

**Rewriting a New Literary History through Poetry:**

**Temporality and the Hidden Histories/ Figures of Webster and Levy's Female Speakers**

Paula Alexandra Guimarães

paulag@ilch.uminho.pt

Many late Victorian women writers were deeply interested and engaged in time-preserving activities of an archival nature, such as collecting, editing, critical reviewing, translating (contemporary and classical works) and life writing (namely, biographies of women writers). That was the case of Augusta Webster (who, besides being a literary critic for *The Athenaeum*, was also a competent translator of Greek), and of Amy Levy (who practised as a critic and journalist for many periodicals), but also of Mathilde Blind (a critic, translator and biographer, having written the life of George Eliot). With their contribution and that of many other women intellectuals of the period, a new literary history was gradually being constructed – one which, for the first time, offered a female perspective of certain figures and events, and gave women writers a central role in the redefinition of later nineteenth-century culture.

In particular, the examples of Webster and Levy, as poets belonging to two different generations, may illustrate the development of women's writing in the English fin-de-siècle, from Realism to Symbolism and from Aestheticism to Decadence; thus, helping to situate in literary history other women poets of the period (like Alice Meynell, Mary Robinson, Vernon Lee, Michael Field, and Charlotte Mew).

With these ideas in mind, the paper will try to answer two major questions: How, within this larger context, do female poets like Webster and Levy address the central issue of time and temporality in their works? And how do they attempt to write a new (feminine) literary history through the more indirect medium of poetry? The paper will demonstrate their awareness that time is a particularly important concept for women, intrinsically connected with their biological rhythms and with their innate capacity for remembering and recollecting. In their interest in and preoccupation with history, and how certain events and figures can be revived and transformed through artistic practise,

or else fall into oblivious decline, Webster and Levy seem to anticipate or identify with other aesthete and decadent writers of the period.<sup>1</sup> Webster's later openly aesthetic poetry, in her mature collections *Portraits* (1870), *A Book of Rhyme* (1881) and *Mother and Daughter* (1895), points towards a more progressive or constructive notion of temporality. But Levy's markedly decadent poetical works, like *A Minor Poet* (1884) and *A London Plane Tree* (1889), seem to fully confirm the *fin-de-siècle* (and queer) sense of exhaustion and pessimism.

In spite of their differences, these women poets attempt to create an alternative literary history, by disinterring hidden female figures that, through their dramatic discourses, try to inscribe their unwritten, marginal voices in the partial male historical records. In deliberately looking back to the ancient classical and medieval worlds, Webster and Levy bring to the full modern light, of the later Victorian period, the forgotten and dusty images of charismatic figures; such as those of the would-be-scholar Xantippe (the infamous wife of Socrates), the formidable filicide Medea, the biblical prostitute Mary Magdalen, the medieval warrior-saint Joan of Arc, and the mythical enchantress Circe.

After Webster's family moved to Cambridge in 1851, Augusta received a classical education, attending the Cambridge School of Art, and later the South Kensington School, making her extremely well educated for a woman of her time. This enabled her to write well-received translations of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in 1866 and Euripides' *Medea* in 1868, both of which were published under her own name.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that, in this respect, Webster fared much better than many of the women in her poems. As a professional writer (poet and dramatist),<sup>3</sup> she was much acclaimed during her lifetime and, when she died in 1894, her reputation remained solid.<sup>4</sup> As a critic, Webster had written several essays for *The Examiner* during the 1870s, and became the regular poetry reviewer for the *Athenaeum* for several years during the 1880s and '90s.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Such as James Thomson, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson, to name but a few.

<sup>2</sup> Later on, she would assume a pseudonym, Cecil Home.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1870s and early 1880s, Webster published four verse (closet-)dramas: *The Auspicious Day*, *Disguises*, *In a Day*, and *The Sentence*, of which only one was performed. They are located in ancient times and seem to deal with religious and gender issues.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Watts-Dunton wrote in her obituary that Webster belonged to "the noble band represented by George Eliot ... and Miss Cobbe." Webster's sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, unfinished at the time of her death, was published posthumously in 1895 with a glowing introduction written by William Michael Rossetti.

<sup>5</sup> Watts-Dunton, her magazine colleague, considered that 'as a critic ... she had no superior, scarcely an equal'. The topics in the essays ranged from issues as disparate as 'clothes' and

In his article on “Augusta Webster and the Social History of Myth”,<sup>6</sup> Shynyn Fiske states that she “believed in literature’s ability to create meeting places between disparate historical moments” (471), and that she “reimagined the Greeks as a way to think through the problems and possibilities of a newly-emergent female identity” (470). For her, “literature and mythology highlighted the actions of extraordinary women who could offer her, and those like her, a more supportive history with new possibilities for thought and action” (475). Her poems emphasize “the necessity of recuperating Greek women’s voices to express the frustrations and desires for which Victorian women had yet to conceive a language.” (478). Her portrayals “allowing them an emotional depth and complexity unsounded in their other classical and modern manifestations” (479). But the poems also show, he says, their “extraordinary powers of [...] raising above their temporary state of helplessness and entrapment.” (479)

The appearance of Medea<sup>7</sup> in mid nineteenth-century drama “corresponded to the Victorian sensation culture and heightened anxieties about the violent, manipulative, and socially deviant women that some feared could result from the breakdown of traditional, domestic ideals.” (481). In ‘Medea in Athens’ (*Portraits*, 1870), Webster ‘has resuscitated Medea to expand on Euripides’ (p. 125), Patricia Rigg states,<sup>8</sup> but her nineteenth-century version (taking place many years after her revenge)<sup>9</sup> rather ‘enacts her despair on an inner stage’ (Rigg argues); Webster, thus, deviates from the classical model, namely in the depiction of the complexity and depth of Medea’s feelings for Jason. For example, she declares that

[...] Ever to think of me--  
with love, with hate, what care I? hate is love--

And she asks a dead Jason to come back to ‘the world of the living’, so that she might perpetuate her hatred of him:

[...] we two so far apart  
as dead and living, I an envied wife

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‘champagne’ to ‘poetry’ and ‘university degrees for women’. The reviews were of works by literary figures as Browning, Patmore, Symons, Robert Bridges, Mary Robinson, Michael Field, etc.

<sup>6</sup> In *Women’s Studies*, 40: 469-490, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Medea was a priestess of Hecate, who betrayed her father to help her lover Jason to secure the Golden Fleece. But finding that he planned to marry Glauké, she kills her own children in revenge against him (according to Euripides, and no one else).

<sup>8</sup> *Julia Augusta Webster. Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer*, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The poem is set many years after these events, after her escape to Athens and her marriage to king Aegeus.

and he alone and childless. Jason, Jason,  
come back to earth; live, live for my revenge.  
[...]

Webster's portrait of this paradigmatic murderous mother becomes a highly problematic figure in terms of a Victorian idealised maternalism. But, for Rigg, it is rather of 'a Victorian woman indulging in a few precious moments of recognition of the darker elements of the female' (p. 124); precisely those that the tragedian (Euripides), as a man, did not have access to. Rigg adds that Webster's Medea 'emerges from the experience of gathering together the fragments of her past' and creating a persona that enables the text to 'transform personal desire into a cultural aesthetic' (p. 127). In claiming her subjectivity, she thus turns her archive/story and herself into a decadent art object.

In turn, S. Fiske argues that "Webster's Circe, like Nightingale's Cassandra, contributes to the growing tradition of women writers, reaching back to the Greeks, to create a history for the uncommon experiences and visions that the average woman of the time was unable to achieve." (487) The poem, with its time-related dilemma and feminine rhythms, "voices an even stronger protest [than Medea's] against the stifling boredom, loneliness, and ennui of domestic life." (485) Circe begs:

[...]  
Give me some change. Must life be only sweet,  
all honey-pap as babes would have their food?  
[...], give me then  
something outside me stirring; let the storm  
break up the sluggish beauty, let it fall  
[...]

And she asks:

Too cruel am I? [...]  
Too cruel? Did I choose them what they are?  
or change them from themselves by poisonous charms?  
But any draught, [...]  
out of my cup, revealed them to themselves  
and to each other. Change? there was no change;  
only disguise gone from them unawares:  
[...]

In Webster's version, the sorceress anticipates her meeting with Ulysses and his men, and defensively insists that she does not turn men into pigs—she merely takes away the disguise that makes them seem human.

According to Christine Sutphin,<sup>10</sup> 'Webster is revising both Homer and the misogynist transformations of Circe'; in the sense that 'her Circe is neither the self-

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<sup>10</sup> Introduction to *Augusta Webster. Portraits and Other Poems*. Broadview Press, 2000.

sufficient goddess of Homer, nor the *femme fatale* commonly accepted by her contemporaries.’ (p. 381) – or male artists.<sup>11</sup> This means that while Webster’s Circe ‘is not entirely divested of her occult powers’, she still ‘claims to be “a woman, not a god”’ (pp. 381–382). By choosing to represent Circe’s own desire or longing (“Give me some change ...”), the poet thus enhances her latent humanity and brings her closer to contemporary women.<sup>12</sup> She thus becomes a living, breathing archive, not a dusty icon from the past.

Regarding Webster’s earlier monodrama entitled *Jeanne D’Arc* (from *Dramatic Studies*, of 1866), P. Riggs states that the character “speaks from within the prison where she awaits her execution. It is the night before she is due to die” and “She is aided ... by ... those that she draws forth from memory and those with whom she interacts in visions.” (77) Riggs adds that Jeanne tries to “cast her history in terms she can accept, and to this end she strives to aestheticize her worldly experience by defining it as a religious quest” (77). That “She re-enacts old memories of her past life, not only her military successes, but her village, her home, and all she loved before” (79). In choosing a speaker that is both a recognised historical figure and a legend, in both Britain and France, simultaneously a woman and a warrior, a victim and a saint, Webster proposes not only to recover Joan of Arc’s story, but also to finally give her a ‘voice’ of her own, to re-humanise her in her approximation to the contemporary world.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Male artists have particularly emphasised Circe’s wickedness and sensuality, which is visible notably in nineteenth-century painting (of Burne-Jones and Waterhouse).

<sup>12</sup> Circe was a sorceress renowned for her vast knowledge of potions and herbs. Through the use of these and a magic wand or staff, she would transform her enemies, or those who offended her, into animals. The best known of her legends is told in Homer’s *Odyssey* when Odysseus visits her island of Aeaëa on the way back from the Trojan War and she changes most of his crew into swine. He forces her to return them to human shape, lives with her for a year and has sons by her. Circe has been seen as the archetype of the predatory female. In the eyes of those from a later age, this behaviour made her notorious both as a magician and as a type of the sexually free woman. Later male interpretations were to take the metamorphoses she inflicted not just as reflecting a temptation to bestiality but as an emasculatory threat. Among women she has been portrayed more sympathetically.

<sup>13</sup> Joan of Arc (1412–1431) is a heroine of France, for her role during the Lancastrian phase of the Hundred Years’ War, who was later canonized as a Roman Catholic saint. She claimed to receive visions of the Archangel Michael and saints Margaret and Catherine (mentioned in the poem), instructing her to support Charles VII and recover France from English domination. He sent Joan to the siege of Orléans, and this eventually led to his coronation in Rheims (mentioned in the poem). But she was captured at Compiègne by the Burgundian faction, which was allied with the English (mentioned in the poem) and put on trial by a pro-English Bishop of Beauvais on a variety of charges, particularly witchcraft, for which she was burned at the stake (mentioned in the poem).

As a living myth of transformation and liberation – of herself and her country – Jeanne constitutes a fascinating subject. But Webster decides to show her in a more problematic fashion and in her last critical moments. Her delirious soliloquy (suggesting a latent madness) not only takes place in a grim prison cell, but just before she is to be taken away and executed for heresy – ‘This then is the truth’, ‘The prison and the chains’ (pp. 138–139). In her feverish dream-vision, she recalls fragmentary episodes of her earlier, almost idyllic, life as a peasant girl and how, against all probability, she was given a new life and mission in the world – to save her country: ‘The soul of France is in me’ (3). Though she recalls the moments of military victory and defeat in battle – trespassing the male sphere – she finally realises her shameful death on the heretics’ pyre: ‘My living limbs were to be given to scorch’ – ‘And writhe and shrivel in the fire’ (46–47). She then calls on her saints in heaven for tender support and for a merciful spiritual salvation. Showing an informed awareness that Jeanne’s trial for heresy was politically motivated, Webster represents her as a symbol of sacrificed womanhood, in that she becomes a victim of masculine imperial and ecclesiastic powers. This critical position emerges explicitly when Jeanne questions the hypocritical logic of God’s choice,

Was it for this that I was chosen out,  
From my first infancy—marked out to be  
Strange ’mid my kindred and alone in heart? (145–147)

Though Webster’s major female speakers are all subject to patriarchal conventions, they are all quite unconventional, if not exceptional. They are all caught in the process of collecting the fragments of their past as earlier selves, in order to contrast and confront them with their present (more) problematic or transgressive selves. Their many powers and weaknesses indeed suggest that, despite their latent humanity, they are also very lucid self-analysts and historians.<sup>14</sup>

Florence Boos<sup>15</sup> sees “Webster’s cautious feminism” also emerging in “Faded”, another monologue included in *Portraits*, and one that directly addresses the effects of time for women. In it, “An aging, unmarried woman reflects on the social conditions which limit ‘respectable’ women to roles of passivity and negation.”(282-3) The speaker in “Faded”, who defines herself as “this later drearier self”, describes a dream in which

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<sup>14</sup> Paula Guimarães, “Retrieving Fin-de-Siècle Women Poets: The Transformative Myths, Fragments and Voices of Webster, Blind and Levy”, in *Comparative Critical Studies* 14.2–3 (2017): 225–249.

<sup>15</sup> “Augusta Webster”, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (DLB), 35, 280-284.

her body died but her soul remained alive. She says she had “grown viewlessness” (82) because, after her death, she is not remembered by her family. They do not see her: “What am I? / A shadow and an echo - one that was.” (pp. 80-81) Though she is able to come to terms with her face, by noting the similarities between her physical decay and the decay of the painting of her younger self, she says

Both shall have had our fate ... decay, neglect,  
Loneliness, and then die and never a one  
In the busy world the poorer for our loss. (163-165)

The late Victorian sense of (deep) time had been radically transformed by the many implications of Darwin’s theories. Therefore, the human preoccupation with the brevity of life and the inexorable march of time became more acute. In 1881, and as if conscious of this (she would die of cancer soon after), Webster published a collection entitled *A Book of Rhyme*, in which she included a sequence of *English rispetti* – short inter-rhyming love poems based on Tuscan pastorals.<sup>16</sup> According to Patricia Rigg,<sup>17</sup> these “mark an important [new] phase” in Webster’s writing, both in terms of form and content, because they are “an ironic presentation of the complexity of human existence in its temporal and temporary state” (2004: 136). By dramatizing the inner life of a woman, named Marjory, and her growth through the phases of marriage, motherhood and widowhood, her lyrics suggest “the irony of a human existence that is limited and finite, even as they celebrate the power and mutability of human love.” (136) Rigg states that though deceptively simple, Webster’s lyrics “develop and sustain complex metaphors of limitation and finitude.” (143-4) Indeed they express the poet’s ‘acute consciousness of the brevity of life and beauty’, namely the decadent ideas of pending decay, destruction, and death. But the inevitable process of aging is traced by the natural seasonal cycles (of Spring and Winter) that are conflated with the speaker’s own life cycle.<sup>18</sup> This idea would also be present in the unfinished sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*.

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<sup>16</sup> Also known as *stornelli*, they may contain from 3 to 8 metrically-ordered lines.

<sup>17</sup> “Augusta Webster and the Lyric Muse. The ‘Athenaeum’ and Webster’s Poetics”, *Victorian Poetry*, 42(2), 2004, 135-164.

<sup>18</sup> Another form of recuperation that she engaged with at the end of her life was the writing of *Mother and Daughter*, which involved a formal revival of the sonnet sequence and an emotional revival of the very special relationship with her only daughter, Margaret. Its writing coincided with the critical moment when Webster was facing a terminal cancer. Through this unusual twenty-seven-sonnet tribute, the poet seemed to want to immortalise this great and unique form of love between mother and daughter. The sequence is also an interesting archive of different personal moments concerning the relationship with Webster’s only daughter and the poet’s reflections on the experience of motherhood and parenting.

From 1879 to 1881, Amy Levy (1861-1889) attended Newnham College, one of the few Cambridge schools that allowed women, and was its first Jewish student. Her publishing career began early, at the age of 13,<sup>19</sup> and she continued to publish throughout the 1880s—three volumes of poetry, three novels, some translations, a number of essays, and many short stories. But, in September 1889, at the young and promising age of 27, Levy committed suicide. Like George Eliot, Levy’s liberal education included ancient Greek philosophy and drama, which provided her with another language, literally and figuratively, with which to explore her own philosophical and political concerns – with wit, wisdom and erudition.

A high level of critical divergence on the issue of Levy’s queerness, or potential queerness, and the way in which her work articulates queer poetics makes the area of sexuality particularly challenging.<sup>20</sup> Caroline Baylis-Green<sup>21</sup> states that Levy’s Hellenic texts do offer a creative feminist response to contemporary discussions concerning the role and function of marriage and its usefulness to educated women.<sup>22</sup> Through her use of ‘Xantippe’ and ‘Medea’, from the collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884), Levy confronts patriarchal figures and institutions, in a highly political manner. What links the texts in *A Minor Poet* is a concern for the finding of voice, or giving a voice to those deemed to be living and creating on the margins of cultural history, affected by misogyny, racism and pathology. These marginal figures become central in Levy’s handling of neglected muses.

If historically Xantippe was known as a scold and has been used allusively in literature to describe ill-tempered women or wives, Levy re-envisioned her as an intellectual woman frustrated with her unfulfilling marriage to Socrates and, by doing so,

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<sup>19</sup> A poem, in *The Pelican*, a feminist journal.

<sup>20</sup> As Alex Goody notes, Levy’s work sits more comfortably within a queer, rather than lesbian framework, partly because of its date but also because of its highly complex relationship to identity and identification. There is a recognition of the multiplicities of identification and a rejection of a simple assumption of a ‘lesbian’ position, which would be anachronistic as well as reductive.

<sup>21</sup> *QUEER SUBJECTIVITIES, CLOSETING AND NONNORMATIVE DESIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN’S POETRY AND LIFE WRITING*, CAROLINE BAYLIS-GREEN, PhD Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, December 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Levy called into question the efficacy of the institution of marriage in her satirical poem entitled “The Ballad of Religion and Marriage.” Levy suggests that marriage has gone the way of the Judeo/Christian God, both of which the speaker of the poem disavows.



critiques the misogyny and homoeroticism of the male academy.<sup>23</sup> Levy subtitles 'Xantippe' (A FRAGMENT) in a clear reference to cultural recovery, but of a text that never existed. By adding this subtitle, Levy suggests that the whole story has not been told and that the poem is concerned with a poetic persona which is broken, damaged or incomplete. This also gestures to the only known positive portrayal of Xantippe in classical writing in Plato's *Phaedo*.<sup>24</sup> The use of Greek spellings in the text further adds to this process of minute cultural recovery. Xantippe's search for a relationship based on intellectual and educational equality marks it as one of Levy's most explicitly feminist texts, as does her use of dramatic monologue, challenging the established conventions of univocal lyric poetry, and the relationship between genres. Hybrid forms of poetry and drama that produce dramatic verse, or verse drama, seem to find resonances in plural classical forms such as the Greek chorus (the maidens that she addresses).<sup>25</sup>

For Baylis-Green, Levy recreates an alternative Platonic Symposium within 'Xantippe', which acts as the setting for the impassioned confrontation between Xantippe and Sokrates. This moment of epiphany illustrates the extent of the challenge for women trying to engage with Sokratic dialogue and intellectual discourse. From the outset, Xantippe is excluded from this gathering and forced to view the events as a voyeur, through the door, "As I stood/ Ling'ring upon the threshold, half concealed/By tender foliage" (146-148). Xantippe's exclusion and yearning for knowledge provides an obvious parallel with the position of many women in the Victorian period and *Fin de*

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<sup>23</sup> T. D. Olverson, in *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, states that in 1866 Thomson wrote an essay entitled 'A Word for Xantippe', in which he examines the reputation of the wife of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. Thomson invites respectable Victorian matrons to follow Socrates home, in order to 'judge whether Xantippe had or had not the right to scold and rage, and even to pour out vessels of wrath.'

<sup>24</sup> Plato's portrayal of Xanthippe in the *Phaedo* suggests that she was a devoted wife and mother of three sons. Xenophon, in his *Memorabilia*, portrays her in much the same light, although he does make Lamprocles complain of her harshness. It is only in Xenophon's *Symposium* where we have Socrates agree that she is (in Antisthenes' words) "the hardest to get along with of all the women there are." Nevertheless, Socrates adds that he chose her precisely because of her argumentative spirit. Aelian also depicts her as a jealous shrew in his description of an episode in which she tramples underfoot a large and beautiful cake sent to Socrates by Alcibiades. In his essay "The Case for Xanthippe," (1960) Robert Graves suggested that the stereotype of Xanthippe as a misguided shrew is emblematic of an ancient struggle between masculinity (rationality, philosophy) and femininity (intuition, poetry), and that the rise of philosophy in Socrates' time has led to rationality and scientific pursuit coming to exercise an unreasonable dominance over human life and culture.

<sup>25</sup> Xantippe's call to maidenly support is ambiguous, it is not clear in the text whether these maidens are a physical presence, or a metaphorical chorus. 'Maids' also suggests a dual connotation of virginity and servant/serving maid, which runs throughout the text.

*Siècle*. Thus, queer solidarity is limited in 'Xantippe', in a way that excludes women, regardless of their sexuality (with the exception of Aspasia). Levy uses the example of the Platonic community to highlight the potential misogyny at the heart of Ancient Greek society. Intellectual love could be found only in a relationship between two males. The poem offers an obvious example of feminised masculinity in the figure of Alkibiades, shown to be accepted above femininity, and arguably seen as more desirable.

Xantippe's declarative act "Then sudden stepping from my leafy screen' (176)... / Lit by a fury and a thought I spake:" (179) marks the breaking free from the submissive voice of orthodox femininity, outing herself as a powerful voice, which refuses to be shamed into silence. The use of the word 'spake' stresses the importance of the act itself – Xantippe steps out of the shadows into the light, literally and metaphorically. Her flinging of the blood-wine is both a powerful act of rebellion, and an admission of defeat. Xantippe crosses the threshold into the male-dominated chamber of debate, weirdly defiling the space. Through this bodily act, Xantippe tries to make another statement, "with both angry hands I flung/ The skin upon the marble" (218-219). Xantippe's last act is to reconfigure the scene by showing where her hysteria stems from: her womb: 'He wished a household vessel – well twas good,/ For he should have it' (241-242).<sup>26</sup> If post-symposium Xantippe is brought down, she takes Sokrates down with her, and he is finally removed from his position as intellectual mentor and muse. At the end, she symbolically demands: 'Why tarry? – give me air [...] and give me light!' (284-285).

In turn, Levy's *Medea: A Play in Fragments* (of 1884) is a hybrid verse drama that bridges the gap between high and popular culture, in order to deconstruct attitudes to femininity and the maternal. The figure of Medea haunts the western imagination, as she seems to embody the philanderer's nightmare: the wife who kills her husband's lover, the mother who murders her own children. In fact, she is one of the few ancient female protagonists not to be killed, willed or persecuted into submission or extinction. As seen with Webster, Medea certainly enjoyed a privileged position in the literature, theatre and culture of the late nineteenth century. She again appears in the 1890s, but in these late fin-de-siècle configurations, Medea's character undergoes a significant, symbolic transformation.<sup>27</sup> As Baylin-Green states, "the late Victorian Medea is not the semi-

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<sup>26</sup> An unconfirmed anecdote purports that Xanthippe was once so enraged with her husband that she took a chamber pot and poured it out over Socrates' head, which – according to the tale – the philosopher accepted with the allegory: "After thunder comes the rain."

<sup>27</sup> From the 1860s to the 1880s, the character of Medea is repeatedly recovered, revised and reinscribed by artists, writers and dramatists. In Mona Caird's novel, *Daughters of Danaus* (1894)

divine, dragon-chariot riding witch of Euripides. She is a more intangible and ephemeral presence, an influential spirit rather than a dynamic personality.”

Shanyn Fiske argues that “unnatural, decadent aesthetics do not sit easily in classical morality tales.” And ‘Medea’ has historically been considered a play which concerns the horror of a woman who commits the ultimate act ‘against nature’ in killing her own children. In Levy’s version of the drama it is made clear that Medea is being read as *abject*, and possibly racially *other* if we note the repetition of ‘creature.’ Medea is labelled as a potential threat but also as a victim of prejudice, as is clear when she addresses the Athenians:

This strong, fair people, marble-cold and smooth  
As modelled marble. I, an alien here,  
That well can speak the language of their lips,  
The language of their souls may never learn.  
(22-30)

‘Medea’ sets up an opposition between cultural and biological maternity and tropes of frustrated creativity. In Levy’s version, she is shown to be both creator and destroyer, but also a victim of circumstances and an outsider. Medea is accused of being unnatural and less than human, in a discourse which reiterates late nineteenth-century racial and ethnic stereotyping concerning Jewishness.

As Fiske argues, Levy’s Hellenic texts can also read as reflecting upon fin-de siècle ideas concerning degeneration and eugenics. Both ‘Xantippe’ and ‘Medea’ are labelled as ethnically other in their darkness. Besides, ‘Xantippe’ and ‘Medea’ both feature examples of problematic, heterosexual marriages. And Medea is reified and ‘othered’ as a monster, on grounds of gender and ethnicity, who then delivers a monstrous act. Olverson, in turn, stresses Levy’s sympathy for her character in her reading of the text, and the importance of Levy’s contribution to feminist revisions of Hellenic sources: Levy combines classical erudition with subversive intent in her revisionist mythmaking (Fiske).

Levy’s dramatic poem “Magdalen” (from *A Minor Poet*, 1884) is transgressively spoken by a dying atheistic prostitute who is confined to a refuge or reformatory.<sup>28</sup> As

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and Vernon Lee’s ghost-story, ‘Amour-Dure’, the visceral figure of Medea is removed to the margins and disembodied. Ghosts return via narratives, and come back, again and again, across centuries, every time a tale is unfolded.

<sup>28</sup> Magdalene asylums, also known as Magdalene laundries, were initially Protestant but later mostly Roman Catholic institutions that operated from the 18th to the late 20th centuries, ostensibly to house “fallen women”. The term implied female sexual promiscuity or work in

she fragmentarily recalls the history of her seduction, she angrily repudiates both her male seducer and God, “welcoming her impending death as an escape from the world’s oppressive theology” (Emma Francis).<sup>29</sup> In ironic contrast with the iconic biblical figure, this Magdalen is not pious or repentant, but obdurate and defiant before the nun and priest that attend to her final moments. Moreover, she appears to be succumbing to a form of venereal disease (which, in turn, signifies contamination and degeneration).<sup>30</sup> In fact, many of Levy’s speakers (including Xantippe and the ‘minor poet’) seem to exist on the threshold between life and death, in a temporal bridge or limbo, as they invariably address the reader from their deathbeds, levelling an intemporal curse against those that have oppressed or ‘contaminated’ them.

According to Emma Francis, Levy’s later poetry

interrogates the process by which mythic, symbolic and identificatory structures are produced. She studies subjectivities and forms of experience which are not restricted to gendered perspectives but seem more universal. The very category of woman becomes void, as in ‘In the Mile End Road’ and ‘Contradictions’, and also the pair ‘Life’ and ‘Death’, exploring liminal states and obliterating temporal distinctions. They are addressed by the living to the dead, addressing forms of dissolution and forgetting.

And, in *Escape Artists: Adventure and Isolation in Women’s Writing at the Fin de Siècle* (2017), Jennifer Nicol states that notions of Levy’s triple-marginality<sup>31</sup> have given rise to important examinations of her biography and literary output and these, in turn have contributed to a sharpened understanding of the relationship between gender, sexuality, race and aesthetic culture in fin-de-siècle Britain.<sup>32</sup>

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prostitution; young women who became pregnant outside of marriage, or young girls and teenagers who had no one to look after them.

<sup>29</sup> “Amy Levy. Contradictions? – Feminism and Semitic Discourse” (Chap. 9 in *Women’s poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, ed. Armstrong and Blain, 1999, Macmillan).

<sup>30</sup> During the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was conflated in western tradition with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed “sinful woman” who anoints Jesus’s feet in Luke 7:36–50. This resulted in a widespread but inaccurate belief that she was a repentant prostitute or promiscuous woman. However, the view of her as a former prostitute has persisted in popular culture. Mary Magdalene is now considered a saint by the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches—with a feast day of July 22. Other Protestant churches honour her as a heroine of the faith. Some portray her as Jesus’s closest disciple and the only one who truly understood his teachings. In the Gnostic gospels, Mary Magdalene’s closeness to Jesus results in tension with the other disciples, particularly Simon Peter.

<sup>31</sup> That Amy Levy is depicted as a figure trapped in a network of conflicting marginal identities: she was a British-born Jew who was critical of the Anglo-Jewish community, a woman with homosexual tendencies, a friend of socialists without a staunch political affiliation, and a depressive with a rich and varied social life.

<sup>32</sup> Levy’s writing is now receiving considerable interest from feminist and queer feminist scholars, particularly because of its combination of urban aesthetics and intersectional poetics that confront a matrix of oppressive judgements based on race, class, gender, religion and alternative desire.

Concluding, we have seen that Webster and Levy's major poetic speakers deal with a specific time-related dilemma. Xantippe bitterly documents a whole life of servitude to Socrates, Medea is unwilling to let time efface her revengeful feelings for Jason, a dying Magdalen refuses a pious redemptive afterlife, while a condemned Joan wants desperately to secure hers, and the lonely Circe faces the torture of a perpetual waiting. By literally collecting, carefully dusting, and imaginatively reviving this catalogue of somewhat problematic or transgressive historical women, Webster and Levy try to demonstrate that through artistic practise, i.e. through poetry, certain preconceptions can be, and should be, exposed, changed or transformed.

In their poems, one can witness multiple forms, concepts and strategies that pertain to the realm of the archive: recollecting, remembering, reusing, reconfiguring, revising and translating; whether this 'experience' emerges from their immediate reality, their former selves as women or from other texts, historical sources and characters. Theirs is an art that carefully collects the archaeological findings and makes strategic appropriations of former artefacts. Moreover, as this is so often the case with Modern Art, one could perhaps argue that it is also in this sense that Webster and Levy can be called 'modern'.<sup>33</sup>

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However, there is a growing interest in how her ambiguous personae fit within frameworks of non-normative desire.

<sup>33</sup> See Guimarães.