"PRESENT IN THE DRAMA": THE LITERARY DRAMA OF AUGUSTA WEBSTER

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Augusta Webster wrote four dramas between 1872 and 1887, a period when she was actively involved in public feminist activities. Webster was diverse and innovative, successfully integrating into her drama the feminist interests that define the nature of her activism. In her four dramas, she offers a practical view of human nature and a realistic assessment of a society struggling for and against socio-political redefinition. Webster wrote her first two plays in the 1870s, when she was on the Executive of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage and when she was contributing provocative, socially pointed essays on the Woman Question to the *Examiner*. Her next two plays appeared in the 1880s, when she had severed formal ties with the Suffrage Society and when she was serving as an elected member of the London School Board and as a reviewer for the *Athenaeum*. As one might expect of a working feminist, all four plays focus on issues of class and gender; as one might expect of a writer as diverse as Webster, these plays are also experiments in genre, for they are literary dramas rather than stage dramas. Therefore, Webster was intent on addressing her audience not through performance but through a textual exchange of ideas "performed" by the reader on his or her own inner stage. Moreover, she seems to have reshaped her perception of her readership to accommodate a shift in her feminist perspective in her two plays of the 1880s. This shift coincides with her decision to leave the Suffrage Society at a time when there was a serious parliamentary stall in the women's suffrage debates. In this paper, I consider Webster's increasingly pessimistic view of gender-related conflict resolution in her drama within the context of her work for women's rights and, more broadly, for human rights.

Augusta Webster signed the first petition for women's suffrage presented to parliament by John Stuart Mill 7 June 1866 (Blackburn 54-55). In 1870, the Webster household moved to London so that Webster could enter into the greater literary scene and so that she could participate actively in formalising and expanding the "cause." From 28 April 1871, when she attended a meeting at the Langham Hotel to establish the London National Society for Women's Suffrage, through the amalgamation of the London branch with provincial branches to form the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, Webster was a prominent and active member. Her first play, *The Auspicious Day*, appeared in 1872, when she was one year into what would be nine years of service on the Executive Committee

of the Central Committee. She worked closely until 1880 with Frances Power Cobbe, Louisa Boucherett, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett and the Fawcetts, as well as with Helen Taylor, who was instrumental in convincing Webster to run for a School Board seat in the 1879 elections and with whom she would continue to work on the Board. These were the years when Webster seems to have been most convinced that perseverance in the fight for women's suffrage would lead to a positive outcome. In these years the movement was strengthened by the broad membership of the Suffrage Society that included such notable men as Erasmus Darwin, Alexander Macmillan, William Michael Rossetti and George Davies, Webster's father.

In the year of her father's death, 1876, Webster was busy on a subcommittee formed to ensure regular publications on important Suffrage issues, out of which came her most famous *Examiner* essay, "The Female Voter," published independently as a Suffrage Leaflet titled "Franchise for Women Ratepayers." However, Suffrage Society records reveal that shortly after this point, her commitment to the Suffrage Society lessened, and by the end of the decade she was attending few meetings. In 1880, she ended her membership in the Society. Webster's reasons for leaving the Society are perhaps connected to her poor health – she was continually battling severe bronchial infections. However, she was also caught up in the general rift in the Suffrage Society between those who wanted suffrage for all women and those who, like Webster, felt that in attaining the vote first for women who were heads of households and consequently paid taxes, the Society would insert the thin edge of a much larger wedge, and universal suffrage would surely follow. Webster articulated this view in her "Women Ratepayers" essay, and differences with more hard line thinkers may have led her to reconsider her membership. Her demanding London School Board commitments no doubt offered what seemed to be a more certain way to better the position of women. Therefore, although she seems to have decided in the late 1870s to extricate herself from increasing Suffrage Society dissension, she dealt with Suffrage and related issues in her *Examiner* articles until the fall of 1878, several months before her second play, *Disguises*, was published. She continued to help the Suffrage Society to publish materials, writing in June of 1879 to ask her publisher and friend Alexander Macmillan to meet with Helen Blackburn to publish "a collection of short expressions of opinion from women of more or less note as artists, writers, educationists, philanthropists, etc." By this time, of course, she was preparing to run for her seat on the London School Board and had her campaign in place by August, but as late as May of 1880, she took the stage at a large suffrage rally and she continued to sign public petitions for suffrage throughout the early 1880s.

Like many others, Webster must have been disheartened by the complete failure of the issue of suffrage to gain ground in parliament. Indeed, from 1867, when the Mill amendment was first debated and defeated, until Webster's death in 1894, there were no parliamentary gains for women's suffrage. Other than a few positive moments when the Women's Disabilities Bill survived the first reading,

there was nothing about which Webster and other Suffrage Society members could be at all optimistic. *In a Day*, published in 1882, and *The Sentence*, published in 1887, coincide with a time when, regardless of gender, people seemed increasingly committed to retaining the socio-political status quo, and these plays explore the gender-based consequences for both men and women of absolute patriarchal control. Webster's four dramas have in common not only qualified heroes, in whom virtue is linked to an adherence to a problematic set of patriarchal conventions, but also ambiguously liberal heroines, in whom virtue is linked to an endorsement of the patriarchal status quo. Together, the plays suggest through characterisation Webster's growing conviction that forces were marshalling to prevent significant changes to the status of women and that women were willing members of these forces.

I am interested in Webster's choice of literary drama, not only because it is related to other dramatic forms popularised by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers, such as Closet drama and monodrama, but also because Webster would certainly have known that in writing literary drama she could not expect the professional acclaim or the financial gains of a successful stage play. However, she may have expected to win the kind of critical tribute paid to Ibsen by the nineteenth-century critic William Archer, who applies the term "literary drama" to *Hedda Gabler*, a play in which, he writes, "Ibsen has achieved with unexampled completeness the fusion of character, action and dialogue into an indissoluble whole" (qtd in Marchall 136). Although she was not a professional playwright financially dependent on a stage success, correspondence with Alexander Macmillan indicates that she treated her writing as a profession, and she and Thomas carefully managed promotional tasks and monitored the financial success of each work. Her first poetic drama grew quite naturally out of the dramatic poetry that had made her popular, and she seems to have upheld a principle identified by Om Mathur as a criterion for memorable drama: it is "necessary for good drama to be good closet drama as well" (8). Webster's literary dramas are not Closet dramas in the strictest sense.[1] They develop themes less abstract than those conventionally thought appropriate for Closet drama. Furthermore, Webster's language in her plays can only be defined loosely as poetic language, and, unlike closet drama, these plays tend to sustain considerable dramatic action. Therefore, Webster's drama resembles stage drama in terms of structure, length, and subject matter, a general resemblance that is not surprising in light of the legacy of closet drama. As Catherine Burroughs

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[1] For a comprehensive discussion of Webster and dramatic forms, see Susan Brown, "Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women," *Victorian Poetry* 33.1 (1995): 89-109, and Patricia Rigg, "Augusta Webster: The Social Politics of Monodrama," *Victorian Review* 26.2 (2001): 75-107.

explains, "the female closet of the Romantic period may be viewed as a small experimental theatre in which dramas and gendered identities were conceived and rehearsed, sometimes in preparation for public viewings, at other times for private or semiprivate readings and dramatizations" (11). Webster's literary drama grows out of this tradition of theatricality, blurring the generic boundaries between performance and text. Webster herself links the literary drama more closely to stage drama than to closet drama in her *Athenaeum* review of Lewis Morris's *Gycia*: "Apart from such practical limits of representation behind the footlights, from which [the author] is free if he pleases, he does not write under different artistic conditions from him whose play is for acting" (835). The theatre historian George Rowell explains that the literary drama was quite popular by the middle of the nineteenth century when a "reading public had arisen for the stage play, as opposed to the closet drama" (108). Webster may have been attracted to the literary drama by its scope, for in this particular dramatic form, she is able to develop highly nuanced, intricate patterns of cause and effect, thereby creating a drama of ideas more complex than the shorter, more focused closet drama allows. She could write for an intellectually engaged reader.

Webster's decision to write literary drama placed her outside a mainstream effort to revitalise the theatre. Around 1870, the theatre, as Nina Auerbach writes, "cast off its aura of tabooed disrepute and began to win respectability [. . .] reaching a high cultural centrality even Matthew Arnold might have had to acknowledge" (13). This process of legitimising what was previously associated with impropriety and lack of decorum was complicated somewhat by seemingly antithetical nineteenth-century middle class goals. As Sara Hudston explains, on the one hand, Victorians were faced with an increasingly complex world from which "all classes wanted to be diverted." Hudston continues, Victorians had "a real hunger for knowledge that was part of the Victorian character in a scientific era" (6). In the second half of the century, the theatre seems to have responded to these complex needs by becoming a more serious business than it had been in the first half. In the 1840s Macready had begun the process of theatre reclamation by banning prostitutes from the Drury Lane area, thereby making it a place suitable for middle class families to visit. The process continued while Webster was writing literary drama. For instance, in 1878, a year before *Disguises* was published, Irving took over the Lyceum and "marketed" Ellen Terry with great success. The Theatrical Reform Association and Church and Stage Guild were founded in the same year that the play appeared, and the following year the Bancrofts did for the Haymarket Theatre what Irving had done for the Lyceum. In short, despite a continued resistance to theatricality, the fact was, as Jacky Bratton writes, "worth and value and cultural significance were said to have disappeared from a theatre that was thriving, multiplying and serving ever-increasing numbers of spectators (14-15). While Webster was focusing on a literary audience who would judge her work by the standards with which she was familiar, the British theatre was also attracting an

intelligent, discerning audience who would apply similar standards to what they were viewing on stage. By 1884, men and women were bringing to the stage a sense of professionalism, and the actress Mrs. Kendal was able to present a paper to the *Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* in which she comments, "the most remarkable change that has come over the condition of the Drama is the fact that there is at last a recognized social position for the professional player" (qtd in Jackson 131). On a personal level, Webster was involved with the theatre through her daughter, Margaret Davies Webster, who eventually became a professional actress, and who studied with Herman Vezin, E.B. Norman, and Henry Neville. Indeed, the Webster family enjoyed a social relationship with Neville, Webster even prevailing in a letter dated 27 January 1881 upon William Gladstone, with whom she was working on the London School Board, to help Neville's brother-in-law secure employment. Margaret Davies Webster went on to establish an entertainment company with Rose Cazelet, to adapt and produce her own play in 1899, and to make a living by teaching voice and movement (Parker 458). Davies Webster also became a member of the Actresses Suffrage League. It is probable that Webster herself knew Ellen Terry, to whom she sent a presentation copy of *The Sentence* inscribed "Ellen Terry, from Augusta Webster, with kind regards" (Catalogue).

The literary drama, then, both in form and function, casts some of these connections of Webster to the theatre in an interesting light. As Russell Jackson points out, "few dramatists could expect to make a living by their plays alone" (296). Indeed, the work of her female predecessors earlier in the century might have been a reminder of the perils of public production for a woman, for, as Burroughs points out, many Romantic women playwrights "prefaced their plays with language that alluded to – if not directly addressed – the difficulties women encountered when they chose to offer their work up to public scrutiny" (74). By 1872, Webster had earned a professional reputation and was familiar with the publishing market and the biases of the critics; however, she was relatively unfamiliar with the practical theatre. Furthermore, as John Stephens notes in his study of censorship in nineteenth-century drama, there remained a general preference for text over performance: "Until the advent of Shaw, and to a lesser extent Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, the best minds ignored the theatre in favour of the intellectually more respectable (and, incidentally, far more lucrative) medium of the novel" (155). Moreover, the audience attending the theatre might have been more discerning than in previous years, but the Victorian theatre, as a struggling business, had to balance the intellectual demands of a play with its popular appeal. Those with money to spend on the theatre, explains the nineteenth-century French critic Augustin Filon, "are indignant when, having come to weep or to laugh, they are made to think" (299). It is not surprising that in this time of tension between intellectual activity and playful diversion, as well as reading and viewing, writers and critics of literary drama tended to be at odds with writers and critics of stage drama. Brander

Matthews, another contemporary, complains that the writers of literary drama "liked to think of themselves as dramatists and to claim praise for dramatic achievement, but without facing the ordeal by fire before the floodlights" (24). Therefore, although Webster was of the opinion that the modes of production of literary and stage drama were the same, she would most certainly have known that the reception of the different genres would not be the same.

Women were further "handicapped," as Kerry Powell's writes, "by the common opinion that their gender disqualified them from writing drama, a prejudice which influenced a situation in which their plays would in fact be rejected, thus making it impossible for women to assemble the kind of credentials as playwrights that would count with actor-managers" (82-83). Powell's study of the disparity between the number of women who wrote for the Victorian stage and the few plays written by women that are today considered part of the literary canon suggests, I think, that some women writers might well have been deterred from writing in a genre that offered such poor odds for professional success. Unfortunately, although Webster's plays were generally well received by the reviewers, they were not successful commercially. Of the four, only the first was published by Alexander Macmillan, who continued to be her publisher for other work. Perhaps he was reluctant to publish her drama after the limited success of *The Auspicious Day*.

Despite their commercial failure, Webster persevered in the dramatic form and produced four plays that deal with gender relations. Her correspondence during her drama-producing years, from 1872 until 1887, reveals her growing pessimism that the political and social conditions of women would be addressed legally. She was, after all, living in a culture in which "woman was revered, humoured, sheltered, fussed over, but never treated as an equal" (Agress 171). In letters to Edmund Gosse, in whom she seemed to be able to confide, Webster often mentions the difficulties of being a woman writer and balancing all the domestic demands placed upon her. For example, in May of 1876, still active in the Suffrage Society, Webster writes at length about the position of women in general and the woman artist in particular. "I don't suppose I am the only woman living a happy life (so far as all else a woman can want for her best happiness goes) who knows what it is to feel a longing for a prison or a convent that she might at least now and then have the certainty of a half hour's unbroken time to think her own thoughts in." Two years later, on 5 January 1878, she writes again to Gosse that being a woman precludes her having "regular working hours." She explains, "Nobody feels more strongly than I do that a woman's first duty is to her home; but I don't feel very thankful to the special dispensation which has made the home life of all Englishwomen not millionaires such a treadmill." In 1881, a year before the publication of *In a Day*, Webster read Frances Power Cobbe's *Duties of Women*, an inspirational volume obviously meant to rekindle interest in the original goals of the Women's Movement. She writes to Cobbe on 5 January 1881 that she was "refreshed" by *Duties* and, perhaps triggered by her ongoing disagreement with Christina Rossetti

about women's rights, refers to Rossetti's short poem to explain the extent of Cobbe's effect on her: "I have for two or three years been conscious of a general disappointment about women and work for women, and personally of growing 'weary in well doing.'" She seems to draw strength from the *Duties of Women*, telling Cobbe, "when I closed it my first thoughts were in prayer." However, in her literary drama, Webster conveys her growing conviction that in grouping to fight patriarchal dominance, women may be replacing one kind of dominance with another; they needed to think of themselves in more individualistic terms. In 1886, the year before the publication of *The Sentence*, she refused an invitation by William Morris's daughter May to speak to the Socialist League. Writing to Morris on 17 May 1886, when she was serving her second term on the London School Board, Webster explains why she feels compelled to decline the invitation: "I feel a very great interest in Socialism and find myself in sympathy with it on many points but I am not a Socialist and never shall be unless a form of Socialism is developed which leaves [. . .] a larger room for Individualism than is generally connected with the idea of Socialism." Individualism provides an important feminist context for Webster's literary drama. In each play dramatic tension arises neither out of thwarted individual ambition nor out of the collective problem set by the limitations of a Victorian patriarchal culture; rather, dramatic tension arises out of the slow and inexorable erosion of Individualism that is connected to a generalised failure of responsibility. Webster targets both men and women in drama specifically structured to reveal an unpleasant trend of complacency and inertia, a trend that was probably more than many feminists and certainly more than many "thinking" social critics of either gender might have cared to recognise.

For many reasons, then, Webster's decision to write literary drama casts an interesting light on the comparison frequently made between her and Robert Browning. Browning, of course, intended his plays to be staged, and their collective failure in the theatre is well known. In contrast, Webster's contemporaries were aware that she was not aiming for the stage. The *Athenaeum*, for instance, lists *The Auspicious Day* under "Minor Poets," and the reviewer explains that "the drama that was never intended to be played is a form of poem that may be said to have grown up in our own day" (465). Webster deliberately targets readers who were probably also reading Ibsen, assuming that Filon is correct in reporting that by the time Ibsen was being staged in London in 1889 people had been reading him for several years (280). Filon explains that Ibsen became progressively popular, first with readers and later with matinee-goers, before he was more widely appreciated in England. He "was tried at afternoon performances, or, as a last resource, as a *fin de saison*, when there was nothing any longer to be lost or gained, in some second-rate theatre which was about to be closed, or which might be said to be only half open" (280). Two years later, in 1899, Clement Scott comments on the profound and enduring social impact of Ibsen: "The Ibsen reaction, with its unloveliness, its want of faith; its hopeless, despairing, creed; its worship of the ugly in art; its grim and repulsive

reality, regret it as we will, is a solemn and resistless fact" (x). Recently, Susan Barstow has shown that Ibsen was successful as a matinee offering precisely because his audience was primarily female. Perhaps, then, we might more reasonably compare Webster with Ibsen than with Browning, for she implicitly addresses in her plays an audience willing to scrutinise its gender assumptions within a broad social context. In her review of Morris's *Gycia*, Webster talks about the reader for whom she writes:

> But there exists a minority to whom a good play between the covers of a book is a real dramatic treat; who, perhaps possessing, by nature or practice, in a stronger degree than common, the faculty of inward sight and hearing, receive a sensation of the action quite other than that from only narrative; *who are present in the drama of which they read* [emphasis mine]. These persons enjoy the effort of imagination which the majority give grudgingly or not at all, and without which a play to read is nothing more than a literary skeleton. (835)

Webster's plays turn on a reader's willingness to employ that "inward sight and hearing" to come to terms with a depiction of society he or she might not want to face. Hugh Walker, her old friend and himself a respected critic, remarked after her death that Webster "could not truckle or pander to the whims of the day, and her close-knit thought was ill adapted to the taste of a public which wanted amusement rather than thought" (596). The enormous respect critics like Walker, Theodore Watts, and William Michael Rossetti express for Webster's dramatic work suggests that her intentions were well understood by the kind of readership she hoped to cultivate, the readership implicit, for instance, in her chiding of Gosse on 15 February 1878 for losing sight of his literary audience, thereby allowing himself to be "kept down by the stage and actors you have been writing for."

Webster was in good company in writing literary drama. Michael Field produced literary drama, causing the popular critic and playwright John Todhunter to warn Katherine Bradley, "a literary play is in danger of being something which is neither literature – nor a play." Certainly literary plays appealed to a select group interested in substance as well as aesthetics. In her *Athenaeum* review of Todhunter's *A Sicilian Idyll: A Pastoral Play*, Webster complains that Todhunter privileges the aesthetic elements of the drama at the expense of the dramatic subject: "A gossamer web is a dainty thing; but it will not carry weight," she writes (426). Webster, in contrast, incorporates in each drama a weighty challenge to the ideologies of a gender-conscious and gender-determined social structure. Anachronism objectifies these ideologies so that the delineation of men and women who in *equal measure* lack the will to reshape the gender underpinnings of social conventions is subtly situated within a Victorian context. The consequence of this

social inertia is a series of heroes and heroines who lose their autonomy, their social and personal stature, and even their lives. In short, the characters that drive the action of Webster's plays can only be described as ironic: they are ineffectual people trapped in a social mess they can neither understand nor ameliorate. Furthermore, Webster's feminist-based criticism is strikingly inclusive, and gender equality is linked ultimately to guilt and to moral corruption. Through anachronism she hints at a disturbing historical continuity of this equality.

The Auspicious Day and *Disguises* are set in the feudal past when a patriarchal structure was supported by superstition, witchcraft and old world Catholicism. Individual desire is undermined by the irrational assumptions that keep society functioning as a patriarchy. In short, the individual is subsumed in a society that is structured to eradicate personal autonomy for the collective good. These are five act plays and, given their numerous characters, unwieldy scene changes, complex poetic language, and awkward sequences of dialogue spoken as *asides*, they would present significant challenges as stage productions. In contrast, the two plays of the 1880s are markedly more modern, both in terms of language and a three-act structure. Furthermore, *In a Day* and *The Sentence* work more pointedly through anachronism than their predecessors to depict the complex ideological underpinnings that pit Individualism against gender-determined social roles. *In a Day* situates issues of gender and marriage in the slave-holding society of Roman-occupied ancient Greece. *The Sentence* uses the cruel and violent Rome under Caligula's rule to explore patriarchal power gone mad and individual integrity blighted. The technical differences between Webster's earlier dramas and her later dramas suggest a growing conviction that men and women were lulled into complacency, hoping that they might experience improvements in personal fortune without actually restructuring their societies. Webster's characters are increasingly unwilling to see themselves as intrinsic to social growth and development.

In *The Auspicious Day* issues of gender and class are subsumed in the encompassing problem of a whole society directed by superstition, religious fervour, and ignorance, as indicated in the opening scene when the patriarchal ruler of this society, Lord Wendulph, determines through astrological charts the best day for the marriage of his daughter, Dorothy, to her betrothed, Percival, who has just returned from battle. Percival's limitations are conveyed through his superficial and histrionic – albeit chivalrous – gesture of wearing a patch over one eye during the two years he is away from Dorothy, to keep him, he explains "but half sighted for all else" (9). The patch is a physical symbol of Percival's lack of self-restraint, a failure that is underscored by his contrast to Roger, who struggles successfully to keep his own desire for Dorothy under control. Unfortunately, since Lord Wendulph's charts indicate that the wedding must be postponed for a short while, Percival's weakness is gendered by the two good eyes he turns toward Amy, Lord Wendulph's impoverished ward. Amy has good reasons for trusting in Percival – she is poor, young, naïve, and at the mercy of Lambert Miller, a lecherous and cruel self-made

man. Ironically, when Percival "rescues" Amy from Miller by eloping with her, he starts a series of events that emphasise specifically gendered feelings. For example, Dorothy's pique of jealousy that prompts her to accuse Amy of witchcraft, thereby ensuring Amy's death, elicits from Percival a quick willingness to believe that he has been "bewitched." His weak protest that he "never did cease loving Dorothy" underscores his lack of moral fibre and his inability to act beyond the limits of his sexual desires (155). A remorseful Dorothy and a chastened Percival are punished, not only in that they fail to save Amy from a violent and unruly mob, but in that they are forced to wed on the most auspicious day – Amy's execution day.

Critical reception of the liaison between Percival and Amy is telling, for Webster's contemporaries consistently overlook Percival's lack of restraint and excuse his betrayal of Dorothy. The *British Quarterly Review* suggests that Percival acts on a "lingering affection" for Amy, but the reviewer fails to recognise the broader implications of Percival's taking advantage of a woman left helpless by her position in the class hierarchy (253). The *Westminster Review* sidesteps the nuances of plot, setting and character entirely, commenting only on Webster's effective use of poetic language (131). The *Examiner* suggests that it is reasonable and natural for Percival to love both women; after all, he is a man and they are both appealing (434). The *Nonconformist* explains that he is "somehow divided" in his affections (552). All of these reviews identify Miller as the evil force in the play, and they connect his evil to his lower class origins: Miller's crudeness contrasts the chivalric sensibilities of Percival. Miller is certainly reprehensible, for he has fathered a child illegitimately, taken him from his mother, and taunts her with the knowledge he has of the child's whereabouts. He is a manipulative liar who takes pleasure in causing pain to others. However, as the tragic denouement makes clear, he is no more corrupt than Percival, who runs off with someone disadvantaged by gender and class, or than Dorothy, whose lies lead to an innocent girl's death. The marriage of Percival and Dorothy is a bleak and unhappy conclusion to a play that reveals the limitations of social values that arise out of superstitious convictions, for through this union, the flawed original class and gender structures of society are reconstituted. Amy must be eliminated because she is in the way of a dramatically satisfying reconstruction of the status quo. In an ironically inept reading, the reviewer for the *Nonconformist* actually rewrites the end of the play to suggest Webster's endorsement of the return to the same patriarchal context that led to so much tragedy: "In the joy of the rescue of Amy, the nuptials of Dorothy and Percival are celebrated. [. . .]" (553). The misreading suggests the audience Webster might have hoped to enlighten, for in ignoring the disturbing implications of the fact that Percival's behavior is intrinsically connected to a superstitious restriction of sensible thought and intelligent action, the review is confirmation of the self-perpetuating, limited world view of Webster's society.

While she was writing *The Auspicious Day* Webster was intensely committed to the Suffrage Society, and one can see in the limited perceptions of her dramatic

society the broad targets of the Suffrage Society outlined by John Stuart Mill in his role as Chair of the first meeting of the London Society for Women's Suffrage in 1869. Mill defines the "modern spirit" as a combination of positive forces that are moral, philanthropic and democratic. This is an optimistic speech in which Mill expresses his conviction that the time is right for women to be given the same privileges as men (Mill). The gender and class inequities dramatised in *The Auspicious Day* are Victorian inequities, and in drawing attention to these inequities in her drama, Webster draws attention to the failure of the "modern spirit" in terms of the condition of women. The problems that link the two societies are made explicit through Amy, for her fate is determined solely by her gender and her class. The injustices done to Amy – by Miller, by the "mob" society, by Dorothy and by Percival – are never addressed in the play; therefore, we are left with the final image of Amy victimized by a complex web of gender and class assumptions. Furthermore, because it undermines the conventional comic ending of marriage, the death of Amy is a feminist comment on the consequences of Percival's lack of sexual and emotional restraint. Ultimately, Amy's death draws attention to the power of impulsive and thoughtless acts of violence in the name of political, social and religious stability. Witch hunt or wedding seem to be the same to the mob. "They'll toss their hats, / And shout for the gallant show. 'Twas witch or wife," Lambert Miller says when the mob turns at the last moment on Dorothy, prepared to condemn her as a witch as well until she is safely married to Percival (220). Alliteration emphasises the fact that woman is defined as one or the other, a limitation that ensures the continuation of the patriarchal rule of Wendulph.

Disguises was published in 1879, and Webster won her seat on the London School Board in November of that year. This complex pastoral comedy is a depiction of social hypocrisy, political power and personal ambition, and these elements are linked to assumptions about gender. On the frontispiece of the original edition, the twin trees of science and of life are bound together by the banner that bears their names. This image suggests a context within which we might read *Disguises*, for throughout the play both men and women struggle to integrate socially defined, reasonable behavior with the natural impulse for self-determination. Unfortunately, this impulse is shown to be unreasonable within the social and political context of the play. The image also suggests an ideal balance of political expediency and personal satisfaction, and indeed, once the layers of politically and socially determined trappings that disguise their real identities have been removed, the two romantic couples in the play find love. On the surface, *Disguises* seems to be an optimistic depiction of Individualism, but in fact the drama traces the tailoring of individual circumstance to the prevailing social context in which the characters continue to live.

Once again the central issues in the play are issues of class and gender. As Queen of Aquitaine, Claude has been promised to Aymery because he is the nephew of the ruling Count de Peyriac, who, through this marriage, will maintain political

power. However, when Aymery falls in love with the commoner Ghalhardine, his personal desires threaten the state plans. Aymery's cousin Raymond has fallen in love with Claude, but as a commoner he cannot act on his feelings. Webster solves this class dilemma through the romance convention of ironic reversal when Raymond, rather than Aymery, is revealed to be the true heir to the throne. However, through this seemingly neat reversal, Webster highlights the overarching problem of a generally passive acceptance of each shift in fortune. Once disguises have been removed and the play reaches its "satisfactory" conclusion, it is clear that the socio-political status quo remains firmly in place, and all that has really occurred is that duty to the self now coincides with duty to the state. The layered meaning of "disguise" problematises this transformation of duty, for although class is entirely a matter of chance, it determines marriage; marriage, in turn, determines the political profile of society and the happiness of the individual.

Contemporary critics were aware that Webster was aiming for a more subtle representation of issues of gender and class than the surface text suggests, but they had a great deal of trouble determining just what these issues might be. A reviewer for the *British Quarterly Review* complains that "Mrs. Webster must 'draw out' her *ideas* and exhibit ever so many under-currents" (516). This is a justified comment given that the play struggles against itself in crucial ways, particularly in the suggestion at the end that the patriarchal rule that has been shown to be so limiting will continue. However, this reviewer finds Raymond problematic, "a sad anachronism, imbued with the most modern 'ideas,' and apt at a kind of intolerable speeches," but he or she fails to link the anachronism to the general social criticism the play develops (516). A reviewer for the *Spectator* writes the same of Aymery, calling him "an anachronism" who "shows the modern bias" to privilege personal desire over political duty (144). The critics obviously recognise a modern impulse for self-determination, but they fail to see the final irony of a return to the prevailing social order that has led to the difficulties in the first place. When Ghalhardine says at the end, "we have, in turns, all played disguiseful parts, been life's forced actors, puppets to ourselves," it is clear that purely through chance and good fortune have all four characters managed to realise their desires and to balance these desires with the needs of the state (202). In both *The Auspicious Day* and *Disguises*, then, the romantic marriage convention is undermined by the unsettling sense of unfinished business, and in neither play do the central characters reshape themselves or their societies. Consequently, the social and political context that was the source of all the strife remains.

Between *Disguises* and *In a Day*, Webster spent two years working long hours on the London School Board, published *A Book of Rhyme*, and spent eight months in Italy recuperating from a severe attack of pleurisy. During all this time, the Suffrage Bill languished in parliament, and although Webster returned to England too ill to re-offer for the next Board election, she returned with a pointedly feminist play ready for publication. In her study of Webster's *Examiner* essays of the late 1870s,

Angela Leighton describes Webster as "an unsentimental social critic [. . .] [whose] opinions grow out of a middle current of liberal thinking in the nineteenth century"; however, when she returned to London in the spring of 1882, she returned with a drama that is less moderate in its treatment of gender than any of her previous works (173). *In a Day* conflates issues of marriage with literal and figurative issues of slavery. The fact that the play opens with Klydone's pending freedom from slavery – freedom that is a gift from her master, Myron – would seem to bode well for Klydone, for Myron and for society. However, there are several impediments to this freedom: Klydone is a Greek slave under the Roman occupation, and Myron has only freed Klydone so that he can marry her. The apolitical Myron has political enemies, and the consequence of his lack of political interest is evident that afternoon, when he is falsely accused of working to undermine Roman control. To make matters worse, he can only prove his allegiance to the state through the testimony of his slaves, Klydone and her father, Olymnios, and their testimony is considered admissible only if it is given under torture.

The complexity of *In a Day* is connected to language that conveys the layered and paradoxical meaning of the term "slave." On the first level, Webster makes the obvious feminist point through the conflation of "woman" and "slave," for, as Klydone says, in marrying Myron, "I do but change my bonds in name not strength – " (28). However, *In a Day* also modernises the issue of slavery by suggesting that slavery is as much a state of mind as a matter of gender and class. Throughout the play Olymnios maintains that he is "free" in the most significant sense, for he is "master of [his] will" (16). In contrast, the literal master, the kind but self-indulgent Myron, is enslaved by desires that lead him, as he admits, to "take life soft and loverlike" (8). The ideologically free Olymnios withstands the torture, but Klydone, in her acute awareness that she is doubly enslaved by class and gender, succumbs, thereby through such unfair means confirming Myron's guilt and condemning him to death. In the end, Myron is simply not able to save himself or anyone else because he is a master through the accidents of class and gender rather than through will and self-determination. Complacently failing to deal with the unjust and unsubstantiated accusation against him, Myron unwittingly brings about the tragic denouement. Klydone, burdened by guilt and regret, feels compelled to end her life to follow into eternity the man she felt coerced into marrying, and she remains in death a symbol of passiveness and futility. Only Olymnios dies a free man, exercising his free will and choosing death rather than enslavement in circumstances that, with the apolitical Myron gone, will certainly impede his ideological freedom.

In a Day was the only one of Webster's plays to be staged, and this event occurred 30 May 1890 as a one time matinee at Terry's West End theatre with Margaret Davies Webster in the role of Klydone. The fact that it was staged in such a prestigious location is a testament to the respect accorded Augusta Webster, for as Powell writes, "plays by women were more often than not mounted at theatres outside the West End – where the rewards were greatest and the access for untried

playwrights most difficult" (82-83). Terry's was a popular theatre in a prime location, and it is very likely that Webster drew on her personal connections with the theatre to stage her play as a Friday afternoon matinee to allow her daughter to debut in London. However, although Margaret Davies Webster's performance as Klydone was praised, the play itself was not well received. Having ventured to stage the play, Webster must have found the performance review in the *Morning Post* a few days later an uncomfortable reminder that she had ignored the distinction between stage and literary drama: "Nothing could prevent the representation being extremely fatiguing," concludes the reviewer (4). To make matters worse, eight years earlier her old friend Theodore Watts had warned in a review for the *Athenaeum* that the dialogue was "too intellectual and subtle for pure representative art" (891). Watts was close enough to Webster to be aware of her dramatic intentions and, in this overall positive review, accurately predicts its failure on the stage.

In both dramas of the 1880s, men and women with limited vision flowed from the pen of a feminist who was achieving professional status through her work on the *Athenaeum* and a political profile as a member of the London School Board. This was a difficult time for a Board that had become large and divided into two distinct camps on nearly every important issue. Webster was caught up in several different internal Board struggles, but the issue she worked hardest to address in this period was a gender issue: the reluctance of the Board to hire married women as teachers. Those supporting the Board position pointed to the domestic ideal that married women should neither need nor desire to work. Webster and others who opposed the Board position defined "need" and "desire" in pragmatic, feminist terms and pointed to the married woman's ability to integrate her various female functions. Webster is paraphrased in *The Schoolmaster* as arguing that "No man could fully understand the reasons why it was expedient to employ married women in their schools." She explains that married teachers bring maturity and experience to education, and, she concludes, "It would be as reasonable to turn the fathers out of their schools as to turn out the mothers" (880). She helped to defeat the Board motion to prohibit the hiring of married women as teachers, but contributed little to the business of the Board in her third year, and her silence may have cost her a great deal, for she lost her Board seat in the 1888 election. In her final play she is more pessimistic in her dramatisation of social progress than ever before, and after her 1888 election defeat, she essentially retired from public life. The dispiriting outcome of *The Sentence* is telling in light of the difficult final years of her School Board representation.

The Sentence is a disturbing depiction of greed, ambition, and despotism in an extreme patriarchal state. Watts suggests that this depiction is really carried out as a study of atavism, timely, he suggests, in light of what he calls "Darwin's somewhat disputed theory" and the inherent implications of the idea that "all the potentialities of the race of family are latent in each member, and only await circumstances to develope [sic] them" (313). If *The Sentence* is a study in atavism, questions of power might be understood in a context less focused on gender and class and, in the

broader social sense, more pointedly defined by the ideology of Individualism. The play was recognized as Webster's finest, not only by Watts, but by William Michael Rossetti and Christina Rossetti: "As to Mrs. Webster, I have more than once had occasion to record Christina's very high admiration (fully shared by myself) of that poetess's tragedy *The Sentence*," writes William (*Family Letters* 175). The play is indeed a tragedy, not Caligula's tragedy, but the tragedy of those who challenge Caligula's right to power – the right of the patriarchal tyrant. The climax of the play underscores the central problem that has been dramatised: those who try to wrest control from Caligula do so for the sole purpose of transferring that power to themselves. Webster is clear that irrespective of gender, these people are doomed to fail as individuals, and they imperil society as a whole.

The love triangle formed by Aeonia, Stellio and Laelia is, of course, a convention in itself, as is Stellio's rationalisation of his love for Aeonia. His complaint about Laelia is that she lacks the ambition he feels would be more appropriate for his own rising career. Aeonia, on the other hand, is extremely ambitious; and in her violent and ruthless pursuit of power and control, she is unlike all of Webster's previous heroines. Like Stellio, she hopes to seize as much power as she can by any means she can – for herself. Victorian critics resisted such tendencies in a woman: even Watts describes Aeonia as "the woman who is willing to dare all for love if she is only sure that her passion is reciprocated" (*Athenaeum* 314). However, Aeonia's conflation of power and love is ominous. She complains that "in modern order power is to run in harness," although she admits that "Power in a man, rule, leadership of the crowd, / Aye, that belike would thrill a woman's heart" (26). Her actions soon make it clear that such power in herself would "thrill" her even more. Ironically, her ruthlessness makes Aeonia very much like Caligula. Furthermore, unlike Dorothy, Claude and Klydone, she is strikingly intelligent, independent and far more determined than her male partner. She wants to seize control – on a political level and on a domestic level. Unfortunately, in joining forces with Stellio, Aeonia misdirects her energy, and together they lose sight of the real problem – the evils of despotism. Aeonia is a study of feminism gone awry; in fact, the conflation of her love for Stellio with her aggressive personal ambition makes her a violent and dangerous woman who shapes the play into a social warning. Ambition sustains her just as it sustains Caligula, but she is unprepared for his perverted abuse of power in the terrible events he brings about to punish those who contest him: Laelia's suicide, Stellio's murder and her own exile. Caligula maintains control not only because of his devious nature, but also because of his innate and incontestable conviction that he is all-powerful. The return to the social norm at the end of the play is ominous, for the insane, despotic Caligula maintains absolute power and demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of misdirected attempts to challenge a purely evil governing "body." His self-satisfaction at the end of the play is connected to his awareness that there is neither man nor woman with enough disinterest, integrity and will to defeat him.

Collectively, her literary dramas reflect Webster's general disappointment in the lack of progress in the social reformation for which she was working so hard. Parliament was certainly not addressing the suffrage issue, and I suspect it is not an accident that in Webster's dramas figures come out of the past to underscore the most immediate consequence of Victorian patriarchy – the exclusion of women from determining by vote the political, social and economic patterns of the country. Through drama, Webster is able to enact her growing fear that the men empowered to alter the political and social fabric of the last decades of the nineteenth century lack the will and the courage to effect change, and the women excluded from effecting change lack the will and the courage to press for their rights as individual members of society. The literary drama provides an opportunity for Webster to deal with feminist issues that were not consistently staged until the intensification of suffrage activism in the theatre that resulted from the establishment in 1908 of the Women Writer's Suffrage League and the Actresses Suffrage League. Her dramas anticipate these later works in that they relate lack of progress not only to an abstract system of patriarchal assumptions about class and gender, but also to men and women who are never defined heroically and who never demand enough, either of themselves or of their society. These are characters damaged by the long legacy of patriarchy, a self-perpetuating system of social injustice and inequity that appears, reinforced, at the end of each drama. Webster writes for the world stage of ideas, moving out of the closet with her literary drama, and her timing in making such a move proved to be crucial, for she readied an intelligent audience for the social criticism staged by the likes of Ibsen and Shaw, each of whom, like Webster, believed that drama could and should change lives.

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