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Consultation with the Self: The Diary as Speakability in “A Castaway”

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ABSTRACT: Together with the diary and dramatic monologue, Augusta Webster's poem "A Castaway" achieves a fiercely critical appraisal of Victorian society and the subjugation of its female community. Provoking the performativity of the monologue, the diary enables and empowers the voice of the protagonist, affording a space—*A Room of One's Own*—to sincerely and persuasively relay the societal injustices that pervade the life of the Victorian sex worker and that thrust them into the darker, morally depraved recesses of Victorian society. The novelty of this paper is its investigation of the purpose of the diary as it relates to dramatic monologue and the interrogation of identity. Simply put, this paper argues that the diary—as surrogate auditor and instrument of consultation—enables the speakability of the protagonist, and this speakability is demonstrated by the candid outspokenness of the dramatic monologue. This paper's usage of the term "speakability" connotes the ability to freely voice one's speech: in this case, the unfiltered criticisms of the speaker and her appraisal of society at large. If we consider Judith Butler's coinage of the term "impossible speech"—"the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the 'psychotic'"—speech that fails to subscribe to conventional interpretations of accepted speech, then "speakability" can be understood as the uninhibited (arguably unbridled) freedom to speak candidly without the restrictions of speech that the Victorian sex worker was typically consigned to. From the disparity between innocent girlhood and adult courtesan to the symbolic nature of the diary as both a literal and figurative mouthpiece, this paper interrogates the female Victorian's outlet for communication and consultation.

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Consultation with the Self: The Diary as Speakability in "A Castaway"

Situated among the literary canon, Augusta Webster's "A Castaway" is widely considered to be her "most successful poetic expression" of dramatic monologue (qtd. in Taft 401). The "dramatic monologue is a longer speech or monologue that is spoken by a single speaker," in which a situation or series of events are conveyed (X). It is no coincidence that the dramatic monologue is widely employed by the Victorian female author: "the speech of actual Victorian prostitutes was consigned either to the silence of interior monologue or the silence of imaginary auditors" (Luu 25). The dramatic monologue conveniently, powerfully and succinctly conveys the oppression and mistreatment of the Victorian sex worker from her personal perspective and offers a voice to what are "often marginal characters constructed in the third person by male authors" (Sutphin 512). Provoking the performativity of the monologue, the diary in "A Castaway" enables and empowers the voice of the protagonist, affording a space—*A Room of One's Own*—to sincerely and persuasively relay the societal injustices that pervade the experiences of the Victorian prostitute and that thrust them into the darker, morally depraved recesses of Victorian society.[1]

Admittedly, throughout the poem, the diary is scarcely referred to or mentioned: twice in the beginning (between lines 1-23) and once again (line 189). Despite this, the diary is imbued with considerable meaning, as it provokes and enables the ensuing dramatic monologue. While commentators have spoken at length on Victorian relics and diaries, however, seemingly little to no scholarship has addressed the literal and symbolic purpose of the diary in "A Castaway." In tandem with the diary and the dramatic monologue, Webster achieves a fiercely critical appraisal of Victorian society and the subjugation of its female community. The novelty of this paper is to

investigate the purpose of the diary as it relates to dramatic monologue and the interrogation of identity.

This paper argues that, as surrogate auditor and an instrument of consultation, the diary enables the speakability of the protagonist, and this speakability is demonstrated by the dramatic monologue. First, this paper will consider the disparity of identity between adult courtesan and childhood innocence (personified by the diary), and how these differences provoke the dramatic monologue. Secondly, following a consideration of the diary as an example of apostrophe, this paper will contend that the diary is a surrogate auditor which Eulalie addresses, and once again, this is evidenced by the dramatic monologue. This paper's usage of the word "speakability" connotes the ability to freely voice one's speech, in this case, the unfiltered criticisms of the speaker and her appraisal of society at large. If we consider Judith Butler's coinage of the term "impossible speech"—"the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the 'psychotic'"—speech that fails to subscribe to conventional interpretations of accepted speech, then "speakability" can be understood as the uninhibited (arguably unbridled) freedom to speak candidly without the restrictions of speech that the Victorian prostitute was typically consigned to (133). Whereas impossible speech "challenges the model of authoritative speaking which underpins . . . the prevailing theory of [women] as a clutch for linguistic freedom, power and authority," speakability freely allows the speech of the speaker (Luu ii). Therefore, "speakability" helps illuminate the poem's emphasis and reliance on the diary as a mouthpiece for the speaker.

With its introduction into the poem, the diary demarcates the whimsical and naïve musings of childhood—"'Darned stockings,' 'Tatted,' 'Practiced my new song,'" (4)—from the grim social inequities of adulthood, and this juxtaposition exacerbates the fallenness of our

protagonist, Eulalie: "Was I this good girl, / this budding colourless young rose of home?" (7-8). "Regardless of their social and cultural position, whether . . . a high-class prostitute ('A Castaway') or an old woman ('Faded')," Helen Luu specifies, "all of Webster's female speakers define themselves as women and wrestle with the ways in which the category of 'woman' in turn defines them" (251). Lamenting the moral fall of adulthood and scolding the naivety of youth, both spheres of femininity are not without criticism, and neither can both be reconciled together: "A wild whim that, to fancy I could change / my new self for my old, because I wished!" (206-7). Hence, Eulalie struggles to reconcile the forgone innocence and youth of childhood with her current status as a courtesan:

> So long since:
> And now it seems a jest to talk of me
> As if I could be one with her, of me
> Who am . . . me. (23-26)

Rather than recognize that she has matured from girlhood into adulthood, Eulalie dichotomizes childhood and adulthood, thus dividing her existence into two separate identities—childhood Eulalie is a "her" and not a "me." The "Poor little diary"—as the personification of childhood Eulalie—is contrasted against the "poor fantastic fool," as Eulalie describes herself in adulthood (59). They are both "poor," but one is the personified diary and the other a "fool." No longer "little," Eulalie has become "fantastic" in her foolishness. Despite the speaker's apparent mastery over language and expression of thought (conveyed through Webster's writing), the syntax of language cannot accurately explain or communicate her identity; identity itself has become ineffable. Line twenty-six even shows this ambivalence about whether to conclude as a question or statement—a question mark or period—but does indeed choose the latter. "Fascinated by

those areas where we have no language, or where language cannot exist in any richness," the monologue becomes an "analytical psychological exploration which discloses contradictions in the construction of feminine subjectivity" (Armstrong 345). Thus, exacerbating Eulalie's fallenness: the diary, as "an index of the pain of her loss," provokes the passionate ensuing monologue (Lei 184).

As the monologue unfolds, the identity and assessment of the self extends outward to the scathing criticism of the society in which the sex trade is made permissible—Eulalie's identity is inseparable from the world's social construction of her. In an attempt to reconcile or comprehend her identity, she consults the looking-glass: "And what is that? My looking-glass / Answers it passably; a woman" (26-27). By doing this, the diary and looking-glass are elevated to symbolic significance, and subsequently constitute a dichotomy. The diary reflects childhood with its identity imbued within its words. On the other hand, the looking-glass reflects adulthood and her present status as courtesan:

> Aye let me feed upon my beauty thus,
> Be glad in it like painters when they see
> At last the face they dreamed but could not find
> Look from their canvass on them, triumph in it,
> The dearest thing I have. Why, 'tis my all,
> Let me make much of it: is it not this,
> This beauty, my own curse at once and tool
> To snare men's souls, . . . (34-41)

As opposed to the "Victorian ideal of femininity [which] involved economic and intellectual dependency," the prowess of Eulalie's feminine charms and sexual desirability further

exacerbate her imprisonment beneath the societal ideology of the Victorian era (Lei 171). Writing nearly a century before Webster, Mary Wollstonecraft would testify “that elegance is inferior to virtue”—“that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love . . . will soon become objects of contempt,” in which Eulalie finds herself (Greenblatt et al. 172). Instead, the fallenness of prostitution is irreconcilable from the former chaste innocence:

> . . . Fancy me
> Infallible nursery saint, live code of law!
> Me preaching! teaching innocence to be good! —
> A mother! (419-22)

The sophisticated elegancy with which Eulalie articulates herself in tandem with her detailed appraisal of society is testimony to her intelligence and linguistic ability. But whether by an apathy towards teaching—“That I might plod, and plod, and drum the sounds / Of useless facts into unwilling ears” (335-6)—or the tedium of being a governess—within “a dull home” (351)—Eulalie favors the “miserable respectability and comfortable misery of high-class prostitution,” and does not heed the feminist commentary, as Wollstonecraft articulates (Lei 175). Rather, gesturing to Aestheticism, Eulalie concedes hypocrisy, consuming her own beauty—“Aye let me feed upon my beauty thus”—just as her male patronage consume her beauty and sexual promiscuity. Indeed, Eulalie concedes as much: “Why do I play the hypocrite alone” (60).

Some commentators suggest that “Her fall is largely caused by social and sexual disadvantage: poverty, inappropriate education, an imbalance of the number of women against men, and a shortage of work” (Lei 172). However, blame cannot be so readily accounted for, for

whether we “find society to blame, or law, / The Church, the men, the women, too few schools, / Too many schools, too much, too little taught,” many elements contribute to the fall (291-3). The emphasis on blame is contrasted against

> . . . the grave blameless life
> Among such simple pleasures, simple cares:
> But could they be my pleasures, be my cares?
> The blameless life, but never the content —
> Never. . . . (226-30)

Later in the monologue, the blame is attributed to God: “But I say all fault’s with God himself / Who puts too many women in the world” (295-6). (Note here the emphasis on “himself”; the typical male-gendered interpretation of God further connotes the male persecution of women.) To add further confusion, near the end of the monologue, Eulalie concedes, “Oh I blame no one — scarcely even myself” (573). All things considered, these musings are made possible through the disparity between life as a courtesan and the innocence of childhood, personified by the diary.

Having considered how the disparity between girlhood and adulthood aggravate the musings of inequity, this paper will demonstrate how the symbolic nature of the diary—through the literary device known as apostrophe—enables speakability (as shown by the dramatic monologue). A literary device and figure of speech, apostrophe is an address to an absent figure or inanimate object. Apostrophe commonly interrogates an abstract idea, as *Hamlet* illustrates: “Alas, poor / Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite / jest, of most excellent fancy” (5.1.190-2). In this instance, William Shakespeare interrogates the brevity of life, that so soon as we are alive, we are dead and forgotten. The use of apostrophe in “A Castaway” is unique in that

when addressing the diary, Eulalie addresses it both as a personification of a younger self (as a subject) and as an object of consultation and authorship. We see that the beginning of the poem connotes apostrophe:

> Poor little diary, with its simple thoughts,
> Its good resolves, its 'Studied French an hour,'
> 'Read Modern History,' 'Trimmed up my grey hat,'
> 'Darned stockings,' 'Tatted,' 'Practiced my new song,'
> 'Went to the daily service,' 'Took Bess soup,'
> 'Went out to tea.' Poor simple diary! (1-6)

"The Victorian desire to materialize memories of the dead"—in this case the semblance of a former self—is owed to that which came before it—the Romanticism, "a gospel of immanence that 'fixed' temporal and affective moments by mixing them with the tangible and legible" (Ledger-Lomas 415). However, absent of the grand reverence to nature and exclamations of "Ah!" and "Oh!" commonly penned by the poets of Romanticism, Eulalie's object of interest is "poor," "little" and "simple." The scathing criticism of the diary reflects (much like the looking-glass reflects) Eulalie herself and her dissatisfaction with reality. As demonstrated earlier, the diary symbolizes Eulalie's girlhood, and therefore, when she addresses the diary, she also addresses herself. The dramatic monologue expresses much passion because the diary is the receptive surrogate other. At once, the diary is the personified subject with which to speak to and an object or instrument of consultation—the diary encourages speakability just as the diary once promoted the musings and identity-making of childhood Eulalie.[2] The monologue makes clear Eulalie's loneliness and yearning for company: "So long alone! / Will no one come?" (454-5).

As such, we recognize that the diary is the surrogate-auditor and mouthpiece through which Eulalie can communicate the dramatic monologue:

> Why did I read
> That silly diary? Now, sing-song, ding-dong,
> Come the old vexing echoes back again,
> Church bells and nursey good-books, back again
> Upon my shrinking ears that had forgotten — (188-92)

Commentators such as Luu have noted that the poem begins with "Poor" and ends with "alone" (630). Much the same, Eulalie begins and ends her ruminations "poor and alone," and that which separates the time between "This rain, rain, rain," and the "wretched thoughts it brings" is the confiding in and consultation with the diary (186).[3] However, it is unclear whether this consultation provides much, if any, catharsis. Nonetheless, this temporary abatement from the cruelty of reality provides some solace, howsoever brief.

With further consideration to apostrophe and the diary's symbolic significance, the poem might be read as a more modern invocation of a muse, as Homer's *The Odyssey* illustrates. The sacred knowledge and inspiration of the heavenly muse is invoked by the profaned poet, elevating her speakability. In this case, the innocence and chastity of youth become the worthy invocation with which to communicate one's fallenness. Childhood Eulalie speaks through adult Eulalie just as the heavenly muse was thought to speak through Homer. The poet is the conduit through which the muse speaks, and in much the same manner, childhood Eulalie speaks of the innocence and chastity of youth, and these sentiments evoke adult Eulalie's scathing commentary on herself and Victorian society. Indeed, the "fallenness" which commentators frequently attribute to Eulalie, is considered a spiritual fall from the virtuous and chaste

innocence of youth to the debasement of prostitution. While the poem shows no explicit invocation of a muse, Eulalie posits the modesty and innocence of her youth, personified by the diary, as the guiding principle of goodness from which to deliver a monologue her fall into prostitution. The diary might be understood as the better part of Eulalie: "the full force of synecdoche is at work here: the piece of the person can bring the presence of the whole" (Lutz 131). Without the dichotomy of naïve goodness—with its Christian "church bells and nursey good-books"—contrasting against the moral complexities of prostitution, there would be no "unceasing 'tension between sympathy and moral judgement'" (qtd. in Taft 402). Rather, the reader would only perceive the incoherent and rambling "impossible speech" of a prostitute, as opposed to the chronicle of the fallen "budding colourless rose of home." For "if the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech . . . [then] that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject [is] called into question" (qtd. in Luu 4). Simply put, the symbolic nature of the diary, imbued with its innocence of youth, is the instrument through which the speakability and dramatic monologue are enabled. Without the diary, there simply would be no dramatic monologue to discuss.

This paper has attempted to show how the diary—through its contrast with the grown Eulalie and its symbolic undertones—connotes Eulalie's speakability in the form of the dramatic monologue. Webster's construction of "A Castaway" is precise and deliberate. Specifically, the dramatic monologue is inherently purposeful and not without reason. The diary and its imbedded association with identity helps propel the momentum of the narrative and dramatic monologue forward. Ultimately, the poem continues the identity-making of narrative from the childhood diary to the grown Eulalie's spoken dramatic monologue. We know that "diaries in the mid-nineteenth century suggest an awareness of audience and a recognition of identity as a social

construction" (Linder 192). Therefore, it is the diary and its events therein that constitute Eulalie's conception of her former self. As such, if we understand the diary as the construction of childhood identity, by extension, we can understand the dramatic monologue as the identity-making of adulthood. Though no human auditor is present (besides the diary as a surrogate auditor), "the polemics of Webster's monologues make them public rather than private speeches" (109 Luu). So, if we entertain the possibility that child Eulalie writing in her diary connotes authorship—"'Read Modern History,' 'Trimmed up my grey hat,'"—we can consider adult Eulalie's dramatic monologue as the adult variation of authorship. Yet Eulalie is no longer writing within the diary but rather addressing the diary (whether verbal or imagined in stream-of-consciousness fashion). Therefore, in tandem with the speakability the diary affords, the continuation of authorship from girlhood to adulthood is just one level of nuance the poem interrogates. All things considered, this paper hopes to have been of some value in highlighting the seemingly endless insights and nuances the poem "A Castaway" entertains.

Endnotes

1. Though it is beyond the purpose of this paper, readers might consider the problematic relationship of the diary being contemporaneously a symbolic object of authorship and meaning-making, while also a mass-produced, economic commodity which perpetuates power dichotomies of consumer/producer and buyer/seller. Unsurprisingly, Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," which explores the psychological complexities of Victorian shopping, coincided with London's rapid revolution of shopping and retail expansion (X). Considering this development, ordinary household objects became decisively inseparable from capitalist commentary and the literary vocabulary associated with it. Simply put, ordinary items became commodities, and by extension, consumers themselves became commodities to the manufacturers. However, the diary seemingly rejects this commodification, and rather stands apart as wholly unique, imbued with a childhood's identity. After all, the diary is humanized; it has "simple thoughts" and "good resolves" (1, 2). Can the larger economic and power ideologies be separated from the diary as a commodity? Or does the diary's ability to produce its own meaning supersede any moral complications that arise from its manufacturing?
2. Considering apostrophe more generally, the poem's unique interpretation and use of it might be interpreted as an evolution of the apostrophe owing from the Romantic period's prevalent use of the literary device. The Romantic's use of apostrophe was not often materially apprehended. Considering the famous Odes, John Keats' urn and nightingale may only be apprehended by sight and the imagination of the mind, whereas Webster's diary is at once an abstract symbol of the former self and a material object or instrument of which one can use to write.

3. We recognize the same dynamic when we consider Julia Kristeva's "abjection" (a term generally employed by the post-structuralists), "the state of being cast off." Eulalie's conventional understanding of identity is dichotomized, separated into the self (reflected by the mirror) and the other (reflected by the diary). Kristeva's example of the milk froth demonstrates both an abjection and need for the milk and its froth. At once, the milk provides nutritional value and sustenance, yet the skin of the milk is a point of disgust and revulsion. Likewise, the diary and its association to innocence and chastity intensifies the shame and humiliation of being a courtesan. Nevertheless, the diary sustains Eulalie, by enabling speakability and providing company. Moreover, we see more broader abjection with the "Victorian gender ideology that both condemns and sustains her 'trade'" (Luu 33); Eulalie "hate[s] men," yet her male patronage sustains her livelihood as a courtesan and the financial prosperity it affords (258).

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