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Winner of the 2005 Robert T. Wilson Award for Scholarly Writing

I'm Ceded: Sexual, Social and Gender Role Rebellion in the Poems
of Emily Dickinson

Maggie Glover '05

"I'm ceded--I've stopped being their's"
--Emily Dickinson

In this quote, taken from Dickinson's well-known poem, the narrator rebels against a group, a majority or an institution that has become oppressive. But against whom, we might ask, is she rebelling? The question of Emily Dickinson's intentions and motivation for her work has produced a voluminous amount of debate and discussion, particularly in terms of political and feminist perspectives. Some critics, such as Mary E. Galvin, suggest that Dickinson was a lesbian and that "by placing her on the continuum of lesbian existence, we can begin to appreciate her resourcefulness in resisting the compulsory subservience of women under heterosexism"(12). Others believe that Dickinson was so removed from the world around her, and had such little knowledge of politics, society and war, that she could not be considered a revolutionary or even a good poet—just an "eccentric woman isolated from the concerns of her day" (Dickie 186-187). I believe that Dickinson was somewhere in between: a talented poet whose heightened sensitivity to injustice was paired with a bravery to challenge the faults of society. However, her relative isolation from certain social problems, such as slavery and the war, shaped her work, perhaps causing it to be more subtle and less desperate than one who was affected on a daily basis by society's injustice. Although Dickinson felt the pressures of this injustice, she was able to observe it somewhat from a distance. Thus, her poetry is not obviously political. Dickinson, did, however, question her society, its expectations and resulting consequences.

In my paper, I will specifically focus on Dickinson's discussion of female sexuality and femininity in terms of pleasure and its use as commerce in the "marriage market" of her time period. I will also focus on how she desired her audience to question the concept of "gender" and its worth in determining one's identity. I believe she intended to rebel against the institutions that strove to victimize not just women but all of the neglected and those who did not fit into specific categories of sexuality or gender. I will also discuss the ways in which Dickinson's tendency to use diminutive language when discussing her body actually worked to undermine society's gender constructs, as well as how she discussed the interaction of genders by utilizing the personification of objects in her poetry as well as her purposeful failure to identify the narrator of many of her poems with a particular gender.

In order to properly discuss the ways in which Dickinson challenged her society, it is necessary to examine her social location in terms of class, race, education and time period. Dickinson spent the majority of her life comfortably in Amherst, MA in an upper-middle class family. The small town, home to Amherst College, was fairly small and most residents centered their lives in agriculture. She was fairly well educated for a woman at the time, attending several academic institutions such as Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. Religious revivals emphasizing a return to God and stricter moral codes swept the town, but Dickinson failed to participate. Her parents were involved in the community; her father served on Amherst's General School Committee, was treasurer of Amherst College and even ran for Congress as the Whig part candidate in 1855. She was close with her family and even had a few close friends, such as her brother Austin's wife, Sue (Kirk 9-27). The isolation and reclusiveness she is famous for was, for the most part, self-imposed.

Because of her race and financial and social position, Dickinson did not have to participate in hard labor to survive or encounter the harsh realities of the real world firsthand. Instead, she was able to live at home and was properly cared for all of her life, even during her illnesses and death. However, she was a woman; during her time, even in so-called "liberal" Massachusetts, women did not enjoy the same freedoms as men. For women of Emily's class, the imbalances were particularly daunting in terms of what a woman could consider her own, particularly after she was married. Therefore, although Dickinson may have been somewhat removed from certain political and social problems, such as slavery, she did respond to those social injustices to which she was exposed.

What, specifically, were the policies regarding women in 19th century New England at the time of Dickinson's writing? According to Caroline H. Dall, who gave a speech concerning women's rights at a meeting in West Newton, MA in 1855, a husband was not "liable for any action against [his wife]" and he possessed "sole ownership of a wife's personal, and use of her real estate." In addition, adultery was considered a "criminal breach of the marriage covenant". However, perhaps the most insulting of the laws was one stating that, after marriage, a wife lost her "legal existence," and was unable to make her own decisions regarding residence or property (Dall). This was true in most states in New England; all state legislatures had laws stating that when a woman was married, she

was no longer a separate being from her husband.

This is an issue that Dickinson seems to deal with directly, the concept of physical identity and how a woman was forced to exchange it for marriage. Her poetry subtly undermines the idea that a woman's sexuality and body is not truly her own—even single women only have their identities, it seems “on loan” until they are married. Although never married, Dickinson's social position suggests that she witnessed the effects of such practices and laws happening all around her. Her poems are revolutionary in that they address certain issues that were forbidden at the time, but that she approaches it in a subtle and imaginative way and uses them as an example of the negative consequences of society's concept of “gender.”

Female sexuality was quite a taboo subject at the time, particularly due to the religious revivals occurring in New England. Dickinson's use of clitoral symbolism and pleasure imagery would have been considered quite wicked if it had been more blatant, which could have been motivation enough to approach the subject delicately. Several critics have discussed the many symbols that are clitoral in nature in her poems, such as the ever-present bees, and it seems that her poems themselves could be classified accordingly as they fit perfectly into the definition of such imagery: small and hard. In these poems, Dickinson is, at the very least, encouraging women to take control of their sexuality. Perhaps one of the most obviously sexual poems is “Forbidden Fruit a flavor has”:

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks—
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks—(1482)

Indeed, the “pea” which is unlocked and blossoms for the narrator is Dickinson's clitoral symbolism at it's most astonishing. By utilizing natural foods, such as fruits and vegetables, Dickinson is also suggesting something about female sexuality: that it is a part of nature and should be enjoyed, although it may be considered “forbidden” to man-made society. This image also indicates that female sexuality is, indeed, a form of nourishment that is as needed as vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables.

In fact, clitoral imagery, according to the usual definition, occurs more often than expected in Dickinson's work. As author Paula Bennet argues: “[c]litoral imagery—peas, pebbles, beads, berries, nuts, buds, crumbs...was central to Dickinson's writing. So far I have counted...287 of these small, round and frequently hard objects” (239). Dickinson's use of these symbols is not just sexual for the sake of being sexual, but saying that such sexuality is an essential tool of social rebellion. In a way, the clitoris is an outright challenge to patriarchy because, as Bennet states, “male

domination is based on women's sexual subordination to and within the autonomy” (239). A woman's knowledge, and celebration of a part of her own self that can provide her with sexual pleasure without the aid of a man is downright revolutionary. Therefore, by Dickinson's use of this imagery in her work, Dickinson is encouraging women to take back their sexuality, identity and rights from the patriarchy.

In most instances, Dickinson links female sexuality with secrecy and suggests that the joy that which is derived from such behavior is unacceptable to some degree. In the poem, “So bashful when I spied her”, Dickinson seems to recreate the narrator's tender search for a lover's clitoris and, therefore, sexual pleasure:

So bashful when I spied her!
So pretty—so ashamed!
So hidden in her leaflets
Lest anybody find—

So breathless til I passed her—
So helpless when I turned
And bore her struggling, blushing,
Her simple haunts beyond!

For whom I robbed the Dingle—
For whom betrayed the Dell—
Many, will doubtless ask me—
But I shall never tell! (70)

Here, it seems, the narrator is able to coax the object hidden in the “leaflets” until the subject of her poem is “struggling” and “blushing,” a direct association with the female orgasm. The gentle voice of this poem is charming and quite moving, as the audience can almost feel the tenderness of the narrator as he or she approaches the subject. However, it is the final section of this poem is most compelling and indicative of Dickinson's comment on female sexuality. The narrator is promising to never reveal for whom he or she performed this act of love. This sort of act must have been kept secret at the time, as well as all forms of female sexual pleasure. The narrator will not reveal for whom he or she robbed the “Dell” and “Dingle,” terms that are synonymous with a small, wooded valley. The tone in this last section is much different from the soft, loving tone of the previous stanzas. Indeed, the narrator seems almost panicked at the thought of discovery. We are not sure if the narrator is male or female, so we cannot immediately assume that the narrator fears exposure for lesbianism. This is what makes the poem truly daunting, in that the narrator may be male, perhaps even the female subject's husband and yet, her sexual pleasure must be kept a secret.

In another poem, Dickinson embodies an unlikely

object with clitoral imagery in order to illustrate the idea that female sexuality is associated with sin and negativity:

Adrift! A little boat adrift!
And night is coming down!
Will no one guide a little boat
Unto the nearest town? (6)

Here, a “little” boat is searching for a companion and, at last, “[gives] up it's strife” and allows the ocean to drag it down. The poem ends with the boat being “o'erspent with gales” and, finally “sh[ooting]—exultant on!” (6). The boat, in the poem, represents the center of female pleasure; the subject finally “gives in” to sexual passion and is overcome with an “exultant” orgasm. However, she must first “gurgle down and down”; in other words, in terms of Dickinson's society, the acceptance of pleasure is synonymous with sin and degradation. The boat can only witness the red dawn after she succumbs to the so-called darkness.

This “darkness for pleasure” exchange relates to another subject in which Dickinson attempts to challenge. As discussed earlier, women were considered a part of their husband once they were married. They literally traded in their selves in exchange for marriage, including their virginity, individuality, property and femininity (because a woman certain loses a degree of feminine identity if she is no longer considered, legally, a person). In these poems, she utilizes symbols of femininity, such as flowers and soft fabrics, to depict the exchange of women as currency and objects in marriage and sexuality. In the following poem, Dickinson uses the image of “satin cash”:

I pay—in Satin Cash—
You did not state your price—
A Petal, for a Paragraph
Is near as I can guess (526)

The transaction involves her offering a piece of herself, a feminine “petal” in exchange for a cold, inhuman document or “paragraph”. Similarly, a woman in her time was required to sacrifice her identity in exchange for the legal bonding of marriage. Before the exchange takes place, she is unclear exactly what is required of her, as many women must have been before they were married. The narrator is unsure what is expected of her, what the “price” could be of what she would be about to purchase. It is also important to note that Dickinson's use of satin depicts a “higher end” fabric and, therefore, an upper-class problem. She is stating that, “luxury goods are bought and sold like any others; they only seem to transcend the grubby world of trade” (Stoneley 585). She is concerned, in this work, with the marketing of upper class women and the naivety these women possess in believing they are above corruption and the commonplace when, in fact, they are an integral part of

one of society's greatest travesties.

Another one of Dickinson's works that deals with truth of the “marriage market” is her very famous work, “I'm wife—I've finished that—” (225). In this poem, a woman is newly married and discusses how distant her girlhood (and, of course, virginal) life feels. She begins to compare the two at the end, but stops:

This being comfort—then
That other kind—was pain—
But Why compare?
I'm “Wife”! Stop there! (225)

The narrator has undergone the exchange of her identity and virginity for the title of wife and is feeling the disappointment that must accompany it. She has become “Woman”, in society's definition of the term and yet, doing so, has been forced to give up that which makes her a woman: control of her own destiny, identity and sexuality. The narrator does not wish to continue comparing her life as a virgin and female with the life she has “bought” because she realizes that she will only discover more disappointments and be forced to confront the fact that she has given up herself.

Dickinson also confronts the ways in which marriage conflicts with nature and how, upon entering the covenant, a woman must bid farewell to her own nature. In fact, she views marriage as a form of death, and treats the subject as she would her dying day, as represented in the poem “I haven't told my garden yet”:

I haven't told my garden yet—
Lest that should conquer me.
I haven't quite the strength now
To break it to the Bee—(40)

By viewing the Bee, as well as the garden, as clitoral and pleasure imagery, the narrator is saying that she does not want to face the idea that her sense of physical pleasure will be lost upon her marriage. She is aware that her pleasure “self” or center will be greatly disappointed at the knowledge that she must trade them in under the condition of marriage. She continues to discuss how she must keep her engagement a secret and alludes to a form of death in “going”:

The hillsides must not know it—
Where I have rambled so—
Nor tell the loving forests
The day that I shall go—(40)

The narrator tends to keep her marriage a secret as a woman might want to keep secret a betrayal. By associating marriage with death and utilizing natural symbols as symbols for identity and sexuality, Dickinson is suggesting that her marriage is a betrayal of herself as death is a way

of turning one's back to the living. She shies away from that which thrives as she shies away from the lively sexuality that exists within her, because she knows she will abandon it all in the near future.

Perhaps one of the finest examples of Dickinson confronting the loss of a wife's ownership is in her poem "I had some things that I called mine":

I had some things that I called mine
And God, that he called his—
Till recently a rival claim
Disturbed these amities.

The property, my garden,
Which having sown with care—
He claims the pretty acre—
And sends a Bailiff there (101).

The first two sections of this poem show how the narrator has been forced to abandon that which she called her own. In addition, the "rival" or husband is bringing the law into "her garden". In this way, Dickinson is questioning the legislation of female sexuality and bodies. Marriage is a way in which the government infiltrates a woman's privacy. The "things" that the narrator believed to once be hers has been forcefully taken from her, as she is now another "part" of her husband, not legally a person of her own. Somehow, the law has laid claim on determining what she can and cannot do with her body and property because she is a married woman.

In addition to discussing the victimization of women, Dickinson pinpoints the main cause of such injustice: the societal construction of gender. Dickinson is rivaling the concept that gender is an essential part of identity. Instead, she places the emphasis upon "sensation" and, thus, sexuality. (Diehl 36). In many of her poems, Dickinson fails to identify with a particular gender at all, suggesting that that which is important about our bodies is not whether they are assigned "male" or "female," but how they affect us, the feelings they stir within us, the ability that they give us to physically experience. In the erotic "Forbidden Fruit a flavor has", the narrator is neither male or female, nor is the narrator in "So bashful when I spied her!" By emphasizing sexuality and sensation instead of categorical physicality, Dickinson "intensifies the erotic while erasing the marks of gender" (Diehl 4). She is also suggesting that by eliminating the mandate of gender, it would be become impossible for our society to legislate laws against a particular gender or support imbalances within institutions like marriage.

There are several poems in which Dickinson's narrator embodies an "I" character without indicating whether or not she is male or female. However, the poem "I'm No-

body! Who are you?" deals directly with identity combined with this lack of gender identification:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—too?
Then there's a paid of us!
Don't tell! They'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog! (260)

Here, the narrator is praising the state of being "nobody," the state of possessing no gender or recognizable features of identity. She does not identify whether or not the narrator or the subject is male or female—indeed, they are neither. Their consciousness grows from their physicality from sensation and thought, not from the ways in which society has characterized their bodies. She again cautions her subject to keep their "state" a secret, as it is certainly unacceptable to identify with something that society condemns. The narrator goes on to point out the flaws of being "somebody" and fitting into specific categories that society has pre-planned. By avoiding these categories, such as gender, they will not be able to be discriminated against. The only way to avoid prejudice and injustice is to abandon all signs of that which is subjected to injustice. Dickinson is stating that we can find our identity beyond the gender so why not abandon the target of social injustice that society has forced upon its members?

When Dickinson does choose to have her narrator identify with gender, it is often for a specific purpose. This purpose is usually to show the victimization of females by males: "although Dickinson's poetic victims and victimizers take many forms, the former are usually feminine figures and the latter invariably masculine" (Smith). This most commonly occurs in her personification of objects and images of her poems, such as in the poem "I started early. Took my Dog". In this poem, the ocean is assigned the pronoun "He" and the narrator is endowed with feminine traits, such as wearing an apron and bodice. In this poem, "the gender specific personification of the sea, as a male with whom the female speaker interacts, transforms the commonplace ebb and flow of the tides into a momentous human ritual" (Guerra 78). The sea seems to embody the patriarchy of the society at the time and pursues the narrator aggressively, particularly in the third stanza:

But no Man moved Me—Till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe—
And past my Apron—and my Belt
And past my Boddice—too—(656)

Here, the sea seems to be raping the narrator as he travels from her shoe to her belt to her bodice. In addition, Dickinson points out that "no man had touched" the narrator, expressing her virginity. In this way, she is again challenging the trade between man and woman and how a woman's identity, represented by her sexuality, is forcefully taken. This represents two aspects of the lives of young women entering marriage: sexual activity, sometimes forced, as a husband's rite as well as the symbolic rape of a woman's identity and possessions. A woman, who was pressured to remain virginal until her marriage, was then expected to immediately succumb to her husband. After the marriage, she could be persecuted if it were discovered that she went on to engage in sexual acts with one other than her husband. Therefore, the narrator's rape by the sea literally represents a woman's loss of control over her sexuality in marriage. Similarly, the ocean represents a husband's usurping of his new wives property, possessions and identity, as she has now legally become a mere extension of himself.

In another poem, Dickinson actually chooses to assign a typically clitoral image in her poems, a bee, with a male gender. This bee serves to infiltrate a rose, which is assigned the gender of female. The bee forcefully consummates with the flower and then, at the end:

Their Moment consummated
Remained for him—to flee—
Remained for her, of Rapture
But the Humilty.(1351)

After stealing the nectar from the flower, the bee leaves. The rose does not feel the "rapture" that was expected, but shame. Dickinson is recreating a scene of an unsatisfied female, most likely on the night of marriage. The male bee has stolen from the Rose what he wanted and has left satisfied, while the feminine flower is left alone without the thing she has come to call her own. It is important that Dickinson chooses to specifically contrast (and capitalize) "Rapture" with "Humility" (1351). These adjectives contrast both the narrator's expectations with reality as well as the difference in consequences of the male bee and female flower. In her society, it seems, men typically were encouraged to feel rapture when women were encouraged to feel humility.

Dickinson deals with this idea of humility in her frequent assertion of her own physical "smallness". Again, since women are typically considered the smaller gender, Dickinson will often link the female with smallness. In the same way in which society mistakenly victimizes women, it also mistakenly associates importance and ability with size. Initially, it appears that she is considering herself as diminutive and unimportant. However, as author Bennet states:

The high value Dickinson places on littleness is, in fact, distasteful to many readers...associate it with a trivializing femininity and with the poet's

so-called little girl voice...however...I now believe that such judgments are culturally constructed...to Dickinson and to many other nineteenth century women writers, the little could also be great, the insignificant could be meaningful and valuable. (236)

Dickinson intentionally utilizes the concept of smallness to reject society's association with it as being weak and unworthy. To Dickinson, the smallest things are often the most important. In her poem "Except to Heaven, she is nought," Dickinson stresses the vital importance of one woman, despite her apparent unimportance in the perspective of others:

Except to Heaven, she is nought.
Except for Angels—lone.
Except to some wide-wandering Bee
A flower superfluous blown.

Except for winds—provincial.
Except for Butterflies
Unnoticed as a single dew
That on the Acre lies.

The smallest Housewife in the grass,
Yet take her from the Lawn
And somebody has lost the face
That made Existence—Home! (173).

First, Dickinson asserts that the "smallest Housewife" is neglected by all earthly beings. She is unappreciated and neglected by those around her; however, she is seen by angels, Heaven and the winds (which, of course, are what is moving the blowing flower and wandering bee). This implies that the forces that have that have the greatest power and, indeed, have the ability to change the human world, do hold the small woman in high regard. In addition, a similarly helpless flower and bee (also symbols of femininity) identify with the woman. However, the powerful final lines assert that without her, existence and humanity would never have occurred. Dickinson is emphasizing the importance of womankind in a world that does not notice her; although women are legislated as feeble and unworthy of rites, although they are merely considered an extension of their husbands, they are an integral part of the continuation of the human race. In addition, she seems to suggest that, like the invisible wind, there are forces that are on the "side" of women and, indeed of all the neglected.

This poem seems a perfect summation of all of Dickinson's finest methods of social challenge; the flower and the bee, feminine symbols, are tossed by an invisible wind; the narrator is a disembodied, non-gender specific entity; the neglected subject is assigned the gender of

woman. The most essential part of the poem, however, is the wind that touches them all. This wind, according to the narrator, does not neglect the woman. I believe this is where Dickinson chooses to give her audience hope; she is stating that the winds of change, of movement, of upward mobility, are pushing the neglected forward. She is saying to hold on, because change is coming.

In the end, Dickinson believes that the flaws in her society can be corrected. She utilizes sexual imagery and concepts to encourage women to discover their own sexuality; she challenges the trade of a woman's sex and identity for marriage. Dickinson believes that, in order to escape the injustice of society, we must stop identifying with its social constructions, such as gender. She urges her audience to establish a new identity apart from what is expected. When Dickinson says she has ceded, she is asking her audience to join her and to trust the upcoming winds of change.

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