

as a curiosity than as the important work that it is. Thomson is, however, one of the finest examples of a middle-class, self-educated Victorian author whose work gives a portrait of his struggle to come to terms with the new ideas and changing values of his age. It is unfortunate that he is not more often or more seriously studied by literary critics and historians, for he expresses in his works an important aspect of the Victorian era.

Biographies:

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Papers:

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Augusta Webster

(30 January 1837-5 September 1894)

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- BOOKS: *Blanche Lisle, and Other Poems*, as Cecil Home (Cambridge & London: Macmillan, 1860);
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Lesley's Guardians, as Cecil Home (London: Macmillan, 1864);
Dramatic Studies (London & Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866);
A Woman Sold and Other Poems (London & Cambridge: Macmillan, 1867);
Portraits (London & Cambridge: Macmillan, 1870; enlarged, London & New York: Macmillan, 1893);
The Auspicious Day (London: Macmillan, 1872);
Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute. A Chinese Tale in English Verse (London: Macmillan, 1874);
Disguises; A Drama (London: Kegan Paul, 1879);
A Housewife's Opinions (London: Macmillan, 1879);
A Book of Rhyme (London: Macmillan, 1881);
In a Day; A Drama (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882);

- Daffodil and the Croixaxicans: A Romance of History* (London: Macmillan, 1884);
The Sentence; A Drama (London: Unwin, 1887);
Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster (London: Macmillan, 1893);
Mother and Daughter. An Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence, edited by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1895).

- TRANSLATIONS: *The Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus*, edited by Thomas Webster (London & Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866);
The Medea of Euripides (London & Cambridge, 1868).

The poet Augusta Webster was distinctive for her forcefulness, psychological acuity, and reforming spirit. She evinced the first two in her narrative poetry, lyrics, sonnets, translations, dramatic monologues, novel, and plays and the last in her suffragism and work for the London School Board. Her literary work was well reviewed, and its sub-



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sequent neglect has been unwarranted. She wrote several effective women's monologues (including "A Castaway," spoken by a prostitute) and created some complex and believable dramatic heroines.

Webster's forms and mannerisms were pioneered in works by others—Robert Browning's monologues, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sarcastic declamations, and Alfred Tennyson's lyric interludes. Though derivative in form, her poetry often uses such patterns with great skill, and her plays at their best balance mild reformism with romance.

Webster was born Julia Augusta Davies in 1837. Her maternal grandfather was Joseph Hume (1767-1843), a close friend of Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and William Godwin; his daughter, Webster's mother, Julia Hume (1803-1897), married the naval officer George Davies (1806-1876). Webster's childhood was spent on the ship *Griper*, in various harbors in southern England (1837-1843), at Banff Castle in northern Scotland (1843-1848), at Penzance in Cornwall (1849-1851), and after 1851, in Cambridge, where her father was chief constable of Cambridgeshire. She attended classes at the Cambridge School of Art, studied Greek to help a younger brother, learned Italian and Spanish, and became fluent in French in Paris and Geneva. In

December 1863 she married Thomas Webster, a fellow and later law lecturer at Trinity College; the couple had one daughter and moved to London in 1870, where Thomas Webster practiced law.

Augusta Webster's earliest works include an article for *Macmillan's*, two volumes of poetry, and a three-volume novel, all published between 1860 and 1864 under the pseudonym Cecil Home. The article, "The Brissons" (*Macmillan's*, November 1861), recounts with great feeling the 1851 rescue of the survivors of a shipwreck off the coast of Cornwall; the two volumes of poetry, *Blanche Lisle, and Other Poems* (1860) and *Lilian Gray* (1864), rework the theme of a woman betrayed by her suitor. Both volumes show the influence of Tennyson's *Poems* (1842) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), but the first volume contains some lively refrain ballads ("Cruel Agnes," "The Bitter Knight," "Edith"), and the verse narrative *Lilian Gray* is more carefully structured than its predecessor, *Blanche Lisle*. The novel *Lesley's Guardians* (1864) embeds the fickle-lover motif in a plot with some unconventional touches. The heroine endures a period of genteel poverty as a student-artist in France, and her visits to her British guardians and relatives provide the occasion for some sharp reflections on the socially enforced waste of women's time. Her eventual marital fortunes are contrasted with those of a wealthy but homely French romantic rival, Stephanie, and a more self-consciously independent English friend, Marion, and the author maintains some balance of sympathy for all three. On the title page of the copy of *Lesley's Guardians*, which she gave to her fellow poet Jean Ingelow, Webster wrote, "One of my early failures." With the partial exception of a long fairy-tale romance for children, *Daffodil and the Croëxaxicans: A Romance of History* (1884), she never returned to the novel form. This seems unfortunate, for Webster's genuine gift for description of women's reflections and social relationships never found full expression in her essays or dramas.

In 1866 she began to publish under her own name—a translation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and, when this was well reviewed, of Euripides' *Medea* in 1868. In 1866 at age twenty-nine, she also produced *Dramatic Studies*, eight dramatic monologues of remorse, renunciation, and compromise; three are spoken by women. Webster's debt to Robert Browning in *Dramatic Studies* is most apparent in the first two monologues, "A Preacher" and "A Painter." In the first, a Victorian preacher contrasts his lack of religious intensity

with the powerful emotions he can evoke in his hearers and reflects on the inconsistency of his private tolerance for the foibles he denounces from the pulpit. Unlike most of Browning's casuists, however, the preacher is fundamentally decent, self-aware, and troubled by his imperfections. In "A Painter," the Victorian protagonist regrets that the financial constraints of marriage have hindered his best work (compare Browning's "Andrea del Sarto"), but loves his wife Ruth, who—unlike Andrea's Lucrezia—tries to encourage his art. "The Snow Waste" was the poem most admired by contemporary reviewers and the sole poem from this volume chosen by Webster for inclusion in her 1893 *Selections*. Like a condemned sinner in Dante's *Inferno*, the poem's speaker, trapped in snow, recounts his jealousy and macabre murder of his wife and brother-in-law.

Two of the women in *Dramatic Studies*, Jeanne d'Arc and Sister Annunciata, are spiritual, self-sacrificing heroines who suffer much irresolution and inner turmoil. Jeanne d'Arc, in prison, is alternately frightened and enraptured by memories of her angelic visitations, and Sister Annunciata celebrates the anniversary of her entrance into the convent, but her attempts to pray yield to poignant memories of her lover. In the second part of "Sister Annunciata," the Abbess Ursula praises the now-dead Annunciata, whose tranquil death has followed spiritual visions. But Ursula's simplistic comments on Annunciata's struggle only widen the incongruous distance between inner experiences and their outer interpretations.

Reviewers praised *Dramatic Studies*. The *Saturday Review* for 9 February 1867 declared it "marked by many signs of remarkable power," and the *Westminster Review* for October 1866 remarked that "Mrs. Webster shows not only originality, but what is nearly as rare, trained intellect and self-command."

Webster's next work, *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*, was published in 1867. It is considerably longer than *Dramatic Studies* (288 pages to *Dramatic Studies*' 165) and shows more variety in poem length, tone, viewpoint, and stanzaic form. The volume's five long narrative poems and forty-two lyrics again recall Tennyson's *Poems* (1842) as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems* (1844) and Robert Browning's *Dramatic Romances & Lyrics* (1845); there are lesser debts to Christina Rossetti and perhaps to William Morris. The volume's final long narrative, eighty-nine pages of blank verse entitled "Lota," evokes themes and devices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Some of

"Lota" 's reminiscences, social descriptions, and intermittent pathos reflect Webster's genuine talent for third-person narrative.

The volume's forty-two shorter lyrics exhibit a variety of verse patterns, situations, and emotions; Webster's ballads, short narrative lyrics, and dialogue poems—for example, "The River," "Two Maidens," "The Heiress' Wooer," and "The Hidden Wound"—are the most successful. Her Tennysonian poems tend toward greater optimism, as in the close of "Shadow":

Dark, dark, as when dull autumn yields his breath;
Strange days when will ye change and let me see
A little sunshine ere I pass in death?

.....
Oh! dark all night—but, if the morning come,
I shall awaken, in whichever world,
With opening eyes, and know myself at home.

The *Saturday Review* complimented Webster's "admirably subtle analytic power" in *A Woman Sold*, and the *Leader* commented on her "masculine" set of mind.

Webster's next poetic work, *Portraits*, a volume of thirteen dramatic monologues, appeared in 1870, the same year as the first trade edition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Poems*. Two editions were published in February and August and a third, with an additional poem, in 1893. One of the best of the five monologues spoken by women is "Medea in Athens," Webster's partial defense of Euripides' heroine. Medea fantasizes about Jason's image of her as he dies:

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?"

One of the monologues by women in *Portraits* is the striking sketch of a prostitute, "A Castaway." Webster's poem is less conventional and censorious than Rossetti's "Jenny," included in *Poems*: her middle-class heroine, who has had to sacrifice her education for that of her brother, compares her behavior with the respectable hypocrisies of her clients and criticizes the double standards of kept married women who look down on her. She admits, however, that she does not respect the role she is paid to play.

Webster's cautious feminism also emerges in two of the other monologues. In "Faded," an aging,

unmarried woman reflects on the social conditions which limit "respectable" women to roles of passivity and negation, and a male Victorian intellectual in "Tired" examines the limitations of his "unconventional" marriage to a lower-class woman, who has eagerly embraced the dreariest conventions of middle-class matronhood. The *English Independent* praised the author of *Portraits* as "a daring genius" whose work was distinguished for its "air of reality and . . . deep sense of seriousness," and the April 1870 *Westminster Review* remarked, "if she only remains true to herself she will most assuredly take a higher rank as a poet than any woman has yet done." Unfortunately, Webster wrote very little poetry after 1870.

In 1872, she published her first play, *The Auspicious Day*, a complex melodrama whose principal themes are the evils of superstition and the need for constancy in love. Many individual scenes are excellent, but the final marriage between discredited lovers seems arbitrary and inconclusive.

Her next work, *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute* (1874), based on a French version of a Chinese tale, hovers somewhere between translation and original poem. Its combination of pathos and exotic elements creates a delicate and moving allegory. A prince, Yu-Pe-Ya, plays his lute in a forest and is amazed to find a peasant, Tse-Ky, who understands his music. After testing Tse-Ky's musical ability, the prince confesses deep loneliness and pledges Tse-Ky to eternal friendship. When the latter insists he must return to support his aged parents, the prince gives him two gold ingots, and the two promise to meet in the forest a year hence. A year later the woods are empty, and the prince learns that Tse-Ky bought books with the gift but died from exhaustion of work and study. The prince adopts Tse-Ky's father as his own, plays a final elegy to his friend, and shatters the lute over the grave. The tale's egalitarian message tempers its pervasive sense of death and loss, and its lyrical descriptions and songs are effective. A good Victorian poet, the lute is deeply troubled by beauty's transience:

"And the sweet pain
Of present ecstasy, knowing it must wane,
Thrilled in my heart; and then the long regret
Of one who going ere nightfall gazes yet
On home or mother or the friend he had.
Delight was all, and all delight was sad."

In 1879, Webster produced *A Housewife's Opinions*, a collection of essays which had originally appeared in the *London Examiner*. The title is pre-

sumably mock deprecation, for Webster's topics range widely. The early essays are undercut by forced jocularity, but the later style improves in force. In "Vocations and Avocations" she criticizes the elaborate social role imposed on the upper-middle-class Victorian woman: "So that, on the whole, if she has at all the central business in life which can be called a vocation, it is to let her acquaintances make tatters of her time and to make tatters of theirs in return."

In 1879 Webster also produced her second drama. *Disguises* is a romantic comedy whose disguised identities in a rural setting vaguely suggest the pastoral world of *As You Like It* or *A Winter's Tale*. The play's protagonists embody two contrasting value systems: on the one hand, love of dominance and court intrigue, and on the other, respect for honesty, political freedom, and simplicity of life. Reviewers found *Disguises* a major work: "Mrs. Webster," wrote the critic for the *Scotsman*, "has produced an original drama which is by far the most important contribution made to this department of English literature in recent years."

Webster turned her attention to municipal politics in the 1870s and in 1879 was elected a member of the London School Board from Chelsea by a margin of 4,000 votes. In a summary of Webster's life for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Elizabeth Lee describes her advocacy of state-supported and improved education for the poor: "She threw herself heart and soul into the work. Mrs. Webster was a working member of the board. She was anxious to popularize education . . . and she anticipated the demand that, as education is a national necessity, it should also be a national charge. . . . Her leanings were frankly democratic. . . ." In the early 1880s her health forced trips to Italy, and she did not seek reelection in 1882, but she ran again successfully in 1885.

Webster's 1881 *A Book of Rhyme* contains a graceful seasonal sequence of thirty poems which she called "English stornelli" (Theodore Watts-Dunton believed the proper term for the eight-line stanza form she used was *risputti*) and sixty other lyrics, most of them brief. The *stornelli/risputti* have something of the effect of a sonnet sequence but lack the conclusive force of the sonnet form's sestet. As usual, the *Westminster Review* was enthusiastic: "The *Stornelli* are a series of wonderful picture verses, *huitains*, containing each a little study, carved like a gem by a skillful master-hand."

Webster's 1882 tragedy *In a Day* was the only one of her plays to be produced, at Terry Theatre in London in 1890; according to Elizabeth Lee, the

Websters' daughter played the heroine. The play offers a version of the classic stoic dilemma of the sage on the rack. Myron, unjustly accused of treason, refuses to permit his two slaves, Klydone, his betrothed, and Olymnios, his former teacher, to give testimony on his behalf under torture. When they volunteer without his knowledge, Olymnios holds fast but Klydone breaks, and all three then commit suicide. Unfortunately, *In a Day's* good set pieces are too static to sustain strong dramatic interest.

Perhaps Webster's best play was *The Sentence* (1887), a domestic tragedy based on incidents recorded by the Roman biographer and historian Suetonius. The play's evil characters are plausibly complex and show enough attractive qualities to maintain irony and suspense. *The Sentence's* baroque intrigues and unexpected complications eventuate in a certain ironic justice, as one utterly corrupt character (Caligula) outmaneuvers two others (Stellio and Aeonias).

The Sentence was very favorably reviewed and strongly admired by Christina and William Michael Rossetti. The latter praised the play as "the one supreme thing amid the work of all British poetesses . . . one of the masterpieces of European drama."

Only one more book by Webster was published in her lifetime, an 1893 volume of *Selections*, which included nine miscellaneous poems that had earlier appeared in magazines. At her death in September 1894, she left behind a few short lyrics and an uncompleted sonnet sequence on her daughter. William Michael Rossetti included these in the posthumously published *Mother and Daughter* (1895) and remarked that the sonnets formed the first poetic sequence on the title's subject. In fact, they represent one of the few sustained sequences about parental love of any kind. In them Webster transfers several familiar conventions of romantic love to the maternal—for example, its exclusivity:

You know not. You love yours with various stress;
This with a graver trust, this with more pride;

This maybe with more needed tenderness:
I by each uttermost passion of my soul
Am turned to mine; she is one, she has the whole:
How should you know who appraise love and
divide?

After Webster's death critical enthusiasm for her work waned. She seems to have lacked the network of literary connections which helped other poets—Coventry Patmore, Thomas Woolner, William Allingham, Arthur O'Shaughnessy, or Edmund Gosse—find their places in standard literary histories. Much of her work was in little-read genres—the lyric fable, the long verse narrative, and the closet drama. She shifted genres too frequently and her best mode of expression—the dramatic monologue—was almost completely associated with Robert Browning. Apart from a few reviews, after her death only William Michael Rossetti, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Elizabeth Lee (who wrote the two-page memoir for the *Dictionary of National Biography*), and Mackenzie Bell (author of an appreciative introductory essay to Webster's verse for volume seven of A. H. Miles's *Poets and Poetry of the Century*) wrote significant responses to her work.

This neglect is unjust. Webster filled a significant gap between the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Christina Rossetti's maturity and the early poems of Alice Meynell. She had a sharp sense of humor and was skilled at portraying themes of revenge, romantic love, and religious self-renunciation. More interesting, she provided a realistic, sympathetic, and analytic view of the experience of middle-class women in several of her works. One would not speak of a Websterian style of poetry, but one might speak of a Websterian view of female character and achievement. Her best dramatic monologues and plays, the poetic tale *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute*, and several of her ballads, essays, and lyrics can still be read with the respect once accorded them by the *Westminster Review*.