution was mainly a 'transitional state'.²⁹

In Dickens's and Mrs Gaskell's novels, the fallen women who manage to survive are always those who are lucky enough to be rescued. Ruth, Little Emily and Martha are examples. In *David Copperfield*, Little Emily and Martha are saved by Mr Peggotty and migration is the solution to their problems. They leave England and migrate to Australia. Mr Peggotty says in a hopeful manner before he leaves, 'Theer's might countries, fur from heer. Our future life lays over the sea. [...] No one can't reproach my darling in Australia. We will begin a new life over theer!' (Chapter 51) It is interesting to note that insofar as migration was one of the ways of coping with political radicals, like Philip Hewson in Clough's *Bothie*, there is clearly a latent potential for the prostitute as a socially subversive voice. The colonies became the place for what cannot be contained within the centre.

²⁹ Chapman, p.200.

In the 1840s and 50s many institutions and societies for reclaiming 'penitent females' were established. However, Mrs Gaskell and Dickens show little faith in these refuges in their writings. The fallen women in their works are always restored to a decent place in society through private rather than institutional benevolence. Ruth never goes to the penitentiary, which Mrs Bellingham suggests she might repair to. She is rescued by the Bensons, who take her to their home. Little Emily and Martha never enter a refuge. Ironically, Dickens himself was actually associated with such an institution. Since May 1846 he had been planning, and since November 1847 virtually running Angela Burdett-Coutts's 'Home for Homeless Women' — Urania Cottage. The refuge taught repentant women household skills and then sent them out to the colonies. The only statistics of its success are given in an article in *Household Words*. Of the fifty-seven girls who had been through the Home by then, thirty had done well in Australia or elsewhere, seven of them having also found husbands. Of the rest, 'seven went away by their own desire during their probation; ten were sent away for misconduct in the Home; seven ran away, three emigrated and relapsed on the passage out.'³⁰ It seems a creditable enough achievement. However, we must remember that the inmates of Urania Cottage were selected, seemingly impossible cases were rejected, and girls who proved recalcitrant were expelled. Dickens knew that the reclamation of the fallen woman was not easy. Before the refuge was established, he had already foreseen some of the difficulties. He also found that the work in most of the refuges was inefficient. After studying many similar institutions in Paris and London, he informed Miss Coutts, 'Very little has yet been done in this respect, and if you

³⁰ Quoted by Collins, p.110.

could do no better than has been done already I really doubt the expediency of founding an entirely new establishment in preference to assisting in the endowment of an existing one.'³¹ The later history of Urania Cottage is uncertain. According to Philip Collins, it seems that Dickens spent less time on it from about 1854 onwards, and his association with it ended in 1858.³²

Obviously, the success rate of the asylums and refuges was low. The author had to look for other sources of redemption for their fallen women. Motherhood is always presented as a source of redemption. In *Aurora Leigh* and *Ruth*, the illegitimate child is considered as a blessing rather than a punishment. Marian loses her sense of self and becomes nothing but a body after she is raped in a French brothel. As she says herself, she is 'murdered'. When she learns that she is going to bear a child, she feels joyful:

The light broke in so. It meant that then, that?
 I had not thought of that in all my thoughts,
 Through all the cold, numb aching of my brow,
 Through all the heaving of impatient life
 Which threw me on death at intervals, — through all
 The upbreak of the fountains of my heart
 The rains had swelled too large: it could mean that?
 Did God make mothers out of victims, then,
 And set such pure amens to hideous deeds?
 Why not? He overblows an ugly grave
 With violets which blossom in the spring.
 And I could be a mother in a month?
 I hope it was not wicked to be glad.
 I lifted up my voice and wept, and laughed.
 To heaven, not her, until it tore my throat.

(*AL*, VII, 49-63)

Motherhood, even illicit motherhood, is presented as woman's highest calling.

The child gives Marian means of life and she continues to live for the sake of her son. When Ruth finds that she is pregnant, her first act is a cry of joy to God for

³¹ Charles Dickens, *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts 1841-1865*, ed. by Edgar Johnson (London: Cape, 1953), p.175.

³² Collins, p.111.

his Blessing: 'Oh my God, I thank thee? Oh! I will be so good!' (Chapter 11)

Because she is responsible for another human life Ruth seeks religious

redemption, gains both the desire and the means to achieve a place in society.

Ruth begins to educate herself so she can teach her son Leonard. After living for

some time in the Benson household she is an altered person, though her

improvement, in some sense, conforms to middle-class standards:

Six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal. (*Ruth*, chapter 19)

Long after Ruth is religiously redeemed she suffers her social fall: her secret is made know to the world. She is dismissed by Mr Bradshaw in disgrace. But by this time Ruth has already become a much stronger person. No longer able to work as a governess, she turns to nursing and ultimately becomes director of the fever hospital during an epidemic. Her honour in the world is wholly regained; the doctor and the clergyman publish her praises. Everyone in Ecclestone knows of her past but, as a friend says, 'the remembrance of those days is swept away' (*Ruth*, chapter 34). As Sally Mitchell suggests, Ruth's victory is significant because she is regenerated not in isolation, nor in the altered society of a Utopian outback, but within a conventional and recognizable contemporary world.³³ If the story had closed here, it could have stood as a lesson in successful reclamation of the 'fallen woman'. But it does not. Bellingham falls ill. Ruth steps back into the fever to nurse him, takes the fever and dies amid her honours.

In April 1852, when Mrs Gaskell told Charlotte Brontë the outline of her novel, Charlotte praised *Ruth*'s theoretical strength, hoped for practical results

³³ Mitchell, p.33.

and suggested that it might give hope and energy to those who feared they had 'forfeited their right to both'. Then she continued: 'Yet — hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?'³⁴ In Jenny Uglow's opinion, Ruth 'had to die, if only to wring a final tear of sympathy from readers and hardened critics'.³⁵ Conventionally, madness or death is the fate of the fallen woman and Mrs Gaskell could not conceive of Ruth in other than tragic terms. Following this convention, once a woman falls, even if she is rescued and does not need to die, she is destined to a life of self-denial. Marian in *Aurora Leigh* keeps declaring that she is dead after her fall. When she rejects Romney's offer of marriage, she says:

It may be I am colder than the dead,
 Who, being dead, love always. But for me,
 Once killed, this ghost of Marian loves no more,
 No more ... except the child! ... no more at all.
 I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead;
 And now, she thinks I'll get up from my grave,
 And wear my chin-cloth for a wedding-veil,
 And glide along the churchyard like a bride
 While all the dead keep whispering through the withes,
 'You would be better in your place with us,'
 'You pitiful corruption!' At the thought,
 The damps break out on me like leprosy
 Although I'm clean. Ay, clean as Marian Erle!
 As Marian Leigh, I know, I were not clean:
 Nor have I so much life than I should love,
 Except the child. (*AL*, IX, 387-402)

When she talks of her future, she says:

Here's a hand shall keep
 For ever clean without a marriage-ring
 To tend my boy until he ceases to need
 Our steadying finger of it, and desert
 (Not miss) his mother's lap, to sit with men.
 And when I miss him (not he me) I'll come
 And say, 'Now give me some of Romney's work,
 To help your outcast orphans of the world
 And comfort grief with grief.' (*AL*, IX, 431-39)

34 T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington eds, *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, 4 vols, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1932), vol.3, p.332.

35 Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.337.

In real life, many fallen women did get married. But in Victorian literature, marriage is usually denied forever to the fallen woman, unless she is so wholly peripheral to the story that it scarcely counts. Even Dickens, who in real life insisted that the girls in Miss Coutts's refuge should be offered the bait of eventual marriage as a reward for their repentance and re-education, seldom allowed the fallen women in his novels to marry. In *David Copperfield*, Martha marries a decent young farm-labourer in Australia. However, Little Emily, a more important character, chooses a life of repentant spinsterhood and good works, though 'she might have married well a mort of times' (Chapter 63). Obviously, Dickens the novelist contradicts Dickens the social worker.

Sometimes, Victorian writers are criticized for romanticizing the issue of the fallen woman. For example, the innocence of Marian and Ruth sometimes seems too white to be true. Innocence is given to fallen women in the Victorian Literature as a kind of protection against the disapproval of the readership. Like most of the Victorian writers, Mrs Gaskell wrote for ordinary, middle-class readers. She knew that in the opinion of most readers the blame would lie with Ruth herself. For this reason she stresses her heroine's purity, her 'gentle downcast countenance', her goodness, patience and piety. Ruth's innocence is so profound that she is quite happy for a time after her fall. Her only worry is that she cannot please Bellingham enough. She does not feel doubt or guilt until a small boy refuses to let her kiss his baby sister because he had heard his mother say that Ruth was a 'bad, naughty girl' (Chapter 6). Mrs Gaskell kept her the sort of untainted girl who appealed to readers' sympathies. For the same reason, Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrays Marian as a faultless figure. These Victorian writers also tried to sweeten the dose for the readers

by delivering their fallen women from actual prostitution. Little Emily and Ruth are fallen, but they never spend any time as prostitutes. Marian is raped in a brothel, yet she never prostitutes herself for 'certain profits'.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning might have learned of the things she wrote through second-hand materials. Dickens and Mrs Gaskell knew the issue of the fallen woman at first hand. However, their treatment of it in their novels is still more or less constrained by middle-class moral conventions, as well as by the narrative structures with which they are working. In her novels Mrs Gaskell does not flinch from death, disease, starvation and violence, but she is not able to elaborate on prostitution. Esther in *Mary Barton* is presented as an extreme case. She leaves the Bartons' house and disappears after John Barton attacks her vanity:

Says I, 'Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther and then, don't you go to think to darken my door, though my wife is your sister.' (Chapter 1)

Esther becomes an outcast from her own class after her fall and there is no return for her. Also in *David Copperfield*, Little Emily and Martha are treated as extreme cases rather than common ones. And even after they are rescued, they cannot remain in England. However, in reality it was not uncommon for working-class girls, who were exposed to poverty and temptations, to become prostitutes. And many prostitutes from the working-class merged back into communities, from which they had never been wholly distinct, after they left their profession. From her early married days Mrs Gaskell's charitable work brought her face to face with women or girls who were abused and exploited, while Dickens, as we have seen, actually ran a refuge for repentant prostitutes. It seems that it was a shared concern for the fallen woman that brought Mrs Gaskell into contact with Dickens for the

first time. There is no doubt that both of them knew a great deal more than they allowed into their novels, but they were compromised by the convention, and were not able to express the whole truth.

It was not until 1870 that the prostitute was given a voice. In Augusta Webster's *A Castaway*, a voice speaking out bravely on the subject of the fallen woman appeared. In Angela Leighton's words, Webster 'makes a break with the whole tradition before her'.³⁶ Yet, the story is perhaps a little more complicated than this suggests.

A Castaway is a 600-line dramatic monologue collected in the volume *Portraits*.³⁷ In this poem, many of the social concerns of Augusta Webster are presented. Together with prostitution, which, as indicated above, was one of the most discussed social problems of the day, questions about women's education, women's employment, the life of middle-class girls and the marriage market are brought into play. Webster refuses the usual dehumanizing oversimplifications. The monologue is spoken by a relatively high-class courtesan, who muses on the course of her life. She is 'no fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools', and not 'a sort of fractious angel misconceived' either (*Portraits*, 36, 38). Like a number of speakers in Browning's *Men and Women*, Augusta Webster's heroine has reached a crisis point in her life where she can imagine neither progression nor return.

³⁶ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.197.

³⁷ Augusta Webster, *Portraits* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1870); henceforth *Portraits*.

Augusta Webster's works mainly depict upper- and middle-class life. The background of the fallen woman in *A Castaway* is different from that of Nancy or Marian. She is not an uneducated girl from the working class. She has quite a middle-class upbringing. Her story claims that prostitutes are not only from the working class: middle-class girls are exposed to the danger as well, and it is unquestionably as a danger that prostitution is presented. The overwhelming majority of prostitutes in the nineteenth century came from working class or deprived backgrounds. But then, of course, lower-class prostitutes were more easily turned into statistics than higher-class prostitutes. For example, the survey mentioned earlier, which estimates that more than 90 per cent prostitutes were from the working class, was done in a prison. As William Tait says, 'It is generally the lowest, most depraved, most degraded, and most ignorant prostitutes that are found guilty of riot and crime, and consequently most frequently committed by the police.'³⁸ Henry Mayhew points out, 'The metropolitan police do not concern themselves with the higher classes of prostitutes; indeed, it would be impossible, and impertinent as well, were they to make the attempt.'³⁹ So we may speculate, at least, that the number of the prostitutes with a middle-class upbringing is larger than the statistics show.

Obviously, Victorian middle-class girls were much less likely to become prostitutes than working-class girls. Usually, they were more protected and received more education. However, they were not always more independent and more capable in maintaining themselves than girls from the working class. On the

³⁸ William Tait, *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Rickard, 1840), p.27.

³⁹ Mayhew, *London's Underworld*, p.34.

contrary, they might be even more constrained by Victorian concepts of femininity, which might make it difficult for them to make a living. The Victorian ideal of femininity involved economic and intellectual dependency. Late-Victorian middle-class society had developed a very marked sexual division of labour. Men went outside the home to earn money to maintain the household. Their wives, on the whole, stayed at home and were economically dependent on the male breadwinners. The distinction between the world of mother — the private, comparatively leisurely routine of the home and neighbourhood activities; and the world of the father — distant, invisible — a public world of regular time-keeping and rather vague but decidedly important activities, was abundantly clear. As indicated in earlier chapters, the vast majority of middle-class parents had no interest whatsoever in cultivating scholarly abilities in their daughters. They wanted them to grow up as decorative, modest, marriageable beings. The Report of the Schools' Inquiry Commission notes:

Parents who have daughters will always look to their being provided for in marriage, will always believe that the gentler graces and winning qualities of character will be their best passports to marriage, and will always expect their husbands to take on themselves the intellectual toil and the active exertions needed for the support of the family.⁴⁰

Victorian middle-class girls were instructed that marriage was their purpose in life. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, mainly because of the disproportion between the sexes, not all of them could get married. When penniless gentlewomen were compelled to earn their own bread, teaching was one of the few livelihoods opened to them. However, since the education the middle-class girl received was generally desultory, imperfect, shallow and unsystematic, when she needed to earn a

⁴⁰ Report of Schools Inquiry Commission, P.P. 1867-78, vol.28, chapter 6, p.547, quoted by Carol Dyhouse in *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p.43.

living through teaching, it was very likely for her to find that she was not competent enough:

The efforts of a good girl who has to maintain herself or assist her family by teaching, to qualify herself for her profession, not before, but while she is exercising it, are a pathetic spectacle. [...] She will feel her incompetency at every step, and the burden on her conscience will be great. You will find her getting up at impossible hours to struggle through some sort of preparation for the labours which she cannot intermit, and squeezing half-sovereigns out of her earnings that she may employ her hard-won holidays in getting finishing lessons in studies which, properly speaking, have never been begun. Want of sound and thorough training will hamper her from first to last.⁴¹

So the ability to earn a living possessed by a Victorian middle-class girl was very limited. When she lost the protection and support of her family, and failed to secure herself a husband, a downfall was not impossible. In an article, 'The Dearth of Husbands', Webster regards the middle class as the class which produced the 'Unprotected Female' (*AHO*, 242), who was vulnerable to temptations and traps.

She asserts:

So it was generally recognised that the class which produces the Unprotected Female must, like the class which produces the Habitual Criminal, be brought, for the public good, under the redeeming influences of sound education. (*AHO*, 242)

In *A Castaway*, the exact details of the history which leads from the innocent girl to the worldly courtesan are a little baffling. Yet, the social conditions which create her are presented clearly enough. Her fall is largely caused by social and sexual disadvantage: poverty, inappropriate education, an imbalance of the number of women against men, and a shortage of work. As in Browning's monologues, contemporary readers are forced to supply the gaps in the narrative from their own, only half acknowledged information about the social oppression of women.

⁴¹ Menella B. Smedley, 'The English Girl's Education', *Contemporary Review*, 14 (1870), p.39.

Eulalie, the protagonist of *A Castaway* muses on the domestic purposelessness of her girlhood: 'New clothes to make, then go and say my prayer, / Or carry soup, or take a little walk' (*Portraits*, 35), on her lack of training for any useful work, on her stunted education: the education 'girls with brothers all must learn, / To do without' (*Portraits*, 56), and on her financial reliance on a brother, who casts her off.

The education she receives is the typical middle-class girl's education, very much similar to that of Octavia and Eloisa in *Lesley's Guardians*, and it has all the deficiencies of that education. As a Victorian middle-class girl her accepted destiny is to become a wife and mother. However, like many women of her class, she fails to secure herself a husband. Caroline in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) comments on the overstocked matrimonial market:

The great wish — the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don't want them; they hold them very cheap: they say — I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time — the matrimonial market is overstocked. (*Shirley*, Chapter 22)

In *A Castaway*, Eulalie talks of this problem in a more radical and bitter tone:

but I say all the fault's with God himself
who puts too many women in the world.
We ought to die off reasonably and leave
as many as the men want, none to waste.
(*Portraits*, 48)⁴²

The presentation of the problem offers an oblique critique of the capitalist ethic which bears much of the responsibility for the depressed situation of women. The *Castaway* imagines God is an inefficient capitalist who fails to guard against overproduction and consequent flooding of the market.

⁴² Augusta Webster prints her verse without capitals at the beginning of the lines in her 1870 edition of *Portraits*. Some nineteenth-century critics consider that as eccentricity: see *Contemporary Review*, 14 (1870), p.483; *Athenæum*, June 11, 1870, p.770. Probably as a compromise she capitalizes the words at the beginning of the lines in the 1893 edition.

In some sense, the background of Eulalie resembles that of Jane Eyre or Lesley. But unlike *Jane Eyre* and *Lesley's Guardians*, *A Castaway* is no fairy tale. Eulalie's father's dream of 'some sudden fairy come, no doubt, to turn / my pumpkin to a chariot' (*Portraits*, 49) never comes true. Becoming an orphan, losing the protection of her family, and failing to secure herself a husband, she has to work in order to maintain herself. In *Lesley's Guardians*, Lesley's uncle presumes that Lesley, who is cast into poverty with her mother, works as a governess. Lesley turns out to be a distinguished artist, in a social position which is, in her uncle's opinion, less objectionable than that of a governess (*LG*, II, 193-94). Lesley's talent is rare, and it requires early training. Like many unmarried women of her class, Eulalie starts as a governess, and enters another overstocked market:

The increasingly rush of unmarried women eager for governesses' places would have choked the market even if there had not been an addition from below to the influx: but, with the downward spread of education, such as it was, which came with the advancing prosperity of the lower orders, competition with half-educated gentlewomen became possible to similarly half-educated women of the classes which had formerly filled the more comfortable and once well respected places of upper servants. The governesses' profession, overstocked from the beginning, was evidently foredoomed to be crowded past possibility of existence for half those struggling in it. (*AHO*, 240-41)

Like the example Menella B. Smedley gives, the shallow and unsystematic education Eulalie receives in her girlhood is not enough for her to earn a living. She feels her 'incompetency at every step':

that I might plod, and plod, and drum the sounds
of useless facts into unwilling ears.
tease children with dull questions half the day,
then con dull answers in my room at night
ready for next day's questions, mend quill pens
and cut my fingers, add up sums done wrong
and never get them right; teach, teach, and teach
what I half knew, or not at all —

[...]

But I must have a conscience, must blurt out
my great discovery of my ignorance!

(*Portraits*, 49-50)

Her girlish innocence which ought to be a motive for her protection becomes her downfall since she admits her inadequacy to her employers. Her honesty merely damages her, for she is replaced by someone who 'has all ladies' learning in her head / abridged and scheduled, speaks five languages, / knows botany and conchology and globes, / draws, paints, plays, sings, embroiders' (*Portraits*, 51). She herself 'went off / to housemaid's pay, six crossgrained brats to teach, / wrangles and jangles, doubts, disgrace ... then this' (*Portraits*, 50-51). Augusta Webster leaves a gap — literally three dots — between her employment as a skivvying governess and her fall into prostitution. The three dots on the page become an emblem of the tiny distance between miserable respectability and the comfortable misery of high-class prostitution. Augusta Webster never fills in this gap, this distance, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that like other girls in her position, Eulalie was initially seduced by her employer or her employer's acquaintance.

In *Lesley's Guardians*, Webster had already presented the possibility of such a downfall. Lesley meets her first suitor Louis de l'Aubonne, a young man of the French upper class at her old master's studio when she is a student-artist. She marries him in London without knowing that Louis never meant to recognize her publicly as his wife and that in France at any rate, she is not his wife. Louis and his brother Paul work out a scheme of making her his mistress. In order to keep their conversation from 'curious ears' they speak in the patois of their birthplace. Fortunately, Simon Gueret, a French banker on a short tour in England, who understands their dialect, happens to overhear their scheme which he immediately reports to Lesley and her mother. So Lesley leaves Louis within half an hour of the marriage and of course, maintains her physical chastity. Lesley's case is a

hairbreadth escape. Webster has arranged so many coincidences here that Lesley's good fortune sounds unrealistic. The message she gives is, without such incredible good luck, that the danger a girl like Lesley is exposed to is tremendous, while the protection she has is pathetic. Later, Lesley becomes a distinguished artist and earns material comfort through her talent and hard work. She can afford nice clothes and carriages. Without knowing the real situation of Lesley, in order to diminish Louis's desire for her, Paul tells Louis that Lesley has become a prostitute. Paul is confident that the story he makes up is very close to the truth:

'I should not have used these inventions [...] if I had not been aware that under the circumstances there must exist facts resembling them. [...] The poverty in which she was when she found him (Louis), and her present manner of living and dressing in her humble position – a position which of itself forebodes'. (*LG*, II, 226-28)

Paul's story turns out to be a lie. However, his presumption reflects reality: a young woman in 'humble position' had little chance to prosper through honest work, while it was not uncommon for a penniless middle-class girl to fall into prostitution. *A Castaway* can be read, in a sense, as Augusta Webster's apology for the implausible plot manipulations of *Lesley's Guardians*. If the writer does not put her thumb on the balance, the story of the poor middle-class girl may be quite different.

The only power the Castaway possesses is her beauty, which fades as time goes by. As a successful courtesan, she is no more than a plaything of men. She herself is conscious of this. Nothing erotic enters her commercial relationships: she says, 'I hate men' (*Portraits*, 46). The message Webster gives through the presentation of Eulalie's course of life echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's much earlier claims in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft urged that girls should undergo national co-education from five to nine years and then be

taught to earn their living as doctors, midwives, nurses and business women. They should become 'friends' to their husbands instead of 'dependents', worry less about romance, appearance or inconstancy, and if their marriages failed they should be able to turn to paid professions rather than having to choose either prostitution or the 'degradation of being a governess'.⁴³

Eulalie's fall is mainly caused by economic and sexual disadvantages. However, it is also partly caused by moral choice. Not offered a fairy tale, she is also not given the inner strength and determination of Jane Eyre and Lesley. Making the fallen woman both responsible for her position and yet simultaneously a victim of oppressive social conventions and laws, is one of the most important departures of *A Castaway*. Augusta Webster realized that the pure victim is an inadequate central figure and that if a prostitute is to be given a voice, she must be both educated and capable of introspection.

Most of the fallen women in nineteenth-century literature are innocent girls who are seduced, raped or betrayed. Ruth, Esther, Little Emily and Marian Erle are examples. They are victims, dramatically presented. But as Angela Leighton says, they are only 'variations on the real theme'.⁴⁴ *A Castaway* breaks away from this tradition. There is no romance, no seduction (although we may imagine a seduction) within the poem. Eulalie is only an ordinary woman without strong will, whose life is largely determined by the solid facts of contemporary society.

⁴³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792): An Authoritative Text Backgrounds, the Wollstonecraft Debate Criticism*, ed. by Carol H. Poston, 2nd edn (New York and London: Norton, 1988), pp.52-77, pp.148-49, pp. 157-78.

She is not extremely good but also not particularly sinful. By creating such an unheroic figure, Webster presents the fact of prostitution and treats the issue without sentimentality. Exposing the reality of the profession, as Angela Leighton says, Webster 'can point to the real unmentionable of Victorian prostitution: the male client'.⁴⁵ In Victorian literature the male clients are seldom mentioned. The fallen women are very rarely seen with the men who buy them. Martha in *David Copperfield* is an outcast who wanders the streets on the brink of suicide. Dickens does not even briefly indicate the man who might have made use of her services, without whom she would not be what she is. In *A Castaway*, as Angela Leighton points out, Webster 'dares to mention the men who in reality provided the rationale of prostitution'.⁴⁶ These are not the extreme cases such as dark seducers or brutal men. Eulalie's lovers are also unheroic figures: they are, in Leighton's words, 'quite simply, other women's husbands, for whom the illicit is routine'.⁴⁷

Webster's exploration does not stop here. As Leighton says, besides the 'silent clientele of married men', Webster also exposes 'the hidden presences behind them':⁴⁸

The wives? Poor fools, what do I take from them
worth crying for or keeping? If they knew
what their fine husbands look like seen by eyes
that may perceive there are more men than one!
But, if they can, let them just take the pains
to keep them: 'tis not such a mighty task
to pin an idiot to your apron-string;
and wives have an advantage over us,
(the good and blind ones have) the smile or pout
leaves them no secret nausea at odd times.
Oh, they could keep their husbands if they cared,
but 'tis an easier life to let them go,

44 Leighton, *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), p.122.

45 Leighton, *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), p.122.

46 Leighton, *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), p.123.

47 Leighton, *Victorian Poetry*, 27 (1989), p.122.

48 Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.197.

and whimper at it for morality.
(*Portraits*, 39-40)

In Victorian literature, besides the fallen woman there is always another woman presented, usually the other way round with the fallen woman as foil to the virtuous one. In Dickens's novels, the other woman is always set opposite a pure woman. In *Oliver Twist*, there is Rose Maylie, who is admired by Nancy:

Thank heaven upon your knees dear lady [...] that you had friends to keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness and — and — something worse than all — as I have been from the cradle. I may use the word, for the alley and the gutter were mine, as they will be my deathbed.
(Chapter 40)

Amy Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* (1857) is another pure woman. She has carved her own modest, untouchable route through the streets of London. The anonymous prostitute she encounters is remorseful at having touched her and goes away with a 'strange, wild, cry' (Chapter 14). The fallen woman and pure woman live in different spheres, even if they encounter each other, they go along different ways after that. But in *A Castaway*, the other woman is the prostitute's client's wife. Even if they never meet each other, they are connected by being enslaved by the same man. Both of them are bought, the only difference is that one is bought with wedlock and the other without.

At the beginning of the poem, Augusta Webster depicts the prostitute's appearance. Far from appearing a mass of disease and mental disorder, she is beautiful and looks like a 'modest' woman:

And what's that? My looking-glass
answers in passably; a woman sure,
no fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools,
a woman with a ripe and smiling lip
that has no venom in its touch I think,
with a white brow on which there is no brand;
a woman none dare call not beautiful,
not womanly in every woman's grace.
[...]
Here's a jest!

what word will fit the sense but modesty?
A wanton I, but modest!

(*Portraits*, 36-37)

The *Castaway* further implies that in terms of appearance, she is comparable to the 'pure' women in her clients' lives:

For I am modest; yes, and honour me
as though your schoolgirl sister or your wife
could let her skirts brush mine or talk of me;
for I am modest. (*Portraits*, 37-36)

Both contemporary and subsequent critics have compared Webster's 'A *Castaway*' with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Jenny*, also published in 1870. The speaker in *Jenny*, a male client, is confused as he finds no continuity between the prostitute's appearance and what she is meant to represent culturally:

So Young and soft and tired; so fair,
With chin thus nestled in your hair,
Mouth quiet, eyelids almost blue
As if some sky of dreams shone through!

Just as another woman sleeps!
Enough to throw one's thoughts in heaps
Of doubt and horror. (*Jenny*, ll.173-76)

The speaker finds the prostitute resembles the 'pure' woman in his life — the girl who is going to become his wife:

My cousin Nell is fond of fun,
And fond of dress, and change, and praise,
So mere a woman in her ways:
And if her sweet eyes rich in youth
Are like her lips that tell the truth,
My cousin Nell is fond of love.

(*Jenny*, ll.185-92)

The portrait of Nell reminds us of the opening description of Jenny: 'Lazy laughing languid Jenny, / Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea' (*Jenny*, ll.1-2). As Susan Brown suggests, 'Nell is fond of fun and love as Jenny is fond of kisses'. Both women are 'characterized by the rather shallow emotion: fondness'. And Nell's fondness of dress and praise suggests the vanity quite often associated with

the fallen woman.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as Amanda Anderson points out, the ‘pun on “change” brings this phrase into alignment with its counterpart, “fond of a guinea”’,⁵⁰ Therefore, as Susan Brown suggests, Nell will be redeemed from Jenny’s destiny, not by any difference in her own qualities, but by the consequences of social advantages and marriage. Jenny’s prostitution is not the result of moral weakness or sinfulness on her part, but the result of socio-economic circumstances.⁵¹

In *A Castaway*, as Angela Leighton indicates, Augusta Webster blurs the distinction between the fallen woman and the ‘pure’ woman by drawing a parallel between marriage and prostitution:⁵²

Oh! those shrill carping virtues, safely housed
from reach of even a smile that should put red
on a decorous cheek, who rail at us
with such a spiteful scorn and rancorousness,
(which maybe is half envy at the heart),
and boast themselves so measurelessly good
and us so measurelessly unlike them,
what is their wondrous merit that they stay
in comfortable homes whence not a soul
has ever thought of tempting them, and wear
no kisses but a husband’s upon lips
there is no other man desires to kiss —
(*Portraits*, 39-40)

In her *London Journal*, French socialist Flora Tristan is full of indignation at the legal dependence of the married Englishwoman,⁵³ who, at that time, had no right to sue for divorce, to own property, to make a will, to keep her earnings, to refuse

⁴⁹ Susan Brown, ‘Economical Representations: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny”, Augusta Webster’s “A Castaway”, and the Campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts’, *Victorian Review*, 17 (1991), pp.78-95 (p.83).

⁵⁰ Amanda Anderson, ‘D.G. Rossetti’s “Jenny”: Agency, Intersubjectivity, and the Prostitute,’ *Genders*, 4 (1989), p.112.

⁵¹ Brown, *Victorian Review*, 17 (1991), pp.83-84.

⁵² Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, pp.197-98.

⁵³ Jean Hawkes, trans., *The London Journal of Flora Tristan 1842 or The Aristocracy and the Working-class of England* (London: Virago, 1982), p.83.

her conjugal services, to leave the conjugal home, or to have custody of her children if separated. Furthermore, marriages, especially among the well-to-do, were frequently arranged by parents. Loveless 'commercial' marriages were not uncommon.

By the time she came to write *A Housewife's Opinions* Augusta Webster seems rather more hopeful for love as a motive for marriage. In *A Housewife's Opinions*, she claims: 'There are women who marry for position; there are women, fewer probably, who marry for money. But these are the gross cases — cases which, if too frequent, are yet happily so few by comparison as to be exceptional — and they need no criticism' (*AHO*, 231). However, 'the woman sold' did preoccupy Augusta Webster throughout her literary career. She first appears as 'Cruel Agnes' in Augusta Webster's earliest work *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems* (1860), and comes back in 'A Woman Sold' (1867) and in her later work *The Sentence* (1887). In 1867 a critic even complained that Webster harped 'a great deal too much on one string' and warned that 'loveless marriages and blighted loves' threatened to 'block from her view all the rest of the broad field of human life and human passion'.⁵⁴ None of Webster's female characters who marries for money is allowed a happy ending. Agnes in 'Cruel Agnes', whose endless demands send her lover to an early grave, marries a rich baron soon after her lover's death. She suffers miserably in this loveless marriage, wastes away and dies young. Eleanor in 'A Woman Sold', widowed young, never wins back the man she once turned down: at the end of the poem, she is informed that her former lover is marrying her best friend. *Æonia* in *The Sentence*, in her desperate and aggressive quest for love and position, reveals

⁵⁴ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.182.

her infernal personality: eventually she is made to slay her lover and banishment is her destiny. Even Marion in *Lesley's Guardians*, whose case is treated with great sympathy, is not forgiven for marrying a man she does not love. She conceals her love for Maurice and encourages her best friend Lesley to marry him. She is destined to a life of loneliness and discontent. Commenting on Webster's *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*, the *Saturday Review* says:

The idea of the *Woman Sold*, the opening poem which has given a title to the volume, is old enough. The lady who sells herself for jewels and lands and servants and rank in the county is a familiar personage in modern fiction and modern poetry, just because she is a very common personage in actual life. An age that makes its account so entirely as we do in material things is sure to furnish a perilous abundance of such people.⁵⁵

Looking at the role of women in society, Dickens pointed out that marriage could be the same thing as prostitution — an exchange of sex for money. In *Dombey and Son* (1848), women within a social system dominated by mercantilism are simply one more object of trade. Dickens works out the parallel plots of Alice Marwood and Edith Dombey in neat symmetry, down to the tidy detail of their cousinship across the bar sinister. Each girl has been raised and trained for sale. The only difference is that Edith is bought with a wedding ring and Alice without. So when a woman marries without love, she is not very different from a prostitute.

Therefore, Eulalie says:

How dare they hate us so? What have they done,
what home, to prove them other than we are?
What right have they to scorn us — glass-case saints,
Dianas under lock and key — what right
more than the well-fed helpless barn-door fowl
to scorn the larcenous wild-birds? (*Portraits*, 39-40)

The prostitutes in Mrs Gaskell's and Dickens's novels are always repentant innocents. Both Esther in *Mary Barton* and Martha in *David Copperfield* have a horror of their profession. The prostitute in *A Castaway* is fully conscious of what

she is and sickened by it. However, looking back, she doesn't show much sign of repentance. The life of her girlhood is empty: her girlhood is not a 'golden gate' shut behind her, but a 'poor simple diary'. She also claims she does not miss her life as a governess. She describes her first place as a 'safe dull place; where mostly there were smiles / but never merry-making; where all days / jogged or sedately busy, with no haste' (*Portraits*, 50). But, we must notice that the vehemence of her denial of the 'poor simple diary' and the 'vexing echoes' of innocence is, in some sense, an index of the pain of her loss.

Towards those married women — her clients' wives, she shows no admiration or envy, for they are also unhappy beings. Comparing herself with the 'budding colourless young rose of home', the governess and the married women, she finds her situation is not much more tragic. What *A Castaway* exposes is not only the sorrow of prostitution, but the sorrow of the whole female sex suffering under 'the laws' made by men.

Nevertheless, the prostitute in *A Castaway* is sick of her profession, and wants to separate herself from it. But there is hardly any solution to her problems. Unlike some prostitutes from the working-class, who merged back into communities from which they had never been distinct, she cannot return to her own community. She is from the middle class, a class which demands purity on the part of women. Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* is trapped by the double barriers of a narrow provincial society and conventional attitudes towards women. Although Maggie returns without consummating the relationship with Stephen, St Ogg's condemns her. Even her brother Tom disowns her. Having

⁵⁵ *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867), p.181.

established her heroine as an outcast, George Eliot cannot imagine a future for her. It seems that death is her only relief.

Eulalie tries to return to the respectable life by going to a refuge, but she cannot bear the life there:

Dreary hideous room,
coarse pittance, prison rules, one might bear these
and keep one's purpose; but so much alone,
and then made faint and weak and fanciful
by change from pampering to half-famishing —
good God, what thoughts come! Only one week
more
and 'twould have ended; but in one day more
I must have killed myself. And I loathe death,
the dreadful foul corruption, with who knows
what future after it. (*Portraits*, 45-46)

Like many fallen women who went to the refuges, she comes out unreclaimed.

Here, Augusta Webster criticized the impracticality of the refuges:

Well, I came back,
back to my sloughs. Who says I had my choice?
Could I stay there to die of some mad death?
and if I rambled out into the world,
sinless but penniless, what else were that
but slower death, slow pining shivering death
by misery and hunger? (*Portraits*, 46)

In Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, motherhood is presented as a source of redemption. Like Mrs Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster became a mother in real life. She had one daughter, and she celebrates her motherhood in her sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter* (1895):

Young Laughters, and my music! Aye till now
The voice can reach no blending minors
near;
'Tis the bird's trill because the spring is here
And spring means trilling on a blossomy
bough;
'Tis the spring joy that has no why or how,
But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear —
Spring is so sweet and spring seems all the
year.
Dear voice, the first-come birds but trill as thou.
(*M&D*, I, 15)

That she is beautiful is not delight,
 As some think mothers joy, by pride of
 her,
 To witness questing eyes caught prisoner
 And hear her praised the livelong dancing
 night;
 But the glad impulse that makes painters
 sight
 Bids me note her and grow the happier;
 And love that finds me as her worshipper
 Reveals me each best loveliness aright.
 (M & D, II, 16)

In *A Castaway*, Webster expresses more obliquely her faith in motherhood.

Eulalie says:

Had he come before

and lived, come to me in the doubtful days
 when shame and boldness had not grown one sense
 for his sake, with the courage come of him,
 I might have struggled back. (*Portraits*, 53)

But this motherhood is denied to her, since her baby dies shortly after it is born.

So Webster does not consider motherhood an adequate solution to Eulalie's problems. Eulalie's fall is not simply caused by moral weakness and sinfulness. The complicated social and economic disadvantages of Eulalie are not simply something that the courage and strength motherhood arouses can overcome. Unlike Mrs Gaskell and Dickens, Webster offers no solution to the problems of the prostitute in her poem. She does not tell us the fate/end of the Castaway. It seems that endless, complete isolation is her destiny.

One important achievement of *A Castaway* is the primacy it gives to the voice of the fallen women. It presents a striking contrast to Rossetti's *Jenny* in this way. Mackenzie Bell observed at the turn of the century: 'It is extremely interesting to compare these two poems, one touching the theme from the

masculine, the other from the feminine standpoint.’⁵⁶ The prostitute in *Jenny* is asleep throughout the poem. From the ‘masculine standpoint’, she is made a silent object completely submitted to male observation. The prostitute in *A Castaway* is a speaking subject. In fact, being free from all the constraints and conventions, the fallen women in Victorian literature can always speak more boldly. Nancy and Marian Erle are examples. However, they are only minor characters, and their English expression is sometimes criticized for being too good for their educational background. In *A Castaway*, the fallen woman becomes the central figure, and the fact that she is educated makes the first-person narration possible. Through such a character, Webster manages to speak bravely about the issue of prostitution from the perspective of the fallen woman. The boldness of the poem is remarked by Webster’s contemporaries. Mackenzie Bell claims: ‘Were it not for the tender pity which inspires this poem as a whole some of the bitter things that fall from the lips of the lost girl would be too terrible and too daring for poetic art.’⁵⁷ As Susan Brown asserts, ‘Webster’s most powerful and subversive strategy is to merge her poetic voice with the prostitute’s first-person speech.’⁵⁸

The fallen woman has then moved in the course of the century from the pitiful Dickensian victim desperately seeking but failing to achieve so-called reintegration, to a figure, equally pitiful perhaps, who can effect a commentary on her own position and a critique of the society which has in part forced it upon her. In giving voice to the fallen woman Webster enlarges the possibilities inherent in

⁵⁶ Mackenzie Bell, ‘Augusta Webster’, in A. H. Miles ed., *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 10 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7, p.503.

⁵⁷ Bell, p.503.

the type. In her poems, in general, Webster likes to see society from the position of the outsider. Through the character of the fallen woman, an outcast from society, Augusta Webster works towards the articulation of unpalatable truths about that society.

In *A Castaway* besides exposing the reality of prostitution and the situation of the female sex, the *Castaway* bravely criticizes people engaged in the 'respectable' professions:

I know of worse that are called honourable.
Our lawyers, who, with noble eloquence
and virtuous outbursts, lie to hang a man,
or lie to save him, which way goes the fee:
our preachers, gloating on your future hell
for not believing what they doubt themselves:
our doctors, who sort poisons out by chance,
and wonder how they'll answer, and grow rich:
our journalists, whose business is to fib
and juggle truths and falsehoods to and fro:
our tradesmen, who must keep unspotted names
and cheat the least like stealing that they can:
our — all of the, the virtuous worthy men
who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,
and do their businesses of lies and shams
honestly, reputably, while the world
claps hands and cries 'good luck,' which of their
trades,
their honourable trades, barefaced like mine,
all secrets brazened out, would shew more white?
(Portraits, 39)

Conservative Victorian commentators were pleased to link prostitution with dishonesty, even criminality. The fallen woman in *A Castaway* responds by pointing out that all those respectable professions are no more honourable than hers.

Nearly a century after *A Castaway* was published, John Fowles, a twentieth century novelist, presents a Victorian woman who chooses to be an outcast figure in his novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Fowles recognizes in his

pastiche Victorian novel, which also critiques the nineteenth century legacy, that the voice of the figure who has nothing to lose is a powerful one. Sarah Woodruff, the heroine of the novel, is a woman who can 'see the pretensions of a hollow argument, a false scholarship, a biased logic', and see through people in 'subtler ways' (Chapter 9). She pretends to be a fallen woman who is slightly mad so that she can observe society as an outsider. When she is finally dismissed by her employer, Mrs Poulteney, she accuses her of hypocrisy:

'All I have ever experienced in it (Mrs Poulteney's room) is hypocrisy. [...] I suggest you purchase some instrument of torture. I am sure Mrs Fairley will be pleased to help you use it upon all those wretched enough to come under your power.' (Chapter 30)

Sarah is not the only one who detects Mrs Poulteney's dissimulation, but only Sarah, an outcast, tells her to her face. In reality fallen women were more than capable of seeing through the hypocrisy of society and, being outcasts, they could speak more freely. As Nickie Roberts says, their knowledge and experience showed them 'what a sham the prevailing morality was'.⁵⁹ A girl who was committed to prison told Josephine Butler:

'It did seem hard, ma'am, that the Magistrate on the bench who gave the casting vote for my imprisonment had paid me several shillings, a day or two before, in the street, to go with him.'⁶⁰

American prostitutes saw the 'snide, smug, respectable' men out there as hypocrites who used 'bribery, dishonesty, lies, corruption in high places, and swindled taxpayers'.⁶¹ The prostitute saw that the respectability of politicians and

⁵⁹ Roberts, p.241.

⁶⁰ Mrs Butler's second letter, Shield, 2 March 1870. Quoted by Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public 1850-1900: Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), p.212.

⁶¹ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America 1900-18* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.107.

businessmen was often really a front, behind which lay the reality of pay offs and the double standard. An anonymous prostitute wrote to *The Times* on 1858:

We come from the dregs of society, as our so-called betters call it. What business has society to have dregs — such dregs as we? You railers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, you the pious, the moral, the respectable, as you call yourselves, who stand on your smooth and pleasant side of the great gulf you have dug, and keep between yourself and the dregs, why don't you bridge it over or fill it up? [...] Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality?⁶²

Meanwhile middle-class women who were sensitive to the world around them began to perceive other circumstances — besides personal poverty — that gave them more in common with women of lower classes than with men of their own classes. In the later part of the nineteenth century, middle-class women were taking an active part in rescuing fallen women. As one of them wrote in *The Magdalen's Friend*, 'It is a woman's mission — a woman's hand in its gentle tenderness can alone reach those whom men have taught to distrust them.'⁶³ As women began to pay serious attention to prostitution and seduction, they discovered that it was their sons, their brothers, their husbands or husbands' friends that were the clients of prostitutes. The observations and knowledge of the outcasts and their view of society was transmitted to their rescuers. Sometimes, communication between the middle-class women and their fallen sisters could lead to political movements. In fact, the women's movements in the late nineteenth century were almost always directly or indirectly involved with the issue of prostitution. The movement for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts is an example. *A Castaway* was published just as the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts exploded into prominence. In her letter to the *Shield*, Josephine Butler recalls a prostitute's bitter complaint:

⁶² A letter in *The Times*, 24 February, 1858.

It is men, men, only men, from the first to the last, that we have to do with! To please a man I did wrong at first, then I was flung about from man to man. Men Police lay hands on us. By men we are examined, handled, doctored, and messed with. In the hospital it is a man again who makes prayer and reads the Bible for us. We are handed up before magistrates who are men, and we never get out of the hands of men till we die!⁶⁴

Listening to the complaint, Josephine Butler thought, 'And it was a Parliament of men only who made this law which treats you as an outlaw. Men alone met in committee over it. Men alone are the executives.' She concludes:

When men, of all ranks, thus band themselves together for an end deeply concerning women, and place themselves like a thick impenetrable wall between women and women, and forbid the one class of women entrance into the presence of the other, the weak, the outraged class, it is time that women should arise and demand their most sacred rights in regard to their sisters.⁶⁵

Feminist repealers came to feel that that the Acts were the result of an exclusively male Parliamentary system. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy asserts in a letter to *The Times* that the Contagious Diseases Acts 'could never have been proposed to, much less sanctioned by, a Parliament in which women were represented. [...] It seems hopeless to expect that this wrong will be set right until women themselves can directly influence legislation'.⁶⁶ The affirmation of solidarity between middle and lower-class women in the repeal campaign represents, as Janet Murray observes, 'one of the most radical and imaginative efforts' of the Victorian era.⁶⁷

This kind of sisterhood which can lead to political movement does not exist in *A Castaway*. There is certainly no sympathy yet between Eulalie and her clients' wives, though they are all suffering under the laws made by men. She yearns for 'some kind hand, a woman's' which can help her 'to firm ground', but

⁶³ *The Magdalen's Friends and Female Homes' Intelligencer*, 1 (1860), p.93.

⁶⁴ Mrs Butler's third letter from Kent to *The Shield*, March 9, 1870; quoted by Hollis, p.212.

⁶⁵ Quoted by Hollis, p.212.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, 'The Parliamentary Franchise for Women: to the Editor of *The Times*', *Before the Vote was Won: Arguments for and against Women's Suffrage*, ed. by Jane Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1987), pp.404-408.

⁶⁷ Janet Murray, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), p.391.

she knows that the rescuer cannot solve her problems: 'but, let her be all brave, all charitable, / how could she do it?' (*Portraits*, 46) The rescuer who comes at the end of the poem is certainly not what she wants. She calls her a 'cackling goose', who will not understand her problems and feelings. And so the need for community is articulated, without community yet being available.

In *A Castaway* the character of the fallen woman never develops. There is no solution to her problems. The Castaway remains an outcast and her life continues to be isolated and empty. However, the figure of the fallen woman gives Augusta Webster the power and freedom to write boldly. The woman's voice tells of the woman's experience of the reality of prostitution and the hypocrisy of society, and leads the reader to a further understanding of the issue of the fallen woman and prostitution. And the poem itself provides a model for future directions in women's writing.

Chapter Four

The Dramatic Monologue:

Dramatic Studies and Portraits

As a rule, I does not mean I.

Augusta Webster¹

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

T. S. Eliot²

The Victorian woman poet is, for the most part, not primarily concerned to draw on some stable sense of self out of which to write, but uses her verse as a means of exploring the fact that identity may be diffuse, reachable through writing and reading which can stretch both writer and reader well beyond the bounds of personal experience.

Kate Flint³

A Castaway is certainly one of those cases where 'I' does not mean 'I'. The voice of the prostitute allows Augusta Webster to bypass the self, and explore many truths of society. Angela Leighton claims that 'Webster's mundane sanity finds its most successful poetic expression in the dramatic monologue'.⁴

Traditionally, Robert Browning and Tennyson are credited with establishing the importance of the dramatic monologue in the nineteenth century. In November 1833, W. H. Thompson wrote to a friend of a visit from Tennyson:

He left among us some magnificent poems and fragments of poems. Among the rest a monologue or soliloquy of one Simeon Stylites: or as he calls himself Simeon of the Pillar: a poem which we hold to be a wonderful disclosure of that mixture of self-loathing self-

¹ Augusta Webster, *A Housewife's Opinions* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p.154; henceforth *AHO*.

² T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p.21.

³ Kate Flint, ' "... As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I": Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet', in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.156-66 (pp.158-59).

⁴ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.173.

complacence and self-sacrifice which caused our forefathers to do penance when alive and to be canonized when dead.⁵

'St. Simeon Stylites' was not published, however, till 1842. In 1836 Browning published his dramatic monologues 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' in *The Monthly Repository*. And he reprinted these two poems, subsequently 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' in his own 1842 *Dramatic Lyrics*⁶ under the combined heading 'Madhouse Cells'. Starting in the 1840s the genre involved most of the major Victorian poets as well as a group of minor poets. After the publications of Robert Browning's *Men and Women* and Tennyson's *Maud* in 1855 criticism began to recognise a definable genre. The reviewers, in response to *Men and Women* and *Maud*, began to develop the understanding and terminology fitting these 'portraits in mental photography'.⁷ By that time, the dramatic monologue's association with abnormal mental states and religious scepticism had been established. To Browning's and Tennyson's contemporaries the dramatic monologue was, above all, the poetry of psychology. *Maud* was seen by nineteenth-century critics as a 'remarkable sketch of poetic mental psychology',⁸ a subtle and accurate 'delineation of the path to madness'⁹ and an 'exposure of morbid self-investigation'.¹⁰ And Browning, especially since the publication of *Men and Women*, had established himself as a 'mighty [...] master of psychology'.¹¹ George Eliot was

⁵ Peter Allen, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp.162-63.

⁶ In Part III of *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-6).

⁷ *British Quarterly Review*, 118 (1865), pp.77-105 (p.102).

⁸ John Charles Buckhill, *Asylum Journal of Mental Science*, 2 (1855-56), p.102, quoted by Ekbert Faas in *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.26.

⁹ *Fraser's Magazine*, 52 (1855), p.268.

¹⁰ *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1856), p.137.

¹¹ Robert Bell, in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger & Donald Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.227.

one of the first to describe Browning's monologues as a 'dramatic-psychological' genre.¹²

Victorian criticism tended to relate the new school of psychological poetry directly to the rise of mental science. According to Ekbert Faas, psychology and psychiatry which emerged during the early nineteenth century 'struck people as new and exciting in ways entailing changes in every domain of human life'.¹³ W. J. Fox claims in his review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) that the modern poet should be grateful to the mental scientists: 'a new world' has been 'discovered for him to conquer'.¹⁴ In his 1869 review of W. W. Story's *Graffiti d'Italia* H. B. Forman links the new 'Psychological School of Poetry' to the rise of mental science, since the poetic phenomenon had evolved during the previous three decades, a time when scientists everywhere, but especially in Britain, laid the groundwork for 'a definite and invaluable science of psychology'.¹⁵

Nineteenth-century mental science may well have influenced the poets, as well as their audience. The Victorian reading public tended to search for biographical elements in literature. Like Victorian alienists 'watching their unsuspecting fellow citizens for possible signs of incipient madness',¹⁶ some Victorian reviewers screened literature for symptoms of morbidity and sickness. In 1859 Walter Bagehot points out it was the critic's solemn task to spot 'the healthiness or unhealthiness of

¹² George Eliot, *Westminster Review*, 15 (1856), in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.174-77 (p.176).

¹³ Faas, p.30.

¹⁴ W. J. Fox, *Westminster Review*, 14 (1831), pp.210-24 (p.214).

¹⁵ H. B. Forman, *Fortnightly Review*, 11 (1869), p.117.

¹⁶ Faas, p.91.

familiar states of feeling' as expressed in literary texts.¹⁷ So it is not surprising that poets like Browning and Tennyson had a fear of revealing their innermost feelings. When J. A. Froude described Carlyle's mental instability in his *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1836-1881*, the aged Tennyson said he only wished that, unlike his friend, he would not be 'ripped up like a dog' after his death.¹⁸ So poets had to find ways to keep themselves safe from the, in Carlyle's words, 'biographic appetite' of reviewers.¹⁹ In 1838 Arthur Hugh Clough discussed the matter in a letter to J. P. Gell. He admits that 'all poetry must be the language of feeling of some kind, I suppose, and the imaginative expression of affection must be poetry'. At the same time, he claims it is 'critically best and morally safest' to dramatise one's feelings 'where they are of a private personal character'.²⁰ Tennyson stresses that the speaker of *In Memoriam* was not to be mistaken for the poet: 'The different moods of sorrow as a drama are dramatically given. [...] "I" is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking thro' him.'²¹ Matthew Arnold declares in the 1853 Preface to his *Poems* that the poet is 'most fortunate, when he most entirely succeeds in effacing himself'.²² The dramatic monologue was one way through which the Victorians expressed and controlled the

17 Walter Bagehot, *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Norman St John-Stevas, vol.1 — (London: the Economist, 1965-), vol.2, p.181.

18 Charles R. Sanders, 'Carlyle and Tennyson,' *Publications of the Modern Languages Association of America*, 76 (1961), p.96.

19 Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols, ed. by H. D. Trail (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897-99), vol.28, p.47.

20 Arthur Hugh Clough, *The Correspondence*, 2 vols, ed. Frederick I. Mulhauser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), vol.1, p.73.

21 Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1897), vol.1, pp.304-305.

22 Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allot (London: Longmans, 1965), p.598.

burden of personality. 'My poetry', Browning claims, 'is always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not myself'.²³

In an article titled 'Poets and Personal Pronouns' collected in the volume *A Housewife's Opinions* (1879), Augusta Webster points out that it is the poet especially whom the general public 'are wont to assume to have filled his canvases with direct studies from living lay figures' and points of personal description 'are seized on in the most ludicrous way for identifying purposes':

He writes a poem about an unnatural grandmother; people guess which of his two grandmothers it was who endeavoured to poison him in his youth and left him with such an unpleasant feeling about it; and, if it is quite certain that he never had a grandmother, then the question is which of the grandmothers of his confidential friends he has had for heroine. (*AHO*, 152)

And even more likely the poet 'is believed to be his own lay figure':

He is taken as offering his readers the presentment of himself, his hopes, his loves, his sorrows, his guilts and remorse, his history and psychology generally. Some people so thoroughly believe this to be the proper view of the poet's position towards the public that they will despise a man as a hypocrite because, after having written and printed, "I am the bridegroom of Despair," or "No wine but the wine of death for me," or some such unsocial sentiment, he goes out to dinners and behaves like anybody else. (*AHO*, 153)

She ridicules the common assumption that the poet is 'his own lay figure' and indicates it is impractical to believe that poets feel, or have experienced all they write:

Turn over the pages of any dozen poets now living, men and women, and take all their utterances for their own in their own persons, suppose the first personal pronoun not artistically vicarious but standing for the writer's substantive self; what an appalling dozen of persons! Not to speak of those legions of love-affairs simultaneously carried on in which they indulge — although some of them, being married and moving in respectable society, ought long ago to have 'renounced all others' — not to speak of these, what sort of existences can they be that allow of all the miscellaneous tragedies and idylls which appear to diversify the days of these multifarious beings? [...] We have only to try to imagine what, if I meant I, must be the mental state of these writers of many emotions. (*AHO*, 153-54)

²³ Quoted by C. Vaughan in 'Mr Browning', *British Quarterly Review*, 80 (1884), p.8.

With a touch of playfulness, which frequently marks her journalistic writing, she concludes that the fact of the writers' being able to 'correct their proofs and get their books through press', is evidence that, 'as a rule, I does not mean I' (*AHO*, 154).

Webster asserts that 'few poets are even ostensibly autobiographical' and it is hard on them to investigate them 'as if they were putting themselves through a process of vivisection for the public to see how they are getting on inside' (*AHO*, 154-55). She points out that the personality put forward by poets who accept the 'popular theory of poetry being [...] confessional' is not always real:

The burst of sorrow has many a time had its ostensible subject hit upon only when it was wanted for the printers; the anger and withering scorn have found their theme in something that happened after the taunts and the rhymes were irrevocably fixed; the dirge has had to wait for a death to make it relevant; the love poem has had to be antedated to give it an appropriate motive (*AHO*, 154).

And she wittily indicates 'Byron's most Byronic heroes were certainly less a portrait of him than he of them; he made them and then imitated them' (*AHO*, 154). Byron has often been accused of acting. T. S. Eliot, for instance, has called him 'every inch the touring tragedian', 'a thorough going actor' and 'an actor who devoted immense trouble to becoming the role that he adopted'.²⁴

Webster demonstrates, again playfully, that the poet's use of 'I' is inevitable:

If instead of I they took to the editorial We, for instance, a man might thus write: ---

We Loved, she was unworth our heart;
We scorned her, but loved not again

without the public thinking him disrespectful to his wife from any point of view; or he might begin, 'We wept alone o'er him we slew,' without fear of his readers thinking him a case for the police. But then poets are so fond of saying 'we' in an emphatic manner as short for the particular *she* and I, and confusion might arise. The use of a little i instead of a big I might have some effect as a sort of modest disclaimer of the writer's personality in

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'Byron', in *From Anne to Victoria: Essays by Various Hands*, ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (London: Cassell, 1937), pp.601-19; see also Bancroft and Archer, 'Byron on the Stage', in *Byron the Poet*, ed. by W. A. Briscoe (London: G. Routledge, 1924), p.161.

the matter; but the printers would never stand that. Our vernacular 'says he' and 'says she' would give considerable protection; but then if they were inserted in the matter of the poems they would put the metres out.

(*AHO*, 155-56)

The recommendation Webster makes at the end of the essay, that for self-protection poets can substitute editorial pronouns for personal pronouns, is, of course ironic. 'I does not mean I', the very essence of the dramatic monologue, serves best as a means of detaching the self from the text.

In 'Poets and Personal Pronouns', Webster points out that unlike the novelist, who is expected 'to draw characters that each shall seem the presentment of some special person known in the flesh', the poet needs to represent feelings, thoughts and actions 'in a way which shall affect us as the manifest expression of what our very selves must have felt and thought and done if we had been those he puts before us and in their cases':

He must make us feel this not only of what we ourselves, being ourselves, could come to think and feel and do in like circumstances, but of what no circumstances could possibly call out in us. One may be hopelessly incapacitated by a limp and considerate mental temperament from ever becoming a murderer even in a moment's thought, and for the matter of that so may the poet, but if the poet describes the sensations of an intending murderer he has to make one feel that he has found out just what one's sensations would be if one could have been capable of thinking about committing murder. Or one may be impermeable to any more ecstatic love than goes to make a matrimonial choice in a comfortable way, but the poet describing the passion of love must make one feel that one knows it all for a fact, that those are just one's own sentiments — or at least what one's own sentiments would be if one were of the sort to fall in love. (*AHO*, 151-52)

The reader's participation in the reading process is emphasized here. George Eliot said after the publication of Browning's *Men and Women*, that in order to appreciate this new genre, the reader must shed most of his traditional preconceptions: for in Browning,

he will find out no conventionality, no melodious commonplace, but freshness, originality, sometimes eccentricity of expression; no didactic laying-out of a subject, but dramatic

indication, which requires the reader to trace by his own mental activity the underground stream of thought that jets out in elliptical and pithy verse.²⁵

H. Bernard Carpenter indicates that the reader must not only try to imagine or 'vividly realize' the speaker's situation at each point; he must also 'supply for himself the gaps often left vacant by the abrupt transitions'.²⁶ As Thomas McNicoll observes, the poet often 'leaves out a link here and another there'.²⁷

Augusta Webster obviously has observed this convention of the dramatic monologue. Like Browning's dramatic monologues, Webster's monologues often begin 'with a startling abruptness'²⁸ — the sight of a man sitting amid a waste of snow, the arrival of a message, the reflection of a face in the mirror, the bits and pieces from an old diary, a startling remark, or a seemingly insignificant phrase spoken by someone. The reader, as Hiram Corson says, 'must read along some distance before he gathers what the beginning means'.²⁹ These openings manage to catch attention, arouse curiosity as to their possible significance, and therefore induce the active participation of the reader. Commenting on Augusta Webster's poems, the *Month* points out that 'the line of dramatic monologue or dialogue, in which the chief aim is to analyse and set forth the intricacies and subtleties of character, requires somewhat of an effort on the part of the conscientious reader'.³⁰

For Robert Langbaum, the dramatic monologue induces a tension in the reader between 'sympathy versus judgment' and dramatizes the mind of a natural person

25 George Eliot, *Westminster Review*, 15 (1856), in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, pp.174-77 (p.174).

26 H. Bernard Carpenter, *Literary World* 13 (1878-79), p.67, quoted by Faas in *Retreat into the Mind*, p.174.

27 Thomas McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature* (London: B. M. Pickering, 1861), p.305.

28 Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1899), p.86.

29 Corson, p.86.

30 *Month*, 6 (1867), 276.

imagined as 'other' than the poet.³¹ A. Dwight Culler stresses the 'artificial distance between poet and speaker', arguing that the poet's ironic betrayal of his speaker is crucial to the genre:

Indeed, in the modern view, the peculiar structure of the dramatic monologue depends entirely upon this tension between sympathy and judgment — on the dramatic irony that arises from the contrast between the limited understanding the speaker has of his own words and the larger, encompassing understanding of the poet and reader.³²

As a poet Webster is often considered as a disciple of Robert Browning. In *Our Living Poets*, published in 1871, H. B. Forman groups Augusta Webster in the 'Psychological School', together with William W. Story, under the leadership of Robert Browning:

Mrs Webster's two best-known volumes make up a very respectable show of work done consistently and consciously in the method of Browning; and that method is followed with completer consistency and seeming consciousness in the last collection of *Portraits* than in the former collection of *Dramatic Studies*.³³

Forman reckons 'her works in the fashion of that school are really noteworthy'. So although by 1871 Augusta Webster had already published translations of Greek classics, which were very much esteemed by her contemporaries, a novel, long narrative poems as well as collections of lyrics and ballads, she was mainly represented by her dramatic monologues. Forman believes her work is 'not only valuable as a compact proof how firmly the analytic method is taking root, but is also supported by a good knowledge of modern life and thought, and a good classical education, much sterling thought if no strikingly new ideas, and the faculty of neat work at will'. In Forman's opinion, the salient quality of Webster's work is 'a keen

31 Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p.75.

32 A. Dwight Culler, 'Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue', *PMLA*, 90 (1975), p.367.

33 H. B. Forman, *Our Living Poets: An Essay in Criticism* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871), p.171.

power of analysis and self-elimination', which 'fits her peculiarly for graduation in that school wherein her name has been included'.³⁴

Augusta Webster finds in the dramatic monologue a poetic form that enables her to efface herself, to transcend her own personality. Surely by the time she wrote her dramatic monologues, she had consciously studied the genre established by her male predecessors. However, the influence of her 'poetic grandmothers' must not be ignored. In fact, the dramatic monologues written by Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838) predate those written by Tennyson and Browning, as well as the dramatic theories of poetry mentioned above. Landon's *Improvisatrice*, published in 1824, is the utterance of a persona. In Isobel Armstrong's words, the poem is 'a mask, a role-playing, a dramatic monologue'.³⁵ The speaker of *Improvisatrice* is an Italian woman poet, who improvises a series of miniatures of long-suffering heroines. One of the figures she turns to is Sappho (c.610, - c.580 BC), the Greek woman poet. 'My aim', claims Landon, 'has been to draw the portrait and trace the changes of a highly poetical mind, too sensitive perhaps of the chill and bitterness belonging even to success'.³⁶ Hemans's *Records of Women* (1829), a collection of poems exploring female psychology, contains several dramatic monologues. As Isobel Armstrong points out, 'given the difficulties of acceptance experienced by women writers, the dramatic form is used as a disguise, a protection against self-exposure and the exposure of feminine subjectivity'.³⁷ Furthermore, as Kate Flint states, the multiplicity of poetic voices assumed by women during the

³⁴ Forman, *Our Living Poets*, p.171.

³⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.325.

³⁶ Quoted by Flint, pp.156-166 (p.156).

³⁷ *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, p.325.

nineteenth century 'acts as a challenge to the identification of women with the purely subjective, the personal, the sensual, the incapacity to grasp the wider vision'.³⁸ Felicia Hemans's *Records of Woman* includes British, French, Indian, German, American and Greek narratives from different historical periods.³⁹ Felicia Hemans's dramatic monologues also experiment with male speakers. The male speaker of 'The Indian with his Dead Child' (1830) digs up the corpse of his dead child to carry it through the woods and reburial it at his homeland because his grief had been ignored by the white settlers. He protests:

When his head sank on my bosom,
 When the death-sleep over him fell,
 Was there one to say, "A friend is near?"
 There was none! — pale race, farewell!⁴⁰

The speaker must raise his son from the 'grave-sod, / By the white man's path defiled' and carry him hundreds of miles to escape the 'spoiler's dwellings'.⁴¹ Kate Flint considers it as an example of the woman poet's expressing social and political protests which 'stretch far beyond personal experience'.⁴² The dramatic monologue, in Kate Flint's term, offers the woman poet a means of 'literary transvestism', allowing her to don, as it were, a wide variety of rolls.⁴³ It is now a critical commonplace to remark that the theme and motifs of Hemans's 'The Indian with his Dead Child' are somewhat reworked in Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1850). The speaker is a Black American slave, who murders her newborn baby, the result of rape by a white master. She carries its body through the woods and eventually buries it in a

³⁸ Flint, p.165.

³⁹ *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, p.324.

⁴⁰ Felicia Hemans, *The Poetical Works of Mrs Hemans: Reprinted from the Early Editions, with Explanatory Notes, etc.* (London and New York: Frederick Warne, 1891), p.381.

⁴¹ Hemans, 380-81.

⁴² Flint, p.162.

⁴³ Flint, pp.165-66.

hand-dug grave. The works of Hemans were reprinted on countless occasions right up until 1900 and, as Joseph Bristow reckons, her experiments with the dramatic monologue 'would have far-reaching effects on the development of this poetic form throughout the nineteenth century'.⁴⁴ We might not necessarily assume a direct relationship between Hemans and Augusta Webster. But Webster must have known the works of Hemans. Marion Raymond, the remarkable female character in her novel *Lesley's Guardians*, reads Mrs Hemans (*LG*, II, 21).

Tying Webster to the female poetic tradition, Dorothy Mermin claims that Webster 'vastly enlarges the range of voices through which women poets can speak'.⁴⁵ Webster probably wrote her first dramatic monologue, 'The Snow Waste', in 1856, just a year after the publication of Browning's *Men and Women*. In the poem she recounts a Dantesque vision of one who has sinned through jealousy. According to Mackenzie Bell, Webster wrote 'The Snow Waste' at the age of nineteen, after a sleepless night.⁴⁶ The poem was first published in 1866, collected in the volume *Dramatic Studies*.⁴⁷

Dramatic Studies contains eight dramatic monologues of remorse, renunciation and compromise: 'A Preacher', 'A Painter', 'Jeanne D'Arc', 'Sister Annunciata', 'The Snow Waste', 'With the Dead', 'By the Looking-Glass' and 'Too Late'. Among the eight monologues in the volume, three are spoken by women. As Mackenzie Bell says, 'One of the chief features of Augusta Webster's more mature poetry — her intense and

⁴⁴ Joseph Bristow, *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.4.

⁴⁵ Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁴⁶ Mackenzie Bell, 'Augusta Webster', in *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, ed. A. H. Miles (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7, p.502.

⁴⁷ Augusta Webster, *Dramatic Studies* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866); henceforth *DS*.

passionate study of Woman's position and destiny — first became manifest in "Dramatic Studies".⁴⁸ *Dramatic Studies* was well received by nineteenth century reviewers: Eric S. Robertson says the volume is 'remarkable for man-like reserve of expression, and sympathy for varied phases of character'.⁴⁹ Mackenzie Bell believes 'all these "soliloquies" prove their author to possess in full measure the faculty of "thinking the thoughts of others"'.⁵⁰ The *Athenaeum* says Webster 'endeavours to translate herself thoroughly into the characters which she conceives'.⁵¹ 'The Snow Waste' was the poem most admired by nineteenth-century critics: the *Illustrated London News* sees it as a 'remarkable example of Augusta Webster's precocity and power'.⁵² Mackenzie Bell believes it is the best poem in the volume and the "'Dantesque" conception is treated in a masterly manner'.⁵³ The *Reader* claims 'The Snow Waste' is a 'noble and imaginative poem of which any living poet might be proud'.⁵⁴

Webster's next collection of dramatic monologues, *Portraits*, appeared in 1870. 'A Castaway', the striking sketch of a prostitute, which has been discussed in Chapter III, is collected in this volume. Two editions were published in February and August. The first edition contains eleven monologues: 'Medea', 'Circe', 'The Happiest Girl in the World', 'A Castaway', 'A Soul in Prison', 'Tired', 'Coming Home', 'In an Almshouse', 'An Inventor', 'A Dilettante' and 'The Manuscript of S. Alexius'. A third edition of *Portraits* was issued in 1893 with an additional poem, 'Faded', which was

⁴⁸ Bell, p.502.

⁴⁹ Eric S. Robertson, *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies with Illustrative Extracts* (London: Cassell, 1883), p.355.

⁵⁰ Bell, p.502.

⁵¹ *Athenaeum*, August 11, 1866, p.175.

⁵² *Illustrated London News*, September 15, 1894, p.330.

⁵³ Bell, p.501.

written in 1870, after the publication of the second edition. 'A Preacher' and 'A Painter' from the *Dramatic Studies* are also added to this edition of *Portraits*. The *Athenaeum* points out the portraits Webster draws in this volume have the 'cardinal merit of being life-like' and the 'soliloquies' display Webster's 'great insight into the workings of different minds'. The critic claims in most of these monologues there is moral significance, and, that being moulded in dramatic form, they teach without preaching, and produce deeper effect than so called didactic poetry.⁵⁵

Besides *Dramatic Studies* and *Portraits*, *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867) contains various dramatic monologues, under the title 'Anno Domini'— a set of studies from characters in the New Testament: Bartimæus, Judas, Pilate and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. The *British Quarterly Review* points out that Webster's 'power of conceiving remote and almost unique states of feelings, as in "Judas" and "Pilate", is remarkable'.⁵⁶

As I have indicated, the dramatic monologue came to be associated with abnormal mental states, often morbid and criminal. In Ekbert Faas's words, 'From the perspective of contemporary alienism, St Lawrence, St Simeon Stylites, Johannes Agricola, and the speaker of "Remorse" all suffer from some form of total or incipient religious insanity, while Porphyria's murderer is an example par excellence of the morally insane.'⁵⁷ Tennyson's *Maud* is considered by nineteenth-century critics as 'the history of a morbid, poetic soul'⁵⁸ and the speaker is seen as a

54 *Reader*, June 2, 1866, pp.537-38.

55 Thomas Purnell, 'Portraits', *Athenaeum*, June 11, 1870, p.770.

56 *British Quarterly Review*, 46 (1867), p.249.

57 Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.51.

58 Quoted in Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Alfred Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), p.1039.

character on the road towards madness.⁵⁹ The poem constitutes the ramblings of an unnamed speaker, disaffected with peace-time England, who savagely decries a grotesque landscape and corrupt society. He grows sanguine temporarily through his love for his more socially and financially secure neighbour, Maud, until, in a confused duel, he murders Maud's brother. After a time at an asylum in Breton, where he learns of the death of Maud, the protagonist heads off, in a blaze of nationalistic fervor, to fight in the Crimean War.

Webster's 'The Snow Waste' is also a history of a deeply troubled soul. It describes in allegory the penalty of the heart which, having shut love out, lies in darkness and becomes a castaway of all human emotions. Like a condemned sinner in Dante's *Inferno*, the poem's speaker, trapped in snow, recounts his jealousy and the murder of his wife and brother-in-law. The allegorical landscape around the speaker is well contrived. The poem opens with a frightful picture of 'one sitting 'mid a waste of snow', with nothing living but himself, companioned by 'two forms that seemed of flesh, / But blue with the first clutchings of their deaths' (*DS*, 113). The protagonist, who 'uttered speech / That was as though his voice spoke of itself / And swayed by no part of the life in him' (*DS*, 114), tells how he was jealous of, even hated, his wife's brother, and how he having lost his wife by the plague, tricks his brother-in-law into going in to embrace the corpse, and then locks him in with it to catch the plague. As H. B. Forman says, the poem is a 'powerful rendering of that

⁵⁹ George Brimley, in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by John D. Jump (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p.193.

arrogant egotism of a mean soul'.⁶⁰ Like Mackenzie Bell, the *Guardian* admires

Webster's treatment of the 'Dantesque' conception:

Poets and painters have both represented cold as an instrument of penal torture. Do our readers know Gustave Dore's icefield, over which Dante and Virgil walk together among the heads of the wretches frozen into it? Even there, according to both poet and illustrator, human passion can glow with terrible fervour. But Mrs Webster is more consistent; her penal snow waste excludes the heat even of immoral emotions: the wretched sufferer tells the tale of his crime with a dull, dreamy loathing, a quiet nothingness of gaze, in 'shadeless rhythm' and monotonously recurring rhyme. The cold has eaten into his soul.⁶¹

Again in the poem 'With the Dead', the connecting thread is jealous hatred.

The speaker, a pagan, is in love with Lucilla, a Christian maiden. Having lost her through her preference for Glaucon, a fellow-Christian, the pagan feigns half-conversion, and betrays the Christians in the hope of saving her and getting Glaucon out of the way. Things do not turn out as he wishes and he is driven mad by watching Lucilla's horrible death. Webster gives a striking rendering of how the pagan attains repeatedly to a shallow desire towards Christianity, but is always pushed back by his hatred for Christian Glaucon. The pagan has constantly before him the thought that the death he meant to part her from Glaucon has instead united her to him. And this thought is thrust upon him by reading over and over the legend on the grave-slab: 'LUCILLA A SWEET SOUL ASLEEP IN CHRIST. / AND GLAUCON LOVING HER, MORE LOVING CHRIST' (*DS*, 136, 138, 148). This simple legend combines the two suggestions of what the tortured, haunted man most desires — rest and sleep; and what he most loathes — the community that Glaucon belongs to. And this antithesis of hate and craving for rest is sustained throughout the poem.

Also throughout the poem the speaker's insanity is emphasized. The poem opens with the lines 'The hour has come, my hour of yearly rest / From the long

⁶⁰ Forman, *Our Living Poets*, p.175.

⁶¹ *Guardian*, August 29, 1866, p.905.

madness while I grope my way' (*DS*, 133). Then when he sees Lucilla's spirit in his dream the pagan cries, 'Thou madest me suffer more than I did thee' (*DS*, 138). When he recounts the moment he loses Lucilla to Glaucon he says, 'So my love / Grew a great madness' (*DS*, 140). As he reads the legend on the tomb-slab repeatedly he claims he is a madman 'held [...] in the place of tombs' (*DS*, 143). And he concludes his utterance by crying, 'Oh gods! my madness drives me on. / Darkness, all dark — I know not what I say' (*DS*, 148).

The protagonists of 'Pilate', 'Sister Annunciata' and 'Jeanne D'Arc' also question their sanity. Overcome by guilt, doubt and fear the speaker of 'Pilate' cries: 'What! can I never now / Trust myself with myself? Must there still come / This madman's mood upon me' (*AWTS*, 66). Jeanne d'Arc in prison, recalling her 'visions', cries out to the saints for help, to rescue her from the 'mad dreams' (*DS*, 31). When Sister Annunciata's attempts to pray give way to memories of her lover she asks:

Am I mad? Am I mad? I rave
[...]
Oh this was what I feared.
The night-watch is a long one and I flag,
My head is hot, I feel the fever fire
Of weariness before the languor comes. (*DS*, 64)

with extraordinary intellectual or moral positions placed in dramatic and self-revealing situations. Generally speaking, these situations are moments of crisis, which make the speaker want to tell his or her story. So in her dramatic monologues Webster observes and makes use of the tradition established by Browning and Tennyson, to explore and exhibit the innermost feelings of a variety of characters.

Showing the influence, then, of her acknowledged mentor, Robert Browning, Webster wrote dramatic monologues in blank verse, often on sociological themes. Webster looked to her own age for the materials of her monologues, addressed the broad issues of her own day — the crisis of faith, the role of art, the ills of a mercenary society and above all, the woman question. Commenting on *Portraits*, the critic of the *Spectator* asserts: 'It is clear that she does not hold to the principle of "art for art's sake"; she seeks to give utterance to the thoughts and feelings of the day, to its faith and doubts, to the aspects under which life presents itself to its children.' Defining the dramatic monologue as 'philosophy in verse', he believes Webster finds it the most serviceable and powerful form for her purposes:

The volume is a series of soliloquies, in which a number of men and women, good and bad, utter their thoughts about themselves and about the world. The plan has the conspicuous advantage that an author is not hampered with the limitations from which he can scarcely set himself free when he speaks in *propria persona*; that he sets forth different attitudes of mind and phases of feeling with an unrestricted fullness and force.⁶³

Webster's debt to Robert Browning in *Dramatic Studies* is most apparent in 'A Preacher' and 'A Painter'. 'A Painter' is a kind of reply to Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto'. As Angela Leighton has remarked: it takes Browning's poem about the moral and inspirational basis of art and rewrites it into the context of the nineteenth-century art market.⁶⁴ The theme of 'A Painter' and the style it adopts

⁶³ *Spectators*, 43 (1870), p.497.

⁶⁴ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, pp.184-85.

are so close to those of Browning's poem that one may well suspect Webster of mimicry in this case. The speaker, the Painter, has just completed a painting which, 'though so far short / Of what I aimed at' (*DS*, 15), he nevertheless feels he can praise. But he has not been able to devote himself to his art in the way he feels he ought to have done. He is a poor man who married for love before he had established a reputation; impulsively he and his lover did not wait. It is an impulse that he both applauds, for he loves his wife, and deprecates, since he must do hack work to support his family. He despises the sentimental and sententious work that he must churn out for the market:

Ah well I am a poor man and must earn;
 And little dablets of a round-faced blonde
 Or pretty pert brunette who drops her fan,
 Or else the kind the public, save the mark,
 Calls poem-like, ideal, and the rest —
 I have a sort of aptness for the style —
 A buttercup or so made prominent
 To point a moral, how youth fades like grass
 Or some such wisdom, a lace handkerchief
 Or brodered hem mapped out as if one meant
 To give a seamstress patterns — that's to show
 How 'conscientious,' 'tis the word, one is —
 And a girl dying, crying, marrying, what you will,
 With a blue-light tint about her — these will sell:
 And they take time, and if they take no thought
 Weary one over much for thinking well.
 A man with wife and children, and no more
 To give them than his hackwork brings him in,
 Must be a hack and let his masterpiece
 Go to the devil. (*DS*, 16-17)

Yet he also despises the framers of public reputations, 'critics forsooth / Because they have learned grammar' (*DS*, 16) and wishes that his new work could be judged by 'Raphael and Michael Angelo', who he believes might have found in his work 'something of the soul / That was their art' (*DS*, 17). Browning's Andrea is aware that he lacks the soul of Raphael and Michelangelo and blames his unfaithful wife, Lucrezia, for his falling short while Browning implicitly conveys

that it is the same moral failing that contaminates both his love relationship and his art.

The Painter's wife, Ruth (the very name figuring fidelity and endurance), encourages her husband's work as well as being a good mother. The Painter knows this and loves her, yet he permits himself to entertain the notion that he would have succeeded without her, only to admit that in another sense he would be nothing as artist or man without her loving support. This is in a way similar to *Andrea*: the same infirmity corrupts both life and work.

Angela Leighton points out that Browning, unlike Webster, is working with absolutes. Browning obviously believes that true genius is a possible thing and will rise above the exigencies of the every day and, by implication, the age. She goes on to suggest that the commodification of art may itself condition or prohibit the possibility of genius but detects a slippage into the simple inadequacy of the man at the end of the poem.⁶⁵ A further poignancy of the poem, however, is the way in which commodification contaminates human relationships, until the Painter is confused about whether his wife is an asset or a burden, although all the time he knows that this is not really the point.

Like 'The Painter' 'A Preacher' is torn between self-knowledge and self-justification. The poem analyses the condition of a conscientious Victorian clergyman, using him to examine the nature of contemporary faith. The preacher is fundamentally self-aware, and troubled by his imperfections. Contrasting his lack of religious intensity with the powerful emotions he can evoke in his hearers and reflecting on the inconsistency of his private tolerance for the foibles he denounces

⁶⁵ *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, pp.184-85.

from the pulpit, he says, 'I seem / Divided from myself' (*DS*, 5). He is aware of the rhetorical power of his preaching: he can stir believers but cannot himself be stirred, cannot align his inner self with his outer presentation, he has in reverse the problem of the most famous of Webster's women speakers – a Castaway. 'A Preacher' was originally published in *Dramatic Studies* but subsequently included in the third edition of *Portraits* presumably because Webster wanted the poem to be informed by its new context: the Preacher after all begins with an adapted text from I Corinthians:

'Lest that by any means
When I have preached to others I myself
Should be a castaway.' (*DS*, 3)

So both male and female dilemmas are invoked to examine the tensions between inner and outer, private and public: the fallen woman and the doubting preacher are found to be siblings under the skin.

The protagonists of 'Sister Annunciata' and 'Jeanne D'Arc' are spiritual, self-sacrificing characters. Unlike Hemans, who emphasizes the heroism and martyrdom of her heroines in 'Joan of Arc in Rheims', 'The Bride of the Greek Isle', 'The Switzer's Wife' and 'Gertrude', Webster focuses on the irresolution and inner turmoil they suffer. The *Athenaeum* claims 'Sister Annunciata' shows 'a peculiar psychological insight' and 'the power to fathom the secrets of the heart and to unravel their intricacies'.⁶⁶ The speaker of the poem takes the veil for family reasons:

There were too many daughters in our home,
Too scanty portioning, and, with a name
So high as ours, need was that none should wed
But with the other noblest houses: then
It must not be that one of the three sons
Should be too poor to bear up from the dust
The honour of his heirship of long race;
And where were dowers for such brides, and where
Gold purses for the spending of such sons? (*DS*, 61)

⁶⁶ *Athenaeum*, August 11, 1866, p.175.

The reality of the upper-class marriage contracts are revealed here. The protagonist of the poem is chosen by the family to take up a 'saintly life' so that her dowry can be saved. She herself, however, 'in her folly of eighteen', chooses for herself a 'mad match', a young man from an impoverished noble house like hers, and it has been decided by both families that 'the pair must never wed' (*DS*, 61, 62). During her vigil, while deeming herself Christ's bride, Sister Annunciata cannot help looking passionately back on her earthly lover. Interestingly, the critical concern with the identity of the speaking voice seems to be brought into play in this poem. As the protagonist utters passions and desires which she is expected to deny, she vainly tries to argue that 'I doesn't mean I':

Why am I — ?
 Am I mad? Am I mad? I rave
 Some blasphemy which is not of myself!
 What is it? Was there a demon here just now
 By me, within me? Those were not my thoughts
 Which just were thought or spoken — which was it?
 Oh not my thoughts, not mine! (*DS*, 64)

Ironically, it is obvious that the voice she refuses to identify with here tells exactly her deepest memories, innermost thoughts and desires. In the second part of 'Sister Annunciata', trying to soothe and encourage a young nun who is new to the 'holy bondage', the Abbess Ursula tells the story of the now-dead Annunciata, who has died peacefully after 'spiritual visions', which actually reflect the struggle of denying her earthly lover:

 Some one came, she said,
 Who had been dear to her, and, whispering close
 Beside her bed where she lay taking sleep
 After a half-night's vigil, tempted her
 To pray to heaven that heaven might be for her
 Eternal life with one she once had loved — [...]
 She said 'Ah! make me not remember now
 Whom the saints' selves have bidden me forget,'
 [...]
 While she was struggling in a sort of maze
 Between a wish to shriek the prayer aloud
 And a half-sense of something more than her

represents the feelings of women less fortunate than herself. Commenting on 'A Castaway', Mackenzie Bell indicates 'if a fault can be found in the writing of "Castaway" [...], it is that the delineation of Woman's heart in the most appalling condition of Woman's life is too painful'.⁶⁷ However, the speakers in these monologues are different from the suffering women in Hemans's *Records of Woman*. In Hemans's volume, women are either heroic spirits like the Switzer's wife, Gertrude and Joan of Arc, or victims of treachery or violence. Even when her female protagonists are victims, they suffer heroically. And the poems often express an affirmation of dignity and pride. Perishing of an unrequited attachment, Properzia Rossi, a celebrated female sculptor, dedicates all her strength and passion to her last work, a basso-relievo of Ariadne:

It comes! The power
Within me born flows back — my fruitless dower
That could not win me love. Yet once again
I greet it proudly, with its rushing train
Of glorious images; they throng — they press —
A sudden joy lights up my loneliness —
I shall not perish all!

The bright work grows
Beneath my hands, unfolded as a rose,
Leaf after leaf, to beauty; line by line,
I fix my thought, heart, soul, to burn, to shine.⁶⁸

As purely righteous as religious martyrs, figures like the bride of the Greek isle and the protagonist of 'Indian Woman's Death-Song' commit suicide. The bride of the Greek isle, captured by the pirates who have slain her husband, avenges the death of her compatriots and groom and brings about her own by setting fire to the ship. A victim of man's faithlessness, the Indian woman drowns herself and her child in the Mississippi. Before she dies the Indian woman lifts 'her sweet voice'

⁶⁷ Bell, p.503.

⁶⁸ Hemans, p.336.

that 'rose awhile / Above the sound of waters, high and clear' and sings proudly a 'song of death':

Roll swiftly to the spirit's land, thou mighty stream and free!
Father of ancient waters, roll! And bear our lives with thee!

Perishing, the Indian woman sings the last two verses to her female child:

And thou, my babe! Though born, like me, for woman's weary lot,
Smile! — to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave thee not;
Too bright a thing art *thou* to pine in aching love away —
Thy mother bears thee far, young fawn! From sorrow and decay.

She bears thee to the glorious bowers where none are heard to weep,
And where the unkind one hath no power again to trouble sleep;
And where the soul shall find its youth, as wakening from a dream:
One moment, and that realm is ours. On, on, dark rolling stream!⁶⁹

Speakers in Webster's 'mirror poems' break away from the notion that 'the victim speaks in a pure voice: I suffer therefore I have moral purity and none can question what I say'⁷⁰ and they invariably lack the heroic qualities portrayed in Hemans's poems. As Leighton says, 'womanhood in these monologues, while not simply victimised as it is in Hemans, appears self-divided, not because of disingenuousness within, but because of reflections and myths without.'⁷¹ The speaker of 'A Castaway' is certainly not a victim who 'speaks in a pure voice'. Recalling her old self — a simple middle-class girl — the worldly prostitute says, 'now it seems a jest to talk of me / as if I could be one with her, of me / who am ... me' (*Portraits*, 36). Trying to find some inner explanation of her socially determined identity she scans the face in the mirror, which only makes her confront the contradiction between the soul and the face:

⁶⁹ Hemans, pp.353-54.

⁷⁰ Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power, and Meaning', in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. by Nanerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi (Brighton : Harvester, 1981), pp.127-145 (p.136), quoted by Leighton in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.37, p.131.

⁷¹ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.178.

And what is that? My looking-glass
 answers it passably; a woman sure,
 no fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools,
 a woman with a ripe and smiling lip
 that has no venom in its touch I think,
 with a white brow on which there is no brand;
 a woman none dare call not beautiful,
 not womanly in every woman's grace.

(*Portraits*, 36)

As Angela Leighton suggests, Webster uses the monologue, 'not to divulge the moral and emotional inconsistencies of the inner self, but to probe the borderlands between its social construction and its unknown potentiality'.⁷²

The Speaker in 'By the Looking-Glass' is a plain girl who returning from a wearisome ball, where her plainness has been painfully on display, looks in her mirror knowing that what she sees in it cannot be transformed or repudiated. Again this is a figure of pathos and pain. Her inner self and desires seem no different from those of a good-looking girl: she too longs to be loved. As an amateur painter, she compensates by surrounding herself with beauty, feeding upon it 'till beauty itself must seem / Me, my own, a part and essence of me, / My right and my being' (*DS*, 151). However, the mirror brings her to face with the self seen by the outside world and to fear that this is her identity: 'Alas! it is I, I, I' (*DS*, 150).

But the potential pun here undermines what is affirmed and comes perhaps from Webster's own training as a painter and her knowledge of the function of the 'eye'. On the one hand, the cry asserts the inescapability of the publicly and socially constructed self, but on the other the pun suggests that beauty is more than a question of surface. The problem is that the plain girl herself cannot believe this: she is plain not because the world fashions her so but because she believes it does. And it is this belief, rather than the surface that the mirror reflects, that confirms the

girl's fate and corrupts her inner self, making her incapable of the self-forgetfulness that love demands. She believes that she has been passed over by her nearly lover for her 'young fair sister', but another story is latent in the poem, a story where her would-be lover is repulsed by her refusal to open herself to him:

I thank God, I have not loved,
Loved as one says it whose life has gone out
Into another's for evermore. (*DS*, 153)

And so the plain girl is left still with the desire to be loved but without the capacity for loving.

Another poem that deals with divided selves and at the same time shows that concern with the visual arts that runs through much of Webster's work from her novel to her children's story, is 'Faded'. The poem does not appear in the 1870 editions of *Portraits* but is included in the 1893 enlarged edition.⁷³ At first the narrative appears to be a rather conventional lament of an aging, unmarried woman for her lost youth as she sits in the dusk looking at a painting of herself when she was a young girl. The woman addresses the 'Fair, happy morning face who wast myself' (*Portrait* III, 63). But the relatively straightforward contrast of expectant youth and disappointed age turns into a subtle examination of the impermanence of the artistic image as well. At last the speaker imagines how the painting itself will be replaced after the woman is long gone and the cycle of apparently fixed representation and changing life will begin again with a new image. But more than this, the representation, too, is subject to change and decay and thus comes more subtly to figure the processes of life:

⁷² Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.186.

⁷³ Augusta Webster, *Portraits*, enlarged 3rd edn (London and New York: Macmillan, 1893); henceforth, *Portraits* III.

Yes; after me thou'lt years and years be thus,
 Be young, be fair, be, dumb unconscious toy,
 Beloved for youth and fairness; but at the end
 Age and decay for thee too. Face of mine,
 Forgotten self, thou art woman after all:
 Sooner or later we are one again:
 Both shall have had our fate ... decay, neglect,
 Loneliness, and then die and never a one
 In the busy world the poorer for our loss.
 (*Portraits* III, 69)

In 'The Happiest Girl in the World', Webster gives voice to a figure frequently objectified in the poetic tradition. Under her fiancé's male gaze the protagonist of the poem is a 'dewy daisy'. Seeing her 'come along the coppice walk beneath the green and sparkling arch of boughs', watching the yellow lights that 'played with the dim flickering shadows of the leaves' over her 'yellow hair and soft pale dress', the man says, 'I see my wife; this is my wife who comes, / and seems to bear the sunlight on with her' (*Portraits*, 25-26). Watching her sleeping he concludes that she loves him 'utterly, no questioning, no regretting' (*Portraits*, 29). Webster makes her heroine speak from a position conventionally associated with silence. The speaker of the poem is a girl just betrothed. It is a marriage of choice and there seems to be a certain romance in the courtship. However, far from being the happiest girl in the world, as others take her to be, she is full of doubts:

Where are the fires and fevers and the pangs?
 where is the anguish of too much delight,
 and the delirious madness at a kiss,
 the flushing and the paling at a look,
 and passionate ecstasy of meeting hands?
 where is the eager weariness at time
 that will not bate a single measured hour
 to speed to us the far-off wedding day?
 (*Portraits*, 28)

Looking forward to her wedding day she says:

I am so calm and wondering, like a child
 who, led by a firm hand it knows and trusts
 along a stranger country beautiful
 with a bewilding beauty to new eyes
 if they be wise to know what they behold,
 finds newness everywhere but no surprise,

and takes the beauty as an outward part
of being led so kindly by the hand.

(*Portraits*, 28)

She is not unlike the 'Sleeping Beauty' described in Webster's social essay 'Matrimony as a Means of Livelihood', who waits unconsciously in her enchanted palace for the lover who awakens her 'to the fullness of life', and is 'quite ready to start with whomever it is on the journey to wherever he may be going to take her, providing he can pay the travelling fares' (*AHO*, 230-31). In the article Webster points out:

The position of our multitude of fresh unpremeditating girls with no particular office in life except to be marriageable may be likened to that of the spell-bound princess waiting, forewarned yet unconsciously except in dreams, for a husband. (*AHO*, 231).

The speaker of 'The Happiest Girl in the World' admits before the engagement she 'more gladly danced with some one else' who 'waltzed more smoothly and was merrier' and 'more gladly talked with some one else' whose 'words were readier' and who 'sought' her more (*Portraits*, 24). She is hesitant about the substantiality of her affection for the groom. She is afraid the love she calls love is 'less than love':

This love which only makes me rest in him
and be happy and so confident,
this love which makes me pray for longest days
that I may have them all to use for him,
this love which almost makes me yearn for pain
that I might have borne something for his sake.

(*Portraits*, 27)

Her mood parallels what Augusta Webster describes as the typical state of mind of women who marry in order 'to be married, to be "settled in life", to have a home and be thought a somebody and be taken care of and never be called "old maid"':

Marriage is for them a means of livelihood, and any marriage better than none. In this mood joy at an offer often enables a woman to set up for him who makes it such a comfortable good will as may seem to meet all his requirements in affection and appreciation for him, and in many cases, even her own. (*AHO*, 231)

Webster explores various possible outcomes of such a marriage. She observes that frequently 'the amicability may stand wear, and in a kindly and unromantic nature,

develop into a very proper wifely regard'. And if 'aided by a pleasurable sentiment towards the bridegroom', does fairly well as a substitute for 'more exalted feeling'.

However, she warns:

Where the woman has not succeeded in learning, but only in hoping to learn, what she feels to be a sufficient affection to last her as a wife, or where, having acquired as much affection as suffices for most women who marry for marriage's sake, she is yet aware that she would have been capable of a different, deeper feeling to some different man, she is accepting a position her nature cannot but deteriorate and she will become that worse thing than a 'social failure', a domestic failure. There is no need to suppose her more ready to drift into flirtations or misconduct than her neighbours who have married with more love or a less conscious indifference. (*AHO*, 231-32)

The story after the 'Sleeping Beauty' marries her prince is not told in 'The Happiest Girl in the World'. The poem ends in the speaker's reaffirming her position as the sleeping beauty who is waiting, while appearing not to wait:

my truant should be here again by now,
is come maybe. I will not seek him, I;
[...]
I will wait here, and he shall seek for me,
and I will carelessly — (*Portraits*, 33-34)

In her essay 'Husband-Hunting and Match-Making' Webster points to the contradictory romantic attitudes expected of marriageable girls:

People think women who do not want to marry unfeminine: people think women who do want to marry immodest. [...] This is hard upon marriageable women. [...] They must wish and not wish; they must by no means give, they must certainly not withhold, encouragement; they must not let a gentleman who is paying attention think them waiting for his offer; they must not let him think they [...] are not waiting for his offer. (*AHO*, 234)

As Angela Leighton says, the sleep of the sleeping beauty is 'not for poetic dreams, but for the hypocrisy and resulting mental paralysis of trying to do and think two contradictory things at once; for being both dedicated sexual objects and innocently blank sexual subjects'.⁷⁴ Webster's monologue, like her journalism, deals with the political truths behind, in Leighton's words, 'life's pleasing myths'.

⁷⁴ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.172.

Webster then, uses the dramatic monologue to portray figures who clearly raise contemporary social issues. On the other hand, she also uses a common strategy of Browning and Tennyson by giving voices to mythological, historical or literary figures. In 'Poets and Personal Pronouns' Augusta Webster claims:

The highest powers of creative imagination have usually found their fittest exercise in intensified portrayal of the men and women and events of history or of legends and tales. It seems as if the resistance, so to speak, offered to the plastic despotism of the artist by characteristics accepted, not made, called forth a subtler and a stronger skill than if he had worked with the limitlessness of free invention. (*AHO*, 150-51)

In practice, she often adapts voices that have already been heard so that her speakers include both invented, hence unknown figures, and figures about whom the reader will already have preconceptions. Giving 'Jeanne D'Arc' as an example, Mackenzie Bell claims that, Webster is 'no less dramatically effective' when her subject is historical than when it is contemporary.⁷⁵ In 'Medea in Athens' and 'Circe', Webster deals with classical figures. However, as the critic of the *Spectator* points out, the speakers in these two poems are 'modern' rather than 'classic'. He believes that Webster, who has herself translated 'with no little skill the great drama of Euripides', must be perfectly aware how different her Medea is from the heroine of the Athenian dramatist:

Nothing is more remarkable than the simplicity, the straightforwardness, so to speak, of the character of the classical Medea; the complexities of motive, the intricate self-questionings which we find in the Medea of the "Portraits" is out of harmony not only with the original conception, but generally with the tone of Greek thought in such matters.⁷⁶

'Medea in Athens' is obviously Webster's partial defence of Euripides' heroine. It continues the untold story left by Euripides. At the beginning of the poem, Medea is informed of Jason's death. The protagonist recounts Jason's treachery as well as her own crimes. She claims she has been a 'grave and simple girl in a still home'

⁷⁵ Bell, p.502.

⁷⁶ *Spectator*, 43 (1870), p.497.

learning her spells for 'pleasant services' until Jason turns up to change her 'natural blood' with 'fanged kisses':

With me went
the sweet sound of friends' voices praising me:
all faces smiled on me, even lifeless things
seemed glad because of me; and I could smile
to every face, to everything, to trees,
[...]
for all things glad and harmless seemed my kin,
and all seemed glad and harmless in the world.
Thou cam'st, and from the day thou, finding me
in Hecate's dim grove to cull my herbs,
didst burn my cheeks with kisses hot and strange,
the curse of thee compelled me. Lo I am
the wretch thou say'st; but wherefore? by whose
work? (Portraits, 10)

Like the fallen woman in *A Castaway*, Medea blames man for what she has become:

Man, man,
wilt thou accuse my guilt? Whose is my guilt?
mine or thine, Jason? Oh, soul of my crimes,
how shall I pardon thee for what I am? (Portraits, 11)

'Circe' is represented by Angela Leighton and George Macbeth as reflecting the life of a Victorian middle-class girl with nothing fulfilling to do. As Angela Leighton observes, the opening of the poem expresses 'active female desire':⁷⁷

The sun drops luridly into the west;
darkness has raised her arms to draw him down
before the time, not waiting as of wont
till he has come to her behind the sea;
and the smooth waves grow sullen in the gloom
and wear their threatening purple; more and more
the plain of waters sways and seems to rise
convexly from its level of the shores;
and low dull thunder rolls along the beach:
there will be storm at last, storm, glorious storm!
(Portraits, 14)

On her island of enchantment, where she feels imprisoned, she sees 'Always the same blue sky, always the sea / the same blue perfect likeness of the sky' (*Portrait*, 15). The landscape reflects the condition of Circe's life and it is the 'modern

condition'. As George Macbeth points out, 'Circe' 'spells out an effective moral about feminine prurience and boredom in the England of the 1860s'.⁷⁸ The female frustration, discontent and imprisonment presented in 'Circe' had been expressed in Webster's first volume, *Blanche Lisle and other Poems*,⁷⁹ published in 1860. The opening of 'Blanche Lisle' illustrates the boredom of an upper-class adolescent girl with nothing to do:

The gold-barred shadows slumber on the grass,
Unstirred by breathing of the languid day,
Seldom and slow the lazy cloudlets pass,
Flecking the blue sky with their silvered grey,
And faintly floating on to fade away. (*BL*, 1)

Blanche gazes at the landscape 'With dreamy wistful eye of discontent' (*BL*, 3). She is 'Too curbed for joy, too care-free for distress, / Wearied of all things, most of its own weariness' (*BL*, 3). Angela Leighton claims that the speaker in 'Circe' is 'evidently yet another nineteenth-century woman begging for that most elusive of rights: the right of experience'.⁸⁰ In her 'Cassandra' Florence Nightingale presents a scene of typical Victorian upper-class family life and points to the young women of the 'higher classes':

What are the thoughts of these young girls while one is singing Schubert, another is reading the Review; and a third is busy embroidering? Is not one fancying herself the nurse of some new friend in sickness; another engaging in romantic dangers with him, such as call out the character and afford more food for sympathy than the monotonous events of domestic society; another undergoing unheard-of trials under the observation of some one whom she has chosen as the companion of her dreams? Another having a loving and loved companion in the life she is living, which many do not want to change?⁸¹

⁷⁷ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.194.

⁷⁸ George Macbeth, *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.277.

⁷⁹ Augusta Webster, *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1860); henceforth *BL*.

⁸⁰ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.195.

⁸¹ Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra and other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. by Mary Poovey (New York: New York University Press), p.207.

Leighton draws a connection between Webster's Circe and Florence Nightingale's Cassandra, suggesting that like Cassandra, Circe cries for more real human 'anguish':⁸²

Give me some change. Must life be only sweet,
all honey-pap as babes would have their food?
And, if my heart must always be adrowse
in a hush of stagnant sunshine, give me, then,
something outside me stirring; let the storm
break up the sluggish beauty, let it fall
beaten below the feet of passionate winds,
and then to-morrow waken jubilant
in a new birth; let me see subtle joy
of anguish and of hopes, of change and growth.
(*Portraits*, 16)

The most fruitful comparison for 'Circe' is probably, however, 'A Castaway'. As 'A Castaway' gives voice to the silenced fallen woman, 'Circe', like 'Medea in Athens', of course, allows the terrible destroyer of male virility to speak her sexual disgusts and desires. As Circe watches the first signs of the sail that surely heralds Ulysses, she thinks about the way that the about-to-be-shipwrecked sailors will behave on the morrow. She speaks of men with all the contempt of the Castaway for her clients: they will begin soberly, thanking the gods for their escape from death, speak of their wives and children and weep. But shortly they will begin to enjoy the good life and become at last, drunken, lewd and gluttonous; 'and I shall sickly look and loathe them all' (*Portraits*, 21).

Unlike the Castaway, however, Circe still has a fantasy of male mastery that Webster seems to suggest is one of the other unfortunate consequences of female lack of occupation and over deference to the arts of female seductiveness. Circe, for all that she is given a hearing, remains a male sexual fantasy, a scornful woman waiting for the man that will possess her:

⁸² Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, p.195.

why am I given pride
 which yet longs to be broken, and this scorn,
 cruel and vengeful, for the lesser men
 who meet the smiles I waste for lack of him,
 and grow too glad? Why am I who I am?
 but for the sake of him whom fate will send
 one day to be my master utterly,
 that he should take me, the desire of all,
 whom only he in the world could bow to him.
 (*Portraits*, 18)

What lends the poem the edge that we have come to expect of Augusta Webster is, however, our knowledge that the man will come and after a brief blissful interlude, he will, like the clients of the Castaway, go back home to his Penelope. In these deconstructions of myth, then, Webster anticipates the work of twentieth-century women poets and novelists.

According to Ekbert Faas, it was a commonplace of nineteenth-century poetry and mental science to compare the 'psychology of individuals with that of entire eras, nations, movements'.⁸³ In 1854 a contributor of the *Journal of Psychological Medicine* wrote:

The association of ideas [...] is manifested in national and social as well as individual habits of thought. There is also from age to age a progressive development of nations and societies which, varying in its successive phases, begins and ends in a like manner in every successive cycle, because it is guided onwards by similar associations of ideas, each linked to its predecessor and developing its successor. It follows, therefore, that the stages of development in the lives of nations as well as of individuals are comparable.⁸⁴

Numerous dramatic monologues of this period were inspired by a psychoanalytic spirit in dealing with historical subject matter. Specific characters and sentiments are dramatized 'as the offspring of a given time and place'⁸⁵ and history is reinterpreted psychoanalytically. Among the dramatic monologues using this 'historic view' there is a group dealing with biblical subject matter. In 'The Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician' (1855), 'Cleon' (1855) and 'A Death in the Desert'

⁸³ Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind*, p.169.

⁸⁴ *Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 7 (1854), pp.1-2.

(1864). Robert Browning views the events surrounding Jesus Christ through various personal perspectives: through an Arab doctor to whom Lazarus's resurrection is a mere revival from a prolonged epileptic trance; through a pagan philosopher-poet despairing of his immortality yet who longs for the new message of Christianity to be true; and through one of the evangelists, St John. As David Masson, a nineteenth-century reviewer, points out, in the monologues dealing with New Testament subject matter, Browning and his confrères try to imagine 'the different impressions made on different men occupying different points of view in that great Pagan and Polytheistic world, by this new doctrine which they saw creeping in upon them from Judea, and by the facts reported to them concerning its origin'.⁸⁶

Angela Leighton points out that in 'Pilate' Webster 'sets her monologue at a crossroad of culture'.⁸⁷ According to Matthew 27:19, Pilate's wife sent her husband the following message regarding Jesus: 'Have thou nothing to do with the just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.' The poem opens with a short dialogue between Pilate and his wife. Therefore as a whole poem Webster's 'Pilate' is not really a monologue. Pilate, who, in Leighton's words, 'represents the older, classical values of judicious expediency',⁸⁸ argues that his duty to the stability of the Roman Empire is more important than his duty to the life of an innocent individual:

It means a man, a ruler as I am,
Must look beyond the moment, must allay
Justice with prudence. Innocence is much
To save a man, but is not everything
Where a whole province is at stake for Rome.

⁸⁵ C. Vaughan, 'Mr Browning', *British Quarterly Review*, 80 (1884), p.24.

⁸⁶ David Masson, 'Men and Women by Robert Browning', *British Quarterly Review*, 23 (1856), pp.151-80 (p.171).

⁸⁷ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets Writing Against the Heart*, p.179.

⁸⁸ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets Writing Against the Heart*, p.179.

How many lives think you had cost this life
Refused to these hot zealots? (*AWS*, 54)

Pilate's statement certainly strikes a modern note here and therefore can be seen as another example of Webster's making the classical modern. As Angela Leighton has noted, Pilate's statement echoes John Stuart Mill's argument in *On Liberty* (1859):

In the morality of the best Pagan nations, duty to the State holds even a disproportionate place, infringing on the just liberty of the individual; in purely Christian ethics, that grand department of duty is scarcely noticed or acknowledged. [...] What little recognition the idea of obligation to the public obtains in modern morality is derived from Greek and Roman sources, not from Christian.⁸⁹

Throughout the poem Pilate keeps identifying himself with pagan religion, referring to 'Apollo' and 'the Gods'. As Tom Davidson pointed out in 1868: 'We know that the teachings of Christianity were to the Greek foolishness'.⁹⁰ The first words Pilate says in the poem are 'Foolishness! foolishness', in response to his wife's prophetic dream of Christ's divinity. Emphasizing his male importance and reminding Procla to stick to her woman's sphere, he ends his conversation with his wife:

And now, dear Procla, leave me, I have work,
Letters and long reports to write for Rome.
Go to your tapestries — a fitter use,
And fairer, for your wits than these sad thoughts.
(*AWS*, 60)

So Webster's Pilate also represents the traditional values of a male-centred society.

However, unlike the wife in 'A Painter' and 'A Preacher', who is necessarily mute,

Procla is given a voice. Procla argues:

And does that mean
A woman thinks a judge is to be just,
And a man thinks a judge is to resolve
What policy were spoiled if he were just?
(*AWS*, 54)

⁸⁹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. By Gertrude Himmelfarb (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859), p.90.

⁹⁰ Tom Davidson, 'Las Veneris', *The Radical: A Monthly Magazine*, devoted to Religion, 3 (1867-68), pp.316-23 (p.317).

Augusta Webster's husband was a lawyer. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that she was well informed about the legal system of her time. The speaker of 'A Castaway', a prostitute, claims the profession of lawyers is no more moral than hers: 'Our lawyers, who, with noble eloquence / and virtuous outbursts, lie to hang a man, / or lie to save him, which way goes the fee' (*Portraits*, 39). Procla is another female character Webster uses to voice her protest against the law made, and exercised by man. Towards the end of the dialogue, protesting against her husband's opinion that women are 'bird-minded' and that she will soon forget the 'sad thoughts', she says:

But as for tapestries, the needle flies
And thought flies quicker. Sorrow will not die
Upon the needle's point. (*AWS*, 61)

Procla's voice therefore challenges the assumed patriarchal authority. Her moral influence on her husband is evident. After sending his wife away Pilate starts his soliloquy, admitting:

I'm strangely moved!
Indeed these several days I have not lost
The sense of shame that shook me when he looked
With quiet eyes at me, standing condemned
By my allowance. Wonderful weird man!
If gods indeed would take men's shapes, I'd say.
I saw the God in him. (*AWS*, 61)

Various scholars have drawn a comparison between Charlotte Brontë's 'Pilate's Wife's Dream' (1846) and Webster's 'Pilate'.⁹¹ In Charlotte Brontë's poem, the protagonist, Procla, confirms her faith in the new religion.

Ere night descends I shall more sure know
What guide to follow, in what path to go;
I wait in hope — I wait in solemn fear,
The oracle of God — the sole — true God — to hear.⁹²

⁹¹ See Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, p.325; Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets Writing Against the Heart*, pp.178-80.

⁹² Charlotte Brontë, *The Poems of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. By Tom Winniffrith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.8.

Unlike Charlotte Brontë's poem, there is no determined monologue of belief in Webster's 'Pilate'. Pilate repeatedly says, 'we're sure of nothing' (*AWS*, 64). As Angela Leighton points out, Webster's speakers are, 'by and large, not the convinced visionaries and prophets of the world, but its disinterested onlookers, who are "sure of nothing"',⁹³ Like most speakers of Webster's dramatic monologues, as well as those of Browning, at the end of the poem Pilate is in the same position as when he starts his soliloquy: 'There's much to do, / These letters should be sent to Rome at once' (*AWS*, 67).

While she bestows great sympathy on her female protagonists, Webster's male speakers are often undermined in one way or another. The speaker of 'Tired', a male Victorian intellectual examines the limitations of his 'unconventional marriage' to a lower-class woman, who has eagerly embraced middle-class convention. He therefore joins a line of nineteenth-century heroes, major and minor, who conceive of women as instrumental to their own selves and projects – we might think of Barrett Browning's Romney Leigh and Charlotte Brontë's St John Rivers, or Dickens's David Copperfield and Pip. Even as he concedes his responsibility for her transformation from wild flower to hothouse bloom, he cannot see that he has never recognised her right to autonomous existence. Even towards the end of his reverie, lamenting his loss of vigour and purpose – 'Tired, tired – grown sick of battle and defeat' – he still wonders whether she might join him in his fantasy retreat to some 'kind southern clime'. Always she is conceived of as completing or complementing him.

Even when the speaker is a saint, he is not allowed to reveal himself as a likable character. In 'The Manuscript of S. Alexius' Webster exhibits the struggles of

the ascetic against nature. The speaker, Alexius, only 'son of Euphemianus, senator', feels himself called of the Lord to the religious life. His parents oppose this and find a wife for him. He believes that the familiar beauty of a maiden whom he has known from childhood will not trouble him, thinking:

My soul shall still be spared me, consecrate
Virgin to God.

[...]

But in the hour
when all the rite was done, and the new bride
come to her home, I sitting half apart,
my mother took her fondly by the hand
and drew her, lagging timidly, to me,
and spoke, "Look up, my daughter, look on him;
Alexius, shall I tell what I have guessed,
how this girl loves you?" Then she raised her head
a moment long, and looked: and I grew white,
and sank back sickly. For I suddenly
knew that I might know that which men call love.
(*Portraits*, 140-41)

So he flies, and while hiding himself in a chapel, he hears his wife pray for him. He escapes over the sea and wanders for years, visited by some thoughts of home, but eventually grows completely callous. However, as the love of man dies out so does the love of God:

My prayers were words
Like trite good-morrows when two gossips meet,
And never look for answers. (*Portraits*, 153)

He feels that he has need of 'quickenings pains'. So he goes back to his old home, being so broken and changed that he cannot be recognized. Webster describes with great force how Alexius lives on, watching the old life of home, changed as it has been by his absence: his father grown stern and silent; his mother half childish; his wife developed into an exquisite womanly tenderness. At last he dies, sending in his last hour for Pope Innocent, to whom he gives a scroll with the story of his life. The Pope sends for the three, and shows them the corpse as one they should know.

It turns out that Claudia his wife has actually recognised him all along, but has kept quiet, bearing it all under the mastering sense of a higher duty.

The speakers of Browning's 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' (1842), Tennyson's 'St Simeon Stylites' and 'St Lawrence' all suffer from some form of religious insanity total or incipient. Webster's portrayal of the Christian saints also touches the theme of religious doubt. As Angela Leighton says, she seems to 'reject visions which claim transcendent allegiance' and tends to 'stick to the social and economic truths of "real life"'.⁹⁴ The visions experienced by the speakers in 'Jeanne D'Arc', 'Sister Annunciata' are far from being taken seriously by the author, and far from being convincing under the judging eyes of a rational-minded reader. Jeanne D'Arc's angelic visitations could be, as the speaker says, 'mad dreams'. Sister Annunciata's 'spiritual visions' are, in the nineteenth-century critic H. B. Forman's opinion, hallucinations. Webster doesn't seem to have portrayed Saint Alexius as an admirable figure. Few nineteenth-century critics approved of his behaviour. H. B. Forman describes the poem as 'a masterly delineation of that almost devilish fanaticism of some of the early Christians, who sought, at all hazards and sacrifices to other people, to save their own souls'.⁹⁵ The real heroic figure here is Claudia, who, with all her womanly grace, tenderness, love and devotion, is committed to severe self-discipline and self-sacrifice.

At times the speaker can serve as a mouthpiece, more or less indirectly, for the poet's view. Both Browning and Tennyson were charged with adopting their personae as disguises. Henry Reeve, a nineteenth-century reviewer observes: 'Even when they speak in borrowed masks, we know the voice, and we listen, not to hear

⁹⁴ *Victorian Women Poets Writing Against the Heart*, p.180.

what the fictitious personage says, but what the poet says in the guise of his imaginary personages.⁹⁶ In the monologues of Augusta Webster, the poet and the dramatized speaker — two sharply differentiated figures — sometimes blur together when the speaker is an extraordinary woman. The speaker of 'Sister Annunicata', being 'the bride of Christ' and therefore 'more than other women', sees her 'poor human want of human love' as a weakness she must overcome. The protagonist in Webster's 'Jeanne D'Arc', who has been 'made first of women and of warriors', utters:

Was it for this that I was chosen out,
From my first infancy — marked out to be
Strange 'mid my kindred and alone in heart,
Never to cherish thoughts of happy love
Such as some women know in happy homes,
Laying their heads upon a husband's breast,
Or singing, as the merry wheel whirrs round,
Sweet cradle songs to lull their babes to sleep?

[...]

Ah! I like other women might have lived
A home-sweet life in happy lowly peace.
(*DS*, 35-36)

It seems likely here that Webster's model for Jeanne d'Arc derives not from her male mentors but rather from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The lines quoted certainly echo Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, the story of a woman poet:

I might have been a common woman now
And happier, less known and less left alone,
Perhaps a better woman after all,
With chubby children hanging on my neck
To keep me low and wise.

(AL, II, 513-17)

95 Forman, p.178.

96 Henry Reeve, 'Tennyson and Browning', *Edinburgh Review*, 172 (1890), p.314.

Both Aurora Leigh and Jeanne d'Arc try to balance the competing claims of the vocations and their female natures. Aurora feels as a poet, she cannot be a 'common woman'.

The woman warrior is a woman in a man's world, but so is the woman artist. When Elizabeth Barrett Browning fantasised about becoming a 'female Homer', as Dorothy Mermin says, the poetic tradition was 'formed by a vision of life seen through men's eyes' and there was 'an essential lack of congruence between the shapes of her own experience and the imaginative worlds of the grand tradition running from Homer to Wordsworth that filled her mind'.⁹⁷ *Aurora Leigh* allows Elizabeth Barrett Browning to work out some of her personal conflicts, to find out the meaning of being a woman and a poet. Augusta Webster's career shows a similar trajectory. The conflict between love and art is argued, analysed and dramatized in her novel *Lesley's Guardians* (1864). In her dramatic monologues, Webster adopts the voices of some historically or mythologically powerful women to negotiate her own position as an extraordinary woman, a female poet. So it seems that Barrett Browning's struggle of finding a woman's place in the tradition of poetry was still felt by Webster, the younger poet. Webster published her earliest works under the pseudonym 'Cecil Home' and did not start publishing under her own name till she was married. Though by 1860 Elizabeth Barrett Browning had well established herself as a major poet and it had been well known that George Eliot was a woman, Webster's choice of a male pseudonym is still telling. As it has been generally

⁹⁷ Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.13.

agreed,⁹⁸ Webster's earliest volumes do not display the confidence of her dramatic monologues, on which her reputation mainly rests, and which were published under her own name.

So it seems by the time Webster published her dramatic monologues, she had already found a powerful poetic expression, as well as fulfilment in domestic happiness. In Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora, fulfilled in both love and art in the end, triumphantly reconciles the roles of woman and poet: there is no such reconciliation in Webster's monologues, and hardly any in Webster's work in general. Perhaps the roles of woman and poet are never comfortably reconciled in Webster's dramatic monologues. In order to position herself in cultural tradition dominated by men, in order to take part in the discussion of the major issues concerning that tradition, Webster often, as in the case of 'A Painter', dresses her verse in the style of a male predecessor, and practises another form of, to borrow Kate Flint's term again, 'literary transvestism'. The dramatic image of Aurora's 'loose long hair [...] alive to the very ends', which Aurora must with 'passion' repress into a 'knot as hard as life' (*AL*, V, 1126-33), represents Aurora's passionate female life and its sublimation into masculinity. As a warrior, Jeanne d'Arc necessarily stands outside the 'common sex'. She forbears to 'deck' her beauty 'with the pleasant woman arts' that 'other maidens use and are not blamed', hides her female body in steel and wears a 'dented helmet' on her 'weary brows' (*DS*, 36).

⁹⁸ See Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, pp.173-201; Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow ed., *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.591; Forman, *Our Living Poets*, pp.171-84.

In the following chapters I will continue to analyse Webster's constant effort to expand the woman's sphere and her negotiation of a woman's place in the cultural world.

Chapter Five

Closet Dramas:

An Auspicious Day, Disguises, In A Day and

The Sentences

The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms. [...] The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible and being combined than any other, the connexion of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form.

Percy Bysshe Shelley¹

When we read Shakespeare [...], we forget about the element of local colour, about how much the moral attitudes, the manners, the ways of speech of the Elizabethans and Jacobean differed from ours. We are caught up in an intense illusion of reality. This illusion can be more intense even in the mere reading of a great play than in the reading of a great novel. [...] When we read a novel we are passive: the novelist, with his descriptions and analysis and moral commentaries, does a great deal of our work for us [...] We do not have to cooperate with him, merely to watch and listen. But a play is all plot, all action, it exposes its machinery nakedly. We cooperate with the dramatist even in reading silently to ourselves. We imagine the scene; we become the characters; we recite the speeches; we are possessed by the passions.

G. S. Fraser²

It has been generally agreed that Augusta Webster finds adequate expression and realizes her potential as a poet in the dramatic monologue. Commenting on Webster's *Portraits* the *Westminster Review* remarked in 1870: 'if she only remains true to herself she will most assuredly take a higher rank as a poet than any woman has yet done'.³ However, apart from *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute, A Chinese Tale in English Verse* (1874), Webster wrote very little poetry after 1870. Most of her

¹ P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *Peacock's Four Ages of Poetry; Shelley's Defence of Poetry; Browning's Essay on Shelley*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp. 37-8.

² G. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), p.68.

³ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 37 (1870), p.628.

creative energy went into producing verse dramas: *The Auspicious Day* (1872), *Disguises* (1879), *In a Day* (1882) and *The Sentence* (1887).⁴

The Auspicious Day is a complex melodrama set in medieval England. Sir Percival Dufresne, returning from an expedition, is to marry Lady Dorothy Wendulph as soon as 'the auspicious day' arrives, the day which has been fixed upon by Dorothy's father, Lord Wendulph, who believes in astrology. Percival has a lingering affection for Lady Dorothy's cousin, Amy Laverett, who is brought prominently before his attention in a masque given in his honour at his return. Amy is courted by Lambert Miller, a wealthy landowner, who wants to use his wealth to 'purchase noble blood'. Amy flirts with him, gives him false hope, and then by refusing his suit converts him into an unscrupulous enemy. Lambert has a mistress, Priscilla Reeve, who, out of jealousy, develops a deep hatred towards Amy. Then there is Roger Esdaile, Percival's most intimate friend, who has cherished a hopeless passion for Dorothy. So it is evident that there are elements of an imbroglio in this drama. The peripeteia of the drama comes when Percival, at an unguarded moment expresses a warmer affection towards Amy than is consistent with his position as the betrothed lover of Dorothy. Priscilla, Dorothy's foster-sister, betrays the secret to Dorothy. Percival and Amy flee but are almost instantly brought back by force. In the frenzy of her grief Dorothy charges Amy with witchcraft. Both Lambert and Priscilla give false testimony against Amy, whom they hate bitterly. The charge once made can never be withdrawn. Even

⁴ Augusta Webster, *The Auspicious Day* (London: Macmillan, 1872), henceforth *AD*; *Disguises, a Drama* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), henceforth *Disguises*; *In a Day, a Drama* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), henceforth *In a Day*; *The Sentence, a Drama* (London: Unwin, 1887), henceforth *Sentence*.

Percival, realizing Dorothy is the one he loves, believes that Amy is a witch, who has bewitched him. Both the accuser and the accused have to bear its severe consequences: for Amy either confession or denial is alike fatal; Dorothy's remorse leads to nothing save an implication of herself in a like guilt. In order to redeem her fault, with the assistance of Roger, who cannot bear to see her live with her guilt, Dorothy tries to swap identity with Amy in prison so that she can die in Amy's stead. The scheme has hardly been carried out when a riot bursts: the multitudes of Wendulphstown, who believe in witchcraft, are violently stirred. So on 'the auspicious day' Amy is captured and slain by a mob while Dorothy, in order to prove herself not a witch and appease the mob, marries Percival.

Disguises is a five-act romantic comedy in which contrasting value systems are represented. The story is set in the age of chivalry. The scene is laid in Aquitaine, a kingdom embodying love of dominance and court intrigue, and Saint Fabien, a little 'rustic republic' that preserves a stubborn independence in spite of covetous neighbours. Aymery, nephew of the powerful Count de Peyriac, accompanied by his cousin Raymond, seeks in peasant's disguise a retreat in the wild woods of Saint Fabien. Aymery has a respect for honesty, freedom and simplicity of life. Burdened by the anticipation of a political marriage to the Queen of Aquitaine, he hopes to find comfort by communion with the uncorrupted race, who are incapable of treachery or fear. Aymery has an admiration for Republicanism and the independent state on the borders of his future kingdom he means not to conquer, but to federate. He has neither the pride of princes, nor the deeper-rooted pride of family. His cousin Raymond is very different. He is the child of his age: a paragon of chivalry, whose conquests of cities and fair ladies have won him the name of the 'Victor Raymond'. In Saint

Fabien, Aymery and Raymond meet Gualhardine, the charming granddaughter of the chief magistrate, Piarres Otamendi. They also meet Claude, the young queen of Aquitaine, who is also playing truant awhile in disguise. Like Aymery, Claude finds the projected marriage the repugnant fruit of a cradle betrothal. Raymond gaily courts Gualhardine with brilliant speeches but Aymery unwittingly wins her love. Aymery and Gualhardine are forced to part, in the bitter knowledge that they must risk the vengeance of De Peyriac on Gualhardine's countryman, if his heir should wed another than the Queen of Aquitaine. So in order to bring about a happy ending Aymery needs to be removed from the high responsibilities of an heir. The Countess Bertrade, Aymery's mother, discloses to him that Raymond is the legitimate, not, as was supposed, the bastard son of her elder brother; is, therefore, true heir to De Peyriac, and the proper instrument of his ambitious match-making, as well as a far more willing one. Aymery at once resolves, in spite of his mother's entreaties, to disclose this to Raymond. De Peyriac accepts Raymond as his heir, instead of Aymery, and it only remains to persuade Claude to exchange Aymery, whom she considers poor-spirited, for Raymond, the winner of her heart. However, Claude resolutely refuses to forsake the now forlorn Aymery, and Raymond as stubbornly rejects what she does not offer. The all-powerful De Peyriac confines Claude to her palace and Raymond to his chamber. Both of them escape and flee to Saint Fabien. There, too, Aymery, newly released from the prospect of being king with Claude, has sought out Gualhardine, and secretly wedded her. Claude, now 'a fugitive and free', offers Raymond her hand of her own free will. So the 'disguises' drop and the pairs of lovers are triumphantly united. Then the idea that every one must be sent happy away, seems to fall at once upon all the responsible persons, and induces them

hurriedly to transform their habitual severity into good-humour and complaisance: De Peyriac accepts with approval the match of Aymery and Gualhardine, to which he had been bitterly opposed; the Countess Bertrade, who turns up with a solemn protest against the threatened Gualhardine, accepts her as her daughter-in-law and leaves her with a kiss.

The date of *In a Day* is the period of Roman domination of Greece, while as yet the Greeks had hopes of freedom. The title has a strict application to the drama. Myron, a wealthy Greek, is in love with one of his slaves, Klydone, In the morning he declares his love, and professes himself ready to enfranchise Klydone and her father, Olymnios, so that he may marry her lawfully. His friend Euphranor, endeavours to interest him in a scheme of national revolt. Myron, who loves for the enjoyment of the hour, has no thought beyond his present dream of love. However, in the afternoon he is falsely accused of complicity in a plot against the Roman Government. The charge is entirely groundless but Myron's wealth has attracted the cupidity of the proconsul. The judges dare not pronounce him guilty, but demand for the testimony of his household slaves. Slaves' evidence is given under torture. Knowing that Klydone and her father can only give testimony under torture, Myron refuses to hand them over for this purpose. Refusal means guilt by the terms of the statutes. The father and daughter, determined to save Myron, submit themselves to the ordeal without Myron's knowledge. Olymnios, slave in name but lord of his own will, braves the torture successfully. With Klydone flesh is weaker than spirit. In spite of her high resolution, Klydone is driven by the pain to utter all kinds of frantic and imaginary charges against Myron. As a result Myron is convicted and condemned to die. So in the evening Myron drinks the appointed cup of hemlock and dies.

Klydone drinks of the same cup and perishes too. Olymnios dies of a broken heart.

The Sentence is a three-act tragedy based on incidents recorded by the Roman biographer and historian Suetonius. It is set in Rome in the days of the Roman Empire. The chief character is Caius (Caligula), the half-lunatic successor of Tiberius. The subject is the 'sentence' with which he avenges the wrongs of Lælia, his foster-sister, whom he loves with the purest affection that is left to him. Lælia's husband Stellio has become fascinated by the superior attractions of a Roman widow, Æonia. In order to carry on the intrigue he induces Lælia to visit Æonia at her country house in Baia, where he joins her. Caligula, hearing that Lælia, Stellio, and their children are gone to the Baian Villa, suspects something wrong, and sets himself to watch the proceedings of the guilty pair. He repairs to Æonia's garden and becomes the secret witness of certain scenes there — scenes in which Lælia is made acquainted with her husband's treachery, and is driven to such a state of despair that she throws herself into the sea. However, when the local fishermen and populace, believing Stellio and Æonia have thrown Lælia from the rocks, threaten the pair with physical harm, Caligula turns up and rescues them from the rage of the populace by declaring that Lælia's death was the result of an accident. The two lovers are profuse in their professions of gratitude to the emperor; little knowing that he has only postponed his vengeance till he can make it more complete. Stellio and Æonia go to Rome to get married. But on their marriage day, in the midst of their festive preparations, Caius suddenly appears and orders the immediate execution of Stellio's uncle and best friend, Publius Cæcilius Niger, who is innocent of any crime. Then, while Stellio is absent, Caius, in disguise, comes suddenly upon Æonia, and, after revealing

himself to her, asks her to marry him instead. Æonia, though in love with Stellio, accepts the offer, for she is ambitious. So they plot to get rid of Stellio, who is obviously in their way. At first Æonia tries to negotiate on Stellio's behalf some prospects brighter than banishment. Caligula then tells her that he possesses the secret of her and Stellio's wrongdoing and of Lælia's death, and threatens that if she refuses to cooperate with him, Stellio will be doomed to die by horrible tortures and she herself will be condemned to public disgrace. After some struggle, Æonia consents to administer poison to Stellio by her own hand at the marriage feast. While Stellio is struggling with death, Caius tells him that he is perishing by poison administered by his paramour, who has suddenly become ambitious of being Cæsar's wife. Maddened by the information, the dying Stellio tries to strike Æonia. Æonia, defending herself in horror, stabs Stellio to death. Then in front of all the guests at the feast, Caius reveals the whole story and sentences Æonia to life banishment in Pandataria, a remote island.

Although so far Webster's reputation rested mainly upon her dramatic monologues, some nineteenth-century critics believed Augusta Webster's strength was in drama. Edmund Clarence Stedman claims the best and most original things Webster has done are her dramas.⁵ Mackenzie Bell also indicates that 'Augusta Webster's genius is largely dramatic'.⁶ 'William Michael Rossetti said in 1906, after Webster's death, 'Mrs Webster's chief excellence, it appears to

⁵ Edmund Clarence Stedman, 'Some London Poets', *Hurper's New Monthly Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.886.

⁶ Mackenzie Bell, 'Augusta Webster', in A. H. Miles ed., *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 10 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7, p.505.

me, is in drama, though some of her poems in a different form are intellectual and able work.'⁷

Webster's dramas were certainly favourably reviewed by her contemporaries. Various critics confirmed in the 1880s that Webster had achieved a foremost place among the poetical dramatists of the time. The *British Quarterly Review* notes that in *The Auspicious Day* there are 'snatches of racy, unaffected humour, the best proof and fruit of real dramatic faculty'.⁸ The *Scotsman* praises *Disguises* as an original drama, which is 'by far the most important contribution made to this department of English literature in recent years':

The personages are powerfully conceived and consistently wrought out, while the action is natural and skillfully sustained, and the dialogue combines poetical force and beauty with dramatic effect in a very exceptional degree.⁹

The *John Bull* asserts that *In a Day* 'teems with evidence of dramatic power and of poetic insight'.¹⁰ The *Athenæum* says the volume 'can hardly fail to increase Mrs Webster's reputation as a dramatist'.¹¹ *The Sentence* was strongly admired by Christina and William Michael Rossetti.¹² William Rossetti suggests, '*The Sentence* [...] is so fine that I hardly discern where its superior is to be sought since the time of Shakespeare'.¹³ He asserts though Webster 'had many and discerning admirers throughout her literary career', her true rank will only be

⁷ *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, vol.2, p.502.

⁸ *British Quarterly Review*, 56 (1872), p.253.

⁹ From the advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 8-9.

¹⁰ *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 9.

¹¹ *Athenæum*, December 23, 1882, p.841.

¹² See Christina Rossetti, *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Brown, Langham, 1908), p.175.

¹³ William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, 2 vols (London: Brown Langham, 1906), vol.2, p.502.

fixed when *The Sentence* 'comes to be generally recognized [...] as one of the masterpieces of European drama'. He claims the play is the 'supreme thing amid the work of all British poetesses':

Taking into account its importance in scale and subject, and its magnificence in handling, it beats everything else. The theme of the drama — a three-act tragedy in verse — is thrilling and stupendous. [...] Mrs Browning had to show such splendid work as *The Drama of Exile* and *Aurora Leigh*; but she could never have done *The Sentence*, or anything like it. As for Christina Rossetti — though it may easily be supposed that I should be the last to undervalue her noble work in other fields of poetry — the very suggestion of her writing any tragedy, much more any such tragedy as *The Sentence*, would be preposterous. Let me have the pleasure of here adding that she was fully alive to the unmatched claims of this great work of Mrs Webster's, and eager in asserting them.¹⁴

The *Athenæum* believes *The Sentence* is 'a tragedy of remarkable originality and power'.¹⁵ The *Glasgow Herald* confirms that 'the whole play is a masterpiece of dramatic art'. The *Scottish Leader* reckons *The Sentence* 'furnishes fresh evidence of Mrs Webster's right to a foremost place among our living dramatic poets'. The critic gives emphasis to the 'masculine' qualities of the play: 'Mrs Webster's blank verse is, if possible, more masculine and vigorous than ever. [...] It has something in it of the fearless strength of the Elizabethan writers'. The *North British Daily Mail* also says that 'no other Englishwoman has done work of such masculine strength and artistic delicacy, so classic in form, and at the same time so fresh, original, and full of human interest'.¹⁶

For the modern reader, whether Webster's dramas supersede her dramatic monologues, is questionable. In fact Webster's ambition to become a dramatist may well have cut short her masterful development of the dramatic monologue

¹⁴ William Michael Rossetti, 'Introductory Note', in Augusta Webster, *Mother and Daughter: An Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence* (London: Macmillan, 1895), pp.13-14.

¹⁵ *Athenæum*, September 8, 1888, p.315.

¹⁶ Quotations from the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Scottish Leader*, and the *North British Daily Mail* are from the advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 10-12.

and assigned her to a lesser place in literary history. However, it might be reasonable to consider Webster's dramas as deriving from her earlier work. As a nineteenth-century reviewer¹⁷ points out, Webster's 'fitness' for producing a drama is 'foreshadowed' in her dramatic monologues and her translations of the *Prometheus Bound* and the *Medea*. The title poem of *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867), which centres on a woman who is persuaded by her family to marry a rich old aristocrat rather than the struggling young lawyer she loves, is a drama which has not actually achieved its stage-form. The drama consists two acts: the first act comprises an interview between the protagonist, Eleanor, and her young suitor, Lionel, who has just heard of her engagement to Sir Joyce; the second act, presenting her as a widow six years later, consists of a confidential talk between Eleanor and her friend, Mary. The two acts are distinguished by the woman's single and married names, Eleanor Vaughan and Lady Boycott, which represent the contingencies of a woman's position and identity in Victorian society.

Webster's dramatic instinct had been observed by her reviews before she actually turned her hand to drama.¹⁸ Critics of Webster's dramas generally esteem highly the way her characters are conceived. And that is certainly owing to her capacity for 'thinking the thoughts of others', of 'conceiving remote and almost unique states of feeling',¹⁹ of 'translating herself thoroughly into the characters

¹⁷ *Scotsman*, quoted in the advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 8.

¹⁸ See *London Review*, July 28, 1866, p.105; John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 31 (1867), p.579; *Month*, 6 (1867), p.276; *Saturday Review*, 23 (1867); p.181; John Westland Marston, 'A Woman Sold, and other Poems', *Athenaeum*, May 4, 1867, p.586; Thomas Purnell, 'Portraits', *Athenaeum*, June 11, 1870, p.770;

¹⁹ *British Quarterly Review*, 46 (1867), p.249.

which she conceives'²⁰ and of giving voices to her characters, all talents which she has employed extensively in her dramatic monologues. Caligula in *The Sentence*, as William Michael Rossetti points out, 'is conceived as equally righteous, ruthless, and insane --- an awful, and yet a perfectly human, dramatic figure'.²¹ And the *Spectator* comments, 'Caligula in Suetonius is an incredible monster; in *The Sentence* he is a possible creature, and one, too, whom we can at least pity'.²² As the *Month* points out, one of the most striking features of Webster's dramas is 'the way in which the dramatis personæ live':

The dialogue is natural, flowing easily from the lips of the persons represented. [...] They are real men and women; not actors dressed up, labelled, and speaking words put into their mouths --- often words no more appropriate to any one character than to another. These beings live; their lips utter spontaneously the thoughts that arise in their hearts.²³

The mistress of the closet drama was, of course, Joanna Baillie, whose 1798 volume of *Plays on the Passions* inaugurated the series which finally ran to three volumes.²⁴ Although a number of her plays were performed, some with limited success, she remained a dramatist to be read, rather than a playwright to be performed. Coleridge's *Remorse* was produced at Drury Lane in 1813 and Wordsworth tried unsuccessfully to have his *The Borderers* staged in 1798. But many nineteenth-century poets, including Webster's acknowledged mentors, Tennyson and Robert Browning, wrote plays which were not intended for the stage, or dramas which had few public performances. Most critics have defined

²⁰ *Athenæum*, August 11, 1866, p.175.

²¹ 'Introductory Notes', *Mother and Daughter*, p.13.

²² *Spectator*, 61 (1888), p.212.

²³ *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 10-11.

²⁴ Joanna Baillie, *A Series of Plays: In Which It is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind, Each Passion Being the Subject of a Tragedy and a Comedy*, 3 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1798-1812).

the closet drama as a play deliberately intended to be read and not acted. C. E.

Montague, for instance, observes:

I imagine that there is traceable a complete history of the 'study' play or 'closet' play as a deliberately chosen literary form, a play having the outward shape of drama in some obvious respects, but intended only, or chiefly, to be read in a book.²⁵

Brander Matthews also calls the closet drama 'a play not intended to be played'.²⁶

But Browning and Tennyson did intend some of their dramas to be staged and a number were. Tennyson meant all his plays to be acted, and was anxious that they should be seen in the theatre.²⁷ Browning was an established playwright. His *Strafford* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* were written not only to be acted, but to be acted by one particular actor.²⁸ Joanna Baillie was not a closet dramatist by intention. In 1798, while publishing the first volume of her plays, she clearly repudiated the supposition that she had written them for the closet rather than the stage.²⁹ Om Prakash Mathur stresses that the actual achievement often does not reflect the intention. Mathur suggests:

It will be truer, rather, to say that two opposed purposes — one conscious and the other unconscious [...], are discernible in most of the plays of this type. The conscious purpose was, doubtless, their production in the theatre, but unconsciously the poet in the dramatist ever pulled him in the other direction, making his plays more readable thanactable — giving their true and best rewards in the closet and not in the theatre.³⁰

Webster's contemporaries have indicated the 'closet' nature of her dramas.

Assigning *The Auspicious Day* to the class of dramas that are not intended for the stage, the *Athenæum* suggests:

25 C. E. Montague, 'The Literary Play', *Essays and Studies: By Members of the English Association*, 2 (1911), pp.71-90 (p.90).

26 Brander Matthews, *A Study of the Drama* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), p.252.

27 See Terry Otten, *The Deserted Stage* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1972), pp.76-107.

28 See Otten, pp.108-49.

29 Joanna Baillie, 'Introductory Discourse', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1832), p.24.

30 Om Prakash Mathur, *The Closet Drama of the Romantic Revival* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1978), preface, i-ii.

The drama that was never intended to be played is a form of poem that may be said to have grown up in our own day. Since Byron's time, and his plays were the first step in this direction, it has been brought to a high degree of perfection by Sir Henry Taylor and Mr Browning; for though the latter has written, if with but moderately success, for the stage, and apostrophizes himself as 'you writer of plays', it is more in the light of poems to be read than of plays to be acted that we regard 'The Blot on the Scutcheon' or 'Colombe's Birthday'. Of these and the other dramas of their author, Mrs Webster is evidently an admirer and student.³¹

The *Spectator* indicates that Webster's *Disguises* belongs to the same kind of dramas as Byron's *Cain*, Coleridge's *Remorse* and Tennyson's *Harold*.³² Brander Matthew observes that in the history of literature closet drama has appeared only when there is a separation between literature and the theatre:

It is first seen in Rome under Nero, when the stage was given over to vulgar and violent spectacle; and so Seneca seems to have polished his plays solely for recitation by an elocutionist. It is visible again in Italy, when men of letters, enamored of the noble severity of Greek tragedy and of the artistic propriety of Latin comedy, despised the ruder miracle-plays and the lively but acrobatic comedy-of-masks, which were the only types of drama then popular on the stage; and they therefore attempted empty imitations of the classic dramatists with no regard to the conditions of the contemporary theatre. It emerged once more in the nineteenth century, when adaptation of Kotzebue, and later of Scribe and his cloud of collaborators, were the chief staple of the stage, and when the overwhelming vogue of the 'Waverley' novels drew the attention of authors away from the drama to the novel, which was easier to write, easier to bring before the public, and more likely to bring in an adequate reward.³³

Om Prakash Mathur suggests the Industrial Revolution created the background for the revival of the closet drama in the nineteenth century:

The age of industrialisation was fulfilling itself in different ways. For literary authors it created, on the one hand, a large reading public and publishers usually willing to treat gifted authors liberally. And, on the other, it produced vulgar theatrical crowds and managers ready to throw art on the dung-heap to cater to the depraved tastes of the multitudes.³⁴

What the audience wanted in a play were 'vigorous action, intense and even violent emotion, flashing and unmistakable wit, humour that brought an unreflective laugh, striking costumes and scenery, sensation in scenery or action,

31 *Athenaeum*, October 12, 1872, p.465.

32 *Spectator*, 53 (1880), p.144.

33 *A Study of the Drama*, pp.259-60.

34 Mathur, p.17.

and a deep colouring of sentiment, appealing directly to the heart'.³⁵ While praising dramatists like Byron, Coleridge, Maturin and Joanna Baillie,³⁶ Scott condemned the popular taste of the contemporary theatres in no uncertain terms. Condemning the popular mode of dramatic representation in which show and machinery 'usurp the place of tragic poetry', he says, 'Thus we have enlarged our theatres, so as to destroy the effect of acting, without carrying to any perfection that of pantomime and dumb show'.³⁷ He puts the blame for the degeneration of drama on the contemporary theatrical audience of which 'prostitutes and their admirers usually form the principal part'.³⁸ So it was almost impossible to expect intellectual or literary drama to be popular on the stage. Byron deliberately separated himself from the stage to create a 'mental theatre'. Condemning the popular theatre, which he was familiar with, Byron repeatedly insisted that his plays were not to be staged.³⁹

According to Allardyce Nicoll, the stage in the early part of the century was largely a 'popular' affair, and for the most part bourgeois opinion regarded its delights with 'cringing disapproval':

Typical audiences were composed mainly of lower-class citizens with a sprinkling of representatives from the gayer and more libertine section of the aristocracy. The staid middle class and the respectable, dignified nobility tended to look upon the stage as a thing not to be supported in an active manner.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ernest B. Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-century London Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), p.117.

³⁶ Sir Walter Scott, *The Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* 21 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1834-1836), vol.6, pp.387-88.

³⁷ *Prose Works*, vol.6, p.390.

³⁸ *Prose Works*, vol.6, p.393.

³⁹ See *The Deserted Stage*, pp.41-75.

⁴⁰ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama: 1850-1900*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), vol.1, pp.8-9.

There was a certain change in attitude in the middle of the century. Queen Victoria engaged a special box at the Princess's Theatre, 'which she has retained annually [...], and still more satisfactorily marked her approbation of the theatre by constant personal attendance'.⁴¹ Allardyce Nicoll believes the royal visits to privileged London playhouses convinced the aristocracy that what for years had been regarded as an almost entirely popular amusement might be tolerated by society.⁴² However, this influence did not produce any sudden and immediately appreciable difference in the nature of the audience. A complete alteration had not been effected when Augusta Webster started her literary career. In her novel *Lesley's Guardians* (1864) she depicts the conditions of the theatre in London. After Lesley leaves him, the distressed Louis de l'Aubonnes tumbled into a theatre with his brother, Paul:

There was nothing for it but the theatre.

It does not much matter which they chose, as neither of them understood more than three words of what they heard there. No does it matter what was the name of the piece nor who was the fascinating actress who played its heroine, the brothers themselves never having been cognizant of either particular. (*LG*, I, 125)

The play on the stage is an emotionally extravagant melodrama:

In the piece it so happened that there was a tremendous quarrel and parting between the lovers, and the fascinating actress [...], turned angrily, dashing the tears from her eyes unseen by any one, excepting the audience, away from the despairing young gentleman kneeling at her feet. (*LG*, I, 125)

The two upper-class Frenchmen become completely out of place in such a theatre:

Sitting close to the de l'Aubonnes, were four squat youths luxurious in pomatum and sham jewelry, who might have been shopmen, but if they were would be very much mortified at being thought so, while if they were not, some respectable shopman might feel as much mortified at the mistake which had classed them with him. They dropped the H's and were facetious: and as they had all of them passed two or three degree beyond sobriety, and one of them conspicuously, their facetiousness was extra offensive.

⁴¹ John William Cole, *The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean: F. S. A. Including a Summary of the English Stage for the Last Fifty Years* (London: Bentley, 1859), p.13.

⁴² Nicoll, vol.1, p.6.

Louis, who had relapsed into a weary quietude, fixed all his attention on the stage-lovers, and the squat youths fixed all theirs on him. Paul perceived that they were practising their wit at his brother's expense, and in a less degree, at his own. [...] He cast withering glances at them, but these, met by new grimaces, only added to their flow of wit. Louis perceived nothing of all this. In fact, he was losing himself away from his surroundings. (*LG*, I, 125-26)

The unruly audience take pleasure in teasing Louis, who is deeply moved by the performance. Trying to defend his brother, Paul makes the 'squat youths' their enemies, who attack them when they get out of the theatre.

Complaints regarding popular taste continued to be made in the 1870s. In 1871 Thomas Purnell took a melancholy view:

The chief supporters of our theatres are country people [...], those of the nobility afflicted with *ennui* [...], busy professional men who come at fixed intervals with their families [...], men who go to the theatres from habit, just as they smoke tobacco, and a large number of green grocers and other shop keepers, who have received orders for displaying play-bills in their windows. [...] At one time the most intellectual and scholarly people habitually visited the playhouse.⁴³

Both *The Auspicious Day* and *Disguises* are five-act plays. As the *Westminster Review* pointed out in 1880, 'the five-act drama is virtually dead'.

The critic stresses:

It is the greatest of errors in our day to follow the Elizabethan dramatists in having five acts. No modern audience will put up with such an allowance. The theatre in the days of Shakespeare was to our forefathers a kind of club — Mudie's, theatre, and Royal Institution all combined. Now it is simply a theatre, attended no longer by the intellectual classes, except on rare occasions.⁴⁴

The *Spectator* suggests her *Disguises* is composed 'in scornful independence of the dominion of the Stage'.⁴⁵ It is likely, as various nineteenth-century critics have indicated, that she wrote closet dramas because it was impossible for her to find her place on the stage of her time. In 1872, commenting on *The Auspicious Day*, the *Westminster Review* regretted that Webster 'should have chosen a

⁴³ Quoted by Nicoll in *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama*, vol.1, p.10.

⁴⁴ *Westminster Review*, 57 (1880), p.609.

⁴⁵ *Spectator*, 53 (1880), p.144.

dramatic form for her new poem' and blamed it on the depraved conditions of the theatre:

In these days a closet-drama has become associated with weariness of the flesh. We are apt to regard a reading-play as an intellectual feat, which it is a duty rather than a pleasure to read. Our stage has sunk so low, that there is no chance of writers of Mrs Webster's genius turning their attention to play-writing. Her dramatic instinct, which is so strong, finds its only outlet in a shape like the present.⁴⁶

We cannot completely exclude the possibility that Webster, like Byron, was engaging in a literary pursuit as a project to distance herself from the popular taste of the contemporary stage when she wrote *The Auspicious Day* and *Disguises*. And as Denise A. Walen suggests, some women writers might have utilized closet drama as an option to writing for the stage because they could not, or did not care to, struggle within the male dominant theatre system of nineteenth-century England.⁴⁷ However, it is hard to believe that Webster, who had her only daughter educated privately and prepared for a career as an actress, wrote dramas with no thought of the actual theatre. It is true that Webster copies the Elizabethan models in her first two dramas. As a nineteenth-century critic points out, *Disguises* actually belongs to the class of romantic dramas, of which *As You Like It* is one of the finest examples.⁴⁸ And Mackenzie Bell suggested in the 1890s that 'the play comes nearer than any other of our time to the fanciful comedy of Shakespeare and Fletcher'.⁴⁹ Theodore Watts-Dunton also sees *Disguises* as a 'poetical comedy on the Shakespearean model'.⁵⁰ One of the

⁴⁶ *Westminster Review*, 42 (1872), p.271.

⁴⁷ Denis A. Walen, 'Sappho in the closet', in *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.233-255 (p.235).

⁴⁸ *Spectator*, 53 (1880), pp.144-46 (p.145).

⁴⁹ Mackenzie Bell, 'Augusta Webster', in A. H. Miles ed., *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 10 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891-7), vol.7, p.505.

⁵⁰ Watts-Dunton, *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

reasons why Webster chose to follow the Elizabethan tradition when she wrote her first two dramas might be, as Paull Baum points out, 'the English stage in the eighteen seventies offered no sound literary tradition for drama, no proper models'.⁵¹ And like Tennyson, she 'fell in with the nineteenth-century tradition of closet drama [...], the Elizabethan tradition modified by literary rather than theatrical considerations'.⁵²

Webster's next two dramas, *In a Day* and *The Sentence* are three-act plays and are considerably shorter than *The Auspicious Day* and *Disguises*. When *In a Day* was published the *Morning Post* suggested that 'with suitable actors the play would be effective on the stage'.⁵³ Opposed to the more gloomy denunciations of the theatre were the optimistic views of those who recognised in the audience a power and a force able to herald in a great era of dramatic productivity. The general growth of an intellectual public was noted in the 1870s.⁵⁴ The period also witnessed the rise of the modern matinée. The commercial theatre manager, in his want of knowledge and in his purely financial aims, persisted in relying upon the plays written by a limited number of already tried and recognised authors. W.

Allingham wrote in 1886:

The question, of some importance to the English drama, is this: How shall a writer outside theatrical circles bring a play under the eyes of managers without the risk that, should it contain anything of value for stage purposes, this will be appropriated without the smallest acknowledgement?⁵⁵

⁵¹ Paull F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), p.214.

⁵² Baum, p.214.

⁵³ *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 9.

⁵⁴ Nicoll, vol.1, p.12.

⁵⁵ *Athenæum*, March 6, 1886, p.338.

The emergence of the *matinée* can be seen as a slight attempt to find a solution for these conditions. The *matinée* system, whereby an author could hire a theatre for an afternoon or morning and present his untried play, served a useful purpose in mitigating the power of the established circle. According to Nicoll, the presence within the new audience of numerous leisured people able to attend the theatres in the morning or the afternoon had made such performances ‘all the rage’ in the 1880s.⁵⁶ The *Westminster Review* suggests:

Whether the intellectual classes might be won back by such writers as Tennyson and Mrs Webster, if they would but adapt themselves to new forms of art, is the problem. [...] But there must be also a change not merely in the form of the representation, but in the hours of performance. At this moment there is springing up a strong feeling for what is called ‘afternoon theatres’. Here is the golden opportunity for such writers as Mrs Webster.⁵⁷

Inaugurated about 1869, *matinées* gradually increased in number until in 1889 a critic could refer to ‘these days of endless *matinées*’.⁵⁸ *In a Day* was produced at a *matinée* at Terry’s Theatre, London, on 30th May 1890. *In a Day* is the only one of her plays that was acted on the stage. Webster’s daughter, Margaret Davies Webster, played the heroine, Klydone. Elizabeth Lee notes in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that the performance had a *succès d’estime*.⁵⁹ However, *In a Day* is still a reading-play by nature. Esteeming highly the ‘literary merits’ of the drama, the *Scotsman* says *In a Day* is ‘a book to read and re-read and study, always with an assurance of intellectual pleasure’.⁶⁰ As the *Athenæum* suggests, the dialogue ‘may be much too intellectual and subtle for pure representative art’.⁶¹ Commenting on the performance at Terry’s in 1890, the *Stage* points out:

⁵⁶ Nicoll, vol.1, p.19.

⁵⁷ *Westminster Review*, 57 (1880), p.609.

⁵⁸ *The Theatre*, 14 (1889), p.12.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Lee, ‘Mrs Augusta Webster’, in Sidney Lee ed., *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.61 (London: Smith, Elder, 1899), pp.115-16 (p.116).

⁶⁰ *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 10.

⁶¹ *Athenæum*, December 23, 1882, pp.841-42.

Poetry in any set form stands a poor chance on the stage in these days, which are full of the Hour almost to the extinction of the classical spirit: Mrs Webster's beautiful muse, with something of the Greek manner in which this poetess is learned, stands absolutely no chance.⁶²

The critic also suggests because of the lack of modern stagecraft in the play, the theme, though essentially dramatic, becomes in exposition markedly non-dramatic to play-goers educated in theatres of the time. So the 'niceties of the Old World scheme' pass unperceived and the 'riches of the poetry', unrealized as they 'go for little worth in burdensome abundance'. The *Era*, while acknowledging the literary and poetic merits of the play, complains it is painfully prolix for the stage. The critic claims it is difficult to 'cherish charitable feelings' towards an authoress who takes two hours and a half to tell such a simple story. According to the critic, the time allotted to the performance of *In a Day* was chiefly occupied with the utterance, by the 'various personages of the play, of sententious speeches in blank verse, sometimes elevated, frequently poetical and fanciful, and always smooth and refined'. The 'pretty scene' and costumes of 'correct and chaste design', as well as the painstaking acting of the performers, only managed to mitigate the 'weariness necessarily begotten by the sluggishness of the action'. The reviewer also believes that the lengthy speeches, which often run over twenty lines, must have been taxing on the actors:

Mr Matthew Brodie, whose memory must have been severely taxed on this occasion, delivered line after line with commendable distinctness and discretion, and was as earnest and reposeful as the part demanded. Stoically calm was the Olymnios of Mr Stephen Phillips. [...] And Myron's gift of freedom to him did not surprise us, because we had auricular evidence that Olymnios was capable of pouring out, on the smallest encouragement, long-winded exhortations and reflections of a deeply philosophical and verbose description. Mr Stephen Phillips [...] delivered his speeches with a crisp distinctness that deserved warm praise.⁶³

⁶² *Stage*, June 6, 1890, p.13.

⁶³ *Era*, May 31, 1890, p.9.

So *In a Day* is an eloquent example of the type of closet drama defined by Om Prakash Mathur, which is intended for the stage, but unconsciously made more readable thanactable by the ‘poet in the dramatist’.

Obviously in *The Sentence* Webster has made further adjustments in order to adapt herself to the stage. The lengthy and sententious speeches, which mark her other dramas, are gone. As the *Academy* notes, its ‘rills of dialogue never wander idly in windings of mere aimless poetic beauty, but flow with direct and ever-deepening force of general impression into the main tide of the story’.

Webster chooses a startling and somewhat scandalous figure, Caligula, as the chief character of the play. And she works out a plot that involves adulterous love, treachery, murder and revenge. There is certainly more action in the play. It even includes a sensational scene in which a bride is driven to stab her bridegroom to death at the wedding feast. ‘Vigorous’, ‘nervous’, ‘concentrated’, ‘subtle’, ‘thrilling’ and ‘intense’ are the words reviewer use to describe *The Sentence*. *The Sentence* approaches the stage-drama also in its external appurtenances. The main part of its scenic background: Stellio’s house in Rome, ‘a spacious inner hall with flowers and shrubs growing, and a fountain’ (*Sentence*, 5), and the ‘curtained embrasure of the colonnade of the Banquet Hall’ in Atonia’s house (*Sentence*, 114), can be effectively represented on the stage. Most nineteenth-century critics consider that *The Sentence* would be effective on the stage. The *Glasgow Herald* claims:

Mrs Webster has written much and greatly, but we do not think she has ever conceived a scene so tragically terrible as this closing scene. [...] If this play could be put upon the stage, the last act especially would produce a great effect. [...] We should like to hear Mr Irving’s opinion as to the adaptability of the play for the stage.

The *Scotsman* suggests that with some slight alterations, the play would be 'one of the most telling of productions'.⁶⁴ William Rossetti believes that *The Sentence*, besides its poetic value, would make an excellent acting-play. He asserts, 'Were it translated into French, a French manager and audience might probably reach the same conclusion, and cast shame upon British backwardness.'⁶⁵ But *The Sentence* has never been acted. At the beginning of the twentieth century Brander Matthews wrote:

The divorce between poetry and the drama, visible in English literature in the nineteenth century, is acknowledged to be most unfortunate for both parties to the matrimonial contract. [...] The prose-drama of modern life, dealing soberly and sincerely with the present problems of existence, has at last got its roots into the soil.⁶⁶

Webster's poetic dramas certainly stood 'poor chance' on the stage towards the end of the nineteenth century, when poetry and drama were 'divorced'.

Like *In a Day*, *The Sentence* remains in the class of dramas, which are appreciated in the closet.

So Webster's dramas find their performances in the minds of readers in their 'closets'. Like her dramatic monologues, they demand active participation of the reader. G. S. Fraser articulates the active part of the reader when reading a play, by drawing a distinction between novel-reading and play-reading. He claims when we read a novel we are passive because of the 'descriptions and analysis and moral commentaries' done by the novelist. But a play is 'all plot, all action, it exposes its machinery nakedly'. Therefore in reading a play on our own we cooperate with the dramatist: 'We imagine the scene; we become the characters;

⁶⁴ Quotations from the *Academy*, the *Glasgow Herald* and the *Scotsman* are from the advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 11-12.

⁶⁵ *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, vol.2, pp.502-3.

⁶⁶ Brander Matthews, *A Study of the Drama*, p.249.

we recite the speeches; we are possessed by the passions'.⁶⁷ So like the dramatic monologue, the closet play relies on the reader's imagination and induces a tension in the reader between 'sympathy versus judgment'.⁶⁸

Webster's closet dramas and her dramatic monologues share a commitment to providing characters with a dramatized, unmediated voice in the text. A nineteenth-century reviewer of *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* groups closet drama and monologues together in terms of the active participation such texts require of the reader: 'The line of dramatic monologue or dialogue, in which the chief aim is to analyse and set forth the intricacies and subtleties of character, requires somewhat of an effort on the part of the conscientious reader'.⁶⁹ As Susan Brown observes, 'where the drama differs significantly is in the multiplicity of voices working together to create a dialogized representation of the issues, in contrast to the single dialogized voices found in the monologues'.⁷⁰

Like the dramatic monologues, the verse drama, intended for the stage or not, provides the author with a means of effacing herself. The *Westminster Review* pointed out in 1880 that poets like Augusta Webster found in the five-act, which had no place on the stage at the time, the only channel into which they can freely pour their thoughts.

In a five-act play they are able [...], to give vent to their feelings and passions under the mask of impersonality. They can give to the world, by means of their characters, their own views on social questions no less than on religion [...], in the most effective manner.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Fraser, p.68.

⁶⁸ See Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p.75.

⁶⁹ *Month*, 33 (1867), p.276.

⁷⁰ Susan Brown, 'Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women', *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), pp.89-109 (p.102).

⁷¹ *Westminster Review*, 57 (1880), p.609.

In a novel, the third-person narrative voice, often read as the moral position of the work, is identified closely with the author. In a drama, direct speech removes the need for mediating commentary in the voice of a narrator. Thus the controlling perspective widens into a series of diverse and developing interpretations. In her closet dramas Webster can again employ the strategy, 'I does not mean I' and represent controversial positions without being identified with her speaker. As Susan Brown suggests, the drama allows her to explore social questions in a form that does not lend itself to simplistic reduction.⁷² This may explain why, Webster, who has suggested a desire to distance herself from the voices of her texts,⁷³ chose the dramatic form over the novel. With the exception of the fairy-tale, *Daffodil and the Croāxaxicans: A Romance of History* (1884), she never returned to the novel form.

Shelley realised the importance of drama as a form of expression. He says, 'the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence'. He calls drama 'a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms'. Being a 'living impersonation of the truth of human passions', drama enlarges our sympathies,⁷⁴ 'teaching the human heart its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself'.⁷⁵ Joanna Baillic believes that 'the theatre is a school in which much good or evil may be learned',⁷⁶ She wanted to create a drama which 'improves' us by giving us

⁷² Brown, pp.89-109 (p.103).

⁷³ See 'Poets and Personal Pronouns' in *A Housewife's Opinions*, pp.150-156.

⁷⁴ *A Defence of Poetry*, pp.37-8.

⁷⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, preface to *The Cenci: Five Act Tragedy*.

⁷⁶ Joanna Baillic, *The Complete Poetical Works of Joanna Baillic* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1832), p.22.

‘knowledge’ of our own minds’ through ‘the thoughts’ and behaviour of other’.⁷⁷ In order to realize this moral object she decided to create ‘a gallery of Passions to warn and to guide her fellowmen’.⁷⁸ It seems that Webster is not unlike Baillie in this respect: there is certainly a heavy moral tone in her dramas.

The Auspicious Day depicts the evils of superstition and the disastrous consequences of inconstancy in love. Contrasting value systems are represented in *Disguises* and the predominant theme of the piece is the importance of freedom in love. *In a Day* portrays the pathos of an aimless life. *The Sentence* is again a call for constancy in love.

As a nineteenth-century critic points out, the ‘modern point’ appears ‘here and there’ in Webster’s dramas,⁷⁹ though none of them is laid in Victorian England. Webster makes her dramas, intended for the stage or not, a vehicle for her compulsive urge for dramatic expression, her philosophy of life, her interest in history and politics, and above all, the woman’s question.

The modern note in *Disguises* is obvious. Aymery, who surrenders state and power in order to live with a woman he loves among the peasantry, though placed among circumstances at least several centuries distant, as the *Spectator* says, shows the ‘modern bias’ in many ways. He does not at all accept, for example, the chivalrous view of war which the Victorians, ‘whether through enlarged humanity, or the higher nervous susceptibility of a more luxurious and cultivated age’, were more generally beginning to repudiate:⁸⁰

War to me,
Seems, justly waged, the seasonable wound

⁷⁷ Baillie, *Complete Works*, p.17.

⁷⁸ See Mathur, pp.308-9.

⁷⁹ *British Quarterly Review*, 56 (1872), p.253.

⁸⁰ *Spectators*, 53 (1880), p.144.

That heals a worse disease, and yet a wound
Where at all nature sickens. (*Disguises*, 50)

Aymery and Claude's repudiation of the arranged political marriage and their longing for freedom in love again strike a contemporary note. Aymery laments his destiny as the future king of Aquitaine, husband of the Queen:

More than a man, so less, one who shall live
Puppet or tyrant of a hundred tyrants,
And, whichever way, be more a slave
Than my dog, who snarls or fawns on who goes by,
To the honesty of his liking. (*Disguises*, 4-5)

Claude also regrets that being a queen, she is 'barred the harmless right / Of shepherdesses mating as they love' (*Disguises*, 23). She believes 'The fruit one's own hand picks through dew and thorns / Is daintier than the goodliest ever served' (*Disguises*, 22). Commenting on *Disguises* a nineteenth-century reviewer observes that 'the motif and many of the situations are familiar enough'.⁸¹

In *The Auspicious Day*, Webster reworks the love-triangle of Euripides' *Medea*. Lambert's motive in marrying Amy certainly recalls Jason's purpose in his new marriage. Lambert claims he loves Priscilla but decides to marry Amy, who is of higher birth. He argues:

I properly
Should use my wealth to purchase noble blood
For my heir's veins, and for myself support
Of high-born kinsmen. (*Disguises*, 32)

Like Jason, breaking his promise to Priscilla Lambert goes for a match which is based neither on oaths nor on desire for the partner but on the desire for the connection the marriage offers. He believes that his relationships with Amy and Priscilla could have coexisted but for Priscilla's passion. He distinguishes himself as a rational being from Priscilla as a passionate one. He claims his purpose in his

⁸¹ *Spectators*, 53 (1880), p.145.

marriage to Amy is not the gratification of sexual longing but the procreation of an heir of nobleblood.

Things do not really work out the way Lambert plans but unlike Jason, Lambert is a figure who is in control. Priscilla has an illegitimate son by Lambert. In order to rule out the possibilities of her making use of the child to take revenge on him, Lambert hides the child from her and blackmails her with the child. In the first half of the drama Priscilla is a version of the discarded wife, a witch-like figure like Medea: passionate, vengeful, potentially powerful and dangerous. The seemingly meek, sweet and slight Amy is the one who is about to take up the role of a wife. However, rejecting Lambert, she is made a witch and suffers a horrid death. Priscilla is tamed and becomes Lambert's wife. The remark Lambert makes to Priscilla at the end of the play — 'Twas witch or wife. / Dost hear?' — echoes the interchangeable positions of the embittered spinster, the fallen woman and the wife in Victorian England.

In various social essays Webster criticizes upper- and middle- class society in which a woman's time is considered of no value. *In a Day* is about a man who treats his time as if it is of no value. Myron, the protagonist of the piece, is gentle, accomplished, intelligent and generous. He claims he lives for the enjoyment of the hour but when he suddenly comes to the end of his life, he has no fear or regret because it is actually a life without hope. Refusing to living as an exile he tells his friend, Euphranor:

Thou hast thy purpose like an inward sun
That floods all darkness with a summer hope;
But I, it was my world that shone on me,
What shall I do in the dusk? No; best end now.
(*In a Day*, 63)

If I should prune it, if I grafted in fruit,
 Or even did but bud on worthier flowers,
 'Twould from the tending take but strange disease,
 Or else, defying, keep its plant kind.
 My daughter's not my scholar. (*In a Day*, 18)

So he leaves Klydone in Myron and his mother's 'soft controls'. Then Euphranor questions why Myron, Olymnios's pupil, becomes what he is. Olymnios replies, 'Life is his ill nurse; / Too lavish of sweet cloyings' (*In a Day*, 18). But he does not seem to have taught Myron to live above his circumstances. Considering Myron's love towards Klydone as a folly, he claims women 'well-dowered' are more sensible choices for Myron.

So when the crisis comes, Myron does not have the strength to live a life without enjoyment. Klydone, who is willing to give up her life for Myron, betrays Myron because she cannot bear the physical torture despite her determination. As Olymnios puts it, Klydone has been spoiled:

Thou hadst spoiled the girl,
 Thou and thy mother, in whose soft controls
 She hath not known so much ungentle need
 As to walk northwards with the wind in face.
 (*In a Day*, 74)

So Klydone behaves like a 'wincing mindless babe' at the trial:

A crouching thing distraught by pain, and faithless.
 [...]
 And, being quickly mad with pangs,
 Has answered all their promptings as they would,
 Joined on imaginings of her startled brain,
 Signed thy direct accusal. (*In a Day*, 74-5)

Like the bride of the Greek isle in Hemans's *Records of Women*, death is the only power Klydone possesses and it becomes her only means to freedom.

Webster continues to depict the position of women in their relations with men in *The Sentence*. The issue of divorce, which was debated throughout the Victorian era, is explored in the drama. The Marriage and Divorce Act of 1857

made divorce available through the law courts rather by Act of Parliament, and therefore less costly. By the time *The Sentence* was published, the number of divorces had risen from 200 in 1868 to 400 in 1878 and 450 in 1887.⁸⁴ The years between 1870 and 1900 witnessed a gradual change in the attitude towards the discussion of the issue of divorce. Middle-class newspapers and ladies' journals began to carry details of divorce cases in the 1880's and 1890's, whereas previously they had left them to the more 'popular' Sunday newspapers who treated them as 'scandalous and salacious copy'.⁸⁵

The Sentence is set in ancient Rome. In the Roman Empire people were not expected to marry for love. The choice of spouse was ideally not an emotional but a rational decision, often financial and among the aristocracy sometimes political. According to the Roman family system, a citizen of legitimate free origin belonged only to the paternal family. The husband was expected to be the dominant partner in marriage. But women in the upper classes had in general more personal property, which gave them independence. In classical Roman law, divorce was free. After Augustus's legislation it had to be formally announced, perhaps mainly for reasons of proof. The other party did not need to consent. Men and women were equally entitled to break their union. So the all-powerful father could take his daughter, as well as her dowry back if he wished. The mother was a member of another family. Theoretically, she had no rights to her children. So in divorce children normally went to the father.⁸⁶

84 C. W. Cunningham, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 1935), p.272.

85 G. Rowntree and N. H. Carrier, 'The Resort to Divorce in England and Wales, 1858-1957', *Population Studies*, 11 (1958), pp.188-233 (p.198).

86 See Antti Arjava, *Woman and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

Caius in *The Sentence* certainly tries to treat marriage in an unsentimental way. At the beginning of the play, as a conscientious ruler he declares:

I know my duty:
I shall take steps. Æmilia seeks my spouse.
Some girl of Rome's chief houses, grave and gracious,
A woman fit for policy and for home.

(*Sentence*, 9)

He does not want to make Lælia, whom he loves dearly, his wife. He believes Æonia, who is 'stronger, more daring and loftier' (*Sentence*, 50), a fitter mate for him.

The marriage relationships in *The Sentence* are extremely unstable. As Lælia's mother says:

Oh, this satiate license of our Rome!
Love, and then Jade, then love and jade, then ... more of it;
And chop and change their lovers, hands around.
Would 'twere no worse, not chop and change the spouses!

(*Sentence*, 20-21)

Stellio wants to divorce Lælia because he has become attracted to Æonia, whom he thinks can 'help a man to take from Fortune's hand' (*Sentence*, 12). Suspecting Stellio is not kind to Lælia, Lælia's brothers plan to take her back, together with her dowry, and ruin Stellio. Despite her powerful connections, Lælia, a typical 'Angel in the House', is a vulnerable figure. She fears that once the marriage breaks she will lose her children. Out of loyalty towards Stellio and her self-sacrificing nature Lælia tries to hide all Stellio's wrong doings from her friends, and declines all their offers of help. In order to consummate their relationship Stellio and Æonia decide to get rid of Lælia. Stellio comes up with a scheme of poisoning her so that she may die slowly without raising suspicion. But even before the scheme is carried out the knowledge of her husband's treachery drives her to suicide. As Antti Arjava points out in *Woman and Law in Late Antiquity*, whatever the wider social implications, most individual women certainly regarded

divorce and widowhood as a human tragedy rather than an emancipatory victory.⁸⁷

In contrast to Lælia there is the beautiful, proud, strong and assertive Æonia, to whom widowhood is an emancipatory victory. Her father sells her to a man above her rank. After her first husband dies she marries even higher and again survives her husband. She rears herself 'to such a reverend worth / As Rome's signorial wives in nobler days' (*Sentence*, 22). The unsuspecting Lælia has a high opinion of Æonia: 'Her perfectness, her soft imperious calm — / Something that makes her more than I too much' (*Sentence*, 21). After obtaining wealth and position through two mercenary marriages, Æonia declares she can afford to go for true love. So she falls in love with Lælia's husband, Stellio, a poor knight. Æonia muses on her desire for Stellio:

Yet once I lived not needing love. I: no.
Oh, 'twas but I as the worm that crawls and feeds
Is the winged rapture drunken with free air
That's playmate to the sunbeams. Oh, this love!
Stellio, thou hast given me a soul. [sits]

She thinks of sending Stellio kisses through a rose:

Rose, fie!
Wilt thou touch lips I dare not let him touch?
Why, thou, I'll pluck thee for our go-between.
Thus do I give him kisses — thus — thus — thus —
And thou shalt breathe them to him stealthily.
(*Sentence*, 52)

However, Æonia almost instantly dismisses this relatively timid sentiment. Æonia finds the situation she gets herself into by having an affair with Stellio intolerable:

I, with ripe strength and treasured passionate heart,
To wed thee I have trampled on myself,
Stooped me to fears, to feigning, to shamed blushes,
Timorous to every eye lest it should read me.
(*Sentence*, 41)

⁸⁷ Arjava, 192.

Tearing the rose she gives way to violent passion, which certainly challenges conventional female propriety:

Oh me! Oh me! When shall I be Stellio's?
When shall our loves leap meeting, fire to fire,
River to river, life blent into life.
He is there! Too slow, too slow.

(*Sentence*, 52-3)

This passion proves to be dangerous. It brings out the selfishness and cruelty in Æonia's nature. Lælia, the traditional 'angel woman', is a victim of Æonia's passion. After Lælia is driven to death Æonia has Stellio all to herself. However, there is no end to her ambition. While the others believe she would not give up Stellio for the world, she poisons him in order to clear her way to becoming Cæsar's wife.

In her novel *Lesley's Guardians*, Marion, a woman 'with ripe strength and treasured passionate heart', is treated with great sympathy. But in *The Sentence* Æonia is portrayed as a fatal woman that all men and women must shun. Neither Æonia nor Lælia represents Webster's feminine ideal. In general, Augusta Webster gives quite a bleak picture of womanhood in her tragedies. Kyldone in *In a Day* is a failure and perishes in her first bloom of youth. In *The Auspicious Day*, the three major female characters, who are all attractive in their own ways, all suffer from a downfall at some point. The strong, assertive and proud Priscilla, who appears to show no interest in her wooers, is actually a fallen woman: she is the mistress of a wealthy land-owner and has an illegitimate son by him. Amy, who appears to be most innocent, is vain and is an expert in flirting. Dorothy is noble, generous, sensible and calm, loses her self-control in her grief and commits the worst wrong she can still live with. Female friendship is celebrated in Webster's earlier writing. In *The Auspicious Day*, three women, who are normally on very friendly terms,

turn against one another. Amy's jealousy of Dorothy's status and wealth to a certain extent motivates her to seek Percival's attention. Dorothy accuses Amy of witchcraft and Priscilla gives false testimony. Reconciliation happens towards the end of the play: Dorothy tries to give up her life to save Amy and Priscilla asks for Amy's forgiveness. Amy forgives them both. However, the reconciliation is far from complete: as a consequence of the accusation Amy is killed and Dorothy can never forgive herself.

So it seems Webster depicts the dark side of women's nature in the writing of her later days. 'The ideal 'Honour shall come woman's race, / And envious fame no more weigh women down' (*Medea*, ll.417-18) is not realized in Webster's tragedies. However, this does not mean that Webster gives up her quest for the feminine ideal in her later works. Female power, strength and friendship are again celebrated in her fairy-tale, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans: A Romance of History*, published in 1884.

Chapter Six

A Fairy Tale

Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans:

A Romance of History

While the feminist movement of the late nineteenth century was fighting bloody battles, the mode of fantasy was fostering a quiet rebellion fuelled only by pen and ink — one that held out great hope for the future equality of the sexes because it worked in a magical way on the minds and hearts of future generation.

Edith Lazaros Honig¹

Fantasy is ultimately the most philosophic form of fiction, giving scope to man's deepest dreams and most potent ideas.

Stephen Prickett²

In *Breaking the Angelic Image*, Edith Honig writes:

Victorian women in adult fiction were submissive and repressed or, if independent and assertive, mad and bad. Twentieth-century fiction for adults saw the emergence of the liberated female. Where did she come from? [...] Familiarity with Carroll's bright and independent Alice first suggested to me that Victorian children's fantasy might forge that missing link.³

The adult fiction of the nineteenth century often focuses on female characters:

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Cathy Earnshaw in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* are the adult counterparts of Lewis Carroll's Alice and like Alice they struggle in an often hostile and incomprehensible world. However, while these novels contain some fairy-tale elements or proceed with strategies derived from such tales, they are anchored in contemporary reality and constrained by the adult reader's

¹ Edith Lazaros Honig, *Breaking the Angelic Image: Woman Power in Victorian Children's Fantasy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988), p.8.

² Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), xv.

expectations. They cannot go too far beyond the possible. Books intended for children were more readily allowed the luxury of the fantastic mode. With fantasy or fairy tale came freedom to explore female power and potential, freedom to project the author's own conceptions of what females were really like, or should be like, or could be like. Thus fantasy can accommodate aspiration in ways not available to the realist novel.

Augusta Webster's *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans: A Romance of History*⁴ is a story of an Alice-like descent into a claustrophobic underground. Daffodil is a yellow-haired, grave and wise little girl. Her parents are 'grave and very wise people' who 'used to take a great deal of pains to teach her everything good for a little girl to know' (*Daffodil*, 1). From this sensible regime she seeks relaxation and companionship in fairy tales and dreams of people who dwell in the river. One day she finds an elf-cup and with the aid of its charm she penetrates into the kingdom of the frogs who dwell below the river bed. She reaches high favour among the frogs and takes office, first becoming Private Royal Jester to the Queen Raucocoäxine and then 'Dressmaker Plenipotentiary [...] with all the authority and precedence of the office, the titles of Pre-eminence and pre-eminent Madam, and the right of the jewelled fillet and the jewelled star' (*Daffodil*, 152). The frogs try to make her marry the frog-prince Brekekex. In refusing to wed the prince she commits high treason, and is condemned to be swallowed by the state boa constrictor. The frogs grieve greatly for they all love Daffodil, but 'discipline must be maintained,' and she is led to death. Brekekex, however, saves her by stuffing

³ Honig, p.3.

⁴ Augusta Webster, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxican: A Romance of History* (London: Macmillan, 1884); henceforth *Daffodil*.

the state boa constrictor so full of mushrooms that he cannot swallow the victim. Then the prince sews her up in the stuffed speaker of the House of Commons and eventually, Daffodil joyfully hails an elf-cup, and, bidding farewell to the frogs, returns to the upper world.

Nineteenth-century critics were quick to point out the influence of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on Webster's *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans*. The *West Middlesex Advertiser* says, 'The romance is conceived in a most whimsical spirit, very much after the manner of *Alice in Wonderland*, yet without any trace of imitation.'⁵ The *Athenæum* claims, 'It is no reproach to Mrs Webster to say that her '*Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* could hardly have been written unless Kingsley's *Water Babies* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* had preceded it'.⁶

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, published in 1865, is one of the most original and most enduring of the nineteenth-century fairy tales and fantasies written for children. In the *Pall Mall Gazette*'s 1898 poll concerning the twenty best books for a ten-year-old child, *Alice* is ranked first. *Through the Looking-glass* (1871), Carroll's second fantasy of Alice, is ranked eleventh. They inspired a number of imitations, which began to appear a few years after the publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, and continued in a trickle up to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* is such a book which

⁵ From advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 6.

⁶ *Athenæum*, December 13, 1884, p.768.

its author admitted had been written 'in the Alice style with an eye to the market'.⁷ *Cross Purposes* (1867) by George MacDonald, *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877) and *The Children of the Castle* (1890) by Mary Louisa Molesworth, *Down the Snow Stairs* (1887) by Alice Corkran, *Little Panjandrum's Dodo* (1899) by George Edward Farrow and *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) by Edith Nesbit were all influenced by the *Alice* books. Most of them are stories of ordinary children who happen to tumble into fantasy worlds where they have incredible adventures.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is bold in its disregard for didacticism, which dominated the field of children's literature until the 1840s and continued to exert considerable pressure on writers throughout the Victorian age. Darton calls the book 'a revolution in its sphere. It was the coming to the surface, powerfully and permanently, the first unapologetic, undocumented appearance in print, for readers who sorely needed it, of liberty of thought in children's books'.⁸ Lewis Carroll himself disavowed any didactic intent: 'I can guarantee that the Alice books have no religious teaching whatever in them — in fact they do not teach anything at all.'⁹ The *Examiner* commends the book for being 'deliciously purposeless' and sees it as a sign of hope for children and their literature, particularly in its lack of didactic concerns:

We have hope for the future of the children who can enjoy writing of this sort; and we respect the five thousand uncles, aunts and others, who have thought it a [...] more

⁷ William Michael Rossetti, *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, Letter from Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, May 4, 1874 (London: Brown, Langham, 1908), p.44.

⁸ F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 268.

⁹ Lewis Carroll, 'To the Lowric Children,' n.d., in *A Selection from the Letter of Lewis Carroll to His Child-Friends*, ed. by Evelyn M. Hatch (London: Macmillan, 1933), p.242.

profitable gift book than the lumps of hard face turned into the shape of literary sweetmeats that are every year presented for their choice.¹⁰

Didacticism, however, certainly did not vanish from English children's literature after the appearance of the *Alice* books. Some children's books written after the fashion of *Alice in Wonderland* actually blend Carroll-like fantasy with moral earnestness. Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likeness* is one of them. It is about Flora, who escapes from a disastrous birthday party into a fantasy world where all the unpleasant characteristics of selfish children are personified in 'speaking likeness'.

Alice's success ensured that most children's books would not again be subject to the joyless and obtrusive didacticism which had often marred earlier Victorian writing for children. 'Books of Fiction for Children', an essay attributed to Bennett Johns which appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in 1867, reveals that by the late 1860s, it was still considered important that children's literature, and adult fiction, have some moral value, but preachiness was rejected: 'there is a fair, wise moral lying hidden in sound, healthy fiction. [...] The youngest reader [...] gets hold of the moral for himself without having it preached into him, and without even a reflection tagged on as an antidote to the fiction'.¹¹ In 'Children's Literature', an article written for the *Examiner* in the 1870s, Augusta Webster claims:

A child should be allowed to read for the pleasure of it, like its elders; it would no more do to prescribe its literary amusements on a carefully arranged educational system of our own than to direct its games of romps and convert them into a judicious course of gymnastics. But, just as we may, without losing it the healthy freedom of its pleasure, encourage games which shall help, not hinder, its bodily growth, so we may encourage it, when it reads for amusement, to find that amusement in books which will expand its imagination and its sympathies and widen its mental range. (*AHO*, 118)

¹⁰ *Examiner*, December 15, 1866, p.791.

¹¹ Bennett Johns, 'Books of Fiction for Children', *Quarterly Review*, 121 (1867), p.33.

The years between 1880 and 1914 are the very centre of what is often referred to as 'the Golden Age of Children's Literature'. Augusta Webster witnessed an unprecedented output of books for children and observed the way they were consumed in the market:

The number of books for children published in each year is becoming portentous. There seems to be a magic mill at work on their production — a magic mill like that salt mill which, in consequence of no one knowing the spell for stopping it, went on grinding out salt long after it had ground too much, till it had to be thrown into the sea, of whose briny condition it is, as everyone knows, the abiding cause. [...] More wonderful still, it seems never to have ground too much. The market for the ware is inexhaustible. [...] — in fact the great bookseller's stock-in-trade seems to be all children's books. [...] Numbers of well-to-do people lavish of their money in all sorts of other directions are singularly chary of spending any of it on books; for themselves they buy none — the notion does not occur to them — unless it be a railway novel on a journey. [...] Many people have to count their shillings too closely to have the courage to part with them to purchase the volumes they long to have in the little home library. [...] And many people do not get books as they do not get harpoons, because they have no use for them. But everybody buys the children their children's book. (*AHO*, 115)

The type of children's work that really flowered in the Victorian era and earned this period the title of the Golden Age of children's literature was the fantasy. Its extreme popularity made it clearly influential. Fairy tales became fashionable fare in many literary magazines of the period. Even publications that normally did not cover children's literature included pieces on fairy tales as reading for adults: The *Nineteenth Century* included scholarly studies of fairy tales, notably 'Cinderella' and 'Puss in Boots'.¹² The *Gentleman's Magazine* revealed a newly discovered fairy tale in verse by Charles Lamb.¹³ The *Edinburgh Review* (1898) published an extensive history, 'Fairy Tales as Literature', which was one of many that expressed what the author called 'the gospel of childhood's

¹² W. R. S. Ralston, 'Cinderella', *Nineteenth Century*, 6 (1879), pp.832-53; W.R.S. Ralston, 'Puss in Boots', *Nineteenth Century*, 13 (1883), pp.88-104.

¹³ Richard Heme Shepherd, 'An Unknown Fairy-Tale in Verse by Charles Lamb', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 259 (1885), pp.188-96.

imagination'.¹⁴ So it is possible that Augusta Webster, like Christina Rossetti, wrote the fantasy in the Alice style 'with an eye to the market'.

So it seems that the Victorian era sanctioned the modes of fantasy and fairy tale. However, the debate on Fantasy versus Realism in 'Literature for Children' continued throughout the century. The early reformists like Maria Edgeworth and Sarah Trimmer were concerned with educating children to live in a material world. In *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) and *Early Lessons* (1801), Maria Edgeworth urges upon children the need to act on rational principles, and points out the disasters that could result from failure to do so. In her story of 'The Purple Jar', which was included in both the collections named, Rosamond's mother allows her to have the jar of coloured water from the chemist's window in preference to new shoes with the result that her shoes deteriorate to such a degree that she can 'neither run, dance, jump nor walk in them'. In 1831 an article in *The Ladies Museum* could still rejoice that 'The days of *Jack-the Giant Killer*, *Little Red Riding-Hood*, and such trashy productions are gone by, and the infant mind is now nourished by more able and efficient food'.¹⁵ The idea that fairy tales were pernicious and useless lingered even in mid-century. Dickens's *Hard Times*, published in 1854, satirises the hostility which still existed towards fanciful literature in mid-century. The Gradgrind children in *Hard Times* receive a purely factual and scientific education and

¹⁴ Una Ashworth Taylor, 'Fairy Tales as Literature', *Edinburgh Review*, 188 (1898), pp.37-59.

¹⁵ Anonymous, *The Ladies Museum*, September 1831, quoted in Gillian Avery's *Childhood's Pattern: A Study of Heroes and Heroines of Children's Fiction 1770-1950* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), p.42.

have never heard of fairy tales or nursey rhymes. Fairy tales were then a subject of controversy. Fantasy in general had long been considered objectionable because it blurred truth and fiction and because it distracted children from the serious business of learning facts and moral lessons. As Richard Altick observes in *The English Common Reader*, both Utilitarians and Evangelicals ‘were distinguished by their deep seriousness. [...] Profoundly aware that each passing moment was precious and that life had to be lived with the utmost methodicalness, they deplored what they called the habit of “desultory reading”’.¹⁶ The issue continued to be debated in the periodical press into the late nineteenth century: in 1895, a column in *Punch*, ‘Meeting of Fairy Folk’, satirized an article from the *Educational Times* by Mr H. Holman, School Inspector, who expressed his aversion to fairy tales for their primitive, immoral nature. *Punch* then imagined the fairy tale characters meeting to protest their expulsion from the nursery and to defend their intrinsic utilitarian worth.¹⁷ Augusta Webster states her objection to the realistic children’s books of her days:

One great fault of children’s books as a class is that they are about children. Heroes and heroines not yet in their teens run their important careers, they are martyrs, benefactors, geniuses, wronged and blighted beings shining forth at last in a blaze of recognised virtue — or perhaps they are villains who do their exercises with the help of a surreptitious crib, and bully their immaculate schoolfellow — but at all events they are personages.

She points out that little boys and girls ought not to regard themselves, as these stories teach them to do, as possible personages, nor should they be ‘set analysing their own characters and watching themselves grow’. She claims that

¹⁶ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), p.85.

imagination is not merely the creative gift essential to the poet and the artist, but the ability to conceive and appreciate other circumstances and other needs than those of one's actual experience. Webster believes that fantasy is what children need. And it is objectionable only when children's fantasy and imagination is too close to reality and the crude facts of daily life. She asserts the boy who is 'wont to fancy himself a Julius Caesar, or a Jack the Giant Killer, or a King Alfred', has a manifest advantage over the child 'whose choice can only wander among the Harolds and Algernons of good young ladies' stories of schoolboys' (AHO, 116-118).

So Webster puts her young heroine into a fantasy world — the kingdom of frogs, where she can be an eminent artist and hold the most important office of the kingdom. It is significant that *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* is a fantasy of a girl's adventure, for the decades of the 1880s and 1890s saw a growing consciousness of gender and more rigid classification of children's books. Reflecting the broader discourse on gender roles, children's books during this period often dealt with themes of the 'test of manhood' or 'true womanhood'. While books for the youngest readers tended to be more gender inclusive, those for older children divided largely into adventure fiction for boys and domestic chronicles for girls. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9) stand as quintessential examples. Historians generally agree that gender divisions in children's books became a marked trend in the 1860s, the 'after-Alice' boom period of publishing. Edward Salmon, a prominent author and authority on children's books in the 1880s and 1890s, who

17 'Meeting of Fairy Folk.' *Punch*, 109 (1895), p.287.

addressed the subject in various periodicals and in a collection of essays, *Juvenile Literature as It Is* (1888),¹⁸ was critical of the writing available for girls. In 'What Girls Read', Salmon complains that domestic dramas for girls, described as 'goody-goody', appeared lacklustre after the hairbreadth escapes of boys' fiction. Girls' books existed as a transition to adult reading and to prepare young women for their social roles ahead.¹⁹ According to Harvery Darton, however, girls were not content with girls' romances, but often stole trashy boys' adventure stories from their brothers.²⁰ And they could only imagine themselves in the hero's role. Commenting in 1886 on girls' fiction, the *Times* suggested that publishers would be more successful 'if they occasionally gave a clever authoress her head, remembering that girls, as well as boys, delight in life and action.'²¹ *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* is a fantasy slanted toward girls' interests and aims to satisfy a 'delight in life and action'. The protagonist of the book, Daffodil, is a curious, wise, courageous and positive figure who has an amazing adventure in the frogland. She is an independent girl with whom the girl readers could enjoy identifying. As well as the female power Augusta Webster presents through Daffodil, which I will discuss later, there are details in this fantasy which suit girls' taste especially. As the *West Middlesex Advertiser* says, 'Girls especially will appreciate and enjoy the sly fun that pervades every chapter.' Girls would find the description of the waterworks, and the Royal Garden, an 'immense hall walled, paved, and coiled, with patterns of every shape and colour in mosaic of some rough material' delightfully interesting. The

¹⁸ Edward Salmon, *Juvenile Literature as It is* (London: Henry J. Drane, 1888).

¹⁹ Edward Salmon, 'What Girls Read', *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (1886), pp.515-29.

²⁰ Darton, p.313.

ladies' clothes in Croäxaxica are frequently described in length in this fiction. Getting dressed is one of the most important things in Croäxaxican life. The highest personage in the country after the royal family is the Dressmaker Plenipotentiary, and Daffodil herself becomes the Dressmaker Plenipotentiary. Girls would be expected to be fascinated by the Croäxaxicans' making clothes with flowers:

All the shelves in the part of the Plenipotentiary's enclosure in which she kept her dresses were filled chiefly with flowers of bell shapes. Daffodil recognized among them the beautiful pink heath of which the tunic she so greatly admired was made, and she was tempted to make her choice of that. [...] She stopped before a crowded stalk of wild bluebells and asked if she might take the longest she could find for her dress. [...]

Croäxaxicans do not use under-clothing, and Daffodil caused considerable surprise by asking for some: but she was shown some white harebells from which she chose another tunic to wear inside her bluebell. She was offered flowers for the fashionable leggings and for sleeves of the same style, or for puff sleeves, pouch sleeves, bell sleeves, butterfly sleeves, all of which were in favour with the leaders of high society. (*Daffodil*, 75-6)

However, *Daffodil* is not a book written just for girls. For example, the importance of ladies' clothes in Croäxaxican life might also imply that, in reality, fashion was an important way for Victorian women to express themselves. C. Willett Cunningham seeks to describe Victorian women through a study of their dress, he claims: 'All through the century the significance of Fashions in dress has to be emphasised, because for the most part it was Woman's chief or only means of self-expression.'²² In Webster's earlier novel *Lesley's Guardians*, Marion Raymond spends lots of time and energy on dressing. Through the way she dresses, she presents her taste, creativity, as well as her unconventionality. In 1882, Edmund Clarence Stedman says in an article acclaiming nineteenth-century

²¹ 'Christmas Books,' *The Times*, December 21, 1886, p.13.

²² C. W. Cunningham, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 1935), p.10.

British female poets including Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow and Augusta

Webster:

There seem to be, in the new generation of English women, few maidens whose thoughts are fixed upon the succession to these gentle palm-bearers whom I have named. Possibly the artistic sensibilities of English girls find due expression in their appeal to the sense of vision, in their taste for dress and decoration, and in pursuing aesthetic devices that are the modern extension of those who fashioned the tea-cup times of Anne.²³

The emphasis on clothes also represents Victorian middle-class extravagance, which Augusta Webster criticized in essays like 'The Depravity of English Ladies' (*AWO*, 16-20), 'Clothes' (*AWO*, 42-46) and 'English Extravagance' (*AWO*, 260-265). Cunnington calls the period from 1866 to 1880 the 'golden age' of the dressmakers' art:

Never before or since has the Englishwoman's costume been so complex, reaching a degree which defied even the professional fashion journalist to describe. In a technical sense it seems as though the costumier was indulging in sheer bravura display, inventing new difficulties in order to show her skill in overcoming them. The moment was auspicious. Materials had reached a high level of excellence. Until the wave of prosperity began to decline, late in the seventies, the demand for fine clothes was wider than ever and extravagance in dress had become habitual among the class represented by the Perfect Lady.²⁴

A whole range of fashions was possible, requiring as many as five or six changes a day.²⁵ Special walking dresses and afternoon dresses came to be regarded as a necessary part of the wardrobe of the lady of fashion in the 1860's, and evening dresses of all kinds elaborated the variety and richness of their trimmings during the next twenty years.²⁶ Throughout the 1860's and 1870's the evidence all points

²³ Edmund Clarence Stedman, 'Some London Poets', *Harper's Magazine*, 64 (1882), p.886.

²⁴ C. W. Cunnington, *The Perfect Lady* (London: Parrish, 1948), p.39.

²⁵ *The Perfect Lady*, p.40.

²⁶ C. W. Cunnington, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber, 1937), chs. 7 & 8.

to a growing awareness that women's clothing had become increasingly expensive, although yard for yard the cost of raw materials fell.²⁷

So we can see that *Daffodil* is not a book written just for children. In some sense, it is intended as a satire on the adult world. Its somewhat irreverent treatment of royalty reminds us of Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring; or, The History of Prince Giglio and Prince Bulbo: A Fire-side Pantomime for Great and Small Children* (1854), which, as the title suggests, is intended for youngsters and grownups alike. In fact Augusta Webster did not believe that children should only read books written specially for children, and she did not think that there should be a rigid demarcation between adult and children's literature:

The most popular, the immortal, children's books were composed for adults. *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the ancient evergreen fairy tales, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Arabian Nights*, were not written down to the supposed standard of infants' comprehensions and limited within the sphere of infants' lives. Such books have the strength but not the twaddle of simplicity, and they live, not by the favour of the guardians of youth, but by their own vitality. Children will read them again, and again, and again, till they all but know them by heart; and grown people, taking them up for the sake of the memories of their youth, discover that they are new to their maturer apprehension. It is difficult to name any book written expressly for children which can compete with these in children's favour, or which one could wish to do so. (*AHO*, 118)

Augusta Webster claims that the author of *Alice in Wonderland* 'seems to have found a secret for making a book for children and about a child which shall be as safe and as sparkling as pure water bubbling up with oxygen'. She points out, however, that 'the daintiness of his excellent fooling' is most appreciated by adults: 'It is they and not the children who have given the Mad Hatter and the Mock Turtle their place among our most popular heroes of romance' (*AHO*, 119).

²⁷ J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), pp.96-100.

Actually the lines between adult and children's literature in the Victorian era were by no means sharply drawn. Nineteenth-century children read many books that were written for adults, both on their own and as part of family sessions of reading aloud. Victorian daughters were often called upon to entertain fathers and brothers by reading aloud the works of Dickens or Sir Walter Scott. On the other hand, children's books were read frequently by adults. Six of the ten best-sellers in the United States between 1875 and 1895 were children's books: *Heidi*, *Treasure Island*, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and *King Solomon's Mines*. The dual readership was recognized in the reviews: the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1894 described the phenomenon as 'not juvenile literature but books for the big about the little'.²⁸ *The Times* (1889) found that 'some of the stories for younger children are far more amusing reading to our minds than nineteen-twentieths of the three-volume novels'.²⁹ The *Art Journal* (1881) distinguished between two classes of children's books: those actually written for children and those catering to 'the pleasure of grown-up as well as infantile minds' and noted the continuing trend of publishing high-class works 'nominally intended for the little ones, but also catering to the grown-up folks'.³⁰ Reviewers frequently made reference to books 'delighting all children between the ages of six and sixty' or 'pleasing the old as well as the young'. The *Art Journal* (1883), recounting the history of children's books, noted that *Alice in Wonderland* appealed to both adults and children, and its enormous popularity and commercial

28 'Books for and about Children,' *Atlantic Monthly*, 73 (1894), pp.850-54.

29 'Christmas Books', *The Times*, December 5, 1889, p.13.

30 'Children's Christmas Books', *Art Journal*, 43 (1881), December 1881, pp.380-408, cited by Anne H. Lundin in 'Victorian Horizon: The Reception of Children's Books in England and America, 1880-1900', *Library Quarterly*, 64 (1994), pp.30-59 (p.43).

success encouraged authors to write for both. Perhaps in consequence of this dual readership, various English writers began to explore the potential of the fairy tale as a form of literary communication that might convey both individual and social protest and personal conceptions of alternatives. To write a fairy tale was considered by many writers a social symbolical act that could have implications for the education of children and the future of society. While the fairy tale was not overtly 'realistic' and purported to have nothing to say about the 'real' world, in this fantastic strain of writing may be found some more or less profound observation about human character and contemporary society. It dealt largely with utopias, and posited the existence of societies remote from the everyday world; yet in doing this it was usually commenting, often satirically and critically, on contemporary life. Jack Zipes says in *Victorian Fairy Tales*, 'The Victorian fairy-tale writers always had two ideal audiences in mind when they composed their tales — young middle-class readers whose minds and morals they wanted to influence, and adult middle-class readers whose ideas they wanted to challenge and reform. It was through the fairy tale that a social discourse about conditions in England took form'.³¹

Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1862) offers a classic example of children's literature employed to charm and to teach. C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and many others after them have used Kingsley as a model, writing a nonsensical story supposedly for children, fully aware that it will be read aloud by adults. The *Water Babies* is a symbolic tale of spiritual growth and redemption. Little Tom, a

³¹ Jack Zipes ed., *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (New York: Routledge, 1987), preface p.xi.

neglected and ignorant chimney-sweep's boy who has never heard of God, is washed clean in the river and enters a new and delightful existence as a 'water baby'. In order to mature, however, he must learn that sin inevitably brings its own punishment, the province of the stern Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid. The next step in spiritual growth is the development of an unselfish love for others, which Tom learns from Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. Finally, Tom must help someone whom he dislikes, his former master, who is duly punished for past crimes and then reforms. Having been purified, educated, and redeemed, Tom returns to human form and becomes a great man. When the *Water Babies* appeared in volume form in 1863, the *Saturday Review* indicated, '*The Water-Babies* [is] a child's story really for grown-up people, but nominally for children'.³² By cutting his 'shrewd observation' with a vast quantity of 'picturesque fancy', Kingsley created a parable of human development whose meaning only adults could fully unpack.

Like the *Water Babies* Webster's *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* deliberately aimed at a dual audience. The *Scotsman* recognizes that it is 'a charming book for the reading of young people' and believes that it 'will take a high place in the class of literature to which it may be said to belong'. The *Athenaeum* says, 'we are treated to an exhaustive survey of their manners, customs, and institutions. Their court etiquette is of the strictest, and it is set forth in great detail, there is, indeed, an overwhelming mass of detail, and is hardly of a nature very interesting to children. Yet this much ado about nothing is not without its charm.'³³ The *Manchester Examiner* points out, 'Mrs Webster's story will be read with pleasure for the simplicity and grace of its language; but young

³² 'The Water-Babies', *Saturday Review*, 15 (1863), pp.665-67.

lovers of fairy stories who think neither of style nor hidden meaning will doubtless get the greatest amount of enjoyment from it.' The *Glasgow Herald* says, 'There is no preface to this story to tell us what Mrs Webster meant it to be, but whether we regard it as a fairy tale or as a delicate satire, it is delightful. [...] Altogether *Daffodil* is a book that will, if read rightly, amuse equally both old and young.'³⁴

The influence of *Alice in Wonderland* and the *Water Babies* on *Daffodil* was, of course, recognized by nineteenth-century critics. The narration of the *Water Babies* starts with the conventional story formula:

Once upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom. That is a short name, and you have heard it before, so you will not have much trouble in remembering it. He lived in a great town in the North country, where there were plenty of chimneys to sweep and plenty of money for Tom to earn and his master to spend.

The opening paragraph of *Daffodil* obviously resembles that of the *Water Babies*:

There was once a little girl who was born with such shining yellow hair that her father and mother said it was as bright as the yellow daffodils, and therefore they gave her the name of Daffodil. She was born in the dull grey time of the year when all the flowers have gone and the trees are left with only a few wet brown leaves upon them; and her father and mother did not quite remember in their eyes how very bright and how very yellow the daffodils are. When spring came, they saw that their little one's beautiful golden hair did not match with the tint of the flower after which they had named her. But by that time they did not care about her name reminding them of anything but herself. (*Daffodil*, 1)

The narrator's voice, the voice of the story-teller, is an accepted presence. The style itself is typical of a children's story and its tone makes the fantasy seem like a book written expressly for children. Augusta Webster also adopts some nonsense literature elements in *Daffodil and the Croixaxican*. Chapter Four is a good example of the appropriation of nonsense strategies from Carroll. After

33 *Athenaeum*, December 13, 1884, p.768.

34 From advertisements in the back of *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster*, 6.

her long lessons on the language, history and customs of the Croäxaxicans,

Daffodil is exhausted when she is presented to the Queen of Croäxaxica:

The rushes in her eyes kept her from falling downright asleep, but she was all the while growing more and more bewildered, till at last it seemed to her as if all this were a dream and she found herself every now and then saying nonsensical things, as if she were talking in her sleep. [...]

'What are you, and on what mission have you come to our kingdom?' she (the Queen) said. But Daffodil was half dreaming and she somehow got a dazed notion that the queen was Keziah (The old servant of Daffodil's parents) dressed up; so she said to her 'Oh what a dear funny stupid old thing you look!' [...]

You may imagine what consternation there was! Some of the Maids of Honour shrieked, and the Noble-men drew their swords to defend their Queen. The Princess Royal almost fainted with horror and alarm.

The Queen was so indignant that she shook the King till he woke up shaken out of breath. But she was always courageous. [...] So, with a stately and fearless air, Her Majesty said, 'Miserable creature, if your life had not been already forfeited by your High Treason against our ceiling, it would become forfeit now. [...]

But here Daffodil, who had now got it into her head that Her Majesty was the big black dog barking, interrupted her with 'Do be quiet, there's a good fellow. Don't make a noise.'

'I order you to instant death,' cried the Queen, hopping with rage.

'Lie down and hold your tongue, there's a good fellow,' said Daffodil.

(*Daffodil*, 45)

Scenes like this remind us of the *Alice* books, and, poems by the poet-prince

Brekekex, 'the first genius of the world', certainly enhance the taste of

nonsense literature:

Such was the great Queen's mercy, such her mind;
Thus she made wrong be right, and front behind:
And all the agonies and shuddering throes
Of Seventy Seven and a Half found close:
And, Lo! A Croäxaxican by birth
Helped by the lowest creature on the earth!
Thus can a fortnight's air of our great land
Make virtue in a savage heart expand,
Thus swell a soul and breathe a froggish sense
And fill an odd-shaped mouth with eloquence.

(*Daffodil*, 106)

However, far from being a purely amusing, far from being a 'deliciously

purposeless' fantasy, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* is heavily loaded with the

author's social observations and concerns. Like Charles Kingsley, Augusta

Webster here chooses a fantasy as her vehicle for the portrayal of society, and for

the expression of her personal ideals. In fact, almost all her social concerns find

their way into the nonsense of this fairy tale. Through the exhaustive survey of the Croäxaxicans' history, manners, customs, and institutions, Augusta Webster satirizes contemporary British society, the British Empire, and perhaps even the development of human civilization or the assumption of development. Issues such as contemporary politics, conceptions of class, royalty, education, child-rearing, marriage are presented and examined in this fantasy.

Perhaps Augusta Webster's concerns and ideals are not quite the same as those of Charles Kingsley. However, they both had an interest in natural science and human development. By the time Charles Kingsley wrote the *Water Babies*, he had already written an introduction to marine biology for children. And the topic that had preoccupied him for a number of years before he sat down to write the *Water Babies* was the Darwinian theory of evolution: in fact, he became the best-known Darwinian in Cambridge,³⁵ and, like many Victorian clergymen, he was an amateur botanist and called Darwin his 'Master'. His interest in evolution is reflected in the *Water Babies*. The history of the nation of Doasyoulukes, who evolve backwards from man into ape because of their mental and moral laziness, is at once a simple parable and a sarcastic piece of rhetoric in support of Darwin. The theory of evolution is touched on in Webster's fantasy. The Regius Professor of Everything tells Daffodil the history of the Croäxaxicans:

The Inimitable Croäxaxicans had not in the earliest ages been an underground people. They had inhabited territories beside the river above, and had carried on intercourse with the other nations of frogs. Although, as the Professor's researches led him to believe, the Croäxaxicans of that period had not attained that magnificent physical development which now characterised them, they were larger and stronger than the kindred races, and they were, he need hardly say, their superiors in intelligence and enterprise. (*Daffodil*, 113)

³⁵ Owen Chadwick, 'Charles Kingsley at Cambridge', *The Historical Journal*, 18 (1975), p.313.

Moreover, the presentation of the biology of the Croäxaxican frogs in *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans* also reflects Webster's interest in science. In a letter to Professor John Stuart Blackie, she mentions attending a lecture: 'It was much about the temperature of the sea (there being the remarkable phenomenon of a warm and a cold stretch side by side to expatiate upon) and little about the new wild beasts and still alive fossils (or ought-to-be fossils) dredged up, though there was a large gallery of their portraits on the wall behind Dr Carpenter.'³⁶

However, above all, the central concern in *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans*, which is also the central concern in Webster's other writing, is the position of women. The protagonist of the story, Daffodil, is a female child. Most of the important characters she encounters in Croäxaxica are also female. Females are the dominant figures in Croäxaxica: the highest personage in the country after the Royal Family, the Dressmaker Plenipotentiary, is, of course, a woman. In this fantasy, Augusta Webster presents various women characters in different stages of life, explores questions related to them like girlhood, spinsterhood, motherhood, marriage, and family life, and redefined the conceptions of the feminine ideal.

Croäxaxica is not a feminist Utopia. Prince Brekekex states his feminine ideal in his poems and in doing so exposes the subservient situation of women, serving as Virginia Woolf later put it 'as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size':³⁷

The female mind has so divine a grace,

³⁶ Augusta Webster, Letter to Professor John Stuart Blackie, May 30, 1870, National Library of Scotland, *Blackie Papers*, MS. 2629, ff. 205-208.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), p.37.

Whatever male minds find too dull and base
Is just what our sweet sisters should desire,
And in its joyful practice never tire.

(*Daffodil*, 179)

He believes that a wife should be:

A well-trained angel by one's side
The two halves of one's ills to bear with pride
To laugh at all one's jokes, shake at one's rages,
Praise, serve, admire one, and save servants' wages.

(*Daffodil*, 183)

Elsewhere Augusta Webster satirizes the conventional idea of female weakness:

Their Lords and Ladies in Waiting were ranged along the curve of the wall — apparently standing, but in fact it was so managed by the shape and height of their seats that they should have the advantage of sitting while they looked as if they were bolt upright on their feet. This arrangement was the result of the kindly thoughtfulness of the Queen herself, in consequence of the Lords and Ladies in Waiting have been perpetually fainting away while she required them to stand so many hours as her Sociable Evenings usually lasted. [...] At last it flashed upon her one evening, when *thirteen* Lords and *two* Ladies had been carried out in swoons, that, if somebody could make some sort of contrivance to enable these distinguished attendants to be seated without betraying it by their attitude, a stop might be put to their fainting. [...] This matter of the seats won the Queen great applause, because, as all the Croaxaxican newspapers pointed out, it showed that, though she was a Queen she felt a sympathy for her sex, and all the Ladies in Waiting ought to be ready to give their lives for such a mistress. The Ladies in Waiting gave her a magnificent diadem of snail-shells in memory of her goodness, and the Lords in Waiting came to the presentation of it and unanimously delivered a speech in which they heaped praises on her for her Royal and tender consideration for their colleagues in office, the Ladies in Waiting. The Queen was so pleased that she had ever since been looking for something to do for her sex again. (*Daffodil*, 86)

This passage echoes Queen Victoria's speaking of 'her poor weak sex' and perhaps not quite noticing their basic toughness. Queen Victoria never questioned her own ability to rule the British Empire, but when Lady Amberley expressed advanced views in her lecture entitled 'The Claims of Women' in 1870, Queen Victoria denounced 'this mad wicked folly of "Women's Rights"' with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety: Lady Amberley ought 'to get a good whipping'.³⁸

³⁸ See Elizabeth Longford, *Eminent Victorian Women* (Auckland: Macmillan, 1981), pp.9-10.

Augusta Webster develops the matter of the chairs to show that the idea of women as 'the weaker sex' has merely been taken for granted by both men and women. Women are like snails hiding in their shells, refusing to face and accept the reality of their own strength. Webster further satirizes and rebukes this belief throughout the novel by presenting strong and independent female characters, as well as deliberately undermined male characters.

Raucacoäxine, the Queen of Croäxaxica, is a decidedly powerful figure. The narration of the novel claims that 'The Queen of Croäxaxica was no ordinary person, even if she had not been a Queen'. She is curious, creative, courageous, adventurous and eager to learn; she is certainly one of the most outstanding frogs in Croäxaxica. For instance, she is the best dancer in that country:

The Queen smiled, and arose. And she danced. Words cannot describe that dancing. With grave composure she sprang and shuffled and hopped and pirouetted. She made twenty steps in an inch, she made strides of thrice her height. Nobody could dance like the Queen of Croäxaxica. (*Daffodil*, 89)

Of course, the satire here is double-edged. The Queen serves both to stress female strength and to expose human vanity and pomposity.

The King of Croäxaxica is an insignificant figure, asleep almost all the time. When Daffodil first arrives in the Kingdom of Croäxaxica, the Officer in Command sends his Aide-de-camp to tell Their Majesties everything that has happened. The King is asleep when the messenger comes, but the Queen, 'on hearing the narrative', feels 'curious to see the prisoner', and we are told that under the instruction of the Regius Professor of Everything, she is the most learned woman in the Frogland. When she actually meets Daffodil, she orders one of the soldiers to turn the prisoner slowly round several times that she may 'view the creature thoroughly'. After leaning 'her head on her hand' and remaining in 'deep thought

for ten minutes' she concludes, 'the thing is a human being'. She is the first frog in the country to recognize that Daffodil is a human being and she is the first one to learn Daffodil's language and speak to her in English (*Daffodil*, 20-24). When the whole palace is shattered by the half dreaming Daffodil, the soldiers all run away, all the Maids of Honour go into hysterics, the Crown Prince creeps under his father's throne and the Queen creeps under her own, the King, unmoved by the catastrophe, 'stretches himself and leans back in his chair again and says, 'Noble Croäxaxicans, Lords and Ladies, my loyal and deserving subjects, things seem going wrong, but Her Majesty, my wife, who is absent somewhere or other now on business of the State, knows my mind on the subject and will put them all right presently when she comes back' (*Daffodil*, 47). And with these words he goes back to sleep again, and eventually it is the Queen who has the courage to 'peep out from under her throne' and comes out to inspect Daffodil who is lying motionless on the floor.

Raucacoäxine is not only a Queen, she is also a mother. The ideal Victorian mother would subscribe to the cult of True Womanhood. According to Barbara Welter in *Dimity Convictions*, the attributes of True Womanhood consisted of 'four cardinal virtues — piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity'.³⁹ In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter says that a proper mother would be 'a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home'.⁴⁰ Such a picture seems to preclude the possibility of independence and creative thought. In her *Woman and*

³⁹ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), p.21.

⁴⁰ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.14.

the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth, Nina Auerbach claims that the propagation of the subjugated Angel in the House image was a response to the perceived danger of unleashing women's real potential.⁴¹

The Queen of Croäxaxica is by no means submissive: she is certainly not an ideal Victorian mother. Nor does she seem to be Augusta Webster's ideal: she is quite domineering towards her sons, the Crown Prince and Prince Brokekex. However, the treatment of her relationship with her daughter reveals a new concept of mother and daughter relationship. At the beginning of Chapter Fifteen, when Queen Raucacoäxine informs Princess Guachapeara, who is just of age, that she is going to succeed to the Dressmaker Plenipotentiaryship, Guachapeara is overjoyed:

She kissed her mother over and over again. 'You dear magnificent darling!' she said enthusiastically, 'What a thing it is to have a mother who can appreciate one! I was beginning to think I should never learn to be an artist after all, because of Art being so stupid and wasting one's time so after things that always turn out different from how one expected, but now I feel quite sure I shall get on. Of course a Dressmaker Plenipotentiary always is a great artist.'

'Quite so,' said the Queen, fondly stroking her daughter's cheek.

'The greatest of living artists, mustn't she be?' continued the delighted young princess.

'It is her privilege to be so — and in fact her duty,' replied Her Majesty. 'And, my dear Guachapeara, I hope, young as you are, that you will remember duty.'

(*Daffodil*, 190-191)

Here, Queen Raucacoäxine is presented as a loving and approachable mother. And instead of petty domestic issues, the mother and daughter are discussing occupation, career and duty.

Queen Raucacoäxine is a mother in a fantasy world; Daffodil's own mother, an 'actual' Victorian woman, is not much on the scene. In adventure stories the mothers of the protagonists are often absent. Since courage and

⁴¹ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.8.

daring, not submissiveness and dependence, are the qualities demanded of a child hero or heroine, mothers might be felt to get in the way. These qualities, and the adventures that ensue for those who possess them, may not peacefully coexist with the presence of an ideal Victorian mother. Carefully watchful conventional mothers would keep their children away from rabbit holes, magic clocks, thus preventing their adventures from ever taking place and therefore keeping the children from maturing through their adventurous confrontations. Through the brief description in Chapter one, we can see that Daffodil's mother is quite different from conventional Victorian women. Like Daffodil's father, she is a philosopher, a 'very grave, very wise' person. Just before Daffodil jumps into the river and starts her adventure, she appears in front of her parents and asks for the record of a tree's being cut down, which is crucial for finding the way to the river people, her mother takes off her spectacles, so that she may 'be able to look at her better' and gazes 'inquiringly'. Later, when her father finds that he has given Daffodil the wrong date, her mother says, 'She will be as happy over her calculations as if she had got the right day to count from' (*Daffodil*, 8-9). Obviously, she is not a ever-watchful mother. Because of that, Daffodil is allowed the freedom for the display of independence and for growth and maturation through adventurous experience.

Chachareraroncaxa, Queen of Grachidichika is a figure quite opposite to the Queen of Croäxaxica. She is a tragic character which can be read as representative of the traditional submissive and suffering Victorian woman, as well as the paradigm of many suffering domestic victims in Victorian novels. Her husband,

King of Grachidichika, is an old idiot. As a Queen, Chachareraroncax has to 'work too hard' and put her hand to 'everything to get the servants on':

'You think that strange for a Queen. But, where there's a big house and next to no servants and little money, there's plenty to do. We shouldn't have the means for State on high occasions if we spent on being waited on and done for properly every day. The fact is, my dear, the revenue of this kingdom has been this long while too small to keep it up. I brought a nice little fortune when I married, but it got used up in building new roofs to the barracks when the old ones fell in, and in things like that. I have to slave to make both ends meet, I can tell you.' (*Daffodil*, 165)

Augusta Webster's depiction of Chachareraroncax's life can be seen as a portrait of the life of a gentlewoman of a less well off family, struggling to maintain a middle-class life style for the family. Her dreary imprisonment in her 'walled-in-dead-alive little kingdom' only big enough for 'a large family' represents female imprisonment in contemporary society. The description of the fatal blow she receives on the head from her husband reminds us of Nancy's death in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837):

As they turned the corridor, something came flying at the Queen's head and hurled her to the ground. As Daffodil rushed to her, the King sprang forward, chuckling, caught up the chair which had been his missile, and ran away.

The Queen lay stunned for a minute. But, while Daffodil, supporting her head, was calling for help, she raised herself, quite revived and apparently unhurt. 'I am used to it,' she said. 'You needn't mind. He *will* do it. Anybody he is fond of he plays tricks upon, and, as, of course, he is the fondest of me, I get the hardest bangs.'

'He should be whipped!' exclaimed Daffodil indignantly. She had been afraid the Queen was killed or dangerously hurt, and had not recovered her composure. [...]

The blow she received on the head, when the King threw the chair at her, had caused fatal injury, and that night, before it was well understood that she was ill, the Queen of Grachidichika was no more. (*Daffodil*, 173-6)

Dickens always insisted that Nancy was true to life. He defended his conception of her character (particularly her loyalty to the brutal Sikes) by referring to his years of observation of such girls and their environment: 'It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong, IT IS TRUE.'⁴² Dickens

42 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872-74), p.96.

records an occasion when he accompanied a magistrate whose job it was to try a man charged with brutality. Since the object of his brutality was hospitalized and could not attend the trial, the court came to the hospital to question the victim. The woman did her best to hide the wounds and insisted that the clearly guilty offender was innocent:

'Oh, no, gentlemen,' said the girl, raising herself once more, and folding her hands together, 'no, gentlemen, for God's sake! I did it myself — it was nobody's fault — it was an accident.'

When she is told that her persistence in what she knew to be untrue could not save the man, she lays her hand upon the brutal man's arm and murmurs,

'They shall not persuade me to swear your life away. He didn't do it, gentlemen. He never hurt me.' She grasped his arm tightly, and added, in a broken whisper, 'I hope God Almighty will forgive me all the wrong I have done, and the life I have led. God bless you, Jack.'

The nurse bent over the girl for a few seconds, and then drew the sheet over her face. It covered a corpse.⁴³

Besides wifhood and motherhood, spinsterhood is another state increasingly presented in Victorian Literature. The problem of spinsterhood has been discussed in Chapter II: like married women, Victorian spinsters had also been raised to become wives and mothers. In *Petsetilla's Posy*, published in 1870, Tom Hood satirizes the upbringing of the English single woman with his picture of the Nexclorean woman. In the Kingdom of Nexclorea, princesses are so specifically raised for marriage that they are permitted to learn no language until they are betrothed. Then they may learn the language and customs of their future husband. In *Daffodil and the Croûxaxicans*, The Kingdom of Grachidichika exists only for

⁴³ Charles Dickens, 'The Hospital Patient', *Sketches by Boz* (1836; London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.243.

the convenience of Croäxaxica so that 'a Royal race of marriageable persons' may be raised for the Croäxaxican princes and princesses:

A Royal Princess was given him in marriage; and; as fast as his daughters and sons were born, they were betrothed to sons and daughters of the reigning King of Croäxaxica. From that time the children of the Sovereigns were always married to each other as far as they would go. [...] If there are any more of them than sons and daughters of a King of Croäxaxica can marry, they have simply failed to accomplish their destiny and they are accordingly deposed from their exalted position and cease to be members of their family. As impostors and vagabonds without recognized means of subsistence, they are imprisoned for life in a workhouse specially built for them, where, however, they are provided with such simple requisites of food and clothing as become their humble sphere. (*Daffodil*, 117-118)

The gentle spinster was rigidly locked into place for her entire life. Not only did she have virtually no choice of profession, but all her action and sometimes, it seems, her very thoughts had to conform to strict social patterns. She is an outcast and her identification always carries the stigma of failure. As Caroline Helstone says in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849): 'Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world, the demand disturbs the happy and rich; it disturbs parents' (Chapter 10).

Webster's position is clear: in *A Housewife's Opinions*, she advises parents not to go on educating their daughters 'to the occupation of waiting till somebody came for them, and educating them to no other occupation' (*AHO*, 240).

As the century wore on, the number of English women who would never assume the expected role of wife and mother showed a steady increase. By 1911 there were nearly 1,400,00 more women than men, and this disproportion was much greater among the wealthy and middle classes than among the poor.⁴⁴ Partly as a result, social attitudes became more tolerant, and work opportunities became more open. The spinster's professional choices slowly began to expand.

⁴⁴ Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies At Work* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973), p.11.

Since there were more women who were no longer content with a purely domestic role. Between the years of 1881 and 1961, there was a 161 per cent increase in the number of women working in middle-class occupations. And the vast majority of these women were spinsters. The first professions open to the spinster were clearly an outgrowth of her natural role as 'Angel in the House'. She could be a social reformer, nurse or governess.

Croässaquagha, the Dressmaker Plenipotentiary in *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans*, is an upper-class spinster. Instead of being depicted as an embittered old maid, or a comic figure like Violet Raymond in *Lesley's Guardians*, she is almost an admirable figure who makes her life useful and full. She is the 'highest personage in the country after the Royal Family' and is considered as a genius. She is 'born in splendours, nursed in luxury, revered, beloved, admired'. But in spite of 'this dazzling celebrity, and in spite of her exalted position and authority', her manner is 'characterized by a modesty': She is a graceful and beautiful frog:

She habitually wore a tunic of some light bell-flower, left to hang round her tall and stately figure in its natural shape, sleeveless, the armholes being merely edged by a daisy frill, and unaccompanied by the fashionable leg-flounces of one flower, or row of flower petals. [...] But her crimson boots were surmounted by anklets of pearls gleaming out upon the yellow of her beautifully marked skin, and she wore on her forehead a jewel in some lights like a ruby and in some like a topaz, of priceless value, and on her wrist bracelets made of buds of the rarest toadstools. To-day her tunic was a pale pink heather-bell with a crimson edge, and Daffodil, as she stood before her, waiting for her attention, gazed with admiration on the smooth texture and delicate tint of the gigantic flower. (*Daffodil*, 70-71)

Croässaquagha is devoted to her art. But when she finds that Daffodil is a greater artist than she is, she selflessly surrenders her post to Daffodil:

'And now I have a duty to perform — a duty to the world. To me it shall owe the possession of its greatest artist, now left in inglorious obscurity to be lost to it. [...] The Plenipotentiary addressed Daffodil: 'Inspired imaginer,' she said, 'teacher for all artists forever, to thee I surrender my office. Be to Croäxaxica what I have been — and More.' She took the fillet from her head and transferred it to Daffodil's.

(*Daffodil*, 149-150)

In her earlier novel *Lesley's Guardians*, a story about a female artist, Webster has presented a woman whose life can never be empty because she has her art to live for. Croässaquagha is content with her life: after surrendering her office to Daffodil, she lives in 'unassuming retirement':

Out of deference and loyalty, she appeared occasionally at court; but she withdrew from all other participation in the splendours of society, and declared herself unsuited to etiquette. She did not encourage interruptions of callers; she wanted to live with her soul, she said, and to make the acquaintance of her own deepest to understand ordinary people.

She was not entirely solitary, however. Prince Brekekex, Daffodil, the Regius Professor of Everything, and the Head Royal Physician, were frequently guests in the home which she smilingly called her hermitage, where, amid all the luxuries and refinements known to the Croäxaxicans, but with an absence of state and formalities which, she said, was to her at once novel and natural, like sea-water to an oyster bred without a taste of it, they conversed on the equal footing of friends. [...] But she could not be persuaded to continue her own artistic career. 'No,' she would say, 'I will no longer drag down my art to outward manifestations. The noblest creation, the subtle completed work, is but a mockery of the far surpassing idea within us. And why should I drudge for results? [...] Your genius, stronger than mine, can submit to the trammels of execution and not be hampered, but mine feels the chain and faints. Let me leave the frail exquisite spirit to its limitless freedom.' (*Daffodil*, 156-57)

Again Webster uses her inventions in a characteristically multiple way.

She believes in the importance of female work and in the dignity and integrity of artistic effort. And the Dressmaker is used to flesh out these beliefs. Nor is the significance of dress-making as a professional skill being sent up.⁴⁵ At the same time, however, Croässaquagha is clearly also being gently mocked for the overstatement of her artistic claims as Daffodil's mystification indicates:

'Well, I suppose it is,' Daffodil answered musingly. 'If people have nothing they can do except what is not very useful, and they dislike doing that, doing nothing seems to be all that it's necessary for them to do. But I should call it dreadfully tiring work.'
(*Daffodil*, 158).

Although Croässaquagha has some of the qualities of a free spirit, on the surface she is not a rebellious character. Most of the time she tries to compromise and

⁴⁵ It is worth remarking that Mrs Oliphant, who also stressed the importance of female occupation, makes the heroine of *Kirsteen* (1890), a successful mantua maker in the early part of the century.

conform to the strict rules and customs of the country, eventually marrying Prince Brekekex. As a marriage of love as well as convenience, it is the conventional happy ending to Victorian spinsterhood. However, in accordance with the dual aspect of her role she has resisted the rules and regulations boldly by rescuing her friend Daffodil, a 'high traitor' sentenced to death. It is she who works out the plan to save Daffodil; she offers to go into the Boa Constrictor's cage to release Daffodil, while male characters like her husband Brekekex, the Regius Professor and Head Royal Physician shrink from it. She is devoted to her husband, but obviously she knows that she is braver and cleverer than Brekekex. The dialogue between Croässaquagha and Brekekex when they are trying to release Daffodil from the cage of the Boa Constrictor is exemplary:

'Some of us might help her,' said Croässaquagha.
 'It's not a masculine sort of danger,' replied her husband. 'Of course if it were I would face it myself, as Your Majesty knows.'
 'Of course you would, my dear noble Your Majesty,' said Croässaquagha enthusiastically. 'But I'll go in to help her. And Seventy Seven And A Half (also a woman) may come with me.' (*Daffodil*, 348-49)

Later, when Daffodil is safe, she tries to give the credit to her husband:

'Ah! my generous Your Majesty, do not rate my humble, though singular, imaginativeness too highly,' said Croässaquagha diffidently.
 'Ah! to be sure — it was Your Majesty that proposed the trial and the mushrooms,' said Brekekex. 'But it was I that thought of our finding out some plan to save her.'
 'It was,' said Croässaquagha. 'Daffodil, it was. Thus did my husband's poetic genius forgive your well-nigh fatal aberration. Thus did his lofty genius combine with what the too partial world is willing to call my genius too. He has saved you.'
(*Daffodil*, 350-351)

The irony of the passage quoted above is obvious. Croässaquagha's submissiveness towards Brekekex might seem difficult to understand at times, but it is a function of the social realism that underpins the fantasy: Augusta Webster might have taken it from the life. Mrs Oliphant recalls a Mrs Blackett,

who was a 'fine creature' very much cleverer than her husband, though treated by him in any serious matter as if she had been a little girl:

At a time when she had got to be very anxious about the education of her boys and he had been somehow moved — a little, perhaps, by myself, impelled in secret by her — to think of sending Arthur to Eton, that while talking it over with me, he suddenly turned to her and said, 'Come, Nell, tell me what you think — let us hear your opinion.' I remember the frightened look that came on her face, the same look which came over it when she flew before the cow for which she was frightened, and she cried, 'Oh, Henry, whatever you think best,' and morally ran away, though it was indeed her movement through another which was in reality setting him agoing. Now, why was she afraid of him? He was as good to her as a rather good-humoured but self-important man could be, very fond of her and very proud of her. She was a pretty woman, bright and full of spirit, and much his superior [...] — why was she frightened to express an opinion while privately moved very strongly, much more strongly than he was, with the desire to get that important matter decided, and secretly working upon him by all the means at her command?⁴⁶

In her novel *Phoebe, Junior* (1876), Mrs Oliphant gives us a heroine who hides her learning, using it only to write brilliant speeches for her rich and stupid husband once she gets him into Parliament.

Croässaquagha is clearly not a feminist model but she exemplifies ideal feminine traits and is used to critique and expose contemporary attitudes to women. It is in Daffodil, an Alice-like figure, the heroine of the book, that woman's power and potential are most fully developed and explored. Through her treatment of Daffodil, Webster redefines the feminine ideal.

Just as their mothers were expected to be Angels in the House, Victorian girls, too, had to conform to an ideal standard of behavior. And though they were expected within the limits of what they were taught to excel at lessons and even to continue their studies on their own, those studies centered on drawing room accomplishments — sketching, music and modern languages. Girls were never to

⁴⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *Mrs Oliphant: The Autobiography*, ed. by Harry Coghill, with a new forward by Laurie Langbauer (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.82.

compete with boys in their studies, and they were always to place domestic duties before scholastic ones. Girls who came from poor families had to help their mothers with the children and housework and take full responsibility for the household when mothers were sick or confined with another pregnancy. Wealthy girls were still expected to aid and entertain their parents and brothers and put their own needs last, appearing at least to be content with their lot. The anonymous author of *Girls and Their Ways* (1881) describes the ideal girl as one who reads to her father, and chats with him, helps with the housework, is a companion to brothers and sisters, and plays with the little ones, and is cheerful and amusing throughout.⁴⁷ The romantic girl's novels, the magazine fiction, and the instructive manuals for girls all promoted the feminine ideal of a girl-Angel in the House, a virginal miniature of her mother.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll presents a heroine very different from the submissive, domesticated 'angel' represented in Victorian literature. She is assertive, adventurous, independent, and even aggressive, breaking the mould of the traditional ideal girl. The heroine of *Daffodil and the Croðxaxicans* has had a very different up-bringing from that of a typical Victorian girl. Unlike Lewis Carroll Augusta Webster does not completely remove Daffodil's parents from the scene. In Chapter One in sketch of her upbringing, we are told that learning plays an important role in her life:

Daffodil's father and mother were very kind to her. When she grew old enough to learn, they used to take a great deal of pains to teach her everything good for a little girl to know, and they explained all so carefully and so pleasantly that she liked some of her lessons, and especially her history, more than any stories, except stories about fairies and mermaids and such people. But they did not teach her to play; because they did not know how themselves, for they were grave very wise people; and, as they did not like

⁴⁷ Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth Century Children: Heroes and Heroines in English Children's Stories 1780-1900* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), p.200.

her to go with other children, there was nobody to teach her that. Their house stood by a river and behind it there was a wood: a road through the wood led to a good-sized town, but there were no houses very near. [...] So Daffodil could not easily have found children to play with often. But sometimes she would hear people say to her father and mother 'Do let your child come to the town and have a game of romps with my boys and girls' and they said too 'All work and no play make Jack a dull boy'. But, when she asked her father why she might never have the game of romps, he told her he wanted to see his little girl grow up thoughtful and good, and, as he could not tell which were so, he was forced to keep her from them all. [...] And, as she found that learning one thing was generally only a way of finding out that there was another thing to be learned, so that she suspected there was more to be learned than she could manage even in ten whole years, she did not feel afraid of growing too clever even by a quarter.

(*Daffodil*, 1-4)

Daffodil's parents don't believe in fairies. They always say that Keziah, the old servant who 'knew a great deal about the laws and customs' of the elf world has no trustworthy authority for her statements, and after 'much study and research, they had come to the conclusion that the elf world with all belonging to it was nothing but nonsense, or imagination' (*Daffodil*, 3). However, Daffodil is not like the Gradgrind children in Dickens' *Hard Times* who receive a purely factual and scientific education and have never heard of fairy tale or nursery rhymes. She 'was fond of telling fairy tales as well as of hearing them', she 'used to lie down on the grass with her face leaning over the bank so that she could see into the water, and keep trying to fancy what the river people's bowers were like' (*Daffodil*, 5). Her parents don't take her fantasy seriously but they show no objection to it. When she asks her parents whether they will object to her making friends with the river people, they 'smiled, and gave her leave to do so'. Being isolated but 'well-informed', Daffodil is given more freedom and space for imagination and adventures.

It is significant that Daffodil ventures into the fantasy world alone. In many *Alice* imitations, the heroine requires the aid of a male. George Edward Farrow, a very popular author in his day, wrote a series of *Alice* imitations. *The Wallypug of Why*, published in 1895, follows *Alice in Wonderland* quite closely. However, the

heroine, Girlie, does not venture alone into her Wonderland, but is accompanied by her brother. His *The Little Panjandrum's Dodo*, published in 1899, features another Alice-like figure, Marjorie, who is also thrust into a wonderland filled with adventure and fantastic creatures. Again unlike the lone Alice, Marjorie is accompanied by her brother Dick. Dick assumes command, while Marjorie is portrayed as a 'typical girl' — fearful of the unknown, excitable, nervous, and quick to break into tears. In George MacDonald's *Cross Purposes* (1867), the heroine is actually named Alice, but as in most of the Alice imitations, a heroine is not considered sufficient without sharing the stage with a hero. The hero, Richard, is poor and humble, but brave, while Alice is affluent, snobbish, and somewhat squeamish in spite of her adventurousness. In her rudeness to Richard, in her fearfulness of new things, she is initially presented as a negative figure. It is only when she falls in love with Richard that Alice learns to be kind under love's influence. Rather than encouraging the heroine to grow up in independence, the adventures in *Cross Purposes* foster dependence. The Alice of *Cross Purposes* remains fearful and squeamish, and at the story's end, it is only by jumping into Richard's arms that she is able to jump out of Fairyland. She has been taught a lesson and put into her proper, feminine place.

Webster's Daffodil needs no male to share the spotlight. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, she falls into the wonderland alone, and jumps out of it alone. Like Alice, Daffodil is curious, adventurous and independent. But unlike Alice, Daffodil is prudent. Alice's adventure is precipitated and sustained by impetuous decisions prompted in large measure by wilful self-indulgence. 'Burning with curiosity', she follows the talking White Rabbit under a hedge and down his hole,

‘never once considering how in the world she was to get out again’ (Chapter 1). Daffodil plans her adventure carefully. Things go wrong because her parents, who do not take her quest for the ‘river people’ seriously enough, give her a wrong answer when she searches for information crucial for finding the route to the wonderland, and getting out again. So instead of reaching the ‘river people’, Daffodil is stuck in a kingdom of frogs. Daffodil is a figure who grows and changes and responds to her environment, and matures through her adventurous confrontations. As with Alice, most of the creatures that Daffodil meets in the Croäxaxica are adults. Because of her size, she is treated like an adult, though she keeps telling people that she is just a little girl. She is ten years old when she first arrives in Croäxaxica and she is as tall as the tallest frog in that country. Queen Raucacoäxine and Princess Guachapeara discuss Daffodil’s age: ‘As to Daffodil, one can see by her size that she must have come of age twenty years ago and gone on growing ever since’ (*Daffodil*, 191). The remark of Daffodil’s is significant. In her poetry and dramas Webster presents a long line of female characters who are never seen by their male relations as adults. Procla in ‘Pilate’, the speaker in ‘The Happiest Girl in the world’, Klydone in *In A Day* and Lælia in *The Sentence* are examples. In *The Sentence*, Lælia protests when Caius calls her ‘child’: ‘Child! I! A five years’ wife!’ (*Sentence*, 9) However, her male relations certainly don’t accept the view that by becoming a wife, having taken up the child-rearing role she has achieved her maturity.

Coming of age is one instance of what anthropologists call rites of passage or rites of initiation. All such rites mark the passage of an individual from one state to another: from one tribe to another, from life to death, or, in

this case, from childhood to adulthood and full participation in society. Arnold Van Gennep's 1908 study of *Les rites de passage* treats these rites as essentially concerned with changes of status in males:

Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class occupational specialization, and death.⁴⁸

Van Gennep's study primarily documents male activities from birth to grave, discussing women only in conjunction with pregnancy, childbirth, and marriage. Bringing forward the question of women's coming of age Brian Attetbery says:

Do women come of age? In Van Gennep's view perhaps not, for he considers women and children to form a single social group. Boys require a drastic break from this group to that of adult men; girls merely work their way through it. The further implication is that women never do become fully adult, that they are like those salamanders that stay underwater all their lives, able to reproduce but otherwise still in the gill-bearing immature stage.⁴⁹

As Carol Dyhouse says, a society which defines maturity for men in terms of economic and occupational independence and actively discourages women from achieving economic independence is effectively condemning women to a permanently 'adolescent' state.⁵⁰

In *Daffodil and the Croûxaxicans*, Princess Guachapeara's coming of age is immediately followed by vocation and duty. *Daffodil*, believed to have 'come of age twenty years ago', is involved in all sorts of adult activities. She has to face all sorts of problems in that adult world: forced marriage, the workhouse, imprisonment and even death. She must be extremely clever and the education

48 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.3.

49 Brian Attetbery, 'Women's Coming of Age in Fantasy', *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 28 (1987), pp.10-22 (p.11).

50 Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p.118.

she receives from her parents has obviously done her some good. She is intellectually at least equal to the adults in Croäxaxica. Brekekex, 'the first genius' of the country enjoys discussing poetry with her and values her opinions. Her talent as an artist is worshipped by Croässaquagha. She has obtained the kind of adult power that a child does not possess in reality. And most importantly, she is given an occupation.

However, being a child, Daffodil is still in the process of becoming, of growing, of maturing, both physically and mentally. When she first arrives in Croäxaxica, she is mainly at the stage of observing and learning:

Although, as is the case with all who find themselves in a foreign country without any knowledge, by reading or hearsay, of its manners and customs, she was for a long time always meeting with surprises in even the commonest detail of life, yet the account we have given of her earliest experiences will serve to convey a sufficient idea of her new surroundings. And the limits of our story do not allow of our entering upon a careful description of all she saw and learnt. (*Daffodil*, 98)

She works as Her Majesty's Private Royal Jester for some months, in charge of the 'third best pocket-handkerchiefs', and in this way she is admitted to the work-rooms of the Plenipotentiary Department. We are told that she amuses herself with learning all the methods of the Plenipotentiary Art, shortly becoming a very fair dressmaker.

The exploitation of the perspective of the dislocated outsider, a common strategy of Augusta Webster's work, is in place in this children's book. Webster gives an account of the freedom and privileges of an outsider and shows that being considered as an inferior alien, Daffodil is in a very good position to observe, to learn and to assess:

She was a favourite with all the members of the staff of every grade, and all took pleasure in answering her questions and teaching her. Her ignorance and her quickness at learning alike inspired them with interest in her attempts, and their sense of superiority to her as one of an inferior race prevented the possibility of any little grudges

and jealousies against her, such as the indulgence with which she was treated might have called forth, if any one could have regarded her as a rival.

The same inferiority which rendered her position among the members of the Plenipotentiary staff so agreeable gave her an extraordinary footing of intimacy with the Royal family. Looking on her as one of the lower animals, they made no scruple of treating her as one of themselves. She was encouraged to question and reply, she was allowed to sit in their presence, and even to move about the room. Notice was taken of her likes and dislikes; and her sayings were quoted with delighted recognition of their intelligence. Such a state of things could not have existed if it had not been felt that Daffodil, in any breach of etiquette she was allowed, could be no more guilty of presumption than a pet oyster or beetle. Lowliness has its privileges. (*Daffodil*, 98-99)

Daffodil's physical growth parallels her mental growth. When she first descends into frogland she is bewildered and passive; she keeps emphasizing that she is 'only a little girl'. And she behaves just like a typical little girl: after a big fall, when she observes 'how terribly dirty her clothes and her hands' have got, and feels sure her face must be as bad, she can 'hardly help crying at this disaster' and expects somebody to come and help her. Crucial progress occurs when she finds that she has grown too tall so that no flower is long enough for her to wear. At first she thinks that she should wait till somebody come to look for her passively: "Anyhow, I suppose somebody will come before I am starved to death," she said resignedly, and sat down in her light blue kilt to wait.' Then she thinks of 'a better way than that':

'They will nearly crack themselves with laughing at my queer costume,' said she; 'but being laughed at is less disagreeable than staying here wondering if any one will come to help me.' And she picked up the dark campanula from where she had thrown it, took off the one she had on, and set to work. (*Daffodil*, 143)

The dress she makes under these circumstances is recognized as a creation of a genius by the Dressmaker Plenipotentiary, who surrenders her office to her, although Daffodil keeps insisting that the whole creation is an accident, not a design.

When Daffodil arrives in Croäxaxica she brings to bear the armor of a good Victorian upbringing: politeness, good manners and obedience. She is not

in the habit of voicing her opinions because 'Keziah had often told her it was rude to argue' (*Daffodil*, 34). Unlike Lewis Carroll's Alice, whose attempts at politeness go unreciprocated in the Wonderland, Daffodil's good manners and modesty earn her popularity in Croäxaxica. The Queen of Croäxaxica is pleased with the curtesy Daffodil makes because she thinks 'it looked extremely loyal' (*Daffodil*, 21). But Daffodil soon finds that the upbringing of a good little girl is not enough for her to deal with all situations. Being a wise child, she finds the complicated and often unreasonable conventions in Croäxaxica are not something she can follow indiscriminatingly. Through series of crises like forced marriages, prison and even death, Daffodil learns to be more and more resourceful, daring and assertive. She learns to deal with new situations by acquiring new weapons. She uses these weapons not only for her own protection, but for the protection of others.

Daffodil soon gets to comprehend the regime of the Croäxaxicans and instead of being restrained by it, she makes it her weapon. So when Seven Seven And A Half breaks the law by showing the Queen's Royal Private Garden to Daffodil, Daffodil manipulates the Queen's rigidity and manages to save her from punishment:

Her Majesty, however, still considered that some punishment must be inflicted on the guilty Under Royal Wardrobe-maid: 'And [...], how can I punish her and let My Majesty's Private Royal Jester, who profited in her offence and bore a part in it, go unharmed?'

Daffodil saw her opportunity. 'If you punish a person for going trespassing with me [...], you cannot help putting me into disgrace too: and if I am in disgrace you will have to take away my post at Court.' (*Daffodil*, 104)

The Queen does not want to lose Daffodil, her Private Royal Jester. So both Seventy Seven And A Half and Daffodil go unpunished.

In her dramatic monologue 'Sister Annuciata' (1866) and her drama *Disguises* Webster explicitly depicts upper-class marital convention, which allows little freedom for love. In her fairy tale Webster reworks the motif of *Disguises*, in which young lovers rebel and triumphantly get their own way in love and marriage. In *Daffodil and the Croäxaxica*, Daffodil's mature personality becomes manifest as she rebels against two forced marriages.

After Chachareraroncaxa, the Queen of Grachidichika, is tactlessly murdered by her husband, according to the law, Daffodil becomes the only eligible person to marry Grenoulcawk, the King of Grachidichika. By this time Daffodil has already become an opinionated and forthright person: she 'flatly refused to be the King of Grachidichika's wife' (*Daffodil*, 199). When the Queen of Croäxaxica explains to her the 'important considerations, as to Prince Brekekex's matrimonial question', which necessitates Daffodil's marriage to King Grenoulcawk, Daffodil, 'after pausing to reflect', replies 'with a counter proposal that the law should be altered and that Prince Brekekex should be made able to marry anybody he and his parents liked' (*Daffodil*, 200). But Daffodil has not completely overcome her submissiveness. She replies 'submissively' and stops arguing when the Queen cries 'Be silent'. Hoping the Queen would change her mind, she goes back to her own apartment and waits passively for something to happen:

All the evening she kept expecting some message from the Queen, or that something would happen, or somebody come. But the hours went on and no notice was taken of her. 'I should have liked to know whether I am to be in disgrace or not,' she said to herself, at last; 'but it is too late now for there to be any change of the Queen's sending for me tonight. I had better go to bed. And I shall know all about it tomorrow. I daresay it will all come right, like the other things that have happened to me here.'

(*Daffodil*, 201)

Things do not turn out the way Daffodil has hoped. She is sent to prison in the middle of the night and is told that the marriage is inevitable. In prison she dreams of 'showing a lovely green and lilac caterpillar' to her parents and 'asking them how long it would take to turn into a butterfly', Her father nods his head and says, 'it will depend on yourself' (*Daffodil*, 206-7). The dream gives her an 'odd encouragement' though she does not find it convincing:

The observation 'It will depend on yourself,' did not seem particularly practical and convincing [...], as an account of the prospects of the caterpillar in the dream, and alas! was but little applicable to her own prospects awake, of which the alarming point was that they were not to be allowed to depend in the least on herself. (*Daffodil*, 207)

The prospects of the caterpillar actually symbolize Daffodil's own transformation and maturity. Daffodil does not fully understand the significance of the dream and becomes an independent person all of a sudden. When she wakes up she is still convinced that 'it all depends on the Queen'. She writes the Queen a courteous letter and, when that fails to move the Queen, Daffodil is almost resigned:

The only bit of brightness about her prospect was, she declared, that the horrid old idiot who was to be her husband would be sure very soon to throw a chair at her head and kill her, as he did poor Chachareraroncaxa, and she should be out of it all.
(*Daffodil*, 212)

Nevertheless, Daffodil finds the statement 'It will depend on yourself' coming over and over again into her mind and 'raising her spirits surprisingly'. She finds herself 'singing it and whispering it, as if it were a charm to bring better luck' (*Daffodil*, 207). Daffodil breaks away from her submissiveness, a Victorian feminine virtue, when she confronts King Grenoulcrawk at the wedding. Lewis Carroll's Alice learns to be assertive and aggressive when she sees that her Victorian feminine virtues are failing her in the Wonderland — an up-side-down

world. If the kingdom of frogs is not really an up-side-down world like the Wonderland, King Grenoulcrawk is certainly an up-side-down character:

The Matrimonial King Regnant was sitting on the back of his throne with his feet on its arms, dandling a doll and croaking to it — which seemed to Daffodil rather odd, and in marked contrast to the reverend calm of the Croaxaxican Monarch, of which his subjects were so proud. He winked at her, too. (*Daffodil*, 161)

Not only his behaviour and mannerism do not correspond his age and position, playing with a doll he has transgressed gender norms. He behaves even more outrageously towards Daffodil when he meets her at the wedding:

He went so far as to stroke her face and call her his fine big doll.
 'If you do that again, I'll slap you,' cried Daffodil.
 'That will be fun,' answered her bridegroom. 'But we mustn't begin to have a game of romps yet; because we must keep quiet till they have done getting us married. But come along, we'll go quicker, and then all the fuss will be over sooner and we can do what we like by ourselves. Hooray!' and he began to prance along double quick. (*Daffodil*, 229)

Realizing the traditional feminine qualities are completely irrelevant in front of such a character, Daffodil takes resolute and aggressive action as she walks towards the altar:

There was no time to be lost.
 'Do look at my funny nose-knob,' said Daffodil.
 Grenoulcrawk gazed at the protuberance, he stopped to gaze better, and turned to face her. On the momnet, she moved to go on, and trod with all her might on his feet!
 With a loud howl, the injured bridegroom sprang over the ground, ten feet at a time, and plunged into the nearest guggle-ooze beds. In vain was he pursued, in vain was he even overtaken, go near the bride he would not. (*Daffodil*, 230-31)

So Daffodil successfully turns away her first suitor and the wedding ends in catastrophe. The startled Grenoulcrawk goes completely out of control and turns into an extremely dangerous figure: 'whenever Grenoulcrawk was not faint or in a fit, he was using his skill in throwing all sorts of heavy things at the wedding party'. Amid chaos, Daffodil reveals her sound judgement and courage. She rescues Brekekex when he is pursued by Grenoulcrawk 'with the Patriarch's seat from the Cathedral on his head':

In the hurry to leave Grachidehika, Brekekex was almost forgotten. Daffodil remembered him when she caught sight of Grenoulcrawk running sily to the Palace with

the Patriarch's seat from the Cathedral on his head. Pointing him out with a cry of warning to those around her, she ran to the Palace. [...] Just as she was telling Brekekex why he must come away at once, Grenoulcrawk rushed in [...], and was about to hurl his missile. But suddenly, seeing Daffodil, he gave a shriek of alarm, and fled. Brekekex, on his side, lost no time [...], hand in hand with Daffodil, whom he felt to be a sure protector against King Grenoulcrawk, he ran to the road out of Grachidichika.

(*Daffodil*, 231-32)

Daffodil's strength further develops as she resists the marriage to Prince Brekekex. Brekekex seems to be a far less objectionable suitor than King Grenoulcrawk and Daffodil admits he is 'a hundred times nicer' than Grenoulcrawk. But Daffodil stands even firmer this time. She repeatedly claims that she will not marry him at all costs. We are told that she always speaks 'respectfully, but firmly'.

Needlework forms an important part of nineteenth-century women's life. In *Aurora Leigh*, it represents the traditional womanhood Aurora's aunt tries to mould her into. In *Villette*, little Polly's needle represents her emotional and physical dependency on men. In her various writings, Webster condemns needlework as an 'industrious waste of time', which represents the idleness and purposelessness of conventional upper-middle-class women's life. However, in *Daffodil*, Daffodil's needle asserts a kind of female wisdom, power and subversiveness. After openly protesting against the marriage in vain, Daffodil resorts to a scheme that clearly recalls Penelope's stratagem of delaying her suitors.⁵¹ According to Croäxaxican custom, a royal bride must wear a white water lily. So Daffodil has her wedding postponed by killing the flowers with needles:

⁵¹ When Odysseus failed to return from the Trojan War, Penelope was beset by suitors. In order to delay them, she insisted that she could not remarry until she had finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes. She worked each day at her loom, and unravelled the cloth each night.

She had every evening dexterously inserted some of her tiny needles into the poor flowers' delicate stems. The pricks were so fine that no trace of them was observable, but the needles were lodged within and the lilies were not able to bear this treatment and perished away in a few hours. (*Daffodil*, 280)

Realizing further delay of the wedding may put innocent people's prospects and even lives at risk, Daffodil decides to take full responsibility and reaffirms she has no intention of marrying Brekekex at all. She is charged with high treason and is to be swallowed by the 'State Boa Constrictor'. Daffodil demands a trial:

'I claim a trial,' replied Daffodil. 'If you put me to death without a trial, you will be murdering me.' [...]

'If I am tried fairly by your laws, I suppose I mustn't complain. But, if your laws were to condemn a person to death because she won't marry a frog, they would be very unjust,' said Daffodil. (*Daffodil*, 321-22)

A trial is supposed to be a peculiarly adult institution, bound by a complex system of societal rules. Daffodil's demand of asserting herself in such a forum is a solid proof of her self-confidence and maturity.

The trial of Daffodil turns out to be an empty ceremony. In *Croäxaxica* prisoners of High Treason are not allowed to defend themselves. The death sentence is pronounced even before Daffodil gets a chance to speak:

Daffodil, who would have repeated her efforts for a hearing before the sentence, had been stopped by the Head Usher's pouring water into her throat. [...] She tried to struggle, but they held her motionless; she tried to cry out, but they laid their cold hands on her mouth. (*Daffodil*, 341-42)

This is the most violent scene in *Daffodil and the Croäxaxica*. The court scene in Webster's fantasy may well symbolize how brutally women's efforts for representing themselves and voicing their opinions in public were suppressed in reality: an ardent suffragette, Webster witnessed six parliamentary defeats of the movement in her lifetime. However, Webster is by no means pessimistic in *Daffodil*. Though Daffodil is not allowed to voice her opinions in public, she has already influenced and convinced her friends, who risk their lives to rescue her.

Then with wisdom, good physical conditions and courage, Daffodil finds her way to freedom and goes back to the world above water.

The physical exercise Daffodil takes is significant for her physical and mental growth. Historians suggest that the condition of Victorian middle-class women's health reflected their inferior position in society.⁵² Middle-class women were often weak frail creatures with poor constitutions. The majority of Victorian women suffered from depression, headaches, listlessness and hysteria — or what has been termed the 'fashionable diseases'. Frail health was one aspect of Victorian female delicacy. In *Lesley's Guardians*, when Lesley's mental and physical health is seriously damaged by Louis's constant haunting and pursuit, Maurice finds her 'fragile gracefulness' and 'helplessness' more his type of femininity and prefers this 'paler figure' at the side of the physically and mentally strong Marion, whose form is 'of fuller outline, in better proportion to the height'. Webster deprecates this aspect of femininity, and in various writings she depicts it as an inferiority of women. The wife in *The Brissons* cannot survive the physical trial in the stormy sea after the shipwreck while her husband survives a even severer trial. When Klydone, the heroine of *In A Day* is submitted to torture, in spite of her high resolutions, betrays the man she loves because she cannot bear the physical pain, while her father Olymnios braves the torture successfully.

⁵² Ann Wood, 'The Fashionable Diseases: Women's Complaints and their Treatment in Nineteenth Century America,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1973), quoted by Patricia Branca in *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p.8.

Charles Kingsley was an especially vocal proponent of the ideal of forming a sound mind in a sound body, suggesting that sports should play a major role at Eton, Harrow and the 'other training grounds for the leaders of the Empire'.⁵³ Physical exercise for girls was not always encouraged. Nevertheless, by the time *Daffodil* was written, there had been a decided improvement among girls of the well-to-do class in the direction of sport. A writer remarked in 1883: 'The life of a young English lady to-day [...], is essentially one of exercise; certainly the ladies of to-day can indulge in far more physical exercise than their mothers or grandmothers had before them; the demand for muscular education and amusement has increased rapidly of late.'⁵⁴ In 1885 *The Field* recorded that 'it is a sign of the times that various games and sports which would have been tabooed a few years ago as "unladylike" are now actually encouraged at various girls' schools'.⁵⁵ But there were controversies. Mary Scharlieb for instance, a gynaecologist with conservative views about the role of women, contended in 1911 that girls needed to be protected from the 'unhealthy effects' of too much physical exercise. She claimed that the new fashion for athletics and vigorous recreation in many girls' school had gone too far:

Doctors and schoolmistresses observe that excessive devotion to athletics and gymnastics tends to produce what may perhaps be called the 'neuter' type of girl. Her figure, instead of developing to full feminine grace, remains childish, or at most tends to resemble that of a half-grown lad, she is flat-chested, with a badly developed bust, her hips are narrow, and in too many instances there is a corresponding failure in function. When these girls marry they too often fail to become mothers, and it appears to be probable that even when blessed with children they are less well-fitted for the duties of maternity than are their more feminine sisters.⁵⁶

53 John C. Hawley, 'The Water Babies as Catechetical Paradigm', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 14 (1989), p.19.

54 Quoted by Cunningham in *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century*, p.238.

55 Quoted by Cunningham in *Feminine Attitudes*, p.238.

56 Mary Scharlieb, 'Recreational Activities of Girls During Adolescence', *Child Study*, 4 (1911), p.9.

In Webster's fairy tale, Daffodil is encouraged to learn how to swim in Croäxaxica. She is told that 'it is the custom among well-bred Croäxaxicans always to swim gently round and round three or four times after dinner' (*Daffodil*, 37). Daffodil learns with perseverance. In the end, her physical strength becomes crucial when she makes her way to freedom:

She hopped up the tall stairs — no light stretch for her un-frog-like limbs — and reached the window. Its height from the canal alarmed her; but she could, by now, dive and swim, if not like one of the natives, as no human being had ever dreamt of being able to do, and escape hence was her only way. She waited a moment or two in silent preparation, and plunged into the depth. (*Daffodil*, 384)

Daffodil is a triumphant figure in Croäxaxica. Carrying out the message 'it depends on yourself', she is also the only truly triumphant heroine among Webster's female characters. Even Claude and Gualhakdine in Webster's comedy *Disguises* owe their happiness much to coincidences. By focussing on and glorifying her heroine, Augusta Webster tries to present to children, as well as adults her new conceptions of the feminine ideal. As Carolyn Sigler suggests, children's literature was a means for ambitious and reform-minded outsiders — those excluded by class, economics, gender, and religious, political or sexual preferences — to communicate both subversive and optimistic values to succeeding generations who embody society's hopes for the future.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Carolyn Sigler, *Wee Folk, Good Folk: Subversive Children's Literature and British Social Reform 1700-1900* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Florida State University 1992), abstract, vii.

Conclusion

The history of women's writing is a history of social, cultural and personal interaction far more complex than any history drawn from the trajectories of men's lives can possibly convey.

Norma Clarke¹

To understand the workings of the social memory it may be worth investigating the social organization of forgetting, the rules of exclusion, suppression or repression, and the question of who wants whom to forget what, and why. In a phrase, social amnesia. Amnesia is related to 'amnesty', to what used to be called 'acts of oblivion', the official erasure of memories of conflict in the interests of social cohesion.

Peter Burke²

In his obituary of Augusta Webster Theodore Watts-Dunton claims that 'the time is gone by when English poets, save a very few, need hope to write for any other generation than their own':

From the latest romantic revivals of Rossetti, Mr W. Morris, and Mr Swinburne, down to the present moment a mass of true poetry has been produced which in quality far surpasses all the poetry that the eighteenth century produced between the time of Pope and the time of Wordsworth and Coleridge; but where is the room for it?

Pointing out that many good poets are forgotten soon after their death, he pessimistically predicts that Webster, a poet of 'remarkable intellectual strength', 'will soon share the same fate'.³ However, in 1914 he protested in a letter: 'It is a monstrous thing that such poetry as Augusta Webster's should be

¹ Norma Clarke, *Ambitious Heights: Writing, Friendship, Love — The Jewsbury Sisters, Felicia Hemans, and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.26.

² Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (London: Polity, 1997), pp.56-57.

³ Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Athenæum*, September 15, 1894, p.355.

unknown'.⁴ In 1993 Dorothy Mermin claimed that Augusta Webster was 'the best of poets whose reputations died with the century'.⁵

As I have pointed out in the introduction, Webster lacked the network of literary connections that might have kept her reputation alive. But also she had never achieved the extreme popularity of Mrs Hemans, whose works were widely read and regularly reprinted till at least half a century after her death. As her contemporaries pointed out, Webster had never been appreciated by the 'multitude': 'Mrs Webster's poetry is not for the multitude; you must bring delicacy and refinement with you in order to appreciate its beauties.'⁶ Her dramatic monologues, which, like the monologues of Browning, require 'the reader to trace by his own mental activity the underground stream of thought that jets out in elliptical and pithy verse',⁷ were surely not widely read. Esteeming highly her *Dramatic Studies*, the *Westminster Review* said in 1866, 'We much fear, however, that the form into which Mrs Webster has thrown her thoughts will interfere with her immediate popularity.'⁸ Her closet dramas, which engaged the last two decades of her career, did not help her to reach the 'great public' of her time, and commenting on *In a Day*, the *Athenæum* points out:

It is the universal opinion among the booksellers that there is with readers a positive antipathy to the dramatic form of poetry, whether the poetry be good or bad. And the

⁴ T. E. Hake and A. Compton-Rickett, *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*, 2 vols (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1916), vol.2, p.18.

⁵ Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.53.

⁶ John R. de C. Wisc, *Westminster Review*, 37 (1870), p.626.

⁷ George Eliot, *Westminster Review*, 15 (1856), in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, pp.174-77 (p.174).

⁸ John R. de C. Wise, *Westminster Review*, 30 (1866), p.275.

reason seems to be the public dislike of difficulty in its reading. Now the dramatic form is essentially difficult as compared with narrative.⁹

As a genre closet drama was not widely read in the early part of the twentieth century. Though they have sometimes been claimed as her best works, it was impossible for Webster's closet dramas to carry her fame into the twentieth century. In 1910 Brander Matthews asserted:

The so called closet drama, the play that is not intended to be played [...], may have interest of its own to the chosen few who can persuade themselves that they like that sort of thing; but it is not what the rest of us want.¹⁰

The difficulty and intellectuality of Webster's poetry and drama are sometimes considered drawbacks that hinder her popularity. The *Westminster Review* points out that the style of her drama *In a Day* is too difficult:

Where the thought is profound, obscurity of language is perhaps pardonable, but where the fancy is subtle, there should the diction be clear. It ought not to be necessary to sit down before a concert and take it by force.¹¹

The *Edinburgh Review* confirms that Webster's dramatic monologues are the 'productions of a more masculine order of mind', and that the studies of 'types of human character' in *Portraits* show 'an observation of life and power of dramatic characterization very unusual in the writing of a woman'. However, the critic also points out Webster's writing is that of a 'powerful intellect expressing itself in metrical form rather than that of an inborn poet'. Comparing Webster's monologue 'A Castaway' with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Jenny', the critic claims that the former is a 'painfully realistic presentation of fact', while the

⁹ *Athenaeum*, December 23, 1882, p.842.

¹⁰ Brander Matthews, *A Study of the Drama* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), p.250.

¹¹ *Westminster Review*, 63 (1883), p.278.

latter 'raises the subject above mere realism into the region of poetic thought and illustration'.¹²

It is true that Webster is more committed to 'truths' and 'facts' in her poetry. She makes her dramatic monologues vehicles for expressing her sociological opinions. Her dramas are often loaded with intellectual suggestions and moral indications. Discussing *Disguises* a nineteenth-century critic complains:

Gualhardine, the lovely grandchild of the chief magistrate [...], is most daintily conceived, and when she is first presented to us in the unexpected and romantic interview with Aymery, we really expect some sudden and truly dramatic result; but no, Mrs Webster must 'draw out' her *ideas* and exhibit ever so many under-currents — imprisonments, flights, romantic 'disguises' and confusions.¹³

Quoting from 'A Castaway' Vita Sackville-West comments: 'You may say that that is not poetry. [...] But at least we must concede that it is the vigorous expression of a woman who was deeply concerned with the lot of women throughout her life.'¹⁴ As a nineteenth-century critic points out, Webster does not hold to the principle of 'art for art's sake' but seeks to 'give utterance to the thoughts and feelings of the day, to its faiths and doubts, to the aspects under which life presents itself to its children'.¹⁵ Thus she represents the artistic attitude which was already being challenged by the aesthetes in the 1870s and 80s. In 'The School of Giorgione' (1877) Walter Pater calls for a poetry which rejects social realism of any kind. He asserts that art is 'always striving to be

¹² *Edinburgh Review*, 178 (1893), p.495.

¹³ *British Quarterly Review*, 71 (1880), p.516.

¹⁴ Vita Sackville-West, 'The Women Poets of the Seventies', *The Eighteen-Seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. by Harley Granville-Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p.124.

¹⁵ *Spectator*, 43 (1870), p.497.

independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material'.¹⁶

Webster remains a socially committed voice. Theodore Watts-Dunton remarks: 'Dearly as she loved her art, the wellbeing of her fellow creatures was to her more than the highest prize that art has to bestow.'¹⁷ Though as her contemporaries reckon, she 'possessed much metrical skill and an ear for melody', she often 'sacrificed beauty to strength'.¹⁸ The words 'power' and 'strength' and 'intellect' consistently appear in reviews. As Angela Leighton points out, the 'strength' in Webster's writings often 'sent her critics into a flurry of sexual anxiety'.¹⁹ Her monologues and dramas, her best works, are always described as masculine. According to Norma Clarke, by 1830, the tradition of intellectual women that Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More unselfconsciously drew on was no longer available. Intellectuality and womanliness had become opposites. A woman who showed intellect was automatically defined as 'masculine'. The word 'feminine' could no longer contain intellectual achievement.²⁰ Webster's success with critics seems to have been achieved at the expense of defying gender stereotypes. As I have noted in Chapter Four, various dramatic monologues of Webster depict the powerful woman's departure from the 'common sex'. Like Jeanne d'Arc, in her writings of socio-political themes Webster forbears to 'deck' her beauty 'with the

¹⁶ Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater*, 10 vols (London: Macmillan, 1900), vol. 1, p.138.

¹⁷ Watts-Dunton, *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1994, p.355.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Lee, 'Augusta Webster', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.60, p.116.

¹⁹ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.167.

²⁰ Clarke, p.91.

pleasant woman arts' that 'other maidens use and are not blamed' and hides her 'female body in steel' and wears a 'dented helmet' on her 'weary brows' (*DS*, 36). In order to find the most efficient expression for her concerns, Webster frequently shifted genres and explored a variety of literary forms existed — lyrics, novel, verse novel, social essays, dramatic monologue, drama and fairy-tale. Her literary career demonstrates an intellectual woman's quest for a woman's place in a male literary tradition.

Webster's importance has started to gain recognition among scholars. Dorothy Mermin comments, 'Self-consciousness, self-exposure, and woman's double place as subject and as object in art are reinterpreted by Webster in light of an emergent feminist ideology, and she vastly enlarges the range of voices through which women poets can speak.'²¹ Isobel Armstrong claims, 'Given the impressive technical and imaginative strengths of her work, there can be no doubt that Augusta Webster ranks as one of the great Victorian poets.'²² Indeed, Augusta Webster deserves a place in the mainstream of Victorian literature. And as a woman writer whose course of life neatly spans the Victorian era, her voice is one that must not be neglected by those who are interested in the conditions of nineteenth-century England.

²¹ *Godiva's Ride*, p.80.

²² Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow, eds, *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.590.

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