

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#1072 (c.1862)

Title divine – is mine!
The Wife –without the Sign!
Acute Degree—conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary!
Royal – all but the Crown!
Betrothed – without the swoon
God sends us Women –
When you – hold – Garnet to Garnet –
Gold – to Gold –
Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
In a Day –
Tri Victory –
“My Husband” – women say –
Stroking the Melody –
Is *this* – the way?

ANALYSIS

“My reading of the poem is hypothetical by default, for its syntax alone, not to mention the elliptical progressions and the rapid transformation of pronouns, insists upon respect for its difficulty. What we can ascertain is that the speaker is comparing the life of the heavenly bride to that of the earthly one. The woman exalted in the first half of the poem is royal by virtue of what she does not have. Without the sign or ring legitimating marriage and without the swoon of sexuality, this woman, seemingly self-elected, is dangerously close to Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus,’ who will also insist upon ‘Acute Degree --’ and who will carry the claim of suffering one step further into hyperbole than Calvary.

This miracle—a woman without the swoon, divine by virtue of its absence—makes us hunger for a more generous world where salvation is not had at the expense of life. It is the other world we think we are getting when we read of ‘the swoon / God sends us Women -- / When you – hold – Garnet to Garnet -- / Gold – to Gold.’ But the transition is strangely enough no transition: deprivation is here not absent, it is simply of another order. ‘When you – hold – Garnet to Garnet -- / God – to Gold --’ (in the secular context of the earthly wedding ceremony), what you get is death (‘Born – Bridalled – Shrouded -- / In a Day –’). The shift in pronouns is a shift to the colloquial ‘you,’ almost as if in talking implicitly about sexuality the speaker had to cast attribution as far from herself as possible. But in the very process of distinguishing herself from the wealth of the early alternative, she temporarily allies herself with it, with the swoon ‘God sends us Women –’ In the fusion and confusion of these lines, both options funnel to death, the contraction of the self into its own ashes. For the birth of the wife becomes the death of the woman. Upon such sacrifices, the gods themselves throw incense. The problem is that both alternatives require sacrifice.

Between the nothing that is the self and the nothing to which the self gets reduced when it capitulates to another, we see our options clearly. While it is true that the jewels in the poem suggest the blessing of the earthly wife, the lines, coming as they do in the middle of the poem (as a manifestation of its transition from divine to earthly), are a half-implied metaphor for the necessary complement of divine and earthly wife, for each by herself is inadequate. Thus although the lines tell us that garnet is held to garnet and gold to gold (each alternative able to assess only itself), the proximity of the lines requires us to see the colors (and the choices they represent) held against each other, as if the speaker’s vision of impossibility momentarily enabled its transcendence.”

Sharon Cameron

“‘A Loaded Gun’: The Dialectic of Rage”
Lyric Time (Johns Hopkins 1979)

“Ironically reversing the image of herself as the helpless waif, Dickinson presents herself as ‘Royal,’ an ‘Empress of Calvary.’ Having sustained and learned from her suffering, she has mastered it. This is a love poem, but it is also an announcement of her power--her capacity to experience intense emotions and to survive their annihilating potential. Although her love has been unrequited, she has not been defeated by her suffering. She is not ruled by a master--she reigns over herself. As we have seen, the compensatory image of the queen in command of her energy appears repeatedly in Dickinson’s poetry as an antidote to the destructive impact of romantic imagery on women. This poem also takes an ironic view of conventional marriage, revealing Dickinson’s scorn for the loss of self women experience when they wed; there is a pun on ‘bridalled’ and bridled, as the wife’s expectations about her new life—‘Born’--are contrasted with the reality of her now constricted world—‘Shrouded’.”

Wendy Martin

An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich
(U North Carolina 1984)

“Read against the earlier poems, it is clear that Dickinson meant ‘Title divine’ to be about her mature identity as woman, an identity she assumed sometime in late 1861 or early 1862 and was apparently eager to share with Samuel Bowles. While she acknowledges that she has assumed this identity at real cost, it is also, as she underscores in the 1866 version of the poem sent to Sue, a ‘Tri Victory.’ For in becoming a ‘Wife -- without the Sign’ that is, a wife without an actual husband and therefore, also without the ‘swoon’ or loss of self that real marriage involved--Dickinson had at last found the way out of the personal and social dilemma that had plagued her from adolescence on. In ‘marrying’--without-marrying the Master, she could, albeit by a sophisticated twist, free herself permanently both from her social obligation to marry and from the childhood she had sought so long to escape. By becoming a bride, as it were, in perpetua, she remained woman on the point of transformation, a woman who had renounced both the life that had been, childhood, and the life that in her society was meant to be, marriage. And thus she achieved a new ontological status: woman-without-being-wife.

It is this definition of self as woman on the point of transformation or bride in perpetua which, I believe, became the basis for Dickinson’s new poetic voice after 1861. It was a voice that obtained its power from the fact that the person behind it had experienced in her poetry, if not in her life, all the stages of a woman’s life, from childhood through ecstasy and marriage to, finally, martyrdom and death. This person could, therefore, speak with all the authority that Dickinson’s poetry had hitherto lacked. By using her poetry to become a bride in perpetua or ‘Wife -- without the Sign,’ Dickinson was able to make her role as poet and her role as woman one. It was a piece of linguistic legerdemain to be sure, but for Dickinson it worked. If she could not be a woman in real life without marrying, then she could marry and be a real woman in her art. Symbol-maker that she was, for Dickinson this ‘Victory’ was more than adequate. It gave her both the security and the freedom she required to explore the powers lodged within herself. She was a poet and a woman at last.

A number of different factors made becoming a ‘Wife -- without the Sign’ or bride in perpetua a perfect means to Dickinson’s new status as woman poet or queen. To begin with, in the nineteenth century a woman’s bridal was the mid-point between the two great, unalterable mysteries in her life: birth and death. Upon these three occasions, at birth (symbolized by baptism), at death, and when she got married, a woman wore white and approached most closely the ‘blameless mystery’ of God. Insofar as a bride took a new name or ‘Title,’ she was moreover both dead and reborn during the ceremony, dying to her old life and baptized into her new one. As the midpoint in a woman’s life, the marriage ceremony was also, equally important, her apex or ‘Acute Degree,’ the moment conferred upon her by God when she experienced her greatest rapture or joy in living. And it was the moment in which she was translated from one state of being into another, receiving not only a new name, but a new status, power, and identity.”

Paula Bennett

My Life a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity
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“The poem is sometimes read, in the context of the separated-lovers plot, as referring to a secret and platonic betrothal that has left the speaker spiritually wedded but without any public sign of her estate and without the sexual swoon of earthly nuptials. The title being divine, it will be recognized only in heaven, when the lovers meet again. Whether we adduce such context or not, the speaker’s committed but uncertainly determined state allows her to question wifehood without quite being fully bridaled and shrouded but also without merely anticipating it as prospect. The stakes are triumph and status, as the imagery of titles, degrees, crowns, and victories makes clear, but no clear answer is forthcoming to the question in the last line.

The poems in the marriage group lend themselves especially well to a strategic deferral, for a moment of deliberation is built into the plot. Whatever empowerment she (or more rarely he) envisions in the marital state, she must commit herself to that state irrevocably. Moreover, thanks mainly to feminism, we have recently had little difficulty appreciating Dickinson’s reluctance to commit herself to the Master’s care. Indeed, contemporary prejudices make it difficult to understand the lure of embridalment, about which Dickinson is equally emphatic. Perhaps more fully than we, she accepts in these poems the most baleful premise of the romantic sublime, namely that empowerment requires emulating another’s majesty.”

Gary Lee Stonum
The Dickinson Sublime
(U Wisconsin 1990)

“Her indictment of those who do not make note of the disparities and inequities in treatment of women and men is evident in her disdainful tone. Dickinson feels the need to integrate and internalize an assertive self, one which will not subscribe to the thankless duties allotted women in conventional roles [The Victorian wife was idealized by both ladies and gentlemen as “The Angel in the House”; see Washington Irving’s ‘The Wife’] More importantly, by conquering Calvary, she, like the emperor Christ, is the empress who has won ‘Tri-Victory’ over death and, perhaps--as implied by the reference to ‘My Husband’ as something other women say--over male barriers and institutions. Only such a feat would gain the persona equal status with Christ, who also transcended the laws and dictates of his persecutors and oppressors. Like him, she was ‘Born -- Bridalled – Shrouded --’, all stages of being wrapped in cloth, perhaps white, at birth, through life (e.g., in marriage), and at death. She has rewritten a portion of the Apostolic creed: that Christ was born, died, and was buried, and on the third day, he rose again. Or perhaps, as indicated in the next line: ‘In a Day,’ she--like Christ, through his crucifixion and resurrection--experienced in one moment these variant stages of a similar state of rebirth. Her rebirth is made possible by creating a philosophy that enables her to validate her own experience and being. Once again, Dickinson subverts patriarchal definitions and collapses the duality upon which they are based, for through the development of these poems, Calvary is linked with victory, rather than with defeat or (only) anguish.”

Roseanne Hoefel
“Emily Dickinson: Fleshing Out a New Word”
Emily Dickinson Journal I.1 (1992)

“Though Dickinson uses certain religious words and tropes repeatedly, the meaning she attaches to them may vary from one poem to another. In ‘That I did always love,’ Calvary is the emblem for her thoughts on salvation, love, and the risk of tragic loss should a man persist in doubting the constancy of a woman who loves him and is worthy of his trust. In ‘Title divine,’ Dickinson again uses the image of Calvary, but she refocuses our associations with the word and shifts the emphasis to issues not of doubt and faith, but of recognition and fate. Consequently, the tone is less personal and more judgmental--even angry.

To understand better Dickinson’s role as translator, it is useful to recall some of the conventional meanings of the Christian images that appear in this poem: first, ‘Title divine.’ In his sermon ‘The Mortal Immortalized,’ Charles Wadsworth describes the terms ‘the Resurrection and the Life’ (John 11:25), which Christ bestows on himself just before raising Lazarus from the dead, as being Christ’s ‘Divine titles’ (234). The power to give life, therefore, is implied in Dickinson’s ‘Title divine.’ Then there is the figure of Calvary, the place where Christ was crucified along with two thieves. The image is of a hill with three crosses on it, symbolizing both the scene of the sacrifice and the trinity. Finally, the ‘Crown’ and the ‘Sign’ clearly recall the crown of thorns and the mocking sign placed over the cross that read ‘King of the Jews.’

'Born -- Bridalled -- Shrouded --', and 'Tri-Victory' echo Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and trinity respectively. 'Is this -- the way?' recalls Christ's words 'I am the way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6).

The images that Dickinson chooses are some of the most poignant and frequently cited in Protestant discourse. They are descriptive of the ultimate sacrifice, the climactic event of the New Testament scriptures. The Son of God submits to humiliation and death, offering redemption even to those who, failing to recognize divinity, mock and torture him. Here are words and figures with weight behind them, with connotations Dickinson finds particularly apt for describing her subject: women and the sacrifices they make--whether as wives, poets, or Christians. In 'Title divine' Dickinson presents the figure of the 'Wife' crucified. Women stroke 'the Melody' of the word 'husband' and consider themselves 'Royal.' But at Calvary, to be royal is to be humiliated, the symbols of royalty having been transformed into symbols of ridicule by Christ's executioners....

The extreme discrepancy that Dickinson perceived between male and female power is evident in these lines. The male 'sun' is ubiquitous. He has freedom to move through the sky and dominion over all living things, including the 'scathed' female 'blossoms' that have neither mobility nor power. The image of a male lover as a potentially overpowering, indifferent, and life-depleting 'sun' and the woman as a frail flower persists for years in Dickinson's letters and poems. In the 'Master' letters, the poet refers to herself as 'Daisy.' In addition, there are poems such as 'The Daisy follows soft the Sun' (Poem 106), in which she depicts that extreme dominant-submissive relation.

Because Dickinson so often felt that there was little spiritual nourishment available to women as Christians [false] or as wives, and because the tone of several lines in the poems is heavily ironic, it is possible to read the wives in 'Title divine' as being fools for stroking the melody, for not realizing they are being mocked. At the same time, the resonances of sacred words surround all the human figures in the poem with an aura of virtue and spiritual glory. The melody stroked by the women saying 'My Husband' is pitched in that 'Key of Calvary' which, for Dickinson, is loud with both beauty and fraud.

The image of the bloody sacrifice...could suggest the blood that is shed in childbirth. A woman who consented to marriage in the mid-nineteenth century consented to risk, since the mortality rate for women in childbirth was high. A woman taking the risk of 'bearing a man's child' gave that man a kind of immortality, an immortality in which she was not believed to share.... The child would have the man's name, imparting to him another sort of immortality. So, the wife's 'Title divine,' her power to be 'the Resurrection and the Life,' made it her destiny to sacrifice her life (whether literally or figuratively) to gain immortality for her husband, just as Christ's 'divine titles' made it his destiny to be sacrificed to save mankind.... [This feminist analogy makes wives equal to God, even more exalted than Victorian angels in the house.]

We have still not explored all of what the 'Title divine' is for Dickinson.... As in many of Dickinson's most intriguing poems, metaphor is stacked upon metaphor. The tropes of Christ's sacrifice and divinity are also descriptive of Dickinson's sense of identity as a woman and poet. To be a poet, she may be understood to have sacrificed her life in Amherst society and the possibility of being a wife and mother. As the church and the human soul are considered the 'brides' of Christ, Dickinson is the bride of poetry. She is 'the Word made flesh,' a Christ figure whose father in heaven is poetry rather than [why either/or?] Deity. [This is another projection of Atheism by a feminist critic, ignoring the religious faith expressed in many other poems.] Her 'Title divine,' then, is that of poet. Through poetry she is 'the Resurrection and the Life.' She has the power to give life to language. In a letter to T. W. Higginson, Dickinson asks 'Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?' (Letter 260). She is one, like Christ (but 'without the Sign'), whose greatness is not recognized, who would (should she reveal herself) be vulnerable to mockery and ostracism in a society unable and perhaps unwilling to understand her.

We can also read the 'Title divine' as being a title to love and 'The Wife -- without the Sign!' as being a figure for and statement of enduring devotion. The 'Title divine' is the true love the poet feels, even though she does not have the 'Sign,' a ring or marriage license to show as material proof of her commitment. Suzanne Juhasz has elaborated on this point: When do you 'hold -- Garnet to Garnet -- / Gold to Gold --'? Because this sounds like a description of wedding rings, of, consequently, a double-ring ceremony, the

phrase probably modifies the swoon that God sends to women, so that swoon can be read as symbolic, or symptomatic, of the ordinary woman's response to a man, a husband, to marriage. Thus, being a wife without the sign would be being a wife without the ring--and without the swoon. No church wedding: no crown. Another sort of marriage.

But whether we read Dickinson as poet, lover, or both, she endures the pain of making sacrifices to what or to whom she loves in secret. The missing 'Sign' is a double metaphor. It is the mocking, public sign that labels the cross and becomes a metaphor for the position of a wife in society or for the woman-poet. It also suggests a wedding ring -- the public 'Sign' for marriage. If we consider these figures to represent Dickinson as a poet, the 'Wife -- without the Sign' becomes the woman-poet who has received no public recognition. Since women writers were frequently subject to ridicule, being 'without the sign' has its appeal. We see the poet being sacrificed silently in the name of some greater cause that operates beyond the ken of average mortals. But, once again, because she persistently aligns herself with Christ, the pains and humiliations experienced in being the 'Empress of Calvary' are nevertheless indicative of power, virtue, and superiority.

Dickinson's use of other Christian images in 'Title divine' reinforces her several metaphorical premises. The image of 'the Crown' carries a particularly heavy load of meaning. The contrast between Christ's mortal crown of thorns and his heavenly crown is often the subject of Protestant hymns.... Like Christ, both wife and woman-poet must wear a crown of thorns, must bear humiliation and a lack of recognition for their virtues, at least in their mortal lives. But both are possessed of divine power (albeit unacknowledged) and are heirs to the 'royal diadem.' The symbol of the crown of thorns defies the act of sacrifice and sanctifies pain and humiliation. Christ, the most loving and perfect human being who ever existed, was forced to wear the crown of thorns by a society that perceived him (as it would perceive a great female poet) as a threat to its power structures. The crown, then, is also a symbol of guilt, a guilt by which the Puritans felt burdened. Superimposing the image of the crown of thorns onto the image of the wife, Dickinson imbues woman's fate (as wife or poet) with great value and dignity. At the same time, she points an accusing finger at a society that crowns her with thorns.

The lines 'Born -- Bridalled -- Shrouded / In a Day -- / Tri Victory' are bitterly ironic. By inserting the image of a woman being 'Bridalled' (as one would bridle a horse) between the facts of birth and death and by calling this 'Victory,' Dickinson makes a tightly compressed poetic statement.... There is a double significance in the word 'victorious' just as in the image of the crown. Christ's crucifixion is a victory for mankind because it offers a chance for immortality.... The pain of crucifixion is enough, however, to shake the faith even of the Son of God. The heavenly victory seems remote to him when he cries out to God from the cross, 'why hast thou forsaken me?' The wife's ultimate victory in 'Title divine' (whether she is interpreted as being woman or woman-poet), like Christ's victory, seems remote because no immediate reward is in sight and because the pain endured in obtaining that victory is so great.

The final line of the 'Title divine,' 'Is this -- the way?' asks is this the way to stroke 'the melody'? Did the tone of my voice express the proper degree of smug contentment when I said 'My Husband'? Interpreted in this manner, the line sounds sarcastic and supports the idea that the wives with 'the Sign' are being mocked by the poet. But it is also possible to interpret the line as echoing Christ's words, 'I am the way, the Truth, and the life,' in which case we hear the poet asking, 'is this the way to salvation? Is the sacrifice of marriage really the way for a woman to find fulfillment in life?' A third possibility exists as well. Underneath the irony and uncertainty, the speaker may be practicing her articulation of the word 'Husband' with a certain smugness of her own--as the secret bride of poetry. All three readings of this line are supported by the text. Dickinson's restatement of religious figures frees them from any single interpretation; their connotations multiply and contradict one another, remaining fluid within poems and between poems."

Kim Hosman
"Emily Dickinson's Poetics of Translation"
Emily Dickinson Journal III.1 (1996)

Michael Hollister (2014)