

**‘Enter into the genius of him’: Augusta Webster and the Discourse of Translation Theory**

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<1>In May of 1870, Augusta Webster wrote to the Scottish scholar John Stuart Blackie to thank him for sending her a paper on Greek mythology. In this letter, she moves into a theoretical discussion of translation, telling Blackie, “my being able to make out the meaning of a poet—if I like him so as to be able to enter into the genius of him—comes from a rather remarkable gift of good guessing” [emphasis Webster’s]. Her self-deprecation does not seem to have fooled Blackie, for he responded by sending her his “Homer and the Iliad” for her comments. Perhaps “guessing” was not really how Webster felt about her own work either: she sent both the *Prometheus* and the *Medea* to Blackie for his review on 13 June 1870. What Webster meant by the “genius” of Aeschylus and Euripides is crucial to an understanding of the contribution this prominent nineteenth-century writer made to translation theory, as well as the extent to which the debate about the essential accuracy of translating according to the letter or according to the spirit of the original dominated scholarly circles. The broader issue of translating the work of the ancients is problematized by the fact that translation is essentially an art of retrieval and is, therefore, complicated by historicity. It is this last point that informs Webster’s work, as, from the perspective of a nineteenth-century, self-educated, reforming woman, she does justice to the spirit of Aeschylus while maintaining the denotative sense of Greek usage.

<2>Webster’s use of “genius” in her discussion with Blackie indicates her sense that historicity inevitably compels a nineteenth-century translator to work from a nineteenth-century perspective. However, while the denotative meaning of “genius” is commonly understood to be related to exceptional intelligence, the word can also signify a “tutelary spirit,” in this case of Aeschylus and Euripides. As a translator, Webster must be guided by her intuitive understanding of the nuances of language that reflects the socio-cultural context of the age in which the ancient writers worked. On one level, then, Webster shares the context of production with the original author, entering into the “genius” of Aeschylus and Euripides, and is, thereby, enabled rather than hindered by historicity to convey the nuances of the original Greek language in the English language reflective of her own experience as a nineteenth-century woman.

<3>During the years in which she was translating, Webster’s life was defined not only by the inner circle of her marriage and the birth of her daughter Margaret, but also by the outer circle of the suffrage society activities in which she was engaged. Thomas Webster hints at the extent to which both of these circles intersect in Webster’s work in his preface to the *Prometheus* dated 18 January 1866, when he explains that Webster felt that she needed his name on the text because

she “wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady’s name could give, and so, rightly or wrongly, looked to me for what she wanted.” Perhaps Webster’s apparent lack of self-confidence is related to the difficulty of furthering the “cause” that women experienced on every level leading up to and resulting from John Stuart Mill’s unsuccessful presentation to Parliament on 7 June 1866 of the Kensington Society’s petition for female suffrage, which Webster signed. During the period when she was working on the translations and commuting from Cambridge to London for meetings, Webster was a member of the Kensington Society and a member of the first Enfranchisement of Women Committee until July 1867, when it became the London National Society for Women’s Suffrage.

<4> Webster’s struggle to integrate herself into a man’s world with equity beyond reach is implicit in her decision to translate these two plays in particular and in her self-conscious awareness that without a formal education and the scholarly preparation of male translators, she had to draw on other resources linked to the ways in which her experience of the world might be consistent with the experience of Aeschylus and of Euripides. The esoteric, tenuous nature of the connection to the ancients, I think, informs her response to Blackie’s suggestion that her translations are “flirtations.” “I confess the flimsiness of my scholarship,” she writes on 30 May 1870, “because, though I certainly do my own translating and though I mean to translate and publish one more Greek drama (some one of Sophocles), I do not want to carry false colours and wear the honours of a learned person when I am but a dabbler.” Her self-deprecation is understandable in light of Blackie’s earned reputation as a classical scholar in an elite group that included Matthew Arnold, who had published “On Translating Homer” in 1860. Arnold warns that the translator must “try to satisfy *scholars*, because scholars alone have the means of really judging him” [emphasis Arnold’s] (117). Alexander Macmillan, Webster’s friend and publisher, reminded Thomas in a letter of 21 June 1868, shortly after the *Medea* appeared, “that only the scholars and critics can appreciate or attempt to appreciate these translations.” The lack of a formal education no doubt made translation a Sisyphean task at times, but so too did the many demands on Webster’s time as a wife and mother. She is implicitly resentful as she complains to Blackie in the May letter that Thomas is “lazy” about giving her “a sound classical education” and that “housekeeper’s duties and a little daughter to attend to and all the many social taxes on a married lady’s time leave little room for any steady study.” Paradoxically, Webster’s correspondence with Blackie reveals another side of Webster, for when she discusses translation with Blackie and accepts his invitation to comment on *Homer and the Iliad* in June, she writes with an air of professional confidence that is surprising, not only in light of her demure tone in May, but also in light of the fact that she is writing to a senior scholar who had translated both the *Prometheus* and the *Medea* himself: “You translate I see in a measure of which I have never been very fond, but I suppose it will give a rush and swing at times where they are most wanted and are apt to get left out in the more steady going lines of ten syllables which are pleasantest to me, and it is less unlike hexameters.” She writes from the perspective of an author aware of the creative nature of each and every act of translation, and she implies here her confidence in her own ability to make the decisions essential to a translation that truly resuscitates the original.

<5> Webster never did complete the translation of Sophocles that she proposed to Blackie; however, several years later she authored a much praised two part article for the *Examiner* in November 1877: “Translations of the Agamemnon,” published on 17 November 1877, and “Mr. Browning’s Agamemnon of Aeschylus,” published on 24 November 1877. In this intelligent,

extended essay, she compares extensively two translations of the *Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, one by Robert Browning and one by E. D. Morshead. She combined the two parts and titled the whole “A Translation and a Transcription” when she collected the *Examiner* essays for *A Housewife’s Opinions* in 1878. Webster also published a separate article, “The Translation of Poetry,” in the *Examiner* on 29 June 1878, just in time for inclusion in *A Housewife’s Opinions* that fall, thereby making translation theory an important thread in *A Housewife’s Opinions*. On 3 January 1878, Alexander Macmillan writes to Thomas, “I am sorry I missed the article on Browning’s “Agamemnon” in the *Examiner*, but my son George tells me he read it not knowing whose it was, but thought it very able.” Webster begins the first article by comparing Robert Browning’s literal translation of the *Agamemnon* to E. D. Morshead’s more liberal translation of the same work. She points out that ironically Browning’s “word-by-word translation . . . bears the strong impression of origination power”; on the other hand, Morshead’s “loose translation, giving play to interpolated originality . . . leaves the reader suspicious of the want of such a power in the translator and certain only of his elegant scholarship” (1856). Browning has clearly “entered into the genius” of Aeschylus with the intuited contextual depth that, as the final title choice for the combined essays implies, differentiates his true “translation” from Morshead’s much flatter and less interesting “transcription.” Morshead has sacrificed “the higher thing, the spirit” to “the lower thing, the letter,” she complains, and, in retaining the spirit of Aeschylus through his scrupulous attention to detail, Browning has, suggests Webster, “done by Aeschylus as he would have had Aeschylus do by him if each had been the other” (1458). The woman with an informal education but with intuitive scholarly acumen recognizes the same qualities in the similarly educated and similarly intuitive Browning. Moreover, she pays tribute in this article to Browning’s creativity and talents as a poet, the same qualities that make her own translations works of art worthy of comparison to the originals.

<6> Webster’s preoccupation with language as a poet and dramatist herself is clear in all her comments on the activity of translation. Her hard won command of Greek alone in her bedroom with the help only of her brother Gerald’s Charterhouse grammar text bespeaks her determination, tenacity, and intellectual capacity, but it is also her facility with language in a more abstract sense that earned her a place among reputable translators from the Greek. Yet, in the matter of translation, Webster was unsuccessful in negotiating the publication paradox that plagued her throughout her professional life: she did not appeal to a popular readership or enjoy commercial success because she appealed to a professional readership and enjoyed academic success. Alfred Miles, writing from the perspective of a literary critic about Webster as a poet in general, links the dilemma to Webster’s success as a translator, suggesting that “perhaps the severity of her methods is partly the result of her deep study of the great classical writers of antiquity” (500). On the other hand, one might argue that the trajectory of Webster’s literary career, shaped by her continued experiments with genre, implies that she viewed the activity of translating Greek drama as a form of apprenticeship for later work and, instead of translating Sophocles, she published in 1872 the first of four lyrical dramas of her own, *The Auspicious Day*. The fact that translation theory, with its emphasis on the tutelary influence of original “genius,” served Webster as a natural source of her own poetic and dramatic inspiration is implicit in the style and tragic vision of all four of her plays.

<7> The nature of Webster’s classical “training,” I suggest, is directly related to the clear and direct language that typifies virtually all of Webster’s work after 1866 and the publication of the

*Prometheus*. Her conscious effort to emulate the precise connotative power of Aeschylus and Euripides is consistent with her progressively refined lyric and dramatic work, refinement indicative of her increasing aestheticist sense of transience, impermanence, and fluidity as features of human existence. Arnold suggests that the translator of Homer “should *penetrate* himself with a sense of the plainness and directness of Homer’s style; of the simplicity with which Homer’s thought is evolved and expressed” [emphasis mine] (111). To “penetrate” oneself suggests an immersion in the ancient context and a corresponding complete subversion of the translator-self in order to mitigate the generally recognized problem of translation that Andrew Benjamin points out: “history seems to make translation problematic, for not only is there the gap occasioning recovery to be traversed, there also seems to be a temporal gap that positions the historical as the other whose comprehension may be difficult and thus dependant [sic] upon the support offered by con-textual and inter-textual markers” (61). A careful reading of both of Webster’s translations suggests that these markers were nuances of language that enabled her to bridge the “gap” through the treatment of political power by the ancients. Charles Cayley, in the preface to his own translation of *Prometheus Bound* in 1867, seems to have recognized the significance of Webster’s careful language choices and groups Webster with Blackie and Barrett Browning as an “able” translator (1124). Webster is considered “able” by her critics because she adheres to the letter of Aeschylus as well as to the spirit—she translates literally rather than liberally, but she is sensitive to the nuanced space in which the connotative diction of the author and the connotative diction of the translator intersect. The reviewer for the *Westminster Review*, for instance, praises Webster’s negotiation of language, indicating that in the *Prometheus Bound*, she shows “fidelity to the original, without losing its spirit.” The reviewer goes on to compare her translation to that of Potter, who at the time was, next to Paley, the most accepted translator of the Greek: “The first and most striking difference is Mrs. Webster’s terseness as opposed to the older translator’s diffuseness. The number of her lines corresponds with those in the original. . . The next difference is the delicacy of translation” (130, 131). The *Nonconformist* writes that Webster is “wonderfully true to the spirit of the original,” but that she has “aimed less at translation—if we may so express ourselves—than at transfusion” (526). Indeed, there is in Webster’s *Prometheus* and in her *Medea* a lyrical freshness and vitality that leaves one with the sense that her nuanced language brings Aeschylus’s imagery back to life.

<8>On 1 October 1870, a few months after she confided to Blackie her plans to translate Sophocles, Webster wrote to John Byrne Leicester Warren, later the Lord de Tabley, who had sent her a copy of his translation of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*. In this letter, Webster embraces the conundrum of the translator who strives to remain true to the original but who is inevitably writing not only from a different perspective but for a different audience as well:

. . . there is to me something unnatural about a modern antique poem, that I feel the perplexed analysing sadness of the nineteenth century man cropping up through the surface, as a thing not akin to the old Greek spirit, and that I end by thinking that the poet of *Philoctetes* will move more hearts and more move any heart when he comes closer to the sympathies of our days. And one feels the old Greek dramas nearer to us now (because they were real to their days) than the noblest imitation of them can be. I think it would be a very soulless man who would write anything without betraying signs of being touched by the age he lives in and these signs injure the truth of the copy.(1)

Webster suggests that it is impossible for a translator to divest herself or himself of a world view specific to his or her time; however, in reflecting one's age to a contemporary audience, the translator brings the work of the ancients alive in a way that paradoxically conveys the spirit of the original. Perhaps when she was writing to Warren about *Philoctetes*, Webster was thinking of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's reminder in 1861 in the preface to *The Early Italian Poets* that when a translator can wed "literality" with "the primary condition of success," which Rossetti says is simply a good poem, then "the translator is fortunate" (2). The chance meeting of like minds that Rossetti implies occurs when the translator assumes responsibility for ensuring that the "good poem" remains a good poem. As Anna Swanwick suggests, the "universally recognized principle" of translation is that "a translation ought, as faithfully as possible, to reflect the original, but in spirit and in form, and that any willful [sic] or unacknowledged deviation from it is tantamount to a breach of trust" (iii). Ironically, then, the art of translation is a creative act that requires not only a keen understanding of language and context but also a tacit acceptance that in entering into the genius of an author, the translator must at times suppress his or her instinctive relationship with language. As Webster's reviewers recognized, this is the dilemma of translation. In a review of the *Prometheus Bound* for the *Illustrated London News*, for instance, a critic writes, "It is well that translators should aim at the impossible, for they may thus attain to the highest point possible" (95). Because Webster appeals to nineteenth-century sympathies, she reaches the "highest point," for she attains what Arnold identifies as the "one proper aim of the translator," which is "to reproduce in the intelligent scholar, as nearly as possible, the general effect of [the original]" (118).

<9>In the second part of the *Examiner* article on Browning, Webster echoes Arnold as she stresses the importance of precision in language, pointing out that only by using modern language that has the same effect on a modern audience that the ancient language had on an ancient audience can the translator address the audience of the day (1498). The difficulty in balancing the obligation to translate as close to the original as possible or as literally as possible with the desire to retain the spirit of the original or the effect on the reader/audience often leads to a sentence that is "upside down in English," warns Webster, and the translator has, therefore, "introduced an element—that of confusion or of eccentricity—which was not in the original phrase" (1488). This seemingly paradoxical task—achieving accuracy and transcending historicity—has, in Webster's view, been Browning's achievement: "It often happens that, not only at first blush but for some time, Mr. Browning's phrases wear a meaning other than he meant, and that the careful critic, after much pondering over some surprising passage, is about reluctantly to believe in a mistranslation, when, all at once, there beams on him a new sense, not in the Greek but in the English, and everything becomes clear" (1489-90). Browning, she points out, manages to restore the Greek word to its root meaning "by some sleight of brain" and then further manages to "constrain his English word to give the older meaning, plus all compatible infusion of the later which it had come to convey in the parlance of Aeschylus's times" (1489). Given the timing of the *Examiner* essays on 17 and 24 November 1877, Webster may well have been responding to John Addington Symonds in his review of Browning's *Agamemnon* for the *Academy* earlier in the month on 3 November 1877. Symonds finds Browning's "dexterity in matching word with word and maintaining the exact order of the original" commendable, but he is less appreciative of the final result, complaining that "as regards both language and form it is neither English nor Greek" (419). Symonds's conclusion is really Webster's point as she argues that Browning has the ability to convey the nuances of language that arise out of connotation and

“secondary meanings” that separate a word from its “root meaning.” In “The Translation of Poetry,” which was published in the *Examiner* six months later, Webster explores in a more complex philosophical discussion the reductive nature of the central argument of whether a translator should “take meaning by the rules of the dictionary or evolve them from his own inner consciousness,” and she comes to the conclusion that since “in poetry the form of the thought is part of the thought, not merely its containing body,” translating simply according to one’s “free rendering” will not convey the spirit of a work (814). In like manner, “the letter, though it becomes part of the spirit, is not the spirit” (814). Ultimately, the translator, while recognizing his or her inferiority to the original poet, must be able to manipulate the English language in its “perfection” to render the Greek language in its “perfection,” thereby capturing “the translated author’s thoughts as he himself gave them and to trust to accuracy to the letter for accuracy to the spirit” (815).

<10>When Webster reviewed for the *Athenaeum* from 1884 until her death a decade later, she took the opportunity to enter into the discourse of translation theory once again. For example, in 1885, she reviewed Sir Theodore Martin’s translation of Goethe’s *Faust*, the only indication that Webster was proficient in German. “We have carefully compared this version line by line with the original,” she writes, claiming that this careful scrutiny of the two texts underscores certain faults in the translation that may diminish the work somewhat, presumably at the level of word choice and phrasing. However, she concludes, “it is fairer to regard the version as a whole, and to praise its finish, pith, and fidelity” (712-13). In Webster’s view, Martin has successfully conveyed the spirit of *Faust* by finding the English diction and syntax that most closely correspond to the German and that ensure consistency in the affective powers of the work. When she does review classical poetry written in English, she applies the same principle of grammatical persuasion. For instance, of Robert Bridges’s *Prometheus the Firegiver* she says: “If this were a translation it would be a good one,” explaining that “there are, in short, so many merits and faults of a translation, that one feels at times a conviction that the author must have written his poem in Greek and then done it into English” (115). It is helpful to read Webster’s translations in the context of the challenges she identifies in accessing through her appreciation of Greek as much of the world that informed Aeschylus’s choices as possible. She must use the English language to reflect the world of Aeschylus in his work, thereby making both the spirit and the language of Aeschylus accessible to an English readership. The three way relationship formed by the original author, the translator, and the reader is necessarily complicated by, Benjamin points out, the fact that translation involves not only “the recovery of a meaning, or truth, and the subsequent re-expression of what has been recovered,” but also the idea of “free exchange” (60). This exchange, I suggest, occurs between the translator and the original script and, as Swanwick implies in her warning to avoid “a breach of trust,” reoccurs between the translated script and the reader (iii).

<11>In both her translations, Webster brings the nineteenth-century world and the ancient Greek world into a common sphere through the historical association of power and control with the masculine. The gendered focus of the *Medea* makes this association clear, but Webster’s translation of the *Prometheus* is also gendered, as was recognized in 1866 by the reviewer for the *Illustrated London News*. This reviewer focuses on Webster as a female translator: “on the whole, Mrs. Webster’s translation creates a misgiving that it is published with a hidden purpose; that it is intended to serve a certain cause; that the object of it is to show that even in the learned

languages (and Mme Dacier is not yet forgotten) women may become proficient as great as, if not greater than, men” (95).(2) The reviewer goes on to hint at subversive elements in the translation through ridicule of John Stuart Mill and other men who participated in the Women’s Movement. Webster was, of course, a woman translator among women translators, including Barrett Browning, who published two very different translations of the play in 1833 and 1850. However, there had also been translations by men such as Thomas Medwin, a Byron scholar, as well as W. M. W. Call, a poet, and F. A. Paley, a Cambridge scholar whose 1857 text Webster followed closely. These translators contributed to the considerable discourse of translation theory to which Webster had access by the time she published the *Prometheus*. For example, in 1832, Thomas Medwin published his *Prometheus Bound* with a preface to explain his deliberately loose translation. The “aim of a translator should be the full and entire sense, and not a servile adherence to forms or expressions,” he writes (iii). Medwin was influenced by the German dramatic theorist A. W. Schlegel and attempts to convey Schlegel’s depiction of Prometheus as “the representation of constancy under suffering.” The chained figure, suggests Medwin, “is thus an image of human nature itself, endowed with a miserable foresight, and bound down to a narrow existence, without an ally, and with nothing to oppose to the combined and inexorable powers of nature, but an unshaken will, and the consciousness of elevated claims” (vii). Medwin’s language choices reflect his sense of the lofty god unjustly and cruelly restricted, his conception of Prometheus’s plight formulated through a conventional masculine world view that is evident in formal, stately, and measured diction, poetic syntax, and blank verse. Webster, however, while also translating Prometheus’s speeches in condensed and compressed terms, subtly infuses the text with her nineteenth-century feminist presence by integrating poetic language and rhyming patterns to convey the constrictive and pained spirit of Prometheus. She thus indicates Prometheus’s complex and self-determined imprisonment, effectively enabling the tragedy of Prometheus’s complicity in his fate to transcend historicity and to resonate with Victorian men and women themselves focused on a society caught up in a struggle for some to maintain social power structures and for others to sweep these structures away. The ways in which Webster’s diction and syntax choices are reflective of her own ideology and of her times are evident when we consider the diction and syntax of earlier nineteenth-century versions of the *Prometheus*. For instance, consider the opening lines of the *Prometheus* in which Strength describes the desolate edge of the earth situated in the Indian Caucus mountains, where Prometheus is to be chained to the rock. Medwin begins the description thus: “Behold us at the extreme verge of earth! / A Scythian waste of solitudes, untrod, / And uninhabitable by man” (7). In plainer words, Webster manages to convey the desultory isolation of place that contributes to Prometheus’s misery: “Now we have come to the earth’s far final plain, / To the Scythian reach, the untrodden wilderness” (9). Through alliteration Webster conveys clearly and gracefully the wasteland in which the ritualistic and methodical imprisoning of Prometheus will take place, and this wasteland is new and “untrodden” territory, a “wilderness” in the biblical sense of an unsocial and uncivilized expanse.

<12>Barrett Browning eventually methodically destroyed as many copies of her first translation of the *Prometheus* as possible, her dissatisfaction implicitly associated with the different word and syntax choices she makes in 1850. In 1833 she had already linked her concerns about language to the polarized relationship between the translator and the original author, asking her readers to “forgive my English for not being Greek, and myself for not being Aeschylus” (139). Her considerably more modernized language in 1850 no doubt reflects her increased experience

as a poet, as well as her expanded experience of the world through love, marriage, and motherhood. Her struggle with the *Prometheus* over a twenty year period suggests that she was also familiar with the contemporary discourse of translation theory unfolding in scholarly and popular circles. The poet Call takes a number of liberties with the play, such as adding descriptive scene settings and dividing the play into three parts, “The Binding of Prometheus,” “The Wanderings of Io,” and “The Fate of Prometheus” (viii). While the divisions make the play more accessible to those not familiar with the original, they also, as the word “transfusion” implies, change the essential nature of Aeschylus by directing the reading process in specific ways not characteristic of the original. Call makes choices in diction and syntax consistent with his emphasis on an episodic plot, often making decisions more appropriate for melodrama than for classical tragedy. When she appears to seek advice from Prometheus, for instance, Io “laughs hysterically”; the gendered connotation of Call’s adverb contrasts Webster’s treatment of the same moment with the language of the Aristotelian passions—fear and pity—as Io cries, “Alas! Woe! Woe! (41). Repetition conveys Io’s sense that Prometheus is a fellow victim of unjust gods.

<13>Prometheus’s rebellious and defiant character clearly appealed to Webster. He neither apologizes for nor regrets his actions, and he is in this respect, as Barrett Browning notes in 1833, a probable model for Milton’s Satan (xiii). Barrett Browning also offers insight into Aeschylus’s compelling delineation of Prometheus, pointing out that the dramatist fell from grace upon his defeat by Sophocles for the drama prize, eventually leaving Athens to die in Sicily (xvii-xviii). Prometheus serves as a timeless reminder of the perilous course of fighting tyranny, for his sorrow and suffering during the course of the poetic drama arise not from the punishment itself but from the public humiliation to which his being chained to the rock exposes him. By 1866 Webster was well into her engagement with Mrs. Grundy as she fought the tyranny of Victorian patriarchy and as she entered into the male domains of translation and dramatic poetry.

<14>Webster’s translation of the *Prometheus*, then, is infused with a nineteenth-century spirit that transcends the barriers of historicity in ways subtly specific to her self-conscious sense of herself as a woman in a man’s world, both politically and professionally, and this spirit is conveyed through deliberately contemporary language that resonated with her contemporary audience as the “spirit” of Aeschylus. Webster modernizes important words in Prometheus’s first speech to indicate the complex nature of his resentment, sense of injustice, and humiliation. Barrett Browning and Webster both condense language in this speech to emphasize the movement around Prometheus that contrasts so sharply with his immobility. Barrett Browning conveys the sublime beauty and terror of place, writing in 1833, “O holy Aether, and swift-winged winds, / And River-wells, and laughter infinite / Of yon Sea-waves! (143). The substitution of “holy aether” for the more conventionally used “divine” focuses the passage to reflect the fact that the elements are waiting to swallow Prometheus up. However, Webster’s use of “marvellous” in the same context underscores the whole existence that Prometheus will miss: “Oh marvellous sky, and swiftly winging winds, / And streams, and myriad laughter of sea-waves, / And universal mother earth” (15). The reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* was not impressed by this particular word choice, writing, “the passage is too grand to be ruined even by the poor phrases ‘marvellous sky’, ‘swiftly winging winds,’ . . . but it has invaluable beauties that might have been developed by more careful handling” (10). Nevertheless, Webster’s selection of

adjectives in this passage underscores Prometheus's pleasure in the earthly elements that will soon be denied him and emphasizes his deep horror at his unfolding fate.

<15> Webster's translation of the choral passages is particularly revealing of her ability to "enter into the genius" of Aeschylus. As Alistair Eliot suggests, "these choral odes are not irrelevant music: the odes contain general reflections on the themes of the play, they sometimes aim at persuasion, or dissuasion—they are part of the structure" (81). In these passages, Webster makes the conventional shift to more poetic language and to rhyme and metre that suit the communal song patterns of the chorus, and she pays attention to the divisions of strophe and antistrophe, as well as to uniting the chorus in the epode. Swanwick maintains that "it is better to aim at the true lyrical ideal, however difficult of realization," and she, along with Barrett Browning and Webster, successfully conveys the significance of the lyrical attributes of the chorus (iii). Barrett Browning and Webster in particular adeptly establish the authority of the chorus in the first strophe of the Sea Nymphs' song. That is, they retain the higher moral tone of the chorus without compromising the essential sympathy intrinsic to the idea of community that the chorus must convey. In its first address to Prometheus, the collective reassures him that it has come to offer him emotional support in his time of trial. Barrett Browning implies this sympathy in 1833 with the choral introduction as a "friendly train" and in 1850 with the substitution of "troop" for "train" to emphasize communal concern (9, 143). Webster changes "troop" to "friendly crowd" to indicate even more overtly the position of the chorus with respect to Prometheus (18). Once again, not everyone approved of Webster's language, the defining feature of these sections as well. For instance, the reviewer for the *Contemporary Review* writes, "We welcome her as a worthy addition to the goodly company of translators. . . . But we own that we miss, in the chorus especially, the loftiness and the music of Aeschylus" (448). In his review for the *Athenaeum*, John Conington, a fellow translator from the Greek, finds Webster's verse lacking in "poetical beauty and rhythmical facility" in this particular passage, a rather serious criticism, since the beauty and grace of the chorus is intrinsic to our perception of the contrasting grotesque position of Prometheus chained to the rock (424). However, the translator must convey to a modern audience the ancient standards according to which Prometheus casts himself in an increasingly heroic light, and Webster's chorus tempers regret that Prometheus is reluctant to ask for mercy and is instead eager for the chorus to redefine the communal understanding of sin to reflect its sympathy with his plight. Therefore, Webster's chorus joins Oceanus in commiserating with Prometheus on the consequences of his actions, but it also tacitly agrees with Oceanus that Prometheus's "too braggart tongue" has contributed to his situation (29). Contrary to convention, Webster divides the chorus into Strophe and Antistrophe in the third ode, explaining in an endnote that "there are great doubts as to the accuracy of parts of this division of the chorus"; however, through the division she emphasizes the interplay of fear and pity suggested by the story of Atlas and his suffering (75 n.1). The chorus tells the story as a warning to Prometheus in the Strophe and a source of sympathy with him in the Antistrophe, emphasizing collectively that all elements of nature, above and below ground, commiserate with Prometheus and "moan piteous for thy distress" (35). The personification of nature ironically underscores the most stirring—and paradoxical—aspect of Prometheus—his humanity.

<16> In the *Examiner*, Webster comments on the importance of diction in the choral sections, criticizing Morshead's depiction of "the oracular chorus which with its intentionally mystic obscurity and veiled meanings must have been meant to be but semi-intelligible to the audience,

attuning their minds to the coming tragedy by mysterious forebodings, but not revealing too much of the story beforehand" (1457). A modern audience approaches the poem numerous times and has different expectations, of course, particularly since this lyrical feature of ancient Greek poetry does not always translate easily. The choral passages, points out Swanwick, "may be regarded as a musical accompaniment," and, she explains, the fact that they are rhymed musical commentary that often defy rhymed translation into English means that in aiming for a translation in the spirit of the original, rhyme might have to be abandoned (iv). Webster does not translate the chorus in rhymed verse, but conveys through metaphor that Prometheus's kindness to humankind is also hamartia, as the chorus tells Prometheus that in defying Zeus "through a warp / In the mind thou wentst astray," and suggests that he is like "a bad physician [who] fallen sick, / Despair and know no drug to heal thyself" (36, 37). In attributing a kind of mental aberration to Prometheus, a momentary madness, Webster makes clear that the chorus is dismayed by the harsh reality that humankind cannot now help Prometheus. Later in the play the chorus moans rather than sings the effect of the story of Zeus's desire to marry Io, a mortal, in modern, alliterative language that underscores the social impropriety of intermarriage, which, the chorus feels, is always "a trackless path too hard to tread" (62). Despite her claim that the sense of this line is blocked by historicity and her admission that she has "to plead guilty to having by this line imitated, not translated, the expression it represents," she successfully incorporates into one line the terrible, unrelenting, isolated, and directionless motion of Io through the words "trackless," "hard," and "tread" (76 N.7).

<17>When Webster's Prometheus speaks he does so in language that underscores the unique attributes of the spirit of the ancients conceived by a nineteenth-century woman "educated" by the circumstances of gender turmoil. For example, when Prometheus lists his gifts to humankind, he speaks the language of reconciliation, for although he clearly thinks humankind worth saving, he is also aware that his well-meant gifts have not always been used wisely. In this important passage, the subtlety with which Prometheus negotiates the disparity between his intentions and the outcomes for humankind is dependent on the tone in which he refers to humans. Once again Webster's word choice reflects her innate sense of Aeschylus's tremendous sympathy with Prometheus. For example, Medwin translates Prometheus's sense of early humans as "brutes," Barrett Browning as people living in "idiot state" in 1833, and Call as "puling babes" (30, 28, 29). In 1850, Barrett Browning changed "idiot state" to "fools," suggesting a more redeemable race (28). Webster, however, using language to emphasize the pathetic human condition that warrants Prometheus's tremendous act of charity, chooses an even more suggestive term, "child-brained," which suggests not only the innocent and nurture-needy state of humankind, but also Prometheus's moral obligation to help such beings (35). Through all his gifts, including inventiveness and literacy, Prometheus is intrinsic to the survival of the human race; this is what he wants the chorus to understand and this is what the translator must convey.

<18>In the concluding passages of the *Prometheus*, Webster's challenge is to present the powerful figure of the imprisoned Prometheus, resolute—yet filled with a sense of injustice—poised for the earth to swallow him up to face the generations alone. His final speech is filled with pathos, primarily because, even as he asks his mother, Themis, the goddess of justice, to see the injustice of his punishment, he speaks without a trace of remorse and remains a presence long after his bound body has disappeared. Once again, the brevity and terseness of Webster's

language sets her translation apart from others, including Barrett Browning's second edition. Barrett Browning relies on punctuation to shift the focus from Prometheus to the violence of the moving earth. Prometheus begins, "Ay! In act, now—in word, now, no more! / Earth is rocking in space!" (190). In contrast, Webster's more intense and quiet language, with no emphatic punctuation, resonates convincingly: "Lo, in very deed, no more in mere talk / Does the earth now rock" (73). The elements have come together in the name of tyranny, but in his final, quiet acceptance of his fate Prometheus conveys through calm and clear language his predicted resurrection and his part in the restoration of peace. In her translation, Webster combines a literal, line-by-line accuracy with the spirit of Aeschylus's sense of the need for a Promethean hero in a world increasingly filled with tyranny. Her innate sympathy with the fight against tyranny represented in this powerful play reflects her political perspective on and feminist resistance to the Victorian patriarchal structure of her nineteenth-century world.

<19>By the time the *Medea of Euripides* was published in 1868, Webster had forged her reputation as an "accurate" translator, and reviewers continued to focus on her ability to provide what the *Westminster Review* termed "a photograph of the original, without any of that harshness which so often accompanies a photograph. She has combined, what is the despair of the translator, accuracy with freedom" (607). To this reviewer Webster's modern language suits its subject, for the story of the legendary Medea, the woman scorned who refuses to accept rejection passively, was bound to appeal to a woman writer with a keen and developed sense of the tragic, particularly to a woman writer involved in the fight to improve the social and legal condition of women. As Josephine McDonagh points out, theatrical productions of the *Medea* increased from 1845, and this increase can be tied to contemporary discussions about marriage reform (164). In BC 431, the play garnered Euripides third prize behind the first prize winner Euphorio, the son of Aeschylus, and the second prize winner Sophocles (Paley 5). Euripides begins his dramatization of this legendary woman at the point when Jason betrays Medea and decides to enhance his social position and fortune by marrying Glauce, the daughter of Cleon, King of Corinth. Medea is a complex character, her capacity for greatness and for cruelty in equal measure presenting challenges to a translator, for although she kills her children, she must be delineated in such a way as to warrant tremendous sympathy at the end of the play. Perhaps even more than Prometheus, Medea relies on the nuances of language to convey her awareness that her cruel desire for revenge leads to her intense suffering. She is "a tragic figure," writes McDonagh, "because, like the queen bee, her act makes her a casualty of evolutionary progress, an anachronism, unfit for the world as it exists" (165). Indeed, the complexity of Medea's character continued to preoccupy Webster after she had translated Euripides: two years later she published "Medea in Athens" in *Portraits*, situating Medea after the murders, her escape, and her marriage to Aegeus.

<20>The popular academic translations of the *Medea* with which Webster was probably familiar were published by the Reverend Andrew Robert Fausset in 1851, W. Brownrigg Smith in 1862, Roscoe Mongan in 1865, and John Lee in 1867, the same year in which William Morris published his verse narrative *The Life and Death of Jason*. Not surprisingly, Webster's gender did not go unnoticed by the reviewers. The reviewer for the *Contemporary Review*, for instance, writes, in "faithfulness and accurate interpretation she is second to none, and this in itself is saying a great deal for a lady-translator" (465). This reviewer continues to qualify praise in gendered terms, writing, "we are somewhat surprised, however, that she is less faultless in

matters of rhythm and smoothness, where the feminine ear should have stood her in stead” (466). The reviewer for the *Westminster Review* is specific about the significance of this particular play “in these days, when the whole question of woman’s position is being discussed,” and suggests that certain passages, such as the chorus’s commiseration with Medea on being a woman and at the mercy of men, are poignant in the mid-nineteenth century. This reviewer finds that the idea of a woman taking control might serve as “consolation for those who faint and despair of any better order of things than the present—a consolation which has supported so many noble spirits in all ages” (608). In the *Athenaeum* J. Millard writes that this tragedy “is also one which a lady might naturally be expected to handle with success, as she must be able to enter fully into the feelings of the unfortunate heroine in her distressing condition, and, therefore, to produce a vivid copy of the tragedian’s conception” (394). Webster clearly did feel more confident in her ability to enter into the genius of Euripides on some level, since this time she published without her husband’s apology.

<21> Webster’s successful entrance into the genius of Euripides is suggested at the beginning of the play with the Nurse’s language, which conveys both the fact that Medea “loathes her sons, nor now joys in seeing them,” and the fact that she is afraid, “lest she slay those royal ones” (9). The foreshadowing in this speech, complains Fausset, is one of the defects of the play; however, this initial impression of Medea is crucial to our later understanding of the extent of her shock at Jason’s desertion (iii). Webster’s sense that the precarious state of Medea’s mind warrants sympathy is implicit in her deviation in introducing Medea to the audience with the simple and plaintive cry “Woe’s me,” instead of the lengthy explanations of her state of mind that Fausset, Mongan, and Lee all deliver (Fausset 5, Mongan 5, Lee 5). The emotion compressed into Medea’s verbal sigh is crucial to our understanding in these early scenes that Jason’s betrayal has left her dangerously distraught. Her grief is intensified by the memory of her homeland and her father, “whom I forsook / Traitorous” for Jason (16). The women of Corinth who form the chorus suggest that the Nurse tell Medea to come out and meet them, for they will embrace her in their common womanhood and will try to soothe her. Brownrigg Smith, firmly placing Medea outside a nineteenth-century English context in order to explain her state of mind, suggests that she comes on stage “with all the passionateness of an Eastern nature” (121). Webster, however, presents a nineteenth-century Medea who understands her misfortune in terms of her gender: “Of all living and of reasoning things / Are woman [sic] the most miserable race,” she says, for men have all the power in marriage and now, it seems, in divorce as well, since “Nor can one spurn a husband” (19). She turns to the female chorus to solicit support for her plan for revenge, and in the exchanges that follow Webster pointedly links Medea’s tragedy to her womanly passion: she is passionate about her children and she is passionate about Jason. In this sense, she is true to the spirit of Euripides, for Medea’s tragedy arises from the incompatibility of these passions in her current situation. While Brownrigg Smith relates Euripides’s talents to his ability to see “far more deeply into woman’s heart than it has been given most dramatists to see,” Webster writes from a perspective ultimately denied to Euripides, for she shares with Medea the position of a woman at the mercy of laws made by men (122). However, this shared position also presents a challenge for the translator writing for a Victorian audience who, in 1868, by and large condoned the double standard claimed by Jason and condemned the mother willing to kill her children to set a new standard. Because to the Greeks perjury was “one of the heaviest of the social sins,” a Greek audience would well have understood Medea’s grief and outrage, explains Paley in his later, 1876 translation; however, a nineteenth-century audience treated infidelity on the part of

the man with more tolerance and viewed Medea's vengeful manner as inappropriate for a woman (54). It would have been crucial for any nineteenth-century translator to treat Medea's infanticide with great care, for although Euripides's audience censured him for depicting Medea in tears when she is about to slay her children, a Victorian audience would have expected the tears to represent remorse and self-loathing.

<22>Despite Paley's assurance that "we may be content to think that the poet understood a mother's feelings better than his critics did," the *Medea* has often been read as a misogynist play that reflects Euripides's intense dislike of women (7). However, Webster's intuited sense of the genius of Euripides is evident in the fact that she highlights collective sympathy through Euripides's female chorus, who understand Medea's agony as a woman who has "lost / The shelter that a wife's should be, / Thou widowed as thou art and sent / Dishonoured into banishment" (31). Euripides, points out Alistair Elliot, was writing when "tragedy was an inherently unstable form—the Chorus had already shrunk to being less than a quarter of the play instead of well over half, and over the next fifty years or so disappeared altogether" (82-83). Euripides draws on this fading convention to emphasize the ignominy of Medea's outcast state to a Greek audience predisposed to understand her actions in light of it, and the translator must find the language to make the actions of this strong and forceful woman comprehensible to Victorians suspicious of such an unseemly tribute to an immoral woman. Webster's diction and syntax choices direct the audience away from emphasis on Medea as a womanly aberration and instead elicit sympathy for woman as a victim of patriarchy. For Fausset and Mongan, for example, Medea's first off-stage speech is simply a "cry"; for Lee it is a "passionate wail of anguish sore" (Fausset 6, Mongan 6, Lee 6). For Webster, it is a "shriek" of fury, fear, and despair that resonates throughout the remainder of the play, placing in perspective Medea's vacillation and her fear of being made "a laughing-stock" (14, 67). Significantly, as Medea shrieks her pain and her fear of ignominy, the chorus sings of childbearing and childrearing, thereby tacitly endorsing in principle Medea's decision to take back from Jason what is rightfully hers (67).

<23>Lee points out that "it was maliciously reported that the people of Corinth, who were anciently believed to have been guilty of the assassination of Medea's children, bribed the poet to remove so foul a stain from their city and lighten the horrors of his plot, by representing the mother as the murderess of her own offspring" (iii). Webster delineates a complex woman driven to kill those she loves by what the Greek chorus recognizes as specifically gendered injustices, and the difficulty she faces is not that she must convince the chorus of this, but that she must retain the loyalty of the chorus despite her treatment of Glauce, another woman. Therefore, suggests Brownrigg Smith, Glauce is delineated as "so selfish and frivolous, that it becomes more evident than ever that Jason turns from Medea to her for none but the most unworthy reasons" (123). John Lee, writing the year before the publication of Webster's *Medea*, suggests that Jason is also a fine counterpoint to Medea in "his contemptible and quibbling defence, when boldly accused of baseness and perjury; his mean subterfuges; and, when crushed and baffled, his coarse and brutal taunts, lessen the sympathy which his terrible punishment might awake in the spectators" (4). Webster's *Medea* appeals to the chorus's womanhood to understand her own heroic status as a mother in the context of Glauce's status as non mother and Jason's treachery; Medea explains that whereas it is often said that women "lead in our homes a life undangerous," she "would liefer thrice / Bear brunt of arms than once bring forth a child" (20). When she refuses Jason's offer of money she does so in the voice of an

anachronistic nineteenth-century Medea, calling the offer “the greatest shame to thine manliness” (32). In the end, she says, “what we are we are—I’ll say no worse—women,” and when she brings the boys forward and symbolically “gives” them to Jason by asking them to take his hands, Jason hears what he wants to hear, as she has known he would (57). By the time Medea puts her plans into action, then, she has secured the sympathy of the audience through gendered language that predisposes us to pity her for her fall from motherhood to childlessness and from wife to cast-off. Subsequently, the nineteenth-century audience could not help but see the implications for society of her success in destroying what was once emblematic of her womanhood—her husband and her two children. Reviewers obviously liked Webster’s uncompromising, complex, and, at times, anachronistic Medea. The reviewer for the *Westminster Review* asks Webster not to “shrink from the task of translating some more of [Euripides’s] plays, and allowing the English reader to feel the beauty of one of the most ethical and pathetic of dramatists” (608). The reviewer for the *Contemporary Review* expresses the same desire (467). For whatever reason, though, this was to be Webster’s last translation.

<24>Clearly, Webster’s affinity with Aeschylus and Euripides was not, as she demurred to Blackie, simply the result of chance. Rather, in both the *Prometheus of Aeschylus* and the *Medea of Euripides* Webster manages to meet her own criteria for excellence in translation, criteria set out most succinctly in “The Translation of Poetry” a decade after the publication of the *Medea of Euripides*, when she points out that the translator’s duty is to transcend historicity, with its inherent historical, cultural, and linguistic barriers between “authors” in trusting to “accuracy to the letter for accuracy to the spirit” (815). Webster translated in a culture of high Victorian correctness confronted daily with redefinitions of that correctness by women like herself, and through her intuited understanding that ancient social and political processes resembled the context within which she lived and worked, as well as her capacity to produce critically acclaimed poetic drama, she captured the spirit of Aeschylus and Euripides dependent on her ability to respect the denotative and connotative sense of Greek usage. Modern readers must permeate an additional layer of historicity to reach Aeschylus and Euripides through Webster: we read her translations in the context not only of her membership in a small group of women working within an elite group of primarily male scholars, but also in the context of her social and political activism. Webster is, therefore, enabled by historicity through the arduous and determined self-education that redefined her status as a nineteenth-century woman and through the intuitive sense of justice at the core of both plays. Like Robert Browning, she “adds” to Aeschylus and Euripides, conveying the nuances of the original Greek language in English words and inflections that depict her own complex experience as a nineteenth-century woman writer and reformer.

## Endnotes

(1)The letter is undated, but based on the fact that the address is still Fitzwilliam Street in Cambridge, I estimate the date to be early 1870. Warren's translation of *Philoctetes* came out in 1866.(^)

(2)Mme Dacier was a well-respected translator who, in 1799, published a translation of *The Iliad*, along with a preface that defended faithfulness to Homer's original work in the face of eighteenth-century tendencies to adapt works to eighteenth-century tastes.(^)

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