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## **A Disruptive Force to Challenge the Conventional Female Identity: Victorian Dramatic Monologue**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the use of dramatic monologue in constructing female identity in the poems "Xantippe" by Amy Levy and "Faded" by Augusta Webster. In this sense, this study has dual layers, which aim to complicate the general realisation of the dramatic monologue by focusing on the women poets' monologues having an important place in the tradition of form, and to foreground Victorian women poets' construction of feminine identity by using the dramatic monologue. The analysis of poems displays that women poets, Augusta Webster and Amy Levy challenged Victorian female identity, which imprisoned women in the Victorian ideal female image, and represented women's identity as free from male identity by violating Victorian gender norms. Thanks to dramatic monologues that provide a large horizon of female characters, from the mythological wife to the old spinster, Levy and Webster question, protest, revise, and criticise societal perception of women and cultural expectations from women. In this way, the analysis of Webster's and Levy's dramatic monologues as a medium for constructing female identity allows us to discover the worlds of women under the social pressure of their age, as well. Moreover, while they are exemplifying the new image of women, they are touching on a common issue of all Victorian suppressed women.

**Keywords:** Dramatic monologue, patriarchy, women poets, female identity, Victorian poetry.

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## Introduction

*"The Victorian woman poet is, for the most part, not primarily concerned to draw on some stable sense of self out of which to write, but uses her verse as a means of exploring the fact that identity may be diffuse, reachable through writing and reading which can stretch both writer and reader well beyond the bounds of personal experience. "(Kate Flint 1997: 158-9)*

In the passage above, by Kate Flint in the chapter "As a rule, I does not mean I" in the edition of Roy Porter, *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, it is relatively underlined that women poets in the Victorian age benefitted from poetry in constructing a female self. Flint highlights both the formation of identity in Victorian women's poetry and the difference between Victorian female writers and Victorian male writers in terms of "stretching both writer and reader well beyond the bounds of personal experience." While they express their personal experiences through the speaker, which is one of the main elements of the form, they convey the general female identity of the general community of women. They become the voice of women rather than just expressing what they feel or think. Accordingly, they not only form the female tradition in the male-dominated canon but also contribute to the development of the poetic form: dramatic monologue. Flint's sentences above underline the points that are significant in this article: the use of dramatic monologue in diffusing the female identity and women poets' contribution to the development of the form. The article aims to present a general overview of the use of dramatic monologue by women poets in identity formation, with specific poems by Amy Levy and Augusta Webster. Two prominent Victorian women poets' poems are examined in a sequential manner, focusing on their form. The poems to be analysed in the dissertation are "Faded" (1870) by Augusta Webster and "Xantippe" (1881) by Amy Levy. The poems under examination have been chosen because of their importance in the aspect of constructing a female identity of the speaker rather than focusing on the construction of a literary identity of the poet, as exemplified in many studies. Moreover, rather than well-known Victorian poets including Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, Levy and Webster and their poems were chosen since they were two of the most neglected women writers of Victorian literature when compared to Browning and Rossetti. Cynthia Scheinberg underlines in her article "Recasting 'Sympathy and Judgment': Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue" that the "exclusion of women writers in the discourse on Victorian poetics—and in particular studies of the dramatic monologue—is so pervasive that it has gone unquestioned," especially in the "generic neglect" of writers like Felicia Hemans, A. Mary F. Robinson, Adelaide Proctor, Amy Levy, Augusta Webster, and

several others (1997: 174). Two of the "generic neglect" of writers are under critical attention in the study for their contribution to both women poets' dramatic monologue and the construction of a new female identity in their poems.

This study argues that the dramatic monologue, as a poetic form, takes attention to the late nineteenth-century feminist consciousness since it allows women poets to articulate voice of protest and to discover different points of view thanks to various masks. For Victorian feminist writers like Webster, the conscious use of the dramatic monologue to speak for the previously silenced, repressed, and marginalized group of women, whose opinions sometimes conform to, sometimes question, and sometimes boldly challenge, clearly proves that this poetic form is an effective medium in disseminating feminist ideas. Webster, using different masks of women, focuses on the construction of various female identities. In this study, her poem "Faded," of which the speaker is one of the marginalised persons, is examined in terms of the construction of the female identity and raising awareness about these old women who were deserted to their fates. Similarly, Xantippe, the wife of Socrates, is another marginalised figure in her own history. It is expected that Socrates, as an intellectual, provides her wife an opportunity to improve herself and a chance to express herself. On the contrary, she is silenced and excluded from the public sphere dominated by Socrates and his male friends. Levy takes her characters from other times, and through them, she reflects on the gender issue of her own time. These women poets' poetry differs in terms of both content and form.

Here, it is necessary to underline the importance of the study, which originates from the fact that it not only analyses women poets' dramatic monologues but also covers, particularly, how women poets contribute to the development of the form. While this study has identified strong associations between dramatic monologue and identity formation, the extant body of literature presents several gaps that necessitate a thorough exploration. First, although the literature has highlighted the distinctness of women poets from men poets with regards to the use of dramatic monologue, there is a lack of scholarly attention given to the use of dramatic monologue in terms of women's struggle against patriarchy through a female identity formation and their contribution to the use of the form. Also, since these two women poets have been neglected women writers of Victorian literature when compared to Browning and Rossetti, as mentioned above, the analysis of their use of dramatic monologue in terms of female identity formation is limited. This study will contribute to the literature by providing subtle results.

## Theoretical Framework

Women have been marginalised and suppressed; in well-known anthropologist Edwin Ardener's words, they have formed the muted group, which is ignored and neglected in terms of constructing the culture (1975: 21). They have not been accepted as an inseparable part of the general culture and it has been believed that they form just a complementary part of the dominant men's culture. This perception stems from women's culturally constructed and socially dictated roles such as wife, mother, and prostitute. Even in the modern world, while men are busy in building a career in the public sphere, mostly women are expected to raise their children and serve their husbands or fathers in their houses by the society.

These roles and, accordingly, the meaning of females and female bodies are determined by cultural images and symbols, for Luce Irigaray, one of the French feminist theorists. A woman's body is the body of a mother. That is, the culture defines first the male body and identity, then the female body and her identity are defined through the male identity. This makes women dependent on men (Stone, 2016:59). In this context, women's main reason for existence is to give birth and raise men's children. Irigaray asserts that this point of view should be changed, and a new culture that will make the female identity free from the male identity should be established. Judith Butler (1999: 17), a US academician, reports that "sex" is biologically given but "gender" is culturally constructed. Therefore, it is not possible to cut out social and political norms that are constructed by the patriarchy, which covers the whole of life (Lloyd, 2005: 74).

The negligence and exclusion from the society of women were more visible in Victorian society. Women were squeezed into the private sphere and were not admitted into the public sphere, which was presided over by men (Finke, 2018: 114). They had very limited roles in society (Showalter, 1985: 198), especially in the Victorian age, as mentioned above. Women were always living for others, in contrast to men, who were enjoying their lives. Thus, Victorian female identity consisted of features opposite to male identity and was completely dependent on male identity. That stereotypical point "was promoted in education, in learned essays, and [...] popular fiction" and the girls were encouraged to be a "professional good wife and mother" which is the "highest ambition" in their life (Rowbotham, 1989: 11–12).

As mentioned before, this suppression and oppression towards women have, of course, had a reflection in the literary world. The negative effect of patriarchy is reflected in the criticism and literary works through the neglect of women poets. Even women anthologists neglect women in their works. For instance, although Jennifer Breen's anthology, consisting of thirty poets, is more scholar-oriented

and includes "biographical notes" and an informative introduction, women poets are represented with only one or two shorter poems each. Even, it covers a limited number of Webster's shorter, more lyrical, and personal poems rather than one of her dramatic monologues. Of course, there are works, including larger poems. For example, Leighton and Reynolds include four lengthy dramatic monologues by Webster ("By the Looking-Glass," "Faded," "Circe," and "A Castaway") and by Levy ("Xantippe," "A Minor Poet," and "Magdalen") in their book, *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1995). In terms of criticism by male writers, the neglect of female writers is obvious. Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957) declares that the theory of dramatic monologue consists of only men's poems (qtd. in Scheinberg, 1997: 174). Furthermore, many critics, from Langbaum to Shaw, Slinn, and Knoepflmacher, focus on canonical male poets, including Browning and Tennyson, neglecting women poets' contribution to the genre. Fortunately, this negligence of women poets was challenged by the feminist canon. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1977), Margaret Homans's *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980), and Kathleen Hickok's *Representations of Women* (1984) are among the feminist literary works challenging this negligence.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and toward the early twentieth century, under the influence of the fin-de- siècle aesthetics, women attempted to redefine their identity beyond their constructed self. A French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss asserts that women poets cover "signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and "speaking through the medium of things by choices made from limited possibilities" at that time (17). It means that women poets benefitted from opportunities of the poetic language to have a new sense of self. They dealt with "aesthetic possibilities of poetic language" to promote their position in culture and society (Entwistle, 2003: 3). The poetry becomes a medium of redefining female subjectivity and as a result, it becomes a space for the experimentations in terms of textuality and identity. As a type of poetry, the dramatic monologue was enthusiastically adopted by many Victorian women poets who needed a medium for foregrounding unstated feelings and unheard voices (Gill, 2007: 168). Upon considering the significance of dramatic monologue in women's poetry, it is apparent that women's dramatic monologues have started to gain attention since the early 1990s. Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets* (1992) and Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry* (1993) are famous works raising awareness about women's dramatic monologues. Even, Armstrong (1993:326) notes that "it was the women poets who 'invented' the dramatic monologue", a genre that contributes to the development of the female tradition in Victorian poetic works in contrast to the male poets' projection and objectification of women. In addition to women's contribution to the development of the form, Leighton, Armstrong, and Mermin underline the significance of dramatic monologue in constructing female identity. Two Victorian poets, Augusta Webster and Amy Levy, challenge the insistency of patriarchal female identity

that imprisons women into the Victorian ideal image of the "angel in the house," and they represent women's identity as free from male identity. Two selected poems, "Faded" by Augusta Webster and "Xantippe" by Amy Levy, illustrate two women poets' conceptualization of dramatic monologue with their feminist consciousness rather than a passive imitation of the pattern used by male poets. The following section first presents a review of poetry and the definition of dramatic monologue as a poetic form, then the features of dramatic monologue are examined through two poems.

### **The Genre: Poetry as the medium of making women heard**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), advocated that men were not superior to women but men were accepted to be superior to women as women did not have any education, so she emphasized the power of poetic imagination. In the nineteenth century, British women writers inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft used poetry to discuss gender issues. Barrett Browning and Rossetti, two prominent Victorian women poets, displayed that women were talented in writing poems. Accordingly, Isobel Armstrong states that Victorian women poets were accepted as one group of the first advocates of feminist theory, which started in the late eighteenth century. Not only did they write about women's issues, but also they wrote social poems about psychological circumstances (Shires, 2008: 601). Therefore, women's status in society and their attempts to have a position in both society and the patriarchal canon are among the prominent themes in Victorian poetry.

### **The Form: Dramatic monologue in hand of the suppressed community of women**

The term "dramatic monologue" was seen in G.W. Thornbury's poetry collection in 1857. Before that, it was known as dramatic lyrics, referring to an emotional or psychological state. To clarify the term, the difference between dramatic monologue and other forms will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Claud Howard defines the form and lists three important components of the dramatic monologue: the occasion, the speaker, and the listener in his article, "The Dramatic Monologue: Its Origin and Development (1910)," by giving an example of Robert Browning's "The Patriot." Here, these elements are exemplified in Levy's and Webster's poems under examination in this study.

The first one is the occasion or purpose of the poem. In Levy's poem, the speaker, Xantippe, believes that she will take a public stance by marrying an intellectual. However, she cannot reach her dreams. In the second poem, Webster chooses an old woman to depict the life of an alone and unmarried

woman who loses her beauty of body and raises attention to the women deserted to loneliness in the patriarchal society.

The second component is the speaker. Levy chooses a female character from mythology, Socrates's wife, Xantippe, as the speaker. She wants to have a place in the public sphere and have a conversation on the field from which women are excluded. While marrying, she dreams that her husband will provide a place in his intellectual world. Time passes, and unhappy Xantippe tells her maids how bad she feels. In Webster's dramatic monologue, "Faded," the speaker is an old woman who violates the Victorian ideal image of a woman with her aging and unmarried body. She speaks of her own portrait, which represents the old woman's divided or fragmented identity. Both in Levy's poem and Webster's poem, the speakers are the poetic personas; that is, they are separate identities from the poet. This enables the poet to discuss her ideas without the anxiety of her personality being called into question. Hereby, she can have a "voice more concerned with opinions, facts, and ideologies", a challenging alternative to "the singing sincerity expected of women poets" (Leighton 1992: 173).

The third element is the hearer. The hearers are Xantippe's silent maids in Levy's poem and the old spinster's portrait in Webster's poem. Although they seem to be in the background, they are significant and inseparable parts of the poems. They are the reasons for the spoken monologue. That is, if they had not been there, the speakers could not have expressed their feelings and ideas in such an intimate way.

Langbaum (1974: 132–133) notes that the speaker and the hearer are the keys in the form. The speaker is the camera through which the reader sees and hears, and so the reader "identifies himself or herself with the speaker." Likewise, the reader explores the world and self of the poet through the speaker (Howard, 1910: 83–85). This enables women poets to convey whatever they want because the message or idea conveyed is the responsibility of both the speaker and the reader. Alan Sinfield supports this argument and declares that the speaker camouflages the author's voice (cited in Byron, 2003: 14). Furthermore, Byron (2003: 47–49) gives the example of Felicia Hemans, who "creates her own persona as a poet". That is, while she keeps herself from her speaker, they share the same voice, indeed. This makes the form a suitable medium in the hands of the neglected, suppressed community of women poets because the use of the pronoun 'I' does not expose the real "I". These unnamed "I"s articulate a collective voice of discontent and protest against women's bounded position in Victorian society (Gill, 2007: 168). Xantippe's "I" transforms into "we" as seen in the following 12-line length stanza. In the new identity of the speaker, she has a public voice and a new public identity:

*"The richest gem lies hidden furthest down,  
And is the dearer for the weary search;*

*We grasp the shining shells which strew the shore,  
Yet swift we fling them from us; but the gem  
We keep for aye and cherish. So a soul,  
Found after weary searching in the flesh  
Which half repelled our senses, is more dear,  
For that same seeking, than the sunny mind  
Which lavish Nature marks with thousand hints  
Upon a brow of beauty. We are prone  
To overweigh such subtle hints, then deem,  
In after disappointment, we are fooled." (Levy, 1881, lines 62-73)*

Through her denial of the traditional role of the silent woman, she adopts a new role as the voice of all women. In this way, the poem displays the complexity of the female identity and challenges the Victorian ideals of female submissiveness and dependence. Hereby, as Kate Flint asserts, the dramatic monologue of women poets becomes "more radical" when considering the concept of identity. It allows her to "speak out from a position traditionally associated with silence." (2002: 160) Through the use of the first plural pronoun, the speaker becomes a woman's general voice, speaking out from a silenced position.

When we focus on the difference of dramatic monologue, the first form compared with dramatic monologue is epic. Dramatic monologues are completely different from epics in terms of length because an epic is a long narration of events. Howard (1910: 37) draws attention to another difference and asserts that the epic is a narration of the whole nation's consciousness during a crisis, while the dramatic monologue is strictly individual. However, although an individual awareness depicts the state of the speaker, the theme, and message may concern the general community as we see in Levy's and Webster's dramatic monologues.

On the other hand, it is much more similar to the lyric. They are mostly short, emotional poems. Both are expressed by an individual personally. Nevertheless, the lyric is more subjective, and in the lyric, the poet expresses his or her feelings and ideas directly; however, in the dramatic monologue, she expresses herself through another individual who speaks to the audience. The existence of these audiences is lacking in the lyrics, as well.

Another form, the soliloquy, is closely related to the dramatic monologue. Both have a speaker who in the soliloquy conveys what he/she thinks loudly and directly. In a dramatic monologue, there is an audience whose personality influences more or less the speaker. In Levy's poem, Xantippe's choice of words in addressing her maids and Socrates is different. While she is calling her maid, she is more authoritarian, as seen in the following lines:

*"Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn.*



*Come hither, maids; too soundly have ye slept  
That should have watched me; nay, I would not chide—  
Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide  
In this last hour; —now all should be at peace.”* (Levy, 1881, lines 7-11)

Since the early 1990s, many critical works have focused on Levy, and her works have been examined in terms of theorizing female identity (e.g., Minsloff, 2007; Jusová, 2005; Vadillo, 2005; Beckman, 2000; Goody, 2006; Scheinberg, 1996). In such critical works, Levy's subverting conventional gender roles, marriage, and motherhood and advocating women's education and having a career outside their houses are underlined. While commenting on the poetry of Amy Levy, her multiple identities—New Woman femininity, Anglo-Jewishness, fin-de-siècle woman poet, and minority identity—direct the critics into identity-based criticism. Levy's early dramatic monologue, 'Xantippe' provides an opportunity for both critics and readers to examine the construction of identity in terms of sexual equality (Jusová, 2005), "modern, unstable subjectivity" (Vadillo, 2005), urban identity through culture criticism (Beckman, 2000), and restrictions in the formation of the notion of identity of the poet (Goody, 2006). Iveta Jusová examines Levy's depiction of the New Woman and discusses gender equality by analysing Levy's early dramatic monologue, "Xantippe". Jusová discusses that Levy's language displays sexual equality. On the other hand, Ana Parejo Vadillo examines Levy's poetry in terms of "a modern, unstable subjectivity" and evaluates that her female and Jewish identities are significant in the formulation of "a modern, unstable subjectivity," but they are secondary (2005: 57). Furthermore, Goody examines how Levy portrays the stereotypical concerns about Jewishness and New Woman femininity and describes the restrictions in the formation of the poet's identity. On the other hand, as one of some studies examining Levy's poetry and the formation of identity from different perspectives, Cynthia Scheinberg's (1996: 178) research emphasizes that Levy interprets the Jewish voice in Christian literary culture rather than examining directly the problem of Jewish identity.

When we focus on the particular poem, "Xantippe", the studies focus more on the formation of Levy's own poetic identity as a woman poet (Bernstein, 2015) or definition of the speaker in the poem as an alienated suicidal subject (Weisman, 2001). Because of the existence of such a speaker, Karen Weisman defines the poem as a type of elegy in terms of its content and its suicidal author. Elegy and dramatic monologue qualify one another. On the other hand, Susan David Bernstein (2015) underlines that Amy Levy not only contributed to feminist women's writing but also had an influence on modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf by challenging traditional gender ideology with experimental voice and poetic forms. This argument is the basis of the study, and it is exemplified through the lines from the poem, "Xantippe" in the analysis part.

Another woman poet whose poem, "Faded" is examined in this study, Webster has begun to regain recognition among feminist scholars since the 1980s, after almost a century of neglect. Kathleen Hickok's *Representations of Women* (1984), Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets* (1992), and Dorothy Mermin's *Godiva's Ride* (1993) all recognize Webster's literary talent. Although a handful of journal articles more or less discuss Webster's works, not a single book has been devoted to a more focused study of Webster. In many respects, Webster's poems may be evaluated to have a feminist message. Critics of the early to mid-nineties examined Webster's dramatic monologues for their cultural and social significance, focusing on social issues related to female sexuality. More recent but very few works have focused on gender identity and its relations to other elements (e.g., Murphy, 2017). However, there are many dissertations examining identity issues in Augusta Webster's dramatic monologues (e.g., Shao, 2000).

Patricia Murphy (2017) emphasizes the bond between women and nature. In her analysis, Murphy covers the change of gender identity which includes masculine identity attributed to the sun throughout extensive history and the feminine identity of the moon. Webster implies that reassuring or readjusting the conditions for females is possible. Helen Luu (2019), in her article, compares women's dramatic monologues to men's dramatic monologues. She asserts that this difference is gendered; that is, women poets are more interested in particularity than universality (248). Luu states that by excluding women from intellectual discourse, the male speakers in poems reflect intellectualism as a male-dominated area (262). The construction of gender differences and disregard for women cause limitations in women's constructing their identities and subjectivities.

In a similar vein, Bing Shao, in his dissertation, examines Webster's poems to depict the changing identities of the characters and interprets the contextual elements such as religion, society, women, and sexuality. Shao concludes in these poems that Webster establishes different, contrasting contexts in the characters' lives to represent the transformation of their identities. The change in these women's identities closely corresponds to the change of context they live in and further emphasize the underlying causes for the formation of the characters' subjectivity and the contingency of their identity. Letting women speak in these dramatic monologues not only reflects and represents women's conditions but also contributes to the canon by adding a feminine point of view and including a feminine experience as the content.

In rediscovering and reading Webster's and Levy's poems, it should be remembered that social circumstances were not the same as in modern times, since those times led women to live dramatically

different lives. For instance, women were not allowed into most colleges and universities, and they did not have many chances in the aspect of having jobs. Standing in the public sphere and writing publicly was a scandalous and shaking practice for women. That is, the limitations were not only the lack of "a room of their own" but also the patriarchal belief that women were not capable of understanding intellectual fields. Within this context, as Dorothy Mermin who analyzes dramatic monologues by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, notes, "the women's dramatic monologues are different from the men's" in "The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet" (1986: 75). Women poets write dramatic monologues in distinct ways. The difference of women poets is their way of examining the protagonists with whom they seem to sympathize. They do not approach the protagonist with criticism like Robert Browning. The most significant difference is underlined by Mermin in those sentences: "... that is, we find that where men's poems have two sharply differentiated figures—in dramatic monologues, the poet and the dramatized speaker—in women's poems the two blur together." (1986: 75-76). As Mermin underlines, women poets challenge patriarchy, which excludes them from the canon, and attempt to find a "place where a woman could situate herself without self-contradiction" (1986: 64). So, in this article, separation of women's dramatic monologue from the general canon is not suggested because dramatic monologues by females and males work together. To show this mechanism, Levy's and Webster's poems are chosen to reveal the variety of Victorian women's poetry. Amy Levy is a good example of the diversity concretized by Victorian women's poetry. As a Jewish woman, she subverted the stereotype of English poetic identity:- Christian and male.

### **The Present Study**

This study intends to examine the use of dramatic monologue in constructing female identity in Amy Levy's poem "Xantippe" and Augusta Webster's "Faded." The study has dual layers, aiming to complicate the general realization of the dramatic monologue by focusing on the women poets' monologues and to foreground Victorian women poets' construction of feminine identity by using the dramatic monologue. The poets provide female speakers with public voices to express their feelings and desires, and they depict the submissiveness of Victorian women and the confining circumstances they were surrounded by. In other words, the speakers of the poems challenge the conventional identity dictated by the patriarchy by adopting a more independent voice through poetry. The poetic form and dramatic monologues serve an aim as Cornelia Pearsall (2008: 23) defines, the main function of the form is "to achieve some purpose... through the medium of their monologues."

Glennis Byron defines three essential reasons why the form is appropriate to be written by women poets (2003:66). In this study, I revised these reasons in my own way. In this context, the first reason

is that it gives a chance to be aware of the fragmented self; secondly, it vocalizes the muted group; and lastly, it includes an attempt to construct the speaker's new identity. The first poem to be examined is Levy's poem.

### **Subversion of female identity in Amy Levy's "Xantippe"**

As Kate Flint (2002: 160) states, the dramatic monologue gives an opportunity for women to "speak out from a position traditionally associated with silence." In this way, dramatic monologue provides a chance to express themselves indirectly (Howard, 1910: 38). That is, although they are still submissive and silent in life, the speaker expresses her own desires, anger, and rebellions against the socially constructed female identity freely in the poem. Hereby, the poem becomes a mask of the woman poet (Armstrong, 1996: 316). That is, women poets convey their opinions and present their rebellious viewpoints behind the mask of the fictional 'I.' Isobel Armstrong (1996: 253) declares that dramatic monologue may be "used as a disguise, a protection against self-exposure and the exposure of feminine subjectivity." Kate Flint asserts that it prevents women poets from "public, self-revelatory display" (159) and provides the "particular freedom" (159) of "speak[ing] out from a position traditionally associated with silence" (160). This freedom is visible in Levy's and Webster's poems, in which speakers express themselves recklessly.

In contrast to Mermin's assertion that the speaker and the poet blur together, Armstrong declares that the form enables the readers to see the difference between the speaker and the poet. It provides a chance for the writers to prevent themselves from "self-exposure with its sexual connotations, which makes the form a way of surviving for women poets." As seen, the two come to the same point: dramatic monologues provide women a way to express themselves in an independent way. Armstrong adds that Levy and Webster are among the poets who adopted the mask of the dramatic monologue. They used the form as an efficient tool for critiquing the experiences of Victorian women who were imprisoned in the ideal Victorian women's identity (1996: 316–19). She defines the dramatic monologue as a suitable form for Victorian women poets who challenged norms and attempted to "revolutionise" as seen in Levy's poems.

The reflection of the New Woman was the first sparkle of feminism in late Victorian times. One of those women poets who used dramatic monologues to describe the New Woman of modern culture and her experiences was Amy Levy, who is a good example of the variety objectified by Victorian poets by challenging the basic English poetic identity of Christian and male as mentioned before. She had a role in the Victorian mainstream by contributing to various journals; in this way, she challenged the hegemony of the male literary identity in both the literary and publishing world (Scheinberg, 1997:

179). Maybe this situation was the result of her being the first generation of women to enjoy the social freedom of travelling alone and going to the library to read and study. She received an education that girls could not have at that time. First, she attended a girls' boarding school, and then in 1879, she went to Newnham College, Cambridge. The universities had recently been open to women without providing them with a degree. While studying classics at Brighton High School, a school for women, she wrote "Xantippe". The poem was written from the perspective of Socrates's wife of the same name, who did not have a right to say a word in the public sphere like all other women in ancient Greece and in the Victorian period Levy lived in. Through her poem, Amy Levy created a space for women whose voices could not be heard (Cox, 2021: 3). The title poem, "Xantippe" illustrates Levy's sympathy for oppressed women (Blain, 2014: 331). The teller is Socrates's old wife, Xantippe. She remembers her younger times and says what her husband needed was a submissive wife, not a wife with a hunger for knowledge like herself. The teller stands as an authority and "exists as a voice," while her maids "are voiceless" (Mermin, 1983: 9).

Minsloff comments on the language Levy uses and notes that the focus is not on what is said but on how it is said. Levy gives responses more passionately while the man is talking in a 'measured, solemn, abstract rhetoric' way. The female speaker's language is subjective, but Socrates is more indifferent to the neglect of Xantippe (2007:1320). In this sense, it is possible to claim that the revolutionary side is that Levy uses dramatic monologue to foreground the psychological mood of a female speaker (Scheinberg, 1997: 173). The speaker, Xantippe, articulates her disappointment because of her past suicide attempts (Weismann, 2001: 60) and conveys her feelings about her subjugated life to her maids on her deathbed:

*"What, have I waked again? I never thought  
To see the rosy dawn, or ev'n this grey,  
Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come.  
.....  
Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn.  
Come hither, maids; too soundly have ye slept  
That should have watched me; nay, I would not chide—  
Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide  
In this last hour;—now all should be at peace.  
I have been dreaming in a troubled sleep  
Of weary days I thought not to recall;  
Of stormy days, whose storms are hushed long since."* (Levy, 1881, lines 1–14)

The physical circumstances in which she is living on her deathbed are reflections of her gloomy, unsatisfying life. The darkness of the room is again a reflection of her lack of knowledge of science that males have already had. Xantippe gets up from a nightmare and remembers the time that she does not have a desire to recall. She promises she will not chide. These lines make the reader think she sings

a lament depicting her experiences and her suffering. She regrets that her life has passed and does not want to remember those weary days. When she was young, she had intellectual ambitions and hoped not to be limited "to sitting at the loom"; however, as a standard Victorian married woman, she is hindered and alienated. On the other hand, by having a public voice in singing and crying, she is provided a new identity by Levy. Her new identity is freer to express her world without an agent.

*"What cared I for the merry mockeries  
Of other maidens sitting at the loom?  
Or for sharp voices, bidding me return  
To maiden labour? Were we not apart,—  
I and my high thoughts, and my golden dreams,  
My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue  
That should proclaim the stately mysteries  
Of this fair world, and of the holy gods?"* (Levy, 1881, lines 33-40)

She is alienated because she lives in a world that does not provide a well-deserved place for Xantippe (Weissman, 2001: 74). Karen Weissman asserts that Xantippe's alienation is a reflection of the alienation experienced by Amy Levy in her personal life. Although Dorothy Mermin (1996: 200) notes in her "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet" that "The Victorian woman poet has to be two things at once or in two places, whenever she tries to locate herself within the poetic world". Wiesmann (2001: 78) disagrees with Mermin that Xantippe is unable to have two mutually exclusive roles; instead, she defines the poet's effort in this poem to locate herself as "a death speech."

Although Xantippe had hoped that she could be a part of Socrates's intellectual world by marrying when she was a young girl, she could not reach her dreams. For Socrates, she is only a wife who is responsible for households and meeting his needs. In this way, he destroys her dreams and sees her as incapable of intellectual issues and Xantippe tells how Socrates ignores her and her potential, makes her silent, and does not accept her into his social intellectual meetings. His conduct motivates her to find a new identity. She expresses she is talented like Socrates although she is not allowed to have a place in the public sphere. That is, as it is understood from the lines above, Xantippe had the same fate as other Victorian women. They could not have a chance to get an education because of discriminating factors between men and women in a patriarchal society. Since it was thought that women were emotional while men were rational, women were imprisoned within the four walls of the house. Nevertheless, Xantippe had the strength to resist the social restraints confining her to the Victorian ideal woman. She thought that marriage would present a chance to meet her need for knowledge in a society in which she could not attain any opportunities to say an intellectual word as a single woman. It is an issue of constructed gender, as Judith Butler (1999: 12) declares: "When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it is under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology

but culture becomes destiny." This brings a discontinuity between different sexes and culturally constructed genders, as seen in the following lines:

*"In those long days which followed that strange day  
When rites and song, and sacrifice and flow'rs,  
Proclaimed that we were wedded, did I learn,  
In sooth, a-many lessons; bitter ones  
Which sorrow taught me, and not love inspired."* (Levy, 1881, lines 95-99)

She depicts her wedding day as a "strange" day, and her marriage is a way of sacrificing a woman's life for a man's prosperity. Socrates contradicts with his teachings that the search for knowledge is a right by not supporting his wife's willingness to learn. This situation underlines that women are not allowed to stand in the intellectual arena. Regarding this issue, Kate Millett (2016: 42) states in her book *Sexual Politics* that "If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women." As educated women demand equal rights in social life and politics, this situation will disturb the reign of men and threaten the patriarchal system. To prevent the threat, women have been restricted and even not allowed to reach equal educational opportunities. Even in this century, if women who are always obliged to do housework, raise their children, or serve their husbands want to have a career, they have to struggle more than men who find everything ready in terms of housework, marital responsibilities, or child care. Although they help their sisters, mothers, or wives, the main responsibility of providing the welfare of the family is attributed to women. Therefore, women's way is more challenging and longer. In the same vein, Socrates's wife is never invited to the male circle where Socrates talks about the Greek patriarch, Pericles's mistress, Aspasia.

*"This fair Aspasia, which our Perikles  
Hath brought from realms afar, and set on high  
In our Athenian city, hath a mind,  
I doubt not, of a strength beyond her race;  
And makes employ of it, beyond the way  
Of women nobly gifted: woman's frail—  
Her body rarely stands the test of soul;  
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws  
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet,  
Feasting at life's great banquet with wide throat."* (Levy, 1881, lines 168-177)

Here, Socrates is described as a "misogynist" who is afraid of women's strength and effectiveness (Olverson, 2010: 121). This is contradictory to Socrates's display of appreciation for Aspasia's intellect. Another point Levy underlines in these lines is that women's fragile bodies are not appropriate to meet the needs of intellectual life. Especially, this approach was prevalent in the Victorian period when it was "used to account for women's supposedly inferior brain size, a physiological feature that also allied her to the 'primitive' people investigated by Victorian anthropologists." (Pykett, 2003: 13) Because of

this way of thinking, they were not allowed to the intellectual life. It may be concluded that Xantippe's hunger for knowledge is shared with Levy, who struggled to "go beyond her identity in her time, both as a Jewish and a possibly queer woman." (Cox, 2021:5) Nevertheless, Levy's ending is positive.

*"Enough, enough. In vain, in vain, in vain!  
The gods forgive me! Sorely have I sinned  
In all my life. A fairer fate befall  
You all that stand there. . . .  
Ha! the dawn has come;  
I see a rosy glimmer—nay! It grows dark;  
Why stand ye so in silence? throw it wide,  
The casement, quick; why tarry?—give me air—  
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light!"* (Levy, 1881, lines 279-287)

In her poem, Levy emphasizes the significance of a new community of the New Woman, who is a well-educated and self-confident person—a new identity far away from the Victorian ideal housewife. Levy's fictional character is a protesting woman who refuses to be submissive and foregrounds women's intellectual potential and power to decide on their positions in society.

The imagery of light in the end refers to the cycle of a woman's life, which is full of failures in achieving their wishes in an androcentric society. Xantippe is an isolated member of her society, like Levy. Cox (2021:9) states that each one gives a voice to the other. Xantippe tells what she thinks and how she feels, thanks to the poet, Levy. Levy expresses herself in the words of Xantippe, thanks to the dramatic monologue.

### **Subversion of female identity in Augusta Webster's "Faded"**

Claud Howard (1910: 43–44) asserts that dramatic monologue was not invented by Browning and defines it as "not a mechanical device originated by a single individual, but that it was a result of a process of development as natural..." He declares that it is also the result of requiring a new form for depicting new experiences brought by modern culture. For example, Webster's speaker's situation is a result of these new happenings brought about by the modern world. After the Great War, most of the men who had gone to the war lost their lives on the battlefield, and the number of unmarried women increased. Webster, by taking such a woman as the speaker in her poem, reflects an important social issue of the period. Also, her poem will be examined from a feminist perspective in this section. Webster's biographical details show that she was unusually well-educated. She started school life first at Banff in Scotland, then attended a school at Penzance in Cornwall, and after 1851 in Cambridge. She was very creative and talented in character analysis, which is the reason for her success in writing dramatic monologues (Blain, 2014: 145). Webster, as an ambitious supporter of the schooling of women, was an important activist in the Women's Suffrage Movement. To critique women's



subordinate position in society, she chooses female speakers from mythology or Victorian society. Her poem, "Faded," displays the effect of Victorian gender ideology on women (Seonoh, 2020: 87).

Her focus on feminist literature is depicted in her dramatic monologues, especially monologues with a female speaker. Those monologues display changing identities and challenging limitations against women by giving them a voice to criticize their inferior positions. Also, they show how these identities, caged within the patriarchal order, rebel against their confined and suppressed conditions. Women with a voice yell their muffled cries of protest against Victorian patriarchy using different "I"s. These multiple voices challenge any figurations of Victorian women as a monolithic whole. In the following part, this argument will be supported by the analysis of her poem, "Faded."

"Faded" is one of the poems in the collection of *Portraits* which was edited in 1893 and first issued in 1870. Other poems in the collection are "The Happiest Girl in the World" and "A Castaway" in which female speakers share the same fate as Victorian women, whose happiness or unhappiness was dependent on men. That is, their identities were constructed by the Victorian ideology that forced women to have a position as a mother and a wife. Marriage was the most important way for women to survive in such a cruel world. However, due to the wars, colonialism, and mortality caused by plagues, the ratio of men and women was not stable, so many women had to live without marrying in the nineteenth century. Even in the 1860s and 1870s, "for every three women over 20 who were wives, there were two who were widows or spinsters" (Greg, 1979: 33). Byron notes that women poets "appropriate the form for the purpose of exploring questions of gender" (58) and underlines the distinctness of female poets from male poets in terms of the use of dramatic monologue. Women poets prefer to take speakers from modern society but not literal, mythical, or historical characters (58). In Webster's poem, the old woman is a figure from modern life. Webster writes on a social issue, subverts the ideal image of Victorian married women, and gives a voice to an old spinster who contradicts with the Victorian ideal image of beauty with her aging and unmarried body. Butler (1999: 8) defines the "body" as a passive medium whose meaning is determined or interpreted by culture. Under the heavy meaning of the female body, the old spinster speaks of her own portrait. Her younger portrait and her real old self-display the old woman's divided or fragmented self. What she sees in her portrait is a culturally constructed representation rather than her current old self. Her mood is gloomy, and her tone is sad, as she states:

*"Ah face, young face, sweet with unpassionate joy,  
Possessful joy of having all to hope—  
Rich, measureless, nameless, formless, all to hope—  
Fair, happy, face with the girl's questioning smile  
.....*

*While, if my duller eyes through envious tears  
 Reply to thine, there's none at hand to note,  
 Nor yet thyself, in the sad and pensive calm,  
 Wilt flout me for my faded look of thee,  
 As when thou mock'st me in the untender noon—  
 While now we two a little time are one,  
 Elder and girl, the blossoming and the sere,  
 One blended, dateless, woman for an hour—  
 Thou and I thus alone, I read from thee  
 My lesson what I was; which (ah, poor heart!)  
 Means truelier my lesson, bitter to learn,"* (Webster, 2000, lines 1-23)

The young girl in the portrait is the audience. She is "young," "sweet," "fair," and "happy" in contrast to the old woman who describes herself with these words: "this later drearier self" and "my faded look." The young one has all hopes, but the older one is in despair. She addresses the younger self as "thou", she sees her as a different person from herself. The old spinster speaks to not only this young girl in the portrait but also to all other Victorian girls and gives the message that they will be like her. She aims to raise feminist awareness among all other women, especially young ones. Therefore, the audience is not a named girl but a group: the young. In the third stanza, she underlines being older is a concern for all women. By changing the addressee from "I" to "We", she draws attention to the fact that it is a social issue:

*"Tis pity for a woman to be old.  
 Youth going lessens us of more than youth:  
 We lose the very instinct of our lives—  
 Song-birds left voiceless, diswinged flies of the air.  
 And the loss comes so soon; and ere we know:  
 We have so many many after years,  
 To use away (the unmarried ones at least)"* (Webster, 2000, lines 38-45)

In such a merciless society in which marriage is one of the vital phases of a woman's life, it's so unusual that this woman is not married and she is alone in her old age. She is so sad that nature responds to her gloominess: "Song-birds left voiceless, diswinged flies of the air" (Webster, 2000, line 42).

*"Aye, but what man of them could bear, as we must,  
 To live life's worth a stinted dozen years,  
 And the long sequel all for learning age.  
 Why, if we try to cheat the merciless world  
 That bids us grow old meekly and to the hour,  
 (Like babes that must not cry when bed-time comes)  
 And, being old, be nothing—try, maybe,  
 To cheat our lingering selves as if Time lingered—  
 Is our fault other than the toil in vain"* (Webster, 2000, lines 49-57)

The meaning of her whole life is confined to "a stinted dozen years" at her young age, and the rest of the years are "nothing." This way of feeling is the result of societal pressure on women, who are always expected to be young, healthy, and ready to meet their husbands' and children's needs and desires.

The speaker's tension between societal expectations and individual experience is stressed in the cluster in line 53: "That bids us grow old meekly." (Tucker, 2017: 16) The tension is derived from certain social expectations from women, of course. One of these expectations is marriage. In a patriarchal system, marriage is "women's destiny and sole hope" (Webster, 2000, line 103). It has been believed that unmarried women are left to be unhappy and hopeless. Therefore, their marital status becomes the reason for being happy or unhappy. Under social expectations, women have to be beautiful. If they lose their beauty and strength, they feel useless and inadequate. Therefore, if they are not married, they are left with a hopeless life or death, as shown in the line, "As if they lived, and yet they know they are dead." (Webster, 2000, line 80) The social pressure is so heavy that the poet prefers words such as "outlawed from life," "sin," "past all pardon," "past all pity," "filched," and "slink," although they do not do anything wrong. This is an indication and reflection of the suppression of women by society. This is the common fate of women whose lives are described as follows:

*"How strange life is!—a woman's—if, I mean,  
 One miss a woman's destiny and sole hope,  
 The wife's dear service with its round of tasks  
 And sweet humilities and glad fatigues,  
 And anxious joy of mothers—strange indeed!  
 To wait and wait, like the flower upon its stalk,  
 For nothing save to wither!"* (Webster, 2000, lines 102–108)

Patriarchal society does not provide any opportunities for women to renew themselves by creating new things, producing anything, or writing. They just live like "the flower," and nothing can help them. They are left to fade, and, lastly, they die. Webster criticizes and protests that women do not have any alternatives to survive but just marry. This is the main point underlined in the poem. She intends to raise awareness of women. As a social activist, it is natural that her speaker criticizes society while articulating her inner world (Rigg, 2000: 79). Such a speaker who takes sympathy from readers is not a conventional Victorian woman. Webster creates a new identity of the Victorian woman and dramatic monologue becomes a medium of depicting the unjust world women live in.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of Webster's and Levy's dramatic monologues as a medium for constructing female identity allows us to discover the worlds of women under the social pressure of their age. The speakers are Socrates's wife, who has an insatiable desire for knowledge, and the old woman, who subverts Victorian female ideals by not marrying and not having children. Levy and Webster choose public female speakers restricted by patriarchal sanctions. Levy's speaker, Socrates's wife, had a strong desire to break down the traditional image of females by attempting to participate in her husband's intellectual circle with important male figures in her youth. She had hoped to be accepted into the public area but marriage brings her only frustration and alienation. In a similar vein, Webster's speaker,

the old woman, stands against the norms that force women to marry for survival. The poet depicts the old spinster's alienation from her earlier self. In this sense, Webster protests patriarchal society by not only confronting women with men but also confronting a woman's elderliness with her youth. In both poems, dramatic monologue enables Xantippe and the old spinster to convey their frustration and criticism against gender ideology. The form becomes a medium for the creation of a new identity of women: The New Woman, who has a desire and power to make decisions about her life. In fact, both two women—Socrates's wife, Xantippe, and the old spinster—have divided identities. They are between two different identities: they are attempting to be New Women, while they are typical Victorian women who are expected to be ideal. In this sense, thanks to the dramatic monologue that provides a large horizon of female characters, from the mythological wife to the old spinster, Levy and Webster question, protest, revise, and criticize society's perceptions of women and cultural expectations from women. Moreover, while they are exemplifying the new image of women in this way, they are touching on the general issue of all Victorian subjugated women. Levy and Webster provide a voice for suppressed women and subvert this conventional female identity in Victorian society by creating a new identity of Victorian women.

On another level, studying Webster's and Levy's dramatic monologues allows us to reexamine established norms about the form. Webster and Levy renew the dramatic monologue with their own writing styles. They choose marginalised figures in the construction of unconventional identities. By donating them with a challenging voice, they recreate female experiences and contribute to the feminist consciousness in the late decades of the nineteenth century.

### **Implications**

In this study, just one poem of each woman poet was analysed. Because of the argument of this study, my discussion sampled only a fraction of Webster's and Levy's dramatic monologues, and their dramatic monologues are just a small part of their entire literary collections. Here, it is suggested that more studies with an increased number of works by these talented poets should be undertaken to enrich our understanding of the dramatic monologue itself and the formation of female identity through the use of dramatic monologue. Furthermore, in future studies, a comparison analysis among these writers' novels, plays, or other poems may be conducted. Different results can enlighten the literary world. This research just focused on examining the relationship between dramatic monologue and the formation of identity of the speaker rather than the poet, so there is a need for analysis comparing the identity formation of both the poet and the speaker, and the depiction of their relationship is awaiting further exploration.

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