

Power in Petticoats: Augusta Webster's Poetry, Political Pamphlets, and Poetry Reviews

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Julia Augusta Davies was born in 1837. Her father, a vice-admiral of great distinction, settled in Cambridge in 1851 after having been appointed Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire. Augusta's youth was special in the sense that she spent a lot of time on board her father's ship when she was a little girl. But later she had to settle for the school life of any middle-class girl, finishing her education eventually by attending the Cambridge School of Art. Augusta, however, was interested in acquiring languages. She learned Greek—significantly—while helping a younger brother with his studies and she later was to learn French, Italian and Spanish.¹ Augusta married Thomas Webster, a Fellow and Law Lecturer at Cambridge and a partner in an important firm of Cambridge solicitors in 1863. They had one daughter. Her first publication was a classical translation, *The Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus* (1866), which she produced hesitantly, hiding behind an apologetic preface written by her husband:

The reason why the title-page of this book bears the name of an Editor as well as that of the translator is, that my wife wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady's name could give, and so, rightly or wrongly, looked to me for what she wanted (Webster 1866: Preface).

Her three subsequent publications (two volumes of poetry and one novel) also betray a certain shyness, a "false" modesty we would now be tempted to call it, springing from a distrust of the "double critical standard" (Showalter 1991: 73). She published those under the male pseudonym: "Cecil Home." After that she became more assertive and stuck to her name: Augusta Webster.

This short biographical introduction leads us to the point from which I really wanted to start, to the birth of "Augusta Webster" the professional woman writer. Having her name on the title page seems to be a *conditio sine qua non* for the construction of that author.

In this paper I want to concentrate on a selection of her writings in the hope of demonstrating the extent to which her feminist project, her ideological struggle if you prefer, needs to be seen in relation to the other forms of discourse in which she engaged. I hope to find out how she succeeded in channelling and (to some extent) disguising her feminist anger in her writings, and

¹As Victorianists will know, young women were not supposed to study the classics at the time. George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* gives a good idea of what was generally thought to be suitable or unsuitable for a young woman's mind.

how she negotiated her position as an authoritative critic in a world which was fundamentally hostile to women reviewers.

Let's pick up the chronological thread where I left off. At some time in the 1860s and in spite of his thriving business at Cambridge, Thomas Webster gave in to his wife's (powerful) pleas to move to London. Only there could she mix in the right circles if she wanted to cultivate her literary talents. If she had been a somewhat self-effacing, budding writer earlier she certainly seemed to have gained in self-confidence at this stage. Theodore Watts-Dunton, literary critic and self-professed protector of Charles Algernon Swinburne's genius, thought he could claim some of the credit for Augusta Webster's auspicious start as a woman writer. He is said to have graced her receptions with his presence and to have hailed her poetic writings in the poetry column of the authoritative journal, the *Athenaeum*, in the eighties (Hake and Compton-Rickett 1916: 16).

He did so with good reason. Webster's poetry stands out as belonging to the most powerful writings of her age, i.e. the last quarter of the century. She had chosen forceful forms: the dramatic monologue and the short, incisive sonnet. She adapted the dramatic monologue entirely to her own ends, giving it a distinctly feminist mission. For this paper I have chosen excerpts from two longer dramatic monologues "Circe" and "The Castaway" to illustrate my point.

In the first poem she has attempted what would now be labelled as a post-modern, feminist revision of the tale of Ulysses. It is the predicament of the lonely Circe which she focuses on; a Circe, who is on the verge of a depression, burdened by ontological questions. This Circe longs for a storm, because that would mean change. She longs for the company of a number of shipwrecked men to comfort and tend yet, at the same time, she anticipates disappointment. After having welcomed them as kings they are bound to turn into swine as the veneer of civilisation dwindles once food and wine have done their job.

Here is a taste of some of the imagery taken from the beginning of the poem:

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. (Webster 1887: 250).

You will have to agree with me that the construction of femininity through the use of the imagery is quite unvictorian. Femininity is constructed as sexually eager, impatient and dominant. "Darkness," a powerful female can draw the powerful sun down (against his will?) thus foregrounding the powerful heroine of the poem. The whole scene as set in these first lines of the poem adumbrates eroticism and prepares the way for a long passage of unalloyed "jouissance."

And the smooth waves grow sullen in the gloom
 And wear their threatening purple; more and more
 The plain of waters sways and seems to rise
 convexly from its level of the shores;
 And low dull thunder rolls along the beach:
 There will be storm at last, storm, glorious storm.
 O welcome, welcome, though it rend my bowers,
 scattering my blossomed roses like the dust,
 splitting the shrieking branches, tossing down
 My riotous vines with their young half-tinged grapes

...
(Webster 1887: 250).

Circe's plea "Give me some change...give me then Something outside me stirring" sounds strangely familiar—one is reminded of Jane Eyre's heart-felt sigh for "change" (Brontë 1969: 101). But Circe reverses the wish for change in that she seems to lead the perfect life of plenitude and overabundance. Subversion through revision is continued in the image of a narcissistic Circe, loving her own appearance, wondering at the futility of such a perfect face if left unloved.

why am I who I am,
But for the sake of him whom fate will send
One day to be my master utterly,
That he should take me, the desire of all,
Whom only he in all the world could bow to him?

...
Oh sad sweet longing smile; oh lips that tempt
My very self to kisses; oh round cheeks,
Tenderly radiant with the even flush
Of pale smoothed coral; perfect lovely face
Answering my gaze from this fleckless pool;
Wonder of glossy shoulders, chiselled limbs;
Should I be so your lover as I am ...?
(Webster 1887: 254).

She is thrilled to see the sun darkened by the clouds and follows the events of the storm and the shipwreck in her mind. She sees how Ulysses' men survive and count their blessings—the name "Ulysses" is never mentioned though; she has not met him yet. Then, she knows, the men will revel in the music, the food and the wine she and her nymphs will offer them. But the next day it will be all over: their corrupt thoughts will be reflected by their looks. They will turn into swine, all of them, revealing their true selves:

Too cruel? Did I choose them what they are?
...
Change? there was no change;
Only disguise gone from them unawares:
And had there been one right true man of them
He would have drunk the draught as I had drunk,
And stood unchanged, and looked me in the eyes,
Abashing me before him...
(Webster 1887: 256).

Circe's distrust of man's nature is put across even more vigorously in the monologue "The Castaway" which voices the thoughts of a prostitute. The dramatic monologue here is a long interior monologue spoken by a lonely talented woman who had expected much of her life but was betrayed both by her lover and her brother and thus was coerced into making a living as a prostitute. The poem is written in an extremely accessible language which must guarantee the correct transmission of the ideas it wants to convey. The pamphleteering quality is definitely there, but made acceptable within a non-aggressive context. The narrator's position is a defensive one. Her anger, resentment, and blame are directed against the Other: men in general, her lover and her brother more specifically. But equally there are the guilt feelings, the conviction that she deserves what she has got, and that she will be punished for it in death. The

narrator is presented as a complex woman, modern in her rebellion against the existing social structures and woman's inhibited position yet, at the same time, apprehensive and critical of her own cynicism. The conflict within her person is given voice by means of an internal dialogism between the woman she has been and could have remained and the prostitute she now is. Her first, "innocent" state survives in the form of the bodyless notes of her diary and her memories of an unsullied past:

... "Studied French an hour,"
 "Read Modern History," "Trimmed up my grey hat,"
 "Darned stocking," ...
 Was I this good girl,
 this budding colourless young rose of home?
 (Webster 1870: 37).

Apparently it was. Yet underneath the quiet girl there was a receptive mind accurately recording and, no doubt, interpreting what was happening around her. The privileged treatment of her brother, for instance, who was allowed to spend for one pastime in a month what could have gone to a teacher for her in a year (56). The brother she once adored cast her off as soon as she had "fallen" never realizing the discrepancy between their prospects:

Only, I think, my brother—I forgot
 he stopped his brotherhood some years ago—
 but if he had been just so much less good
 as to remember mercy
 (Webster 1870: 56).

The patent irony of these lines verges on sarcasm elsewhere. Yet the bitter smile is merely there to hide the tears. Her brother eventually did well. He married a rich heiress who does not even know she has a sister-in-law. The thought of informing the "poor thing" about her own fallen self nearly makes her burst with laughter—or is it tears welling up from her eyes?

The notion!—I could laugh outright ... or else,
 or I feel near it, roll on the ground and sob.
 (Webster 1870: 62).

The strength of her feelings of indignation and anguish are translated into numerous questions. Thinking about other "professionals" such as lawyers, preachers, doctors and journalists who, she avers, cheat and steal yet claim to be virtuous, worthy men, she exclaims:

And whom do I hurt more than they? as much?
 The wives? Poor fools, what do I take from them
 worth crying for or keeping? If they knew
 what their fine husbands look like seen by eyes
 that may perceive there are more men than one!
 (Webster 1870: 39).

Continuing this train of thought she remembers the letter full of abuse she has received recently. The dialogue she engages in this time deconstructs the stereotypical views of prostitutes articulated in the letter.

"I prey on souls"—only my men have oftenest none I think:
 "I snare the simple ones"—but in these days
 there seem to be none simple and none snared,
 and most men have their favourite sinnings planned
 to do them civilly and sensibly:

"I braid my hair"—but braids are out of date:
 "I paint my cheeks"—I always wear them pale: ...
 (Webster 1870: 42).

Inevitably her lonely musings make her think of old age and death. But the blameless life she could have lived if she had not strayed was possibly even worse than death. "Quiet is hell," according to her, "as if a woman could bear to sit alone, quiet all day, and loathe herself, and sicken on her thoughts." There are too many women and not enough work to keep them busy. Her solution for women's superfluity is as cynical as Swift's "modest proposal,"

... if it were the law
 say, every year, in due percentages,
 balancing them with men as the times need,
 to kill off female infants, twould make room;...
 (Webster 1870: 48).

Webster reserved her prose for her anonymous reviews in the *Athenaeum*, her articles in the *Examiner* and her political writings. The 48 *Examiner* essays were collected in a volume tellingly entitled *A Housewife's Opinions*. They discuss matters such as "servants," and "gossip" but equally the more "serious" (more threatening) subjects such as women's education and women's vote. It would be foolish to underestimate the strategic importance of such a reprint in the process of immortalizing a writer's name. Most "men of letters" had selections of their writings reprinted for the benefit of their readers, future generations and their own purse. Yet, the publication of *A Housewife's Opinions* was not received warmly. The anonymous *Athenaeum* reviewer, A.T. Cook, even proclaimed she had made two great mistakes in publishing it: "first, in reprinting her essays ... at all, and, secondly, in writing a preface" in which she claimed the essays had a lasting value.

But he has to admit that her essays on women's education are "better" and her review of two translations of the "Agamemnon" is worthwhile reprinting. Cook is clearly not interested in a housewife's opinions or the topics which interest her and believes the reading public should not be presented with such a volume:

her essays stand condemned. Light essays meant to be read and forgotten are not worth republishing in a permanent form, and it is a waste of power for an able writer to give them all the care and thought which she might have bestowed on a work which was intended to last (*Athenaeum*, 4 January 1879, 14–15).

Whether or not there was a female reading public which wanted to read about those subjects rather than others does not occur to him. Woolf's celebrated lines come to mind "it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial' and these values are invariably transferred from life to fiction" and, I would like to add, to essays such as these (Woolf 1987: 735). Both in the choice of her subjects and in the treatment of her notably feminist issues of suffrage and education Webster shows herself to be an active campaigner in the women's movement. In their attempt to convince and convert these essays therefore follow another strategy than her poems, working on a different level of the reader's psyche yet essentially striving to achieve the same goals. The polemical essays in the collection, which I would like to set on a par with

political pamphlets (of which she wrote at least one)² are signed or, in the case of the one open letter which survived, signed as "By a Lady." These writings, therefore, are clearly gendered.

In the last part of this paper I want to cast a cursory glance at Webster's critical discourse. I want to find out whether her feminist stance (explicit in her feminist pamphlets, but—as we have seen—unquestionably informing her poetry as well), whether this feminist stance is to be detected here too, even though Webster's anonymous contributions as a poetry critic in the *Athenaeum* were encoded as male.³

"Encoded as male" needs to be explained first. The "power" emanating from her style may well have been the deceptive factor in the readers' perception of the critic's gender. Indeed, literary historians referring to the period generally assumed Watts-Dunton to be the regular poetry-reviewer; they felt confident enough about the authorship of the *Athenaeum*-poetry column to quote the contemporary writer who wrote "there are middle-aged men who have learnt all they know about poetry from Mr. Watts-Dunton's delightful and profound criticism in the *Athenaeum*" (Marchand 1941: 90). Yet Watts contributed hardly anything at all compared to Webster's input. But was it merely her style which led to this gender-confusion?

Webster's review essays on poetry often assumed just as prominent a place in the weekly as the reviews written by her male colleagues. She too was given the opportunity to open the issue filling several columns with her views on a recent publication. She mostly reviewed poetry but was occasionally asked to discuss biographies and translations as well. Webster's contributions to the *Athenaeum* start in 1884 and stop abruptly with her death in 1894. In that one decade she was to comment on some 162 books. A close look at the reviews reveals the (not so surprising) fact that the persona behind the writing was constructed as male. Pronouns referring to the reader, and the critic are always masculine. Webster will not have done so deliberately. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* still refers to "man," "he" and "his" when referring to the human being in general. Nevertheless the fact helps to hide the writer's gender. Considering the general dissatisfaction with the growing feminisation of poetry and of culture in general Webster would have been unwise to change the convention.

With her reviews Webster joined the ongoing critical debate on such issues as Truth, and the essence of the poet. She believes in Truth, in *the* Truth; which must be a poet's concern. More importantly in view of the post-modernist reflections, she believes in the Poet. The central question of her reviews is whether the person producing the verses is a poet or not, whether what lies before her is genuine poetry or not. She talks about the "instinct of the poet" (*Athenaeum*, 22 June 1995, 789). And she can usually answer that question unhesitatingly. Let me give a sample:

²Her letter to the Rt Hon John Bright, MP was recently reprinted in a collection of documents edited by Jane Lewis but oddly enough left unidentified (see Lewis 1987: 257–63).

³Following current *Athenaeum* policy her reviews in that weekly were unsigned. The editors' copy of the weekly, the so-called "marked file" reveals the names of the anonymous contributors. The "marked file" is now preserved at the City University Library, London.

It is not often the reviewer meets with anything so amusingly bad. J.E.D.G. is ambitious, and attempts many things, only to fail in all ...

As a rule Mr Sladen's poems do not rise above the level of uninteresting mediocrity ...

The doctrines contained in Mr Stubbs's verses are unimpeachable. So much unfortunately, cannot be said of their poetic quality ... (*Athenaeum* 23 Aug 1884, 238).

But there are a few difficult cases. There is Robert Bridges, for instance, whose *Eros and Psyche* is far less remarkable according to her than his *Prometheus the Firegiver* since there are, she says, no indications of power and individual thought. But he gets the benefit of the doubt and is given the advice to throw aside all imitation of Greek drama and give free scope to his own poetic impulses (*Athenaeum*, 3 April 1886, 450-1). This claim would place Webster, as a critic, directly opposite such an influential critical voice as Matthew Arnold. She wants spontaneity (*Athenaeum*, 24 March 1888, 12 May 1888) no imitation of the Greek. And this is in line with the distinction she makes between what she calls a "literary artist" and a "poet"; as in the following excerpt:

How far Mr. Waddington is a poet is more difficult for a critic to decide than how far he is an excellent literary artist (*Athenaeum*, 5 April 1890, 428).

Quite predictably, she also pronounces herself on the issue of whether poetry should fulfil a polemical function or not: "We can call to mind no verse directly dealing with any question agitating the public mind, calling for any wrong to be righted, urging any great measure, which has had it in it to survive as poetry the success of its cause except [and this is possibly one of the few slippages indicating her gender] Mrs Browning's 'Song of the Children'" (*Athenaeum*, 12 October 1889, 480). She is not, however, rejecting her own poetic efforts here. The polemical or political writings which she fails to appreciate are those which deal with controversial matters in an abstract, direct way. They are too "argumentative" she writes, and therefore lose their power and their charm once the controversy is over.

In the last analysis it is fair to say that Webster openly confronted the reading public, as a woman, in her signed essays in the *Examiner* and in her political pamphlets, presenting them with her straightforward feminist views. Yet, before these had appeared she had written highly subversive poetry in which she had deconstructed the usual female stereotypes (such as that of the prostitute and that of the *femme fatale*) pointing at society's neglect of a large number of its population and man's inveterate egoism, thus preparing the ground for her own polemical essays. As a professional critic, however, she assumes a gender-neutral position which will automatically, because of her anonymity, be characterised as male. Here it seems she preferred to disguise her gender in order to safeguard her position of "objectivity" and—dare I say it—of power. This at first sight inexplicable stance for such a vociferous feminist was justified (or at least understandable) considering the sharp condemnation by her male colleagues of the feminisation of the press (and of culture in general) with authors going so far as to write: "the monthly magazines are getting so lady-like that naturally they will soon menstruate" (Earnest 1950: 174). The subject position constructed in Webster's reviews is precise as to its views on poetry but blurred when it comes to gender.

Webster was aware of the growing importance of women in London's expansive cultural life. She wanted to stimulate that evolution and avert the reac-

tionary backlash. Her writings all worked towards granting women the same chances as men, the same professional possibilities and the same (political) power. Her own job as a well-paid reviewer of the *Athenaeum* gave her the independence she wished and let her taste some of that power. She could not afford to jeopardise this.

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