

## Retrieving *Fin-de-Siècle* Women Poets:

### The Transformative Myths, Fragments and Voices of Webster, Blind and Levy

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*The fountain of great poesy,*

*Will shine and flash, and flame and glow*

(Mathilde Blind, *The Orange-Peel in the Gutter*)

In the recent process of recovery of late Victorian women poets and of the renovated interest in the later nineteenth century, Augusta Webster, Mathilde Blind and Amy Levy have been the objects of sporadic but keen attention, even if they have not received similar coverage on the part of the critics.<sup>1</sup> While Webster and Levy have had a few recent studies dedicated to them in the last decade or so,<sup>2</sup> Blind still stands on the margins as a dated curiosity – ‘little read today, and not easily obtainable’ (Lerner, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Why then should we focus our attention on this particular set? As Laurence Lerner explains in the section he dedicates to these ‘Three Radicals’, the modern reader may find their ‘generous and forward-looking ideas’ not just ‘sympathetic’ but above all ‘interesting’ (p. 100):

[...] looking back at them from a later age, in which many of their aspirations have been realised, we can place them in the development of thought by saying they were followers of Strauss and Darwin, Mill and Mazzini, [...], and that they anticipated much of our own time’ (p. 111).

He indeed considers them ‘significant figures in social and intellectual history, rather than in the history of poetry’,<sup>4</sup> emphasising though the ‘disgraceful’ neglect that Webster, in particular, has ‘fallen into’ – something that he believes should be ‘remedied’ (p. 111).<sup>5</sup> But Blind has yet to receive the prominence she deserves too; her extensive contributions to Victorian debates on aesthetics, religion, imperialism, gender and sexuality are matched only by the delicate lyrics and bold narratives that this German immigrant with a perfect command of English excelled in.

In her comprehensive review of recent critical trends, Lyn Pykett mentions not only *fin-de-siècle* women’s interest in new ways of representing feminine interiority, thus anticipating modernism, but also that their writing has been read as both an extension of, and in opposition to, *fin-de-siècle* decadence and aestheticism (p. 16).<sup>6</sup> The focus on New Woman poets, which started with the publication of Linda K. Hughes’s anthology (2001), has led to several interesting findings: political critique in the aestheticist poetry of socialist poets, forms of decadent Darwinism, and a cosmopolitan and transnational poetics. Formal variety and experimentation is also shown to be combined with very specific late nineteenth-century concerns: those of nation, empire and race; metropolitan and cosmopolitan places; religion, science and evolutionary thought; higher education and sexual politics.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the insistent call for an alternative poetic canon, namely one containing alternative feminist criteria, should perhaps be strategically combined with the one of cultural recuperation. Regarding both the relative importance and very particular connection between Webster, Blind and Levy’s public figures, Judith Willson pertinently observes in the Introduction to her anthology:<sup>8</sup>

Webster was part of the circle of campaigners for suffrage and education that included Emily Davies, and to which Mathilde Blind and, more distantly, Amy Levy, also had

connections. When Blind died, she left a bequest to Newnham College, Cambridge, where Amy Levy had been a student seventeen years earlier. There is a symbolic significance in the link. (p. 2-3)

But, additionally to pointing out the significance of this public connection, one should explore these women's individual poems in some detail in order to discover the literary and artistic links between them, since both these 'gestures' are acts of salvage. This article, while obviously wishing to contribute to a recuperation of these three women's literary (hi)stories, will above all show how they themselves were not just interested but also actively engaged in different issues and processes of salvaging, salvation, survival, redemption, transformation and emancipation, in their own works.<sup>9</sup> Involvement in radical politics, connected with early feminism and socialism, certainly implied that for them, and their compelling speakers, there could be no transformation without liberation from class and gender constrictions. And the Victorian reality, in many of its inner and outer manifestations, was very much a world of repression, censorship and stigmatization, as the poems of Webster show. But theirs was also an occasion for extraordinary change in social, political and artistic terms, as Blind and Levy indeed suggest; a time that called for the more expansive, public forms of dramatic and narrative verse, but also the shorter lyric in which to express the new, and often anomalous, feelings and attitudes of the poetic subject. As Judith Willson states, these changes 'form both the context and the content of their writing', 'they embody the transition from the Victorians to the modern' (p. 1-2).

It could be said that, as opposed to earlier Victorian poets, these women – and, in particular, Levy – had a 'taste' of the modern condition as we know it. Aided by a post-reformist political context (of which Webster's work is already aware), including the movements for the enfranchisement of women, and amid an increasingly positivist

and post-Darwinian atmosphere (suggestively represented in Blind's poems), when the traditional conceptions of man's nature and place in the world were being questioned and leading, in turn, to a crisis of belief, these late Victorians indeed experienced an existential shift or transition. They consequently began to cultivate a more sceptic 'relative' spirit, as opposed to the 'absolute' one of the earlier period, including a sense of alienation and a feeling of instability, symptoms that are already felt in Levy's poetry. Indeed, being the youngest of the three (a difference of twenty years), she could be grouped with the latest generation of writers, who were more closely identified with the Decadent movement. And critics like Linda Beckman (2005) go as far as claiming that Levy 'stood at the forefront of British poets' who absorbed the symbolist poetics of Baudelaire and Mallarmé 'in the name of producing a decidedly urban poetry'; she would thus predate the writings of the 1890s male poets (namely, Dowson and Symons), the ones credited as the progenitors of a new poetry that confronted the 'fracturing experiences' of modern London.<sup>10</sup>

As older poets and as writers with a longer literary career, spanning from the 1860s to the 1890s, Webster and Blind may in turn provide a fascinating parallel evolution, which contrasts with Levy's because the younger poet's short *oeuvre* is concentrated in the 1880s. We can observe Webster's development from the initial emulation and revision – in the 1860s – of earlier Victorian models, like Tennyson (in poetic language) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (in gender issues), to her subsequent creation of dramatic speakers and the adoption of a cultural critique supported in performative poetics (responding to Robert Browning), in the 1870s, and to a brief final period in the 1880s, when she boldly experiments with aesthetic verse and the shorter lyric. In the case of Blind, we can witness her early interest (1870s) in descriptive and idealistic Romantic poetry (in which, like Swinburne, she engages with Shelley); then,

around the 1880s, she attempts the utopian humanist epic (like George Eliot), as a subversive alternative to both biblical and scientific authorised male accounts; in her final phase (1890s), Blind writes mostly short lyrical dramas (some of which, urban, like Levy's) and songs and sonnets about love that privilege sensations and impressions.

Thus, if we think of their placement within a *Fin-de-Siècle* context and aesthetics, namely that which the contributors to Bristow's volume on the subject consider to be a more masculine, cosmopolitan, interartistic, urban, suicidal and fragmented poetics (as practised by Michael Field, Graham Tomson, Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons), we may realise that only Levy's work corresponds to the label.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the last phases at least of both Webster's and Blind's respective works already show the new literary tendency towards aestheticism and Decadence, despite these two authors' strong ethical and political concerns. As Hall and Murray state in their Introduction to *Decadent Poetics* (2013),

It is common practice to read [...] decadence as an interstitial moment in literary history, the initial 'falling away' from high Victorian literary values and forms', [in which] 'the prolix poetic styles dominant during the Victorian period were on the verge of making way for a less long-winded lyricism (p. 10).<sup>12</sup>

But, perhaps more importantly for our understanding of these three women poets, Hall and Murray frame Decadence as a less 'transgressive' and 'modern' movement than we may assume, because it essentially developed in dialogue with literary history, recreating and rehabilitating the forms of the past (p. 11). They state that Romanticism, namely, was often a source of powerful imaginative revisionism for many poets.<sup>13</sup> Equally relevant in terms of these women poets' work, may be those authors' argument

that, as literary form and social critique, Decadence was a rejection rather than a symptom of ‘decay’, because it was intrinsically productive, and even affirmative (p. 9).

This argument of ‘productivity’ and ‘affirmation’ is explicitly embodied by our first author – Julia Augusta Webster (1837-94), who was a writer, critic, translator, activist, wife and mother; someone who lived under the stress of juggling very different roles and responsibilities, including the one of ‘salvaging’ women’s right to a higher education.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding, Webster was a very eclectic author, boldly experimenting with, and in a way transforming, a variety of different genres and forms; she was interested in lyric and dramatic poetry, fiction, drama and non-fiction prose, which she adapted to her own purposes. Yet, as Willson points out, ‘her life has almost vanished from the record’, because ‘what can be retrieved ... amounts to little more than a chronology of tantalising details’ (p. 9). And it is these ‘details’ that indeed make her worthy of being studied. Webster was a well read and well-travelled young woman, who ‘learned Greek well enough to publish respected translations of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* (1866) and Euripides’s *Medea* (1868)’ (*Ibid.*). And this knowledge of classic culture would also be reflected in her best poetry, where Webster deliberately resuscitates certain female myths to (psycho)analyse and problematize the universal condition of women. This was a ‘condition’ which had, besides, been silenced for many years by the patriarchal systems, and which was thus absent or missing from the written records. As Patricia Rigg states, she ‘was particularly interested in participating in the formation of the history of women.’<sup>15</sup>

And, indeed, Webster’s four mature volumes of poetry explore, in Willson’s words, ‘the selves that women inherit and create, and the languages that define them.’ (pp. 9-10). According to Isobel Armstrong, Webster’s work ‘declares itself as a dramatization of a series of feminine consciousnesses and an analysis of their cultural

determination’, adding that ‘she works through intensely analytic psychological exploration which discloses contradictions in the construction of feminine subjectivity’ (p. 374). Issues of generic identity and questions of language or expression are, therefore, major concerns in her writing. In her monologues, in particular, Webster voices a series of ‘wasted’ lives or even, in some extreme cases, the human ‘remains’ of a set of adverse circumstances. Thwarted professional, religious or artistic vocations are brought to the fore through internalised dialogue; some marginal(ised) figures – the ‘dregs’ of society – seem to fully inhabit her dramatic compositions. A nun’s long vigil only brings her painful visions of her renounced happiness and her former existence as a ‘complete’ woman; a married woman’s guilty speech demonstrates that the corrupt conventions of matrimony and the marriage market have made of her a ‘sold woman’; a prostitute’s bitter soliloquy reveals her not only as a ‘ruined’ being, a ‘castaway’ in the eyes of the world, but also as a careworn, unsexed woman.

This concern with identity and language is already clear in Webster’s early long narrative poem *Blanche Lisle*, of 1860, which had described the rather common fate of an orphaned girl who lives in a Mariana-like seclusion and who, after her lover betrays her, ends up dying of grief:

And cloistered thus [...]

She tired of the old legends of her race,

Tired of a life that seemed spent with the dead. (55-58)<sup>16</sup>

As is certainly implied in the passage, the ‘old legends’ could not ‘save’ or ‘emancipate’ her, as they have no bearing in the world of the living to which Blanche supposedly belongs; besides, they constitute an intrinsic part of male experience, which is not her own. Nevertheless, as Rigg observes, the poem ‘is shaped by the morbid introspection

of the central figure' and is full of echoes of Tennyson, Browning, Keats and Shelley (p. 35), suggesting a form of male influence or retelling. But though it indeed replays Romantic and Gothic conventions, it also clearly outlines some of the poet's later themes.

It is only with *Dramatic Studies* of 1866, Rigg claims, that Webster 'successfully integrates the contemplative self of poetic introspection and the social self of a material world' (p. 65); but though her dramatic poetry is 'both enriched and problematized by its lyrical quality' (p. 66), the representation of the self in the social reality became her major concern. As one contemporary critic pertinently observed, Webster soon became known as someone who 'had the power of going out of oneself and thinking the thoughts of others' (*Ibid.*). This capacity for depersonalisation and impersonation indeed became her trademark. But, for Rigg, her major achievement was to 'aestheticize the ordinary life to offer us access to the disturbing, world-weary perspective that was fast becoming the cultural norm' (*Ibid.*).

One of the most disturbing (and longest) poems in this collection of 'dramatic studies' is "Sister Annunciata", whose first part voices 'the emotions and memories of a nun on the anniversary of becoming a "bride of Christ"' and ends with an 'anguished vision of herself watching her lover drown' (Willson, p. 253). The poet suggests that the girl's former existence as Eva, her 'unrecycled' self as it were, comes to her by alternate flashes of recognition and estrangement:

Ah! I remember me

In the first days – when I was sad and restless

And seemed an alien in a hopeless world (p. 21)<sup>17</sup>



But in her newly found existence (in the convent), in total isolation from the social world, Annunciata must deal with all that she has renounced in her ignorance. She ‘had not known’, indeed, ‘What pleasure meant’, ‘had not conceived what love was’ (p. 27). In the long nights of vigil, the thought of this sacrifice becomes almost unbearable and she desperately asks: ‘Has God condemned all love except of Him?’ and ‘Am I mad?’ (p. 25). In her harrowing doubts concerning her ultimate salvation, or condemnation, and her profoundly internalised dialogue, she seems to merely echo or reflect the fractured modern subject that Webster usually captures in her more worldly monologues.

The monologue in the collection with the title of *Jeanne d’Arc*, a poem on another powerful religious vocation or spiritual calling, seems to be more ambitious in its scope. In choosing a female speaker who is a recognised historical figure in both Britain and France, someone who is simultaneously a woman and a saint, a victim and a warrior, Webster proposes not only to recover this living legend by retelling her story but also to finally give her a ‘voice’ of her own, to re-humanise her in her approximation to the contemporary world.<sup>18</sup> As a living myth of transformation and liberation – of herself and of her nation – Jeanne indeed constitutes a fascinating subject, but Webster chooses to present her in a more problematic fashion and in her last critical moments (of painful realization).<sup>19</sup> Her delirious soliloquy indeed takes place in a grim prison cell, just before she is to be taken away and executed for heresy – ‘This then is the truth’, ‘The prison and the chains’ (138-139).

But Joan seems, at first, to be unaware of her circumstances because she is absorbed in a mystic and feverish dream-vision. In it, she recalls fragmentary episodes of her earlier, almost idyllic, life as a young carefree peasant girl and how, against all probability and through divine intervention and revelation, she is given a new life and

mission in the world – to save her country, ‘The soul of France is in me, rescue me!’ (3). She also recalls the moments of military victory and when she is severely wounded in battle, almost losing her life, ‘Help! Oh now I feel I am a woman and 'mong foes!’ (13-14). But she finally realises (or ‘sees’ in her vision) that the ‘reward’ that awaits her is a 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, once more, 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 also politically motivated, Webster represents her as a symbol of sacrificed womanhood, in that she becomes another major victim of masculine imperial and ecclesiastic powers. This critical position emerges, namely, 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)

In her following collection of 1867, Webster uses the title poem "A Woman Sold" as a dramatization or verse drama of, in Willson’s words, ‘the domestic tragedy of Eleanor Vaughan’s wasted life’ (p. 254). After renouncing her modest lover, who eventually becomes a successful lawyer and marries her best friend, Eleanor agrees to marry a wealthy but elderly man (Sir Boycott) who ends up dying six years later, leaving her widowed and alone again. Through fragmentary speech, this ‘sold woman’ tells her friend Mary how she hated herself for being false to both her husband and her former love: ‘Loved one and left him, did not love the other’ – ‘And married him’ (p. 45). Yet, as is suggested by Webster’s subtle irony, what weighs more on her mind is not

the accusation that she was bought ‘like any lower thing’, ‘like the horse that won the Derby last’ or ‘the best bred pointer’ (p. 36), but the overwhelming sense of having betrayed her own self – ‘I who have smiled a cheating silence for so many years’ (p. 41). The poem thus constitutes Webster’s sustained criticism of the laws of the Victorian marriage market and the scars that it leaves on the social fabric and on individual beings.

Webster’s most important collection would appear in 1870, with the suggestive title of *Portraits*. And, indeed, each of the poems is a truly framed representation of individual lives battling with their own choices within a constricted social world. The poet’s intention was apparently to make them part of a ‘series’, though some seem to function as a sort of ‘resuscitation’ or reframing of classical or mythological figures. Indeed, Webster appears to have created a liminal space between classical myth and Victorian culture. As Rigg states, in “Medea in Athens”, Webster ‘has resuscitated [revengeful] Medea to expand on Euripides’ (p. 125), but her nineteenth-century version (taking place many years after her revenge) rather ‘enacts her despair on an inner stage’ (*Ibid.*); she thus deviates from the classical model, namely in the depiction of the complexity and depth of Medea’s feelings for Jason.<sup>20</sup> For Rigg, Webster’s portrait of this paradigmatic murderous mother – a highly problematic figure in terms of a Victorian idealised maternalism – 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, as a man, did not have access to. Furthermore, 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).

This process is also present in a companion poem with the title of “Circe”, in which the poet boldly depicts the mythological figure of the sorceress that transforms men into wild and pitiful pigs; Webster’s Circe is remarkable, Rigg observes, ‘with her capacity for love unrealised and the burden of her desire making her existence unbearable’ (*Ibid.*). The poem takes place as Odysseus’ ship and crew approach the witch’s island, which functions as a sinister and seductive distraction from the masculine life of action and freedom, but that in the woman poet’s ‘reimagining’, as Willson observes, ‘entraps Circe as much as the mariners’ (p. 254).<sup>21</sup> If these indeed face perdition, the poet emphasises that what Circe faces is permanent loneliness and frustration; and in the end there seems to be no sign of salvation either, in spite of her repeated appeals of ‘Give me some change’. She thus faces the major paradox of being able to ‘transform’ others but unable to operate her own deliverance or ‘rebirth’ as a woman. According to Christine Sutphin, ‘Webster is revising both Homer and the misogynist transformations of Circe’;<sup>22</sup> in the sense that ‘her Circe is neither the self-sufficient goddess of Homer, nor the *femme fatale* commonly accepted by her contemporaries.’ (p. 381). 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, the poet thus enhances and ‘salvages’ her latent humanity and brings her closer to contemporary women.

But Webster’s most famous poem in the collection is “A Castaway”, in which she uses a fallen woman’s discourse to, in Natalie Houston’s view, critique ‘the Victorian sexual double standard and the limited educational and economic opportunities for women’.<sup>23</sup> According to Houston, ‘Webster’s poems are self-consciously concerned with textuality’ and possess ‘multiple frames of allusion’ (9, 153). The prostitute Eulalie ‘develops her self-understanding through interpreting a

variety of texts, including her own childhood diary and a religious tract that are both quoted [distinctively] within the language of the poem' (46). In particular, she analyses the way her former self fits into the discursive categories of the 'good girl' or 'the budding flower of femininity', seeming to try out different explanatory narratives for her experience (35). In the end, the speaker is unable to 'see' herself as performing conventional occupations that would grant her some form of respectability; thus, in a sense, she consciously refuses this transformation into a 'respectable' woman and, with this refusal, the chance of an eventual redemption or salvation. The monologue indeed exposes how Eulalie – a stigmatized being – finds herself in a contradictory position as a speaker excluded from conventional social discourse.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the 1880s and early 1890s, there was a marked change and Webster's poetic leanings became decidedly lyric and aesthetic. As Patricia Rigg points out, one can discern a continuity between the carefully controlled form of her poems inserted in *A Book of Rhyme*, of 1881, the unfinished Petrarchan sonnet sequence in *Mother and Daughter*, and the critical reviews that she wrote for the *Athenaeum*, in which she theorises about precision in language and attention to form (p. 136).<sup>25</sup> That she became a poetry reviewer for approximately ten years (1884-1894) means that in assessing the work of her contemporaries (namely Robert Browning and Mary Robinson) she was also retrieving, retelling and reframing certain authors and texts. Thus, Webster's decision to abandon the dramatic form that had made her popular by 1870 was probably based on her belief that no literary movement or form could last for long. An overwhelming sense of impermanence is also present in her *English Rispetti*, an elaborate set shaped according to seasonal cycles to depict, through natural imagery, the love and inner life of a woman. In these lyrics, Webster ironically links the joys of rebirth and renewal to impending loss, with the purpose of reflecting upon the paradox

of human condition.<sup>26</sup> Another form of recuperation that she engaged with at the end of her life was the writing of *Mother and Daughter* (published posthumously in 1895), which involved a formal revival of the sonnet sequence – previously made famous by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti – and an emotional revival of the very special relationship with her only daughter, Margaret. Its writing coincided with the very critical moment in her life, when Webster was dying – literally ‘wasting’ away – from a terminal cancer. Through this unusual 27-sonnet tribute, the poet seemed thus to want to ‘salvage’, to immortalise this great and unique form of love – the one between mother and daughter.

But if, as Willson states, Webster ‘explores how women live within the script that is written for them’, Mathilde Blind (1841-96), for whom both English and social conventions were second languages, lived to a different script’ (p. 101). She was the daughter of political exiles and an atheist who grew up with European revolutionaries and who ‘lived in the precarious independence of a single woman’ (p. 103), eventually mixing up with the more un-English circles of Pre-Raphaelite painters and Aesthetic writers.<sup>27</sup> Blind wrote mostly, Willson notes, in ‘impersonal genres and on a large narrative scale’, namely epics of evolutionary science and politics (p. 101). She also reviewed and published work by William Morris, A. C. Swinburne and D. G. Rossetti, and contributed to *The Dark Blue* magazine. In later years, Blind’s radicalism moved towards a specifically feminist politics and she became part of a network of other women writers, namely Webster, Vernon Lee, Amy Levy, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird. And, in this context, she translated *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* (1887), an emotional account of frustrated artistic aspirations and that Blind called ‘the drama of a woman’s soul’; according to Willson, it was indeed ‘the link in Blind’s work between

aestheticism and political engagement’, exhibiting similarities with Webster’s “A Castaway” and Levy’s “Xantippe” (p. 103).

Not surprisingly, Blind’s poetry (namely, in *Songs and Sonnets* of 1893) is frequently infused with decadent imagery and images of the solitary artist, often valuing the sense of the fleeting moment – aspects that approximate her aesthetics to her contemporaries but also establish a dialogue with earlier Romantic and Victorian precursors.<sup>28</sup> Isobel Armstrong compares Blind to the earlier Letitia Landon in the method of ‘ransacking different cultures for material’, at the same time seeing evolutionary ideas as the key to reconfiguring a new myth of creativity and gender (p. 375). In *Blind*, the reiterated question of what can be ‘redeemed’ from blind violence, though never satisfactorily answered, is central. In fact, in some more ambitious works, she wants to recover ‘the Poet’s traditional role as the singer of the age’s myths’, Willson states (p. 104); such is the case of *Heather on Fire* of 1886: an epic of the Highland Clearances or evictions that urges in her a saviour’s instinct to defend the crofters’ ancestral land and ecological way of living from eradication and suppression:

For now shall their poor dwellings be laid waste,  
Their thatch be fired, walls levelled with the leas,  
And they themselves be shipped far o’er the wide, wild seas. (p. 120)

But Blind presents a vaster vision in her *The Ascent of Man* (1889), another epic that rewrites Darwin’s evolution of the species in critical and utopian terms, presenting a new myth of human destiny within the casuistic nature of existence. Here, after describing the emergence of Man – ‘nameless – shameless – nude’ (p. 127) – and all the struggles and achievements of his race, Blind focuses on the apocalyptic images of war and misery caused by man’s violent greed; its victims, like some young dying

prostitute, are nothing but ‘Jetsam, flotsam of the monster city’, ‘Spurned, defiled, reviled’ (p. 130). At the end, within this ruined world, Blind formulates a prayer-like hope in the final salvation of the human species through the transformative power of female love:

Drop in dew and healing love of woman  
On the bloodstained hands of hungry strife,  
Till there break from passion of the Human  
Morning-glory of transfigured life. (p. 134)<sup>29</sup>

In other shorter poems, Blind seems to recall the influence that the great Romantic poets had on her; namely in “The Torrent”, which evokes the Gothic natural sublime of Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* and proposes a very skilful use of naturalism and symbolism to hail her great hero, Joseph Mazzinni. In the allegorical companion poem “The Orange-Peel in the Gutter”, Blind uses the decadent image of rubbish to suggest the contrast between her present location – a ‘drear and darksome London street’, full of ‘pain and care’ (p. 110) – and the place where that ‘orange’ came from and to where she travels in mind – bright and happy Italy. The contemplation of that peel indeed provides her with a powerful revelation about ‘life’s perfect harmony’ and ‘the mystic link’ between things, thus transforming her own view of existence.

According to James Diedrick, the decadent poems that Blind published in her latest collections (1891, 1893 and 1895) not only subvert the patriarchal assumptions of her male counterparts, but also radically reimagine identity, sexuality and cosmology.<sup>30</sup> If she indeed begins by exploring ‘the dissolution of self that is a recurring theme within positivist decadence’ (p. 639), she also seems to extend this project of acquisition of ‘forbidden’ knowledge and experience ‘into the realm of sexuality and sexual identity’,



as necessary forms of ‘rebirth and renewal’ (p. 642). Diedrick chooses, in particular, some poems in Blind’s “Songs of the Orient”, part of her *Birds of Passage* collection which resulted from her travels in Egypt in 1892-93, to prove her ‘revisionist cosmology’. She places ‘Nûit’, the goddess of primeval night of Egyptian mythology, and a ‘decadent *femme fatale* on a cosmic scale’, ‘as the female source of all religions’ (p. 642). Diedrick concludes that the poetry that Blind wrote ‘radiates a dynamics of transition at once unsettling and transformative’ (p. 644).

In her *Dramas in Miniature* collection of 1891, Blind selects fragments or episodes from small urban tragedies taking place in different countries, infused with Baudelairian and Swinburnian overtones and elaborate versification, in which the characters – and especially the female ones – seem to suffer from a fatalistic or deterministic bias. Like Webster’s speakers, most are also victims of societal prejudice and repression, and the circumstances in which they find themselves echo or recall those found, for example, in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* or in Robert Browning’s *Porphyria’s Lover*, thus suggesting many intertextual connections or retellings of earlier Victorian texts, under a more aestheticized cover. Furthermore, as will be seen from the following examples, Blind’s work provides an excellent case of how New Women poets pioneered cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, as her career coincided with the revival of socialist internationalism, and thus her poetry consistently gestures towards an imaginary Europe.<sup>31</sup>

In *the Russian Student’s Tale*, for example, Blind reworks the popular theme of the ‘fallen woman’ by means of a subtle allusion to Browning’s text; and suggests that even love is sometimes unable to ‘save’ because of engrained social prejudice. A young male speaker recalls the moment in which he declared his love to his chosen one – ‘I ordered supper, took a room’, ‘I told her all my love’ (pp. 146-7) – only to find out,

through her own confession, that she was not the person he believed her to be – ‘She told me all – she would be true’, ‘Told me things too sad, too bad’ (p. 148). But the greater twist in his monologue comes when the speaker, despite his sympathy towards the sad story of this fallen seamstress – ‘half a child’, ‘Left unprotected in the street’ (p. 147) – is forced to come to terms with his own conscience, his incapability of overcoming society’s prejudices and fulfil his promise to marry the girl; and, as is implied, to save her from the dire fate of public reprobation, abandonment, and almost certain death.

[...] What was I,  
To sit in judgement on her life,  
Who dared not make this child my wife,  
And life her up to love’s own sky? (p. 148)

*The Message*, taking place in another urban setting – ‘London’s smoky skies’, is a poem spoken by a nurse tending a dying young woman, whose circumstances resemble those of the previous poem’s fallen seamstress – ‘All seared she seemed with life and woe’ (p. 149). But whose name, Nellie Dean, suggests another intertextual connection, this time with Emily Brontë’s narrator in *Wuthering Heights*. The monologue has an unidentified male auditor to whom the nurse reports the final moments of the girl, whose own voice is sporadically heard. The fever from which she suffers probably results from tuberculosis – ‘tortured breathings harsh and thick’ – and exposure to the harsh English winter – ‘Her face was bitten as by frost’ (p. 150). This condition is strangely combined with a ‘savage spleen’ and ‘an old cynic’s sneer’ which reject, with raging ‘swear and curse’, any attempts of religious conversion or repentance on the part of the attending nurses (pp. 150-51). The conclusion that the speaker reaches

is thus that ‘Her soul had sunk [...] past repair’ and that ‘She was too cankered at the core’ for any form of salvation (*Ibid.*). Yet, unexpectedly, after the visit of a mysterious flower girl, whose sweet fragrances seem to carry a ‘message’ from Nellie’s deceased mother, the dying girl has a vision of a blissful home-coming and dies in happy anticipation of the final meeting with her progenitor. The implication on the part of *Blind* is that the fallen woman is not saved by conventional Christian prayer but by a nature-suggested remembrance of maternal love. A belief that is coherent not just with the poet’s known atheistic and pantheistic positions but that may also have absorbed some mystical influence from Emily Brontë’s poems.<sup>32</sup>

The last internationalist poem in this collection that is relevant here is *A Carnival Episode. Nice, '87*, a monologue by a male speaker that, like *the Russian Student's Tale*, describes an illicit meeting between himself and a sinful woman, this time in the south of France – ‘We two there together alone in the night’ (p. 157), circumstances that are again reminiscent of Browning’s dramatic poetry and, in particular, *Porphyria's Lover*. The ‘beautiful lady all shrouded in white’ that stands with him in the balconied room is no other than his own general’s wife, the symbol of a respectful disguise of adultery, in the context of festive revelry of Nice’s famous carnival – ‘such shouts of delight and of laughter’ (p. 157). This seems to fit the theme of ‘masking’ that is implied in the deceiving couple’s scheme and, again, reminiscent of Browning’s characters and masks.

But, at the precise moment that the lovers embrace, the speaker is assaulted by remorse regarding their betrayal and the suspicion that the woman does not return his feelings. He then fantasises that he ‘would force her to care’ and, like Browning’s ‘Lover’, should she dream she can drop him at will ‘I’ll strangle us both in the ropes of your hair’ (p. 158). Also at that moment, unexpectedly, God seems to pronounce His

‘word’, manifested not in speech but through a natural phenomenon – a sudden earthquake that hits Nice: ‘A beam crashed between us and drove us asunder’, ‘And all things rocked round us, above us and under’ (p. 159). The reader thus suspects that, like the lady that simply dismisses her lover with the statement that their passionate meeting ‘was just a Carnival joke’ (p. 160) and disappears in the crowd, Blind is also playing a joke on the reader by giving a new twist and reply to Browning’s most famous poem ending – ‘And yet God has not said a word’. If, in his text, there was no divine intervention to prevent the consummation of sin and death, in Blind’s poem Nature indeed follows its destructive and deadly course and prevents it in the end; thus paradoxically ‘saving’ both lovers from eternal reprobation.

Amy Levy (1861-89) could not, unfortunately, be saved either by nature or by God, as she killed herself with charcoal gas when she was only 28 years old. Her short life, as a middle-class educated and emancipated Anglo-Jewish Londoner, apparently did not match up to her high and somewhat unusual expectations. She suffered from unrequited love for another woman (Vernon Lee), to whom she wrote several poems, and she was unsatisfied with her work as a writer, always striving after perfection but never really feeling that it reached the required standards. As can be surmised by her poems, Levy seemed to believe (like many of her decadent aesthete friends – Thomson, Swinburne and Wilde) that ‘if you cannot live your life to the full then you’d better not live at all’. In this sense, one could say that she refused to ‘waste’ her remaining years just dragging along in the struggle for survival like the rest of the world.

But, as Willson states, the critical attempts to retrieve this poet and salvage her work (consisting mostly of three novels and three volumes of poetry) have insisted on the construction of Levy as ‘victim of the pressures of emancipation or the fear of hereditary insanity’ (p. 173) and assigned her ‘to an area reserved for outsiders – as a

woman, a Jew and a lesbian' (*Ibid.*). According to Willson, Levy 'belongs to a very particular moment in the changing relationship between women and the world outside the home' (*Ibid.*). To begin with, she attended Newnham College at Cambridge and she travelled through Germany and Switzerland; in London, the urban metropolis that frequently emerges from her poems, Levy moved among New Women and participated in their discussion clubs and communities. The hardships faced by these early professionals run through their writings and Levy's not the least – the poet was often exhausted and depressed, feeling that her efforts were fruitless:

[...] in the table drawer

Large schemes of undone work. Poems half-writ,

[...] the scattered pages of a tale. ('A Minor Poet', p. 198)

In 1866, the poet James Thomson (1834-82) had written an essay entitled 'A Word for Xantippe', in which he examined the reputation (as a shrew) of the wife of Socrates and 'invited' George Eliot, a fine classicist, to write on the old Greek philosopher's conjugal life.<sup>33</sup> Eliot apparently never did, but Levy took up Thomson's challenge. In the context of an acute awareness of her literary vocation and career, it is significant that Levy published her first collection of poetry, *Xantippe and Other Verse* (1881), when she was attending Newnham College in Cambridge. The title poem is very much a 'Cambridge' poem because it implies a familiarity with classical culture and it deals with the theme of the acquisition of intellectual knowledge on the part of women. There thus seems to be an identification on the part of Levy with the speaker of her dramatic monologue, who is none other than Socrates' wife. Also, the subtitle is 'a fragment', suggesting that we capture the speaker in a decisive or a particular moment of crisis.

And, in Xantippe's case, we find her an old woman and already on her deathbed, reminiscing on her youthful intellectual ambitions (which are not very different from Aurora Leigh's) and bitterly lamenting the fact that her husband, the great philosopher and teacher, had not incentivised her gifts but rather treated her as a servant all her life (a mere 'household vessel'). Apparently, Socrates did not understand or accept that she was different from other women in her thirst for knowledge, even when she challenged him in front of his group of followers (and later ironized his daintiness towards women)

[...] the high philosopher,  
Pregnant with noble theories and great thoughts,  
Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing  
As the fine fabric of a woman's brain. (p. 184)<sup>34</sup>

Her initial enthusiasm at the prospect of a marriage to Socrates had given way, progressively, to a deep frustration of her ambitions of self-realization and even to a form of alienation or madness – 'A huge despair was stealing on my soul' (p. 187). Levy describes a paradigmatic scene in which Xantippe brings the men a fresh wine-skin and which, 'lit by a fury and a thought' (p. 185), she throws to the floor, not just merely calling their attention to herself but intervening in their philosophical discussion with an indignant defence of women ('I spake').

Like Thomson, Levy seems to refashion Platonic philosophy, in particular Plato's dialogues (*Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic*), by assuming the voice of authority and linguistic control. The fact that the poet invented this episode (which is not documented) is in itself important because it suggests that she wanted to give voice to women, to salvage their linguistic authority, namely of those that might have been silenced in classic history. The influence of Webster is also very marked in the poem as

its focus is, all over again, on a thwarted, wasted or ruined woman's life; we thus see the long frustrated, and now old, Xantippe join the company of Webster's 'Annunciata' and 'Eulalie', who in turn are just about to 'meet' Levy herself.

In 1883, Levy apparently published an essay in *The Cambridge Review* on the recently deceased James Thomson (p. 260), one of her favourite poets, in an attempt to secure or salvage his reputation as a 'Minor Poet', but also as a tacit endorsement of his philosophical pessimism. One year later, in 1884, her second collection of poems is published with the significant title of *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, in dedication to 'a great mind and soul thwarted by circumstance' (*Ibid.*). The title poem is a fragmentary dramatic monologue spoken by an unnamed suicidal subject in the presence of a friend, called Tom Leigh, and written in the detached ironic style frequently used by Robert Browning.

The speaker in the poem is caught at the critical moment of trying to poison himself – 'Here is the phial' – for the third time, as 'There is luck in threes' (p. 193).<sup>35</sup> But he is prevented or saved by his friend at the last minute, only to be given the usual sermon: 'all compact', he ironizes, 'Of neatest newest phrases' on how individual grief is nothing 'weigh'd with that of thousands' (p. 193-94). His reply to this is 'I am myself, as each man is himself', implying that each individual is different, feels differently and that individuality cannot be generalised – 'we are as the Fates make us' (p. 194). His particular life, he claims, was 'Darker, more fraught with torment, than the world' could ever devise; therefore, what resulted from this was:

[...] A creature maimed and marr'd  
From very birth. A blot, a blur, a note  
All out of tune in this world's instrument. (p. 194)

This is indeed the description of a misfit, of the dregs of society or even of the remains of a crumbling *fin de siècle* world, with which the woman poet seems to identify herself. And, as ‘The world’s a rock’, the subject’s decision has been that ‘I will beat no more’ against it and ‘into the heart of night I cast myself’. After all, he states that, despite his major ontological hunger, he knows that ‘There are not seats for all’ at God’s table (pp. 196-97). And, as if to confirm this determination, the poet-speaker is soon found dead by his friend in his derelict room – full of books and fragments of unfinished work, but ‘no written word to say farewell’; like God in Browning’s *Porphyria’s Lover*, Tom Leigh states at the end that ‘I have no word at all to say of this’ (p. 198). This literal silence or pause on the part of the linguistic authority becomes for the suicidal Levy the discursive correlative of death. By literally disposing of their lives, as actual and material refuse, they haste to ‘the silent land’ and ‘write’ themselves into silence.

John Lucas points out that, around 1886, an aged Tennyson commented bleakly on the state of the nation as it had appeared to him in the mid-1880s: The future that once had fared so vigorously had turned into an ashy present, and the Science that had looked as the promised redeemer (“Locksley Hall”) had turned into a false Messiah; besides, the arts and letters did not seem to fare any better, as Naturalism and the Decadence took over: “Authors [...] Paint the mortal shame of nature with the living hues of Art” (“Locksley Hall Sixty Years After”, 139-40).<sup>36</sup> In a certain way, M. Blind’s hypothesis as presented namely in her *The Ascent of Man* (1889) does not differ much from Walter Pater’s proposed natural response to the ‘dark godless universe’ suggested by Victorian science, which was exclusively ‘to live *in myth*, and *in art*’; this because it was precisely in the creation of art that humanity retained its dignity (Wilson, p. 557);<sup>37</sup> theirs was thus an intrinsically optimistic view of Man. But, as the tragic fate



of younger poets like J. Thomson and Amy Levy seems to indicate, a full-time dedication to Art (poetry) could not save them from that consumptive *fin-de-siècle* anomie.

In marked contrast with Blind's confident Shelleyan belief in the perfectibility of mankind (as delineated in her Darwinian epic), her German counterpart Max Nordau's work on *Degeneration* (1892, 1895 English translation) diagnosed that such individuals that did not subject their art to moral law, as Thomson and Levy, were exhausted products of industrialised and urbanised societies, thus suffering from decayed brain centres and deranged minds, that in turn produced 'senseless stammering and babbling' (Lucas, p. 293). But Nordau's proposition was obviously built on Cesare Lombroso's earlier theory on *Genius and Insanity* of 1863 (1891, English translation), a work that was most probably scrutinized by Robert Browning himself, if we think of the gallery of artful deranged speakers that 'babble' and 'stammer' in his dramatic monologues; a problematising poetic form which in turn exerted a pervasive influence in all the three poets – Webster, Blind and Levy, who must have thus inherited a portion of his keen interest in the discursive analysis of 'human detritus'.<sup>38</sup>

For Armstrong, the assumption that the so-called aesthetic movement initiated by the Pre-Raphaelites and theorised by Pater constitutes an 'epistemological break' is simplified because it was hardly as unified and cohesive as it seems in retrospect (p. 382). This simplified picture 'presupposes that an art-for art's sake movement supersedes the moral and cultural preoccupations of an earlier generation and runs its course, moving from the 'decadent' poets and culminating in symbolist aesthetics as they are represented in the work of Arthur Symons' (p. 382). She states rather that all the poets of this time ('The 1860s and After') were preoccupied in different ways with the problem of language and power (whether in religious terms as in Hopkins, pagan

and political terms as in Swinburne, gender terms as in Meredith, or social class terms as in Thomson). All these poets seem to be preoccupied with ‘living speech’ rather than the more artificial written word: They ‘tended to write in terms of paradigms of power and explored despotic structure through analogy with ancient and mythic societies’ (p. 398).<sup>39</sup> Respecting the specific development of a female gendered poetic tradition, Armstrong states that though women (including these poets) still wrote of ‘confinement’ and ‘imprisonment’ and demonstrated concern with prostitution and the treatment of ‘fallen women’, in the last quarter of the century, the recurrent figures of ‘music’ and ‘air’ associated with women’s expressive poetics and affective condition became less over determined or evident (p. 372). For Armstrong, *Blind* ‘represents what this tradition could do at its best: [...] bring the resources of the affective state to social and political analysis and speculate on the constraints of the definition of feminine subjectivity in a [...] variety of contexts’ (p. 377).

In the respective poems of this talented trio one can thus witness different literary forms and strategies of recollecting, remembering, re-using, reconfiguring and translating human experience, whether this ‘experience’ emerges from their more immediate reality, their former selves as women or from other texts, historical sources and characters, namely classic myth. One could say that theirs is a truly inclusive and salvaging art, one that carefully collects different ‘recyclable materials’ and then constructs a brand new ‘product’ that is not just appropriate but true to the artist’s individual experience – even if some of those ‘materials’ are easily recognised as strategic appropriations of former artefacts. And as this is so often the case with Modern Art, one could perhaps argue that it is also in this sense that Webster, *Blind* and Levy can be called ‘modern’.

Despite the undoubtedly similar concerns and circumstances depicted in their respective lives and works (most of which were explored in the present article), Webster, Blind and Levy seem to re-present very different options or solutions for the rescue or 'salvage' of their marginalised, oppressed or unfit subjects and speakers. One of these solutions is through a (self-)analytic understanding of social reality and the deeper causes and effects of human alienation (the case of Webster). Another possibility that is explored (in Blind's case) is by means of a utopian, socialistic and redemptive salvage operated through the transcendental powers of (female) love and the arts. And the last one (Levy's stance) is achieved through a major philosophical lucidity leading, ultimately, to a nihilistic posture or an individual escape through death.

The three women poets, writing in the England of between the 1860s and the 1890s, thus appear to respectively represent, and also embody, the actual evolution of late nineteenth-century thought and its concomitant development of notions of salvage; the movement that has been detected is from a more direct concern with immediate social reforms, in the case of Webster, to a more ambitious or idealistic human project of radical change, embodied by Blind, to an increasingly pessimistic and individualistic outlook of things, represented by Levy, already at the threshold of a new century. The timespan of roughly fifty years, from Webster's radical campaigners of the 1850s to Levy's emergent New Women of the 1880s, indeed reveals the significance of the public aspect of their lives and works. In this respect, and as Judith Willson states, 'All three would have been significant figures, at least on the margins of social history, had they never written a word of poetry: in different ways, each was involved in public life, engaging in debate, contributing to the century's changing landscape' (p. 2). That this change was not only political and social, but also psychological, is clear from the highly interiorised poetry focusing on the anomalous and the marginal that we have analysed,

and the shift becomes eventually clearer towards the end of the century, when a new (and openly decadent) sense of self emerges from the largely improvised life of many later Victorians.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the first critics to notice them we find, respectively, Isobel Armstrong, in *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), and Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets. Writing Against the Heart* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). While Armstrong places them well within the expressive tradition of women's poetry, she sees Blind as following mainly the gendered tradition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot, of exploring the possibility of a new myth and of writing directly of political matters, stating that Webster and Levy adopted a more indirect or dramatic way to make a 'masked' critique ('The Poetics of Myth and Mask', p. 372).

<sup>2</sup> We have, for example, Christine Sutphin's edited anthology *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems* (Broadview, 2000), Patricia Rigg's *Julia Augusta Webster. Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009) and Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman's edition of *Amy Levy; Critical Essays* (Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Reading Women's Poetry* (Brighton, Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p. 106. There is only news of a forthcoming biography: *Mathilde Blind: Late Victorian Culture and the Woman of Letters* by James Diedrick (University of Virginia Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Lerner goes as far as considering Webster, Blind and Levy 'far more intelligent and interesting than Christina Rossetti', which is the same as stating that in that respect they surpass this major Victorian woman poet; and that Webster is 'easily the finest poet' of the three (p. 111).

<sup>5</sup> Lerner states that Webster 'is a clear case (...) for individual recuperation', namely because 'the best of her dramatic monologues can stand beside Browning's, and need no special pleading, no adjusting of criteria' (p. 111).

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<sup>6</sup> Lyn Pykett, 'Reviewing Women Writers of the *Fin-de-Siècle*: Recent Critical Trends' (in Adrienne Gavin and Carolyn Oulton's *Writing Women of the Fin-de-Siècle: Authors of Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 15-27).

<sup>7</sup> Since the 1990s, women writers' relationship to aestheticism has been extensively rethought. Several critics have identified and explored what they argue is a specifically female version of aestheticism. Two examples are: Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades' co-edited 1999 collection of essays on *Women and British Aestheticism*, and Ana Vadillo's *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* (2005), about the role that London women poets played in the formation of a specifically urban aesthetic modernity.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Willson, *Out of my Borrowed Books. Poems by Augusta Webster, Mathilde Blind and Amy Levy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006). Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

<sup>9</sup> Reference to each of these forms of salvage will be made, in more or less degree, in the course of the analysis of the authors' respective lives and works, in particular the poems themselves. But it is neither possible nor perhaps advisable to distinctly organise or separate forms that by their nature and the nature of the texts under analysis are intrinsically subjective and mobile.

<sup>10</sup> See Linda Hunt Beckman's "Amy Levy: Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation, and the Fin-de-Siècle Woman Poet", in Joseph Bristow's *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 207-230.

<sup>11</sup> It has to be reminded that Arthur Symons only published his (in)famous celebration of the new writing of France, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', in 1893 (in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*).

<sup>12</sup> See Jason D. Hall and Alex Murray's 'Introduction' to their co-edited volume of *Decadent Poetics. Literature and Form at the British Fin-de-Siècle* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 8-25.

<sup>13</sup> As Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy argue, in their 'Introduction' to *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914* (Ashgate, 2015), 'Aspects such as individualism and self-analysis, fragments, ruinations and decay, melancholia and spleen, [...] oriental exoticism, and dream quests [...] form an intricate weave of continuities [...] between Romanticism and Decadence' (pp. 5-6).

<sup>14</sup> During the 1870s Webster worked for the National Committee for Women's Suffrage and was twice elected to the London School Board, in 1879 and 1885, where she was involved in educational reform.

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<sup>15</sup> Patricia Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster. Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer*, (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p. 18. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

<sup>16</sup> All the quotations from the poems of Webster, Blind and Levy present in this article are taken from Judith Willson's anthology, *Out of my Borrowed Books* (2006), mentioned in endnote 4 above.

<sup>17</sup> Quotations from very long poems will provide the corresponding page numbers instead of poem lines.

<sup>18</sup> Joan of Arc (1412-1431) was 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, namely witchcraft, for which she was burned at the stake (mentioned in the poem).

<sup>19</sup> The history of Joan of Arc was, and still is, a popular theme among authors and artists. In 1828, Felicia Hemans wrote her poem with the title of "Joan of Arc in Rheims" as part of her *Records of Woman* collection. Although she also uses Joan as a model to glorify the strong woman, her earlier version radically differs from Webster's as it is set at the moment of Joan's glory, Charles VII's coronation in Rheims, and offers a more idealised or romanticized portrait of the saintly heroine.

<sup>20</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 Glaucé, she kills her own children in revenge against him. The poem is set many years after these events, after her escape to Athens and her marriage to king Aegeus.

<sup>21</sup> The representation of Circe has suffered major changes in literature and in painting. If in *The Odyssey*, she emerges as a self-sufficient goddess, eventually enjoying an equal status to that of Odysseus, in much later representations she resembles an abandoned temptress more. Male artists have particularly emphasised Circe's wickedness and sensuality, which is visible namely in nineteenth-century painting (Burne-Jones and Waterhouse).

<sup>22</sup> Christine Sutphin, 'The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire in Augusta Webster's "Circe" and "Medea in Athens"', *Women's Writing*, 5.3 (1998), 373-393 (p. 381).

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<sup>23</sup> Natalie Houston, 'Order and Interpretation in Augusta Webster's *Portraits*', *RaVoN (Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net)*, 47 (August 2007), 1-159 (46). URL: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016701ar>.

Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

<sup>24</sup> Webster's major woman speakers are all subject to patriarchal conventions, but they are all quite unconventional. From Annunciata and Jeanne, in the earlier collection, to Medea, Circe and Eulalie in the later one, these tortured women are strong characters in full possession of the word, but they are all looking for some form of deliverance. 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 transgressive selves. Their many powers and weaknesses suggest that, despite their latent humanity, they are also very lucid self-analysts (if not sorceresses and visionaries).

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Rigg, 'Augusta Webster and the Lyric Muse: The Athenaeum and Webster's Poetics', *Victorian Poetry*, 42.2 (2004): 135-164.

<sup>26</sup> Rigg offers a sophisticated and very detailed analysis of the *rispetti*, in conjunction with an analysis of Webster's poetics, in her article cited above.

<sup>27</sup> She was born Mathilde Cohen in Mannheim, Germany, to secular and nominal Jews. After her revolutionary father died, her mother married Karl Blind and the family moved to England to escape political persecution. There, the Blinds actively moved in the intellectual and artistic circles of London. Mathilde studied philology, Latin and Old German in Zurich; she also read Goethe, Heine and Schiller.

<sup>28</sup> Blind's writing offers a body of evidence that demonstrates the centrality of Romanticism to her aesthetic sensibilities; and, in particular, P. B. Shelley's influence – seen in her public lectures and essays, as well as her edition of his selected poetry (1872) – decisively shaped her Decadent poetry.

<sup>29</sup> A more complete analysis of Blind's important epic poem can be found in Paula Guimarães, '(Dis)entangling Scientific and Poetic Discourse: Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man* (1889) and Feminine Rewriting of Darwinian Evolution', in *(Dis)Entangling Darwin: Cross-disciplinary Reflections on the Man and his Legacy*, edited by Sara Graça da Silva, Fátima Vieira and Jorge Bastos da Silva (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 171-187.

<sup>30</sup> James Diedrick, "'The Hectic Beauty of Decay': Positivist Decadence in Mathilde Blind's Late Poetry', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34.2 (2006), 631-648 (p. 632). Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

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<sup>31</sup> James Diedrick emphasises that Blind's cosmopolitan identity is distinct from that of William Morris, for example, who was also a socialist and an aesthete 'citizen of the world'. This because of her gender and her race; though a self-confessed wanderer (like the mythical Jew), as an expatriate she also sympathised for those nationalists struggling for self-determination. See 'Mathilde Blind: Cosmopolitan, Transnationalist' ([mathildeblind.jamesdiedrick.agnesscott.org/](http://mathildeblind.jamesdiedrick.agnesscott.org/)).

<sup>32</sup> I have elsewhere argued about the strong influence of Emily Brontë's life, works and personal philosophy on Blind and her contemporaries, namely A. C. Swinburne and Mary Robinson. Paula Guimarães, "'Over my boundless waste of soul": Echoes of the Natural World, or a Feminine *Naturphilosophie*, in the Poetry of Emily Brontë and Mathilde Blind', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 7.2 (2011), 1-36.

<sup>33</sup> T. D. Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> There seems to be a subtle intertextual allusion on the part of Levy to Robert Browning's famous dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* here, in which the Duke of Ferrara states that he did not deign 'to stoop' before his last wife's wishes. Levy thus hints at the connections between different historical contexts in which women are forced to suppress their selves in favour of their male counterparts.

<sup>35</sup> Again, Levy reworks the poetic conventions of the canonical Victorian poet, Browning, by using another of his major texts and themes, the one of poisoning in the dramatic monologue "The Laboratory", but adapting them to her own specific purposes.

<sup>36</sup> John Lucas, 'Voices of Authority, Voices of Subversion: Poetry in the Late Nineteenth Century' (in Joseph Bristow's *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, 2000, 280-301).

<sup>37</sup> A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (Arrow Books, Random House, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> We may have to look further back in the century for the earliest signs of this modern malaise or anomie, already present namely in the Victorian poet who most defended the moral purpose of art, Matthew Arnold; his first-person poems ("The Buried Life" series, in particular) are precisely the records of what he himself termed as 'a sick individual in a sick society' and, for this, he was labelled as the 'first modern'.

<sup>39</sup> The reasons behind these preoccupations are easy to understand, as the Reform Bill of 1867 had failed to create a male democracy and Mill's parliamentary move to enfranchise women in 1869 was rejected. Armstrong concludes that, with the economic problems of class and colonialism becoming ever more



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complex, 'it is no wonder that an uneasy fascination with power relations marks the latter part of the century' (p. 401).