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EN 220

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3 March, 2018

### Dickinson: Dash Diva

Truth is sometimes most audible in the absence of words. A pregnant pause can alter the fate of a proposal. Read between the lines; ages-old advice that can be applied literally to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. While her verse tends to communicate her messages eloquently, much of the proof is in the print. Dickinson's manner of writing conveys her disillusionment with the standards for women imposed by a patriarchal society. Many realms of Dickinson's life were at odds with norms of the time, whether by nature or choice, but the divergence that underlines her syntax is her active declaration of defiance. Her spinster status can be attributed to her speculated homosexuality and religious refusal on a skewed moral compass. But, her intentional inklings of empowerment were explicit expressions of her feminist stance that influence her successors to this day. Emily Dickinson weaves a narrative of female resistance and independence of thought through her unconventional orthography and intentional transcription of her original manuscripts as well as her aversion to publication of her poetry. The alterations made by male figures that minimize these features of her work exemplify patriarchal insistence on uniformity and the discrimination against homosexual femmes like Dickinson that still plague American culture.

Emily Dickinson's atypical structure and defiance of prescribed grammar, spelling, and punctuation are acts of passive resistance to the male-oriented Transcendental movement. Authors like Thoreau and Emerson cling to traditional syntax in their primarily prose works and

shy away from experimental linguistics. Preemptively excluded based on her preferred genre alone, Dickinson forges her own style perpendicular to the acclaimed works of the time. To frame the following structural analysis, consider this inquiry: “How much does a poet look to words to supply what is put down, and how much to notate what was within the self, prior to the words?” (Blackmur 225). I believe we can respond to this question by examining Dickinson’s poem 409.

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then —shuts the Door—

To her divine Majority—

Present no more—

Capitalization and alliteration of S-words coupled with the feminine pronoun drive home the idea that She is sovereign over the Majority of Men whom she chooses to close the door on. The dash following “Majority” forces the reader to reflect on who the majority is, which leads to an evaluation regarding how men are represented disproportionately to women in public and political spheres. The concept of men dictating outcomes for both men and women was not concealed but rather openly supported by social and religious interpretations. Elsa Greene contextualizes Dickinson’s motivation for inverting the roles of men and women in this work, surmising “[Ralph Waldo Emerson] was not raised to celebrate piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as divinely commanded attributes of himself” (67). The traits listed were stressed in the upbringing of a female child, especially in a religious household resembling Dickinson’s, so imposing them on the submissive male figure in this poem creates an alternate universe in which men are taught to be subservient to women. Positing this monopoly of representation in a roles-reversed situation enlightens, particularly male, readers that this is not a

desirable set of circumstances, because once the door is closed they cease to exist. What an unpleasant idea, to feel as though you only exist when someone needs something from you. This mirrors how women's voices were suppressed by withholding their right to vote or take office. Society valued women based on their ability to serve others and when they were not, they were disregarded wholly.

Submissive male figures persist in the second stanza which continues:

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—

At her low Gate—

Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling

Opon her Mat—

Multiple dashes per line encourage the reader to process her observations slowly, as if the speaker was surveying her domain from a hilltop. By capitalizing “Chariots” and “Emperor”, Dickinson asserts that male figures who were respected in reality were rendered motionless by the female speaker's gaze. Emphasizing “Gate” and “Mat” as well as “Door” in the first stanza signifies the boundaries she has drawn that the men must stay in. Being able to dictate her own threshold was a right that women rarely had, as they were virtually forbidden from owning property.

The final stanza concludes:

I've known her—from an ample nation— /

Choose One— /

Then—close the Valves of her attention— /

Like Stone—

The continued idea of restricted access to the speaker continues in the third line of this stanza. Straddling “close the Valves of her attention” with dashes creates a sense of encroaching claustrophobia as if two walls were sealing off the subjects’ access to liberation, much like how a woman’s path to independence was narrow and fleeting. Repeated line structure of “Choose One—” and “Like Stone—” couples these phrases together. Their compounded message conveys unwavering authority which the speaker wields in selecting the “One” worthy of her presence which, referring back to the first line, is herself. Usage of this full-circle device concretizes the tone of empowerment in this poem, elevating it from a satirical critique of patriarchal society to an idyllic, woman-friendly realm.

Through thorough analysis, we answer the question posed earlier; an entire catalog of female empowerment and the yearning for rights can be extrapolated simply by acknowledging Dickinson’s subtle notations. By delving deeper into her work and revealing how much can be articulated through intentional syntax, it is apparent how societal insistence on poetry following certain rules could be regarded as oppression as well.

Now that the importance of Dickinson's textual inflections has been established, we can examine why only a handful of her poems were published while she was alive. Her consistent correspondence with friends and relatives eliminates the possibility of her hesitation of publication being due to some insecurity about her work. Considering the intentional nature of her transcription, it can be determined that Dickinson never sought out platforms to publish her works because she did not trust they could adequately express her messages with insincere typeface and grade-school grammar rules. Her insistence on her poems being dictated mark-for-mark proves that her work was for her own pleasure rather than any arbitrary audience. Such a concept was frowned upon in her time since, as previously determined, men operated under the

delusion that women lived to please them. For sake of clarity, I have described her distrust of publication, but Dickinson herself states in a letter to Higginson, "I had told you, I do not print..." (Nell 79). Differentiation of printing and publication was significant to her because publishing could simply mean divulging her work to a public audience, but printing involved editing and reduction of the meticulous notation she instilled in her work.

One instance that exemplifies just how much significance could be neglected through traditional printing is Manuscript 445, scribbled on the back of a coconut cake recipe. Juxtaposing the acts of writing and baking seems to be a retort directed at the expectations imposed upon women to foster domestic crafts, because while she was participating in this stereotypical feminine activity, she was simultaneously acting in an unsanctioned manner by exercising her literary capabilities. By transcribing the poem on a recipe, a document accessed mostly by women, it is apparent that it is being told from a woman's point of view. Dickinson proclaims:

But Joys like men  
may sometimes make a  
Journey  
And still abide -

Vertical alignment of "men", "Journey", and "abide" at the ends of the lines hints that only men were permitted to embark on adventures without raising eyebrows over flouting social expectations. The singling out of "men" by the implied female speaker reiterates the concept that geographical mobility was an exclusively male privilege. Male figures in literature have been given freedom of movement since *The Odyssey*, and Dickinson cites "Travelers" and "Sailors" as acceptable occupations that allowed men to indulge their culture quests. Female characters, on

the other hand, rarely breach the borders beyond the boudoir. The poem compels the reader, "But think - enlarged - / of all that they will / tell us -", to reflect on the sojourns of men and how they return to tell tall tales of great sights. Inscribing this message on the back of a recipe evokes a tone of imprisonment, for men are out travelling the world while she is stuck stirring in the kitchen.

R. P. Blackmur remarks, "...consider how Emily Dickinson's poems, all short, have none of the self-modulating advantages of length or any of the certainties of complex overt structure" (227) to magnify the importance of subliminal cues Dickinson depends on in works like Manuscript 445. The recipe on which this poem is written on contributes a twofold meaning and a restrained tone that supports its feminist motives. If it were to be printed on plain paper for distribution, the defiant contrast of writing and baking would not exist. Without the coconut cake recipe as a backdrop, this poem might be interpreted as a lamentation of the perilous journeys of men in search of things impossible to uncover rather than a rebuke of spatial limitations imposed on women by strictly enforced gender roles. Dickinson's deviation from traditional materials plays into her disillusionment towards printing because she felt that meaning was to be found in what she wrote her poems on. The irreplicable nature of these works which superseded publication methods available at the time suggest that her rejection of printing was also an act of rebellion against the notion that publication was a valid measure of her talent. Her apathy to literary acclaim explain her aversion to printing, because she expressed no interest in the approval of an overwhelmingly white male audience whose authority she often refutes.

As discussed, Dickinson shied away from conventional publication because of its inability to express the meaning implied by her orthography, punctuation and material composition. She channeled her need for a public creative outlet by disclosing her poetry through

letters to allegedly trusted correspondents. However, censorship of her sentiments were waged regardless. Consider again how much significance resides in the punctuation and notation of Dickinson's work, then scale the effect of removing minor features to removing entire words, even paragraphs. Many of these "mutilations", as Martha Nell Smith names them, attempt to preclude her intimations on feminine sexual autonomy from destabilizing the most notorious editor's fragile masculinity.

Emily's first nonconsensual editor was her brother Austin Dickinson, husband to the object of Emily's affection, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson. Her fixation with his wife was a recurring conversation topic between the two. One might figure that he would harbor justified disdain at his sibling's confession of interest in his significant other, but evidence suggests he was equally as perturbed that Emily's enchantment displayed homosexual proclivity. Martha Nell Smith's investigation of Austin's edits to their letters reveals, "Many letters to Austin are altered and the changes always appear near adulatory mention of Sue" (84). She references instances where Austin erases direct mentions of Susan, such as in Poem 5 of Franklin's compilation he attempted to expunge the line, "One Sister have I in the house—". This line begins a poem that relays the maturation of their relationship from childhood on. It has been speculated that his motivation in deleting this line is to create ambiguity surrounding the subject of the work, eliminating the intended homoerotic murmurings.

Subtler modifications are also noted, for instance in one correspondence, "[He] alters the singular pronoun from feminine to masculine, evidently in an effort to disguise reference to Sue" (Nell 84). Nell provides a plausible explanation that in a time where lesbian leanings were frowned upon, he was trying to protect his sister. A seemingly reasonable excuse, but one that does not account for why he felt it was his duty to defend her. To chalk his erasures up to

chauvinistic obligation to his sister neglects consideration of why he felt entitled to alter her work instead of keeping the letters to himself. After all, the very nature of a letter is that it is intended exclusively for one stated recipient. The violation of privacy involved in releasing her poems after having completely changed the discourse exemplifies the way men of the time picked and chose which elements of femininity to admire and which to shroud in shame.

Furthermore, sticking with the tradition of men's attitude towards women, it is condescending to assume Emily was unaware of potential repercussions that could come from her declarations of same-sex love. Why, then, did Austin take it upon himself to eliminate any utterance of Emily and Sue's relationship? Homophobia, for one, which certainly reigned within church doctrines of the era. But also intimidation on Austin's part, as Emily's pursuance of Sue posed a threat to Austin's fragile masculinity. The fact that Sue and Emily maintained a close platonic relationship despite Emily's obvious romantic inclination likely deepened his fear. An excerpt of one letter between Austin and Emily regarding an encounter that pitted the two against each other in vying for Sue's affection supports this assertion. The excised lines read "Dear Austin, I am keen, but you are a good deal keener, I am something of a fox, but you are more of a hound! I guess we are very good friends tho', and I guess we both love [S]us[ie] just as well as we can" (A 597; L110).

Purging his legacy of any indication that he was not capable of effortlessly seducing Sue makes it clear that Austin viewed his sister's interest in his beloved as an attack undermining his manhood. Changing "Susie" to "us" rather than omitting her name entirely suggests that he wanted readers to assume Emily conceded to Austin's superior flirtation. Emily's transcription of the incident in itself proves that she was confident enough in her sexuality to relive it. Thus, Emily's ease in embracing the event leads the reader to believe Austin felt his masculinity was jeopardized by Emily's expression of her sexual autonomy.



Another mutilator of Dickinson's work was Thomas Johnson who edited and compiled the first publication of her manuscripts. To best express the extent which Johnson's alterations depreciated the sensuality and intellectual liberty latent in her orthography and notation, I call upon Adrienne Rich's poem, "I Am In Danger—Sir—". Rich seeks vengeance on Johnson by addressing the way he inserts his patriarchal agenda into the work of a marginalized authoress while simultaneously paying homage to Dickinson's voice.

The structure of the poem resembles Dickinson's characteristic use of the dash. In "I Am In Danger—Sir—", the title itself connotes a woman's voice frantically pleading for assistance. Dashes suggest the broken speech and breathing patterns of a victimized woman being interrupted while delivering her urgent message. This line is a reference to Dickinson's words in a letter to Thomas Higginson, but Rich's repurposing indicates Dickinson's crying out from the grave, devastated about her legacy being rewritten. The first stanza contains an allusion to Higginson's description of Dickinson's out-there tendencies and topics. He calls her "half-cracked"; cracked because for the period, her depiction of the sexually liberated, autonomous woman seemed absurd, but only half because the artistry with which she illustrated her ideas negated the perceived deviance. Inclusion of this visage of Emily establishes a precedent for this critique of Johnson's critiques. Despite skepticism she faced from even her closest confidantes, she persevered, and Johnson's edits were just an extension of the circumstances through which she prevailed. The rest of the first stanza compares Johnson's anthology and her original manuscripts to a post-war battlefield littered with glittering remnants of her intentions. Mangled meaning persists in the midst of the destruction Johnson initiated. The second stanza delves into the current resting place of her manuscripts which Rich describes as being "mothballed at Harvard", where access is stridently limited. While this entombment of Dickinson's most

genuine legacy is in part to protect the manuscripts from deterioration, it also shows the continued oppression of Dickinson's marginalized voice. The line "equivocal to the end" is sarcastically comparing the manuscripts to Johnson's translations, insinuating that his versions were hollow shells of Dickinson's art, lacking the poignancy she invested in her transcriptions. Asserting his male dominance by revoking Dickinson's already muted voice evidences the misogyny that steered his adulterations. Finishing the second stanza with the rhetorical question, "who are you?" serves a dual purpose; it is directed at Johnson to undermine his delusions of superiority but also at Emily, because Johnson diluted her voice until it was unrecognizable.

The third stanza exists to declare Rich's defiance of the way Johnson reordered Dickinson's manuscripts chronologically. This compulsive need for order, exemplified in images of "Gardening the day-lily" and "wiping the wine-glass stems", is an element of a society afflicted by a masculine machine complex, detached from any deviance that might impede efficiency. This construct is compounded in the lines, "your thought pulsed on behind / a forehead battered paper thin", illustrating Johnson's robotic methods for eliminating Emily's sentimental musings that create an important image of a confident, self-aware woman standing tall against a society who denied her any unalienable rights because of her gender and sexuality. Rich draws a contrast between "woman" and "masculine" to open stanza four. Juxtaposing these terms provide the context necessary to guide the reader to the conclusion that the unspecified word in line three is "lesbian". Implying the word lesbian without stating it outright plays on the taboo surrounding feminine sexuality and homosexuality. Johnson displays his subscription to the stigma in his edits when he assumes Dickinson faultily included characteristics in her manuscripts that he seeks to normalize. It is important to note that in the first line, Rich also says "you", which throughout the poem was directed at Johnson, but in this sense she is including

herself in the description suggesting lesbianism because she and Dickinson have this in common. “Single-mindedness” preceding and “symptom” following the inferred descriptor of Dickinson’s sexuality relays the judgement and isolation many openly queer people face. The effect of Rich merging her and Dickinson’s experiences as lesbians extends the consequences of Johnson’s mutilations to apply to an entire subset of femmes over centuries. By eradicating Dickinson’s notions of acceptance and pride, Johnson confirms his discriminatory stance towards all queer femmes. Rich continues her thought into the next stanza, elaborating that being lesbian is “a condition of being” rather than the previously stated “symptom”. Dividing this thought between the stanzas and assigning one a negative connotation and the other a positive one symbolizes the disjunction between society’s misconceptions of lesbianism and the actuality of it. Ending the fourth stanza with the negative interpretation reveals Rich’s hope that while Johnson’s presumptions inflicted on Dickinson’s work attempted to overshadow her feminist ideas, any publication of a voice from the marginalized is a victory that holds promises of a beginning of acceptance and empathy. Finishing the stanza with the capitalized indictment of “Perjury” convicts Johnson for associating Dickinson’s name to poems with meanings that no longer resembled what she intended. The final stanza returns to the opening allusion, flipping it on Johnson and deeming him “half-cracked” for choosing “silence for entertainment”. The silence Rich refers to is the poems that remain after Johnson’s extraction of her message. Without the meaning interred in her notation, and orthography, her voice ceases to be audible.

Austin’s mutilations and Johnson’s normalizations negate much of the significance and raw emotion that inspired Emily’s poems in favor of a more palatable picture of the authoress. Assuming that their rendition of her work was superior is indicative of the misogynistic and discriminatory attitudes that grip the patriarch-constructed culture of America that is almost as

blatant now as it was in Dickinson's time. Dispute of subliminally communicated ideas of prejudice is crucial in raising awareness necessary to counteract it. Discourse about the edits has stirred authors to reclaim the history of mutilations and silencing, like Janet Holmes, author of "The Mys of My Kin" in which she takes Dickinson's poems and employs the erasure poetry technique to pay tribute to Dickinson's work and her manuscript history while preserving the original significance. Holmes's ability to maintain the intentions of Dickinson by employing a method once used to censor her also confirm that the erasures by Austin and Johnson had malicious motives. She reverses the oppressive legacy of Austin and Johnson and other editors by proving that erasing does not have to equal erasure of the artist. Dialogue regarding the issues mentioned in this essay as well as many instances not noted has led to copious reparations to published editions of her manuscripts. Subsequent restoration of Emily's voice preaches acceptance, equality and independence serves as an inspiration for those struggling with issues she highlights and teaches all readers that independent women are a force to be reckoned with.

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