

# Fragmenting the Myth: Augusta Webster's "Medea in Athens" and the Victorian Female Struggle

## Fragmentando el mito: "Medea in Athens", de Augusta Webster, y la lucha de las mujeres victorianas

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**Abstract:** Augusta Webster's poem "Medea in Athens" offers a dramatic interpretation of Medea's psychological responses to Jason's death. Using the technique of broken dramatic monologue, this poem allows the poet to offer a personal vision of a Medea in contention with her repressed emotions. Whilst the poem has been much studied by feminist scholars as a remarkable example of the struggle of the New Woman in Victorian England, this paper highlights the role played by the voice of Jason's ghost that represents Medea's unconscious, and that despite her desperate attempts reveals a strong patriarchal image of femininity. As the poem unfolds, it unveils how Jason's ghost projects the intense love that the protagonist feels for him, a love from which she cannot free herself. This paper reads the poem to pinpoint contrasting issues between psychological subjectivity and agency that affected many new intellectual Victorian women in their battles against patriarchy, and their own selves.

**Keywords:** Medea; Augusta Webster; stream of consciousness; dramatic monologue; Victorian feminism.

**Summary:** Introduction. Webster, "Medea," and the Breaking of Victorian Conventions. The Form of the Critical Monologue and the Fragmented Female Identity. The Performance of Female Fragmentation in "Medea in Athens." Conclusions.

**Resumen:** El poema "Medea in Athens" de Augusta Webster ofrece una interpretación dramática de las reacciones psicológicas que experimenta Medea tras la muerte de Jasón. Mediante la técnica del monólogo interior, Webster nos ofrece su visión de una Medea en liza contra sus emociones más reprimidas. Pese a que el poema ha sido profusamente analizado como ejemplo de la lucha de las "nuevas mujeres" victorianas, este artículo subraya el papel que juega la voz del fantasma de Jasón, que representa el inconsciente de Medea y que, pese a los desesperados intentos de la protagonista, desvela una inequívoca imagen patriarcal de feminidad. A medida que

transcurre el poema, su lectura demuestra como el fantasma de Jason proyecta el intenso amor que Medea siente por él, un amor del que no puede liberarse. El artículo analiza “Medea in Athens” para identificar contradicciones entre la subjetividad psicológica y la capacidad de agencia personal presentes en muchas mujeres intelectuales victorianas en su batalla contra el patriarcado y contra ellas mismas.

**Palabras clave:** Medea; Augusta Webster; monólogo interior; monólogo dramático; feminismo victoriano.

**Sumario:** Introducción. Webster, “Medea,” y la ruptura de las convenciones victorianas. La forma del monólogo crítico y la identidad femenina fragmentada. La representación de la fragmentación femenina en “Medea en Atenas.” Conclusiones.

## INTRODUCTION

To challenge the Victorian paradigm of femininity, some Victorian women writers were eager to rehabilitate Medea as a proto-feminist icon. Medea, as the archetypal figure of female alienation and disenfranchisement, became a force for social progress, appearing as “a complex character through which to explore women’s position in society, from which they seem fated always to be estranged” (McDonagh 165). Lorna Hardwick argues that “Medea became a catalyst for female writers’ rejection of the domination of the male voice and for awareness of the conjunction of the oppressions of gender and race” (71). For example, Amy Levy’s short play *Medea: A Fragment in Drama Form, after Euripides* (1882) shows how the story of Medea can also be reused to discuss gender and racial issues, as it mirrors the poet’s anxieties as an Anglo-Jewish woman struggling to be accepted in Victorian England.<sup>1</sup>

George Eliot repeatedly returns to the Medea myth in brief but evocative allusions in *Adam Bede* (1859), *Felix Holt* (1866), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Likewise, T. D. Olverson notes that “the best-selling novels of Ellen Wood and Elizabeth Braddon, for instance, feature unconventional and assertive heroines, who bear an uncanny resemblance to Euripides’ ancient antagonist” (51). In the case of Medea, the myth not only offered the authority of classical drama to a contemporary cause but can also be seen as the inspiration of the prolific genre of suffragette plays (Macintosh 514).

Augusta Webster’s dramatic monologue “Medea in Athens” (1870) has been largely read by feminist scholarship as a remarkable example of

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, my work “Radicalizing the Myth. Amy Levy’s *Medea: The (Un)Assimilated Jewish Victorian Woman.*”

the New Woman's struggle against Victorian patriarchal paradigms. For example, Shanyng Fiske argues that in her poem "Webster reimagined the Greeks as a way to think through the problems and possibilities of a newly-emergent female identity" (470–71). Likewise, Lee Christine O'Brien contends that the depiction of Webster's Medea explores and elaborates "issues of subjectivity, agency and desire [which challenge] conventional associations of women with reproduction, passivity, and nurturance" (184). Furthermore, Christine Sutphin notes that Webster's Medea, the only speaker in the monologue, controls all the play's scenes: she is not only the sole actor in her own drama, but also the scriptwriter, director, and stage manager exhibiting "a range of emotions, which humanize her without detracting from her power to assert herself" ("Representation" 386).

Despite these scholarly approaches, my reading of the poem shows that Medea's firm determination gradually breaks down. As the poem progresses, Medea's ambiguity and fragmentation are clearly perceived through Jason's ghost, a dramatic character out of Medea's control, whose imaginary voice represents Medea's deep-rooted psychological thoughts that consistently undermine her capacity to break free. Jason is featured as an uncanny character through which Webster envisages the influence of different layers of consciousness in human psychological struggles. In this struggle, Webster creates a modern Medea who tries to break free of patriarchal conventions but cannot free herself from her love for Jason, even after his death.

In addition, I contend that the destabilisation of the dramatic character also stems from the fact that Webster's Medea did not intend to murder her children but was forced to by incidental circumstances, a fact that magnifies her suffering and reinforces the central theme of motherhood, implicit in any Medea. As I will argue, this version clearly exculpates Medea from an intentional filicide, which must be highlighted as an innovative interpretation of the Euripidean Medea, in precisely the most enigmatic feature of the mythical woman.

## 1. WEBSTER, "MEDEA," AND THE BREAKING OF VICTORIAN CONVENTIONS

"Medea in Athens" appeared in *Portraits and Other Poems* (1870), a collection of eleven pieces which can be categorised by their voices: the

first four poems are narrated by women and the remaining seven by men.<sup>2</sup> Webster's display of characters "dramatize[s] not only differences within society in the positions of women vis-à-vis men and vis-à-vis each other, but differences within particular women" (Brown 104). The carefully assembled quartet of women's poems features four archetypal Victorian females in nearly all possible states of romantic or sexual liaisons with men: a wife ("Medea in Athens"), a fiancée ("Circe"), a mistress ("The Happiest Girl in the World"), and a prostitute ("A Castaway"), who voice their anxieties, disappointments, and threats in those different relationships with men. The first two portraits revisit two mythical figures, while the last two represent prototypes of improper Victorian women. As Natalie Houston notes, this cluster of poems "mixes ancient characters with contemporary figures to examine the role of marriage in shaping women's lives and introduces Webster's interest in marginal or excluded figures" (5), offering comprehensive insights into the challenges and fates of different types of Victorian women.

Augusta Webster was a prominent literary reviewer, a prolific journalist, a talented poet, and an outstanding translator of classical Greek. Her achievements in the classical literary field are all the more remarkable because Webster did not receive a thorough classical education; she was almost entirely self-taught. Nevertheless, she chose to announce herself to the literary community through her translations of Greek classics, an area almost exclusively reserved for males, which can be seen as a timely contribution to the feminist debates of her age. Webster was highly praised by her contemporaries for her faithful translations of Greek texts into English. First, in 1866 she accomplished a verse translation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and two years later she published her English version of Euripides' *Medea* and, thus, was very well acquainted with the Euripidean heroine when she drafted the poem.

Webster also challenged a typically masculine literary domain by choosing the form of "Medea in Athens," since in the Victorian era dramatic monologues were mostly produced by male writers like Alfred Tennyson, Mathew Arnold, and Robert Browning. Nevertheless, female poets like Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Felicia Hemans, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning would turn to poetry to battle the ideological opposition between the private and the public worlds, and to whom "the crafting of

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<sup>2</sup> All references to "Medea in Athens" are from Sutphin's 2000 edition of *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems* and use the line numbers of this edition.

emotive poetic personas . . . opened up previously unheard-of possibilities for self-fashioning" (Fiske 470). These female dramatic monologues indicate "fluid boundaries between the realms of private emotion and political action, combining lamentation and lyricism with forthright commentary on such volatile issues as the rights of married women, the problem of prostitution, and women's place in the nation's political fabric" (Fiske 469–70). Webster's "Medea" becomes a remarkable example of these fluid boundaries in which Webster creates an overwhelming female poetic persona to discuss both private and public affairs.

In the Victorian era, the so-called "new women" were female's communities allied by their common struggle against the constraints of bourgeois family life. Webster, as an emergent New Woman, fought the Victorian gender wars with her political and literary achievements. She was an enthusiastic activist engaged in issues like the suffrage movement. She signed the Kensington Society's petition for female suffrage that John Stuart Mill unsuccessfully presented to Parliament on 7 June 1866 (Rigg, "The Genius of Him" 3) and worked for the London branch of the National Committee for Women's Suffrage in the 1870s (Rigg, "The Lyric Muse" 135). As a feminist educational reformer, Webster was strongly concerned for girls' instruction. For two terms, 1879–1882 and 1885–1888, Webster was also a member of the London School Board, which promoted educational programmes for girls and fought for the right of women to be awarded a university degree. Her marriage to Thomas Webster, a fellow of Trinity College Cambridge and later a solicitor in London, widened her educational opportunities, especially when the couple moved to the capital, where her husband encouraged her to frequent literary circles, where she became, for example, a member of the Pre-Raphaelites. In fact, as Florence S. Boos points out, it is very likely that William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) influenced Webster's interpretation of Medea's character (53).

Webster's work shows that she strongly believed in the social function of poetry. For example, in a review published a year before her death she remarked: "new poets feel their impulse for song an impulse for change" (qtd. in Fiske 471). Her political activism was so remarkable that, according to some scholars, Webster "must be seen as one of the most politically driven and socially committed writers of the nineteenth century" (Olverson 27), in addition to her great value as a poet.

And yet, although her reviews in the *Athenaeum* and the *Examiner* clearly champion women's suffrage and education, like most Victorian

women, Webster was constrained by her duties as a mother and wife. This is shown, for example, in a letter to Professor Blackie in which she complains about the social obstacles that a woman has to face in her day-to-day routine, which impedes intellectual reflection and systematic study with “housekeeper’s duties and a little daughter to attend to and all the many social taxes on married ladies’ time” (qtd. in Olverson 31). Nevertheless, despite her marital duties, Webster was never a housewife in the conventional Victorian sense. Particularly emblematic of her progressive ideas it is the collection of political articles, originally published in *The Examiner* under the title *A Housewife’s Opinions* (1879), a pointedly ironic title considering that a housewife of that era was not supposed to have transcendent views on any matter.

## 2. THE FORM OF THE CRITICAL MONOLOGUE AND THE FRAGMENTED FEMALE IDENTITY

The tensions that emerge from her “Medea” contribute to articulating the notion of the female fragmented identity that can be seen at two levels: one is extratextual and is perceived in the struggles of the author as an emergent Victorian New Woman who fights against the impositions of her society; the other is intratextual and derives from Medea’s contradictory emotions. These interrelated extratextual and intratextual dimensions show the desire of these women (real or imagined) to pursue self-identity in their own respective oppressive-patriarchal contexts. Webster’s understanding of female psychological and emotional reactions in a patriarchal environment allowed her to develop both her feminist political stance and her poetry, if sometimes ambivalent as a result of the social and cultural conditions she was immersed in.

In her ongoing experimentation with form, Webster was a groundbreaking writer who created “a fairly complex system of poetics based on a balance of technical ability, innovation, and self-discipline” (Rigg, “The Lyric Muse” 135). This can be seen, for example, in her use of Romantic and Gothic literary techniques and its advancement of modernist or even postmodernist features, notably evidenced in Medea’s broken interior monologue or stream of consciousness that very adequately reflects her fragmentation. Webster believes that “in poetry the form of the thought is part of the thought, not merely its containing body” (61–62), and her portrayal of Medea as a fragmented woman heavily relies on the broken

form of the poem, in her performative and contradictory speech of the mind.

The protagonist's mind is torn between her present and her past, between her husband and her ex-lover. Through her unreliable gaze, Jason and herself are moulded according to her wishes with the significant exception of the ghost's menacing presence which, against her will, discloses her real fears and overwhelming desires of love and hate, mixed up with her children's memories and her now repressed sexuality.

In her closet drama "Medea in Athens," Webster employs a hybrid genre, as it stands between poetry and theatre, presenting several characters and changing scenarios, if only in Medea's mind. Olverson claims that Webster renders a "deliberately convoluted narrative, which defies rigid classification" (37), in which the dramatic action takes place within the territory of the lyrical. With respect to the form, Rigg notes that possibly due to Robert Browning's influence, Webster's collection of dramatic poems present features of monodramas ("Dramatic Forms" 1), that is, actual theatrical writings to be staged by one performer. Whereas in the dramatic monologue the speaker's mind remains abstract and distanced from the reader, the monodrama's performative features invite the reader to identify with the speaker's emotional state by endorsing the character's state of mind (Rigg, "Dramatic Forms" 2), which is more successfully achieved when the speaker interacts with other characters. Unlike the monologue's conventional silent audience, in "Medea in Athens" the dramatic persona addresses, if only in her imaginings, figures such as Hecate (37), her dead sons (264), and herself (36); and, more significantly, Medea maintains an imaginary dialogue with Jason (33), thus enhancing, even more, the performative features of the monologue.

Effectively, Webster creates a performative space for the dramatic process of self-definition that can be appreciated in the fluctuating scenarios and the orchestration of the dramatic speakers—albeit only in the speaker's own imagination. For example, at a given moment the monologue transports the reader to a landscape by the sea where Jason, looking at the sky addresses a "screaming sea-bird" (103) that "skimmed out of sight" (105), while Medea imagines him saying:

Fly forth, fly forth, bird, fly to fierce Medea  
Where by great Ægeus she sits queening it,  
Belike a joyful mother of new sons;  
Tell her she never loved me as she talked. (107–10)

Webster's introspective "Medea in Athens" provides a lyrical picture of Medea's new life in Athens, far away from Corinth where she slays her own children while escaping from the vengeful Greek patriarchal and xenophobic society. Webster's rewriting of the myth thus proposes a plausible evolution of the Euripidean Medea, reimagining her life married to Aegeus, the King of Athens. She is now "a joyful mother with new sons" (109) leading an apparently conventional life, in what constitutes an innovative rendition of the myth. As I contend, many of the different subjectivities displayed in the poem reflect different stereotyped depictions of gender. Medea is portrayed as the perfect Victorian girl before Jason arrives, and, as an adult, she is a woman who fully depends on men. She depends on Aegeus materially and socially, as shown by her marriage of convenience, and she depends on Jason emotionally and sexually, as shown in the poem's stress on her desire for him. However, throughout the poem there is an underlying challenge to the stereotype of the perfect wife and the beautiful woman which emerges when Medea is fully honest with herself. Thus, the poem displays a contradictory and ambivalent image of Medea who struggles to escape the traps of patriarchal ideology without fully managing to do so. Both psychological approaches are effectively conveyed by a series of performative acts (or acts of speech) through which the poetic subject battles between both images of herself in her desperate efforts to break normative gender definitions.

### **3. THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE FRAGMENTATION IN "MEDEA IN ATHENS"**

For her psychological approach, Webster chose the form of a dramatic monologue entirely composed by Medea's stream of consciousness. The stream flows from the moment she learns that Jason has died until the instant she rejects Jason's delusional voice, trying to drive away the phantasmagorical echoes. My reading of the poem follows what I see as three distinct parts: (i) her present with Aegeus in Athens, (ii) a reverie in which Medea is transported to her past with Jason, and (iii) her present once again in which she is disturbed by her conscience in the form of an imaginary ghost. The close reading of the three sections that follows, reveals different and ambiguous representations of Medea, which simultaneously challenge and reinforce Victorian female paradigms.



In the poem's first section (lines 1–39), Webster portrays Medea's indifference at learning the news of Jason's death. In the present time, she is a proper wife who coldly learns about Jason's demise: "Dead, is he? . . . a thing / Most natural and so indifferent" (1–3). Yet, she soon unmasks her own self by confessing introspectively the hypocrisy of her dull life: "with all its useless talk / And useless smiles and idiot's prying eyes" (13–14), an instant in which, in a sudden turn, Medea acknowledges the falsehood of her married life.

In a second section (lines 40–129), her initial indifference turns into incredulity to portray an entranced Medea who experiences a reverie that transports the poetic subject to her past, plunging herself (and the reader) into a dreamlike realm where she beholds Jason in the old times, as if in a delusional fit, until he dies just as she had prophesied with "a tottering spar" (124) of the *Argo*. In this second part, a double vision unfolds: first, Jason's vision of her, a beautiful and daring woman; and second, Medea's vision of Jason, a practical man shaped in accord to her wishes.

In the third and final part (lines 130–270), which takes us back to her present, the gender battle emerges. Medea is haunted by an uncanny ghost who mocks her, accuses her, and reveals more of herself than she wants to acknowledge. The voice she imagines is Jason's, although it is not actually heard in the poem. It is only Medea's voice replying to Jason's phantasmagorical echoes that replicates Medea's restless conscience, reminding her of what she desperately wants to forget; namely her passionate love for him and the filicide. In a very long sequence filled with nostalgia, sexuality, grief, and most of all wrath for her losses, she anxiously addresses and challenges Jason, trying to drive away his disturbing voice. Webster thus uses the dramatic echoes of Jason's ghost to offer insights into the protagonist's personality, disclosing her ambiguity.

### 3.1 The Victorian Masquerade

The dramatic monologue starts at the precise moment she learns the news of the death of Jason, who has died just as Medea had formerly prophesied, with his head battered by the ruins of the *Argo*. Medea's social dependence on Aegeus is revealed from the very beginning of the poem, which starts with a question:

Dead, is he? Yes, our stranger guest said dead  
 Said it by noonday, when it seemed a thing  
 Most natural and so indifferent  
 As if the tale ran that a while ago. (1–4)

With the use of the possessive “our,” the poetic voice initially ignores her speaker’s individuality. The use of “our” implies that Medea and Aegeus are the respectable couple hosting the stranger guest who brings the news of Jason’s demise, as if the character were boasting of her new life as a dutiful wife, accompanied by her aristocratic husband, no less than a king. Medea’s response to the news of Jason’s decease is sarcastic: “Good news for us, but ill news for the dead / When the gods sweep a villain down to them” (7–8), the first reference to the gods, Medea’s protectors in this man’s world. At that moment, the poet evokes Euripides himself when Medea acknowledges that such a thought about villains and gods “was the prompt trick of words, like a pat phrase / From someone other’s song found on one’s lips” (9–10). In analysing these lines, Melissa Valiska Gregory believes that Medea suffers a crisis of language, arguing that the reference to “other’s song” suggests that Medea “has lost her voice” while “the rest of Webster’s poem tracks her efforts to invent a more authentic song” (30), a purpose that will be ultimately frustrated since “she can only stabilize the self by shutting down memory and speech altogether” (33). For Fiske, the reference to the hypotext reveals that the dramatic persona appears to have dissociated herself from her past and can hardly remember her old self (480). As she puts it, “for the speaker, this constitutes a search for cohesion between the woman she was and the woman she is” (481). According to Fiske, this dissociation is a trope that shows the duality that runs throughout the poem because the roles of murderer, witch, and filicidal mother are “far removed from her present role as Aegeus’s ‘envied wife’” (480), from her present role as a Victorian wife.

Medea’s fragmentation, thus, emerges from the outset. Her new life as the king’s wife is soon disclosed as a dull one that is based on hypocrisy. Aegeus embodies a conventional life that keeps her safe but lifeless, surrounded by “fools” and “weary mummers” (17, 18). The character thus follows social conventions and tolerates a passionless marriage, which is totally at odds with her passionate nature. The poem discloses numerous Victorian female anxieties and frustrations voiced by the heroine, such as her unpassionate marriage with Aegeus under a convenient prearranged contract, or her introspective longings for a more honest life.

Sutphin has argued that "the apparent cultural and mythical distance [of Medea and other mythical characters like Circe] gives [her] the power to critique heterosexual politics and to express [her] own desires in ways impossible for Victorian women" (Introduction 17). Indeed, Webster's rendering of the heroine depicts a Victorian woman indulging in a few precious moments of recognition; as Fiske puts it, her Medea is a woman "in moments of frustration, ennui, and depression" whose poem at the same time "remind[s] readers that each woman is the product and agent of extraordinary powers capable of raising her above her temporary state of helplessness and entrapment" (479). These words perfectly capture Webster's ability to create a fragmented Medea who struggles to leave behind the static subjectivity constructed by the patriarchal system in the hope of developing a more dynamic one. The poem shows a progression from a constrained position to a more flexible construction of gender which is, however, ultimately frustrated. The Victorian mores finally win over her own sense of self.

Particularly illustrative, the verses that follow convey Medea's apathy towards her new life as a Victorian married woman. She cannot live an honest life but has to abide by the social rules, forgetting "anon" her real self:

And now when day, with all its useless talk  
And useless smiles and idiots' prying eyes  
That impotently peer into one's life,  
When day, with all its seemly lying shows,  
Has gone its way and left pleased fools to sleep. (13–17)

In this introspective moment, she pictures the masquerade of her empty and useless life. It is in this instance that Webster offers an open approach to gender. Through her performative speech, she constructs a woman honest to her own self, aware of the apathic life she is leading because of her yielding to Victorian social constraints. Medea's new context is full of idiots and lying fools with masks on their faces, a situation that allows her to raise the topic of Victorian hypocrisy and marriages of convenience. As we discover through her voice, the hypocritical marriage simultaneously helps her to complete her revenge against Jason:

Yea, my new marriage hope has been achieved;  
For he did count me happy, picture me

Happy with Ægeus; he did dream of me  
As all to Ægeus that I was to him. (147–50)

These lines obviously resonate with the troubled condition of women in Victorian Britain, as the poem replicates the position of those who believed that happiness was attached to matrimony, relying desperately on men to gain not only respect from them and from society but, what is worse, to gain self-respect. The poem uses the myth to show how Victorian society bound women, both culturally and socially, to marriages of convenience and how they usually resulted in women's frustration and unhappiness, an idea that permeates the poem showing the side of Medea that fights against these static gendered representations.

The poetic flow of thoughts soon breaks out. While the poem drifts from noon to night, Medea is overwhelmed by her absence of feelings about Jason's death: the "most strange of all / That I care nothing" (22–23). However, the voice soon shifts to a flowing series of images and ideas running through her mind: "Nay, how wild thought grows! / Me seems one came and told of Jason's death: / But 'twas a dream" (24–26). It is at this point when her unmasked stream of consciousness sets off.

### 3.2 The Reverie

The sequence that follows (lines 40–129) immerses the reader into a dreamlike atmosphere. In Medea's reverie she beholds Jason as a blurred figure: "is not that he, arisen through the mists?" (40), while she makes out a "lean and haggard man rough round the eyes, / Dull and with no scorn left upon his lip" (41–42). Such visionary skills initially may suggest that she is "prone to fits of delusion and flights of imaginative fancy" (Olverson 38). In my reading, however, it soon becomes certain that this part of the poem, rather than reflecting delusional fits, contains what Medea's mind dreams of, what she would like to have happened. Jason is hers now, she controls not only our vision of him but Jason's vision of her: the poet, as Helen Luu puts it, "multiplies the spectacle . . . by multiplying the gaze" (89). At this point, Webster offers a stereotyped image of womanhood; a distorted image of Medea, seen through Jason's gaze who presents her as a dependent woman with a glowing beauty to be admired by her lover, describing a happy couple deeply in love.

Although Medea dominates the discourse and seemingly holds the power, she undermines it by presenting herself at the mercy of Jason's

love, thus incurring evident contradictions. Whereas it is true that in many instances Jason is depicted as a puppet in the hands of Medea, this part of the poem demonstrates that performative acts of speech can help consolidate normative constructions of gender. Indeed, most of the lyrical acts displayed by Webster in this part suggest a conventional vision of Medea's gendered role. As Luu suggests, the images created by Medea's speech are not "simply the active subject who contests the dominant discourse through acts of self-gazing and self-appreciation but also an object who embodies the ideal of femininity produced by those same discourses" (91), an ambivalence towards gender constructions that also reflects the tensions experienced by the author herself as an emerging New Woman.

In this long sequence, the poem gathers Medea's broken recollections of her life with Jason until he dies, battered by the *Argo's* mast. Medea envisions Jason's image of her: she embodies the ideal of femininity and prettiness and the poem emphasises the importance of such qualities: "her face glowed / With daring beauty" (65–66), while "Glaucé was never half so beautiful" (72). This image is cast by Jason's voice, as reproduced in Medea's mind, which says exactly what Medea would like to hear. He speaks "out his loneliness" (56) and creates a scenario of his desire for her in which he acknowledges his sheer admiration for Medea. It starts with Jason's flow of thoughts while he remembers the dangers and love they experienced while fleeing from Colchis with the precious golden fleece. Jason vaguely recalls this episode when he makes out "two sunned and shadowed clouds" (52) that "take shapes of notched rock-islands" (53) and in his own stream of consciousness makes a "languid" connection "to the steep Symplegades and the sound of waters crashing at their base" (54). In this new scenario, on board the *Argo*, in the middle of their escape for the Greek shores, they have just overcome another danger when Medea speaks: "love steers" (58). Carelessly "she laughed" (57), "tossed her head back, while her brown hair streamed / Gold in the wind and sun" (64–65) and she cried "'what of woes,' . . . / 'If only they leave time for love enough?'" (66–67). This moment represents the climax of Medea's happiness, which, in marked contrast with the rest of the poem, conveys the poet's idea of the fleeting nature of a plentiful life. After describing Jason's admiration for Medea and their mutual love, in the constant alternation of stereotypical representations of genders, the sequence continues to emphasise Jason's failure of judgement, a part of the poem

where I identify Webster's attempts to represent defiant gender models by undercutting male domination.

Medea voices the hitherto-silenced woman in search for freedom, whilst it patently destabilises the image of men by presenting Jason as an anti-heroic figure, a flawed and remorseful man who "schemed amiss" (85) and was ruined, while Medea, an apparently "happy wife" (240), survived. Medea's character is never associated with a passive victim; on the contrary, she epitomises the wronged woman abandoned by a man who takes revenge as a result of which the man is ruined whilst she is a "happy wife." Even if bitterly, Medea does triumph over Jason.

In Webster's rewriting of the myth, Jason bluntly acknowledges how wrong he was in choosing Glaucé, recalling her with compassion: "Poor Glaucé; a sweet face; and yet, methinks / She might have wearied me" (74–75). He severely questions (as always, in Medea's mind) his pragmatic soul: "Wealth and a royal bride: but what beyond? / Medea, with her skills, her presciences / Man's wisdom, woman's craft" (80–83), a comparison that clearly encapsulates the daring image of the new Victorian woman which the poet simultaneously aimed to present. Webster's construction of Jason and by extension of males in general is far from sympathetic. Sutphin claims that she presents him to the reader as Medea would have liked him to be; defeated, weak and regretful ("Representation" 386). A common denominator in all renderings of the Medea myth is that Jason is characterised as a practical man who sees women as tools to be used for his own prosperity and glorification (386). Webster's version incites a clear criticism of Jason's drives and explains Medea's actions as a repudiation of such detestable motives. As Sutphin puts it, "although Medea imagines Jason's desire for her, she also has him berate himself for leaving her for Glaucé, not because he realises that he loved Medea more, but because she would have been more useful to him" ("Representation" 386). Jason's failure of judgement is plainly illustrated in these verses: "I schemed amiss / And earned the curses the gods send on fools / Ruined, ruined! A laughing stock to foes" (85–87). While he is complaining, the *Argo's* "tottering spar" (124) hits him and "hush, hush! He has lain" (128); at this point, Medea's reverie adds a slight but significant adjustment that reinforces her ambiguity, illustrating her in-depth internalisation of Victorian gender roles through acts of speech, this time in the imaginary lips of Jason. He dies while calling out for her: "'where is Medea? Let her bind my head' / Hush, hush! A sigh—a

breath—He is dead" (128–29), words that suggest Jason's everlasting (as she wants to believe) love, until death truly did them part.

### 3.3 The Fragmentation: The Ghost and the Children

It is in the third part of the poem, when Jason's ghost appears, that Medea's ambiguous character is more evidently revealed. As the poem advances, it becomes obvious that Medea cannot control Jason's ghost whose echoes, existing only in Medea's mind, reflect her real feelings in the form of obsessive reminders of her past with him. Robert Fletcher observes that the trope of the character's obsession with "awful secrets to discuss contradictions in gender and sexuality in Victorian culture" (149) is used by Webster in other monologues, as for example, in "Sister Annunciata," in which the speaker is haunted by visions of Joan of Arc, or in "An Inventor," in which the dramatic subject is also troubled with revelations (149).

Medea's new civil status fills her with arguments to shout at Jason's ghost, including the significant rhetorical question "Am I no happy wife?," a desperate attempt to persuade both the ghost and herself that her marital status is fulfilling enough:

With thy cold smiling? Aye, can I not love?  
 What then? am I not folded round with love,  
 With a life's whole of love? There doth no thought  
 Come near to Ægeus save what is of me:  
 Am I no happy wife? And I go proud,  
 And treasure him for noblest of the world:  
 Am I no happy wife? (236–42)

Medea's voice is clearly unreliable, as she is immersed in the contradictions between her claims of being a happy Victorian wife and her reflections about the dishonest and meaningless life she is now leading. She tries to bottle up her passionate feelings for Jason and, implicitly, reprimands herself for allowing them to emerge. Yet, ambivalent gender constructions surface, as though she wanted to transform the real feelings by speaking unreal words, with impossible acts of speech, to persuade herself by repeating, as a sort of mantra, "Am I no happy wife"? (240, 242). That she still cares for Jason is also shown later in a speech, full of

nostalgia and euchronias, as if she had preferred to die with him in “the good days” before they arrived in Corinth:

To be so separate having been so near—  
Near by hate last, and once by so strong love.  
Would love have kept us near if he had died  
In the good days? Tush, I should have died too:  
We should have gone together, hand in hand,  
And made dark Hades glorious each to each. (162–67)

In her passionate self she seeks emotional intensity, and in this struggle, love alternates with hate: “with love, with hate, what care I? hate is love” (145). The text displays many euchronias, showing her inner and overwhelming desires for a different ending of her story: “what if –” (267), followed by a suggestive blank space. This is proven, for example, in her desire to have died with him in a shipwreck on the *Argo* “in the good days” (165), a longing that she, if unwillingly, repeats to herself: “Oh me, how I loved him! / Why did I not die loving him?” (176–77). In fact, as a manifestation of women’s dependence on men and in an image drawn from Romantic gothic depictions of true love—almost comparable to Cathy’s in *Wuthering Heights* when the heroine claims “I am Heathcliff”—Medea confuses her identity with Jason’s, as if she had died with him:

But lo, the man is dead: I am forgotten.  
Forgotten; something goes from life in that—  
As if oneself had died when the half self  
Of one’s true living-time has slipped away. (156–59)

However, in her struggle against her proud and passionate being, Webster’s Medea is a woman who refuses to passively accept Jason’s betrayal and longs for further revenge, even after his death: “he should still pine and dwine / Hungry for his old lost strong food of life / Vanished with me, hungry for children’s love” (141–43) and, as she desires, “hungry for me” (144).

Her past actions, most significantly her filicide, are recalled by Jason’s ghost, who represents her remorseful conscience: “go, go; thou mind’st of our sons; / And then I hate thee worse” (267–68). Medea longs for forgetfulness: “go to thy grave / By which none weeps” (268–69), but Jason as her conscience will not relent: “never could I forgive thee for my



boys / Never could I look on this hand of mine / That slew them and not hate thee" (229–31). In her performative speech, she openly reverses the responsibility: "Wilt thou accuse my guilt? Whose is my guilt? / Mine or thine, Jason? Oh, soul of my crimes, / How shall I pardon thee for what I am?" (217–19). Medea presents Jason as the only culprit for her own misdeeds, as when she addresses his ghost:

Thy vengeance, ghost! What hast thou to avenge  
As *I* have? Lo, thy meek-eyed Glaucé died,  
And thy king kinsman Creon died: but I,  
I live what thou hast made me. (185–88)

She hates him because he made her what she is now: a murderer of her brother (211), of Glaucé (186), and of her own children (229). In a nostalgic passage, Webster illustrates one of the most fascinating aspects of Medea's and of many wronged women's claims: that she left everything for him. She pictures herself as the angelic Victorian woman before she met him: "A grave and simple girl in a still home / Learning my spells for pleasant services / Or to make sick beds easier" (191–93). In an idyllic account, the following lines of the poem celebrate Nature evoking a Romantic pastoral environment while offering sweet poetic images full of nostalgia:

All faces smiled on me, even lifeless things  
Seemed glad because of me; and I could smile  
To every face, to everything, to trees,  
To skies and waters, to the passing herds,  
To the small thievish sparrows, to the grass  
With sunshine through it, to the weed's bold flowers:  
For all things glad and harmless seemed my kin,  
And all seemed glad and harmless in the world. (195–202)

Jason seduced and used her in his quest for the golden fleece, which would have failed without the helper-maiden. To her, life seemed innocent and easy until he arrived and changed her orderly Victorian life with his passion, with poisoned kisses that roused Medea's sexual desire, lyrically pictured through animal imagery: "Oh smooth adder / Who with fanged kisses chang'dst my natural blood / To venom in me" (188–90). Medea bitterly reproaches Jason for ruining her: "Thou cam'st, and from the day thou, meeting me . . . / Didst burn my cheek with kisses hot and strange"

(204–06). In her girlish infatuation, she became what he made her: “the wretch thou say’st; but wherefore? by whose work?” (207); “When have I been base, / When cruel, save for thee, until—Man, man” (215–16). From this viewpoint, the type of woman portrayed here is also an archetype, one who voluntarily enters into self-destructive relationships with selfish, manipulative men. Medea complains: “I, put aside like some slight purchased slave / Who pleased thee and then tired thee” (224–25). Once used, she is shunned, as if she were a mere human commodity, reified in the playground of the Victorian man’s game.

Medea, however, finishes this struggle with Jason’s ghost by presenting a male with no pride, dealing with the central theme in the myth: the children. She reveals, if only in her own mind, what Jason thinks of their death, showing a practical man who, as he saw Medea or Glauécé, perceived his children as instrumental (Sutphin, “Representation” 387), just as mere objects at his service:

. . . and he sighs ‘Ah me!  
 She might have spared the children, left me them:—  
 No sons, no sons to stand about me now  
 And prosper me, and tend me by and by  
 In faltering age, and keep my name on earth  
 When I shall be departed out of sight.’ (96–101)

Jason’s laments for the loss of his children disclose his very practical nature, as his desire for his offspring is simply for his self-aggrandizement. Medea asks: “. . . childless, thou, / What is thy childlessness to mine?” (232), thus keeping for herself the privilege of having loved their children. In her psychological struggle, Medea even rejoices in their children’s death because her revenge is thus complete: “If they had lived, sometimes thou hadst had hope / For thou wouldst still have said ‘I have two sons’” (249–50). And so, she continues, “thou hast died shamed and childless, none to keep / Thy name and memory fresh upon the earth” (253–54).

In focusing on Webster’s representation of motherhood, Gregory argues that the poem “suggests that Medea has committed two murders, not just one. The first, of course, is the murder of her children. The second is the annihilation of Jason through the destruction of his bloodline” (31). While Gregory finds some kind of poetic justification in the “latter act, the destruction of Jason” (32), she notes that the destruction of the children seems not to be coherent, because Medea’s laments for her children’s loss,

strongly points at maternal poetic inspiration rather than at her act of destruction (29). Gregory's theory on the poem's representation of motherhood, however, does not fully account for a crucial revelation of the monologue that may enlighten her thesis, as the poem reveals that Medea did not mean to kill her children, but was forced to by an incidental occurrence.

While Euripides presents Medea's filicide as the inevitable divine justice on oath-breaker Jason (Luschnig 38), and most of Medea's modern representations depict her as an enraged women who achieves a vicarious revenge on Jason's abuse through her filicide, Webster's poem plainly changes this common shaping of the Euripidean myth. A close reading reveals the ultimate motive of her crimes, offering Webster's personal understanding of the filicide. This is discussed at the end of the poem, almost casually, when Medea addresses Jason: "Dost mock me still? / My children, is it? Are the dead so wise?" (255–56), and continues,

Why, who told *thee* my transport of despair  
When from the Sun, who willed me not to die  
Nor creep away, sudden *and too late came*  
The winged swift car that *could have saved them*, mine,  
From thee and from all foes. (244–48; my emphasis)

Webster's sequel clearly states that Medea kills her children because the carriage that "could have save them . . . / from thee and from all foes" (247–48) was delayed. Accordingly, in her account, filicide was not intentional; she wanted to take the children with her but was forced to kill them in the last instant in order to save them from a crueller death at the hands of their enemies. Therefore, this revelation strongly reinforces Gregory's claim on Webster's maternal inspiration (29). As later shown in her posthumously published work *Mother and Daughter* (1895), maternity was an inspirational subject for Webster (Gregory 28), and she does indeed manage to save Medea's representation of motherhood.

Consistently with this view, Medea's motherhood emerges in her poetic nightmares, full of images of her sons: "What if I have ill dreams, . . . / When a I would feed my hungry mouth with kisses? / . . . / With young lips prattling 'mother mother dear'" (257, 259, 264). At this point, her suffering for the losses is so immense that she cannot stand Jason's image, dismissing it in the last lines: "go, go; you mind'st of our sons / and then I hate thee worse" (267–68). Yet, it is in the final line when Medea

recomposes herself, for which she recovers her social mask, an internal and psychological protection for her to survive in her mental battle. Thus, in Medea's last attempt to banish "Jason's forlorn ghost from her one-woman drama" (Sutphin, "Representation" 388) and to finally conclude her ongoing agony, she lies to herself and to the ghost: "go to thy grave / . . . I have forgotten thee" (268–69).

The drama runs entirely in her mind from the moment she receives the news of Jason's demise until her contrived utterance of the last line, which conspicuously bears a wish more than the bare truth. This ending leads the reader to imagine a very pessimistic outcome: despite her struggles to attain different subjectivities, Medea remains trapped in the patriarchal net. In the end, the poetic subject remains static, lying to herself to accommodate Victorian mores.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Euripidean Medea has consolidated over the centuries as an icon against oppressions of gender and race, and Augusta Webster recovers Medea's empowering and transcendent mythical story to create a profoundly human characterization of the protagonist to discuss the struggle of Victorian women against social, financial, and psychological dependence on men.

Through a close reading of "Medea in Athens," it is shown how the poetic subject is divided between her past, represented by Jason's imaginary voice, and her present, embodied by her husband, Aegeus. The dramatic depiction of Medea's psychological and emotional responses to Jason's death allows Webster to offer a personal vision of an ambivalent poetic persona who displays multiple subjectivities due to her conflicting emotions, mirroring the predicaments of many contemporary Victorian women.

In reading the poem, I highlight parts that clearly feature constructions of female subjectivity as shaped by Victorian female paradigms, ranging from the perfect Victorian girl to the helper-maiden and the submissive Jason's lover (before betrayal), and finally the happy wife of Aegeus. There are other parts, however, where it is stressed how the text challenges such patriarchal constructions, thus reflecting Medea's attempts to create a new female identity free of social conventions; this is disclosed when she is honest to herself and assumes her dull married life or her profound love for Jason, even after his death.

The monologue strongly conveys both the poet's personal experiences as a woman and her feminist vocation as a politically committed New Woman. Webster's Medea displays an overwhelming personality, offering outspoken opinions that transgress the norms, much as Webster herself did in her work. She does not conform to patriarchal rules and steadfastly believes that she is entitled to contest them. However, this frame of mind is simultaneously challenged by the stereotype of a submissive and manipulated woman, weakened by her sexual desire and steadfast love for the man that, she believes, gives her real happiness. The character's fragmentation emerges through these contradictory desires, which are skilfully framed in the poem's form, a dramatic monologue in between poetry and monodrama, with different characters and changing scenarios, if only in Medea's imagination. The poem is entirely composed by Medea's stream of consciousness, a very appropriate technique to reflect psychological struggles. In this stream of thoughts, Webster uses the dramatic echoes of Jason's ghost to offer insights into the protagonist's mind, unveiling feelings related to her dead children and her intense love for Jason that she desperately endeavours to repress.

Furthermore, in Webster's depiction of the character's mental suffering, the poet manages to exonerate Medea from the murder of her children, presenting the filicide as an accidental event. By rewriting Euripides' ending along with the mourning verses dedicated to her dead sons, Medea's motherhood becomes an important axis of the poem, undermining the myth's vicarious revenge on Jason and highlighting maternity as a key inspirational element of her verses.

"Medea in Athens" becomes a fascinating example of women's fragmentation between what they internally want to be, arguably the agent of their own lives, and what they might become, constrained by the forces of social mores and their deeply internalised ideas of femininity. As shown, despite her feminist aspirations, the ending of Webster's poem—with Medea's self-deception—stresses the great psychological difficulties women face considering the immemorial patriarchal constructions of femininity that consistently configure women's mindset around the family, everlasting loves, and happy endings.

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