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*The Construction of Female Identity and the
Dramatic Monologue*

Augusta Webster's Dramatic Monologues

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I would like to dedicate this master dissertation to all the women like Augusta Webster, past, present and future, and to those whose rights needed, still need, or will need to be so fiercely defended; and to that one friend, who does not believe in feminism, in the hope that she will soon see the light.

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Introduction

A place for everything and everything in its place might as well have been the adage of the Victorian Era. For a woman there seems to have been only one truly proper place throughout the nineteenth century, inside her husband's home, governing the household as the *Home Goddess*, who provided a safe refuge away from the outside world where her husband could relax. To marry or not to marry, did not even seem to be a question and yet, on the one hand there was a considerable number of women who never married either because they never encountered the opportunity or the right man or simply because they did want to marry. On the other hand there were also married women, usually working-class wives, who could not spend their days inside the home because they had to provide an additional or perhaps even the only income for the family.

What were the consequences of society's focus on this ideal for the women who could not live up to it because they were spinsters and/or working women in nineteenth-century England? And how did it affect the prostitutes and other fallen women who displayed other "forms of deviancy", as Lynda Nead refers to it in *Myths of Sexuality* (1988), or what did it imply for any other woman who did not fit inside the straitjacket of *Angel in the House* for any other reason? Did all these women still deserve a place in society or were they considered social outcasts?

An increasing interest in 'fallenness' and female sexuality can be perceived both in a pseudo-scientific discourse and in literature, especially in poetry. Anita Levy observes that "the female body was the subject of legal, medical and scientific debate in many different media" (108) and that "countless volumes devoted to sexuality" were produced (109), mainly in an attempt to throw light on "bad female sexual desire" (109). The idea that Victorians were sexually repressed seems to be in need

of correction. Though it is a bold statement to make, perhaps even more boldly expressed, it would actually make more sense to say that Victorians were obsessed with sexuality. Apparent from all the attention it received, female sexuality was certainly not ignored or denied, but it was considered a dangerous force which had to be controlled lest it would find an outlet in any unacceptable way.

Many nineteenth-century poets also incorporated the theme of fallenness in its different aspects into their poetry. Well-known examples are Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Jenny*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* and Christina Rossetti's *The Convent Threshold*. Especially women poets published a lot of material on the fallen woman, often in the form of the dramatic monologue (Leighton 223). Though the sexually deviant woman was the extreme example of the woman who did not fit the norm, it seems that many women struggled with the social expectations they were required to meet and often had to cope with the harsh judgement of their peers when they failed to do so. As writing poetry was often considered an inappropriate occupation for women to engage in, it might be assumed that these women poets felt personally affected by the dominant image of femininity and the expectations which came with it.

One poet who was strongly committed to the improvement of women's position in society Augusta Webster. She mastered and emulated the genre of the dramatic monologue, employing it to give a voice to all kinds of women and to some male personae as well. Webster wrote "many social and political essays concerning women's rights and responsibilities" and "campaign[ed] for women's suffrage" (Hickok 333), themes which are also explored in her poetry. Susan Brown believes that Webster "broke new ground in the representation of female subjectivity in relation to the constructing and determining factors of Victorian social formations" (90).

Because the socially constructed images of femininity were unrealistic, they forced many women into a miserable marriage, a marginal life or at times even drove them to suicide or infanticide. The second reason why these gender roles were problematic is that they denied women the development of their own personality. Victorian gender roles were based on the construction of identity through a series of binary oppositions, such as male versus female, pure versus fallen, etc... The idea that women could be defined as the exact opposites of men forced Victorian women to answer to the stereotype of the perfect lady, remain childlike and construct their identity solely

through their relationships to the males in their lives. Those who could not fit in, had a hard time leading a fulfilling life. The women who were cast into the other extreme stereotype of the fallen woman whose sexuality had run out of control, could no longer be considered a respectable member of society.

Throughout the nineteenth century women poets like Augusta Webster kept battling these injustices through their poetry. I will argue that Webster gives all these women voices to address and indict the two major issues I have described above. First of all I would like to claim that Webster's poetry evaluates marriage and romantic love as undesirable life goals, not because they are unattainable, but because of the unrealistic expectations society surrounds them with and the consequences if these expectations are not met. The second point I will try to prove is that Webster constructs an identity for her characters, based on their own desires, choices, actions, and not depending on the relations with the men in their lives.

This dissertation is divided into three parts. The first part is concerned with the socially constructed female identity, the second part will cover women and poetry and the third and last part will focus on Augusta Webster.

In the first chapter I will discuss the stereotypical role of the *Angel in the House*. First I will explain how acquiring a husband featured as the most important goal in the average girl's life. Then I will focus on the separate spheres men and women were supposed to inhabit. Finally I will discuss female sexuality. I will first focus on the double standard which prescribed very different norms for men and women. In the second part of the discussion I will have a closer look at the norms and expectations concerning female sexuality.

In the second chapter I will focus on women who do not follow the expectations concerning marriage, the separate spheres and respectable female sexuality. I will cover different notions of 'fallenness', with special attention to prostitutes, spinsters and working women, compared to the unrealistic middle-class ideal.

The third chapter will contain a discussion on female artists, especially women poets. In which categories do they belong according to the Victorian ideology? I will also investigate how these poets dealt with the contradiction of being both woman and creator in the context of the binary construction

of identity based on traditional gender roles. Finally I will try to answer the question whether their engagement in poetry could be considered as a mission.

The fourth chapter will cover the dramatic monologue. I will discuss the definitions of the genre which have been offered by different scholars and will also attempt to clarify why many women poets chose to adopt this poetic form.

The fifth chapter will focus on Augusta Webster's life and work and will pay special attention to her literary project. I will try to evaluate Webster according to Victorian ideology, based on her life and work. Who was Augusta Webster as a person and what was her place in society as a woman? How did she construct her own identity as a poet and does she inscribe in a tradition as a woman poet?

In the sixth and final chapter I will discuss Webster's use of the dramatic monologue.. I will focus on a selection these monologues and analyse them in terms of themes, characters and motifs. First I will discuss how Webster criticises the dominant social ideology concerning femininity by opposing it to more realistic characters and situations. Secondly I will analyse how she constructs the identity of her characters as a complex and multilateral concept which cannot be defined in terms of binary opposition.

Part 1: The Feminine Ideal

Chapter 1 How to Be a Woman in Victorian England

Elizabeth Delafield's *Provincial Lady* tells us that to a woman having “any husband at all was better than none” and that whether she is able to find a husband or not effectively made up a woman's “failure or success in life” (Perkin 75). Accordingly the first section of this chapter will consist of a short discussion of marriage and the married state.

Victorian life was determined to a large extent by the idea of the separate spheres. A man belonged in the public sphere, a woman in the private sphere, both tending to their separate and complementary duties and responsibilities. I will elaborate on this idea in the second section of this chapter. Important to keep in mind when discussing this ideal, is that it is first and foremost part of middle-class ideology. In reality not even every middle-class woman would have met this stereotype. It is also safe to assume that women's lives in the upper classes would have differed from this middle-class ideal; and in the working classes women often lacked the financial means to live up to this standard. This will however be discussed at greater length in the second chapter.

A gender-based division can also be perceived in the sexual double standard, granting men much more liberal sexual norms than women. I will focus on that double standard in the third section of this chapter. As I mentioned in the introduction, an increasing interest in female sexuality can be noticed throughout the nineteenth century. However, the opinions on the subject seem to have been divided and were ambiguous. Often a dichotomy between pure and fallen women was used as a basis for these ideologies. At the end of this chapter I will investigate this notion more extensively.

The prevalent idea throughout these three themes, marriage, occupation and sexuality is that men and women are inherently different. What is more, they are each other's exact opposites. It is wrong to assume that women were considered to be inferior to men. They were simply regarded as different than men, which however was “to be valued since [her differences] entirely complemented male attributes” (Nead 34). Consider the following excerpt from John Ruskin's essay “Of Queen's Gardens” (1865):

Each has what the other has not: each completes the other , and is completed by the other. They are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give...

Now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer and the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest... But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision ... Her great function is praise. (Ruskin as quoted in Nead 34).

Each sex is ascribed very specific characteristics, which are essentially different from and complementary to those of the other sex. Furthermore man and woman need each other, without each other they are not complete. [T]ogether they create a perfect and secure social unit” (Nead 34), this unit evidently being marriage.

1.1 Marriage as a Girl's Life's Purpose

Rowbotham suggests that [a] very narrow conception of the role of a ‘good woman’ had [...] been laid out for girls to follow by the mid-nineteenth century. Only by following such a path, ideally ending in marriage, could they hope to become accepted as ‘ladies’” (15-16). Only a respectable girl would be eligible for marriage, in turn ensuring that only a married women could be considered a truly respectable lady. A woman's respectability was strongly connected to successfully performing her domestic role and to her sexuality, which will be the topics of the following two sections.

Lynda Nead begins a chapter on “respectable femininity” with a description of a George Elgar Hicks triptych titled *Woman's Mission*, depicting the three roles a woman is supposed to fulfil according to the feminine ideal: woman as mother, woman as wife and mother as daughter (12). The meaning is not difficult to decipher: a woman's mission is never her own as she never is her own person, she belongs to her parents or her husband and, on an emotional and moral level, to her children. Though Nead later complicates the ideals represented in these paintings (15), they provide us with an adequate starting point. Nead confirms the message of the triptych: [a woman] is defined through her relationships to [...] men (father, husband, son) (13). The implications of this message concerning female identity will be central to the argument of this dissertation.

Similarly Joan Perkin writes that [the] patriarchal family was regarded by many people as the essential building block of a civilized society” (74). Indeed the husband was not only in name, but also legally the head of the family unit, holding all rights to his wife’s property and earnings and the wife abandoning her separate legal identity upon entering a marriage.

“Despite [these] legal constraints of marriage, it was the life-plan of most women, who avoided the unmarried state like the plague” (Perkin 75), a life-plan for which they started preparing from a very young age. Girls were to be “informed as to what their duties and responsibilities were and how they were to be fittingly performed” (Rowbotham 99). Furthermore, as Nead observes, “early marriage, prolific childbearing and breast-feeding [were] seen to ensure female health” and social deviancy would result in disease (26).

Many women considered being married as an improving factor to their quality of life and, according to Perkin “actually welcomed marriage as an emotionally satisfying and indeed emancipating experience”. She argues that marriage usually offered them more freedom than they had experienced in a life dependent on their parents and enabled them to have a family of their own and develop a social life (75).

How women experienced marriage however, largely depended on the social class they belonged to. Upper-class women usually had a more than liberal amount of freedom and working-class women’s important roles as wives and mothers made them, if never legally, at least effectively matriarchs of their own home. Though marriage might offer “comfort and security”, middle-class women often experienced “the gilded cage of bourgeois marriage” as “claustrophobic and frustrating” (Perkin 76).

Whether marriage was a fulfilling experience for a woman or not, must have obviously depended considerably on personal factors. Abuse and alcoholism in a husband are only some of the more extreme examples of the problems which could have complicated a married woman’s situation. The fact remains however, that more and more women were aggravated “by their subordinate legal status” and their husbands controlling their property and earnings (Perkin 88).

1.2 Separate Spheres

The following section will be largely based on Judith Rowbotham's "*Household Fairy and Home Goddess: The Changing Feminine Stereotype*" from her monograph *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (1989).

Rowbotham sets the tone writing that "women had an essential and fundamental contribution to make to the maintenance of society, by the efficient performance of noble deeds within their own domestic sphere", the key message can be found at the end of the sentence: women belong at home (99).

Whether these model housewives are called *Angels in the House*, *Household Fairies* or *Home Goddesses*, any of these names seem to have an almost sacrosanct connotation, perhaps indicative of the Victorian devotion to the idea of the separate spheres. As Rowbotham mentions this stereotype "was promoted in education, in learned essays and [...] popular fiction" (11) towards general acceptance, encouraging girls to consider becoming a "professional good wife and mother" as their "'highest' ambition" in life (12). As a man should pursue a career in the public sphere to validate his masculinity, a woman should take this same professional approach in their 'career' in the domestic sphere (Rowbotham 12). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this division is not based on notions of superiority and inferiority. It was truly believed that the best place for a woman was in the domestic sphere, where she could utilise and cultivate her natural talents most efficiently.

As described in the introduction to this chapter, this stereotype of the respectable woman was primarily part of middle-class ideology. Rowbotham explains how it finds its origins in the urbanisation and class polarisation processes following the Industrial Revolution. The "rise of the nuclear family" with its separation of home and working space found the woman in her new 'habitat', the home. To distinguish themselves from the working classes, the aspiring middle classes looked up to the upper class to define a new social role for women. The model they constructed through their misconception of the upper-class ladies' lives was that of the idle, "merely ornamental and 'unproductive'" wife (Rowbotham 13).

The middle-class *Household Fairy* however had more than an ornamental role to fulfil. Her most important task was to make “her household a comfortable, tranquil refuge, where the busy man could relax on returning from his toil” (Rowbotham 15). Still from a middle-class point of view, it was a matter of status to be able to provide for the women of the household, without them having to physically contribute to production (15). Middle-class girls now had to strive to become ladies through conduct, rather than through birth, with marriage being the ultimate prize. Following the upper-class ladies, they had to be trained in “ornamental accomplishments” and “household supervision” (16-17). Even more important than the practical side however was the generally accepted notion that it was the moral and emotional duty of a good woman to keep her family together (18-21).

1.3 Female Sexuality

1.3.1 A Double Standard

According to Lynda Nead “the male sexual urge was understood to be active aggressive and spontaneous whilst female sexuality was defined in relation to the male and was believed to be weak, passive and responsive” (6). She includes the following excerpt from an 1850 edition of *The Westminster Review*:

In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by intercourse ... If the passions of women were ready, strong and spontaneous, in a degree even approaching the form they assume in the coarser sex, there can be little doubt that sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception. (Greg as quoted in Nead 6)

The author strongly believes in the opposition between male and female sexuality. It is also apparent from this quotation that the middle-class discourse was permeated with the fear of “unregulated female sexuality” (Nead 6). I will come back to this later. For now it is sufficient to remember that only men are supposed to have active sexual desires.

As Hera Cook mentions males needed to follow their sexual urges and act on them (119). In concrete terms, it was considered natural and acceptable for men to have premarital sex, to have sex with women other than their wives and to frequent prostitutes. In stark contrast to this, respectable

women were not even allowed to discuss prostitution. Cook calls this the “foundation of Victorian sexual hypocrisy” (120). Furthermore, women were expected to be virgins until their wedding nights and to remain faithful to their husbands.

Nead describes that this sexual activity in men was condoned “as a sign of ‘masculinity’” while in women it would be condemned “as a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour” (6).

Joan Perkin writes that [Mary Wollstonecraft] attacked the double standard of sexual morality” and expected men “to control their sexual impulses as they required women to do” (74). Many of Wollstonecraft’s beliefs resonated both with conservative women and with radicals and formed an important basis for the debate “on ‘the woman question’” (75).

1.3.2 Virgin or Whore

Though we know that female sexuality was never completely denied, evident from the prolific coverage of the subject in legal, medical, scientific and other media (Levy 108), as Christine Sutphin argues, it seems “to have existed primarily within male-centered perspectives and to serve male needs” (387). She specifies these “male needs” in another article as “reproduction” and “patriarchal heredity” (514), which are connected to the sexual expectations set on respectable women as discussed above. Not having sex with other men aside from her husband prior to as well as after her wedding, ensured that this husband should not doubt the paternity of the children born during their marriage. Reproduction within the marriage bond seems to have been the only acceptable context for female sexuality.

These restrictions were supposed to enable the desire to draw a “clear line between respectable and disreputable women”, which still proved rather difficult and according to Sutphin, indicated “a profound anxiety about women’s sexuality” (375). This sexuality was generally “organized around the dichotomy virgin/whore [...] and [this] sexual identity determined whether or not [a woman] was seen as a respectable and responsible member of society.” Once again this division can be regarded as a result of the Victorian tendency to think in opposites and to assess the world around them accordingly.

It seemed hard to reach a consensus on what was respectable and what was not though, as the nineteenth century was characterized by attempts to define and redefine female respectability “to

create clear moral boundaries and to prevent any possibility of confusion” (Nead 6). All this anxiety concerning women and sexuality might be partly explained by Nead’s following observation: “female morality determines public morality which is manifested in either social stability or revolution” (92), or as Anity Levy formulates it: [t]he middle-class female body is potentially out of control because it encloses primitive sexual impulses that threaten to disrupt the order of things” (110), though this connection between female morality-sexuality and the social order of civilisation does not seem sufficient. Perhaps a further explanation can be found in the Victorian desire to control and understand the world through science. Despite numerous attempts at consensus female sexuality seems to have eluded a comprehensive and univocal answer.

Levy indicates one major complication in all these theories. The distinction between “what was docile and desirable in a woman from what was degenerate and desirous” ensured that these two sides of female sexuality were [s]eparate but inseparable, the one always [calling] the other to mind” (109). She discusses two late-nineteenth-century volumes on female sexuality which reflect this problem and the inability to reach a consensus on the subject. Below I will summarise this discussion.

The first book discussed by Levy is Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which “ splits sexual desire within the self into two distinct parts: healthy/unhealthy, bridled/unbridled, civilized/uncivilized, or socialized/unsocialized”. Krafft-Ebing believed that the individual’s desires had to be controlled in order for civilisation to “grow and prosper” (115). According to his theory, Levy argues, “the domesticating female would appear to be the more civilized of the two sexes” as she sublimates her desires through her “monogamous drive” and exerts influence on her husband to become more civilised as well (117). Krafft-Ebing thus places an enormous responsibility on women to not only oppress their own “unhealthy” and “uncivilized” desires, but also renders them accountable for the extent to which their husbands can regulate their desires.

Henry Havelock Ellis’ opinion on which one of the sexes is more civilised, is the complete opposite of Krafft-Ebing’s. In *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1898) he writes, as Levy phrases it, that [the female] is ultimately the more sexually primitive, and so liable to disrupt the very civilization she ensures” Women are not able to regulate their sexuality adequately, prone as they are to lapse into either one extreme or the other (121). Ellis considers women to be very paradoxical creatures, seeking

“domestic stability” on the one hand, but on the other hand easily susceptible to inner desires which threaten this stability, as “an impure woman cannot find a husband or make a happy home”, the conclusion being that we cannot separate [t]he desirous female [...]from the docile female who needs to be dominated” (Levy 122). According to Ellis’ theory a woman should submit to a man, because she is an uncivilised “savage” (Levy 121).

These two theories complicate a woman’s precarious position even more, as it implies that the pure and the fallen woman are not actually two extreme poles, inevitably connected through association, but rather the flipsides of a coin, as every woman is likely to succumb to her desires and ‘fall’. This makes respectable female sexuality a severely difficult balancing act. In the following chapter I will elaborate on this unrealistic standard and focus on different forms of ‘fallenness’.

Chapter 2 Straying from the Straight and Narrow Path

Related to the very ambiguous evaluation of female sexuality discussed in the previous chapter, Joan Perkin notes that “though [women] were lauded as men’s conscience and as repositories of virtue, they were also held to be easily corruptible . Eve, not Adam, had been tempted by the serpent, and this showed that women were innately sinful” (229). The concept of original sin is indeed such a deeply rooted part of Western society that even in the Victorian Era it is still a viable reason why women were considered to be more prone to deviant behaviour than men. The scientific discourse of the age supported this claim by emphasizing that women were more emotional than men, weaker creatures who lacked the superior intellect of males. Deviance in women was inextricably connected to their sexuality. One might even go as far as saying that, in the minds of the Victorians, all deviant behaviour in women was caused by their sexuality.

In the first chapter I have defined the middle-class concept of the respectable woman. In this chapter I will discuss some categories of women who did not fit into this stereotype. Summarised, to the Victorian middle class the paragon of female respectability was the *Angel in the House*, the refined middle-class housewife and mother who lived to support and accommodate her husband and children. Notice that she is defined not only by her marital status and motherhood, but also by her class and her

occupation. All these conditions have to be met, as for example a woman bearing a child outside of marriage would be considered a severe disgrace, being a sign that she had sexual experience.

Unfortunately this implies that a very significant part of all Victorian women could never live up to the ideal of female respectability. In terms of class the working-class woman is the most obvious victim of this comparison. Indeed it was not such an uncommon belief that most working-class women were as good as prostitutes in any case. In addition to their social class, the fact that most of these women had to work for a living was another factor which excluded them from respectability.

Upper-class ladies were the examples on which the middle-class feminine ideal was modelled, albeit as a result of lacking and distorted knowledge. The latter category is not relevant to my argument though, so I will not elaborate on these ladies. I will discuss the former however, to describe the circumstances which led so many working-class women to turn to prostitution to survive.

Middle-class women who - for whatever reason - pursued an occupation outside their own private sphere, would be at least mistrusted on some level. Going out into the public sphere, physically or mentally, was seen as a liability to their very womanhood. Working women, both middle- and working-class, will be the subject of the first section of this chapter.

Most working middle-class women were spinsters, whose unmarried state and exclusion from motherhood only added to their doubtful reputation. As Lynda Nead points out “independence was unnatural, it signified boldness and sexual deviancy” (28), making the working spinster, who is- at least theoretically- legally, emotionally and economically independent from any man, twice as deviant. I will discuss spinsters in the second section of this chapter.

Sexual deviancy is of course much more conspicuous in the stereotype of the fallen woman, of which the prostitute is the ultimate example. From a more rigid perspective any woman who had strayed from the respectable path might have even been equated to a prostitute. From a modern point of view, we might consider the concept of ‘fallenness’ in a spectrum of degrees of vice, of different shades of grey. To the Victorian mind however one small mistake was enough to cross the line between pure and fallen (Rowbotham 7). In other words, there was no such thing as a grey zone, only black or white, and women were harshly judged according to extremely strict norms. Still, the prostitute stands quite apart as the utmost symbol of vice and moral decay throughout the Victorian

Era. As Susan Brown describes it: [t]he spectre of the prostitute haunts the Victorians from the mid-nineteenth century onward” (78). Consequently the third section of this chapter will be focusing on the fallen woman and more specifically on the prostitute.

2.1 Working Women

In addition to the notion that the only proper place for women to pursue any occupation was within their own domestic sphere, it was also believed that [p]hysical frailty was a sign of respectable femininity” (Nead 29). This idea has far-reaching implications, throwing all women who are mentally and physically fit for work into disrepute. This was especially true for working-class women, whose hardiness and physical strength implied that they were somehow less feminine than less able-bodied women. However, it also cast a shadow on working middle-class women. All the same the reality many of these women faced left them but little choice but to go out and make a living of their own.

2.1.1 Middle-Class Occupations

Judith Rowbotham explains the situation of middle-class women pursuing an occupation: they were “single girls without finance or a family to turn to and with no immediate prospect, for whatever reason, of marriage”(221). Even when these young women had families, they often lacked “the financial resources to support unmarried girls within the household” (221). We should also acknowledge however, that there were “girls who, with or without financial pressure, increasingly actually desired to find a useful role for themselves outside the domestic circle” (221). Between 1860 and 1905 it became increasingly more accepted that there were women who had a certain “amount of independence” (Rowbotham 222).

Unfortunately however “up to the 1860s few opportunities for paid employment were open to women” (Rowbotham 223). Joan Perkin confirms this situation and adds that many of these women also had to provide for one or more relatives. The limited choices of these women were to become either a governess, a seamstress, or a paid companion (Perkin 164), occupations which were suitable for ladies because of their domestic character (Rowbotham 223).

Any of these occupations required hard work and left these women underpaid and often dissatisfied and even unhappy. It is known that Charlotte Brontë actually hated being a teacher and a

governess (Perkin 164). Even though a woman pursuing any of these occupations would still be considered reasonably respectable, adding to her misery, she would often be excluded from the social circle, and would no longer be considered “eligible for marriage and motherhood” (Rowbotham 224).

Rowbotham points out that, as the century progressed, some other professional options for women emerged. In the 1870s “cheap women clerks” were accepted into “the lower Post Office Grades”, but were often seen as competition for the more expensive male employees (232). The newly invented professional practice of nursing was considered an exceptionally well-suited vocation for women (233), as was teaching (239).

The fact remained that a middle-class woman’s options were very limited and that with them came no guarantee of fulfilment or satisfactory remuneration. I have omitted women pursuing careers as writers from this analysis, as they will be discussed in the next chapter.

2.1.2 Working-Class Women

Being born into a lower social class, working-class women were not expected to be ladies, the fact that most of them worked for a living did however lead the bourgeois population to believe that they were somehow less feminine or womanly than middle-class women.

Joan Perkin points out that many working class girls were forced to work from a very young age in mills, mines and workshops (169) and that abandoned girls and orphans had to make their own living in the streets (173). As they became adults, most women could not earn enough to afford a home and were often dependent on a male relative (174). According to Harriet Martineau’s analysis of the 1851 Census data however, “three out of six million adult Englishwomen [worked] for subsistence” (Perkin 177). I will limit this discussion to the urban working class and will not include women working on farms in rural areas.

Among young working-class women there were the lucky few who were able to become elementary school teachers, but for most working-class spinsters the only choices available were “domestic service, factory work, street-selling and manual labour, and prostitution” (174). The hard and often unhealthy work and the meagre salaries would make their living circumstances a great deal more miserable than those of middle-class spinsters (174-177).

Marriage did not deliver working-class women from the necessity to work however. They still had to contribute to the family income, often being paid lower wages while carrying out the same work as their husbands did (186).

Concerning sexual norms in the working class, premarital sex was not considered an uncommon practice, resulting in a lot of unmarried mothers. Though some had been the victims of rape, and others had been seduced – not uncommonly by the promise of marriage – and later on abandoned, there were those who chose to remain independent by choice, especially in rural areas, where it was more socially accepted for a single woman to have a child (178-180).

From this discussion it becomes clear that the reality of the working-class women's lives could at times not be farther removed from the middle-class ideal. Therefore in addition to the prejudice innate to the social class she belongs too, a working-class woman's job and family circumstances would exclude her from being considered a respectable woman.

2.2 Spinsters

Virginia Blain comments on the stereotypical image of the Victorian spinster: [t]here is still a remarkably pervasive prejudice about unmarried middle-class women in the Victorian age only leading half-lives, bolstered up by a platonic adoration of the local vicar (143). Kathleen Hickok indicates that the spinster was often considered “an anomaly” and that

[she] found herself without a serious and socially acceptable purpose in life and frequently even without the means to live out her exile in comfort and security. While her legal rights were somewhat greater than those of married women, her opportunities for employment were, especially early in the period, extremely limited. (120)

Not only were spinsters, according to Joan Perkin, “generally regarded as social failures” (153), but as Deborah Anna Logan mentions, “culturally rejected as nonreproductive women”, and even associated “with harlots” (8). This last evaluation might seem farfetched and even ridiculous to a modern reader, but as mentioned above, an independent woman was indeed regarded as sexually deviant.

Yet by 1862, the number of women who would not find a husband reached over three-quarters of a million (Hickok 120). Though there were spinsters who would have married if they had been

given the chance –even if only because it was the socially expected thing to do - an increasing number of middle-class women remained unmarried by choice. Indeed, as mentioned above in Hickok’s words and as confirmed by Perkin, “an unmarried woman was more independent than a married woman” (154). Some of them seem to have decided to remain single motivated by religious considerations, [b]ut many other women simply did not want to marry” (155).

For wealthy upper- and middle-class women and for those with a decent income, it was not difficult “to stand by their determination not to marry, and to have fulfilling lives” (159). The fate of others often consisted of “economic hardship and social marginality” (161).

By many within respectable society, the great number of unmarried women was considered problematic and it was more than once proposed that these ‘redundant’ women should be shipped off to the colonies so they could find a husband there (162-163).

Some spinsters lived with a father or brother, taking up the domestic duties of a wife when he was a widower or unmarried or sharing these duties with her mother or sister-in-law, limiting her independence. “‘Romantic friendship’ with another woman was encouraged” (156), probably part of the reason for this being that it could tend to a woman’s need for affection and help her fill her days with womanly activities. In these cases, the spinster would not be entirely alone in the world, and would be considered more feminine than one who pursued a career outside the domestic sphere.

2.3 The Fallen Woman

Angela Leighton points out that the fallen woman is a stereotype attributed to a wide range of women who have committed some kind of sexual offence, including all kinds of prostitutes, adulteresses, procuresses, seduced girls and even raped children (217).

Deborah Anna Logan’s comments that “*unchaste*, during the Victorian period, [assumed] extrasexual connotations” resulting in some less likely categories like alcoholics, anorexics, insane or depressed women, mothers who have committed infanticide, and even slave women being classified as fallen women (9).

Lynda Nead emphasises that the fallen woman “*had been* respectable but had dropped out of respectable society” and that her fall was “frequently attributed to seduction and betrayal which set the

scene for her representation as victim” (95). Logan however indicates the existence of “a powerful code of ethics that categorizes deviancy in any form (this includes all women of other classes and races) as fallenness” (9).

From the descriptions and comments cited above, it becomes clear that it is hard to define ‘fallenness’. In its broadest sense it might even include every woman who does not belong to the respectable English middle-class ladies. The most undisputed symbol of ‘fallenness’ however is the prostitute, though even that term “could define any woman who transgressed the bourgeois code of morality” (Nead 94).

Overall the evaluation of fallen women does seem quite contradictory. As discussed in the first chapter, dangerous sexual desires were seen as inherently part of a woman and yet, crossing a sexual boundary by acting on these desires— as seen from a contemporary point of view would render these women less feminine in the eyes of the middle-class Victorians.

2.3.1 The Prostitute

Lynda Nead notes that ‘prostitute’ “was the broadest and most complex term within the categorization of female behaviour during the nineteenth century” (91) and emphasises that there was “little consensus or stability” on the definition of the word (95).

In any case, though it was considered an “unnatural form of femininity” (100), [p]rostitution flourished in England in the nineteenth century, and many highly respectable men were the clients” (Perkin 228). There are supposed to have been approximately 8,000 prostitutes in mid-century London alone (Perkin 219). The most representative form of a prostitute would have been that of the young working-class woman working as a prostitute to augment her low wages. At the other extreme end there were the high-class courtesans and kept mistresses who often led a life of luxury (220).

For most prostitutes the risks that came with the occupation were not insignificant: “disease, humiliation, being exploited by a pimp, beaten up by a client,” or not being paid and those who catered to more affluent clients would probably have to deal with “eccentric demands” (220). For working-class women though “life was harsh” as was described in the first section of this chapter, “and the dangers of prostitution seemed to many no worse than those they faced already” (221).

Nead mentions that William Tait counted causes of prostitution either as moral or environmental, listing in the first category “vanity, indolence and lust” and in the second “poverty, lack of education and poor housing” (102). In this way prostitution could be considered either a personal choice driven by vice, or an unwanted fate a woman was driven into by circumstances. It is remarkable that one person lists these two possible explanations for prostitution, implying that people believed there were different kinds of prostitutes in the sense that some chose to become prostitutes freely and others did not. Anita Levy points out however that “attempts to deal with prostitution located the origin of prostitution in the defectiveness of the women themselves. Bad desires within the female self, not economic necessity, made women ‘loose’”(109).

The division employed by Tait seems connected to two prevalent images of prostitution, on the one hand that of the prostitute “as a figure of contagion, disease and death, a sign of social disorder and ruin to be feared and controlled” and on the other hand that of the prostitute as a “suffering and tragic figure – the passive victim of a cruel and relentless society” (106). It was indeed a popular belief that prostitution was “infecting the respectable world” (138).

Nead argues that it was considered the “responsibility of the state to minimize the suffering caused by prostitution” (106). Accordingly attempts to regulate prostitution culminated in the Contagious Diseases Acts. These Acts were passed in 1864, 1866, and 1869 in an attempt to regulate prostitution, part of a wider interventionist tendency of the government concerning the poor. According to the CDA, all prostitutes in the surroundings of military stations were to undergo a medical examination every fortnight. If the prostitute was diseased, she “would be kept in a “Lock” hospital for up to three months until pronounced well” (Brown 78). If a woman denied being a prostitute, but failed to prove her respectability, yet still denied to agree to the examination, she could be sentenced to one to three months of imprisonment.

Brown points out that [t]he Contagious Diseases Acts marked an unprecedented degree of state intervention in the domain of sexuality” (79). One of the issues concerning these Acts was that they did not define what was to be understood under the term “common prostitute (79). This meant that the criteria of local administrators and police were diverse and sometimes downright ridiculous. What was also experienced as problematic by many, Harriet Martineau among others, is that these

Acts confirmed the sexual double standard, condoning the men frequenting prostitutes, claiming they are only following natural urges. Martineau pointed out that this was actually equating these men to animals who had no control over themselves and no moral sense whatsoever (79).

A “vigorous campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts” ensued, intensifying in 1869, with “activists as activists petitioned, lectured, lobbied, campaigned, and generally publicized both the conditions created by the Acts and the efforts to extend them to other, non-military, areas” (Brown 79). The movement produced two important organisations: on the one hand there was the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which “excluded women from its first meeting” who responded by establishing the separate Ladies’ National Association (Brown 80).

Brown stresses that “there were significant gender conflicts within the repeal movement”, the two associations disagreeing on several matters, (Brown 80). The Ladies’ National Association was for example very adamant in emphasising the economic causes of prostitution, denying any essential opposition between middle-class ladies and prostitution, which was considered by many Victorians an extremely disturbing proposition to make (Brown 84). Mary Hume-Rothery wrote the following in an open letter to parliamentarians:

there is not one of us, - no, Gentlemen, there is not one of the mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters whom you cherish with proud affection - who dare safely assert that, had she been born in the same unprotected, unfenced position, in the very jaws of poverty and vice, which has been the destruction of so many of her hapless sisters, she, too, in the innocent ignorance of her unfledged girlhood, might not have slipped, like them, into that awful gulf from which society at large has long done its best to make escape hopeless. (as quoted in Brown 84).

These feminists went to great lengths to point out that a woman’s living circumstances forced her to make desperate choices and that not being born in the wrong class, or having inappropriate sexual desires due to some innate morality leads women to resort to prostitution.

Eventually the Acts were suspended in 1883 and “finally repealed in 1888” (Brown 79).

Part 2: Victorian Women and Poetry

Chapter 3 The Woman Poet

Introduction

In the previous chapter I have considered a number of professional career options for middle-class women. In this chapter I will investigate an option that has not yet been discussed above: the first section of this chapter will discuss the possibilities of women with artistic ambitions.

In the context of this dissertation the poet is the most significant of the artistic vocations. In the second section of this chapter I will therefore discuss whether women could be poets in the Victorian Era. The questions I will try to answer are: was being a woman poet different from being a male poet? Did women poets encounter difficulties which male poets did not have to take into account?

3.1 Women and the Arts: a Suitable Career?

Judith Rowbotham remarks that “[a] woman’s capacity for art was always presumed to be less than that of the greatest men and it could only be maximized by a total dedication to the achievement” (242). In other words, ladies with artistic ambition had to keep in mind that they had to work twice as hard as a man, but would never be regarded his equal in artistic achievement. Still the arts were one of those few vocations which were open to ladies.

Painting was considered one of the most acceptable art forms for ladies to pursue, though as most occupations for women, it came with “certain drawbacks”. Rowbotham emphasises that a professional female artist would find it difficult “to retain the private element considered so important to standards of ladylike womanhood” (243).

A female musician would be in an even more challenging situation as she would also have her person on public display. Full performance would in any case only be permitted if a woman needed to use her art as financial support (244)

Acting would prove to be an extremely unlikely artistic career for a young lady to aspire to. Though respectable actresses were not unheard of during the Victorian period, this tolerance was relatively new. For many Victorians acting would still be branded immoral and vulgar” (245). We must not forget in this respect that actresses had long been equated with prostitutes.

The best choice for young ladies, both financially and in terms of respectability, would be to pursue a career as an “authoress, particularly of the didactic fiction intended to perpetuate the values of [middle-class] society” (245-246). The influence of the respectable contemporary example of Jane Austen cannot be overlooked in terms of the positive evaluation of writing as a professional option for young women (246).

Concerning the practice of all the arts however “fiction emphasised that the success rate was comparatively low” and that “without genuine, God-given talent, lasting and professional success could not be achieved, and therefore, should not be attempted” (248)

Dorothy Mermin elaborates on the problematic nature of publishing poetry for a Victorian woman: publication was considered “ a move toward public engagement and self-assertion in the masculine world” (201). The explanation is contained within the word itself, publishing, bringing something out into the public sphere, the domain of the male, would be recognized effectively as transgressing the line between the separate sphere. It was therefore considered “unwomanly self-display” and “even sexual self-exposure”. Financial need would have been considered a valid reason, but one which could only be used to justify writing novels, as the financial gain from poetry was negligible. The expected reward for poetry would not have been money, but glory, a very immodest and unwomanly desire (199).

3.2 How to Be a Woman and a Poet

Even taking the reasons above into consideration, we could ask with Dorothy Mermin: “why were there so few good women poets in nineteenth-century England when there were so many excellent

women novelists?” While the validity of this question might be challenged in the light of more recent rediscoveries of women poets since Mermin wrote this essay, I will follow her in her attempt to answer the question. Victorian critics would have probably answered that “the female imagination [could not] go beyond the personal and superficial” (198-199).

In hindsight it is easier however to make a more accurate and complete analysis, as Mermin does. Poetry was essentially a form of “high culture” and to enter it, one was required to have enjoyed a classical education which “[m]ost women lacked”, furthermore the “traditional conception of the poet’s role [was] inherently masculine” (199). It was also believed that “women could not summon up the sense of self and the self-assertiveness that poetry requires, and that they were too repressed to write strong lyrics” (199).

Barrett Browning acknowledged that “as a woman poet she would have to play two opposing roles at one time – both knight and damsel, both subject and object” (Mermin 199) and this awareness can also be perceived in Christina Rossetti’s poetry (200).

It might sound contradictive to say that writing poetry was more difficult for women, if one knows that poetry and femininity were traditionally associated. In reality this association actually “excluded women poets”; the female figures “could not write their own poems; the male poet, who stands outside the private world of art, has to do that for them”, because to the Victorian mind, poets are men and poems are women (Mermin 201),. “Since women already *are* the objects they try to create, why should they write?” (202) Nicole Ward Jouve confirms that woman and the female body have been used as mediation, as a metaphor (188) and wonders how a woman can create when she is seen as inferior and material, a possession of man (189). Like Barrett Browning and Rossetti she is aware that “women have felt divided in the creative act: both the maker of the sign and the sign, barred from, foreigners in, creation” (205)

Isobel Armstrong uses an excerpt from Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* to indicate a common point of criticism against women poets: they are supposed to have only “individualized feeling, feeling as an end in itself, to respond to a world ‘mad with pain’ ([*Aurora Leigh*,] II, line 203), only pity as a substitute for analysis” (7). This observation is indicative of the conception of women as more emotional creatures as opposed to the more intellectually superior male.

Virginia Blain observes yet another problem for the Victorian woman poet, namely the fact that "[t]he Victorians were obsessed with the poet (or 'poetess') *behind* the poem" (140), often effectively equating the two, implying that it was very difficult to decide "what could and could not be put into discourse at a time when poem and poet were so closely identified that almost any legible inscription of sexual autonomy authored by a woman was likely to be severely condemned" (136-137). In other words a woman poet had to be extremely cautious because any slightly deviant opinion expressed or discerned in her poetry would be considered her own, condemning and discriminating her. In order to counter this problem, women poets needed to adopt a mask, as Armstrong puts it, thus displacing the feminine subjectivity (253).

Mermin points out however, that even behind a mask, a woman poet was still likely to be identified with her poems and

unless a woman poet's mask was male, or exceedingly bizarre, (Barrett Browning's infanticidal black American slave, for instance in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point), she might not be seen as wearing a mask at all. (208)

On the other hand Armstrong indicates the existence of "recognized conventions for women's verse" by the middle of the century (248-249). Women's writing occupied "a particular sphere of influence", and worked "inside defined moral and religious conventions", helping "to make women's poetry and the 'poetess' [...] respected in the nineteenth [sic] century as they never have been since" (249). She adds that "it is undoubtedly the case that women wrote with a sense of belonging to a particular group defined by their sexuality" (250). What does this imply for these women poets' writing experiences and their sense of social responsibility? Does this unique dual identity of being both a woman and a poet encourage them to use their position to advocate for the rights of other women who cannot speak up? Do these women poets feel as if they have been given a mission? I will attempt to discover this in the next section of this chapter.

3.3 The Woman Poet's Mission

The phrase 'woman's mission to women' should be situated in its proper context of public charity. It was used to "describe the role of respectable women in the reclamation of the fallen" (Nead 196).

Respectable women were supposed to be able to connect to their fallen counterparts through their shared womanhood on a level that male charity workers could not. This belief “was at the centre of the Female Mission to the Fallen” (Nead 200).

Similarly in literature:

male writers –even less-privileged, self-educated ones such as Dickens- write —”about” fallen perspectives; women writers, in contrast, write “from” that perspective. As a result, male writers’ fallen characters remain one-dimensional, talked about but not developed, objectified in euphemistic terms that fail to establish the social contexts leading to fallenness (Logan 9)

Helen Groth sees the potential of Victorian women’s poetry as a “humanizing agent in a society where economic and social hierarchies are increasingly being defined in terms of scientific explanations of the natural world” (325). She repeats the sentiment later: “[w]omen poets see their works as contributing to a crucial debate surrounding the issues of human rights and liberty in an increasingly complex and secularized society” (347). Dorothy Mermin articulates the double mission we might attribute to Victorian women poets as follows, but also complicates it:

Rossetti and Barrett Browning [...] tried to use the problematic nature of woman as speaking subject in an attempt to explore and to protests against women’s roles both in poems and in society but since the surface of their poetry [...] did not contradict what Victorian women were expected to say, their shifts in point of view and revisions of old stories generally went unobserved an unencouraged (212).

As Virginia Blain points out, when it comes to tradition, "women poets could either resist, reinvent, or merely reinscribe" (136). Isobel Armstrong notices that there might be a tradition of “poems of protest [...] in which an overt sexual politics addresses the institutions and customs which burden women”(246), but that most women poets are more subtle in their protests. They do not want to break with tradition in any radical way, probably out of fear of being completely dismissed, without being able to convey any message at all, therefore

women poets relate to [expressive poetics] in an ambiguous way and interrogate it even while they negotiate and assent to expressive theory. [...] The simpler the surface of a poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it (Armstrong 251).

Here we see the problem indicated by Mermin further explained. Victorian readers expected to read simple, expressive poetry from women, so when they encountered a poem which seemed simple and expressive, they did not think to seek any further.

It seems that the Victorian women poets needed a different poetic form to give a voice to the voiceless and to their unheard indictment, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have investigated the possibilities of Victorian women who want to pursue an artistic career. In the first section of this chapter I have discussed which art disciplines were considered the most appropriate for ladies.

In the context of this dissertation the woman poet is the most significant category. So I have dedicated the second section of this chapter to the question whether it was really possible for a woman to be a poet in the Victorian Era. The questions I have tried to answer are: was being a woman poet different from being a male poet? Did women poets encounter difficulties which male poets did not have to take into account?

The answers to these questions are: yes, it was different and yes, they did. This meant that women poets had to find a new poetic form to counter and / or address these issues. I will focus on this poetic form in the next chapter: the dramatic monologue.

Chapter 4 The Dramatic Monologue

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the dramatic monologue. The first section of this chapter will be based on Glennis Byron's *Dramatic Monologue* (2003) because it is the most recent and up-to-date volume on the subject. It differentiates between the male and female use of the dramatic monologue and focuses on developments that took place during the Victorian period.

Susan Brown cites Tucker's comment that the dramatic monologue "challenged Victorian reading practices which, in the wake of the Romantic poets, assumed first-person poetic texts to be unmediated lyric expressions of the poet's subjectivity" (Tucker as cited in Brown 101). This was one of the problems which Victorian women poets encountered when attempting to use their poetry as a social protest. If the dramatic monologue can solve the problem of subjectivity in poetry, it might be the right medium to convey the messages these women poets are trying to share with their readers. I will discuss this possibility in the second section of this chapter.

4.1 Defining the Dramatic Monologue

Glennis Byron describes that the practical usefulness of the dramatic monologue "does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition" (Tucker as quoted in Byron 2). Despite many attempts; the dramatic monologue has proved to be hard to classify and the degree of uniformity in its different appearances is indeed very low (2). Perhaps this elusive character is indicative of its versatile possibilities.

Byron considers Ina Beth Sessions as the first to attempt to fix and codify the dramatic monologue in her taxonomic article "The Dramatic Monologue" from 1947. Sessions regarded Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' as the "Perfect" example of the dramatic monologue and used it consequently as the standard against which to evaluate other dramatic monologues (Byron 2-3).

Isobel Armstrong claims however “ it was the women poets who ‘invented’ the dramatic monologue” (253). The women she is referring to are Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. Glennis Byron refers to this claim in a later chapter of this book and comments on it in an essay, admitting that although she believes Armstrong’s case is strong, she cannot entirely agree with this theory (81). A discussion of Felicia Hemans’ use of the dramatic monologue can be found in the second section of this chapter.

Returning to the present argument, Sessions’ article thus set the terms of the debate, determining the formal features of the ‘Perfect’ dramatic monologue as the following seven characteristics: “speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present” (Sessions as quoted in Byron 8).

Byron points out that at first sight the dramatic monologue might be difficult to distinguish from the Romantic lyric and sets out to determine the differences (11). The first point of comparison between the Romantic lyric and the dramatic monologue is that in the former the speaker is usually conflated with the author of the poem and sometimes even with its readers, whereas in the dramatic monologue, the speaker is to be understood as a different person from the poet and is supposed to have a “cinematic effect” on the readers. The situation of the monologue is supposed to unfold itself before the eyes of the reader. Byron questions however how this effect can be ensured. It seems to be highly dependent on reader response, implying that different readers might experience different effects (12).

She then investigates whether the poems display signals to distinguish the poet from the speaker. As is to be expected, this is not the case in the lyric. In some dramatic monologues it is made very clear through temporal and/or cultural information. In other cases the speaker is a historical, literary or mythological figure . Another signal which can be used is very specific language. A last common technique is “cross-gendering”: a man writing as woman or vice versa. The difference is not as clear in all examples of the dramatic monologue though (12-13).

Alan Sinfield’s *Dramatic Monologue* (1977) offers some additional information on the speaker of the dramatic monologue. According to Sinfield the speaker functions as a mask of the author’s voice (cited in Byron 14). Additionally the poem is never free from “the pressure of the poet’s controlling mind” (Sinfield as quoted in Byron14). The ‘divided consciousness’ in the

dramatic monologue implies that there are other, perhaps ‘preferable’ perspectives, different from that of the speaker. This results in the fact that the dramatic monologue is never truly a monologue. (Sinfield as cited in Byron 15). Byron indicates that the division is often connected by critics to the dramatic irony which is often characteristic of the dramatic monologue.

The possibility of different perspectives is often indicated by a silent auditor, challenging the monological voice, though it is not a necessary prerequisite to suggest other perspectives (20). One of the most renewing aspects of the dramatic monologue is that because of the “absence of any clear authorial voice”, the reader is encouraged to become actively involved in the poem and has “a significant role to play” (21).

Byron makes two propositions about the subject of the dramatic monologue, namely that “dramatic monologues primarily present unintentional and unconscious revelations” (24) and that it is “the reader’s task to identify some essential character, either consciously or unconsciously, through the monologue” (25). Tucker however objects to these statements, claiming that [t]exts do not come from speakers, speakers come from texts” (quoted in Byron 25) and that the illusion of a character is a textual effect (cited in Byron 25).

Byron emphasises that the dramatic monologue focuses upon a particular occasion, which is only part of a larger process (26). She wants us to keep in mind that [s]peakers have particular purposes, specific goals, which they not only describe but ‘also labor steadily to achieve through the medium of their monologues’” (Pearsall as quoted in Byron 26), meaning that the speaker is trying to convince us of a certain point and we have to keep our distance. So while we can certainly sympathise with the speaker, we cannot take anything for granted when reading a dramatic monologue. As readers, we are expected to question the information we are given, becoming an active actor in the drama.

4.2 A Suitable Instrument for the Woman Poet?

In the previous chapter it was established that Victorian women poets were experiencing difficulties being accepted as women writers and concerning the subjectivity of their poetry and the struggle to

find an appropriate way to reinvent the lyric tradition. The dramatic monologue might be the right medium to fit their purposes.

Byron indicates that the dramatic monologue was essentially a reaction to Romantic lyricism, which left the Victorians with the legacy of

a lyric voice which presented itself as autonomous, self-conscious, atemporal, and male, and an aesthetic which promoted the possibilities of transcendence, of attaining through metaphor a universality not bound by time, class, or gender (Slinn as quoted in Byron 33).

Byron sees “the uncertainty of the age” as an important contributing factor paving the way for the emergence of the dramatic monologue (34). Christ furthermore indicates that the Victorians experienced the Romantics’ focus upon the self as disabling (quoted in Byron 35).

Robert Browning himself, considered the master of the dramatic monologue, turned to the genre because of the subjectivity issues he had encountered in his poetic career, being too closely identified with his poetry. He emphasised that his *Dramatic Lyrics* were “dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine” (Browning as quoted in Byron 35). Browning is basically claiming that by adopting this form and thus taking his own subjectivity out of his poems, he ensures that these poems become objective, letting his personae speak for themselves, without imposing his own opinion. We have seen in the first section of this chapter however that this is never truly the case.

Byron goes on to explain that the Victorians still conceived of poetry as essentially lyrical. Poetry does not assume to have an audience, is merely expressive without having any particular purpose in mind, merely uttering what comes from within (37-38). As has become clear in the previous section, the poetic form of the dramatic monologue is the exact opposite. It is very aware of its audience and even anticipates reactions, attempting to convey a certain message, even to convince the reader of this message.

Byron explains that Felicia Hemans used an early form of the dramatic monologue to address the subjectivity and identification issues revolving around women’s poetry. Her strategy is however rather peculiar. Instead of creating speakers who are clearly separate individuals, she designs characters who are essentially nothing more than abstract female stereotypes. Through her

identification with these stereotypes, she creates her own persona as a poet, which stands as far from her own person as her speakers. In this way she ensures that as a person she is quite distinct from her speakers, but essentially they are speaking with the same voice (47-49).

Later women poets used the dramatic monologue in a very different way. Isobel Armstrong claims that this poetic genre might indeed be “used as a disguise, a protection against self-exposure and the exposure of feminine subjectivity” (253). According to Armstrong, not only might the dramatic form be able to make readers differentiate between poet and poem, it could also protect the author against the risk of self-exposure with its sexual connotations.

Dorothy Mermin similarly seems to think that “the dramatic monologue, [...] which exploits the problematic nature of the speaking subject [might offer] an opportunity either to escape or to explore problems of gender” (207), but fears at the same time that its essentially dialogical nature might not have been perceived as such by the Victorian reader, because like all poetry by women they were expected to be and thus “perceived as being, univocal” (208). Despite the many layers of mediation, the Victorians were still looking for the woman behind the poem, which they regarded as “an outpouring of personal feeling” by that woman (Byron 47).

Byron also acknowledges that women poets “appropriate the form for the purpose of exploring questions of gender” (58) and focuses on the differences between the male poets’ use of the dramatic monologue and the way the female poets used it.

Women poets tend to use fictionalised speakers placed within contemporary society rather than figures from literature, myth or history. [...] Even when they distance their monologues from Victorian society with such figures, however, women poets still tend indirectly to call forth the contemporary context (58).

For most Victorian women poets their own contemporary context was indeed a theme they could not overlook, as they, with all other women, were affected by it on a daily basis. This is why they hoped their poetry could “destabilise the categories upon which gender ideology was constructed” (Byron 61). To this end, they used different techniques, but the most remarkable one is criticising the system by “giving a voice to marginalised figures, [...] prostitutes or fallen women” (64-65). This was indeed very unusual. In novels fallen women who had been seduced do appear, but only as objects seen from

another point of view and when an actual prostitute is depicted in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny", she does not get a voice. Showing the marginalised as human beings in dire circumstances expressing themselves might not seem very astonishing to the modern reader, but it contradicted all underlying assumptions of the middle-class ideology.

The women reformers and poets emphasised "the social and economic causes of prostitution, a strategy which allowed them to insist upon identification and affirm solidarity" (Byron 66). These women wanted to convey that fallen women were not inherently different from them, that they were not the monsters or disgraced and contagious creatures they were often believed to be.

It is difficult to say whether the dramatic monologue served all its purposes. It does seem to be the most suitable instrument available. We must keep in mind though that an entire ideology cannot change overnight, and that poetry cannot be expected to complete this task on its own. Furthermore the pervasive concept of poetry's expressive nature might have complicated the women poets' missions.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the dramatic monologue. In the first section of this chapter I have followed Glennis Byron's analysis of the poetic form.

The dramatic monologue might have been the right medium to convey the messages the Victorian women poets were trying to convey to their audience. I have discussed this possibility in the second section of this chapter.

While the dramatic monologue must have been the best instrument these poets had at their disposal, their purpose was still an almost utopic one at the time. The dominant conceptions of gender and poetry they were trying to affect could not be expected to change overnight.

Part 3: Augusta Webster

Chapter 5 Augusta Webster

Introduction

In this chapter I will first try to reconstruct Augusta Webster's life and give an overview of her career as a "poet, journalist and activist" (Van Remoortel). In the second section of this chapter I will focus on Webster's literary project, reconstructing it from the major themes recurring in her works. Finally I will analyse Webster as a Victorian woman and as a Victorian poet.

5.1 Biographical and Bibliographical Details¹

5.1.1 Webster's Personal Life and Activism

On 30 January 1837, Julia Augusta Davies was borne at Poole, Dorset. She was the second-eldest of vice admiral George Davies and Julia Hume's six children. Much of . Webster's early childhood was spent in various locations along Britain's coasts, including several islands (Hickok 333) and five years aboard the HMS Griper , with the family following George Davies as he was stationed at different locations as coast-guard commander, before finally settling in Cambridge on Davies' appointment as chief constable .

Webster was particularly well-educated compared to other women of her time. She attended the Cambridge School of Art, "trained as a schoolteacher" and was expelled from the South Kensington Art school for whistling. A large part of her studying achievements were informal and self-educated though, as she studied the classics at home, "using one of her younger brother's schoolbooks" and "taught herself Italian and Spanish, and learnt French" in Paris and Geneva (Van Remoortel).

Julia Augusta married Thomas Webster, "a solicitor and fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, five years her senior" on December 10 1863 (Van Remoortel). They had one child, a girl named Margaret, born in November 1864, whose name, as Christine Sutphin points out, is recorded as Davies Webster, taking first her mother's maiden name and her father's name in second place (10).

Later that decade, Webster became a member of the Kensington Society, a group dedicated to the discussion of women's rights. Their activities consisted of advocating for women's suffrage and the debating of circumstances "affecting women's daily lives such as work, education and property

¹ This section will be largely based on: Van Remoortel, Marianne. "Augusta Webster," *Literary Encyclopedia*, 2010. Any given information will be taken from this source, unless otherwise specified. Direct quotations will be marked as belonging to Dr. Van Remoortel, for the purpose of giving due credit. The pages from the excerpt I have found are not numbered.

rights” (Van Remoortel). Webster’s commitment to these causes is strongly reflected in the poetry she produced and published during this period.

In 1870 the Websters moved from Cambridge to London where Thomas continued his work as a solicitor, while Augusta moved in literary circles, “maintaining close friendships with, among others, Theodore Watts, Alexander Macmillan, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Edmund Gosse” (Van Remoortel). She joined the Suffrage Society, engaging herself actively in “the vigorous campaigns fuelled by the string of unsuccessful votes of the Women’s Suffrage Bill in Parliament” (Rigg as cited in Van Remoortel).

Augusta Webster’s father passed away in 1876, upon which event she and her husband returned to Cambridge, spent a short period in Newquay for health reasons and eventually returned to London living briefly in Westminster and Hampstead, before settling in among Chelsea’s artistic and literary community, where they could count George Eliot, Bram Stoker, Thomas Carlyle and Dante Gabriel Rossetti among their neighbours. In 1879 Webster became “one of the first women to be elected a member of the London School Board, serving a three-year term until 1882, followed by a second tenure in 1885-88” (Rigg as cited in Van Remoortel).

Throughout adulthood, Webster health problems had an increasing influence on “her busy life as an author and reviewer, and with her work for the Suffrage Society and the London School Board” (Van Remoortel). In 1881 she and her daughter travelled to Rome to alleviate her “persistent lung problems” (Van Remoortel). The next year, the family moved to Hammersmith and relocated one last time after 1888, to Kew Gardens Road.

Julia Augusta Davies Webster died of cancer at the age of 67 on 5 September 1894 and was buried on 8 September at Highgate Cemetery.

5.1.2 Her Literary Career

Webster’s first publication was *Blanche Lisle, and other poems*, which she published in 1860 under the pseudonym of ‘Cecil Home’, as she did with her two subsequent works, both published in 1864: *Lilian Gray, a Poem* and her only novel *Lesley’s Guardians* (Hickok 332). Though Van Remoortel mentions that “early reviewers were generally unimpressed” with Webster first poetry

collection, Hickok claims that “though poetically undistinguished, [it] was well received” (333). Generally though, we can conclude that these first publication were not successful.

From 1866 onwards, Webster abandoned her masculine pseudonym and published translations of two Greek tragedies, *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus and *Medea* by Euripides. By 1870 the poetry collections *Dramatic Studies*, *A Woman Sold* and *Portraits* were published, which would turn out to be the most successful of her career as an author.

Webster wrote several dramas, producing one of her plays (*In a Day*) herself in 1890, in which her daughter performed the role of Klydone. She attempted one last venture into fiction with *Daffodil and the Croaxaxicans* in 1884, which became neither critically nor commercially successful.

Her remaining poetic works include *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute* (1874), a narrative poem based on a Chinese tale, two more collections, one called *A Book of Rhyme*, published in 1881 and a last one with poetry selected by Macmillan in 1893 (Hickok 332) and finally the posthumously published sonnet cycle *Mother and Daughter*.

Apart from poetry and drama, in the late 1870s Webster also wrote a number of essays for the *Examiner* “on various topics of socio-political interest to women in particular, including marriage, work, household expenses, suffrage and education”, most of which were collected in *A Housewife's Opinions* (Van Remoortel). In 1878 one of these essays was also published as a pamphlet for the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (Hickok 332;340).

Finally Webster also worked as a reviewer of poetry, especially providing “numerous reviews” for the *Athenaeum* in the early 1880s (Van Remoortel).

5.2 Webster's Literary Project:

Susan Brown believes that Augusta Webster “broke new ground in the representation of female subjectivity in relation to the constructing and determining factors of Victorian social formations” (90). Webster strongly emphasises “the processes of social determination” which create “contradiction or discontinuity” in identity. She makes a great effort to convey her “heroines' subjectivity “ and to clarify “their determined relations to social systems and structures” (Brown 101).

In this section I will focus on the themes Webster uses to construct her characters' identity as complex and socially determined concepts: marriage and love; freedom and identity; and sexuality. For the discussion of these three themes I will rely heavily on Susan Brown's analysis of "A Woman Sold".

5.2.1 Marriage and Love

Similar to what I have described in previous chapters, Kathleen Hickok observes that

women in the nineteenth century were so fettered by the necessity of marriage and so powerless to affect the process of matchmaking that they often found their innocent confidence betrayed by more worldly other – fathers, mothers, suitors, and seducers (337).

Marrying or not marrying respectively was a source of frustrations, pain and unhappiness for many women, a predicament which Webster acknowledges throughout her work.

Women's hope of a happy marriage, a true union with a caring husband, is indeed a recurring theme Augusta Webster's work. It is one of the themes which is explored in her dramatic monologues. In many of her religious poems for example, Webster's characters are often yearning "for quiescence and for release from the torturous and deceptive hope of romantic love" (336). In 'By the Looking-Glass' a "homely spinster" looks back on her life, looking in a mirror, blaming her "lack of beauty" for missing out on so many things in life, such as: "dancing, admirers, love, marriage, and children" (Hickok 337). Waiting for a husband who would never come made the life of many spinsters one of emptiness. Even those who had given up the hope of marriage or did not want to marry found that there were but little "outlets for their energies" (Hickok 337).

Susan Brown analyses Webster closet drama "A Woman Sold", in which Eleanor Vaughan contemplates her socially elevating marriage to Sir Joyce, a match encouraged by her middle-class family and friends that brings her comfort and financial security but forces her to give up the man she really loves" (Van Remoortel). This poem is a critique of mercenary marriages, which feminists "such as Webster" considered "of a piece with prostitution" for which they did not blame these individual women and their choices (Brown 98). They considered such marriages as resulting from "women's economic disabilities" and the "social values" which permeated middle-class ideology (98).

Furthermore “parental coercion” was also an important factor which led women to make “such a choice because [they lacked] the resources to be self-reliant” (98).

5.2.2 Freedom and Identity

Brown also emphasizes that Webster counters “the stock condemnation of women who make mercenary marriages by ironizing a woman's apparent freedom to choose” (101). It is clear that Eleanor never has a real freedom of choice, as her will and desires are “juxtaposed with discourses of economic and social control and placed within a society that silences and isolates women within infantilizing family structures” (101). Additionally, as Brown points out, Eleanor first being represented as Eleanor Vaughan and in the second act as Lady Boycott connects “her to her father and her late husband respectively”, stress how dependent a “woman’s position and identity in Victorian society” is on the men in her life.

Brown indicates that the protagonist displays “a fluidity of identity that exceeds [the] limiting and totalizing social judgments” (101). Webster criticises the paradoxical Victorian ideology which basically deprive a woman of any true claim to their own identity or opportunity to make her own choices, but at the same time holds her personally responsible and even condemns her for the choices society makes for her.

The theme of freedom is also explored in Webster’s play *Disguises* (1879). Kathleen Hickok indicates that the play, which is set in a world which resembles Elizabethan England, [raised] the question: who is more free – aristocrats who have marital obligations they must fulfill, or peasants who can choose their own life mates?” (341).

5.2.3 Sexuality

In the second act of “A Woman Sold” Eleanor has a conversation with her friend Mary about their respective lovers, who unknown to them, is in fact the one and same man. She tells Mary: ““Oh my friend / I need another love than yours, his love. / I want it, want it”” (Webster as quoted in Brown 99). As Brown points out, Eleanor’s desire defies the image of female respectability, making her friend “increasingly uncomfortable with [this] frank admission” (99).

As was described in the first chapter, Victorians believed that female sexuality was passive and dormant, only excited when a man initiated sexual intercourse. Only unrespectable lower-class women and prostitutes displayed unwomanly sexual desires without the physical encouragement of their husbands. Yet Webster here depicts spontaneous female sexual desires in a respectable lady. The response of her friend Mary probably reflects the normal reaction of most Victorians.

I will discuss how this sexuality is explored in Webster's dramatic monologues in the next chapter.

5.2.4 Possible Solutions

Judging from her life of activism, idealistically Webster would have seen a solution to all these problems in the transformation of society. From a realistic point of view however, she would have realised that such changes cannot happen overnight. Therefore as long as social circumstances stayed the same, women would need instruments to create their own happiness within the context they had been given. I believe she explores three of these possible solutions in her works: motherhood, religion and friendship.

5.2.4.1 Motherhood

The theme of motherhood is represented in diverse ways in many of Webster's works, but I have chosen not to focus on, but is important enough to mention. Motherhood is of course explored most intensively in Webster sonnet cycle *Mother and Daughter*. I will not elaborate on it here however, mainly because I believe it deserves an extensive discussion of its own, which would almost double the length of this dissertation.

5.2.4.2 Religion

Kathleen Hickok indicates that one way Webster suggests "to escape the constraints of a woman's life" is religion (336). A woman could choose "to renounce the joys of life" (337). Webster explores this solution in the character of Sister Annunciata who enters a convent to forget her lost lover. Hickok notices that this "religious consolation" is reminiscent of Christina Rossetti's life and of her poetics.

5.2.4.3 Friendship

A third solution Webster proposes was incorporated in “A Woman Sold”. Susan Brown indicates that the drama ends “with a sense of the potential for independent women to forge new relationships beyond the heterosexual contract” (101).

She also explores friendship in *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute*. Though it focuses on the friendship between men, nevertheless it makes a case for the consolation that can be found in romantic friendships “between persons of the same sex” (Hickok 341). As was indicated in the second chapter, these romantic friendships between women were actually already encouraged.

5.3 Augusta Webster: Victorian Woman, Poet and Activist

In this section I will first analyse Augusta Webster as a member of Victorian society and secondly as a Victorian poet. I will compare her to the Victorian standard of female respectability I discussed in the first two chapters and investigate whether her poetry can be connected to the conception of the woman poet as discussed in the third chapter.

Marianne Van Remoortel indicates that the Websters employed “according to the 1871 census, two housemaids, a cook and an Italian nurse to take care of six-year-old Margaret,” signifying that “they clearly belonged to the more affluent segments of the middle class.” This means that Webster belonged first of all to the right class to be considered a respectable lady. Secondly we know that she was married to Thomas Webster and that they had one child.

Kathleen Hickok remarks however that

the difficulties and complexities of forming happy marital unions [...] becomes so much Webster's lifelong theme as to raise the question of whether her own marriage was problematic, or alternatively, whether her many representations of failed attempts to marry for love are in contrast with her own situation. (333)

Unfortunately we do not have enough sources on Webster's personal life at our disposal to give an adequate answer to Hickok's question. We can however try to deduce some indications from the information we do have.

First of all we cannot deny that the image of marriage that is represented in Webster's poetry is rather negative. It would however be wrong to draw conclusions about Webster's personal life solely based on her poetry; or reversed, we cannot expect her poetry to reflect her personal life. Furthermore, we can see the fault in this logic if we extend this to other themes in her poetry and her engagement in activism. Webster was actually quite privileged compared to other women, even other middle-class women. Yet she committed herself to the cause of women who were far less privileged.

Secondly, focusing on this privilege, for a middle-class woman, Webster had a considerable amount of freedom to focus on her ambitions as a writer and to be an active member of associations who petitioned for women's rights. If her husband had been opposed to those activities, it would have been difficult for her to pursue them, so it seems unlikely that this was the case.

Then the question still remains, was Thomas Webster's attitude towards Augusta being able to build a life of her own outside the domestic sphere, not simply a matter of indifference? Christine Sutphin includes the following excerpt from Watts-Dunston's biographers, which may point us to the truth:

Mrs. Webster ... a woman of genius and keen literary ambitions, persuaded [Thomas] to resign his partnership at the legal firm in Cambridge [as well as his position at Trinity College] and to migrate to London, there to begin life practically anew [as a solicitor]; for it had been her dream since childhood to mix in literary circles, where she would win a fuller appreciation of her undoubted literary gifts (Hake as quoted in Sutphin 11).

Sutphin comments that Thomas Webster must have been "an enlightened man to give up his prestigious position to further his wife's professional development" (11). It seems unlikely that he would have done so if he had felt indifferent towards his wife.

Concluding from the circumstantial evidence we have, I would like to favour the opinion that the Websters were happily married. Whether they were ever in love or their relationship was simply based on a deep mutual respect and friendship, is difficult to say.

Being a woman poet and an activist for women's rights however, Augusta Webster would have never fit the stereotype of the *Angel in the House*. Being active in the latter half of the century though,

attitudes towards women pursuing a career would have become more tolerant than they had been before 1850-1860.

On the point of the connection between respectability and sexuality concerning Webster's personal life, there is little to say. We can assume that as a married middle-class woman, she would probably have been considered a respectable woman. On the other hand, it is possible that some more conservative Victorians would have seen Webster's literary career and her activism as an indication of her sexual deviancy.

If we turn to Webster's poetry, we can see that female sexual desire is often depicted, indicating that Webster did not believe that sexuality in women was passive and dormant, until excited by a man's advances. Whether this gives evidence to the fact that she identified with women acknowledging their own sexuality or whether it is only a literary device to construct complex female identities, is a question which will probably never know an answer.

Finally I would like to focus on Webster as a woman poet. In chapter three, I have indicated that a poetic career would not have been considered an appropriate option for a respectable lady, being a particularly masculine form of art for the Victorians. Financial need would have been a valid reason for a woman to turn to writing, but fiction would have been preferable. As the Webster were reasonably wealthy, they would certainly not have been in need of any financial gain from Augusta's literary career.

In chapter three I also used the following quotation on women pursuing careers in the arts by Judith Rowbotham: "fiction emphasised that the success rate was comparatively low" and that "without genuine, God-given talent, lasting and professional success could not be achieved, and therefore, should not be attempted" (248). I would now like to juxtapose it to the following excerpt from "The Painter", a poem from Webster's *Dramatic Studies*:

Ah love, you come in time to chase some thoughts

I do not care to dwell on. Come, stand there

And criticise my picture. It has failed

Of course – I always fail. Yet on the whole

I think the world would praise it were I known.

Webster's painter is contemplating the fact that he cannot reach perfection as an artist. He also indicts the fact that newcomers are often disregarded by art critics, being denied time to practise their art and to grow (Hickok 336). Webster negates the assumption that those who do not seem to have some artistic genius, "God-given talent" as Rowbotham describes it, should not try their hand at art, which is of course especially applicable to women artists. Hickok indicates that Webster's painter "can accept the impossibility of perfectly achieving his artistic vision" (336), but contrasted to the criticism he expresses, it would seem that Webster is trying to convey that the value and the level of accomplishment of an artist is largely constructed by the art critics who evaluate his/her work. This not only makes it extremely difficult for new artists, and especially for women, to see their work become well-known among the general public; it also discourages new artists from persevering and improving themselves.

In chapter three I also addressed the problem of the double role of the woman poet in her poetry and the issue of subjectivity in poetry. I will focus on Augusta Webster's approach to these complications in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to reconstruct Augusta Webster's life including an overview of her literary career poetry, drama and journalism. An important part of Webster's life was her activism in the petition for the improvement of women's rights. In the second section of this chapter I have discussed Webster's literary project, focussing on the major themes and issues she addressed in her works. Finally I have analysed Webster as a member of Victorian society and as a Victorian poet. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the dramatic monologues she published.

Chapter 6 Augusta Webster's Dramatic Monologues

Introduction

Though Webster's 'A Castaway' features prominently in Glennis Byron's *Dramatic Monologue*, Christine Sutphin believes that the poems in *Dramatic Studies* and *Portraits* are actually not dramatic monologues, but should perhaps more appropriately be called interior monologues (15). She indicates that the poems do not follow the strict criteria of the poetic form of the dramatic monologue. We have seen in chapter 4 however that there is no definitive classification for the dramatic monologue and that neither is there complete uniformity within the genre. As the most important point of the definition for the purpose of my study is the tension between the speaking voice and the silent voice, whether it be the silent auditor, the implied division between author and speaker or the expected reader's response, I will follow Byron and call the poems discussed in this chapter dramatic monologues or simply refer to them as monologues. Typical for these monologues is that the speaker is depicted as "struggling with social circumstances" (Sutphin 16). These circumstances are often "shaped by gender constructions" (16).

The dramatic monologues I will discuss in this chapter are the first four from *Portraits*: "Medea in Athens", "Circe", "The Happiest Girl in the World" and "A Castaway"; and the paired "Sister Annunciata" monologues from *Dramatic Studies*.

Augusta Webster's monologues let these women who struggle with the traditional gender roles and the expectations which come with it, tell their own stories. Being expected to find a husband and the romantic aspirations young women attribute to marriage have only caused frustration and pain for most of these women. Marriage and romantic love should not be the only life purpose for young women, they should be given other options. What can women do when their lives do not go according to plans in a world which offers them no other choices?

Secondly Webster's monologues challenge the binary conception of identity construction which expects women to live up to unrealistic, stereotypical ideals, which reduces them to one-dimensional images of femininity. First of all Webster mixes the traditional gender roles and blurs the boundaries between respectable and deviant women. She also emphasises that women are determined by their circumstances, not by some inherent inclination to either virtue or vice. Finally she represents women's identities as independent from the men in their lives and displays the dangers of constructing one's identity in relation to a man.

6.1 Marriage, Romantic Love and Spinsterhood

6.1.1 Medea

In the earlier versions of the myth, Medea only kills Jason's new wife Glauce and her father Creon. As Christine Sutphin points out however, Webster followed Euripides' alteration to the story in choosing to make her Medea the murderer of her own children, turning her into "the ultimate in female monstrosity" to her Victorian readers (384).

"Medea uses the narrative of her relationship with Jason as a critique of the power politics of heterosexuality" (Sutphin 385). Like so many Victorian women, Medea had become a victim of love and of male privilege, but she refuses to go down quietly. [Her] refusal to be a meek and acquiescent victim of love" (Sutphin 384-385), forces her to resort to extreme measures. She has given up everything for Jason, much as the Victorian wife did for her husband, granting him ultimate power over her, so now she is determined to take everything from him. Both to the Ancient Greeks and the Victorians, murdering a man's sons, his heirs, would probably have been the worst thing anyone could bring on him, so Medea decides to do it.

Nathalie Houston notices how determined Webster's Medea is to emphasise that her marriage to Aegus has made her very happy (11).

What then? am I not folded round with love,
with a life's whole of love? There doth no thought
come near to Ægeus save what is of me:
am I no happy wife? And I go proud,

and treasure him for noblest of the world:

am I no happy wife?

Her insistence does seem a bit exaggerated though, it sounds as if she feels the need to defend herself, which Houston confirms, also drawing attention to the fact that

[t]o phrase Medea's self-justification in the language of the Victorian wife safely cocooned in her husband's love, exposes that very category of "happy wife" as an ideological construction that may bear no relation to actual happiness. (11)

The tension between Medea's use of Victorian marriage discourse and her emotional state renders the Victorian idea that marriage ensures happiness an empty promise.

6.1.2 Circe

The main theme represented in "Circe" is that of romantic longing. "Like many Victorian heroines, Circe has little to do and longs for any change to "[b]reak ... the sickly sweet monotony" (32)" (Sutphin 383). And "Circe [...] is tired of waiting" (Sutphin 374). To the Victorians the cure for this boredom would have been romantic love.

Houston points out that Circe "envisions herself within conventional (Victorian) gender relations" (12):

. . . why am I who I am,

but for the sake of him whom fate will send

one day to be my master utterly [. . .].

Furthermore she wants something that is impossible, an ultimate romantic fulfillment which is unrealistic (Sutphin 383). Yet this is the image of love women were taught, which is exactly what Webster is criticising in this monologue: this unrealistic image can only set women up for disappointment, as reality cannot even come near this representation of love. Furthermore she wants to denounce the idea that marriage and romantic love should be the only purpose in a woman's life.

Circe could be seen as a symbol for the Victorian spinster who is waiting for a husband. For many of them, chances were this husband would never come. Still marriage was what they had been taught to expect and nothing had prepared them for the possibility that they would not get married. Similarly, Circe is waiting for love, more importantly she is waiting for a change:

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.

Circe's life is actually quite good, being described with words as "sweet" and "sunshine", but she waits patiently for the change she is supposed to expect. What Webster is seemingly trying to convey here is that life could be much better for Circe and for spinsters, if only they would have some other way to fill their days, than to waste them waiting for a man who will never come. If spinsters want to see their lives changed, they should be able to change their lives themselves.

6.1.3 Happiest Girl

Similarly to Circe, the Happiest Girl has been taught what to expect of love. Now she has been recently engaged, she is confused at not experiencing the appropriate feelings:

Where are the fires and fevers and the pangs?
where is the anguish of too much delight,
and the delirious madness at a kiss

As Houston points out, "Webster ironizes" the Girl's expectations, which are essentially the expectations of all young women (13). Even more than "Circe", "The Happiest Girl in the World" should be seen as a warning against expecting romantic love to be everything in life.

In an essay for the *Examiner* Webster writes that English people "went on, unwarned, educating our daughters to the occupation of waiting till somebody came for them, and educating them to no other occupation." And, while acknowledging that there is a "best ideal" of married love, she argues that less

intense feeling is “less likely to find its end in ... disappointment” [36] and that “secure affection” combined with a “healthy indifference” is more likely to lead to happiness than “[l]ove, with the wooing left in it [which] is a sensitive and fault-finding passion ... keenly aware of coldness or rebuke.” (Webster as quoted in Sutphin 384)

This seems to agree with the message I believe can be found in Webster’s dramatic monologues. Webster evidently felt that a lot of young women were setting themselves up for disappointment, having been taught an unrealistic ideal of love, which they considered to be their future reality.

6.1.4 Annunciata

Eva, as is the original name of Sister Annunciata, has been disappointed by love, as she loved someone who she was not allowed to marry. The tension between personal desires and expectations imposed by society and family duties when it comes to marriage, is resolved by taking away her choice:

They were too prompt to take my girlish fits
Of dream enthusiasm for the dream I made
Of an ideal perfectness withdrawn
From reach of sin and sorrow in the hush
Of convent calm, and turn them to their will.
The fault was theirs. (83-84)

As Fletcher describes, Eva’s mother and uncle decide to send her to a convent, when they discover she is in love with the poor Angelo, taking advantage of a girlish wish she had expressed three years prior to these events (302). Instead of finding a proper husband, she had to become a bride of Christ.

6.2 Female Identity

To the Victorians female identity was made up of a clearly defined set of characteristics opposite to male identity. This is problematic however in the sense that it makes the female identity dependent on the male, with the woman as a complement to everything the man is not. Apart from that it is also unrealistic to consider identity in such binary oppositions, it is more complex and less stable than suggested by this view.

6.2.1 Blurred Lines and Disconnection

In her two monologues about mythological women Webster blurs the lines between male and female through the attribution of active sexual desires to female characters.

The “Sister Annunciata” monologues comment on identity in two different ways, first of all there is the contrast between the abbess’ evaluation of Annunciata and the information we receive from her own monologue; and secondly there is the implication that if even a nun is not immune to certain desires, it is difficult to maintain that respectable ladies are.

6.2.1.1 Medea and Circe

Marysa Demoor indicates the “sexually eager, impatient and dominant” construction of femininity in the opening verses of “Circe” (134):

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;

Christine Sutphin specifies that

[a]lthough she longs for a male lover, she experiences a kind of auto-eroticism, describing her own physical perfections with loving detail: “Oh, lips that tempt / my very self to kisses” (120–121). In fact, she says that she is the lover of her own image, even though she claims to love her beauty “for him till he comes” (129).

Circe feels so comfortable in her sexuality that she is able to rejoice in it, celebrating it as part of herself.

Where is my love? Does some one cry for me,
not knowing whom he calls? does his soul cry
for mine to grow beside it, grow in it?
does he beseech the gods to give him me,

Circe desires to be loved, but is convinced of her own sensuality and beauty without the confirmation of a male lover. This representation of female sexuality cannot be reconciled to the Victorian image of

female sexual desires, which was supposed to be dormant, present in a woman, but to no consequence, only excited when encouraged by a man's advances.

Sutphin points out that "Medea is obsessed with the memory of Jason, recalling that he "[d]idst burn my cheek with kisses hot and strange" (205)"(374). Medea must have been an even greater challenge to Webster than Circe had been, as her desire only makes up one aspect of her strange otherness, she is also the mother who killed her own children out of revenge (Sutphin 384).

Medea's idea of love is similar to that of Circe, she also considers love "an all-encompassing passion" (Sutphin 385). Though Medea takes on the conventional roles of wife and mother, but she violently breaks these bonds "when convention fails her" (386). Medea is presented as an aggressive character, a very untraditional role for a female. Moreover, having escaped from Jason's control, she effectively puts him under her control, creating the following scenario (Sutphin 386):

"She tossed her head back, while her brown hair streamed

Gold in the wind and sun, and her face glowed

With daring beauty; 'What of woes,' she cried,

'If only they leave time for love enough?'

But oh the fire and flush! It took ones's breath!"

And then he lay half musing half adoze;

Shadows of me went misty through his sight.

And by and by he roused and cried "Oh dolt!

Glaucé was never half so beautiful." (64–72)

Webster is here effectively letting a female subject objectify a male, imagining him as she desires him to be. This is one of the few instances where this reversal of traditional poetic roles in women's poetry seems to work. Circe wants to be loved, but Medea creates a version of Jason who desires her.

6.2.1.2 Sister Annunciata

As Barbara Johnson points out, "identity" should be seen "as a constantly shifting, discontinuous, ungrounded fiction" (22). This becomes especially apparent in the "Sister Annunciata" monologues. There is not only the inner tension which Annunciata experiences,

distracted as she is by thoughts of the man she loved as a young girl, but also the disparity between this inner world full of conflict and the monologue spoken by Abbess Ursula:

See, there is one. Look left,
The corner grave beneath the sycamore,
That with the cross a little fallen slant.
There sleeps the saintliest creature! had she lived
The Church would surely have enrolled her name
Upon its calendar. She was to be
Abbess here after me, so was it planned,
And often I felt shamed to think how far
My fervent-souled successor would surpass
My poor endeavours for the convent's good,
And how more far surpass them in the life
Set for a pattern to the younger nuns.

Annunciata's "strict self-discipline has been a product more of her attempts to forget the man she loved" (Byron 98), but Abbess Ursula considers her to be above all other sisters. The disconnection between the identity which the outside world has constructed of her and the identity as experienced by Annunciata herself is complete. This is reminiscent of the Victorian idea of female identity as respectability, which was actually largely based on reputation and appearance and largely ignored the psychological component.

Furthermore, Sister Annunciata's suffering has been misunderstood by the other nuns (Byron 98), making her a symbol for all women who suffered in silence every day. As Sutphin emphasises: ["Sister Annunciata"] reads as a strong indictment of women's suppression and as a poignant comment on all secret or misunderstood suffering" (Sutphin 17)

Fletcher describes a second interesting aspect explored in "Sister Annunciata": she is [a]sking to be forgiven for not rejecting her sexual appetite" (302). As Annunciata cannot stop thinking about Angelo, she wonders [w]hy do I fever so thinking of him?"

This monologue shows a nun trying to denounce the earthly and bodily, who cannot deny the existence of sexual desire within her, implying that all women experience their sexuality to some extent, without it needing to be excited by a husband.

6.2.2 Social Circumstances: “A Castaway”

The speaker of the monologue “A Castaway”, is a higher-class prostitute named Eulalie. Patricia Rigg points out that

Eulalie's performance consists of a series of Attitudes that portray her not so much as the castaway but as the one casting away those who persist in placing her economic reality within a moral framework inconsistent with that reality. (96)

Rigg's analysis indicates the most important message conveyed through this dramatic monologue: economic and social circumstances are the only causes of prostitution and not some kind of moral depravity or uncontrollable sexual desires.

Eulalie claims that women who have been born in better circumstances, do not have the right to judge her, because they have not been in her situation:

How dare they hate us so? what have they done,
what borne, 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? (40-41)

Furthermore, she is not so different from these respectable women. The first reason, that she is a prostitute due to economic reasons and not moral ones, was explained above. But in this particular case, as Christine Sutphin points out, the fact that Eulalie was once a genteel girl and has become a prostitute, was “particularly threatening” to the middle-classes (518). Indeed, it implies that any other middle-class woman could possibly find herself in the same situation, effectively blurring boundaries between respectable and unrespectable.

6.2.3 Independent Identities?

As I started writing this chapter, I was expecting to be able to write that Webster's female speakers had constructed an independent identity, challenging the notion that female identity was formed in relation to the males in her life.

Unfortunately after my analysis of the dramatic monologues above, I cannot say that my expectations were proven correct. Medea, who is a fierce and powerful character, still betrays her own family for a man who only wants to use her, losing everything when he abandons her. Though she gains control over him on an poetic level, as explained above, she is the one who is still controlled by her love for him, allowing him to determine how she experiences her life.

Circe also seems like a very strong and independent woman, confident in her sexuality, but is still desperately longing for a lover to complete her, even if she believes there is no man who deserves her.

The Happiest Girl is not married yet, but already sacrificing herself for her future husband. When she says: "I would that I could love him to his worth, / with that forgetting all myself in him", she expresses a desire to merge with her husband, relinquishing her own identity.

Eulalie is so dependent on the discourse used against her and on the circumstances which determine her, that she is not able to construct her identity, free from these limiting factors.

Sister Annunciata finally is unable to forget her lover on the one hand, and on the other hand trying her best to sacrifice what makes her human in the service of God, meaning that she does not qualify either.

These monologues do reflect the risks these women encounter by constructing their identity dependent on the men in their lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the dramatic monologues “Medea in Athens”, “Circe”, “The Happiest Girl in the World” and “A Castaway” from *Portraits*; and the paired “Sister Annunciata” monologues from *Dramatic Studies*.

In these monologue Augusta Webster gives these women who are struggling with the traditional gender roles and the expectations which come with it, the chance to tell their own stories. The traditional expectation of marriage and the hope of romantic love which is supposed to come with marriage have only caused frustration and pain for most of these women. Marriage and romantic love do not suffice as the only life purposes for young women, they should be given the chance to pursue other ambitions. When there are no other options and the only choice they have fails or is unavailable to them, what should they do?

Secondly Webster’s monologues challenge the binary conception of identity construction which expects women to live up to unrealistic, stereotypical ideals, I have first explained how Webster mixes the traditional gender roles and blurs the boundaries between respectable and deviant women. The dramatic monologue “A Castaway” emphasises that women are determined by their circumstances, not by some inherent inclination to either virtue or vice. Finally I have discovered that the women speakers in these monologues do not succeed at constructing an independent identity, the dangers of constructing one’s identity in relation to a man are represented in these monologues though.

Conclusion

Augusta Webster was a poet who was strongly committed to the improvement of women's position in society. She mastered and emulated the genre of the dramatic monologue, employing it to give a voice to all kinds of women and to some male personae as well. Webster wrote "many social and political essays concerning women's rights and responsibilities" and "campaign[ed] for women's suffrage" (Hickok 333), themes which are also explored in her poetry. Susan Brown believes that Webster "broke new ground in the representation of female subjectivity in relation to the constructing and determining factors of Victorian social formations" (90).

Because the socially constructed images of femininity were unrealistic, they forced many women into a miserable marriage, a marginal life or at times even drove them to suicide or infanticide. The second reason why these gender roles were problematic is that they denied women the development of their own personality. Victorian gender roles were based on the construction of identity through a series of binary oppositions, such as male versus female, pure versus fallen, etc... The idea that women could be defined as the exact opposites of men forced Victorian women to answer to the stereotype of the perfect lady, remain childlike and construct their identity solely through their relationships to the males in their lives. Those who could not fit in, had a hard time leading a fulfilling life. The women who were cast into the other extreme stereotype of the fallen woman whose sexuality had run out of control, could no longer be considered a respectable member of society.

Throughout the nineteenth century women poets like Augusta Webster kept battling these injustices through their poetry. I have argued that Webster gave all these women voices to address and

indict the two major issues I have described above. My first claim was that Webster's poetry evaluates marriage and romantic love as undesirable life goals, not as such, but certainly in the way they were conceived of in the Victorian Era, making them practically unattainable in their ideal form, because of the unrealistic expectations society surrounded them with and the consequences if these expectations were not met. The second point I have tried to prove is that Webster constructs an identity for her characters, based on their own desires, choices, actions, and not depending on the relations with the men in their lives, unfortunately I have been unable to maintain that last point, concluding that these matters more complex than I anticipated.

There were three parts to this dissertation. The first part was concerned with the socially constructed female identity, the second part covered women and poetry and the third and last part focused on Augusta Webster.

In the first chapter I have discussed the stereotypical role of the *Angel in the House*. Acquiring a husband and becoming a good wife was the highest ambition in life available to many young women. Then I have clarified the concept of the separate spheres assigned to men and women. In the final part of the first chapter I have discussed female sexuality. I have explained the double standard which stipulated very different sexual behaviour for women than for men. In the second part of the discussion I have analysed the troublesome and ambiguous evaluation of female sexuality in the Victorian world. These analyses made clear that the standard for female respectability was very strict, and that it was difficult to formulate one consistent discourse concerning female sexuality.

In the second chapter I have focused on women who did not follow the expectations concerning marriage, the separate spheres and respectable female sexuality. I have covered different notions of 'fallenness', with special attention to prostitutes, spinsters and working women, compared to the unrealistic middle-class ideal. Many women must have suffered due to their inability to meet the unrealistic standard.

The third chapter contained a discussion on female artists, especially women poets. In which categories did they belong according to the Victorian ideology? I have also investigated how these poets dealt with the contradiction of being both woman and creator in the context of the binary

construction of identity based on traditional gender roles. Finally I have considered whether their engagement in poetry could be considered as a mission.

The fourth chapter covered the dramatic monologue. I have discussed the dominant definitions of the genre and have explained the emergence and use of the poetic form by Victorian poets and with specific attention to women poets' reasons to adopt this poetic form. The dramatic monologue was particularly well-suited to meet their needs, but did not succeed in resolving all the issues. Additionally the greater issues being implemented in the generally accepted social ideology of the time implied that the process of addressing them became a long-term project.

The fifth chapter focused on Augusta Webster's life and work and has paid special attention to her literary project. I have tried to evaluate Webster and her life and work by the Victorian standards. Who was Augusta Webster as a person and what was her place in society as a woman? How did she construct her own identity as a poet and does she inscribe in a tradition as a woman poet? Overall Augusta Webster must have been considered a respectable member of society. Her poetic vocation and her activism might have been negatively judged by some of her contemporaries, but we have no particular indications to confirm this.

In the sixth and final chapter I have discussed Webster's use of the dramatic monologue. I have selected a number of monologues from *Portraits* and *Dramatic Studies* and analysed them in terms of themes and characters. First I have discussed how Webster criticised the dominant social ideology concerning feminine expectation such as marriage and romantic love by opposing it to more realistic characters and situations. Secondly I have analysed how Webster constructed the identity of her characters as a complex and multilateral concept which cannot be defined in terms of binary opposition. I had also hoped to verify that these identities were constructed independently from males, but I have failed to do so. I believed that some of these women might have been presented as alternatives to women identifying themselves through their relationships with men. Instead they proved to confirm this image, perhaps in this way giving evidence to their relevance to social reality and thus calling attention to the issue.

The dynamics of subjectivity and identity in Webster's work are still open to more extensive research, with any of the other works of Augusta Webster remaining relatively unstudied until this day, ensuring sufficient future possibilities to explore her works.

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