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Classical Women in Victorian Times: Augusta Webster's "Medea in Athens" and "Circe"

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Augusta Webster[1] (1837-1894) re-imagines the lives of two classical figures, Medea and Circe, in her second collection of dramatic monologues, *Portraits*(1870). Since their emergence in Greek mythology, both Medea and Circe have earned a rather notorious reputation for their "unwomanly" conducts. Medea is remembered as the murderer of her own sons, and Circe as the transformer of men into beasts; both images posing a serious threat to the patriarchal order. Moreover, a genealogical fact links Medea and Circe: Medea's father, King Aeetes of Colchis, and Circe are children of the sun god Helios and Perse, a sea nymph, thus making Circe Medea's aunt. Although this aunt-niece relationship is not hinted upon by Webster in her poems, there is an uncanny similarity in her portrayal of the two women. Choosing not to use the anti-heroine archetype that has characterised both Medea and Circe down the ages, Webster probes deep into the consciousness of each woman to explore their psychological complexities, not only to understand who they are, but also why and how they have become who they are. Also, her use of dramatic monologue enables her heroines to speak in the privileged "I" mode, revealing their inner thoughts and defending their actions in their own subjective voices, thus offering glimpses into those aspects of their characters which were hitherto unknown to the world.

The Victorian period witnessed sweeping changes in thinking about the institution of marriage. The establishment of the civil Court for Divorce by the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 inspired judiciary debates about the role of men and women within marriage,

bringing into question previously underestimated instances of marital abuse. The central purpose of the court was to provide relief from intolerable marriages for wider cross-section of the community than had previously been available. But ironically, it failed to do so and rather proposed "to make husbands and wives *more* moral"(Hammerton116). This concept of sexual morality was heavily problematic as it was rooted in a double standard that upheld different paradigms of chastity for men and women. Consequently, even after the 1857 Act, dissolving a marriage remained a difficult proposition, especially for women. As T.D. Olverson observes, "a woman suing for divorce needed to prove an additional offence beyond adultery, such as cruelty, bigamy or incest. A man, on the other hand, could divorce his wife for adultery alone"(40).[2] Along with divorce came the corollary question of custody. In Victorian England, in the event of divorce, it was typical that the father was awarded custody of any children resulting from the marriage. As Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers observe, "the rights and duties of the father were considered synonymous and co-extensive with those of the husband, while the legal powerlessness of the mother was the corollary of her lack of separate legal identity as a spouse: both she and her children were the *property* of her husband" (9). The situation improved marginally after the Infant Custody Act of 1839, but Broughton and Rogers suggest that "the principle of equal rights was rejected repeatedly by parliament until 1923, on the grounds that it would weaken the authority of the father within the family" (9). The iron-grip of coercive patriarchy that manifested itself through the father, the head of the family, thus remained ostensibly unchanged.

In this context Webster's "Medea in Athens" can be read as a piercing commentary on Victorian issues of sexual hypocrisy, marital conflict, and the lack of legal redress for the wronged wife, as Webster situates Medea's account within the discourse of marriage. First and foremost, Webster's Medea is a wife. In Athens she is both the spouse to King Aegeus and the former wife of Jason, and it is from this position that she speaks. In the monologue, Medea describes herself as bound by "dreadful marriage oaths" (222), which "led my treacherous flight / from home and father" (223-224) and then she goes on to mock Jason's ghost with the provocative question "Am I no happy wife?" (255). She has sacrificed her family and home for the love of Jason.[3] She stood by him in every difficult situation and partook in every heinous crimefor his prosperity.[4] But in return she was betrayed and left alone for another woman.[5] But she proclaims that "I am no babe / to shiver at an unavailing shade"(194-195) and that she is rather "an envied wife" (164) and declares her vengeance. In the monologue

Medea confronts Jason's ghost, blaming him for her present state;she recounts that it was Jason "who with fanged kisses changed"(203) her "natural blood to venom" (204) and "the curse of *him*[6] compelled" her to become what she has become. Medea furthers her argument by asking "whose is my guilt? / mine or thine, Jason?" (231-232). However, Webster does not vindicate Medea's act of violence and infanticide. Rather, through Medea Webster voices the injustices inflicted by a social and marital system upon wives and mothers. Furthermore, demanding a dignified treatment from Jason as his wedded partner, Medea refuses to be "put aside like some slight purchased slave / who pleased thee and then tired thee" (238-239). In the Victorian context Medea's act can be seen as a vengeful violence performed by the legally powerless wife against her (even more vulnerable) progeny. Medea is well aware of her legal position as an alienated wife. She knows that she cannot divorce Jason (as per the existing Divorce Acts), without facing an ugly legal battle and the loss of custody of her children. Unwilling to surrender to the double standards of law, Medea resolves to destroy the very basis of Jason's authority as a paterfamilias.[7] She exacts vengeance on her husband by making him pay in blood for his betrayal: since she is unable to vent her anger on him, she strikes back at Jason by terminating his bloodline and destroying what was most precious to him – his sons. Her crime appears to be a calculated attempt to wrest power from the unworthy when she says, "my sons, we are avenged" (256). Of course, her conduct overturns the standard Victorian iconography of the mother as that of an angelic woman engrossed in the nurturing of her offspring. Motherhood, which was culturally celebrated as the biological destiny of every woman, was equated with a woman's ability to selflessly care for her child. Women were viewed, defined and treated with regard to their status as doting mothers. From this perspective, Webster's heroine does not deserve to be called a mother. Rather, she is anti-maternal since she fails to fulfil the socially-approved role of a mother that requires her to vigilantly safeguard the lives of her children. In her conscious slaying of her infants, Medea, by conventional wisdom, stands stripped of her claims to motherhood. But is that the case? Does Medea really lack maternal compassion? Or is it her overpowering maternal love that drives her to kill her children? Does the life-giver have the moral right to be the dealer of death? While Webster refrains from answering these vexing questions, what she does make clear is that her Medea never abdicates her motherly identity. In fact,Webster's Medea goes on to describe her "ill dreams" in which she sees her sons "loathe me, ?y from me in dread" (274). In Webster's eyes,

Medea is a mother who grieves the loss of her sons and regrets her unfortunate role in their deaths. She isa woman driven to an extreme act by the adverse circumstances around her.

It should be noted that in Webster's rewriting of the Medea story Jason's infidelity and desertion of his family does not invite public condemnation. We see only Medea reacting with uncontrollable wrath to Jason's heartless actions. And although Medea's paroxysmal response may seem overreaction, what other legal options did she have in the context of Victorian laws? Her outrage can perhaps be explained by the fact that in contemporary England there were no effective punishments for negligent husbands. Olverson states that for erring wives the consequences for adultery could include the complete loss of parental rights over children, the loss of property or private fortune, or, as in the notorious Mordaunt divorce case of 1869, incarceration in an asylum (41). At the very least, such wives would have to endure social ostracisation, whereas adulterous husbands remained at the centre of legal and social power, enjoying leeway due to the sexual double standards ingrained in law.

In "Medea in Athens" Webster rejects the ancient one-dimensional archetype of Medea and creates a nuanced, three-dimensional portrait of a victimised wife, driven to unusual deeds. Her Medea is a woman more sinned against than sinning. Webster downplays the issue of infanticide until the final section of the monologue, compelling her readers to confront Medea as a woman, rather than as a child-slayer. Significantly, Webster's use of dramatic monologue serves her well in her project of humanising Medea. It enables Medea to put forward her side of the story. She not only reveals her motivations for committing infanticide, but also seeks to establish Jason's culpability in ruining her life. Webster's poem thus opens a window from which Medea can communicate and break free from the mythological (and patriarchal) constructions of her identity.

Circe is a*femme fatale* from ancient myth just like Medea whose character is given a new treatment in Webster's "Circe".In classical texts such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Anaeid*, and Petronius's *Satyrincon* Circe emerges as a dangerously sensual and potentially murderous sorceress; the writers obliterate Circe's magical divinity, her identity as the helper-goddess of the isle of Aiaia, rendering her into a sinister figure. Judith Yarnall in her seminal work *Transformations of Circe* (1994) suggests that Circe is "an archetypal woman of power" who "possesses the ability to *transform*, to give shape to other or to take it away. She offers debasement

and deliverance, a new life in flesh"(6-7). And it is the "fleshy" aspect of Circe's prowess that incited the tremendous interest among artists and writers down the ages. Webster, however, challenged the conventional image of Circe by constructing a totally different manifestation of her, one which is psychologically and philosophically revealing.

While Circe has managed to capture the fertile imagination of several male writers, no one has provided her with an individuated agentive voice. As Yarnall points out, "in most of her literary incarnations, Circe has been as mute as the Virgin Mary, that other magical shaper of flesh and blood whose ponderings of heart remain unworded"(182). Therefore, the most significant feature of Webster's "Circe" is that for the first time since Homer created her, Circe is not presented as a mysterious enchanter being seen through a male artist's projections, but is given a voice to reveal her long-hidden inner world.[8] In using the dramatic monologue, therefore, Webster is able to shift the emphasis from the desires and opinions of male writers to the mind of a self-possessed female figure. Circe's monologue demands an active engagement on our behalf (as readers) as we intently listen to her fashioning of her own selfhood. Circe repeatedly questions her subjectivity and submits herself to rigorous self-scrutiny. She constantly struggles to locate an identity for herself, by provocatively questioning "Why am I who I am?"(110). Webster's clever adaptation of the monologue form unfolds a liberating space in which Circe, together with the reader, attempts to answer the question.

In representing Circe Webster weaves a complex and intricate relationship of nature with her. In her depiction of nature's abandon, Webster appropriates the forces of nature to reflect Circe's physical and emotional intensities. For instance, Circe says, "rend my bowers,/scattering my blossomed roses like dust,/splitting the shrieking branches, tossing down/ My riotous vines" (11-14). Another important aspect shaping Circe's character is her sense of isolation in the beautiful island as she depicts " What fate is mine, who, far apart from pains /And fears and turmoils of the cross-grained world, /Dwell like a lonely god in a charmed isle / Where I am first and only"(58-61) Here, Circe's emotional and physical loneliness can be seen to mirror the social reality of a large number of young English women who lived independently, either through choice or force of circumstance[9] in Victorian England. Apart from being treated as a financial burden and living a life of social neglect, these unmarried women were also considered as a potent sexual threat to the ethical integrity of the social community.

Along with many other female reformers such as Harriet Martineau, Francis Power Cobbe, and Josephine Butler, Webster believed that the solution to the supposed problem of "surplus" unmarried women was education whichshe explores in essays like "The Dearth of Husbands"[10] among many othersfrom her seminal collection of essays*A Housewife's Opinions*(1879).She knew that through education and proper training women will be able to take charge of their lives, living as economically independent individuals with an increased possibility of attaining happiness. The self-exiled Circle with her vast knowledge of potions and herbs, therefore, can be seen to be an educated person and isolation adds to her agency as a self-regulating subject.

Another significant characteristic which distinguishes Circe as a feminist subject is her expression of non-conjugal sexuality. Despite articulating her emotional need for camaraderie, Circe never expresses any wish to be a wife or a mother. The rhetoric of martial domesticity is absent from Circe's scheme of things. In this sense Webster's poem is "a remarkably positive representation of the actively desiring female subject" (Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire" 382). However, sexual desire out of wedlock was considered as a taboo and was highly condemned in nineteenth-century society. This is another reason why Circe's reputation declined from a divine sorceress to a debased figure of vice and sexual depravity in Victorian times. Webster deals with this crude stereotyping and sexual hypocrisy in her poem. Far from being deceitful seductress, Webster's Circe is morally righteous and has little tolerance for any form of intemperance. Her assertive, empowered nature becomes clear in her treatment of selfish male adventurers. A case in point is her description of her encounter with petty onlookers in her island:

> And the silly beasts,
>
> Crowding round me when I pass their way,
>
> Glower on me, although they love me still,
>
> (With their poor sorts of love such as they could)
>
> Call wrath and vengeance to their humid eyes
>
> To scare me into mercy, or creep near
>
> With piteous fawning, supplicating bleats. (177-183)

Circe's authoritative speech contrasts the "supplicating bleats" of the male character.

Olverson suggests that Circe's depiction of the men in loathing term shows "her contempt for, and total domination over, brutish masculinity" (52). Her strong ethical nature condemns the "false and ravenous and sensual brutes / The shame the earth that bore them" (199-200). Thus, Circe holds men accountable to the same impossible high standards to which women are conventionally placed. This is a highly coordinated critique of the Victorian subjugation of women which Webster expresses through her appropriation of Circe's myth. In this poem, as in "Medea in Athens", predatory male behaviour is vociferously critiqued and condemned.

The classical texts unanimously portray Circe as an enigmatic goddess of magic, possessing powers of transformation, of turning men into beasts. Webster's Circe, however, radically subverts this centuries-old image, for in her poem, it is from Circe herself we hear the story rather than from her victims (who, as the legend goes, were turned into beasts by her). She is, she says, "more of a woman than a god", and therefore incapable of transforming the men into beasts through spells. It is the men themselves who are responsible for their brutal metamorphoses:

> Change? there was no change;
>
> Only disguise gone from them unawares:
>
> And had there been one true right man of them
>
> He would have drunk the draught as I had drunk,
>
> And stood unharmed and looked me in the eyes,
>
> Abashing me before him.(188-193)

In other words, the wine in Circe's Cup of Truth is not transformative, merely revealing. The men have been corrupted by their own base instincts as they fail to withstand Circe's simple personality test which teases out their moral hypocrisy and sexual double standards. Here "Homer's cup of female enchantment becomes, in Webster's hands, the cup of female truth. By drinking from it the men become simply themselves" (Leighton, 196). Circe is no longer responsible for the doom of the treacherous men, but it is the inherent evil within the men that devours them; the threat of decadence does not come from outside but from inside. In insinuating these ideas, the poem successfully critiques the misogynistic tradition of blaming women as the root cause of men's moral decline, a tradition of which the story of Circe-as-the-transformer-of-men-into-beasts is an example.[11]

In light of the arguments made so far, it can be concluded that Webster's reworking of the ancient myths in "Medea in Athens" and "Circe" invokes radical feminist agendas already in vogue in the nineteenth century. Both of her protagonists confront the hypocrisy inherent in Victorian conceptions of sexual morality. In her radical questioning of the gender-politics, Webster discards the trope of the transgressive woman and represents male sexual desire as wickedly self-serving and potentially destructive. Her monologues suggest a dramatic change in the representation, understanding, and interpretation of the centuries-old myths about two of the most commented-upon women of Greek antiquity. In her successful retelling of the myths, Webster recasts Medea and Circe as agentive subjects, as strong and articulate women who speak not only for themselves, but also for a whole class of late nineteenth-century English women.

Notes :

[1] Virtually unknown today, Augusta Webster (1837-1894) was a household name in Victorian England, celebrated as a remarkably talented Victorian poet, novelist, dramatist, and essayist of her day. Although Webster has experimented with various literary genres, her dramatic monologues are considered as "her most lasting contribution to English poetry" (Sutphin, *Augusta Webster*11). In 1866 her first collection of dramatic monologues entitled *Dramatic Studies*was published. And in 1870the second collection of dramatic monologues *Portraits*came out and gained widespread critical acclaim.

[2]As aggrieved wives were less able to obtain a divorce, a huge section of them turned to the narrow claim for a judicial separation, which did not permit remarriage.

[3]She betrays her father Aeetes and kills her brother, Apsyrth, while helping Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece. And after the quest she elopes with him, abandoning her birthplace, Colchis.

[4]Medea treacherously kills Jason's uncle, the King of Iolcos, Pelias, so that Jason can ascend the throne.

[5]Jason steals the Golden Fleece with Medea's aid and then together they flee to Corinth, where they living as husband and wife, had two children. But Jason, in the greed of the throne, soon resolves to marry the King of Corinth's daughter, Glauce and exiles Medea and his sons from Corinth.

[6] I have changed the "thee" to "him" for the sake of the expression.

[7]John Tosh in *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (*1999) explains that throughout the nineteenth century "to form a household, to exercise authority over dependants and to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and protecting them – these things set seal on a man's gender identity" as paterfamilias (108).

[8]One of the recent representations of Circe includes Margaret Atwood's "Circe / Mud Poems". The former portrays Circe as an automaton with a blank face without a trace of expression. Atwood's poem, however, adopts Circe's voice and reveals her wide range of emotions. If read carefully, Atwood's poem has some affinities with Webster's.

[9]William Rathbone Greg's article, "Why Are Women Redundant?" informs us that the 1851 Census had revealed that out of a national population of twenty million, there were approximately 500,000 more women than men, and there were two and a half million unmarried women across the country (459-460).

[10] This article was first published in the *Examiner* July 20, 1878. Later it was republished in the collection of essays by Webster, *A Housewife's Opinions* (1879).

[11]The significance of this misogynistic tradition is endless. It goes from Eve's curious choice for knowledge which allegedly prompted the fall of man. It is always women who are accused for the brutalities even exercised upon them. Even a victim of rape and physical abuse cannot surpass the moral gaze of the society that somehow always manages to find the woman as the provoker of such heinous acts.

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